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Reflexive secularization? Concepts, processes and antagonisms of postsecularity

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Abstract

This article deals with the concepts, processes, and antagonisms that are associated with the notion of postsecularity. In light of this article's expanded interpretation of José Casanova on the secular and secularization, as well as thoughts on James A. Beckford's take on public religions, five rubrics on the postsecular derived from critical theory and an understanding of 'reflexive secularization' are presented. This term focuses on secularization processes and how these practices unleash complementary as well as antagonistic tendencies, a confrontation of normativities and specific social-empirical challenges. From this basis it is argued that social-empirical analysis should focus on non-naturalistic relations between individuals occupying structurally equivalent positions in narrative networks. A plurality of normativities are seriously considered as ideas circulating through social relations where the critical competence of the participants of such communication processes are provoked to subvert anything – including any normative positionality – as taken for granted. Moves towards the decolonization of the secular/postsecular dyad are emphasized, with ramifications for thinking about the urban, which point to the universal and authentic foundations of the human condition that are brought into play.

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The concept of postsecularity may, at first blush, appear as the latest fad among academics, one that, if we follow James A. Beckford's (2012) genealogy of the term, is already more than half a century old. But it is our contention that it offers a means for contending with some of the most pressing intellectual, political, and human concerns of our time (Beaumont, 2018a). History has a peculiar way of repeating itself; first as tragedy and then as a comedy, to paraphrase Karl Marx. On an alternative view of history, the eternal recurrence or return – in a Nietzschean sense – condemns us to the return of religion, ever undiminished and always potentiated for the worst, despite the range of individual and collective efforts for social transformation and a better world. Religion continues to play its part, in conjunction with competing and sometimes coalescing ideas and motivations. Diverse scholars have embraced the notion of postsecularity, with its origins in continental philosophy's 'religious turn' and the arrival of radical orthodoxy (Blond, 1997; de Vries, 1999; Rorty and Vattimo, 2007; Žižek and Milbank, 2011). The concept conveys at least a sense of a progressive human spiritual essence, interior to people and existing externally and harmoniously in relation to their social and environmental contexts.

We acknowledge that differences exist between epistemological and normative positions in the debate on postsecularity. Thus, we are sensitive to 'normative optimistic' and 'normative pessimistic' readings of postsecularity and the human condition more generally. Despite little agreement over the precise meaning of postsecularity, the term might refer to the persistence, reformulation, or resurgence of religion in the public sphere (Eder, 2006; Molendijk et al., 2010). Our argument for 'reflexive secularization' as immanent critique avoids a secular/religious schism, showing the latter's capacity to expand into social and subjective spaces always in tension with the original divide. Nuances exist within denominations as well as between believers and non-believers. Empirical work in the USA identifies a spectrum of political leanings between more liberal, progressive, and dissident voices – this worldly – and more extreme conservative (other worldly) currents (see Roof and McKinney, 1987; Pew Research Center, 2015; Stark, 2015).¹ This historical struggle (Wuthnow, 1990) sets the empirical reality for the larger progressive postsecular politics advocated by Habermas and his entourage. In the balance sits a heightened awareness of interrelations between religious, secular, and humanist forces acting together. At the forefront of the analysis are empirical developments on the ground, political advances for social transformation, and theoretical explanations of macrosocial developments at large. As a theoretical intervention our article invites new empirical work.

Charles Taylor's (2007) *A Secular Age* is one of the most widely cited critiques of secularism. Taylor focuses on the cultural conditions of secularity, in which unbelief in religion is considered a viable option among several options, and where religious and secular ideas co-exist on equal terms. Alternatively, Talal Asad's (2003; see also Asad et al., 2009) Nietzschean-inspired, Foucauldian anthropology of religion shows how

European and North American pre-secularisms have mutated into exclusionary forms of secularism today (cf. Scott and Hirschkind, 2006). *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (Butler et al., 2011) includes Judith Butler's critical engagement with state violence in Israel-Palestine (see also Butler, 2013). Work in feminist theology (e.g., Raphael, 2003) holds implications for the relationship between gender and postsecularity (Graham, 2012) and points to a possible relationship between postsecularity and a growing feminist movement (Vasilaki, 2016). The forthcoming *Cambridge Habermas Lexicon* (Allen and Mendieta, 2018) draws attention to how Frankfurt School critical theory helps us to understand relations between world society, the global public sphere, and postsecularity.

One could say we are witnessing a timely and unprecedented exchange between scholars from diverse disciplines, but the sought-after crossover narratives within human geography, for example, remain limited to a few protagonists (Beaumont and Baker, 2011; Cloke and Beaumont, 2013; Cloke et al., 2019), and the more general reception to the concept has been at best sceptical (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2015; della Dora, 2018) and at times hostile. The defiance rests on perceived tensions between 'postsecularity as stance' versus 'postsecularity as debate'. We first explore the concepts of the secular and postsecular, then examine public religion and the postsecular to help establish our five rubrics on postsecularity. Following that we discuss the confrontation of normativities and the empirical challenge of postsecular society, concluding with thoughts on future research directions.

Exploring the secular and secularization

The noun *secular* has Latin roots – *saeculum* – which in turn has certain origins in ancient Etruscan civilization, referring to the longest life span of a human life (Holford-Strevens, 2013). Later Latin uses indicate an indefinite period of time: *per saecula saeculorum* (unto the ages of the ages, i.e. infinity) (Casanova, 2013). Our contemporary deployment, however, owes much to Saint Augustine's intervention: *saeculum* in his works, and especially in *The City of God Against the Pagans* (1998), denotes historical distance between the present and the eschatological *parousia*, the time of divine redemption, when all humans, both Pagan and Christian, would reunite under God's grace. For Augustine, the *saeculum* refers to the time of the *city of man*, in contrast to the time of the *city of God* (Markus, 1988). His distinction between secular, human time of the terrestrial city (or profane time) and the divine time of eternity already equates the secular to the time of the political sphere (Momigliano, 1963). The secular, human, and political are spatialized as the earthly and profane urban realm (see also Marramao, 1994).

In the context of our analysis that follows, it is important to note that the secularization of the Western world paved the way for the Westernization of the world (Latouche, 1996), and to this extent, when there is talk of decolonization, there is also talk of de-secularization. We note this because there are resonances between the postsecular and de-secularization in the wake of processes of de-westernizing, or at least de-linking from the West. Crucial here, however, is the idea that secularization was decisive in the constitution of the West as such.

During Medieval Christianity, the transposed duality – between the city of man and the city of God – gave rise to two dynamics. On the one hand, there was intervention by Christianity in the *saeculum*, through *spiritualization* of the secular through the introduction of the religious practices of the monasteries into the profane world. This dynamic and immanent tendency to spiritualize the world became the source of radical reform movements within Christianity, culminating in the Protestant Reformation and the multiplication of denominations both within Protestantism and Catholicism. The other dynamic was *laïcization*, which aimed for the withdrawal of the Church as the proper place for the spiritual from all spheres of the secular world. This meant that what was allegedly only proper to Christianity within the walls of sacred spaces, would now be taken over by delegates of the Church in the realm of the profane. This withdrawal was sometimes driven by the Church itself, at other times by the rising state, which in Late Medieval times and the early Renaissance would uncouple from the Papacy and the Church (Manent, 1996). Both these processes, spiritualization of the sacred, and laïcization, turning secular what was before properly belonging to the Church, are neither solely immanent nor simply external. Neither is the result of a zero sum, in which the loss of one is the gain to the other. At the very least, this indicates that secularization was and remains not simply the negation, withdrawal, or privation of the religious from the secular realm.

Casanova (2013) called this double dynamic *mere secularity*. He refers to two further senses of the secular: *self-contained secularity* and *secularist secularity* or *secularism as a stadial consciousness*. In the former, self-contained secularity, actors behave as if ‘God does not exist’ and where religion is one option among many others. Casanova follows Taylor’s (2007) argument that the secular implies the phenomenological and existential experience of actors and their focus on cosmic, social, aesthetic and natural orders. This so-called ‘immanent frame’ of intramundane events, devoid of transcendent higher realms, was spearheaded with the Enlightenment revolution in science and technology that relativized religion into one view of the world among many. The latter and third sense of the secular, *secularist secularity* or *secularism as a stadial consciousness*, appears as a naïve self-presentation of episodic, contingent, and non-causally related historical events. This view of the secular emphasizes a diversity of progressive and transformative social, political, cognitive, and moral developments based on the logic of social differentiation and the latest stage in the realization of *Geist* (mind/spirit). Most sociological theory since Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber is due to this presentist conception of the secular and secularity, informing later sociologists such as Parsons, Habermas, and Giddens.

Returning to Casanova (2013), one can conceive of secularization in at least three ways. First, the term refers to the spreading out of spheres of human activity that are no longer under the reign of either the Church or religions. Influenced by Kant, Weber called this process the differentiation of value spheres (state, economy, science, law, art, politics, and the private realm) and Durkheim called it the division of labour in society. Both drew attention to specialization processes, of emancipation and liberation, and the production of the religious as its own legitimate value sphere where commitments can be practised and lived. Second, secularization can also be understood as the inevitable process of decline in the performance of religious beliefs and their diminishing

importance in giving meaning to the life-world of subjects in the modern world. Secularization here entails that religion and religious practices have become atavistic and vestigial practices that are either in discord or are anachronistic – *unzeitgemässe* (untimely), in Nietzsche's use of the term. The third way is that of *privatization of religion*, considered a condition sine qua non for the rise of modern heterogeneous, liberal, rule of law, and constitutional democracies. Casanova (1994) and Eder (2006) have called into question this sociological hypothesis both on empirical grounds: religion has not been banished from the public sphere; and for normative reasons: public religions have re-emerged and have a decisive impact on all other spheres of social life.

We complement and expand Casanova's important differentiations with reference to the entry on 'Säkularisation, Säkularisierung' in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Brunner et al., 1984; see also Koselleck, 2011; Richter, 2011). The volume as a whole is the utmost exemplar and achievement of the distinct field of the history of concepts. Distinct but related to intellectual history, associated notions are: historical semantics, social history, intellectual and social history, and history of crises and social transformation. As Koselleck (2011: 8) notes:

The central problematic (*die leitende Fragestellung*) of this lexicon is the dissolution of old society of orders and estates, and the development of the modern world. These twin processes are studied by tracking the history of how they were conceptually registered.

There are a number of reasons why such a lexicon is focused on the German social and political language. As Germans tend to struggle with Latin, and the Romance languages in general, such an endeavour served to develop their own language; this process of translation was and remains as important as that which took place between Greek and Latin, for example, the struggle over language between Plato and Cicero. Equally, the German state(s) also struggled with the process of secularization if only because these states became the historical theatre on which the drama of the Reformation was performed. Germany has produced some of the most important thinkers of Christianity, in particular, and religion, in general – from Luther through as recently as Peter Sloterdijk (2009; 2017). Germany and the German language, both as synecdoches for the defence and preservation of a version of Christianity, became the stage for one of the most disastrous crusades in European and world history about the meaning of the *saeculum*, the attempt at purification from Jewish 'contamination'. Finally, this monumental contribution illustrates how concepts have histories and how those histories are influenced by the transformation of language.

Important to note is that the term *Säkularisierung* was used to translate *saecularisatio*, which is why another term was used in German as well, namely *Säkularisation*, which retained the Latin/Romance languages' inflection of the process of turning social life to the *saeculum*. Both terms, however, are German latinizations of secularization. Translations into German, however, are *Verweltlichung* and *Weltlichung*, which are substantive versions of the transitive verbs, *verweltlichen* and *weltlichen*, respectively, meaning to make worldly or bring into the world, or to make mundane. This translation signals that the process of secularization as a form of *Verweltlichung* and *Weltlichung* is not simply turning something over to an extant realm but means literally to create that horizon and

time-space. To secularize, then, means to world, to make a world, to constitute a world that is mundane. Habermas begins to develop what a 'dialectic of secularization' might entail after his exchange with Ratzinger. On the one hand, the secular world is produced from within religion; on the other, the religious realm both expands and depends as it relates to its other, that with which it is in dynamic and generative tension.

Public religions and the postsecular

In what sense can we use the terms postsecular and postsecularity in light of these multiple meanings of secular and secularization? It is insightful to draw upon James A. Beckford's (2012) presidential address because, at a minimum, he refers to some of the earliest references to the term in the English literature. According to Beckford, these earliest uses are from Andrew Greely in an article from 1966 and Richard John Neuhaus in a piece from 1982. Beckford registers that after the 1990s 'the concept quickly acquired diverse and divergent meanings' (2012: 2).

Beckford discusses the usages of *postsecular* under six different subheadings. First, there is the 'secularization deniers' who doubt whether secularization is the appropriate term for what has happened to religion in general and Christianity in particular. The term postsecular, then, is used as a corrective to the erroneous and 'mischievous' theorization of the modern religious condition. Second, 'building on the secular' does not take a contentious attitude but instead sees the postsecular as building on both the achievements of secularity and new religious sensibilities. Radical Orthodoxy thinkers, such as John Milbank and Phillip Blond, are grouped under this cluster. These scholars have called for a re-Christianization of culture in the face of the excesses and failures of modernity and postmodernity. Accordingly, the postsecular and postmodern converge. Third, the 're-enchancement of culture' cluster emerges from studies of various art forms. The cross-fertilization of different currents in literary, philosophical, and theological thinking have led to innovative valences of the postsecular, looking towards aesthetic and new spiritual sensibilities that are not tethered to a traditional understanding of religiosity or affiliation to an organized church. The works of Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Thomas Pynchon are cited. Here, the postsecular would be something like a reenchancement of the world by other means than institutionalized religion. Fourth, the 'public resurgence of religion' cluster with reference to Klaus Eder and Clayton Crockett challenges the disappearance of religion from the public sphere. Central is the contestation of the dyad private/public and the evident visibility of public religious acts, such as progressive social justice activism among faith-based organizations (e.g., Cloke and Beaumont, 2013; Beaumont, 2018b). Fifth, the 'politics, philosophy, and theology' cluster focuses exclusively on Habermas and confesses sharing with Hans Joas 'astonishment' at Habermas' embrace of the term which, for Beckford, 'seems to refer to the unfolding of the latest phase of secularization in the sense of functional differentiation and subjectivization process' (Beckford, 2012: 8). Beckford does not note that Habermas distinguishes between a 'secularist' ideology that blinds social theory to the fact of the persistence of religion and faith in modern life, and the process of secularization, which for him has to do with the separation of value spheres and the secularization of state power, i.e. the separation of state and church. Still, Beckford's wariness towards

Habermas' respect for religion, however, is to our minds off-mark, given Habermas' engagement with religious thinkers and theologians since his earliest writings on Jewish-German and non-Jewish scholars like Gershom Scholem, Karl Jaspers, and Johannes Baptist Metz (Habermas, 2002). Sixth, and finally, Beckford speaks of 'a plague on all your houses' cluster, which is essentially critical and dismissive of the concept.

Five rubrics on the postsecular

We would like to offer a more methodologically oriented typology, without attempting to attach specific scholars, schools, or trends, alluding to at least five deployments or rubrics of the postsecular. We briefly address the first four but we are particularly interested in the fifth and final, reflexive, as pivotal to our argument for 'reflexive secularization'.

First, *naïveté*: the term postsecular could be used in the way the postmodern may have been used in the past, reactively and without proper or sophisticated engagement with the phenomenon that it names as moving beyond.

Second, *critical*: the postsecular could be a way to challenge the self-congratulating, presentist narratives that assume that we have indeed become secular, that secularity is equivalent to modernity, and that it has been concurrent with modernization and democratization. The postsecular could be part and parcel of the critique of the West, and a means to de-link from the processes of Western globalization that have in their wake re-activated forms of fundamentalisms.

Third, *genealogy*: this usage refers to the triple sense of genealogical analyses offered by Colin Koopman (2013) and expanded by Amy Allen (2013), as either subversive, vindictory, or problematizing implicit in Nietzsche's (1994) *On the Genealogy of Morality*. In this triple sense, the postsecular could be a way to subvert the presentist narratives of secularity, or to offer a vindication for its accomplishment, while also throwing light on how vindicating those accomplishments presupposes what is to be explained. The interplay between secularity and postsecularity should lead us to the problem of how we can provide an account of society that thinks it has overcome religion while most of its key concepts and categories can be argued to be secularizations and laïcization of religious figures, concepts, and institutions.

Fourth, *history of concepts/historical semantics*: this final deployment or attitude, emphasizing intellectual and social history, as well as a history of crises and social transformation, is partly illustrated with reference to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* lexicon.

Finally, and most importantly for our argument, *reflexive*: scholars here see the concept as a way to engage in a dual process of seeing what has been accomplished and also what remains yet to be done. Reflexive secularity in this attitude also means dialectic, akin to how the term 'reflexive modernity' was used to complement and critique postmodern critics of modernity. More specifically, we are using the term reflexive here echoing Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994).

Since one of the central aims of our article is to introduce the idea of 'reflexive secularization', some general remarks are in order. There is no modernity without modernization. There is no condition that can be considered or experienced as modern

that is not the result of a process of modernization. Modernization is a multi-layered process that involves not only institutions, ideas, social imaginaries, but also processes of acculturation, socialization, and ‘personality’ development. It begins with the overall disenchantment of the world, the bureaucratization of social relations, the separation of value spheres, the decoupling of moral orientations from local forms of ethical life, and the ascendancy of a certain aesthetic-ethical orientation to what is taken to be the ‘new’. The new is always the crystallization of these combined processes of disembedding, uncoupling, and functional differentiation that are ceaselessly turning the life-world into an anonymous means for the action-coordination of strangers. Modernity, seen in this way, is Weber’s Iron Cage. But the results of modernity, with its relentless rationalization, routinization, anonymization, bureaucratization, and monetization, are also a condition of possibility for the emergence of a distinct modern subject, one freed from tradition, religion, caste, class, and implicitly also, gender. Modernization gave us a society where strangers can co-exist, and in where individuals have to face the ‘malaise’ of authenticity (Taylor, 1992).

Postmodernists, who announced the death of modernity, took aim at the Cartesian-Kantian-Rousseauian concept of ‘self’, the Hegelian-Marxist view of history, and the univocity and transparency of reason and language. The overarching theme was that there were no grand narratives to make sense of history. History itself was make-believe narrative. We have entered post-history. As the debate raged over two or three decades – and, intriguingly, this debate has resurfaced now in the so-called age of ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’ – it became clear that the postmodern critics were relying on the same philosophemes as the so-called thinkers of modernity had before them. The postmodernists’ work, then, appeared less as a rejection and more as further analysis of what was happening to the subject, to history, to reason, or rationality, and language under those processes unleashed by the discovery of the New World, the Reformation, the Haitian, French, and American Revolutions, and the slow but sure weaving of the Iron Cage of modernity. Here the work of Beck, Giddens, and Lash becomes relevant. While they are not taking aim at postmodernists or postmodernism, they were in general interested in localizing a certain intellectual position in institutional, cultural, and social terms. Postmodernism belongs to a specific moment in the transformation of the means of both material and social-cultural reproduction (post-Fordism, post-industrialism, and so on). What is key for them, however, is that postmodernism as a critique of modernity is already inchoate in the processes of modernization. There is no postmodernization without modernization, no postmodernity without modernity.

In parallel, we submit that ‘reflexive secularization’ is the proper way to understand what we are now calling the postsecular. We have already indicated the different processes by which something like the secular was produced through variegated processes of secularization, whether from within the realm of the secular and profane or from within the realm of God. To reiterate, there is no secular realm, or age, or sphere, without the processes of secularization, understood either negatively or positively. With the emergence of a new ‘global condition’ in which we co-exist symbolically in a quasi-global public sphere, in which war, ecological crisis, climate change, and globalization have scattered people across the globe, we find ourselves witness to each other’s distinct cultural belief, and the social, cultural, and material reproduction of society. This

confrontation with radical difference and the postsecular names a new self-awareness of world society (for we no longer live isolated in social islands) about the still on-going processes of secularization and the simultaneous reproduction of the religious. Habermas famously spoke of the ‘unfinished project of modernity’. We could echo him and say ‘the unfinished project of secularity’ continues to animate new concepts like reflexive secularization and the postsecular. If we assent minimally to the general thesis that religion lives within secular domains by acts of either self-withdrawal or external limitation, then we are not talking about two entirely different orders, ontologically, symbolically, and socially de-linked from each other. Instead, at the very least, one finds an entangled plurality of both secular and religious understandings that are irreducible to each other and ceaselessly generative.

Now, returning to Beck, Giddens and Lash, their collective volume focused on the reinvention of politics in the wake of the emergence of what Ulrich Beck called the ‘risk society’. Anthony Giddens, on the other hand, focused on the challenges of living in a post-conventional society; while Scott Lash focused on the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of modern reflexive consciousness. Beck notes in his contribution that reflexivity should be understood not as reflection (as in mirroring) but in the sense of a self-confrontation, as when a subject takes stock of itself and attempts an account of itself. The postsecular, then, is the enactment of reflexive secularization, both taking stock of itself and giving an account of itself. In this sense, it is already by itself, beyond itself, to think along the lines of Hegel’s notion of reflexivity.

One should note that the term postsecular by necessity relates reflexively to and is, in a sense, parasitic on the uses of the terms secular and secularization. The secular is the moraine left over by the multiple processes of secularization that have taken place over the last two and a half millennia with respect to Jaspers’ Axial Age and postsecular consciousness (Bellah and Joas, 2012; Assman, 2018; Mendieta, 2018). To repeat: the secular is to secularization as the postsecular is to postsecularization. The challenge is to survey those processes that clear conceptual and social spaces for new sensibilities that allow us to review both the complexity of secularization, on the one hand, and the way in which we are always already secular as we claim to be postsecular on the other. Postsecularity is more than complex secularity. It concerns and attempts to foreground what we call *reflexive secularization*. Postsecularity concerns assemblages of antagonist processes unfolding through state secularization, and structures and practices that uphold respect for one’s right to faith. Bridled with sights on new pathways for social evolution or transformation, our approach yields a new sense of conflicts and solidarities, complementarity of discourses, and confrontation of normativities – all pointing to new empirical challenges ahead.

One last analogy helps illustrate what we mean by reflexive secularization. The influential Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano introduced the concept of ‘coloniality of power’ to name what can be called the ‘colonial present’ (see Moraña et al., 2008; see also Mendieta, 2010). Quijano challenges the naïve attitude of postcolonial and post-modern thinkers that assume that coloniality and modernity could be overcome as if by a Munchausen trick. He argues in tandem with thinkers like Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Santiago Castro-Gomez, and Walter D. Mignolo for a ‘decolonial turn’, rather than a post-colonial turn, that deals with the colonial present in which we live, still, despite the

decolonizing movements and struggles of the last half a century. What ‘decolonial’ thinkers, such as those mentioned, are interested in is precisely rescuing the reflexive dimension of decolonization. In contrast to postcolonialism, which putatively thinks the colonial past and present can be left behind, decolonial thinkers aim to reflect through the *longue durée* of coloniality/modernity. We would argue that something similar is at play with the concepts secular/postsecular. We live in a secular present, one that is not only implicated with colonialism and imperialism, including ‘evangelization’ of colonial others, but also the dual secularization/desecularization of civil society in Europe. If we live in a colonial present, we also live in a secular present. Decolonial is to coloniality as postsecular is to secular, i.e. about immanent, reflexive, critical postures that aim to elucidate the co-determination of the colonial/decolonial, secular/postsecular dialectical dyads. If we have never been secular, to paraphrase Latour on modernity, we can also never become postsecular enough.

Confrontation of normativities and empirical challenge

The notion of postmodernity as well as that of postsecularity is premised on the assumption that we have gone through something like modernity with respect to secularity. But one day we might become modern and secular. Modernity and secularity are ‘unfinished projects’; postmodernity and postsecularity can be seen as intermediate steps towards finally achieving these goals. These intermediate phases produce situations in which modernizers and anti-modernizers have to coexist, where secularists and non-secularists have to relate to each other and maybe even learn from each other. Yet, in the long run, the modern and the secular will win over the non-modern and the non-secular. The reciprocal recognition and tolerance of secularists and non-secularists are, in this story and arguably to their detriment, biased towards the modern and the secular. It is an asymmetric relation that in this modernist perspective will dissolve over the course of time.

This is the narrative, which not only the disciples of the social sciences have believed for two centuries, but also the people who think they are modern and secular. This depiction is so well established that it can be said to belong to the background beliefs of the modern world. There has been much criticism that argues that this story is a Western one, and that non-Western cultures do not share such background beliefs. This criticism has been answered by claiming there are different paths towards modernity (Eisenstadt, 2000) – and therefore also, by implication, different paths to secularity (‘multiple secularities’) such as a one through Muslim secularity among several others. Revitalized religion in modern society, on this view, reflects a European exceptionalism and common reality elsewhere in the world (see Eder, 2002; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, 2012; Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2013; Burchardt et al., 2015). Yet, what tends to come out ahead in the end, time and time again, are modernity and secularism. This is the telos of the story.

One way to undermine such narratives is to be empirical and check what secularism is about on the ground. Secularism has institutional aspects: for example, the appropriation of church property by the state and the dismantling of church power. Secularism also has cognitive aspects: emphasizing the autonomy of people from religious prescriptions,

thus freeing the critical capacities of people and turning them into autonomous individuals. Secularism finally has a site where the critical capacities of human beings can be practised: the public sphere of critical debate. Empirically, none of the processes have come to an end. Church property not only survived in Western nation-states, it even outlived decades of communism in the Soviet Union. Religious prescriptions and norms are still dominating the majority of people living in even allegedly the most secularized countries, such as those of Scandinavia. The public sphere is permeated by religious symbols, whether in state rituals or in using religious symbols in public buildings. Secularism seems to be an unfinishable project. It is cognitively resisted by the majority of people who still look for the religious specialist in the critical situations of life: birth, marriage, and death. Secularism also lives in the public rituals of handing over power to others – to open a new parliament, to mourn those losing their lives from terrorist violence. The list goes on.

Herein lies the empirical basis to the thesis of postsecularism. The simple version is that religion returns to the public sphere of secular society and that the project of secularism, based on the rule of law and on a universalist and rationalist ideology, continues to wane. Religion returns, as growing Pentecostalist, Islamist, and Buddhist movements show (Kepel, 2002; Jondhale and Beltz, 2004; Miller and Yamamori, 2007; Aslan, 2010). It also returns in the form of new religious wars and in the form of a growing variety of privatized forms of religion, fostering the diversification of sectarian movements into increasingly smaller units of believers. Religion also returns as a renaissance of traditional religious symbols and institutions. The recent order by the predominantly Catholic German state of Bavaria shows how this ‘renaissance’ can invoke controversy. All government buildings, not just public schools and courtrooms, must now, as a matter of law, adorn their entrances with Christian crucifixes. The state law which undermines multicultural values has generated allegations of identity politics against far-right and Islamophobic parties in the run-up to federal state elections in October 2018. Even national states, such as Russia, are re-enthroning traditional religion, Orthodoxy, as a pillar of Russian society. Some conservative interpreters have taken these observations as signs of an end of secularism, an end that opens the door to the revival of presecular society. On this view, the postsecularism thesis turns into a ‘presecularism thesis’. Yet, there is another and more radical version of the postsecularism thesis based on these and other empirical observations which provides the empirical ground for the reflexive secularization thesis.

This radical version claims that a social world emerges where differences between people increase that belief in increasingly different things – ‘radical difference’, as one of us calls it (Beaumont, 2018b). People do so in a changing spatial context: at home, in the workplace, in the public sphere, in everyday life beyond the home, and in social networks. They do so over time in a way that makes discontinuity normal or at least in a way that gives the appearance of normalcy. The notion of postsecularism reflects a world that produces many different people with dissimilar beliefs spread out over space and time and united in a higher perspective or reality. This leads to the central question provoked by the postsecularism thesis: how actually do people with different beliefs, values, and worldviews relate to each other in space and time?

Spatially, the question is where we find or can locate the sites of postsecular practices. The classic argument has been that the city is the realm of the secular and the countryside the realm of the religious. It is in fact easier to live a secular life in the city than it is in the countryside. Yet, this binary no longer works, especially when taken in light of new developments in urban theory that challenge this Wirthian separation (Brenner, 2016). The city and the countryside offer equally the tension underlying the secular living together with the non-secular: the countryside as the quasi-religious locus of salvation for urban dwellers and the urban village in the city quarters as a quasi-religious community, raising the issues of secular individualism and the romantic search for belonging to an authentic community. Adding the global aspect, the spatial dimension multiplies the sites that cross-cut established notions of being spatially situated.

Temporally, secular and religious beliefs are no longer stable beliefs that can be attributed to an individual or a group. People change their beliefs over the course of their life. What people do depends on whether they are in the early or late phases of their life course – whether they are part of a generation that marks discontinuities with former generations. We have to consider sequential effects that undermine the notion of a path toward a telos (be it religious renaissance or secular culture). Following Goldstein (2016), one should differentiate between the linear, cyclical, spiral, dialectical, and paradoxical patterns of secularization. Postsecularity, for our part, is more dialectical, restorative, genealogical in nature.

This postsecular condition exerts strong pressures upon the people to live up to it. Living in social relations that no longer provide clear and uncontested modes of being positioned and of self-positioning in the world easily fosters the search for community that provides clear rituals of passage in the life-course and a clear sense of one's place in the social world. The postsecular condition permanently produces a backlash that cultivates closed communities in which ideally religious traditions, ethnic boundary markers, and political constructions of a people coalesce. By drawing clear cultural boundaries around a people and providing well-defined role models for living in such a people, the social prerequisites of reflexive secularization are closed off and the confrontation with a world in which people have to find their way through competing normativities is blocked. People communicate in echo chambers, they do politics in the friend-foe mode, and they obstruct the debate about possible futures by appealing to a regrettably lost and allegedly more authentic past. This regressive version of secularization impedes the creative debate between diverging normativities that the postsecular world has created and continues to create. The postsecular society in which we live generates – as in any social form of social relations – forms of closure *and* openings simultaneously. It invites or even encourages closure as the preferred route, while also summoning or calling for experimentation with openness, given its structural evolution toward a network society. Reflexive secularization has a chance when such experimentation takes place.

Postsecular society is a social world in which differences and boundaries between beliefs and values abound but critically also where attempts are made at their reconciliation. Analyzing this multiplicity, the traditional conceptual tools for making differences visible turn out to be inadequate. Nations, ethnic groups, religions, urban and rural inhabitants, classes, and so on no longer suffice to grasp the multiple differences and boundaries across sites and across time. Even concepts like scaling up or down a

boundary (scaling up a region to a nation and then to a civilization or scaling down a nation to a region and then to a city and finally to a neighbourhood) are no longer analytically sufficient strategies for grasping the diversity of sites. We have to abstract from such taken-for-granted units ('things'). Scrutinizing the structure of social relations emerging from the multiplicity of sites (ranging from individuals to social networks) and the multiplicity of points in time, needs devices that make the network structure of social relations visible. These relations transcend the 'natural' boundaries of ethnic groups, classes, states, or families. The structures of social relations can no longer be read from such 'naturalized' social entities. A non-naturalistic way to make them visible is to analyze them as relations between individuals that occupy structurally equivalent positions in networks (see Smith, 2007; White, 2008; Eder, 2011; Forchtner et al., 2018).

This interpretation of postsecularism requires the relinquishing of the idea that there are entities like 'modern' or 'secular' society. These entities exist as concepts, and as concepts they even circulate well in networks of social relations, certainly among Western liberal intellectuals, but also among people being proud of having cut the bonds with religious authorities and beliefs. Thinking about postsecular society forces us to give up not only the idea of natural groups but also to renounce the habit of attributing to these groups meanings that are either secular or non-secular and religious. Not only the variation of social structures, but also the variation of the meanings of secular and non-secular requires rethinking society as one with diversifying networks through which these differentiating beliefs circulate. What follows is whether the secular self-understanding – and its antithesis, the religious re-enchantment of the world – are just one of the meanings that increasingly circulate through networks of social relations. What happens to secular individualism anchored in liberal society and to the national community that served as its container? Does the unsettling of the secular and the postsecular produce a society of 'disillusioned' and 'insecure' people? Does it produce a society with disintegrating and moreover inauthentic communities? Or, is postsecular society a catchword for evolving networks of social relations through which secular and religious (and other) stories or narratives coalesce and circulate simultaneously?

Some prominent thinkers of postsecularity have already taken up the idea of the simultaneous circulation of different beliefs in society but with different normative orientations. 'Democratic secularism', for the German constitutional judge and liberal conservative political theorist Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde (1976), presents obstacles for the development of social capital. He questions the ethical shaping force of the secular constitutional state. Jürgen Habermas (2008), as we have seen in detail above, has focused on 'postsecular society' as reciprocal learning processes between believers and non-believers. Both reveal versions of a secular position in public debate under the stress of the 'return of religion'. The public sphere is the haven for secularity repaired by debating with non-secular believers, and the secular state is its guarantee. This is, however, only half the story. Modern secular society has a second site, the private sphere, which is the haven for religious and non-religious sentiments alike and at least relativizes the exclusiveness of a secular principle of judging the common good. The two spheres, the private and the public, follow two different principles of judgement, a secular one (in the public sphere) and a non-secular one (in the private). This separation guaranteed the dominance of the secular principle as long as there was a clear separation and

hierarchical organization of these spheres – which in fact was never the case and increasingly no longer is. If two principles of judgement of the common good coexist in modern society, we cannot exclude the possibility of further principles, such as principles of judgement that can be derived from the market, the arts, or the industrial and postindustrial worlds of work. Postmodern society, we would claim, is a society where the structure of social relations allows the circulation of different principles of the common good.

Postsecular society, then, is a subcase of this observation: a society where secular and non-secular principles – beyond others – circulate simultaneously through social relations. This observation creates a particular opportunity and a particular risk for post-secular society. The opportunity is that people learn to switch between different principles of judgement when no consensus on a dispute relative to a principle of judgement is possible. By switching sites – not only from public to private, but also to new emerging sites such as social networks – people can move the dispute to other principles of judgement. If this does not work, then there is the choice of tolerating reciprocal criticism and waiting for further debate; it is the solution of permanent dialogue. Another answer would be to compromise between competing principles, e.g. secular and religious criteria, a situation that runs the risk of being denounced as betraying both sides in the dispute. When there is no agreement or compromise, two solutions remain: forgiving and forgetting, or war and violence. Whatever happens and how traumatic collective experience might become, social processes will continue and produce situations in which people have to restart disputes and re-enter processes of reconciliation and negotiation with each other.

There is a second conclusion from the postsecularism thesis: the issue of taking a ‘postsecular perspective’ as a social scientist observing this postsecular world. The postsecular observer has a critical stance towards this world, and s/he can do that from a secular or a non-secular perspective. If things go wrong in the secular or religious world, this observer criticizes what is going wrong as any other social actor does. In the case of strong and unbridgeable dissent, observers of social science normally do not forgive nor do they fight. Instead, they are specialized in fostering critical capacities. This means exposing the social scientists not only to the critical capacities of their colleagues, but also to the critical capacities of the many others who inhabit postsecular society. The postsecular position forces us to recognize that there is no ultimate solution, final consensus, nor telos whether defined in religious or secular terms. Postsecularism dethrones any claim of normative superiority by religious or secular criteria in judging the common good. It enthrones permanent and critical debate as the only solution left.

Conclusion

We have argued that understanding postsecularity requires reflexive engagement with antagonistic processes unleashed by the secularization of the state, on the one side, and respect for people’s right to faith, on the other. Conflicts as well as solidarities emerge from this complementarity of discourses, the inevitable confrontation of normativities, and new empirical challenges. We do not argue that we should all become

‘postsecularists’ but rather for the value in adopting a postsecular sensibility, consciousness, or ethos to grasp what we mean by reflexive secularization.

At least two lines of inquiry emerge. First, new work could focus on the spatialities as well as temporalities of postsecularity. New theorizations of *urbanization of the postsecular and the enlightened city* would be a possibility. The notion of the ‘postsecular city’ (Molendijk et al., 2010; Beaumont and Baker, 2011; Cloke et al., 2019) ought to broaden to what Beaumont (2018b) calls the ‘enlightened city’ – the conceptualization of urbanization as overlapping ethical and political imperatives that reconcile radical difference and confront injustices. Our thoughts on structurally equivalent positions in narrative networks, if spatialized, would be a valuable social-empirical contribution to the understanding of postsecular urban society. Larger-scale scholarship could explore the immanentist and postmetaphysical connotations, particularly in light of Habermas’ much awaited genealogy of postmetaphysical thought amid the age-old controversies of faith and knowledge, which might point to a creeping transcendent, monist and pantheist modes of thought. Eduardo Mendieta’s work linking decoloniality, urbanism, and the Anthropocene ties into this agenda. Second, new inquiries could attend to the growing recognition of multiple postsecularisms, critical postsecular consciousness and moves to decolonize the secular. New scholarship could raise and address important questions about the universal and authentic human condition, through respect for context-specific postsecularisms outside the Occident.

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