



Adorno monument by Vadim Zakharov, Goethe University Frankfurt | © mauritius images GmbH/Alamy

#### IN THIS REVIEW

##### MIGRANTS IN THE PROFANE

Critical theory and the question of secularization  
208pp. Yale University Press. £25 (US \$35).

Peter E. Gordon

In November 1917, [Max Weber](#) told an audience of students in Munich that “the various possible attitudes to life are in unresolvable conflict, irreconcilable, so in the end we all must make a choice”. He went on to suggest that this existential predicament was a consequence of the disenchantment of the world, that is, the loss of something magical. Previously, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he had presented a subtle argument to show that habits cultivated in response to theological anxiety continued to shape modern Western societies long after the religious beliefs that prompted them had been abandoned.

The consequences of this loss of faith became a central theme in the work of the philosophers who gathered in the 1930s at the Institute for Social Research - later known as the Frankfurt School. Their search for rational grounds on which to construct belief in a better social future is the subject of Peter E. Gordon’s excellent new book, in which he surveys the work of [Walter Benjamin](#), Max Horkheimer and [Theodor W. Adorno](#). All three rejected the truth content of traditional religious belief, but all three also made use of recycled theological motifs, as sources of hope rather than symbols of loss, in their work.

Gordon starts with Benjamin, whose messianic theory of historical irruption was combined, problematically, with a sense of ruefulness towards the loss we feel in our experience of mass-produced artworks. He contrasts these ideas with Horkheimer’s pessimism about the potential for progress in a

rationaly administered society, in which culture functions merely as a sedative. Whereas Benjamin imagined the angel, depicted in his favourite Paul Klee drawing, to be looking backwards in horror at the course of human history, Horkheimer lamented that critical theory had “replaced theology, but found no new heaven to which it can point, not even a heaven on earth”.

In the most suggestive chapter of the book, Gordon describes Adorno’s quest to repurpose the Hegelian dialectic for modernity. Marx had replaced “Spirit” with “humanity” in his subversion of Hegel, but Adorno saw clearly enough what the agency of the proletariat had produced in Russia and Germany. He also recognized that once the dialectical process had lost its subject, so too it might lose any sense of forward momentum. In the absence of a reliable agent of social change, how is progress towards a better society imaginable? Adorno’s answer drew on his insight into the power of the negative: that about which we can neither speak nor represent visually yet can nonetheless believe in. The structural form of this thought, theological in origin, is not abandoned when its content is discarded. Rather, it becomes sacred residue that migrates into the profane.

One of the paradoxes of critical theory is that the subjects it deals with are among our most urgent social and political problems, but the key texts demand our patience, since describing the problems more starkly takes precedence over the promise of easy solutions. One great virtue of Gordon’s book is that it offers an engaging and readable introduction to some of the hardest and most provocative thinking of the Frankfurt School. Another is that while he is sympathetic to the difficulty of the questions they addressed, he draws attention to the insufficiency and inconclusiveness of many of their answers.

That modern societies have failed to live up to their own ethical standards remains a central theme of contemporary critical theory. Gordon concludes his survey of the Frankfurt School’s response to the conceptual challenge of secularization with a brief, positive reference to the work of [Jürgen Habermas](#), who has spoken of “an awareness of what is missing”, namely, insufficient reserves to meet the ethical demands of the modern world.

Contemporary societies suffer from normative as well as fiscal deficits, and they find the former harder to resolve. We can print money, but we cannot mint hope. If progress can be made by borrowing conceptual resources from an earlier, more enchanted world, so be it. You do not need to believe in past magic to choose a better future.

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