

A man in a dark suit and glasses is walking from right to left across a light-colored concrete floor. A large, jagged crack runs diagonally across the floor, starting from the bottom left and extending towards the top right. The man is walking on the upper part of the crack, which is still intact. The crack widens and becomes more jagged as it extends towards the bottom left. The overall scene is minimalist and symbolic, suggesting a path or a break in a solid surface.

**THE END OF  
PROGRESS**

Decolonizing the Normative  
Foundations of Critical Theory

**AMY ALLEN**

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# THE END OF PROGRESS

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DECOLONIZING THE NORMATIVE

FOUNDATIONS OF CRITICAL THEORY

Amy Allen



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Progress occurs where it ends.

—Theodor Adorno, “Progress”

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I would like to say something about the function of any diagnosis concerning the nature of the present. It does not consist in a simple characterization of what we are but, instead—by following lines of fragility in the present—in managing to grasp why and how that-which-is might no longer be that-which-is. In this sense, any description must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, that is of possible transformation.

—Michel Foucault, “Critical Theory/Intellectual History”

The subaltern fractures from within.

—Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*

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# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This book aims to make a contribution to the ongoing project of critical theory. But constraining the aim of the book in this way already raises a difficulty, for the term “critical theory” is contested and unstable, and can refer to a wide variety of theoretical projects and agendas. In its most narrow usage, “critical theory” refers to the German tradition of interdisciplinary social theory, inaugurated in Frankfurt in the 1930s, and carried forward today in Germany by such thinkers as Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst and in the United States by theorists such as Thomas McCarthy, Nancy Fraser, and Seyla Benhabib. In a more capacious usage, “critical theory” refers to any politically inflected form of cultural, social, or political theory that has critical, progressive, or emancipatory aims. Understood in this way, “critical theory” encompasses much if not all of the work that is done under the banner of feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and post- and decolonial theory. A distinct but related capacious usage of the term refers to the body of theory that is mobilized in literary and cultural studies, otherwise known simply as “theory.” Here critical theory refers mainly to a body of French theory spanning from poststructuralism to psychoanalysis, and including such thinkers as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Lacan. Obviously there are significant overlaps and cross-fertilizations between these latter two senses in particular, and my point here is not to attempt to draw hard and fast distinctions between them. Rather, my point is simply to map some of the complicated and shifting terrain on which this book is situated.

For once we have at least provisionally mapped the terrain in this way, it is striking how fraught and contested the interactions and dialogues between “critical theory” in the narrow sense and “critical theory” in these two wider senses of the term are. Although the former has gone some way toward incorporating the insights of feminist theory (primarily through the work of Fraser and Benhabib) and critical race theory (through the recent work of McCarthy), its long-running feud with French theory is well known. And up to now, “critical theory” in the narrow sense of that term has largely failed to engage seriously with the insights of queer theory and post- and decolonial theory. No doubt, these last two points are closely related insofar as French theory—and the work of Foucault in particular—has been so formative for the fields of queer and postcolonial theory.

In this book, I attempt to work across the divides between these different understandings of critical theory, particularly those between the Frankfurt School approach to critical theory, the work of Michel Foucault, and the concerns of post- and decolonial theory. My main *critical* aim is to show that and how and why Frankfurt School critical theory remains wedded to problematically Eurocentric and/or foundationalist strategies for grounding normativity. My primary *positive* aim is to decolonize Frankfurt School critical theory by rethinking its strategies for grounding normativity, in such a way as to open this project up to the aims and concerns of post- and decolonial critical theory. For reasons that I discuss at more length throughout this book, I think that such an opening up is crucial if Frankfurt School critical theory is to be truly critical, in the sense of being able to engage in the ongoing self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of our postcolonial—by which I mean formally decolonized but still neocolonial—age.

In light of this complex and divided terrain, it might be useful for me to spell out at the outset how I deploy the term “critical theory.” As I understand it and as I practice it in this book and elsewhere, critical theory refers simultaneously to a tradition, a method, and an aim. My approach to critical theory is situated in the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School. What I find particularly attractive about this tradition is its emphasis on social theory and on the understanding of the social as the nexus of the political, the cultural, and the individual. This focus on the social gives rise to the distinctive interplay between the critique of political economy, forms of social-cultural analysis, and theories of the self or individual that is the hallmark of the Frankfurt School critical theory tradition. As I see it, however, the best way to do justice to this tradition is not to remain faithful to its core doctrines or central figures but rather precisely to inherit it, by which I mean to take it up while simultaneously radically transforming it. I do this in what follows by bringing Frankfurt School critical theory into a sustained conversation not only with the work of Michel Foucault but also with the work of feminist, queer, and post- and decolonial critical theorists.

But critical theory is more than a distinctive intellectual tradition of social theory. It also consists in a distinctive method for doing social theory. This method is outlined clearly in the famous programmatic essay that inaugurates the critical theory tradition, Max Horkheimer’s “Traditional and Critical Theory.” In this essay, Horkheimer situates critical theory between political realism—which analyzes the empirical conditions and power relations that structure our existing social, cultural, economic, and political worlds—and normative political theory—which articulates ideal, rational, normative conceptions of justice that it takes to be freestanding. In contrast to both of these methods, critical theory understands itself to be rooted in and constituted by an existing social reality that is structured by power relations that it therefore also aims to critique by appealing to immanent standards of normativity and rationality. The difference between traditional and critical theory, Horkheimer notes, “springs general from a difference not so much of objects as of subjects.”<sup>1</sup> On this way of understanding it, what is distinctive about critical theory is its conception of the critical subject as self-consciously rooted in and shaped by the power relations in the society that she nevertheless aims self-reflexively and rationally to critique. As I see it, preserving this distinctiveness requires critical theory to hold open the central tension between power, on the one hand, and normativity and rationality, on the other hand, for to resolve it in either direction would mean collapsing into either political realism or what is now called ideal theory.<sup>2</sup>

But critical theory is not just a distinctive method that emerges out of a particular intellectual tradition. It also has the practical and political aim of freedom or emancipation. Again, to take Horkheimer’s classic statement, the goal of critical theory is not merely the theoretical aim of understanding what constitutes emancipation or the conditions under which it is possible but also the ambitious practical aim of “man’s emancipation from slavery.”<sup>3</sup> But here a potential tension emerges between the method of critical theory and its aim, for the theoretical attempts to identify the ideal conditions under which genuine emancipation would be possible inevitably run up against charges of normative or rational idealism and complaints that they are insufficiently attentive to the complexities of power. For this reason, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> a negativistic conception of emancipation, where emancipation refers to the minimization of relations of domination, not to a social world without or beyond power relations, is most compatible with critical theory’s distinctive method.

Particularly in light of its practical-political emancipatory aim, the failure of Frankfurt School

critical theory to engage substantively with one of the most influential branches of critical theory, in the broader sense of that term, to have emerged in recent decades—postcolonial studies and theory—is all the more puzzling and problematic. After all, if critical theory aims at the emancipatory self-clarification of the political struggles of the age, then how can it ignore the compelling articulation and theorization of contemporary struggles over the meaning, limits, and failures of decolonization that have emerged in this body of work? In many ways, this book emerges out of my puzzlement about this lack of engagement.<sup>5</sup> Some of this failure undoubtedly has to do with the fact that postcolonial theory has been so heavily influenced by poststructuralist theory; in that sense, the ongoing family quarrel between Frankfurt School critical theory and French critical theory is likely operating in the background to shape the Frankfurt School's reception—or lack thereof—of postcolonial theory. But there is, I think, also something deeper going on and it has to do with the way that contemporary Frankfurt School critical theorists—Habermasian and post-Habermasian—have attempted to ground their conceptions of normativity. As I argue more fully in what follows, these attempts have primarily coalesced in the work of Habermas and Honneth in a broadly speaking neo-Hegelian reconstructivist strategy for grounding normativity in which ideas of historical progress and sociocultural learning and development figure prominently. Rainer Forst, by contrast, defends a neo-Kantian constructivist strategy in which normativity is grounded in a foundationalist conception of practical reason. Given the deep connections between ideas of historical progress and development and normative foundationalism and the theory and practice of Eurocentric imperialism, however, both of these strategies are anathema to postcolonial theory. The problematic imperialist entanglements of these normative strategies also shed light on why postcolonial theorists have by and large found French poststructuralist theory—which likewise rejects both foundationalism and progressive theories of history—more congenial to its aims than Frankfurt School critical theory.

The result is that a gulf has opened up between the Frankfurt School approach to critical theory and critical theory done under the heading of postcolonial theory. I felt this gulf very acutely as I worked on this project. When presenting my work to the former sort of audience, including but not only in Frankfurt, I was criticized vehemently for challenging the various neo-Hegelian and neo-Kantian strategies for grounding normativity favored by contemporary Frankfurt School theorists and thus flirting with relativism; when discussing my project with colleagues who work in postcolonial theory, I found that they were often stunned to learn that anyone was still willing to defend either ideas of historical progress and development or normative foundationalist projects at all. This gulf is so pronounced that the very project of this book might seem quixotic. For whom, after all, is it written? Frankfurt School critical theorists are likely to think that the anti-foundationalist account of normativity that I develop here is too weak and relativistic to count as critical, and postcolonial theorists are likely to find the critiques of Eurocentric modernity discussed here all too familiar. And yet this book attempts to speak across this divide, both by showing how and why critical theory in the narrow sense of that term can and must be decolonized and by showing how a certain way of inheriting the Frankfurt School approach to critical theory, a certain way of construing and taking up its method and its aims, can be congenial to postcolonial theory, how it might even allow postcolonial theory to be criticalized.

This book took shape over a number of years and is the result of a great many public presentations of work in progress and conversations with colleagues, friends, and students.

cannot hope to mention everyone whose comments, questions, and suggestions have made an impact on this work, but I am grateful for all of the opportunities I have had over the last six years to reframe, refine, and improve this project.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

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## WORKS BY ADORNO

CCS	“Cultural Criticism and Society”
DE	<i>Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments</i> , by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer
EF	“The Essay as Form”
H	<i>Hegel: Tree Studies</i>
HF	<i>History and Freedom: Lectures, 1964–1965</i>
MM	<i>Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life</i>
ND	<i>Negative Dialectics</i>
P	“Progress”
PMP	<i>Problems of Moral Philosophy</i>

## WORKS BY FORST

CJ	<i>Contexts of Justice: Political Philosophy Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism</i>
JC	<i>Justification and Critique: Towards a Critical Theory of Politics</i>
JJ	“Justifying Justification: Reply to My Critics”
NP	“Noumenal Power”
RJ	<i>The Right to Justification: Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice</i>
TC	<i>Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present</i>
TP	“Two Pictures of Justice”
ZBF	“Zum Begriff des Fortschritts”

## WORKS BY FOUCAULT

ABHS	“About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth”
CT/IH	“Critical Theory/Intellectual History”
ECSPF	“The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom”
HM	<i>History of Madness</i>
NGH	“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”
OGE	“On the Genealogy of Ethics”
OWWH	“On the Ways of Writing History”
PPP	“Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations”
PT	<i>The Politics of Truth</i>
SKP	“Space, Knowledge, and Power”

SP	“The Subject and Power”
UP	<i>The Use of Pleasure</i>
WE	“What Is Enlightenment?”

#### WORKS BY HABERMAS

BFN	<i>Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy</i>
BNR	<i>Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays</i>
CD	“Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Union of Contradictory Principles?”
CES	<i>Communication and the Evolution of Society</i>
DE	“Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification”
DW	<i>The Divided West</i>
EFK	“Essay on Faith and Knowledge”
IO	<i>The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory</i>
JA	<i>Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics</i>
PDM	<i>The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures</i>
PWS	“A Postsecular World Society? On the Philosophical Significance of Postsecular Consciousness and the Multicultural World Society”
R	“Reply to My Critics”
RR1	<i>Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity</i>
STPS	<i>The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society.</i>
TCA1	<i>The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society</i>
TCA2	<i>The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 2, Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason</i>
TP	<i>Theory and Practice</i>

#### WORKS BY HONNETH

CP	<i>The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory</i>
CT	“Critical Theory”
FR	<i>Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life</i>
IP	“The Irreducibility of Progress: Kant’s Account of the Relationship Between Morality and History”
NEL	“The Normativity of Ethical Life”
PDCS	“The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i> in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism”
R2	“Replies”



RI	“Recognition as Ideology”
RR2	<i>Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange</i> , by Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth
RSC	“Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of ‘Critique’ in the Frankfurt School”
SDD	“The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today”
SPR	“A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory”
SR	<i>The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts</i>

# Critical Theory and the Idea of Progress

In 1993, in his sequel to his groundbreaking and field-defining book *Orientalism*, Edward Said offers the following indictment of Frankfurt School critical theory: “Frankfurt School critical theory, despite its seminal insights into the relationships between domination, modern society, and the opportunities for redemption through art as critique, is stunningly silent on racial theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Said argues, this is no mere oversight; rather, it is a motivated silence. Frankfurt School critical theory, like other versions of European theory more generally, espouses what Said calls an invidious and false universalism, a “blithe universalism” that “assume[s] and incorporate[s] the inequality of races, the subordination of inferior cultures, the acquiescence of those who, in Marx’s words, cannot represent themselves and therefore must be represented by others. Such “universalism” has, for Said, played a crucial role in connecting (European) culture with (European) imperialism for centuries, for imperialism as a political project cannot sustain itself without the *idea of empire*, and the idea of empire, in turn, is nourished by a philosophical and cultural imaginary that justifies the political subjugation of distant territories and their native populations through claims that such peoples are less advanced, cognitively inferior, and therefore naturally subordinate.

Twenty years after Said made this charge, not enough has changed. Contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory, for the most part, remains all too silent on the problem of imperialism. Neither of the major contemporary theorists most closely associated with the legacy of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, has made systematic reflection on the paradoxes and challenges produced by the waves of decolonization that characterized the latter half of the twentieth century a central focus of his work in critical theory, nor has either theorist engaged seriously with the by now substantial body of literature in postcolonial theory or studies.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Habermas, this lack of attention is all the more notable, given his increasing engagement in recent years with issues of globalization, cosmopolitanism, and the prospects for various forms of post- and supranational legal and political forms.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, with a few prominent exceptions, critical theorists working in the Frankfurt School tradition have followed Habermas’s and Honneth’s lead.<sup>5</sup> Although the topics of global justice and human rights have been high on the agenda in recent years in Frankfurt, those topics tend to be pursued in a way that refrains from the kind of wholesale reassessment of the links between moral-political universalism and European imperialism that Said counsels. And even those relatively few calls from within the Frankfurt School camp for the decolonization of critical theory have tended to be met with an expansion of the canon of critical theory, to include such thinkers as Frantz Fanon, Enrique Dussel, Frederick Douglass, and Toni Morrison.<sup>6</sup> As welcome as such an expansion of what counts as critical theory is, and as fruitful and groundbreaking as its results are, this strategy for responding to the silence of mainstream critical theorists on the questions of imperialism and colonialism means that the deep and difficult challenge that our postcolonial predicament poses to the Frankfurt School distinctive approach to social theorizing has not only not yet been met, it has not even been

fully appreciated by its practitioners. This book constitutes an attempt both to articulate and meet that challenge.

Like Said, I believe that there is a reason for the Frankfurt School's failure to respond adequately to the predicaments of our post- and neocolonial world and that this reason is connected to philosophical commitments that run deep in the work of its contemporary practitioners. The problem, as I see it, arises from the particular role that ideas of historical progress, development, social evolution, and sociocultural learning play in justifying and grounding the normative perspective of critical theorists such as Habermas and Honneth.<sup>7</sup> As I shall argue at length in what follows, Habermas and Honneth both rely on a broadly speaking left-Hegelian strategy for grounding or justifying the normativity of critical theory, in which they claim that our current communicative or recognitional practices represent the outcome of a cumulative and progressive learning process and therefore are deserving of our support and allegiance figures prominently. Thus, they are both deeply wedded to the idea that European Enlightenment modernity—or at least certain aspects or features thereof, which remain to be spelled out—represents a developmental advance over premodern, nonmodern, or traditional forms of life, and, crucially, this idea plays an important role in grounding the normativity of critical theory for each thinker. In other words, both Habermas and Honneth are committed to the thought that critical theory needs to defend some idea of historical progress in order to ground its distinctive approach to normativity and, thus, in order to be truly critical. But it is precisely this commitment that proves to be the biggest obstacle to the project of decolonizing their approaches to critical theory. For perhaps the major lesson of postcolonial scholarship over the last thirty-five years has been that the developmentalist, progressive reading of history—in which Europe or “the West” is viewed as more enlightened or more developed than Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and so on—and the so-called civilizing mission of the West, which served to justify colonialism and imperialism and continues to underwrite the informal imperialism or neocolonialism of the current world economic, legal, and political order are deeply intertwined.<sup>8</sup> In other words, as James Tully has pithily put the point, the language of progress and development is the language of oppression and domination for two-thirds of the world's people.<sup>9</sup>

Habermas's and Honneth's reliance on a progressive, developmentalist understanding of history as a way of grounding normativity thus raises a deep and difficult challenge for their approach to critical theory: How can their critical theory be truly critical if it remains committed to an imperialist metanarrative, that is, if it has not yet been decolonized? On the flip side, how can it be truly critical if it gives up its distinctive strategy for grounding normativity? If we accept Nancy Fraser's Marx-inspired definition of critical theory as the “self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age,”<sup>10</sup> and if we further assume that struggles around decolonization and postcolonial politics are among the most significant struggles and wishes of our age,<sup>11</sup> then the demand for a decolonization of critical theory follows quite straightforwardly from the very definition of critical theory. If it wishes to be truly critical, the contemporary critical theory should frame its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye toward decolonial and anti-imperialist struggles and concerns. However, if, as we have suggested, contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory relies on ideas of historical development, learning, and progress to ground its conception of normativity, then (how) can this project be decolonized without radically rethinking its approach to normativity?<sup>12</sup> In response to this last question, I will argue in what follows that critical theory's approach

grounding normativity must be radically transformed if it is to decolonize itself and thus be truly critical.

As I mentioned, Habermas's and Honneth's emphasis on ideas of progress in the form of notions of sociocultural development and historical learning processes can be understood as part of the general left-Hegelianism or Hegelian-Marxism of the Frankfurt School, though it is worth noting at the outset that this understanding of history sets the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School apart from the first generation, whose leading members were, at least after World War II, much less sanguine about the idea of progress. The catastrophe of Auschwitz, Adorno noted in his lectures on the philosophy of history, "makes talk of progress towards freedom seem ludicrous" and makes the "affirmative mentality" that engages in such talk look like "the mere assertion of a mind that is incapable of looking horror in the face and that thereby perpetuates it" (HF, 7). Adorno evokes Benjamin's ninth thesis of the philosophy of history, in which progress is famously depicted as the storm that blows from Paradise and irresistibly propels the angel of history into the future. With his back to the future, the angel of history faces the past and "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."<sup>13</sup> Crucially, however, Adorno and Benjamin do not reject the idea of progress altogether, but rather seek to break it apart and reconceive it dialectically. Specifically, Adorno and Benjamin doubted not that progress in the future is possible or desirable but that any sense could be made of the claim that progress had already happened; indeed, on Adorno's view, progressive readings of history serve as ideological impediments that block progress in the future. Thus, as Max Pensky puts it in glossing Benjamin, "progress's first step is the enraged destruction of the discourse of progress."<sup>14</sup> Or, as Adorno put it in the line that serves as the inspiration for the title of this book, "progress occurs where it ends" (P, 150). What distinguishes Habermas and Honneth from the approach of earlier Frankfurt School thinkers is not their commitment to progress as a future-oriented moral-political goal—a commitment that all of these thinkers share—but rather their commitment to what Pensky calls the discourse of progress as an empiricist history. Furthermore, for Habermas and Honneth, these two aspects of progress are deeply intertwined in their critical theory, and it is this intertwining that makes their critical theory so greatly in need of decolonizing.

The overall aims of this book are to critically assess the role played by ideas of sociocultural development, sociocultural learning processes, and historical progress in grounding and justifying the normativity of critical theory in mainstream Frankfurt School theory, and to develop an alternative framework for thinking about history and the question of normativity in grounding, one that is more compatible with the urgent project of decolonizing critical theory. In this project, I draw on theoretical resources that can be found in or nearby the Frankfurt School tradition, particularly the work of Adorno and Michel Foucault. This book thus follows in the footsteps of the work of Robert J. C. Young, and could be understood as an attempt to do for Frankfurt School critical social theory what Young's *White Mythologies* did for Marxist literary criticism: namely, to expose the extent to which that project is implicated at the theoretical level, by virtue of its commitment to a certain understanding of history, in the very imperialism that it condemns politically.<sup>15</sup> My goal is twofold: to decolonize critical theory by opening it from within to the kind of post- and decolonial theorizing that it needs to take on board if it is to be truly critical and, conversely, to show, through a rethinking of the question of normativity in the Frankfurt School tradition, how post- and decolonial theory might be

criticalized, that is, how it might respond to long-standing charges of relativism and question about the normative status of its critique.<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter, I begin by laying out the major conceptual issues involved in the appeal to ideas of historical learning, development, and progress as a strategy for securing normativity. First, I discuss what precisely is meant—and not meant!—by progress in the context of contemporary critical theory, and consider the main reasons that have been offered in favor of the claim that the idea of progress is indispensable for critical theory. Second, I consider the deeply intertwined epistemological and political critiques of the discourse of progress that have gained prominence in post- and decolonial theory. This discussion aims not only to establish why critical theory needs to decolonize itself, to the extent that it is wedded to a certain version of the discourse of progress, but also to motivate the particular strategy for decolonizing critical theory that I will adopt in this book. Finally, I discuss Thomas McCarthy's recent attempt to respond to such postcolonial and postdevelopment critiques of the discourse of progress, and suggest that the shortcomings of McCarthy's approach provide us with some preliminary indications of the shape that a decolonization of critical theory will have to take. Those indications will be taken up and developed further in subsequent chapters.

## PROGRESS AND THE NORMATIVITY OF CRITICAL THEORY

Before exploring the role that is played by the idea of progress in contemporary critical theory, let me first say a few words about what precisely is meant here by the term “progress.” In its broadest terms, the idea of historical progress refers not just to progress toward some specific goal but rather to human progress or development overall, *überhaupt*. As Reinhart Koselleck has argued, this notion of historical progress is a distinctively modern concept that emerges in the eighteenth century. Although the Greeks and Romans had terms that could “characterize a relative progression in particular spheres of fact and experience”—*prokopē*, *epidōsis*, *progressus*, *perfectus*—these concepts were, according to Koselleck, always concerned with looking back and were not linked to the idea of a better future.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, and perhaps more important, they were always partial, local; the term “progress” did not, for the Greeks, refer to “an entire social process, as we associate it today with technological practices and industrialization” (PD, 222). The Christian notion of progress, by contrast, referred to a spiritual progress that was to culminate at a point outside of time; Christianity thus opened up the horizon of the future, but the better future that it projected would only be realized after the end of history. As far as history was concerned, for the Middle Ages, as for antiquity, “the world as a whole was aging and rushing toward its end. Spiritual progress and the decline of the world were to this extent correlational concepts that obstructed the interpretation of the earthly future in progressive terms” (PD, 224). The modern notion of progress transformed the “constant expectation of the end of the world into an open future; spiritual *profectus* became worldly *progressus*” (PD, 225).

On Koselleck's analysis, the modern concept of progress, which went hand in hand with the new experience of time, consisted in several features. First, the idea of the future as an infinite horizon denaturalized the idea that the age of the world is analogous to the old age of an individual; this, in turn, led to a break between the age of world and the idea of decay and decline: “Infinite progress opened up a future that shirked the natural metaphors of aging

Although the world as nature may age in the course of time, this no longer involves the decline of all of humanity" (PD, 226). In modernity, decline was no longer seen as the pure opposite of progress; "rather progress has become a world historical category whose tendency is to interpret all regressions as temporary and finally even as the stimulus for new progress" (PD, 227). Second, in the modern concept of progress, the striving for perfection that had also characterized Christian thinking about progress became temporalized, located in human history. As a result, progress became an ongoing, never-ending, dynamic process, an infinite task (PD, 227–228). Finally, this modern concept of progress referred to both technical-scientific and moral-political progress, that is, to progress *überhaupt*. Here Koselleck again: "Progress (der Fortschritt), a term first put forth by Kant, was now a word that neatly and deftly brought the manifold of scientific, technological, and industrial meanings of progress, and finally also those meanings involving social morality and even the totality of history, under a common concept" (PD, 229).

This modern concept of progress found its clearest expression in the classical philosophies of history of Kant, Hegel, and even Marx. There, historical progress was understood in the strongest possible terms, as a necessary, inevitable, and unified process. Whether operating through the mechanism of a purposive nature, which uses evil to produce good, or of the cunning of reason, which behind men's backs and over their heads rationalizes existing reality, or of the development of the forces and relations of production, which sows the seeds for communist revolution, these classical philosophies of history understood progress to be necessary (though they had somewhat different views on how much of a role individuals should or could play in bringing about that necessary development) and unified (as occurring more or less simultaneously across society as a whole). Moreover, these classical philosophies of history rested on metaphysically loaded conceptions of the goal or telos toward which progress aimed, whether that was understood as the realization of the kingdom of ends on earth, the attainment of the standpoint of Absolute knowing, or communist utopia.

To be clear: none of the current defenders of the idea of progress in the Frankfurt School critical theory tradition makes such strong claims. Thus, I want to emphasize at the outset that I am not claiming that either Habermas or Honneth holds on to a traditional philosophy of history or to the strong notion of historical progress that comes along with it. Already the failure of the proletariat to rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie in Europe and the United States in the early twentieth century caused trouble for the Marxist version of the classical philosophy of history, while the regressive barbarism and moral-political catastrophes of the Holocaust and the Gulag further undermined strong Hegelian and Kantian theodicies of history. For contemporary critical theory, progress is accordingly understood in contingent rather than necessary, disaggregated rather than total, and postmetaphysical rather than metaphysical terms. To say that progress is contingent is to say that whether or not any particular culture or society will in fact progress is a matter of contingent historical circumstances, and that regressions are always also possible. To say that it is disaggregated is to say that progress in one domain—say, the economic or technological-scientific sphere—can occur simultaneously with regress in another—say, the cultural or political sphere. To say that progress is understood in postmetaphysical terms is to say that the conception of the end toward which progress aims is understood in a deflationary, fallibilistic, and de-transcendentalized way, as a hypothesis about some fundamental features of human sociocultural life—the role that mutual understanding plays in language, or that mutu-

recognition plays in the formation of identity—that stands in need of empirical confirmation.

And yet, I do want to argue that a certain vestigial remnant of the traditional philosophy of history remains in contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory and that it takes the form of the notions of sociocultural development, historical learning, and moral-political progress that inform Habermas's and Honneth's conceptions of modernity. In other words, Habermas and Honneth are committed to a common core understanding of social progress, such that if a society can be said to have progressed then this will be because that society has followed a certain developmental, unidirectional, and cumulative moral-political learning process. To be sure, as Habermas emphasizes, this notion of progress does not entail any simple-minded judgment about "the superiority for the actual moral behavior or the ethical forms of life of later generations" (R, 360). The crucial point, for Habermas, is the moral-cognitive one that "there is progress in the de-centering of our perspectives when it comes to viewing the world as a whole, or to making considered judgments on issues of justice" and that this type of progress, epitomized in the Enlightenment, has "become so natural for later generations" that it is "assumed to be irreversible" (R, 360). Habermas goes further than Honneth in that he also defends a notion of technical-scientific progress, though, in line with the nontraditional philosophy of history sketched above, he sees this as wholly distinct and disaggregated from moral-political progress. Indeed, he follows Max Weber in understanding the very separation and disaggregation of moral-political discourses and institutions from technical-scientific ones as a hallmark of modernity and thus as itself the indication of a kind of progress or sociocultural learning. On this view, the ability to separate truth validity from normative validity claims is one of the hallmarks of the post-conventional autonomy that becomes possible in posttraditional societies; thus, it is one of the key features distinguishing modernity from myth (see TCA1).

Insofar as the primary aim of this book is to analyze the relationship between ideas of historical progress and the problem of normativity and the impediment that this relationship poses for the project of decolonizing critical theory, my main focus throughout will be on the idea of normative or moral-political progress. Accordingly I will attempt to leave questions about technical-scientific progress aside. In defense of this move, I can only say that the issues that I am grappling with in this book are difficult enough without my having to take on board the complex debates about progress or the lack thereof in science, for which I lack the requisite expertise in the history and philosophy of science in any case. To be sure, there is an irony here, inasmuch as by accepting the separation of moral-political questions from technical-scientific ones, I could be seen as tacitly endorsing Habermas's conception of modernity at the same time as I am criticizing it.<sup>18</sup> If pressed, I would admit that it seems to me that there are good reasons to doubt Habermas's Weberian story. Think, for example, of Bruno Latour's argument that we have never really been modern in the sense that we have never really accomplished the purification of the realms of truth and normative validity that are taken on this view to be the hallmark of modernity.<sup>19</sup> We have never been modern, Latour argues, because so-called modernity is chock full of the very nature-culture, fact-value, part-object-part subject hybrids that modernizers such as Habermas see—and judge as inferior—in the worldviews of so-called primitive cultures.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as this example suggests and as Latour also argues, it also seems plausible to say that the separation of science, technology, and nature from politics, society, and culture goes hand in hand with the radical separation of "Us" (the moderns) from "Them" (the premoderns) that undergirds imperialism. As Latour

puts it:

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The Internal Great Divide [that is, the divide between Nature and Society] accounts for the External Great Divide [that is, the divide between modern and premodern societies or cultures]: we are the only ones who differentiate absolutely between Nature and Culture, between Science and Society, whereas in our eyes all the others—whether they are Chinese or Amerindian, Azande or Barouya—cannot really separate what is knowledge from what is Society, what is sign from what is thing, what comes from Nature as it is from what their cultures require.... The internal partition between humans and nonhumans defines a second partition—an external one this time—through which the moderns have set themselves apart from the premoderns.<sup>21</sup>

With Latour's argument in mind, my restricted focus on questions of normative or moral-political rather than scientific progress or learning should be understood as a provisionally bracketing rather than a hard and fast separation. The hope is that this bracketing will allow me to bring greater focus and clarity to a particular strand of the broader complex of debates about progress, a strand that has important implications for the vexing question of the normativity of critical theory and its prospects for decolonization. The question of the validity of Habermas's Weberian construal of the superiority of modernity over myth will be broached, if a bit obliquely, in [chapter 2](#).

Turning now to the idea of moral-political progress, there are actually two distinct yet closely interrelated conceptions of normative progress at work in contemporary critical theory. These two conceptions are related, in turn, to two distinct arguments that are offered for the claim that critical theory needs some idea of progress in order to be truly critical. The first conception is forward-looking, oriented toward the future. From this perspective, progress is a moral-political imperative, a normative goal that we are striving to achieve, a goal that can be captured under the idea of the good or at least of the more just society. The second conception is backward-looking, oriented toward the past. From this perspective, progress is a judgment about the developmental or learning process that has led up to "us," a judgment that views "our" conception of reason, "our" moral-political institutions, "our" social practices, "our" form of life as the result of a process of sociocultural development or historical learning. I will call the forward-looking conception of progress "progress as an imperative" and the backward-looking one "progress as a 'fact.'"

As I said, these two different conceptions of progress correspond to two different arguments for the claim that critical theory needs the idea of progress in order to be genuinely critical. The first argument is that we need the idea of progress toward some future goal in order to give us something to strive for politically, in order to make our politics genuinely progressive. Thomas McCarthy expresses this point eloquently when he writes:

There is no doubt that the historical record warrants the melancholy that Walter Benjamin experienced in contemplating it; nor is there any denying the disappointment of hopes for progress by the events of the twentieth century. But though these must remain central to our "postmodern" sensibility, a politics premised solely on melancholy or disappointment—or on some other form of historical pessimism, that is, on the abandonment of hope for a significantly better future—would not be a progressive



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