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## Review

# The end of progress: Decolonizing the normative foundations of critical theory

Amy Allen

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Amy Allen's *The End of Progress* constitutes the most important recent intervention into current debates about the possible intersections between mainstream Frankfurt School critical theory, postcolonial, and the so-called decolonial thought. After Susan Buck-Morss' seminal essay, "Hegel and Haiti" (2000), several interventions have continued to probe this intersection, both from the precincts of critical theory and from postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. *The End of Progress*, however, is the first book-length effort to systematically engage and criticize, through careful exegeses, the leading lights of contemporary critical theory – Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Rainer Forst – with the clear aim of "decolonizing the normative foundations of critical theory." In doing so, Allen offers what amounts to the first effort to bring the writings of these leading figures of contemporary critical theory and mainstream postcolonial theorists into a single field of vision. And to clinch her critique, Allen draws on Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault, casting this unlikely pair as proponents of a kind of "unlearning" that, in turn, emerges as *sine qua non* of critical thinking (pp. 209ff.).

For Allen the central question is how Eurocentric narratives of progress constitute an important trope, occasionally something like a mytheme, for several generations of Frankfurt School critical theorists, and how they inform their grounding of normativity – a grounding predicated on the idea of "a historical learning processes" that nevertheless reverts back to the Eurocentric narratives about the past. Allen thus probes the historical teleology and Eurocentric assumptions sedimented into the idea of progress on which much of contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory's account of normativity hinges. The emphasis on "normativity" is important here. For Allen does not question what Christoph Henning (2005) has sardonically but accurately referred to as the *Supernormativismus* of these critical theorists. Instead, her aim tacitly endorses the conceits about normativity, along with its supervening impulses, that since Habermas have significantly marred critical theory:



My main *critical* aim is to show...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 strategy for grounding normativity, in such a way as to open this project up to the aims and concerns of post- and decolonial thought (p. xii).

Or, as Allen formulates her aim in the crucial chapter on Adorno and Foucault, by “conceptualizing the relationship between history and normativity” in light of Adorno and Foucault, as “history as a story of *both* progress *and* regress *at the same time*,” so that her account “can open critical theory to a more fruitful dialogue with post- and decolonial theory” (p. 166).

How does *The End of Progress* fare in achieving these aims? The first critical aim, for the most part, is successfully carried on, and arguably pursued largely independently of Allen’s “positive” contribution. Indeed, one gets the sense that the decolonial motifs informing her title are a belated, almost *ad hoc* addition to an argument that could be pursued independently of it. The second aim, however, is far less successful and constitutes something of a missed opportunity. Despite expressing the hope of 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 aim, can be congenial to postcolonial theory, how it may even allow postcolonial theory to be criticalized [*sic*]” (p. xvi), Allen does not actually engage in this endeavor. The vagueness of this construction speaks for itself, as does the one-page coda that tries belatedly to make good on this promise (p. 230). One problem is that Allen’s formulation of her aims assumes too much: that something like “decolonization” can be undertaken with theoretical traditions or thought forms; that “post-and decolonial” thought are a form of critical theorizing; and, lastly, that the critical endeavor is mostly a one-way street. The critical import of mainstream postcolonial theory is thus taken for granted, stated, and not shown. And rather than pulling it into its critical light, what *The End of Progress* accomplishes is the opposite. The results are mixed.

In *The End of Progress* Allen brigades mainstream scholars of postcolonial theory to challenge the narrative of progress propping up contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory, but their own theoretical tenets are left unchallenged. Yet the thought forms of mainstream postcolonial theory have been challenged by other critics, including critics drawing on some of the intellectual traditions Allen invokes – say, Aijaz Ahmad, Timothy Brennan, Neil Lazarus, Benita Parry, Satya Mohanty, Keya Ganguly, Neil Larsen, Sumit Sarkar, and Vasant Kaiwar, among others – but which nevertheless remain unmentioned. That these are scholars who challenge the basic tenets of the postcolonial scions Allen relies upon is clear enough to anyone acquainted with the broad field of postcolonial criticism. Better yet, in their unique ways, they have offered theorizations of postcolonial situations



that draw on traditions of critical theory that challenge the theoretical tenets and Heideggerian motifs of the figures Allen invokes. Similarly, there are antecedents to Allen's invocation of Adorno's critique of progress. For instance, Keya Ganguly (2004) draws explicitly on Adorno's critical theory; yet unlike Allen, in Ganguly's work Adorno fittingly remains at a considerable distance from Foucault, whose genealogies not only have an oracular tone amounting to "once upon a time" parables, but explicitly disavow the sense of dialectical continuity and conceptual bindingness that are the signature of Adorno's negative universal history. Yet *The End of Progress*, as is the case with many an invocation of postcolonial theory, has nothing to say about these prominent figures within the broad spectrum of postcolonial criticism.

Nevertheless, on many scores Allen's book offers a compelling and much-needed contribution. Although other critics with theoretical commitments hostile to the conceits about "normativity" found in Habermas and post-Habermasian critical theory – or who consider the second and third generation as a considerable regression of the critical vocation of Frankfurt School critical theory (and would spend little precious time engaging with Forst) – have offered trenchant criticisms of Habermas's conceits, they can be easily dismissed if not downright ignored as outsiders. Yet Allen's criticism of this tradition bears a degree of sympathy, is defined by philosophical scrupulousness, and tacitly acquiesces with critical theory's empire of the normative. All of which makes her critique less easily dismissed. It is, indeed, an "insider's critique," as it were, but one that at least on this score is sharper because of it.

Yet, notwithstanding these attractive features, *The End of Progress* constitutes an important but too limited engagement between the traditions of critical theory and the postcolonial predicaments that postcolonial theory claims to represent. As already alluded to, Allen takes for granted the critical valences of the postcolonial critics her book draws upon, while ignoring how postcolonial studies is a deeply contested field. But the biggest drawback of Allen's *The End of Progress* is her embracing of the "decolonizing" moniker, which, ironically, seems gratuitous to the conceptual architecture of her critique.

To Allen's credit, she is clear about what "decolonization" ultimately amounts to for her, even if one still questions the aptness of the moniker. Roughly speaking, for Allen, decolonizing critical theory consists of the rejection of progressive narratives nourishing accounts of normativity, or the idea of history as a fact and the learning processes invoked on the basis of this fact, and her embrace of the critique of progress formulated by Adorno and Foucault. Even so, this invocation of decolonization seems a belated addition to a critical endeavor largely conceived independently of decolonial motifs. Stated differently: Allen distinguishes her *critical* from her *positive* aims, but her critique stands on its own, while her positive program, which amounts to an uncritical embracing of idealist bromides about "unlearning" and "epistemic humility," is not indispensable to her critical project.



Elsewhere, Allen forcefully states her stronger claims: “any theory that purports to be critical should be extremely wary of such robust claims to progress as a historical ‘fact,’ that is, to backward-looking conceptions of progress that understand history as a learning process that has led up to ‘us’” (p. 98). This holds. And it could serve as an epitaph for Allen’s project. *The End of Progress* eloquently makes good on it. But a different warning goes unheeded. Paraphrasing her formulation, any theory that purports to be critical should be extremely wary of thought forms whose sediments and de-differentiations, along with neo-nativist gestures and inane ideas of decolonization, undermine genuine critique.

## References

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