

in the very imperialism that it condemns politically.¹⁵ 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 questions about the normative status of its critique.¹⁶

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.

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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.¹⁷ 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 a 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 or 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 is 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 mutual 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 socio-cultural 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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:

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.²¹

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 provisional 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 politics.²²

Progress understood in this sense is a moral-political imperative to strive to improve the human condition, and is connected to Kant’s famous third question, what may I hope for? For a theory to be critical, it must be connected to the hope for some significantly better—more just, or at least less oppressive—society. Such hopes serve to orient our political strivings, and in order to count as genuine hopes, they must be grounded in a belief or a hope in the possibility of progress. The second reason that critical theory is thought

to need an idea of historical progress relates to the backward-looking conception of progress as a historical “fact.” “Fact” is in scare quotes here because this is not merely an empirical judgment but necessarily also a normative one.²³ To say that progress is a “fact” is typically to say that the normative ideals, conception of practical rationality, and social and political institutions that have emerged in European modernity—in particular, in the Enlightenment—are the result of a cumulative and progressive developmental or historical learning process.

A central argument of this book is that this backward looking conception of progress as a “fact” plays a crucial, if often unacknowledged, role in grounding the normativity of critical theory for both Habermas and Honneth. This follows more or less directly from the combination of two commitments: first, the desire to avoid the twin evils of foundationalism and relativism;²⁴ and, second, the idea that the normative perspective of critical theory must be grounded immanently, in the actual social world.²⁵ The desire to avoid foundationalism grows out of the resolutely postmetaphysical stance of contemporary critical theory; as Habermas puts it, critical theory must make clear “that the purism of pure reason is not resurrected again in communicative reason” (PDM, 301).²⁶ The attempt to avoid foundationalism gives rise to the resolution to ground the normative perspective of critical theory immanently, within the existing social world. But this commitment, in turn, inevitably raises worries about conventionalism and relativism. If our normative perspective is grounded within the social world, then how can critical theory avoid the charge of reducing normativity to an endorsement of whatever normative standards happen to be accepted at a given time and place? In other words, how can we justify the normative standards that critical theory finds in existing social reality without recourse to foundationalist premises? Habermas’s and Honneth’s broadly speaking Hegelian strategy constitutes an attempt to answer such questions while avoiding the twin pitfalls of foundationalism and relativism.²⁷ The basic idea is that the normative principles that we find within our social world—as inheritors of the project of European Enlightenment or the legacy of European modernity, which has a certain conception of rational autonomy

(Habermas) or social freedom (Honneth) at its core—are themselves justified insofar as they can be understood as the outcome of a process of progressive social evolution or sociocultural learning. The move to ground normative principles within the social world allows critical theory to avoid the charge of foundationalism, and yet, in order to avoid collapsing into relativism, critical theory relies on the backward-looking conception of historical progress as a “fact.” This conception of progress enables critical theory to understand the normative standards that it finds within the existing social world—that is, within its own world, the world of modern Europe—not merely as contingent or arbitrary framework-relative standards, but rather as the results of a process of social development and historical learning.²⁸

But if critical theory’s immanent grounding of normative principles within the social world ultimately rests on a claim about sociocultural learning processes, then this means that the normative standards that enable us to envision a good or more just society—the discourse principle, for example, or the idea of social freedom—are themselves justified inasmuch as they are the outcome of a progressive process of sociocultural development or learning. In other words, the two conceptions of progress delineated above are intertwined in that progress as a moral-political imperative is, for Habermas and Honneth, grounded in the basic normative orientation that is undergirded by the conception of progress as a historical “fact”—at least, this is my central interpretive claim vis-à-vis Habermas and Honneth, a claim that will be developed and defended in subsequent chapters.²⁹ The normative perspective that serves to orient the forward-looking conception of progress is justified by the backward-looking story about how “our” modern, European, Enlightenment moral vocabulary and political ideals are the outcome of a learning process and therefore neither merely conventional nor grounded in some a priori, transcendental conception of pure reason. This normative orientation, in turn, provides us with a conception of the “good” or “more just” society that provides the basis for our moral-political strivings.

This suggests that, at least as the idea of progress is used in Habermas’s and Honneth’s work, these two conceptions of

progress—the forward-looking notion of progress as a moral-political imperative and the backward-looking idea of progress as a “fact” about the processes of historical learning and sociocultural evolution that have led up to “us”—cannot easily be pulled apart. In other words, it isn’t possible for this version of critical theory to hold on to progress as a moral-political imperative without believing in progress as a “fact” so long as the normativity of critical theory is being secured through this progressive story of sociocultural development or historical learning. This means that contemporary critical theory as Habermas and Honneth conceive it could only be disentangled from its commitment to progress by also rethinking its understanding of normativity. As I will argue in the next section, it is Habermas’s and Honneth’s commitment to the backward-looking story about progress as a “fact” that makes their approach to critical theory stand in need of decolonizing and also proves to be the most serious obstacle to such decolonization.

To be sure, it is conceptually possible to retain the idea of progress as a moral-political imperative without rooting that conception of progress in a developmental-historical story about progress as a “fact.” For example, the Kantian-constructivist strategy for grounding the normativity of critical theory advanced recently by Rainer Forst articulates a universal moral-political standard—the basic right to justification—that is grounded not in a backward-looking story about historical progress but rather in what Forst characterizes as a freestanding account of practical reason. Forst further argues that progress is a normatively dependent concept in the sense that it is dependent on this universal normative standard, which in turn provides a clear benchmark for measuring claims about historical progress. This alternative way of understanding the relationship between normativity and claims about historical progress avoids the worries about conventionalism and the reliance on the notion of progress as a “fact” that plague Habermas’s and Honneth’s account. However, as I will discuss further in chapter 4, Forst’s strongly universalist conception of morality and his “freestanding” account of practical reason remain vulnerable to postcolonial critique, in particular, to worries that his allegedly freestanding, universal conception of practical reason is really a

thick, particular, and Eurocentric notion in disguise. Moreover, in seeking to avoid conventionalism and relativism, Forst's neo-Kantian approach ends up in foundationalism. This leads him to adopt a kind of political philosophy as applied ethics approach that sacrifices the methodological distinctiveness of critical theory. As a result, critical theorists who aim to disentangle progress as a moral-political imperative from progress as a "fact" will need to find other ways to accomplish this goal. In the end, I shall argue that the best way forward for critical theory with respect to this problem will be for it to go back, that is, to recover the insights of one of the most prominent members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School—Theodor Adorno—and of the philosopher who I will call his other "other son"—Michel Foucault.

THE COLONIALITY OF POWER: THE POLITICAL- EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF PROGRESS AS A "FACT"

But why think that critical theory needs to disentangle its hope for progress as a moral-political imperative from the idea of progress as a historical "fact"? What, after all, is wrong with this idea of progress as a "fact"? In this section, I further flesh out two specific lines of criticism of the idea of progress as a historical "fact," both of which were alluded to above, and both of which are raised in pressing forms in post- and decolonial theory.³⁰

The first problem is primarily political, and it concerns the entwinement of the idea of historical progress with the legacies of racism, colonialism, and imperialism and their contemporary neocolonial or informally imperialist forms.³¹ In his recent work, Thomas McCarthy traces this dilemma back to Kant, where it is evident in the form of a deep tension between Kant's moral-political universalism—according to which every human being is a self-legislating member of the kingdom of ends who has an infinite worth and dignity—and his practical-anthropological particularism—according to which Africans, Native Americans, and Asians are less advanced than white Europeans and thus less capable of autonomous self-rule.³² In light of this tension, McCarthy notes

that historical progress for Kant in the sense of “cultivation, civilization, and moralization is and will continue to be a process of diffusion from the West to the rest of the world” and progress for non-European cultures is understood in terms of gradual assimilation to European culture.³³ In what McCarthy calls the “convergence model of progress,”³⁴ there is thus an implicit—even if not explicitly articulated—rationale offered for the so-called civilizing mission of the West, a key ideological justification for the colonial and imperial projects.³⁵ Kant’s account of progress and development thus serves, according to McCarthy, as a solution to the problem of how to reconcile his liberal universalism with his liberal imperialism. By taking the European path of development as normative, and viewing non-European cultures and peoples as less developed or as non- or premodern, progressive or developmental theories of history serve as an ideological rationalization and justification for ongoing racism, neoracism, colonialism, and neoimperialism.

The progressive reading of history that views European modernity as developmentally more advanced than premodern cultures or societies also relies on a highly selective reading of Europe’s own history, a reading that ignores the extent to which the distinctively European form of modernity that Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers valued so highly was a product not of Europe alone but of Europe’s interaction with the non-West. This is true first and foremost in a material sense—that is, in the sense that the rise of capitalism in Europe was made possible by the extraction of natural resources from its colonies and the exploitation of colonized subjects.³⁶ As Fanon famously and succinctly put this point: “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The riches which are choking it are those plundered from the underdeveloped peoples.”³⁷ Anibal Quijano echoes Fanon, referencing the earlier wave of colonialism in the Americas that began in the sixteenth century: “The constitution of Europe as a new historic entity/identity was made possible, in the first place, through the free labor of the American Indians, blacks, and mestizos, with their advanced technology in mining and agriculture, and with their products such as gold, silver, potatoes, tomatoes, and tobacco.”³⁸ But Europe was not only materially dependent on its colonies; it was also ideologically dependent

in the sense that Europe's very identity as a distinct culture was formed in response to those it perceived as its geographical, cultural, and historical others, and by the anxieties and dislocations generated by its interactions with the colonies.³⁹ This was one of the central arguments of Said's *Orientalism*, as he explained in his introduction to that text: "Orientalism is never far from . . . the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures."⁴⁰

Moreover, as Susan Buck-Morss's recent work shows, the material and ideological aspects of Europe's dependence on its colonies were deeply intertwined. Even the much vaunted idea of freedom, taken by Enlightenment thinkers and contemporary critical theorists such as Habermas and Honneth alike to be the highest political value,

began to take root at precisely the time that the economic practice of slavery—the systematic, highly sophisticated capitalist enslavement of non-Europeans as a labor force in the colonies—was increasing quantitatively and intensifying qualitatively to the point that by the mid-eighteenth century it came to underwrite the entire economic system of the West, paradoxically facilitating the global spread of the very Enlightenment ideals that were in such fundamental contradiction to it.⁴¹

Hence the political problem with the reading of European modernity as the outcome of a progressive historical development is not only the way in which it positions the pre- or nonmodern as less developed and therefore serves to rationalize and justify imperialism in its formal and informal, colonial and neocolonial guises; it also overlooks or obscures the extent to which the very material preconditions for and ideas of Europe and of European modernity are themselves colonized and racialized.⁴²

So, to sum up the political problem: the backward-looking conception of progress as a “fact,” insofar as it sees the norms or institutions of European modernity as the outcome of a developmental or learning process, and insofar as it overlooks the role that Europe’s material and ideological relation to its colonies played in shaping European modernity as a racialized construct, has served and continues to serve the ideological function of rationalizing and legitimizing contemporary forms of informal imperialism, neocolonialism, and racism. In other words, the notion of historical progress as a “fact” is bound up with complex relations of domination, exclusion, and silencing of colonized and racialized subjects.

The second problem with the notion of historical progress as a “fact” is an epistemological one, and it turns on the following questions: On what basis do we claim to know what counts as progress? Does a judgment about historical progress not presume knowledge of what counts as the end point or goal of that historical development? And how could this be known without having access to some God’s-eye point of view or point of view of the Absolute, ideas that go against the basic methodological assumptions of critical theory, in particular its desire to avoid foundationalism? But if we aren’t willing to posit such a God’s-eye point of view or to consider the standards by which we measure progress to be known *sub specie aeternitatis*, then we are left with the idea that we have to make judgments about what counts as progress from our own, internal, reconstructive point of view. And in that case, we must confront the worry that, insofar as judgments about progress rely on our own current beliefs and principles, they may appear, as Charles Larmore has put it, “irredeemably parochial.” “Is not the notion of progress,” Larmore asks, “basically an instrument of self-congratulation?”⁴³

Although this epistemological worry can be framed, as Larmore does, in broad, conceptual terms, it has also been raised in a particularly trenchant way in post- and decolonial theory. The argument here concerns the original formulation and justification of the stadial or developmental-stages reading of history. In the modern period, this reading of history was developed by thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment such as Adam Smith; later it found its

way into German philosophy through Hegel and Marx, both careful readers of Smith; and through Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, both trained in the Hegelian and Marxist philosophical tradition, it made its way into the founding assumptions of sociology as a discipline. As Gurinder Bhambra has argued in her book *Rethinking Modernity*, this stadial reading of history understood society to develop through a series of progressively advancing stages based on different modes of economic organization. Colonial encounters—for example, the conquest of Native Americans in the Americas—were, Bhambra argues, “fundamental to the emergence of the idea of historical stages of development.”⁴⁴ British and European thinkers of the eighteenth century formulated the stadial reading of history and its attendant notions of historical progress and sociocultural development as a way of understanding the information that was coming back to them from the colonies in the New World. They made sense of this information by hypothesizing that, as Locke put it, “in the beginning all the World was America,” and then postulating a series of stages through which humanity must have passed in order to get from there to the civilized commercial society of eighteenth-century Europe.⁴⁵ The problem with this move is that, as Bhambra explains, “the chronological (and evaluative) relationship established between different types of culture emerged out of a hierarchical ranking of contemporary cultures that had no evidential foundation.”⁴⁶ In other words, at its core this developmental reading of history was based on what I would call a kind of normative decisionism by means of which Native Americans were *first* judged to be inferior to—more primitive, less civilized, less developed—Europeans and then, in a second step, that inferiority was explained by means of a developmental or stadial theory of history.

As Quijano further argues, this inferiority was naturalized through the creation of invidious racial classifications that served to legitimate the relations of domination that were imposed through the colonial conquest. Quijano maintains that it is not unusual for colonial dominators to feel superior to those they dominate and to appeal to their feelings of superiority to justify their domination, but for European colonizers that feeling of superiority took a unique form, namely, “the racial classification of the world population

after the colonization of America. The association of colonial ethnocentrism and universal racial classification helps to explain why Europeans came to feel not only superior to all other peoples of the world, but, in particular, naturally superior.⁴⁷ In other words, for Quijano, colonial domination came first, and then this domination was justified by means of a claim about the inferiority of the colonized, an inferiority that was then naturalized through the construction of racial classifications. Like Bhambra, Quijano also connects this process to the emergence of developmental or progressive theories of history: “The Europeans generated a new temporal perspective of history and relocated the colonized population, along with their respective histories and cultures, in the past of a historical trajectory whose culmination was Europe.”⁴⁸ The colonized were not only deemed inferior, and naturally so because racially so; they were also relegated to a primitive or archaic past.⁴⁹ As Quijano sums up the idea of progress, which he characterizes as one of the foundational myths of Eurocentrism:

All non-Europeans could be considered as pre-European and at the same time displaced on a certain historical chain from the primitive to the civilized, from the rational to the irrational, from the traditional to the modern, from the magic-mythic to the scientific. In other words, from the non-European/pre-European to something that in time will be Europeanized or modernized. Without considering the whole experience of colonialism and coloniality, this intellectual trademark, as well as the long-lasting global hegemony of Eurocentrism, would hardly be explicable.⁵⁰

Moreover, Bhambra argues that this normative decisionism has been obscured by subsequent work in sociology, which has for the most part taken this developmental story of modernization as its starting point. Hence, Bhambra notes, “*the evidential basis for the idea of historical stages remains weak just because the idea becomes embedded in the conceptual frameworks of social science.*”⁵¹ Thus a good deal of work in sociology, especially sociological theories of modernization, tends to “confirm” this developmental reading of history precisely because that reading also frames the basic assumptions

of its research program.⁵² Bhambra's argument raises a deep challenge for Habermas's work in particular. As McCarthy notes, the Habermasian view of history is an heir to Kantian and Hegelian philosophies of history but, unlike those projects, it is empirically based, practically oriented, and postmetaphysical.⁵³ Habermas's approach to progress is not a traditional philosophy of history but rather a reconstructive science that seeks to uncover deep sociohistorical structures that condition historical change; as a reconstructive science, it is open and fallible and dependent upon empirical confirmation from the social sciences.⁵⁴ But herein lies the rub. Insofar as ideas of historical progress and modernity are foundational for certain sociological research programs, the "openness" of a theory of sociocultural learning to empirical (dis)confirmation by empirical work in sociology seems to be not nearly open enough. Rather, the argument threatens to be self-sealing.

The epistemological problem, then, goes to the heart of critical theory's attempt to offer an immanent, reconstructive form of critique that nevertheless relies on ideas of progress, development, and historical learning processes to offer a nonfoundationalist account of normativity that avoids collapsing into conventionalism or relativism. If judgments about historical progress are not to appeal implicitly to a suprahistorical point of view—the purity of pure reason or the point of view of Absolute knowing—then they remain judgments of progress *for us*, made in accordance with our standards or by our lights. In this case they must confront the worry that they are nothing more than self-congratulatory defenses of the status quo. The post- or decolonial version of this criticism raises the particular worry that the very idea of progress or of a developmental reading of history is grounded in a normative decisionism by means of which European Enlightenment theorists congratulated themselves on being more civilized, developed, and advanced than Native Americans and other colonized subjects, and then embedded this self-congratulatory assumption into the sociological theories of modernization to which contemporary critical theorists, in turn, appeal to support their claims about progress.

These two sorts of objections to the idea of historical progress as a "fact," the political and the epistemological, are, as the

reader may have already guessed, closely related to each other.⁵⁵ Quijano brings them together under the concept of “the colonality of power.” For Quijano, European colonialism as a form of political domination and economic exploitation goes hand in hand with Eurocentrism, which he defines as “a specific rationality or perspective of knowledge that was made globally hegemonic, colonizing and overcoming other previous or different conceptual formations and their respective concrete knowledges, as much in Europe as in the rest of the world.”⁵⁶ A similar recognition of this deep intertwining of colonial power relations and forms of knowledge production leads Chakrabarty to ask: “Can the designation of something or some group as *non-* or *premodern* ever be anything but a gesture of the powerful?”⁵⁷

The intertwining of the political and epistemological dimensions of colonialism, captured in Chakrabarty’s question and Quijano’s notion of the colonality of power, helps to motivate the particular strategy for decolonizing critical theory that I will follow in this book. After all, one might argue, following Terry Eagleton, that it is far from obvious that taking on board the insights of “postcolonialism”—understood as a particular theoretical project, prominent in Europe and the United States, heavily influenced by French poststructuralism—is the best way to think through the challenges and injustices of postcolonialism—understood as the current social, economic, and political situation of formally decolonized states, which are still subjected to gross forms of global injustice, largely through the workings of the international financial system.⁵⁸ “Postcolonialism,” according to this view, is simply a fashionable offshoot of postmodernism, and it suffers from the same excessive culturalism that plagues its forerunner. If one wants to think through the challenges of our current post-as well as neocolonial or informally imperialist age, a proponent of this view might ask, why not turn to Marxism, which after all offers ample resources for connecting the critique of capitalism to the critique of imperialism, even if Marx himself never quite connected all of those dots?⁵⁹ On this view, the retreat to the cultural that characterizes “postcolonialism” is not only insufficient for theorizing the complexities of postcolonialism; it is also best

understood as one more indication of the “postsocialist” condition that coincided with its rise to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s⁶⁰—a stance that we can ill afford to take in the wake of the financial crisis, now that the critique of capitalism is as important as ever.

This “postcolonialism” versus Marxism argument is long running—though it has flared up again very recently in a spectacular debate between Vivek Chibber and Partha Chatterjee that has been viewed over eighteen thousand times on Youtube⁶¹—and it could be understood as an offshoot of earlier debates about postmodernism or poststructuralism versus Marxism. It is a strange opposition, however, especially because Marxism has been very influential for much work in postcolonial theory, not only in the Subaltern Studies group but also in Latin American post- and decolonial theory, which draws frequently and heavily on the work of world systems theorists like Immanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin. It is also strange because, as Robert Young has argued very convincingly, French poststructuralism was itself heavily influenced by Marxism—not, to be sure, by the Hegelian Marxism that was so influential for the Frankfurt School, but rather by the structuralist Marxism of Althusser and the Third World, anti-imperialist Marxism of Mao.⁶² Mapping the “postcolonialism” versus Marxism split onto a split internal to twentieth-century Marxism enables us to understand why an engagement with postcolonial theory (“postcolonialism”) is in fact the best way to address the challenges posed to critical theory by our postcolonial condition (postcolonialism). For the simple truth is that there is a perfectly good reason that postcolonial theorists have by and large found poststructuralism more useful than contemporary Marxist theory, and the reason is that, as Young argues, unlike poststructuralism, Western Marxism never addressed the challenge that colonialism posed to “its own political thinking *at a theoretical or philosophical level*.”⁶³ Marxism, particularly its Hegelian variants, remains committed to the kind of developmental or progressive reading of history—historicism or History with a capital *H*, for short—that is the central target of post- and decolonial critique. As Young puts this point: “Marxism, insofar as it inherits the system of the Hegelian dialectic, is also implicated in the link between the

structures of knowledge and the forms of oppression of the last two hundred years: a phenomenon that has become known as Eurocentrism.”⁶⁴ Young draws the conclusion that addressing the challenge posed by what Quijano calls the coloniality of power thus requires a radical rethinking of History. I would add that if my argument about the link between ideas of historical progress and normativity in contemporary critical theory is plausible, then it further requires rethinking the strategy for grounding normativity. For this project, I will argue that the work of Adorno and Foucault, read alongside each other, proves particularly fruitful.⁶⁵ This is *not* to say that none of Marx’s insights is fruitful, nor is it to say that the critique of capitalism is not important for contemporary critical theory; many of them are and of course it is. It is just to say that *for the specific project of rethinking the relationship between history and normativity that is necessary if critical theory is to be decolonized*, we are better off turning to Adorno and Foucault than to Marx.

<-----Stop here.

PROBLEMATIZING PROGRESS

As we have seen, the primary target of post- and decolonial criticism is the backward-looking conception of progress as a “fact,” for it is this assumption that is deeply intertwined with problematic claims about the superiority of European modernity. But notice that if, as I argued above, for certain versions of critical theory, the forward-looking conception of progress as an imperative depends on the backward-looking claim about progress as a “fact,” then the critique of progress outlined above threatens to expose the normative perspective of critical theory as Eurocentric at best and, at worst, as obscuring the racialized aspects of European modernity and thereby reinforcing them.⁶⁶ How can critical theorists best respond to these charges of the ideological nature of the idea of progress as a historical “fact”? If we admit, as it seems we must, that such ideas of progress and development have served ideological uses in the past and may well continue to do so, does that mean that they are *merely* ideological and thus should be rejected?

In his recent work, Thomas McCarthy grapples with these questions. McCarthy argues that, like all Enlightenment ideals, the idea