

Spring 1-1-2011

Dialectical Critique and Secularism: Hegel and the Dialectic of Enlightenment

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Dialectical Critique and Secularism:
Hegel and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

by

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A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
Comparative Literature Graduate Program

2011

This thesis entitled:

Dialectical Critique and Secularism:

Hegel and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Sambrooke, Jerilyn. (M.A., Comparative Literature)

Dialectical Critique and Secularism: Hegel and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Patrick Greaney

The secularization thesis, which posits that religion's influence declines as a society modernizes, has fallen upon hard times. Its critics argue that the religious does not simply oppose the secular. Critical theory has a particularly vexed relationship with religion, and theorists are rethinking religion within this tradition. This thesis argues that critiques of the secular have played a significant role in the development of critical theory. A reading of Hegel's dialectic of faith and enlightenment in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* demonstrates its deep influence on Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a central text of the critical theory tradition. Horkheimer and Adorno draw on Hegel to critique the subject/object distance that enables secular, enlightenment rationality. This argument recurs in recent work by secular studies scholar, Saba Mahmood. This thesis argues that the critical theory tradition is deeply invested in the debates around the secular, despite recent claims to the contrary.

Contents

Introduction	1
Contemporary Theorists of the Secular	2
Hegel's Dialectic: Enlightenment and Its Imagined Opponent	10
Horkheimer and Adorno: Enlightenment as Self-destructive	13
Hegel's Dialectic: Enlightenment Recognizes Itself	16
Horkheimer and Adorno: The Critique of Abstraction	22
Analyzing Secularism: Saba Mahmood's Critique of Subject/Object Relations	29
Conclusion	33
Works Cited	35

Introduction

Describing a theorist's argument as "Hegelian" often solicits a decidedly negative reaction. The implied critique invokes fears that the scholar has posited universalist claims and promoted rigid teleologies. Such critiques would be anathema to most scholars trained in the tradition of poststructuralism. They avoid dialectical arguments and favour multiplicity over duality. In the eagerness to avoid the charge of "Hegelianism," which is seen as synonymous with the problems mentioned above, scholars often pass over both the influences of Hegel's thought and the theoretical opportunities that his thought offers to contemporary issues. This thesis addresses both of these consequences of minimizing Hegel's presence in the current debates concerning secularism. By pointing out the "Hegelian" arguments that secular studies scholars such as Charles Taylor and Saba Mahmood are developing, I do not mean to charge them with subversive universalist agendas. Instead, I mean to draw attention to the ways in which a closer analysis of Hegel—and Horkheimer and Adorno, who draw on Hegel—contribute to these discussions of the secular and provide a rich history of critique that informs these contemporary debates.

This project develops several distinct and interconnected arguments. First, I demonstrate how theorists such as Saba Mahmood and Charles Taylor frame their projects in ways that invoke Hegel's arguments in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, even though they do not acknowledge this influence. Second, I offer a closer reading of the enlightenment/faith dialectical moment in the *Phenomenology*, aiming to make explicit both a) how Horkheimer and Adorno build on this moment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and also b) how this moment returns in the contemporary work by Taylor and Mahmood. These arguments make explicit critical theory's long tradition of

problematizing theories of secularization, and demonstrate that critiques of secular reason are embedded within the tradition of critical theory.

One of the implications of this project concerns critical theory's situation within the current debates concerning the secular. Theorists within the critical theory tradition such as Raymond Geuss and Wendy Brown have been calling for a more rigorous analysis of religion in the writings of Karl Marx and Theodor Adorno as a way to engage these debates around the secular.¹ My project enters these discussions by positing that an emphasis on the Hegelian roots of this tradition reveals that the relation between the secular and the religious has been a consistent theme through the tradition of critical theory.²

Contemporary Theorists of the Secular

In recent scholarship, an important distinction is made between secularization and secularism (or secularity or the secular, for some theorists). Secularization is the object of an established tradition of scholarship in sociology, frequently stemming from Max Weber, that investigates the assumption that modernity inevitably and necessarily marginalizes religion. In *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (2006), Vincent Pecora summarizes

¹ See Raymond Geuss and Margarete Kohlenbach. *The Early Frankfurt School and Religion* (2005). Wendy Brown frequently returns to Marx, calling for a rethinking of his relationship to religion and the secular. See "The Sacred, the Secular, and the Profane: Charles Taylor and Karl Marx" (2010). Jürgen Habermas has also taken up the question of the secular in relationship to the critical theory tradition. See *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*. (2010) and also his lecture "Faith and Knowledge" (2010). Finally, the special issue of *Boundary 2* (2004) on Edward Said's notion of "critical secularism" demonstrates the urgency of this debate in critical theory circles. See Aamir R. Mufti, "Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times."

² This paper does not follow the critics who enter this discussion by tracing theological themes in Horkheimer and Adorno's work. For example, Rüdiger Bittner in "Does *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Rest on Religious Foundations?" argues that yes, "*Dialectic of Enlightenment* is built on a theological or even religious basis in that its framework of concepts makes sense only within a theological context" (158). My argument, in contrast, points to the ways in which these "religious foundations" are problematized in Horkheimer and Adorno's work and in contemporary debates on the secular. Gérard Raulet in "Secularisation, Myth, Anti-Semitism" (2005) argues that the notion of "mythical thought" means a certain "relationship with reality—a 'spiritual form'—which must be granted a lasting presence even in the supposedly enlightened world, despite all 'secularisation', and which cannot be eliminated for good by any demythologisation" (173). Here he remains within the framework of secularization—leaving religion behind—which my paper problematizes, favouring instead the model of "secularism."

two common narratives of secularization.³ One school of thought tells a story in which religion retreats from public life and thereby makes room for the reconstruction of social institutions on a rational basis. In this model, secularization leads to a new perspective, an unprecedented rationality. It enables men to become “more and more capable of ‘making history’” (Monod in Pecora 5). Another narrative frames secularization as a transfer of schemes and models elaborated in the field of religion; in this account, religion “nourishes” modernity. This model challenges modernity’s myth of “auto-foundation” and implies that religion remains present, although undetected, in modernity.⁴

The term secularization emphasizes a social process that is, was, or could be underway. A careful reading of Pecora’s work demonstrates how this framework, which he utilizes, limits his analysis. For example, he argues that what is “[a]t stake in the current conversations is the necessity and universality of linking secularization with modernization” (Pecora 7). While this question raises important issues, especially concerning the politics of “modernizing nations,” the analytical focus here remains on the process of becoming secular: what contributes to this process; what is at stake in this process; how is this process judged to be complete? Similarly, both of the above definitions of secularization investigate “to what degree” a culture has secularized. The assumption behind this question—and other questions such as: To what extent has religion retreated from the public sphere? Where does religion continue or cease to influence public life?—is that the secularizing process has taken place or will take place. The investigation focuses on whether such a process is inevitable, universal, and intrinsic to modernity. Religion

³ These definitions come from Pecora’s reading of Jean-Claude Monod’s recent study *La querelle de la secularization de Hegel à Blumenberg* (Paris: Vrin, 2002).

⁴ Pecora, rather than challenging the founding assumptions in these positions, situates his own work in relation to these traditional definitions: “My goal is less a dissolution of the dualism than a working through of the dilemma we confront in it, a dilemma that is simultaneously conceptual and political, abstractly philosophical and terribly worldly” (Pecora 6). Pericles Lewis argues that, by situating himself within the framework of “secularization,” Pecora comes down “mostly on the side of the traditional secularization thesis” (Lewis 196).

itself, in this framework, is perceived as a force or an object that can be overcome, left behind, manipulated, or altered.

Neither the contemporary critics nor the philosophers whom I consider in this thesis situate their critiques of the secular in terms of “secularization.” The terms “secularism” and “secularity” frame the debate differently, highlighting issues of governance and power. Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2008) provides one example (and an influential one at that) of how this distinction functions. Taylor’s book “is devoted not simply to criticizing the view that modernity inevitably marginalizes religion ... but rather to explaining how conditions of secularity have come to shape both contemporary belief and ‘unbelief’ alike” (Warner 5). The debate around “secularity” (Taylor’s unique term) focuses on the relationship between religious and secular viewpoints, problematizing any simplistic arrangement of them as naturally opposed:

Religious and antireligious people in modernity have more assumptions in common than they often realize. Taylor’s [framing of secularity] is meant to capture this often unrecognized common condition.... *A Secular Age* displaces the commonsense opposition between the religious and the secular with a new understanding in which this opposition appears only as a late and retrospective misrecognition. (17)

Warner describes this as “a powerful and striking thesis” (17), but I am more inclined to see this argument as one that is shared among many theorists of the secular and that has a long-standing, if rarely noted, history.

Saba Mahmood serves as another key interlocutor in this debate. Even though she disagrees with Taylor’s political commitments, she similarly exemplifies the current concern to challenge the simplistic opposition between secular and religious perspectives. In her analysis of the Danish cartoon affair of 2005 and 2008, Mahmood notes how critics of varying commitments

commonly posit an “incommensurable divide between strong religious beliefs and secular values” (64). The assumption is that one simply cannot maintain religious beliefs and support secular values. Mahmood points out, however, that more sensitive voices within this discussion “have tried to show how the religious and the secular are not so much immutable essences or opposed ideologies as they are concepts that...are...interdependent and necessarily linked in their mutual transformation and historical emergence” (64).⁵ She tracks this connection between the religious and the secular in her very definition of secularism. She defines it “not simply as the doctrinal separation of church from state but also as the rearticulation of religion in a manner that is commensurate with modern sensibilities and modes of governance” (65). At stake in any discussion of religion, in other words, is the issue of secular governance.

Mahmood’s article traces how religion is articulated in the secular order, and she focuses specifically on how religious images are read in the legal tradition of the West. She contrasts religious “symbols” with religious “icons,” arguing that at stake in this distinction are assumptions about subject/object relations that limit how a subject can engage with an object of veneration. In the final section of the thesis, I will return to this argument and consider how a Hegelian reading of Horkheimer and Adorno’s work intensifies the claims that Mahmood makes.

Mahmood and Taylor, at first glance, clearly demonstrate that the religious and the secular cannot be treated as opposing forces but must be studied as ways of engaging the world that have much in common, each shaping the other. By framing the issue of the secular in terms of “secularism” or “secularity,” their critical investigations focus on the mutually constitutive

⁵ Some of the scholars that she would include in this grouping would include the following: John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006); Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom & Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2007); Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007); Michael Warner, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010).

relationship between the secular and the religious. They investigate the nature of the relation between them rather than the process of one overcoming the other.

It is precisely this complex relationship between the religious and the secular that I will explore in Hegel's "Enlightenment and Faith" dialectic in the *Phenomenology* and its influence on Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In Hegel's argument, enlightenment claims certainty and universality of knowledge through the laws of rationality that it believes to have discovered. It then assumes a position of superiority over faith, arguing that faith founds itself on an illusion. By positing itself as the opposite of faith, Hegel argues that enlightenment misunderstands its own logic. Hegel's dialectical argument, in which faith and enlightenment confront one another, demonstrates that this strict opposition has been fabricated by enlightenment and that it must recognize its intimate relation to faith.

While Horkheimer and Adorno make no direct references to Hegel in their prefatory remarks to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is clear that his philosophical project—and particularly his "enlightenment and faith" dialectic—informs their work. J. M. Bernstein makes the strong claim that "Horkheimer and Adorno explicitly conceived *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to be a generalization and radicalization of 'The Enlightenment' chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*," even though this fact is "rarely noted" amongst scholars (22). Horkheimer's fascination with Hegel's argument appears in a letter to Friedrich Pollock, in which he writes that he and Adorno were attempting to trace out the same process that Hegel identifies in his critique of Enlightenment in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Schmidt 745).⁶ Even a brief outline of the text itself indicates their debt to Hegel: the opening essay, "The Concept of Enlightenment," immediately

⁶ Horkheimer explains in this letter to Friedrich Pollock that he and Adorno were "attempting to provide nothing less than an understanding of 'the process of enlightenment as it was marked out in the first thought a human being conceived, that same process of which Hegel says that if started it is irresistible'" (Horkheimer cited in Schmidt, "Language"). This particular letter is unavailable for circulation in the United States, and so a fuller context of the comment is unavailable for this thesis.

invokes the Hegelian “concept” and then goes on to develop a dialectical argument engaging myth and enlightenment.

At the core of both Hegel’s and Horkheimer and Adorno’s interrogations of the enlightenment lies the issue of secularization—enlightenment’s presumed overcoming of religious belief or superstition. Although neither text employs the term “secular,” both explicitly interrogate enlightenment’s presumed opposition to belief or superstition. Hegel and Horkheimer and Adorno offer alternative visions of enlightenment rationality, and both texts argue that this alternative can only emerge when enlightenment reflects on itself and its relationship to faith (Hegel) or myth (Horkheimer and Adorno).⁷ This process of reflection reveals a dialectical relationship between faith/myth and enlightenment which then replaces the rather naïve model in which enlightenment reason believes itself to exist as the opposite of faith/myth. Enlightenment reason can no longer declare its superiority based on its secularizing move, its opposition to faith/myth. Hegel’s argument provides the logical template for this argument, which Horkheimer and Adorno build on to develop their more rigorous critique of instrumental rationality.

It is tempting to craft Horkheimer and Adorno into more radical figures than they are. They do not explicitly question whether secularization has occurred or if such a process could be otherwise. While contemporary theorists like Taylor and Mahmood may wish to push critiques of the secular into more aggressive stances, Horkheimer and Adorno’s contributions stem from the theoretical tools that they employ and the questions that they pose. They demonstrate the benefits of dialectical logic for thinking through the relationships between rationality and secularization. While they do not obviously enact distinctions between secularization and

⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno deliberately use the term “myth” rather than “faith” in their argument. “Faith,” they state, “is unavoidably tied to knowledge” (14). In an effort to move the argument away from strictly epistemological grounds, they invoke “myth” so that their argument can address the nature of rationality more generally.

secularism, they concern themselves with investigating what is at stake in rationality's engagement with faith, belief, or superstition. By analyzing the effects of secularization on rationality itself, Horkheimer and Adorno perform a far more complex critique of the secular than traditional investigations of secularization undertake.

In a letter to Loewenthal in 1940, Horkheimer explicitly places the question of the secular in conversation with the issues of rationality and reason that are at stake in their critique of enlightenment rationality:

One must earnestly inquire if, among the rummage that the church has sold off, something that is very valuable has, not unexpectedly, become dirt cheap: for example, the differentiation between thought and truth, with the latter God himself was identified... Now what, now that God has been sold off! We must write our logic anew. (Cited in Schmidt, "Language," 6)

Horkheimer assumes here that the process of secularization is underway; the church has sold off some of "its rummage," and they are looking here to investigate the consequences of this "sale." The stakes are high: truth, thought, and logic are in question. For Horkheimer, enlightenment rationality has a complex relationship to the process of secularization that he perceives working its way through philosophy. What does it mean to "write our logic anew" and why is this necessarily linked to the shifting role of the church within society?

The answers to these questions have their roots in Hegel. Historical explanations of secularization traditionally argue that the secular world will emerge as the enlightenment project gains dominance. They posit decline (i.e. the decline of religion in the public sphere) as the dominant metaphor, and they maintain a linear logical trajectory in which religion eventually gives way to reason. This is the narrative that the secular state likes to tell; it grounds its secular

authority in having conquered religious authority. This is not, however, what the dialectical argument puts forward. Hegel argues for a logical relationship between faith and enlightenment. They are two aspects of a dialectical argument that have misunderstood their relationship to each other and, therefore, have misunderstood their own identities. Horkheimer and Adorno similarly frame enlightenment and secularization in logical rather than historical terms. As Simon Jarvis explains, “enlightenment” does not “designate a historical period running from Descartes to Kant. Instead [Horkheimer and Adorno] use it to refer to a series of related intellectual and practical operations which are presented as demythologizing, secularizing or disenchanting some mythical, religious or magical representation of the world” (Jarvis 1998: 24). By following Hegel and positing a logical, rather than historical, relationship between enlightenment and myth, Horkheimer and Adorno challenge the assumption that religion exists as an object that can be superseded or overcome. It does not exist, they argue, external to enlightened rationality but, instead, has a close dialectical relationship to it.

As a closer reading of the *Phenomenology* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* will demonstrate, the dialectical argument situates “faith” (for Hegel) and “myth” (for Horkheimer and Adorno) as products of enlightenment itself: enlightenment creates them so that it may define itself against them. In order to posit a more nuanced version of enlightened rationality, it must develop a new narrative of its relation to myth/faith. Rather than speaking of faith and enlightenment as mutually exclusive, Hegel’s argument allows Horkheimer and Adorno to develop a relationship in which the two are intimately related. This thesis will trace how this dialectical relation opens a space for making a more radical critique than traditional “rise of the secular” arguments allow.

Hegel's Dialectic: Enlightenment and Its Imagined Opponent

At stake in the section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* titled “The Enlightenment” is the question of how enlightenment will know itself. In the preceding section, “Reason,” rationality attempts to find itself in the world, and Hegel systematically demonstrates how various understandings of rationality are one-sided and inadequate. At the end of that section, consciousness realizes that it needs to “put its merely individual aspect behind it” (Hegel 261) and it is now prepared to move from “Reason” to “Spirit.” The section concerning “Spirit” contains three moments, which each develop further the social elements of consciousness: ethical order, culture, and morality.

Hegel's critique of enlightenment occurs in the middle section concerning culture.

Culture here has a negative connotation, and is addressed under the subheading “self-alienated spirit.” Hegel begins by arguing that in the realm of culture, Spirit does not simply construct for itself a single, unified world, “but a world that is double, divided and self-opposed” (295). He performs here an oft-repeated move in the *Phenomenology*: a form of consciousness creates its opposite, which it must recognize in order to advance to a more complex stage. At this particular moment Hegel demonstrates how culture creates a counterpart for itself that exists in a world “beyond”:

The *present* actual world has its antithesis directly in its beyond, which is both the thinking of it and its thought-form, just as the *beyond* has in the present world its actuality, but an actuality alienated from it. (295, emphasis original)

This separation into two separate worlds occurs as the world of culture—“the whole” (321)—has become alienated from itself. The physical reality and the subject who thinks that she knows this reality constitute the “present, actual world” and thought is banished to the world beyond, which

exists merely in thought, cut off from the actual world. What then passes as thought in the realm of culture amounts to vain, self-centered judgments:

It is the self-centered self that knows, not only how to pass judgement on and chatter about everything, but how to give witty expression to the *contradiction* that is present in the solid elements of the *actual* world, as also in the fixed determinations posited by judgement; and this contradiction is their truth. (320)

Thought is reduced to “passing judgement” but is unable to engage the actual world as Hegel would have a self-conscious mind do. He explains elsewhere that this self-centered self “understands very well how to pass judgement on [the substantial world], but has lost the ability to *comprehend* it” (320). This problem of comprehending the world will persist so long as enlightenment remains unable to see its other as faith.

Rüdiger Bubner provides an insightful gloss to this section of the *Phenomenology*, pointing to Hegel’s unique contribution, which Horkheimer and Adorno build upon. Bubner emphasizes that the world of culture itself gives rise to the believing consciousness—faith. Enlightenment then naively positions itself against this faith. Bubner locates here Hegel’s innovative move:

[Hegel’s] interpretation suggests that the official Enlightenment campaign against “superstition” is itself a product of the world of culture. In contrast to the perspective that is generally presented in textbook accounts of the period, the progressive critique mounted by the Enlightenment is directed not against the obscurantist remnants of an ancient but persisting tradition, but against a partner that has the same origin as the Enlightenment itself. (Bubner 156)

Bubner draws our attention here to Hegel's key argument: the enlightenment project wants to set itself up as that which conquers a stubborn belief in the supernatural or erases a lingering fascination with superstition. The "textbook accounts of the period" or, in other words, standard narratives of secularization, posit enlightenment as a project in which critique functions to purify reason by excising the "remnants" of a "persisting tradition."⁸ Bubner argues that Hegel's critique of enlightenment attacks precisely this assumption by arguing that enlightenment is "the result of, rather than the motive power behind, the world of culture" (156). Hegel's argument "relativises" the enlightenment project and "demotes" the struggle with superstition with which it believes itself to be nobly engaged (156). In what follows, I will return to Hegel's argument in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and demonstrate how Hegel is able to argue that faith becomes a partner that "has the same origin as the Enlightenment itself."

Even though neither Bubner nor Hegel uses the terms secularization or secularism in his discussion of enlightenment rationality, this discussion demonstrates how Hegel problematizes traditional narratives of secularization in which religion is overcome or left behind as enlightenment rationality progresses. Before I turn to consider the specifics of Hegel's dialectic between faith and enlightenment, I will demonstrate how Horkheimer and Adorno also advance a similar argument regarding the relationship between myth and enlightenment in which they demonstrate that "myth" functions as a partner rather than an opposite to "enlightenment."

⁸ The two definitions of secularization that Vincent Pecora (discussed earlier) provides—secularization as a retreat of religion from the public sphere or secularization as a transfer of schemes from religion to politics—both exemplify this "textbook account" that Bubner develops here. Models of secularization that work on the logic of "purity" or of "completeness" function in the manner that Bubner spells out here.

Horkheimer and Adorno: Enlightenment as Self-destructive

To make clear why Horkheimer and Adorno find it advantageous to turn to Hegel's dialectical arguments in the *Phenomenology*, I will set out the problems that they detect in enlightenment rationality. They open the Preface boldly with the claim that the problem lies in "contemporary consciousness" itself (xiv). At the broadest level, they are investigating why the enlightenment project has gone awry: "why [is] humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, [...] sinking into a new kind of barbarism" (xiv). They explain that they began their analysis of enlightenment with a strong trust in the traditional disciplines of sociology, psychology, and epistemology, but soon realized that they had to "abandon that trust" (xiv). They realized that not only the operations but also the purpose of science had become "dubious" (xiv). The very tools of reason and language have become deficient for the task at hand. Traditional critique would restrict them to rearranging bricks; they wanted to bring in more bricks and erect a new building.

They argue that "thought finds itself deprived not only of the affirmative reference to science and everyday phenomena but also of the conceptual language of opposition. No terms are available which do not trend toward complicity with the prevailing intellectual trends" (xv). By locating the site of struggle in thought and language itself, they ask the reader not just to criticize the path that enlightenment has taken, historically, but to consider precisely what constitutes enlightenment. Voicing opposition to the current state of affairs will not suffice; a critique must be made on the level of what constitutes valid opposition.

By briefly analyzing a few examples—the entertainment industry and the education system—Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrate how the intense desire for efficiency has infected contemporary institutions and poisons any attempts to oppose this system. They point to

voluntary censorship in the film industry and the refined bureaucratization of the publication industry, and they argue that the restrictions placed on films and books function to lower costs and increase profits for those industries. The education system receives the most scathing critique, however. It will render the functions of the censors and the bureaucracy superfluous as students are taught to internalize the rationality and efficiency that characterize the industrial spheres of publishing and film. The system aims to increase productivity at any cost, and it assumes that such a goal is best accomplished by narrowly focusing on facts. To leave space for speculation and the inexplicable is perceived as threatening the goal of efficient production:

In the belief that without strict limitation to the observation of facts and the calculation of probabilities the cognitive mind would be overreceptive to charlatanism and superstition, that [education] system is preparing arid ground for the greedy acceptance of charlatanism and superstition. (xv-xvi)

They summarize here the naïve belief that modern education ought to move the mind beyond superstition, and then they argue that such a program produces the opposite effect. The attempt to excise superstition from the mind results, ironically, in the attraction to such superstition. Rationality, understood in this limited way, proves self-destructive, and enlightenment finds itself back in the realm of mythology and superstition. It declares that it can free the mind from enslavement to simplistic notions of fate and supernatural forces. To bring about this freedom, however, the system relies on a rigid framework of logic in which every experience must be explained according to the rules of that system. This need to account for each experience with a logical explanation recalls the system of fate and the supernatural; all can be explained even before it occurs. This model of rationality continually reinforces the existing logic and forecloses the possibility of new knowledge. In this sense, they argue that it is self-destructive.

This element of self-destruction that Horkheimer and Adorno uncover in enlightenment rationality assumes a central role in their project. As they considered their intellectual journey in this project, they quickly realized that the “first matter we had to investigate [was] the self-destruction of enlightenment” (xvi). This self-destruction manifests itself as a “relapse into mythology,” which they elsewhere call the “germ of regression.” As they interrogate the cause of this relapse, they ask why educated people are falling “under the spell of despotism,” despite its “affinity to nationalist paranoia” (xvi). They reject the common argument that the German people (the references to Nazi-Germany are undeniable) are compelled by these modern, nationalist mythologies. Instead—and here we see echoes of Hegel—they argue that this relapse is caused by the nature of enlightenment itself:

We believe that [we have shown] that the cause of enlightenment’s relapse into mythology is to be sought not so much in the nationality, pagan, or other modern mythologies concocted specifically to cause such a relapse as in the fear of truth which petrifies enlightenment itself. (xvi)

The relapse into mythology, in other words, is not caused by external political factors, such as Hitler’s rise to power, but instead by the dynamics internal to enlightenment rationality. The “fear of truth” has immobilized enlightenment. In a move similar to Hegel’s, they demonstrate that enlightenment has produced its own opposite in mythology. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that enlightenment can move beyond this moment of petrification only by confronting the fear that has been projected into mythology: “If enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate” (xvi). Elsewhere, they highlight the urgency of this project: “What is at issue here is not culture as a value ... but the necessity for enlightenment to reflect on itself if humanity is not to be totally betrayed” (xvii). The philosophical innovation for

both Hegel and Horkheimer and Adorno resides in their ability to locate the problems of enlightenment within itself. In order for enlightenment to “reflect on itself,” it must specifically address its relationship to “faith” or “myth.”

Hegel’s Dialectic: Enlightenment Recognizes Itself

Turning to the details of Hegel’s dialectical argument will demonstrate a) how Hegel is able to argue that enlightenment can only progress if it acknowledges its relationship to faith and b) how this interaction with faith will change how enlightenment understands itself. In brief, through his argument, Hegel shifts the relationship between faith and enlightenment from critique to recognition. In the model of critique, enlightenment wants to prove the falsity of faith’s claims: God does not exist; ascetic practices are illogical. In the model of recognition, by contrast, enlightenment realizes that a believer’s relationship to its object of knowledge (God) is based on recognition and trust. Enlightenment rationality ought to emulate this relationship to its objects of knowledge even if that object is not God. By contrasting critique with recognition, Hegel moves the debate away from epistemological arguments in which both enlightenment and faith claim to have discovered grounds for universal knowledge. By emphasizing the importance of recognition, Hegel posits a more nuanced enlightenment rationality. His assertion of a rationality that grounds itself in recognition is precisely what attracts Horkheimer and Adorno to this moment in the *Phenomenology*.

At the beginning of the dialectical moment, enlightenment does not understand that it needs faith in order to come to its own self-consciousness. In “The Struggle of the Enlightenment with Superstition,” Hegel demonstrates that enlightenment misunderstands how faith functions and how it relates to enlightenment. It critiques faith viciously but does not

realize that what enlightenment sees in faith is its own self. Enlightenment's blindness to this fact constitutes Hegel's critique of enlightenment (Stolzenberg 190). This process is necessary, however, because enlightenment will eventually come to a fuller self-understanding through this process: "Pure insight [...] is in the first instance devoid of content and is rather the pure vanishing of it; but by the negative movement towards what is negative to *it*, it will realize itself and give itself a content" (329, emphasis original). Enlightenment is devoid of content—has no self-understanding—because it only critiques faith, without recognizing it as its other. By critiquing faith, enlightenment thinks that it is taking on the task of making faith "aware of what it intrinsically is" (Findlay 563). Enlightenment imagines itself to be attacking and conquering faith, but it fails to see its real nature and significance. In other words, "Enlightenment...wins an easy, but ultimately empty, victory" (Schmidt, "What Enlightenment" 744). How does Hegel render this victory "empty"? In brief, he demonstrates how enlightenment "wins" the struggle with faith, but its victory is empty because it has misunderstood its opponent. It battles a straw man.

In order to convince itself that it has won, enlightenment performs specific critiques of faith. Hegel outlines three dominant critiques of faith that enlightenment offers: faith as anthropomorphic projection (Hegel 336-7), as historically inaccurate belief (337-8), and as foolish (and wrong) ascetic practice (338-9). These are three particular moments in which enlightenment declares faith to be in error, believing in an object that simply does not exist. Hegel does not take these objections seriously and in the following section of his argument, he demonstrates how these critiques are ineffectual and naïve.

If enlightenment has misunderstood faith, then what is it, according to Hegel? First of all, he demonstrates how faith does not function as a belief in propositions but instead as a

process of recognition, analogous to the recognition at work in the master/slave dialectic, presented earlier in the *Phenomenology* and here summarized briefly by Hegel:

Whomsoever I trust, his *certainty of himself* is for me the *certainty of myself*; I recognize in him my own being-for-self, know that he acknowledges it and that it is for him purpose and essence. Trust, however, is faith, because the consciousness of the believer is *directly related* to its object and is thus also intuitively aware that it is *one* with it and in it. (334, emphasis original)

Faith, unlike enlightenment, understands itself to be in a relationship of mutual recognition and has an experience of being-for-itself.⁹ It has a content of its consciousness, as Hegel would put it, that enlightenment does not. God and the religious community function to teach faith that consciousness requires recognition in an other. By positing faith as recognition, Hegel critiques enlightenment's simplistic understanding of faith as error and delusion. You can be persuaded to believe that brass is actually gold or that a battle was won when it was actually lost; "but in the knowledge of that essential being in which consciousness has the immediate *certainty of itself*, the idea of delusion is quite out of the question" (336).¹⁰ Faith, in other words, does not function by declaring a certain being to exist. Rather, Hegel argues that faith provides the subject an opportunity to recognize itself in the idea of god or the religious community. As consciousness "believes in [god], puts its trust in it, and seeks to make it favourably disposed towards itself" (335), consciousness demonstrates that it finds its "pure essence" in god. Faith, then, affords consciousness the opportunity to recognize itself, to have "being-for-itself."

⁹ J. M. Bernstein also highlights the importance of trust for the model self-understanding that Hegel locates in faith: "For Horkheimer and Adorno enlightenment is the general epistemic expression of distrust, suspicion, and the desire for independence, while myth is the epistemic expression of the need for trust, the acknowledgment of our epistemic dependence on the objects of cognition. (Bernstein 24)

¹⁰ Elsewhere, Hegel phrases the argument as a question: "How are delusion and deception to take place where consciousness in its truth has directly the *certainty of itself*, where in its object it possesses *its own self*, since it just as much finds as produces itself in it?" (335-6, emphasis original).

Hegel's particularly influential insight in this section is that he moves the discussion of faith away from the terms of error and truth (which drive enlightenment's critique of faith), and towards the terms of understanding and recognition. At stake in this move for Hegel is the possibility of enlightenment arriving at self-certainty through this process of recognition. As Hegel explains at the outset of the section, "by the negative movement towards what is negative to *it* [i.e. faith], [pure insight] will realize itself and give itself a content" (329). The relationship here becomes an echo of the master/slave dialectic offered earlier in the *Phenomenology*. As enlightenment realizes its other in faith, it will develop being-for-itself. At the outset of this section, enlightenment believes faith to be in "error," and it does not yet understand that it must transcend this incorrect understanding of faith in order to "give itself a content," i.e. understand what it itself truly is.

Noting the parallel emphasis on recognition in both the master/slave dialectic and the enlightenment/faith dialectic raises our awareness of a divergence between the two that must be addressed. In the master/slave dialectic, the slave achieves a new form of consciousness. Through labour, she realizes what she truly is and is able to attain a certain degree of independent being (*Phenomenology* 117-8).¹¹ The master, in contrast, remains in a static position. How is it, then, that here Hegel argues that enlightenment—which has assumed the role of the master, to maintain the comparison—emerges as that which will realize itself? It's important to note that faith, for Hegel, does not become the exemplary model in the same way that the slave becomes in the earlier section. In this dialectical moment, Hegel has made faith (i.e. the slave) static and has made enlightenment (i.e. the master) dynamic and progressive.

¹¹ Bernstein similarly notes this divergence, but does not, however, refer back to the enlightenment/faith dialectic in the *Phenomenology* as he works it out. He exclusively considers the master/slave dialectic and then transposes the question into terms of domination and independence in relationship to nature in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Bernstein 27).

How does Hegel situate faith so that enlightenment, rather than faith, can advance? The answer comes in his argument of mutual critique: while faith critiques the consciousness of enlightenment (its lack of self-consciousness), so enlightenment also critiques faith. Hegel demonstrates that they both must be overcome. The problem with faith, he explains, is that it is “thoughtless” or “non-notional”:

[Enlightenment’s] behaviour towards faith seems to rend asunder the beautiful unity of truth and immediate certainty, to pollute its spiritual consciousness with mean thoughts of sensuous reality...but as a matter of fact, the result of the Enlightenment is rather to do away with the *thoughtless*, or rather *non-notional*, separation which is present in faith.

(348, emphasis original)

Enlightenment, finally, does have a rigorous critique of faith, and it concerns faith’s inability to engage the finite, sensual realm, in which consciousness forms and evaluates concepts (translated here as “notions”). The “believing consciousness weighs and measures by a two-fold standard,” one in the “non-notional” realm and one in the “world of sense.” Enlightenment points out precisely this division in the consciousness of faith, and in so doing, it renders faith contentless: “[faith] finds only the void, it is a sheer yearning, its truth an empty beyond, for which a fitting content can no longer be found” (349). The moment of sublation in Hegel’s dialectical argument occurs here, and enlightenment progresses where faith remains static and empty.

Hegel relates faith and enlightenment in a manner that no longer opposes them but instead dialectically connects them. Enlightenment adopts the posture of recognition that faith had modelled, but it also critiques faith for not engaging with the sensuous world in that process of recognition. Only enlightenment is in the position to advance in consciousness because only it engages with the concept. Although Hegel’s argument does set up a framework in which

enlightenment supersedes faith in a particular way, the emergence of enlightenment rationality is dependent on faith rather than independent of it. Enlightenment does not advance by preaching the errors and inconsistencies of faith's claims. Rather, it learns from faith, recognizing its need to establish a relationship of trust with its object of knowledge, as the believing consciousness trusts its knowledge of god. This trust creates the possibility of mutual recognition.

The problem that Hegel dwells upon in this analysis stems from the question of knowledge: enlightenment claims to have superior grounds for knowledge. It critiques faith for claiming to know something that it cannot know. Hegel targets his intervention directly into this question of epistemology. Looking ahead to how Horkheimer and Adorno adopt Hegel's critique of enlightenment reason, the category of knowledge emerges as particularly contested.

Terry Pinkard's reading of this moment in Hegel provides a particularly salient commentary, as he emphasizes the epistemological stakes in the dialectic between faith and enlightenment. He argues that both enlightenment and faith—which Pinkard identifies as particular emotionalist religious movements popular in the 18th century—attempt to establish universal “grounds” for knowledge. Both movements are reacting against the “groundlessness” caused by the “aristocratic ethos” (166) that Hegel develops in the section on “Culture.” Pinkard explains the connection between faith and enlightenment in terms of their shared epistemological assumptions:

Hegel argues that this attack on religion was in a deep sense a matter of self-deception on the part of the Enlightenment, since both the *philosophes* and the objects of their attacks shared a common conception of what it meant to know something, and thus shared a deeper self-identity than either of the antagonists in the dispute could admit to themselves. (166)

The grounds for knowledge that both faith and enlightenment posit share two main assumptions, according to Pinkard:

Both movements are characterized by the assumptions that 1) for an agent to know something is to submit it to certain authoritative grounds that are not themselves dependent on any transcendent source for their own authentication (although these authoritative grounds may themselves serve to authenticate belief in something transcendent); and that 2) for an agent to know something is to be in possession of “grounds of belief” that hold universally for all individuals. (Pinkard 166)

Hegel’s argument intervenes in this question of epistemological foundations. He does not want to be caught in the circular debate between faith and enlightenment in which the founding assumptions remain unexamined. Instead, Hegel argues that through reflecting on itself, enlightenment comes to understand that it requires a different foundation for knowledge, one that its current project of critique will not create for it.

Horkheimer and Adorno: The Critique of Abstraction

As Pinkard’s critique of Hegel demonstrates, at stake in enlightenment’s perceived superiority over faith is its belief in its epistemological certainty. This issue of knowledge—and of the power within that claim to knowledge—features prominently in Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument about enlightenment and myth. By picking up this question of epistemological certainty, they are furthering Hegel’s project as they move on to propose a different kind of enlightenment that would not found itself on the naïve principles of knowledge that instrumental rationality, as they term it, relies upon. As I note the parallels between their project and Hegel’s project, I will also note their divergences from Hegel’s project, which includes a more radical

critique of enlightenment. Following this, they call for a more comprehensive alternative to instrumental reason.

As Hegel calls for enlightenment to recognize itself in faith, Horkheimer and Adorno also posit the importance of this reflective quality of enlightenment. The malaise of modern enlightenment, they argue, lies in its inability to achieve a self-reflexive stance: “Ruthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness. Only thought which does violence to itself is hard enough to shatter myths” (2). They imply here that enlightenment and myth are inextricably tied to one another, and only in understanding how this relation functions can enlightenment think an alternative to its current state.

What is it that marks enlightenment and myth as related rather than as opposed, which enlightenment has so long presumed?¹² According to Horkheimer and Adorno, they stem from the same past, just as Hegel argued that faith and enlightenment both stem from the world of culture and have never been strict opposites:

Enlightenment thereby regresses to the mythology it has never been able to escape. For mythology had reflected in its forms the essence of the existing order—cyclical motion, fate, domination of the world as truth—and had renounced hope. In the terseness of the mythical image, as in the clarity of the scientific formula, the eternity of the actual is confirmed and mere existence is pronounced as the meaning it obstructs. (20)

¹² Habermas’s answer to this question in his article “Myth and Enlightenment” (1982) advances a markedly different reading than my own. Horkheimer and Adorno argue, he claims, that a completely rationalized world “only seems to be demystified” (Habermas 16), and that modernity does not want to acknowledge that its “compulsion to rationally subjugate the natural forces which intrude from without” (ibid) owes its impulse to mythology, which it imagines itself as purging from modernity. This argument, he concludes, reduces their thesis to a variation on “Max Weber’s well-known theory in which the old demystified Gods are seen rising from their graves in the form of impersonal powers in order to renew the irreconcilable conflict of the demons” (16). Habermas rehearses here a common narrative of secularization: the mythological roots of society are only imperfectly transcended and traces of superstition and transcendental belief are strewn across the foundations modern society. The reading that I offer here does not make this same move, but instead emphasizes their Hegelian influences, arriving at very different conclusions regarding secularism.

Rather than establishing a relationship of intense opposition, where enlightenment enacts a naïve critique of myth as anthropomorphic projection, Horkheimer and Adorno establish here a relationship of ironic similarity, where myth and science both confirm the “eternity of the actual.” They both establish a totalizing system of thought in which no new idea can possibly emerge: “The subsumption of the actual, whether under mythical prehistory or under mathematical formalism...makes the new appear as something predetermined which therefore is really the old” (21). A new event or experience must be explained within the categories that already exist, otherwise it will not have been “explained.” Both myth and science work within this model, which must articulate any new experience in the terms of old categories in order for it to have any meaning.

The strong, secular agenda that aims to eliminate myth and superstition from enlightenment returns here as the object of their critique: enlightenment deludes itself if it thinks it will establish its authority by suppressing mythology. Both mythology and enlightenment, they argue, are bound and confined by a logic that they share. They can only explain—and thereby justify—the current state of affairs rather than introduce critique and new thought. “Mere existence” replaces any experience of engaged, meaningful, historical life.

This question of predetermined knowledge is precisely what is at stake in Horkheimer and Adorno’s use of Hegel. The question of predetermined knowledge—and how to introduce truly new knowledge—marks simultaneously why they find his dialectical logic so compelling and also why they diverge from his project in the *Phenomenology*. Their critique of Hegel rests on the charge that he “succumbed to mythology” (18). Here, they refer to “mythology” in the sense explained above, as that which predetermines the new, rendering any new knowledge simply a reinforcement of the current system. Because Hegel postulates the “known result of the

whole process of negation” as totality or as the absolute, Horkheimer and Adorno cannot follow the path of his dialectical progression. At stake for them is the possibility of new knowledge, which even Hegel, despite his dialectical innovation, cannot include in his philosophical system. In his desire to systematize knowledge, he eliminates the possibility of the new.

Hegel’s dialectic and his notion of determinate negation, however, do offer hope for Horkheimer and Adorno. They contrast the possibilities of dialectical logic with the rigidities of logical formalism in which they claim to have witnessed “the expulsion of thought from logic” (23). In order to realize an alternative enlightenment project, Horkheimer and Adorno reintroduce the concept and thought, which is only possible through a posture of self-reflexivity and the creation of a logical structure that allows for new thought rather than a system that continually reaffirms itself. They locate the possibility of this logical structure in mediated knowledge and determinate negation. In what follows, I will move more slowly through these arguments, demonstrating, first, how Horkheimer and Adorno claim that “mathematics avenges itself on humanity” (33) and, second, how they claim that this logical model affects the failure of the enlightenment project itself. The alternative that they posit (it is less developed than their critique) invokes a Hegelian model of mediated knowledge in which the subject knows the object, but without thereby dominating it.

Horkheimer and Adorno position themselves against the system of logical formalism, which holds that “of two contradictory propositions, only one can be true and the other false” (23). Reason is reduced in this system to a tool that can serve any end. They summarize this logical system as the “suspension of the concept” (32). The concept and thought are both excluded, at great cost to the enlightenment project: “By sacrificing thought, which in its reified

form as mathematics, machinery, organization, avenges itself on a humanity forgetful of it, enlightenment forfeited its own realization” (33).

How is thought excluded from logic here? To explain this move, they invoke the notion of abstraction, which they see as integral to the working of the positivist paradigm. The “distance of subject from object” functions as the presupposition of abstraction (9). This distancing move is where Horkheimer and Adorno locate the destructive effects of this kind of rationality:

Abstraction, the instrument of enlightenment, stands in the same relationship to its objects as fate, whose concept it eradicates: as liquidation. Under the leveling rule of abstraction, which makes everything in nature repeatable, and of industry, for which abstraction prepared the way, the liberated finally themselves become the “herd” (*Trupp*), which Hegel identified as the outcome of enlightenment. (9)

The philosophical assumptions at work in the idea of abstraction make capitalism possible, but rather than associating this exclusively with Marx’s theory of labour, Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize the power and domination that are at work to maintain the framework of abstraction.¹³ The power at work in the “leveling rule of abstraction” is what Horkheimer and Adorno struggle against. Their language itself, drawing on violent metaphors, reinforces this emphasis on power. Abstraction forcibly removes difference: it “amputates the incommensurable” (9). Whatever cannot fit into the pre-established system of knowledge must be cut off.

In what follows, I will parse out the effects of this violent “amputation” of difference, arguing that they make their most aggressive, philosophical interventions around this concept of abstraction. Early in the essay, they make a strong claim about the effects of abstraction:

¹³ Tim Black also notes this Nietzschean influence on the notion of abstraction: “Hence, as Adorno presents it, the history of conceptual abstraction contains an index of actual domination: knowledge as a product of the will to power.”

“Whatever might be different is made the same. That is the verdict which critically sets the boundaries to possible experience” (8). Abstraction limits experience itself, not just knowledge. Furthermore, “experience” includes not only thought but also sensuous experience, as they claim later in the essay: “the acquiescence of thought to the production of unanimity, implies an impoverishment of thought no less than of experience; the separation of the two realms leaves both damaged” (28). The intellect, they argue, “detaches itself from sensuous experience in order to subjugate it” (28). People are trained to develop and maintain this distance from sensuous experience so that they can control the object of knowledge. Finally, the body itself becomes capable of only “impoverished” experiences (28). The oppression of the masses under the industrial order results in an aesthetic poverty: “The regression of the masses today lies in their inability to hear with their own ears what has not already been heard, to touch with their hands what has not previously been grasped” (28). Both intellectual thought and embodied experience are at stake in this critique of instrumental rationality; the dual nature of this claim significantly raises the stakes of Horkheimer and Adorno’s project.¹⁴ Any alternative that they propose must address both effects of abstraction.

Horkheimer and Adorno do not present a detailed vision of their own enlightenment rationality in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but they do state what they consider the true “aspiration of knowledge”:

To grasp [*begreifen*] existing things as such, not merely to note their abstract spatial-temporal relationships, by which they can then be seized, but, on the contrary, to think of

¹⁴ Raymond Geuss also links the question of sensual knowledge with the desire for new knowledge. Although he does not frame his argument in terms of “aesthetics” and “sensuous knowledge,” he demonstrates that at stake for Horkheimer and Adorno is new knowledge, which requires a change in the knowledge system itself: “If society as a whole needs revolutionary change, though, the language too needs to be changed wholesale, not “clarified.” Literature, especially avant-garde literature, and other nonstandard forms of linguistic activity can be seen as attempts to escape the pressure towards conformism and can thus to keep open the idea of that which is radically different” (Geuss, “Dialectics” 125).

them as surface, as mediated conceptual moments [*vermittelte Begriffsmomente*] which are only fulfilled by revealing their social, historical, and human meaning—this whole aspiration of knowledge is abandoned [in the current enlightenment project]. Knowledge does not consist in mere perception, classification, and calculation but precisely in the determining negation of whatever is directly at hand. (20)

The Hegelian influence here is unmistakable. They locate in mediation and determinate negation the possibility of knowing an object without thereby dominating it. The goal of knowledge is not to identify an object and thereby control it, but instead to grasp it and thereby reveal its meaning. “To grasp”—originally *begreifen*—invokes the Hegelian “concept” or *Begriff*, and here Horkheimer and Adorno posit an alternative enlightenment that is characterized by *Begriffsmomente*—instances of true “conceptual” knowledge—rather than by domination.

Horkheimer and Adorno, like Hegel before them, charge enlightenment with misunderstanding its own nature. They reject its naïve agenda of excising myth and superstition, and they identify the shared goal of enlightenment and myth: the need to predetermine knowledge. Fate and science both reinstate the current knowledge structure and eliminate the possibility of new knowledge. This occurs through the mechanism of abstraction, which they identify as a distancing of subject and object. Abstraction determines the bounds of not just knowledge but sensuous experience itself. Any alternative must make possible not only new knowledge but also new experience. The Hegelian model of mediated knowledge provides them with the tools to begin constructing this new model.

Analyzing Secularism: Saba Mahmood's Critique of Subject/Object Relations

The line of inquiry that I will follow in the remaining discussion concerns the connection between Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of abstraction and the broader argument about secularism that I am pursuing. How does a Hegelian reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which the question of subject/object relations feature prominently, cast contemporary critiques of the secular in a different light? This thesis aims to make explicit the Hegelian influences at work in contemporary critiques of the secular, arguing that critics like Mahmood and Taylor are more indebted to the Hegelian tradition than they and their readers readily admit. In what follows, I will focus on Saba Mahmood's contribution to the volume *Is Critique Secular?* (2009), in which she analyzes the Danish cartoon affair. Mahmood grounds her critique of secularism in an argument about subject/object relations. Considering the importance of this debate to the Hegelian tradition, which I have just traced through Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of enlightenment reason, I aim here to uncover the common ground between the Hegelian tradition and Mahmood's critique.

The Hegelian influence that I detect in Mahmood's critique of secularism is not unique to her work. For example, recall Charles Taylor's argument. Taylor challenges the commonsense opposition between the religious and the secular, and he displaces it "with a new understanding in which this opposition appears only as a late and retrospective misrecognition" (Warner 17). The structure of Taylor's argument strongly echoes Hegel's enlightenment/faith dialectic, which tells the story of secular enlightenment's misrecognition of faith. Michael Warner succinctly summarizes Taylor's argument, even drawing on the Hegelian language of recognition, but he

makes no comment on the Hegelian structure of the argument itself.¹⁵ The discussion here focuses specifically on the Hegelian elements in Mahmood's work, but the analysis that I offer here has implications for the larger debates around the secular.

In her article "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?", Mahmood investigates the moral impasse that is posited between secular values of free speech and religious charges of blasphemy. She asks why both religious and secular arguments concerning the cartoon affair so readily "resort to juridical language"? What is at stake, she asks, in privileging the state and the law as the "ultimate adjudicator of religious difference" (67)? Her argument frames the political and ethical questions that escape unnoticed when the law adopts an apparently neutral stance from which to adjudicate between the religious (blasphemy) and the secular (free speech).

The law, she argues, presumes a normative definition of religion that entails a specific subject/object relation in which the subject is expected to distance itself from its object of veneration. Legal discourse—founded on the tradition of religious symbols established under Protestant Christianity—relies on a clear distinction between religious symbols (e.g. iconic images) and sacred figures (e.g. the person of Muhammad). To confuse a symbol with a religious figure—according to this common understanding of religion in the West—is "to commit a category mistake," explains Mahmood (73). Muslims who take offense at the cartoons presumably do not understand this logical distinction between the religious symbol and the sacred figure. By mixing these two categories, the offended Muslims "fail to realize that signs and symbols are only arbitrarily linked to the abstractions that humans have come to revere and

¹⁵ Michael Warner also has published extensively on secularism, and his work could also be analyzed in a similar manner. He would be reticent to acknowledge Hegelian influences in his scholarship, and yet they do play important roles in his argument.

regard as sacred” (73).¹⁶ Mahmood draws our attention here to the assumptions about reading religious imagery: the image of Muhammad is *only* an image and, therefore, does not have a direct relationship to the revered personage of Muhammad himself. When people are unable to distance themselves appropriately from the object of knowledge (in this case, the cartoon), they “exhibit an improper reading practice” (73). Their agitation is thereby rendered as unwarranted and irrational by those who assume that such a distancing move is a prerequisite for reading a religious image properly (i.e. according to Western standards of religious practice).

Mahmood aims to trouble this reading practice that has been posited as the norm in the Western legal and religious traditions. Citing her own field interviews with Egyptians (she was researching there when the cartoons were published), Mahmood argues that reading the cartoons in strictly symbolic terms fails to account for the Egyptians’ feelings of offense. She turns to the idea of the “icon” to develop an alternative way of thinking the subject/object relation. An icon, in contrast to a symbol, posits “a form of relationality that binds the subject to an object or imaginary” (74). She expands on this idea of an icon: “the power of an icon lies in its capacity to allow an individual (or a community) to find oneself in a structure that influences how one conducts oneself in this world” (74). Mahmood’s definition of an icon turns on the question of the subject’s relationship to the object of knowledge: the subject “finds itself” in its relationship to this object.

Here we detect echoes of Hegelian recognition. By invoking the idea of the icon, Mahmood moves away from the framework of knowledge—in which the symbol represents a specific religious truth—and towards the framework of recognition—in which the icon allows the subject to recognize itself in the object. She clearly states her goals in turning to the icon as a

¹⁶ The field of semiotics has a complex story to tell about these relationships, and Mahmood draws heavily on Webb Keane’s work on the intersection of anthropology and semiotics, even though she does not cite him directly in her analysis. See *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2007).

way to rethink the assumptions at play in the category of the religious “symbol”: “What interests me in this iconophile tradition is not so much the image as the concept of relationality that binds the subject to the object of veneration” (77). This notion of relationality accounts more completely for the sense of “moral injury” that Muslims experienced in response to the cartoons, Mahmood argues. The strict dichotomy between free speech and blasphemy does not provide an adequate platform from which to consider more nuanced subject/object relations, such as that invoked by the term “icon.”

Mahmood works to highlight the political implications of these distinctions. Where can such a subject/object relation be practiced, or even thought, within the current organization of the secular state? “Inasmuch as this juridical logic requires clear and distinct categories,” she argues, “it leaves little room for understanding ways of being and acting that cut across such distinctions” (83). By approaching an object as an icon—which presumes an attachment to that image without thereby designating that image as sacred (as Muhammad or Jesus himself would be sacred)—one posits a subject/object relation in which the subject cannot completely abstract himself/herself from that object. Rather than exemplifying poor reading practices, this inability to extract oneself from the object demonstrates a fundamentally different relationship between subject and object. Mahmood challenges us to see the subject/object relation in the iconophile tradition as a challenge to the dominant practice in which the subject must identify the object as wholly external and independent of the subject.

Horkheimer and Adorno posit a strikingly similar claim in their critique of abstraction. By distancing the subject from the object, abstraction makes possible the domination of objects. Knowledge consists of “perception, classification, and calculation” (Horkheimer and Adorno 20) because the connection between the subject and object is completely severed. Abstraction, they

conclude, “critically sets the boundaries to possible experience” (Horkheimer and Adorno 8), both intellectually and sensuously. Horkheimer and Adorno posit a Hegelian notion of mediated knowledge to challenge enlightenment’s abstracting logic, and Mahmood, in a strikingly similar move, invokes the “icon” in order to challenge the strict distancing of subject and object presumed by the normative definition of religion. Her argument works here to expand the “boundaries of possible experience,” to borrow Horkheimer and Adorno’s phrase. Contemporary legal discourse restricts religious images to “symbols” and pushes aside this possibility of relationality that an icon encourages. This restriction—based on a distancing of subject/object—limits the ways in which “being and acting” (Mahmood 83) can be understood. This shows the legal system to be inherently formed by enlightenment logic which has no way to engage with arguments that are grounded in another logical system of relationality. At stake for Horkheimer and Adorno is both knowledge and sensuous experience—what can be seen and heard. Similarly, by investigating the cartoon affair, Mahmood demonstrates that at stake in her critique of the secular is not simply knowledge of religion but the ways in which it is practiced, lived, and experienced.

Conclusion

Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of instrumental rationality offers helpful tools for rethinking not simply the process of secularization, but the philosophical assumptions embedded within secularism. Their critique of abstraction and their invocation of Hegelian, mediated knowledge both posit a subject/object relation that problematizes key assumptions of secular rationality. While Mahmood does not invoke Hegelian terms or references in her work, she develops the notion of the icon in order to enact a similar critique of secular rationality. She specifically

points to the process of recognition at work in a subject's engagement with an icon. This moment of recognition—along with its philosophical and political implications—has been theorized most notably in Hegel and in theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno who draw on Hegel.

This argument opens up a fruitful dialogue between the contemporary debates on secularism and the critical theory tradition. This thesis demonstrates that a long tradition of critiquing secular reason is at play within critical theory, and that a foundational text such as Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* problematizes key assumptions advanced by traditional secularization arguments. Reason cannot advance, they argue, by excising superstition, mythology, or faith. Hegel demonstrates that the enlightenment project misunderstands itself—and will destroy itself, according to Horkheimer and Adorno—by advancing such a naïve understanding of knowledge and rationality. This critique of reason decisively moves beyond the framework of secularization (the decline of religion in the public sphere) and opens up the question of secularism (the relationship of religion to the public sphere). Inasmuch as contemporary theorists like Charles Taylor and Saba Mahmood aim to problematize any simple opposition between the religious and the secular, they utilize theoretical tools that have been developed by Hegel and those, like Horkheimer and Adorno, who draw on his work. Critiques of the secular are embedded within critical theory, and this tradition has important interventions to make in our attempts to think through the politics of the secular.

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