

Philosophy in Review



Peter E. Gordon, "Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization"

Jeffrey A. Bernstein

Volume 43, numéro 1, février 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098274ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098274ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bernstein, J. (2023). Compte rendu de [Peter E. Gordon, "Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 43(1), 19–21. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098274ar>

Copyright © Jeffrey A. Bernstein, 2023



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Peter E. Gordon. *Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization.* Yale University Press 2020. 196 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780300250763).

Two concerns tightly lace Peter Gordon's stirring book-length essay, *Migrants in the Profane*. First there is the theoretical project (present in Chapters 1-3) of discerning how the existence and eventual disappearance of religious categories 'came to have a *philosophical* meaning' (8) in the work of the early Frankfurt School (particularly in Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno). Then there is the practical desire (in the Introduction and Conclusion) to show how this process of secularization 'still has philosophical and political merit' (154). We might suggest (in Hegelian terms) that Gordon's work has the intention of showing the transformation of the substantial theoretical project into the subjective, active, practical one. Or, in language more redolent of the Frankfurt School, the theoretical project of discerning migration of religious categories into a secular context *itself migrates* into the practical insight which operates throughout Gordon's book: '[W]e are all in some sense *elsewhere*.... But if we are all the migrant then migration is not merely a specific political condition. Rather, it might be understood as the constitutive condition of humankind' (148). For Gordon, the condition of being a migrant is attested to by texts of all three Abrahamic religions, and its own migration into philosophy exhibits in the practical sphere what Adorno accomplished with religious discourse in the theoretical sphere—being a migrant turns from a substantive religious doctrine into a demand of thought.

The fundamental thrust of Gordon's work is to evaluate how successful Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno were in migrating religious categories into modern, secular, rationalist discourse. Put differently, Gordon wonders whether the usages made of religion by the three thinkers still maintain a nostalgia for religion as a supplement to secular thought. If nostalgia for religion is indeed maintained, this amounts to saying that modernity cannot make do (at least ethically) without it—that there is what Gordon calls a 'normative deficit of modernity' (79). At stake in this question is whether these thinkers are successful in deriving normative resources from within the very world that they critique (14), or whether they unwittingly adhere to a 'conservative and crypto-Gnostic critique of secular modernity as a fallen world' (141). The alternative for these three thinkers would be to derive an awareness of migration as a constitutive aspect of the human condition from the religious tradition in which all three (to differing extents) participated: 'To be a stranger, to be elsewhere than one's home, is and arguably remains the central experience of Jewish history' (10).

Each of Gordon's chapters begins with historical or biographical vignettes relating to the thought of the figure in question. To this extent, Gordon's work is situated at the best intersection of philosophy and intellectual history. For Benjamin, Gordon revisits the history of the automaton that begins thesis one of Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History.' Whereas originally this figure was supposed to suggest a secular, this-worldly, human-made ability to create a chess-playing machine (33), Benjamin's automaton—representing historical materialism—derives its power from theology. For Gordon, this means that Benjamin treats theology as the actual power that affects historical change by means of brutal irruption into the historical continuum—what Benjamin terms 'the messianic.' Rather than show the dialectical character of religion in history, Benjamin 'sustains a



stark dualism between history and religion, and seems unable to conceive of any means by which the two might be reconciled' in the secular realm (40). This dualism, for Gordon, persists through Benjamin's entire oeuvre—from the *Trauerspiel* through the works on Baudelaire and Proust, all the way to the History-theses. While Gordon's reading is not uncontroversial, skeptics of his interpretation (like myself) have to concede that Benjamin's language is indeed stark at times; he speaks of 'the messianic' and theology as if they were discrete entities that irrupt into normal life. Given that Gordon's Benjamin vacillates between affirming theology and historical materialism, he amounts to 'a theorist of ambivalent secularization, poised in indecision between Marxism and messianism' (53). If Benjamin is indeed a migrant in the profane, his migration is only partial.

A similar situation ensues in the thought of Horkheimer. Gordon notes that his early works evince a notably Schopenhauerian pessimism (71) as to whether modernity can sustain itself on its own terms. The pessimism continues during Horkheimer's work with Adorno on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the 1940s—there he construes 'modernity as a historical condition that no longer proffers any grounds for hope' (75), and this, according to Gordon, sets the stage for a radicalized pessimism that leads (in the later works) to an analogous claim of a normative deficit to the one seen in Benjamin. While *Dialectic of Enlightenment* still held on to the figure of Judaism as 'both domination and the critique of domination' (87), in Horkheimer's later works, 'Horkheimer...assign[ed] to Jewish precepts a foundational role in the philosophical genesis of critical theory' (91). His emphasis on religion and the longing for the 'Wholly Other' (90) demands that religion act as a supplement to aid a modernity without full resources of its own. But as Gordon maintains, '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' (95). Thus Horkheimer.

Adorno fares the best out of the three insofar as he successfully migrates religious categories into secular thought precisely by transforming their substance into a categorical demand of thought: 'The appeal to... a critical standpoint is what Adorno would characterize as "theological." Adorno is careful to say, however, that such an appeal is merely *conceptual*' (112). In emptying religious categories like 'theology' of their original substance and resituating them within thought as precisely a demand that thinking makes on itself, Adorno (more than Benjamin or Horkheimer) migrates these categories into a secularized context. In a fascinating comparison between *Negative Dialectics* and Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, Gordon shows that Adorno radicalizes Maimonidean negative predication about God into a critical stance against affirming ruling forms of thought: 'The critique of idolatry, we might say, migrated into the critique of ideology' (135). The much-discussed ban on representation is a critical reformulation of the Jewish ban on graven images in just this sense. In so doing, Adorno accomplishes the secularization of religious categories and figures in order to make use of them for a secular world.

How does Gordon's theoretical project align with his practical aspiration? How does the migration of religious categories and figures in Adorno (and unsuccessfully in Benjamin and Horkheimer) square with his desire to show the philosophical and political merit of viewing the figure of migration as a demand for our thought and action today? Gordon is not in favor of

maintaining a dogmatic secularism that has no use for any religious figures whatever—such a secularism would be as problematic and as intolerant as the religion that it opposes (147-148): ‘A genuinely *critical* consciousness must be responsive to difference and hold open the doors to people of all faiths’ (148). Nonetheless, ‘we should no longer be ashamed to draw the conclusion that “mere reason” already bears within itself an imperative of secularization that points beyond the horizons of religious belief’ (149). Adorno thus provides a critical model for our ability to learn from religious insight as it now comes to inhabit a secular landscape. A practical question we are left with is whether secularism is absolutely necessary in order to advocate for the migratory condition Gordon sees as constitutive of humanity. Surely there are believers who would view humanity similarly to how Gordon views it—are they simply irrelevant? Have we unwittingly defined all religion as nationalistic theodicy? And if so, do we risk alienating potential allies precisely in the struggle against it? A theoretical question we are left with is whether or not religious categories can actually simply change habitats without initiating a regression in the new terrain. Put differently, if we do not *need* religion to fill a normative deficit (there not being any), why do we *need* religious categories *at all*? Wouldn’t the desire to maintain religious categories—rather than let them slowly evaporate away—manifest the very nostalgia that Gordon seeks to disavow? Readers can only be grateful that Gordon’s work has opened up these questions for us as demands on our own thinking.

Jeffrey A. Bernstein, College of the Holy Cross