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Lessons in Secular Criticism by Stathis Gourgouris (review)

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Gourgouris, Stathis. 2013. *Lessons in Secular Criticism*. New York: Fordham University Press. \$65.00 hc. \$24.00 sc. xxiv + 186 pp.

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The vexed intersections of religion, secularism, and literature have recently moved to the forefront of debates within critique. With *Lessons in Secular Criticism*, Stathis Gourgouris presents six essays that productively reshape these debates by tacking between the traditional formations of the secular and the religious. While many of these writings have appeared elsewhere in earlier forms, this volume significantly expands and revises them. Readers who have followed Gourgouris's debates about secularism with Saba Mahmood or who want to see his engagement with versions of the secular from Charles Taylor or Talal Asad will be especially interested in this collection.

Based on Gourgouris's 2012 Sydney Lectures in Philosophy and Society, the essays are inspired by Edward Said's 1983 collection *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Said opened with "Secular Criticism" and ended with a call to return critical discourse to the secular endeavor he imagined. Taking up this last task, Gourgouris not only challenges the metaphysical commitments he sees in traditional formations of secularism and religion, but he also significantly expands the potential meaning of the term "secular criticism," which remained elusive in Said's original presentation. For Gourgouris, secular criticism is a politics that directly engages the problem of authority. It demands "putting into question the means by which knowledge is presented as sovereign, unmarked by whatever social-historical institution actually possesses it" (xiv). That critical task relentlessly resists "heteronomy," or the ascription of power to an other or Other outside real human conditions and agency (xiv). For Gourgouris, secular criticism is authorized by immanence and self-critique, not by transcendence or religion. He argues that his "ultimate point" is to "take away from the religious the agency of determining what is secular" (62). If secularism has indeed unconsciously modeled itself in the image and likeness of religious concepts of authority, then secular criticism can strip away the "metaphysics of secularism" (28), the "set of principles" that could "posit themselves independent of historical reality" (30). Against this temptation of transcendence, Gourgouris posits the finitude, groundlessness, and inherent incompleteness of secular criticism. Secular criticism thus resists the prime model of foundationalism, the "external, ahistorical, heteronomous authorization" that Gourgouris sees in "divine power" (50).

Following Said, Gourgouris declares secular criticism to be political. His essays consistently link theory with "radical democratic politics" (xvii), culminating in his final lecture, "Responding to the Deregulation of the Political," which deftly covers radical movements ranging from the French Revolution to Occupy Wall

Street. To frame these political interventions, Gourgouris nimbly draws from literary and theoretical antecedents. His first lecture, “The *Poiein* of Secular Criticism,” challenges definitions of “secular” and “secular criticism” derived from critics like Talal Asad and instead delimits the ancient concept *poiesis* to a secular making, an “immanent” and human “encounter with the world” (11). The enduring flux and change of that encounter means that secular criticism “cannot be defined” (12), that it exists not as *theoria* but as *praxis*, “alert to contingencies and skeptical toward whatever pretends to escape the worldly” (13).

In his second and most critically effective essay, “Detranscendentalizing the Secular,” Gourgouris brings his conception of secular criticism to bear on elements of Charles Taylor’s work, challenging the idea of secularization as possessed of a *telos* or end goal. Gourgouris contends that, in *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor draws *a priori* authority from his religious politics, which moves his critique “outside secular authorization” (39). While such a broad claim against *A Secular Age* isn’t new, Gourgouris’s understanding of secular criticism as an inherently and necessarily incomplete critical project challenges Taylor’s understanding of secularization as a process with a “purpose and end point” (39). That is, secular criticism need not conform to a theological framework that demands some kind of final goal and transcendent horizon. Instead, it draws its authority from its own immanence. Gourgouris also rightly takes issue with Taylor’s implicit image of those without religious belief as “yearning and ultimately unfulfilled,” finding it on a par with “portraits of believers as blissed out with certainty and fulfillment” (42). These critiques are interesting and new, but they could do without rhetorical hyperbole: Gourgouris’s idea that Taylor is in “panic before the obstacle of Nietzsche” (38n8), for instance, or that he has a “fear of the tragic” (42) seem unnecessary and inaccurate. Taylor does address Nietzsche in some detail and rather soberly across his work.

Another flaw runs throughout Gourgouris’s lectures, one his collection shares with recent treatments of secularism from within the tradition of critique. Like many secular critics, he reduces a diverse and complex lived identity and experience to the monolithic phrase “religion” (or “Islam” or “Christianity”). This tendency in contemporary criticism can be attributed to another specter of Marx, who associated the reductive formation “religion” with the work of critique, especially in *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (1843). A related problem is Gourgouris’s critical archive, which he constructs almost entirely from within critique (including Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Said). Built only from such sources, “religion” in Gourgouris’s project takes on familiar and tired trappings, particularly those ascribed to it by the generalizations of early sociology. “Religion” is authoritarian, otherworldly, oppressive, antidemocratic, and so on. This critical cast translates into Gourgouris’s occasional breezy dismissal of complex theological problems. In his third lecture, “Why I Am Not a Post-Secularist,” he reads in the Resurrection the idea of the “Christian God” as something like “the living dead, the Undead, like one of those astounding monsters in horror movies” (73). Even overlooked

as moments of provocation, these jabs lack the tight theoretical construction that otherwise marks *Lessons in Secular Criticism*. This failure to engage the sophisticated discourses of contemporary religious studies and theology is a missed opportunity, since the formulation of Gourgouris's secular criticism is so sophisticated that the reader wishes to see it brought into dialogue with religious complexity, not see it settle for religious straw men.

This minor problem aside, Gourgouris's expansion of secular criticism into a sophisticated political practice marks a significant contribution to recent debates about secularism. As he mentions in *Lessons in Secular Criticism*, Gourgouris is now at work on two books of "secular criticism," *Nothing Sacred* and *The Perils of the One*. This is fortunate news as it means readers can continue to learn from the same energy and critical complexity that mark this most recent collection.