Looking Forward to Progress: On Amy Allen's The End of Progress

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Amy Allen. *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, pp. 280 + xxii.

In The End of Progress*, Amy Allen connects post- and decolonial concerns about the implications of the concept of progress to contemporary critical theory. In the work of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, progress—as historical development and sociocultural learning—has taken on the load-bearing role in grounding normativity. Allen seeks to decolonize critical theory "from within" by recuperating Adorno and Foucault's more ambivalent conceptions of progress. While such a move does not itself amount to "decolonizing" critical theory, Allen helps to inaugurate this important exchange via her convincing critique of some of the leading figures of critical theory today.*

Key words: critical theory; post- and decolonial thought; normativity; philosophy of history

In *The End of Progress*, Amy Allen aims "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," as well as to "show how post- and decolonial theory might be criticalized" (6). Admittedly, and despite its growing ubiquity, the meaning of "decolonization" is neither self-evident nor decided, at least in the discipline of philosophy. In this work, Allen suggests a kind of immanent critique whereby critical theory might decolonize itself (165). Allen convincingly argues that second-, third-, and fourth-generation critical theorists—Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst, respectively—must grapple with their reliance on notions of progress in light of how this concept has been deployed to justify colonial projects, in both political and epistemic registers. She ultimately advocates combining the more complicated understanding of progress characteristic of Theodor Adorno and the first generation of critical theory with Michel Foucault's genealogical approach to problematizations—whom she fashions as "Adorno's other 'other son.'" This, she proposes, may offer hints for ways that post- and decolonial theory might immanently frame its own values and practices, thus "criticalizing" itself, which for Allen would stave off unsympathetic charges of relativism or irrationalism.

Although "critical theory" might today refer to multiple schools of thought that seek to analyze and object to mechanisms of domination, the term first designated a collection of philosophers and social scientists at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in the 1930s. Drawing on Marx, Freud, and the western philosophical canon, these thinkers sought to expose the logic—and irrationality—of capitalist society, anti-Semitism, mass culture, and fascism. Many of the Frankfurt School critical theorists were Jewish, and due to the very fascism and anti-Semitism they studied, they and the institute itself were soon forced to relocate to the United States. Both before and after exile, the *political* project of liberation was central to how this first generation understood philosophical inquiry. As Max Horkheimer, director of the institute from 1930 to 1959, polemically avowed, the goal of critical theory is not "merely an increase of knowledge as such," but the "emancipation of the human being from relations of enslavement."[1] Especially given this orientation, Allen quite rightly censures critical theory—both then and

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now—for failing to engage substantially with questions of coloniality and race. Allen's book is a response to the contemporary situation wherein post-colonial thought and critical theory, while ostensibly both committed to the articulation and dismantling of domination, are increasingly at odds. Critical theorists allege relativism, post-colonial thinkers level charges of false universalism and cultural imperialism, and valuable critical resources remain unshared.

In chapter 1, Allen argues that an important source of the seeming incompatibility between contemporary critical theory and post-colonial theory is the former's reliance on the concept of progress in its attempt to immanently ground its values and political norms. Allen helpfully distinguishes between two senses of progress, namely a backward-looking conception of progress as a "fact" and a "forward-looking" sense of the term, "progress as an imperative" (12). Drawing on the work of Susan Buck-Morss, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Aníbal Quijano, and Walter Mignolo, Allen sketches the pitfalls of progress as a "fact," where (European) modernity is figured as an advance over the past. Politically, this backward-looking sense of progress positions "the pre- or nonmodern as less developed," which in turn "serves to rationalize and justify imperialism in its formal and informal, colonial and neocolonial guises" (18). The developmental model of progress also papers over how colonial conditions played a role in the very constitution of Europe and European modernity, and obscures the colonial and racialized preconditions for the emergence of modernity's "universal" values.

Allen's concrete aim in *The End of Progress* is to disentangle the backward-looking conception of progress as a "fact" from the "forward-looking" sense of the term in critical theory. Such a feat would itself constitute progress in the latter sense, which is how Allen interprets Adorno's enigmatic claim: "Progress occurs where it ends." (This pronouncement from Adorno's 1962 essay, "Progress," serves as the first epigraph and inspiration for the title of the book). Again, Allen's focus on the issue of progress is in service of a larger goal: the decolonization of critical theory "from within" (32). As she reads them—and these are central claims of the book—Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth remain bound to a backward-looking conception of progress that perpetuates the colonial schema laid out in the first chapter, and, in his attempt to sidestep such perils, Rainer Forst deploys a universal conception of practical reason as a free-standing foundation of normativity that fails to get a grip on power, specifically the worldly enmeshing of power with rationality. Allen intends to correct the direction of critical theory by recovering Adorno's formulation of progress as the moral-political imperative to be critical of how "progress" is deployed.

In chapter 2, Allen frames Habermas's reliance on a backward-looking notion of progress as a result of his compulsion to put critical theory on "a secure normative footing" (52). While he is certainly critical of any philosophy of history that "presumes a metaphysical, teleological, and necessary progression of a unified historical subject," Allen argues that Habermas retains the backward-looking model of progression (54). Via his formal—alternately called, *universal*—pragmatics, Habermas teases out "normative potentials" inherent in the "communicative" use of language (52). When called upon to defend the universality of communicative rationality, whereby subjects ask for and give reasons, Habermas's answer is his "infamous" distinction between mythical and modern understandings of the world, which "positions 'modernity' as the outcome of a process of moral-practical learning" (38). Allen contends that, for Habermas, it is this theory of social evolution that ultimately grounds normativity and his moral theory, and so he cannot but remain vulnerable to charges of Eurocentrism, as outlined above.

In chapter 3, Allen argues that Honneth is similarly concerned with grounding normativity immanently, and he does so via two arguments that rely on a backwards-looking account of progress. The first, which he draws out of Kant's philosophy of history, is that those "who explicitly endorse the moral or political developments of their own time […] are necessarily committed to the idea of historical progress" (92). He later reinforces this claim with

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a stronger Hegelian story, where our continued reproduction of existing social institutions *constitutes* the immanent justification of values and norms, and that viewing these institutions as legitimate further involves a commitment to historical progress. Allen challenges both claims. Drawing on Jasbir Puar's concept of homonationalism, Allen shows that pro-gay marriage arguments can "intersect" with cultural imperialism. Support for the legalization of gay marriage need not be cast as a historical "fact" of progress, i.e., a mark of American and European cultural superiority full stop, when such a "fact" is used to justify other forms of domination (against queer persons who do not subscribe to a heteronormative model of marriage or against frequently racialized so-called "backward" communities and nations that reject gay marriage).

In chapter 4, Allen examines the work of Rainer Forst, who attempts to avoid grounding normativity in a philosophy of history by doubling down on a neo-Kantian conception of practical reason. Allen contends that methodologically, Forst commits himself to conceptualizing power exclusively from the point of view of reason. Power becomes a noumenal concept, which obscures the very power relations that critical theory—and post- and decolonial theory—aim to analyze.

In the last chapter of the book, Allen argues that the critique of progress undertaken by Adorno and Foucault is ultimately in service of moral-political progress in the future, which is the modified sense of progress Allen endorses. Their critiques of the Enlightenment employ a methodology that "weaves together vindicatory and subversive genealogies," and this critical problematization is ultimately for the sake of "the fuller realization of the normative inheritance of the Enlightenment, in particular, the norms of freedom and respect for the other" (166). Allen contends that the subsequent generations of critical theory would do well to both re-examine the relationship between rationality and power, and to avoid self-congratulation for the sake of remaining thoroughly critical.

Alongside the method of problematizing genealogy, Allen calls for an ethos of epistemic humility and unlearning, especially in relation to progressive notions of history shared by the very imperialism critical theory politically condemns. Drawing on the recent work of Linda Martín Alcoff and Michael Williams on contextualist epistemology, Allen concludes *The End of Progress* with the contention that "contextualism at a metanormative" level—the metanormative bugbear that haunts Habermas, Honneth, and Forst—does not entail relativism for "our first-order substantive normative commitments" (212). While normative ideals are always "justified relative to a set of contextually salient values" or forms of life, there is no "context-transcendent" perspective from which different contexts might be judged (215). This recalls a distinction Allen makes in the second chapter's discussion of Habermas: "To disagree with someone is to treat them as a moral contemporary; to judge them to be backward or developmentally inferior is not" (103).

The End of Progress is an important intervention in contemporary critical theory, as Allen brings post-colonial concerns about the uses and abuses of "modernity" and "progress" to bear on critical theory's solutions to its metanormative problems. One way in which this book may be of interest to cross-cultural philosophers is that Allen takes an honest look at mainstream political theory's assumptions and performs a self-critique of the Eurocentric grounds of critical theory. Especially in her last chapter, Allen speaks directly to issues central to the reception of non-western traditions and comparative approaches in philosophy, as she suggests a mode of cross-cultural engagement that avoids both normative chauvinism and relativism. One critical question, however, is whether or not Allen's demonstration of critical theory's resources for opening itself up to post-colonial critiques by itself yields the decolonization of critical theory. Is decolonizing "from within" sufficient, given that decolonial thought explicitly aims to attend to those excluded from Eurocentric history and reason? If it is not sufficient, perhaps it is strategic, given critical theory's predilection for immanent critique. Allen's book seems aimed at convincing self-identified critical theorists—largely via their own canon, and on their own

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metanormative terrain—of the validity of the decolonial project. This work is thus, pragmatically speaking, preparatory, in that it calls for the opening of critical theory to decolonial voices beyond the metanormative barriers constructed post-Habermas. Hopefully Allen's arguments for epistemic "modesty" at critical theory's foundations will pave the way for more points of contact between critical theorists and decolonial voices, perhaps via such constellations as coloniality and humanism, "Hitlerism" and totalitarianism, or white supremacy in the (neo-)colonial context and anti-Semitism in Europe. Besides its shrewd critique of contemporary critical theorists, *The End of Progress* succeeds as an invitation to many further conversations on increasingly diverse terrains.

Jordan Daniels is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at Emory University in Atlanta, USA. Her research interests include critical theory, decolonial thought, feminism, and aesthetics. She is currently writing a dissertation on Kant and Adorno.

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1 Max Horkheimer. "Nachtrag," *Kritische Theorie* 2, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1968), 194 (my translation).

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