Review

Migrants in the profane

Peter Gordon

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In *Migrants in the Profane*, intellectual historian Peter Gordon engages with the complicated theoretical voyages that Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno had with religion as they struggled to make sense of the war and political instability that swayed the fate of central European Jewry in the mid-twentieth century. The book's title is inspired by Adorno's observation, 'Nothing of theological content will persist without being transformed; every content will have to put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane'. Adorno's uncompromising stance implicates the guiding question of this inquiry: what normative resources can religion offer in responding to the prevailing pathologies of modernity? Although the book makes an important contribution in historicizing relevant intellectual debates, it misses the mark in both its understanding of what secularism is and its confidence in its ability to address the pathologies of the present without the resources of religion.

Migrants in the Profane guides the reader through Benjamin's, Horkheimer's, and Adorno's respective meditations on religion. This order is not accidental, as Gordon's ultimate sympathies lie with Adorno. Gordon starts with Benjamin's ambivalent stance on secularization, which is the result of his commitment to a unique Judeo-Marxist syncretism. Benjamin is critical of the evolutionist approach to history that justifies suffering by the happiness of later generations. To break the mold of such approaches, he believes that Marxism must develop a conception of time that is not 'empty' or 'homogenous'. Benjamin assigns change in history to an exogenous agent: that of the 'messianic' during a moment of profound rupture. Or as Gordon puts it, 'If history bears any promise, this is only because it serves as a theater for the explosion of messianic energies which disrupt the continuous and clocklike movements of secular time' (p. 34).

But the purportedly original intervention of the exercise does not seem to obtain. Gordon seems to admit as much, when he says that Benjamin had failed 'in achieving' a 'harmony' between the omnipotence of religion and the potential for human flourishing in a 'thoroughly secular life' (p. 63). Benjamin rocked 'without resolution between messianism and materialism' (p. 63). Such is the result of an

inquiry which Gordon calls a ‘well-known question’ (p. 63). Unfortunately, this section does not offer much in the way of a new way of thinking about Benjamin.

Gordon then shifts to exploring Horkheimer’s more straightforward but gradually developed use of Judaic thought to explain and make sense of the tumult inspired by war and anti-Semitism. Horkheimer hesitated in his later years – despite his greater religiosity – to refer to transcendental concepts as explanatory mechanisms and normative resources for redressing the shortcomings of modernity. The Holocaust and World War II created what Gordon calls a lasting ‘radical pessimism’ in Horkheimer that drove the ‘indispensability of religious concepts’ in his postwar life (p. 76).

Facing a challenge common to professed confessionalists in modern academia even to this day, Horkheimer had both a desire to be taken seriously as a secular thinker and to avoid forthright association with religious thought. Increasingly cynical as the years passed, Horkheimer became skeptical about the promise of social emancipation. The twin threats of authoritarian regimes and anti-Semitism encouraged him to find solace in Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. This stirred a moment of convergence with Adorno, as the two exchanged letters expressing joy about a theme lining the Theses: the world as being in a state of ‘permanent catastrophe’ (pp. 73–74). As such, the normative deficit that Benjamin saw in mundane, worldly resources became even more pronounced in Horkheimer, whose commitment to critical theory endorsed theology as the key to prosperity to the degree that he assigned ‘to Jewish precepts a foundational role in the philosophical genesis of critical theory’ (p. 91). As a result, Horkheimer found harmony with the late Benjamin, as both thinkers thought of religion as the exclusive custodian of normativity, leaving no room for secularism to inaugurate social transformation.

Gordon expresses deep skepticism about Horkheimer’s late work, noting, ‘An emancipatory project that hopes to redeem modernity of its this-worldly contradictions risks self-contradiction if it cannot locate the resources for this redemption within modernity itself’ (p. 95). Unsurprisingly, he makes no attempt to hide his endorsement of Adorno’s take on the matter. Situating Adorno’s thought in a reverence for – and later criticisms of – Arthur Schoenberg, his friendship with Gershom Scholem, and a philosophically kindred spirit in Maimonides, Gordon suggests that Adorno’s rejection of religious morality was key in the materialization of negative dialectics as a response to modernity’s normative deficit. On this model every identity must be constructed as having within itself a non-identity; every meta-physical act and statement must harbor a contradiction.

Adorno’s objection to all philosophical systems is that they presuppose that the way they describe the world sufficiently captures reality. But when those concepts are juxtaposed, they are inadequate. Non-identity brings this system of representation and the material world into relief, showing how – and this is historically key for Adorno – totalitarian systems are doomed to fail at the outset. For Gordon,

Adorno was able to make productive use of religion because it could be juxtaposed to secularism, leading to a more complete understanding of modernity. But the larger takeaway for the reader is that Adorno wanted to refuse the appeal to utopia lest any idea of the present supplant that idea of a brighter future. Adorno meditates on this resolution without an affirmative philosophy.

Ultimately, Gordon sounds the bugles of a secular multiculturalism generally familiar to the average inhabitant of western democracies. That secular modernity can offer the normative resources necessary for human flourishing without recourse to religion is a theme that seems to have occupied his attention for some time prior to writing this book. In an article reconstructing the debates on secularization between Hans Blumenthal and Karl Löwith, Gordon notes that Löwith's work 'seriously *underestimates* the extent to which modernity itself is capable of generating normative potentials that may *not* derive from the religious past' (Gordon, 2019, p. 168, italics in original). This is a question that has survived through the generations. For example, Jürgen Habermas's concern with the question of normative self-sufficiency features prominently in all his major works.

The broad contours of the book suffer from an ailment persistent in Gordon's scholarship. For him, ruminating on how the Frankfurt School thought about secularization was an attempt to evaluate the broader development of secularization itself. This is true, and Gordon does a noteworthy and careful job of doing so. However, the book assumes that secularization means the gradual extinction of theological concepts from public life. But religion is not as far away from secularism as Gordon thinks it is. Indeed, as anthropologist Saba Mahmood has argued, 'The antipathy that progressive secular intellectuals exhibit toward those forms of religiosity glossed as orthodox or traditionalist is often, paradoxically, conjoined with a certain commitment to the poetic resources of the Judeo-Christian tradition – evident in a literary and aesthetic sensibility, albeit denuded from the requirements of prophecy, doctrine, and traditional authority' (2006, p. 346). Standing in favor of secularism, Gordon argues that 'only by advancing its [secularism's] principles that we can create a social order that will allow for...difference without domination' (p. 155). But as Mahmood suggests, secularism is intertwined with a very Protestant understanding of what faith is, and the idea of religion as a matter of choice goes largely unquestioned in the book.

Over the centuries, Protestantism in its various forms maintained a relatively snug relationship with the nation-state, suggesting that its core tenets merged comfortably into liberal governance. Anthropologist Talal Asad has argued that religion and secularism are not separate: they constitute one another and emanate everchanging dynamics of power. Alongside Asad and Mahmood, Wendy Brown further challenges Gordon in arguing that religion's 'conceit' as emerging from the exercising of individual autonomy is 'a distinct (and distinctly Protestant) way of conceiving of religion' (in 2009, p. 17). Such a formulation of religion makes it easier to understand why Catholicism or Islam do not straightforwardly conform

with the religious subject ‘presumed by the formulations of religious freedom tolerance governing Euro-Atlantic modernity’ (in 2009, p. 17).

By rehearsing the fatigued refrains of secular multiculturalism, Gordon appears to flatten secularism into a disaggregation of state and church, followed by a Weberian-style disenchantment, so he does not consider whether secularism itself has agitated the contemporary migrant crises that serve as one of the primary inspirations for the book.

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