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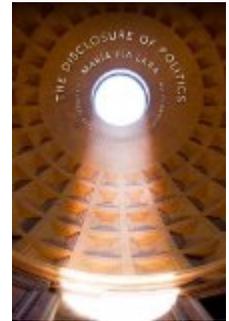


María Pía Lara. *The Disclosure of Politics: Struggles over the Semantics of Secularization*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. xiii + 235 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16280-7.

Reviewed by Kim Shively (Kutztown University)

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Thinking about Secularization: A Meta-Methodological Study

In *The Disclosure of Politics: Struggles over the Semantics of Secularization*, philosopher María Pía Lara provides a critical analysis of twentieth-century German theories of secularization and associated political concepts. Lara focuses on Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg, Hannah Arendt, Reinhart Koselleck, and Jürgen Habermas, though she regularly draws on the work of a wide array of modern political philosophers, as well as the most significant work of the classical and Enlightenment philosophical traditions. The author's ultimate goal is to "rescue" politics from religion (pp. 7-8). To be more precise, she wishes to repudiate recent theoretical trends that have tended to see religion as the semantic source for political theories. For Lara, modern politics is conceptually autonomous from religion.

This book is wide ranging and sophisticated, and as such, it is impossible to summarize the many strands of political philosophy that Lara examines. It would be more productive to focus on the analytic orientations that the author employs throughout the text. For example, Lara makes use of conceptual history to understand how "secularization" has come to have the various meanings it has today and what these meanings suggest about future political arrangements. Borrowing from Koselleck, Lara sees conceptual history, or *Begriffsgeschichte*, as a useful tool that draws on "the double structure of history and language" (p. 3). This approach enables observers to understand how the semantic content of political concepts, such as "democracy," shift not only in relationship to novel historical circumstances but also in

relationship to changes in other ideas. Many political concepts may overlap with each other significantly (e.g., "emancipation" and "equality" in late twentieth-century Europe), while in other historical contexts, the associations may only be tangential. It is possible that concepts that were historically identified with each other can eventually evolve into counter-concepts. For example, "revolution" was viewed as entailing "violence," as in the case of the French Revolution. But by the era of the post-war twentieth century, the two concepts come to stand in opposition, given the emergence of revolutionary social movements—for example, the civil rights movement in the United States—in which violence is explicitly repudiated.

What Lara is doing here, though, is not merely reviewing how concepts develop over time. Such a review would just replicate the work of Koselleck and other theorists. Rather, this book lays out a "meta-methodology," in which the author casts her analytic gaze on the methodologies that the various writers have used to talk about the potentialities of and interrelationships among political concepts over time (p. 6). One central evaluative interest that drives Lara's review is each model's potential to provide the "disclosure of politics." In its simplest sense, "disclosure means the capacity to unveil what was previously unseen" (p. 184), and disclosive political concepts are those that allow political actors to look toward the future as an open possibility, unbound by teleology, where they can imagine innovative modes of existence.

Some methods she finds more useful than others in exploring the disclosure of politics and the semantics of secularization. For example, she criticizes Löwith's "model of translation" (chapter 2), in which Löwith theorized that political concepts are literal translations of religious content, such that secular authority is a translation of divine authority, or secular political striving is a translation of the Christian teleology where salvation is the end of history. Clearly, such a model that presents current concepts as rewritings of past ones can hardly be disclosive, and Lara turns to Blumenberg to counter Löwith (chapter 3). According to Lara, Blumenberg maintained that "history can only be understood as an immanent process. It is not imbued with a transcendental perspective" (p. 71). Hope for the future or ideas of progress are not reworkings of Christian expectations of the final judgment but may instead arise from the uncertainties and existential anxieties experienced by modern actors in their everyday (immanent) contexts. This is Blumenberg's model of reoccupation, in which spaces or problems left by religion are "reoccupied" by immanent concerns.

While Blumenberg takes steps toward saving politics from assumptions of transcendence, Lara draws on other theorists, especially Arendt and Habermas, for more productive ways of exploring the semantics of secularization. It is Arendt especially who developed a concept of politics as autonomous from, not derivative of, religion. She argued that notions of authority do not have to depend on a transcendent agency as a source of power; rather, she suggested that people only experience power immanently in connection to the actions of community. Using the American Revolution as an example, Lara shows how Arendt's notion that "power resides in the people, but belongs to no one in particular" promotes the progressive drive toward freedom and equality (i.e., all may participate in the community), though Arendt did not adequately explain how exclusion may be avoided (p. 114). Habermas is the only of the major philosophers Lara discusses who is still alive and productive, and he is still developing his thinking on the issue of secularization. He is best known for his theorizing on the "public sphere" as a space of mediation between the individual and state in which reasoned debate occurs and public opinion evolves. This is a secular process in which religious issues are only one set of issues among many others. But, as Lara points out, Habermas has been criticized for neglecting to recognize that debate in the pub-

lic sphere—which Habermas sees as its essential political function—can easily become exclusionary, especially for minorities

Rather than providing new theoretical or methodological models, the book really reads more like an erudite, sharply critical literature review. Certainly, Lara expresses her own views throughout the text, but it is really only in the last few pages that she lays out succinctly her own methodological preferences. Not surprisingly, she emphasizes that transcendental meanings should not permeate political theory, though she does not really make it clear why it is essential that politics be absolutely autonomous from religion. I understand that it may not be useful to think of politics as being completely derived from religious concepts, but that does not mean that the two domains have to be completely divorced from one another. It seems that Lara takes for granted that religious thought is especially dangerous to liberatory political goals. Lara points out that other ideologies can also be dangerous, but the special problem of religion needs to be argued more thoroughly than she does in the book.

In discussing a book like this, it is easy to think of the many social theorists who were left out. For all the material on power and conceptual history covered in the book, a greater consideration of Michel Foucault would have been in order, for example. While it is understandable that Lara emphasizes European political theory of secularism, this narrow regional focus can seem provincial, as anthropologist Talal Asad has suggested (see *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* [2003]), especially as debates about the process of secularization occur in societies around the world. The book would also have been helped by a more generous use of concrete examples of the ideas under discussion. When Lara does introduce historical cases, the ideas come into better focus. Otherwise, the presentation can sometimes seem rather bloodless and arcane, when it is clear that Lara is grappling with issues essential to modern political thought.

This book is not for the novice but is written with fellow specialists in mind. The reader should have a good understanding of the history of political theory, with an emphasis on the revolutions in theory introduced during the Enlightenment. This would be a great book for a graduate seminar in political philosophy or political science.

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