

**Critical Theory, Normativity, and Catastrophe: A Critique of Amy Allen's Metanormative**

**Contextualism**

**Bilal Rehman**

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Advisor: Professor Steven Crowell

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## Introduction

Critical theory is an approach to philosophical and cultural analysis that focuses on oppression. Its goal is to expose the ways in which existing social structures and cultural institutions perpetuate different modes of oppression, such as totalitarianism, poverty, and racism. Generally, critical theory is deeply skeptical of prevailing normative assumptions, and argues that popular cultures are limited in their ethical and political potential because they will always be appropriated by the powers that be. For this reason, critical theorists must often appeal to radically alternative conceptions of normativity to ground their criticisms and to motivate political action. In my view, the appeal of critical theory lies in its explicitly political orientation. In the face of a global pandemic, impending climate catastrophe, endless war, and the dangerous distortion of facts through corporate and social media, critical theory is desperately needed today. The seemingly consistent threat and reality of catastrophe suggests that critical theory must entertain the possibility of both political reform and large-scale structural change, and most critical theorists do engage in criticisms of social structures and culture on the whole. Rather than shying away from moral-political judgments, critical theory is aimed at unflinchingly calling out forms of oppression in contemporary life, “the patholog[ies] of modern consciousness” (Habermas 1990, p. 45), and the ways that value-systems alienate us from both ourselves and others. This incessant skepticism is why critical theory is called “critical.” However, a deep skepticism of the normative foundations of social life leads one to ask: How can critical theory pave the way towards moral-political progress? In this essay, I attempt to answer this question by exploring and assessing the normative foundations of a few distinct approaches to critical theory.

The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, a prolific group of German Marxists that assembled before World War II, aimed its sights at the ways that ideology and its many media,

such as consumerist culture and the military-industrial complex, push society to the brink of catastrophe. Perhaps the most influential thinker to emerge out of the Frankfurt School, however, is the “second-generation” Frankfurt School theorist Jürgen Habermas, whose revolutionary ideas about modernity and the ethical foundations of communication have influenced a range of disciplines, from sociology and philosophy of law to linguistics. Although Habermas mostly abandons the dialectical Marxism and ideology critiques that are central to the work of other Frankfurt School theorists, he nonetheless maintains an attention to how instrumental reasoning — pure and practical reasoning informed by the “instrumental,” use-value orientation of capitalism — corrupts ethical life. The main point of Habermas’ project is to develop a theory of communicative rationality, or the kind of reasoning processes involved in communication and rational argumentation. Habermas believes that normativity is baked into the very structure of dialogical communication, and so dialogue may form the basis upon which ethics, social critique, and the pursuit of justice may proceed.

One influential critical theorist situated outside of the Frankfurt School was the French philosopher Michel Foucault. As a poststructuralist, Foucault was less interested in finding normative foundations than in unsettling them. He is most famous for his articulation of the inextricable relation between reason and power, and for his genealogical analyses of the concepts of sexuality, madness, and disciplinary punishment. In his genealogies, Foucault demonstrates how many of our given concepts are constituted by discourses: a confluence of material relations, linguistic practices, and social structures. For example, Foucault argues that the concept of sexuality arose through the scientific study of sexual preference, the conflation of sexual acts with affective character traits (along with the corresponding internalization of these ascribed traits), and the psychiatrization of sexual deviance (Foucault 1978). In tracing the histories of these concepts,

which often function to exclude and confine individuals, Foucault hopes to point to their contingent and ultimately mutable foundations. The poststructuralist tradition more broadly carries this critique to historical metanarratives, arguing against the view (held by Hegel and Marx) that history proceeds in a teleological fashion.

Contemporary critical theorist Amy Allen pursues this Foucauldian line of thought. Her 2016 text, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, is the main focus of this essay. As the title suggests, Allen's stated goal is to "decolonize" the normative foundations of critical theory, or to point out the Eurocentrism inherent in the views of several Frankfurt School theorists, such as Habermas, and to then find normative foundations for critical theory that avoid Eurocentrism. Later in this essay, I will argue that decolonization is only a tangential result of Allen's project. Although Eurocentrism is the principal ethical concern in the text, Allen's project is better understood as a poststructuralist, antifoundationalist attempt to secure normative foundations for critical theory. She grounds her own position, titled metanormative contextualism, in the antifoundationalist philosophies of first-generation Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno and the aforementioned social theorist Michel Foucault. Despite my reframing of *The End of Progress*, Allen's claimed commitment to decolonizing critical theory is a task first put forth by postcolonial theorists. Because a consideration of postcolonial theory will play an important role later in this essay, I will now define what is meant by "postcolonial."

In his critical appraisal of postcoloniality, Arif Dirlik provides a helpful description of the primary concerns of postcolonial theory and of the meaning of the term itself. He writes that the term "postcolonial" is used in three ways:

- (a) as a literal description of conditions in formerly colonial societies, in which case the term has concrete referents, as in postcolonial societies or postcolonial

intellectuals; (b) as a description of a global condition after the period of colonialism ...; and (c) as a description of a discourse on the above-named conditions that is informed by the epistemological and psychic orientations that are products of those conditions. (Dirlik 1994, p. 332)

With its attention to discourse and “the epistemological and psychic orientations” that result, it is fair to say that postcolonial theory shares many of the same theoretical assumptions as poststructuralism. However, postcolonial theory is as diverse as the geographic and cultural locales that the term denotes. Founding postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon was deeply influenced by Marxism and Sartrean existentialism, for example, while members of the Subaltern Studies Group are more directly indebted to poststructuralists like Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Despite the many complexities behind this tradition, one of the main takeaways for our current purposes is that postcolonial studies arise out of the cultural and *political* condition of (neo-)colonialism. For this reason, I will suggest that postcolonial studies, like some strands of critical theory, contain great potential for orienting us toward the political demands of our time.

Having given a brief overview of some of the philosophical traditions that make up “critical theory” and form the basis of this essay, I am in a position to outline the general structure of my argument. Broadly, I will argue that Allen’s position of metanormative contextualism and her method of genealogical problematization serve as a legitimate path by which critical theory can work to interrogate political crises. As a negativistic theory of progress, it offers little in the way of political ideals or even hope. However, in taking up Adorno’s claim that progress should be understood as the avoidance of catastrophe, metanormative contextualism (supplemented by my reading of some postcolonial theorists) grounds the imperative to take political action in defiance of oppression and impending catastrophe.

I begin this essay with a chapter on Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action. I consider his transcendental-pragmatic method, which grounds ethics in what Habermas takes to be the universal features of communication. In support of Allen's criticism of Habermas, I will argue that Habermas' method of rational reconstruction cannot serve as a foundation for normativity in critical theory because it assumes the developmental superiority of modernity, and thereby involves a normative judgment in itself. I will also argue that Habermas' failure to problematize communicative rationality (in addition to instrumental rationality) lends his position to reformism, rather than both reformism and the possibility of larger, structural or societal change.

In Chapter Two, I focus on Amy Allen's metanormative contextualism. I begin with a summary of the two figures who play a central role in her position: Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault. After then summarizing Allen's own commitment to the methods of genealogical problematization and epistemic humility, I pose a few responses. First, I foreground the concern that Allen's antifoundationalist position cannot ground political ideals nor political action. Second, I argue that epistemic humility is functionally the same as fallibilism, as articulated by Habermas, and ultimately suggest that humility and fallibilism are the best approaches to intercultural dialogue. Finally, I point out that Allen fails to critically engage with postcolonial theory, and that decolonizing critical theory is only a tangential goal of her project insofar as it is an indirect result of her antifoundationalist approach to critical theory.

In the final chapter, I attempt to solve some of the tensions raised in the previous sections and foreground the contributions of postcolonial theory to critical theory. First, I argue for the adoption of epistemic humility and Habermasian fallibilism in intercultural dialogue. Second, I attempt to give a more explicitly political inflection to my discussion by considering a range of examples of postcolonial theory's engagement with politics. Finally, I argue that Adorno's



negativistic conception of progress as the avoidance of catastrophe, supplemented by the contributions of postcolonial theory, serve as a foundation for political action. Progress is attainable, albeit in a somewhat muted way: to progress is to achieve the political goals that prevent catastrophe and to confront its sources.

## Chapter 1: Habermas and Communication in Modernity

In this chapter, I will consider the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas rejects the dialectical, teleological conception of history found in traditional Marxism, and attempts to instead develop a “postmetaphysical” critical theory, one that grounds normativity in empirically observable, universal features of communication. The result — Habermas’ theory of communicative action — involves a quasi-transcendental account of reason that understands the social world as a space for consensus building through rational argumentation. I will begin this chapter by summarizing Habermas’ theory of communicative action, paying particular attention to his postmetaphysical approach and his commitment to rational reconstruction. In the second section, I will consider Amy Allen’s objections to Habermas. In support of her objections, I will argue that the method of rational reconstruction cannot serve as the normative foundation of Habermas’ critical theory, since it assumes a normative, developmental conception of social evolution. I will also argue that Habermas fails to respond to both Eurocentrism and what he calls “the pathology of modern consciousness” in modernity. Nonetheless, his theory of discourse ethics serves as a potential model of intercultural dialogue.

### *Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action*

Habermas posits a conception of moral-political progress rooted in communicative rationality. He distinguishes instrumental rationality, a form of reason instantiated in capitalism and utilitarianism that is concerned primarily with efficiency and production, from communicative rationality, the norms and actions characteristic of the cultural lifeworld in which social interaction takes place. Communicative rationality enables individuals to argue about validity claims in the hopes of achieving consensus. Though the end of communicative rationality is often thwarted by

the state or economy through the exercise of instrumental rationality, Habermas generally only takes instrumental rationality to be a legitimate target of critique (Poster 1989, p. 23). Habermas claims that communicative rationality, as the term suggests, is present in essentially all forms of communicative practice, and that the normative principles implicit in dialogue ground a set of ethical norms that may serve as the foundation for ethics. These moral norms implicit in dialogue further ground the process of adjudicating normative validity claims. For example, Habermas defines principle (U): a moral norm is valid if and only if all affected can accept the consequences and the side effects of its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests (Habermas 1990, p. 86). In principle (U) Habermas posits a cooperative method of moral argumentation in which every affected agent has a say in the assessment of the validity of ethical claims. The point that ethical claims can be valid in the first place is grounded by the ethical principles at the basis of communication, which Habermas takes to be universal (I will say more about these principles later). In summary, Habermas grounds his ethical principles in the characteristics of speech that he takes to be universal — we may refer to this notion of communicative rationality as *transcendental-pragmatic*.

This general approach is quite simple, but another major goal of Habermas' project — and the one that I will primarily focus on — is to ground his transcendental-pragmatic approach to ethics in a historically situated theory of modernity. In other words, Habermas wants to ground his philosophical method within a dialectic of cultural development, as well as in empirically-rooted analyses of language found in the social sciences. This is because he wants to avoid the uncritical foundationalism of Enlightenment thinkers like Kant, who thought that philosophy could arrive at universal moral truths through isolated, monological thinking (Habermas 1990, p. 16). Further, Habermas writes that the “pathology of modern consciousness calls for an explanation [of ethics]

in terms of *social theory*” (Habermas 1990, p. 45, emphasis mine). By appealing to social theory in light of the “pathology” of modern life, Habermas suggests that traditional approaches to ethics fail to confront the extent to which pernicious influences within a social context can also pervade whatever theories of ethics are born out of that context. Lastly, Habermas writes that traditional philosophical approaches to studying language fail on several fronts. Namely, they fail to capture pragmatic features of language (e.g., the performative character of speech acts), they formalize fraught analytical concepts, and they “start from the model of the isolated, purposive rational actor” and thereby fail to accurately capture the fallible process of negotiation that is required in intersubjective communication (Habermas 1979, p. 8). For all of these reasons, Habermas’ approach, influenced by pragmatics and the social sciences, can be described as “postmetaphysical.” That is, Habermas avoids earlier, metaphysical approaches to thinking about philosophical questions that have historically tended to assume the infallibility of analytical concepts and teleological conceptions of historical development.<sup>1</sup>

Having briefly outlined the impetus for Habermas’ methodological commitment to pragmatics, the social sciences, and a theory of modernity, I return now to my summary of the theory of communicative action. Through the theory of communicative action, Habermas will ultimately imply that communicative rationality, grounded in the moral assumptions of communication, is universal. Under this view, essentially all statements uttered in the social world are validity claims that can be adjudicated between partners in dialogue. To arrive at this position about the universal features of dialogue, Habermas appeals to an empirically-oriented method that he calls rational reconstruction. As it relates to communication, rational reconstruction relies on “proven intuitive foreknowledge” of the presymbolic structure of speech, a kind of “know-how”

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this issue, see Habermas’ *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1988).

that equips individuals with the implicit rules required to understand and assess an interlocutor's utterances (Habermas 1979, p. 12). Habermas says that in the context of modernity, this "know-how" corresponds to an intuitive knowledge of the three kinds of validity claims — claims to truth, claims to normative rightness, and claims to sincerity — and of the three different world-relations — objective, intersubjective, or subjective — that those claims may have. Rational reconstruction, then, is the maieutic process in which the interpreter transforms this intuitive "know-how" about communication into a conscious set of rules and principles — this set of principles constitutes an account of formal pragmatics, whose principles serve as a foundation for normativity.

Since rational reconstruction appeals to intuitive knowledge, Habermas goes on to explain who, exactly, possesses this knowledge. His answer is clear: "Our formal-pragmatic description of the general structure of speech acts has to draw on the pretheoretical knowledge of speakers who belong to a modern and ... rationalized lifeworld" (Habermas 1987, p. 77). In other words, Habermas claims that in the period of modernity, competent interlocutors possess an intuitive knowledge of the structure of communication (i.e., the distinct kinds of validity claims and world-relations). Only in modernity have reason and power been separated to the extent that the distinct validity spheres are apparent to competent interlocutors. This point is crucial, because it implies that we have reached a point in history in which societies on the whole have achieved a degree of rationalization that has translated to an implicit cognitive "know how" about the structure of communication. Perhaps it is more intuitive to say that the underlying principles of speech are simply universal. But recall that Habermas has a very particular conception of the different validity claims and world-relations that constitute dialogue. Moreover, for the empirically oriented pragmatist, demonstrating the universality of this conception of speech would be a difficult task.

Nonetheless, Habermas' position implies that the pretheoretical knowledge of competent interlocutors reflects the universal capabilities of humans.

In its appeal to experience, the method of rational reconstruction is fallibilistic in a way that purely transcendental methods are not. It is a method that combines empirical and experiential data with transcendental claims about the generalizability of experience. Habermas says of this method:

This is an area where philosophers work as suppliers of ideas without raising foundationalist or absolutist claims à la Kant or Hegel. Fallibilistic in orientation, they reject the dubious faith in philosophy's ability to do things single-handedly, hoping instead that the success that has for so long eluded it might come from an auspicious matching of different theoretical fragments. (Habermas 1990, p. 16)

To reiterate, rational reconstruction may be understood as an attempt to avoid the uncritical foundationalism and absolutism of the Enlightenment, an acknowledgement of the contingency and fallibility of modern communicative practices. This attitude carries over to Habermas' conception of discourse ethics, pertaining to the normative roots of dialogical communication. Although my subsequent discussion of Habermas will focus mostly on the method of rational reconstruction, it is worth rounding out my summary with a description of discourse ethics and Habermas' conception of progress. After all, Habermas' real interest lies in the *outcome* of the process of rational reconstruction, namely, a list of normative procedural assumptions involved in communication that may serve as the foundation for practical reasoning.

Examples of procedural assumptions assumed in argumentation include (1) that a speaker may assert only what he really believes, and (2) that a person who disputes a proposition not under discussion must provide a reason for doing so (Habermas 1990, p. 88). These procedural

assumptions have a prescriptive undergirding in that they are aimed at ensuring argumentative integrity. For this reason, procedural assumptions are normative and contain ethical content. Putting these procedural assumptions in more explicitly ethical terms, one might say that one has an obligation to being honest and providing reasons when participating in dialogue. Having located a basis for normativity within dialogue, Habermas goes on to argue that rational argumentation is the solid foundation upon which we may begin the process of practical reasoning.

I should note that Habermas' commitment to the method of rational reconstruction neatly translates to this social, fallibilistic conception of practical reasoning found in discourse ethics. In the same way that Habermas rejects absolute faith in a monological philosophical method and pursues a transcendental-pragmatic method instead, the process of moral reasoning itself cannot occur in a vacuum (e.g., Kant's categorical imperative), but must proceed through active dialogue between individuals. To be an interpreter (someone who is immersed in and attuned to the pragmatics of speech) in a communicative relation requires that one adopt a performative attitude of understanding and discernment, whereas to be a third-person observer is to assume a position of superiority which precludes the possibility of honest evaluation (Habermas 1990, p. 26). In other words, discourse ethics requires a kind of fallibilism about our normative beliefs: when engaging in the dialogical practice of argumentation, we must be open to the possibility that we are wrong.

Having summarized the theory of communicative action, we are in a position to consider how Habermas envisions moral-political progress. On the one hand, it is clear that Habermas ascribes positive moral-political value to the rationalization processes that have produced modernity. For example, he notes positive ethical potential in the fact that, in modernity, "facts and norms that had previously gone unquestioned can now be true or false, valid or invalid" (Habermas 1990, p. 107). This points to the emancipatory potential in questioning moral and

political norms that are often assumed to be true. Progress in Habermas' view is therefore a process of moral-practical rationalization that opens up the possibility for reasoned dialogue. In Amy Allen's reading of Habermas, progress occurs when members of society rationally assess claims about truth or normative rightness and come to agreements about these claims through dialogue (Allen 2016, p. 54-5).

Habermas' theory of modernity therefore implies that progress is located in the rationalization of cultural and normative lifeworlds. Correspondingly, a more developed society is one in which individuals are open to other worldviews and exhibit a certain degree of reflexivity (ibid). Reflexivity means that individuals are aware that their worldview is just one of many, and that its first-order validity claims are no more justified than the first-order validity claims of other worldviews (at least until those worldviews are put into dialogue, and one position is shown to be more rational than the other). Within the framework of discourse ethics, on the most simple level, progress involves open and honest dialogue about the validity of differing conceptions of moral norms, justice, and the good life. It is also marked by a reduction in the forces of domination which actively prevent the exercise of reason and thoughtful deliberation, as those forces run against the normative principles inherent in communication in the first place. For example, Habermas writes that progress should be understood as the achievement of agreement "without force ... the expansion of the domain of consensual action together with the re-establishment of undistorted communication" (Habermas 1979, p. 46). In these ways, Habermas thinks progress can be achieved (1) through both explicit argumentation about moral norms and the achievement of those norms in social life, and (2) through the broader process of the rationalization of worldviews, which cultivates fallibilism and openness to the views of others.



*Objections to Habermas*

In *The End of Progress*, Amy Allen argues that Habermas' theory of communicative action fails to secure a normative foundation for critical theory and assumes the developmental superiority of Western modernity. My goal in this section is to summarize and assess this claim, and to raise a related objection about Habermas' failure to problematize the cultural inheritance of modernity.

Allen's primary argument against Habermas is that his developmentalist conception of society presupposes normativity to begin with. More precisely, by grounding normativity in a theory of the social evolution of communication — the process of progressive rationalization — Habermas presupposes a developmentalist and inherently normative conception of social evolution. In assuming that modernity represents a more rationalized stage of communicative practice, Habermas assumes the developmental superiority of a modern and admittedly Western point of view; this inherently normative claim about the relative advancements of different societies is problematic for an account of universal pragmatics whose goal is to ground normativity in the first place.

In other words, Habermas' goal is to ground normativity in universal features of communication, which would then allow us to assess the validity of the epistemic and moral principles of different worldviews. However, a developmental or evolutionary account of communication already favors communicative practices that are more accessible to modern, Western subjects. In Allen's words:

[I]nsofar as universal pragmatics reconstructs the intuitive, pretheoretical knowledge of subjects who are deemed competent insofar as they have mastered the

specific use of language required by modernity, it already presupposes a certain conception of social evolution or historical progress. (Allen 2016, p. 53)

Habermas' conception of communicative rationality thus assumes the developmental superiority of modernity, and so it cannot serve as a foundation for normativity precisely because it already presupposes a normatively-oriented, developmental account of rationalization processes.

Besides this structural flaw in Habermas' position, Allen is also skeptical of Habermas' language pertaining to the "competent" members of "modern" society who have greater access to knowledge about communication. Habermas suggests that modern subjects have a kind of pretheoretical knowledge of both communicative practice and the goals implicit in communicative practice — namely, a more "rationalized lifeworld" — which pre-modern subjects lack. Allen's main concern here, of course, is Eurocentrism. Although we might think the intuitive knowledge that accompanies modernity is generalizable across the world, it is clear that Western society holds a unique and privileged place within the development of modernity. For example, Habermas explains that "Western rationalism" enabled European people to distinguish between the different spheres of validity, since "[t]hese cultures specialize in questions of truth, questions of taste, or questions of justice," (Habermas 1990, p. 107). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the numerous ways in which the development of different features of modernity — liberal democracy, transnational capitalism, or modern science, for example — were often tied up with imperialist endeavors. Consider the imperial expansion of Western states across the non-Western world well into the twentieth century. Even today, neocolonial economic relations reinforce the imbalance upon which modernity was founded: Western societies maintain a central role in modernity, whereas many African and Asian countries remain on the economic and cultural peripheries. Habermas thus fails to take Eurocentrism to task. Further, this suggests that although we might

describe our current time period as one of global modernity, it is incorrect to assume that the communicative features of Western rationalism have been carried to all parts of the world in equal ways. It therefore seems wrong to assume that the pretheoretical knowledge of Western subjects is in fact universal.

Allen anticipates a response to these objections, summarized in the following claim: the universal normative principles that undergird communication suggest a natural development of communication toward those practices that are constitutive of modern, post-traditional societies. However, Allen asks why we should think that there is a necessary, developmental trend toward the communicative practices and rationality of modernity (Allen 2016, p. 59). Indeed, this reply seems to ascribe to Habermas the same teleological conception of history that he eschews in his commitment to a postmetaphysical approach. Although there certainly may be a global trend towards rationalization in the way that Habermas has described, I am doubtful of the claim that this occurs naturally (without globalization, imperialism, etc.) or in a predictable fashion.

In a more particular response to Allen's concern about Eurocentrism, Habermas may simply bite the bullet and say that any conception of ethics that enables us to judge the values of societies will necessarily lead us to say that some societies are more developed than others; it just so happens that in the West, subjects have over time become more attuned to the separate validity spheres and world relations that modernity has brought into focus. On this point, I agree that evaluative ethical systems that enable us to make broad judgments about the relative "development" of societies are not intrinsically Eurocentric or ethically problematic. Admittedly, Habermas is not really interested in making these kinds of wholesale judgments, anyway; they are rather indirect results of his grounding progress in certain communicative measures such as the

relative openness of worldviews and fallibilism of subjects. Nonetheless, Habermas fails to confront the constitutive role of Eurocentrism in the development of modernity.

Finally, despite Habermas' concern about the "pathology of modern consciousness," he fails to critically engage with this problem in his discussions about modernity and progressive rationalization processes. For example, Habermas does not consider (as Allen will, via Adorno and Foucault) how the logics of capitalism can affect our communicative practices. Although he discusses how power and reason are intertwined in our current age, and how we should work to separate them to ensure open and uncoerced dialogue, Habermas abandons the critiques of ideology that figured into the work of early Frankfurt School Critical Theorists, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Specifically, Habermas takes issue only with instrumental rationality, and fails to problematize communicative rationality itself. Ultimately, I think this failure to critically engage the concept of reason (or to consider the ways that our very conception of reason might be implicated in ideology) means that Habermas lacks the full range of political critique that critical theory demands. Critical theory must be open to both reformism and the possibility of larger structural change, but as I will suggest in the next chapter, the need for larger structural changes are more effectively made visible through the cultivation of a critical distance between oneself and the normative lifeworld that one inhabits. In his refusal to interrogate communicative rationality or reason more generally, Habermas is unlikely to create this critical distance. This is not to say that the problematization of one's normative lifeworld cannot be accommodated by Habermas' view; I think that it probably can. As we will see in the next chapter, however, other theorists more effectively foreground this approach.

Even if Habermas might be able to accommodate these political demands, I think that his conception of discourse ethics should be taken as a fruitful model for intercultural dialogue rather

than as the main framework for a critical theory. It is worth noting that the objections raised against Habermas, as I have framed them, have more to do with his method of rational reconstruction and his conception of modernity than with discourse ethics. To be sure, insofar as discourse ethics is grounded in the method of rational reconstruction, Habermas must (1) appeal to different (empirical and philosophical) methods that demonstrate the universality of pragmatics, and (2) more fully confront the problem of Eurocentrism in modernity. But assuming he is able to accomplish these tasks, he may once again appeal to pragmatics to ground discourse ethics. As I will eventually argue, I see no alternative to the kind of fallibilism that Habermas suggests when it comes to intercultural dialogue. In this way, the fallibilistic, dialogical attitude that is central to discourse ethics is still a positive contribution to critical theory. However, the problems with the method of rational reconstruction, along with the need for a critical theory that approaches political problems through an active problematization of reason, suggests that we may turn elsewhere. In the next chapter, I will consider Amy Allen's own approach to critical theory: metanormative contextualism.

## Chapter 2: Adorno, Foucault, and Allen: Metanormative Contextualism

In the latter half of *The End of Progress*, Amy Allen outlines her positive vision for a critical theory which she calls “metanormative contextualism.” Rooted in the critiques of reason leveled by first-generation Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno and poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault, Allen conceives of history and reason in fundamentally different ways than Jürgen Habermas. In this chapter, I will critically assess Allen’s theory of metanormative contextualism. In contrast to Habermas, Allen develops an antifoundationalist conception of reason through her method of genealogical problematization. Later in this chapter, I will raise the objection that this antifoundationalism prevents Allen from securing the normative foundations for a politically substantive critical theory. However, this antifoundationalism is grounded in what I take to be a legitimate epistemic shift toward a kind of aporetic conception of reason, espoused by Adorno, and toward the method of genealogy, espoused by Foucault, which help resolve the Eurocentrism of Habermas’ position. Allen devotes the majority of her own theorizing to engaging the work of Adorno and Foucault, and an explanation of Allen’s own views on history, reason, and progress requires some exploration of their ideas insofar as they are relevant to Allen’s project.

### *Adorno and Foucault: Becoming What We Are*

Amy Allen begins with a discussion of the relation between history and reason in the thought of Theodor Adorno, primarily exemplified in his seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written with fellow Frankfurt School theorist Max Horkheimer. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer outline what they take to be an aporia implicit in “enlightened” reason: although “social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought,” they write, such thought also

“already contains the seed of the reversal universally apparent today” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1947/1972, p. xiii). That is, Western society’s current mode of thinking *essentially* contains both the tools necessary for the achievement of greater freedom and a regressive tendency toward totalitarianism and societal catastrophe.

True to the spirit of Marxism, Adorno takes this tendency toward catastrophe to be a function of reason conditioned by late capitalism. Exchange relations, alongside the psychological effects of these exchange relations on individual subjectivity, produce the calculative logics that are responsible for the emergence of the welfare state and the social programs that have enabled individuals to live (and work) longer, but also for global, neocolonial struggles over resources and an impending climate catastrophe. Scientific innovation serves as a way out of climate change through the development of renewable energy technologies, yet industries that invest in innovation continue to rely on fossil fuels, facilitated by complex relations between nation-states which could easily push the world to the brink of nuclear war if disrupted. In Adorno’s time, these tensions materialized in the chemical warfare and genocide of the early 1940s. Adorno also attributes the threat of fascism and totalitarianism to the notion of reason dominant in the current age, presenting a more political and less monolithically economic conception of capitalism than Marx. Nonetheless, for Adorno the primacy of the power of the nation-state in structuring social life in the twentieth century reflected an attempt to preserve and strengthen the possibility of increased productivity and economic output; in this way, the state helps to preserve existing exchange relations (Cook 2018, p. 34).

Out of these rather straightforward Marxist analyses of the contradictions inherent in capitalism, Adorno and Horkheimer arrive at some radical conclusions about reason in the current historical epoch: reason is inextricably linked to power, and enlightenment rationality tends

simultaneously towards freedom and domination (or totalitarianism) (Adorno and Horkheimer 1947/1972, p. 24). In her reading of Adorno, Allen distinguishes between Enlightenment rationality, in reference to the philosophies of the Enlightenment, and ‘enlightenment’ rationality, which she describes as “a more general process of progressive rationalization that enables human beings to exercise greater and greater power over nature, over other human beings, and over themselves” (Allen 2016, p. 167). This enlightenment rationality of late capitalism is Adorno’s primary target in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The aporetic tension within enlightenment reason — its tendency toward both freedom and domination — entails a rejection of teleological progress narratives of history. If the possibility of “self-destruction” is already implicit in enlightenment reason, as Adorno writes, progress is anything but guaranteed. For example, with greater technological capacity and increased globalization (undergirded by the rationality of late capitalism) comes greater possibility for societal catastrophe. Regression is thus both empirically and conceptually a feature of the movement of history. This position represents an important deviation from traditional Marxism, which involves a developmental, teleological conception of history. In Adorno’s view, Enlightenment’s ability to consider its own flaws and to critique the “destructive aspect of progress,” however, still leave open the possibility for conceiving of future improvements. In other words, coming to terms with the historical fact and future likelihood of regress enables us to understand progress as a moral-political imperative (Adorno and Horkheimer 1947/1972, p. xiii).

Although Adorno’s view on the whole might be considered negative and cynical, his work has a decidedly ethical import; he writes, for example, that “the need to let suffering speak is a condition of all truth” (Adorno 1966/1973, p. 17). Continuously foregrounding the normative weight of suffering and catastrophe, Adorno’s conception of progress has a correspondingly



negativistic orientation, quoted at length by Allen: "... if there were no impending catastrophe on the horizon... it will not provide a timeless, absolute definition of progress, but it will give the idea a concrete form. For progress today really simply does mean the prevention and avoidance of catastrophe" (Allen 2016, p. 175). As we will see shortly, Adorno's critique of reason and his negativistic theory of progress will play a central role in Allen's own position, and several of these ideas are adopted by Allen.

Like Adorno, Michel Foucault approaches a critique of reason by situating it historically and culturally within social, political, and economic contexts. Similarly, Foucault also argues that reason has a tendency toward domination, albeit in different ways. Where Adorno attributes enlightenment reason's aporetic nature to exchange relations and market forces, Foucault grounds his critique in the more abstract notion of reason's entanglement with power relations. "Power" is a rather fraught term for Foucault in that it plays a central role in much of his early theorizing, yet seems to change in meaning over time. Often it is unclearly defined. But for our purposes, Foucault's critique of reason rests less on a comprehensive definition of power and more on a general understanding of his conception of history and reason in itself.

Foucault approaches his studies — on sexuality, punishment, and madness, to name a few — through a historical analysis that explores how concepts that we often take for granted came to be. This method, known as genealogy (in part a reference to Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*), aims to show how seemingly ahistorical concepts are in fact the result of contingent historical events. These concepts are mutable rather than static, and tracing their formation shows how these concepts (1) have not always been around and (2) are not the result of a rational trajectory of history. For example, in Foucault's aptly titled *History of Sexuality*, he analyzes the development of the modern concept of "sexuality," and the belief that it denotes a timeless essence that belongs

to all societies. He argues that, over the course of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, sex went from being understood as a set of physical acts to an indication of a kind of subjectivity that was available for scientific analysis, taxonomization, and psychological scrutiny. Human beings themselves were then understood as subjects with a sexuality rather than as individuals who performed certain sex acts, and were attributed certain affective character traits based on the sexual acts they tended to perform. The seemingly innocuous discourse of scientific objectivity led to the taxonomization and psychiatrization of sexual deviance, and thus to the development of social categories (such as the “homosexual”) that effectively excluded certain groups from the exercise of power (Foucault 1978, p. 43). *The History of Sexuality* is a relatively straightforward exemplification of the goal of Foucault’s genealogies: to historicize a range of concepts that are often taken to be stable and absolute, and, in doing so, to gesture toward a broader critique of historical metanarratives, such as that of progressive rationalization found in Hegel.

Amy Allen finds this critique to be clearest in Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, where he traces the development of the modern concept of ‘madness’ in relation to enlightened reason. Allen reads the text not just as an attempt to historicize the modern concept of reason, but also to historicize the Hegelian conception of history as a process of progressive rationalization. Foucault attempts to undermine metaphysical understandings of the dialectic of history by refuting universal, transhistorical claims about how history proceeds. In *Madness and Civilization*, he does this by tracking the emergence of modern, enlightened rationality as it is understood in relation to madness as mental illness. More specifically, Foucault contrasts Renaissance and classical understandings of ‘reason,’ ‘madness,’ and ‘unreason,’ from those of modernity (Foucault 1961/1988, p. 209-10). The trends toward the medicalization and pathologization of human subjectivity led to the conflation of unreason (exemplified in sexual deviants, criminals, libertines,

etc.) with madness, or mental illness (ibid, 210-1). In contrast, reason was taken to be exemplified in the apparently objective discipline of science, which emphasizes the importance of observable sensory experience and rejects the primacy of affective experience (ibid, 217-8). Allen argues that by pointing to the contingent nature of a range of conceptual foundations, Foucault “makes room for contingent, discontinuous, and fragmented events, all of which resist being reconciled and recuperated within a dialectical conception of history as a process of rationalization” (Allen 2016, p. 179). Foucault’s argument, in my reading, thus also functions to situate our own enlightened notion of reason and reframe it as a historically contingent development, one that exists as a result of concrete historical trends and developments. This separates “reason” from the metaphysical, progressive readings of history, and in doing so undermines metaphysical conceptions of history more generally.

Rather than taking a hard normative stance on the modern concept of “reason,” Foucault simply attempts to contextualize the concept and outline the historical conditions that gave rise to it. Foucault does not advocate for a kind of return to the past, for a romanticization of the past would itself constitute a metanarrative of regress. It is at this point that we can begin to see the intersection of the thought of Foucault and Adorno. For both, narratives that romanticize the past or view progress as a historical fact (though their focus is obviously the latter) fail to come to terms with the fragmentations and discontinuities that constitute history. Moreover, just as Adorno suggests that enlightened reason is intimately tied to domination, Foucault thinks that power and reason are inextricably linked. Epistemological frameworks and worldviews are reinforced by sets of norms and values that come to be internalized and reified. They proliferate on a social level, so as to mark certain kinds of behaviors or subjects as deviant. As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, however, these discursively-constructed norms — norms that are reinforced through

social practices, linguistic conventions, and self-conceptualizations — can be toyed with and ultimately shown to be malleable as individuals create space for the acceptance of counter-norms (Butler 1990, p. 187-9). The matrix of power and reason, then, serves as the means for both domination and resistance. Allen notes that for both thinkers, a critical appraisal of reason (and its entanglement with power) in modernity is a necessary task for philosophy (Allen 2016, p. 187). I discuss the normative upshot of this position shortly.

Foucault and Adorno both also historicize the concepts of history (as a process of progressive rationalization) and reason. Because of this, Allen reads Adorno and Foucault primarily as critics of Hegelian thinking. Although Adorno's method is not explicitly genealogical, both figures support their arguments by situating their subjects of analysis within a historical context, demonstrating how the features of a given normative lifeworld are contingent rather than necessary or teleological. As Deborah Cook writes: "Adorno's negative dialectics and Foucault's genealogies could be described as species of the genus critique: they not only try to demonstrate how we have become what we are, they cast a resolutely critical light on the historical forces that have made us what we are" (Cook 2018, p. 21).

One may naturally think that reason's essential entanglement with power must lead to nihilism or hopelessness. Rather than reading the genealogical method as entailing a wholesale rejection of the normative inheritance of modernity (or of ethics more generally), however, Allen argues that there is a normative and moral upshot to the genealogical problematization of modernity. Although the features of our situation may seem natural and unchangeable, in making visible the conditions that gave rise to a situation, genealogy enables us to imagine futures in which the status quo (and its pernicious effects) may be challenged and ultimately overcome. The methods of Adorno and Foucault enable the philosopher to gain a "critical distance" from the

seemingly immutable discourses that permeate social life, and thereby open up a space for challenging those discourses (Allen 2016, p. 194). More specifically, Adorno and Foucault's concern for how prevailing norms contain the seeds of domination — both internal, within individual subjectivities, and external, on a societal level — points to a positive appraisal of the Enlightenment ideal of freedom. Our embeddedness in the social world means we cannot easily break from prevailing values and practices, but through the critical distance created by genealogical problematization, we can nonetheless enhance our freedom in relation to the given discursive frameworks of our historical context (ibid, p. 196). This act is not simply philosophical, but also personally freeing: by showing how our identities have been shaped, Adornian and “Foucauldian critique simultaneously promotes desubjection and desubjectification. It aims to liberate ‘our subjectivity, our relation to ourselves’” (Cook 2018, p. 141). In other words, the critical problematization of the current historical moment enables subjects to resist both the external and interiorized forces that result in docile subjectivity — characteristic of late capitalism, for Adorno, and of the regimented, scientific, and disciplinary nature of modern society for Foucault.

Allen concludes her chapter on Adorno and Foucault by relating this normative upshot to her critique of Eurocentrism in critical theory. This section emphasizes the ethical potential in Adorno and Foucault, rather than the personal potential found in desubjectification. For example, the critical problematization and historicization of our own historical situation (as Western subjects) cultivates a kind of epistemic humility that affords non-Western points of view the same legitimacy as “our” own (Allen 2016, p. 202). This means that in intercultural dialogue, we must be open to these alternative points of view. Allen expands on this point in her concluding chapter,

where she fleshes out her position of metanormative contextualism. I will now summarize this position.

### *Metanormative Contextualism*

In developing her pluralistic, anti-foundationalist position, Amy Allen adopts many of the theoretical moves made by Adorno and Foucault. Of course, she makes nuanced adjustments to these positions, but it is nonetheless appropriate to speak generally about which of the already-described moves she adopts. Before summarizing her position, though, I should note that Allen claims to critique the notions of progress, history, and reason in the service of “decolonizing” critical theory. Though Adorno and Foucault failed to engage with the question of colonialism in their work, much of the following discussion concerns how the theoretical frameworks they developed can help us arrive at a critical theory that avoids the Eurocentrism found in the methods of figures like Habermas.

Allen says that by problematizing the normative inheritance of the Enlightenment, we both transcend Enlightenment and more fully realize its ideal of freedom. Freedom does not have a concrete political meaning here, as the radical questioning required by genealogy entails a “radically open-ended, futural conception of freedom,” where it is possible that our current normative commitments are transcended and thus appear strange to us (Allen 2016, p. 205). In contrast to Habermas, who argues that the central task of modernity is to disentangle communicative reason from the corruptive forces of instrumental reason — characteristic of capitalism and utilitarian ethics — Allen takes Adorno and Foucault to their full (epistemological) conclusion, claiming that the genealogical method requires that the subject must always situate

herself within a normative world that can be problematized. Habermas limits critique to instrumental rationality, while Allen problematizes reason on the whole.

Coming to terms with the embeddedness of oneself in a social whole has positive implications for decolonizing critical theory, Allen says. One positive result is the cultivation of epistemic humility in intercultural dialogue. In producing a critical distance between oneself and the normative cultural discourses that one is immersed in, genealogical problematization produces an openness to alternative conceptions of value and life and thus secures the possibility for genuine, open-ended dialogue with non-Western subjects. This notion of epistemic humility, Allen writes, goes beyond Habermas' fallibilism, or "the acknowledgment of the fact that we may turn out to be wrong — because it entails an active and ongoing problematization of our own point of view and of our belief in its cognitive and moral superiority" (Allen 2016, p. 210). At this point, Allen emphasizes the importance of distinguishing first-order normative commitments from second-order, or metanormative, commitments. First-order commitments are those normative commitments that individuals personally hold to be true, and are localized within a normative lifeworld. Second-order commitments have to do with metaethical questions about how individuals come to possess normative and moral knowledge. For example, moral absolutism and relativism are second-order conceptions of ethics.

Allen argues that Habermas fails to adequately distinguish between first-order and second-order normative commitments, and posits a different approach in an attempt to sharply delineate the first- and second-order. According to her version of metanormative contextualism, on a first-order level we are committed to values such as freedom and equality, but on a second-order, metanormative level, we "understand these commitments ... to be justified immanently and contextually, via an appeal to specific historical context rather than via an appeal to their putatively

context-transcendent character” (Allen 2016, p. 211). In other words, while first-order normative commitments can only be understood in terms of their historical situation, they can also be justified within those specific contexts. That is, there is no trans-historical metanormative context of justification. This “metanormative contextualism” goes beyond Habermasian fallibilism, Allen believes, because it involves the active problematization of our own point of view (including any belief in modernity’s cognitive or moral superiority) along with a critical assessment of the interlocutor’s position. But how can a contextualist account of normative justification allow for the assessment of normative claims at all, if each individual inhabits a different context? In other words, how does Allen avoid moral relativism?

Drawing upon the contextualist epistemologies of Michael Williams and Linda Alcoff, Allen says that foundationalism is not the only way out of moral relativism, and denies the foundationalist view that knowledge is context-transcendent. This does not mean that there is no such thing as moral knowledge, but rather that moral claims are valid only within a particular social and cultural discourses (Allen 2016, p. 213). Here, Allen clearly relies upon Adorno and Foucault’s conceptions of normativity as dependent upon existing social relations, writing that the normative lifeworlds we inhabit are made up of webs of belief, “rooted in specific social, cultural, and material conditions” (ibid, p. 214). Allen summarizes metanormative contextualism:

First, moral principles or normative ideals are always justified relative to a set of contextually salient values, conceptions of the good life, or normative horizons ... Second, there is no uber-context, no context-free or transcendent point of view from which we can adjudicate which contexts are ultimately correct or even in a position of hierarchical superiority over which others. (ibid, p. 216)



In light of contextualist epistemology, Allen suggests (in the vein of Adorno and Foucault) that the urge to achieve a transcendent point of view is linked to the authoritarian impulse of contemporary, enlightened reason.

Metanormative contextualism explains not only how individuals with *shared* cultural backgrounds can adjudicate between normative claims, but also how individuals who inhabit distinct normative lifeworlds can come to agreements, too. Focusing on Western subjects, Allen says that the Enlightenment's commitment to reflexivity and self-criticism requires us to be open to the claims of non-Western subjects. Besides, normative horizons are open and are themselves shaped and informed by other normative horizons. For example, consider how intercultural feminist dialogue can lead both sides of a discussion to rethink their assumptions about femininity and patriarchy: on the one hand, intercultural dialogue might help me realize how patriarchy exists within my own society in ways that I had not yet considered, and on the other hand, I might realize that my judgment about what is "patriarchal" within my own society might not be generalizable across cultures. In short, through intercultural interaction we are inevitably made to reassess our own normative assumptions. This means that fruitful dialogue about norms can occur across cultures, although cross-cultural critique will necessarily appear more radical in light of a lack of overlapping normative horizons. For Western subjects (who generally occupy a privileged position when it comes to intercultural dialogue), however, this process is encouraged by the fact that Enlightenment and modernity take self-criticism and reflexivity to be normative goals in themselves; a first order commitment to self-criticism and anti-dogmatism facilitates reflexivity on a second-order, metanormative level (Allen 2016, p. 218).

Allen concludes the text by summarizing her positions on reason, history, and progress. She spends several pages developing her conception of reason (drawing upon the work of Anthony

Laden), but the position is rather straightforward in light of the above discussions concerning discursive, contextualist accounts of reason and the intersection of distinct normative horizons. Allen argues that reasoning “is an open-ended, ongoing practice of mutual and reciprocal attunement through which shared spaces of reasons are constructed and mapped” (Allen 2016, p. 221). Under this view, reasoning is a social practice by which individuals come together to constitute epistemic spaces of reasons. This reads to me as a kind of positive inversion of Foucault’s analysis of epistemic regimes of truth (e.g., the discourse of psychiatry): power is inevitably tied to reason, but both are mediated through social space. Discursive regimes surely contain the negative potential for the internalization of disciplinary norms, but this is only possible through the construction of shared spaces of reasons. Further, when we are made aware (either through self-reflection or by the charges of others) of the ways in which our conception of reasoning is exclusionary or authoritarian, we are forced to deal practically with this possibility because it challenges the pre-existing, already constructed space of reasons (ibid, p. 223).

Finally, in regards to history and progress, Allen’s position is similar to that of Adorno and Foucault: the historicization of the Hegelian concept of ‘history’ leads her to reject metanarratives, along with the notion of progress as a historical fact. Nonetheless, within the framework of her metanormative contextualism, we are able to make judgments about relative progress when comparing situations (times, places) that share normative horizons. Within a shared normative space, progress is both possible and imperative.

Thus far, I have provided a summary of the critical theories of Adorno, Foucault, and Allen. I have hoped to show the deep connections between each theorist in the service of detailing Allen’s position of metanormative contextualism. I am sympathetic to Allen’s position, and am convinced by the complex portrayal of the relation between power and reason in the work of Adorno and

Foucault. My summary of their work will thus serve my own prescriptions for critical theory in the next chapter. Before developing my own position, however, I will now point out a few objections to Allen's position.

### *Objections to Allen*

First, I would like to fully come to terms with the extent to which an anti-foundationalist, contextualist critical theory places limits on the notion of 'progress,' and consider what implications this has for critical theory's ability to ground and motivate political action. Allen makes the indispensable point that the ideal of liberation seems to assume a telos of history. That is, if liberation or emancipation could be achieved, this suggests that we have reached an endpoint to political struggle. This problem is found in traditional Marxism and other metaphysical, teleological theories of history, such as Hegelianism more broadly. Moreover, abandoning the ideal of liberation does not entail that progress cannot be made. At the same time, however, Allen's poststructuralist position seems to lack the normative content to ground a thorough conception of progress at all, in which freedom from economic exploitation, racism, patriarchy, or oppression more generally ought to take center stage.

To begin, Allen acknowledges that metanormative contextualism, unlike traditional Marxism, is not aimed at liberation or emancipation. Like Habermas and Foucault, her orientation towards progress is decidedly post-metaphysical, and I take this to be a strength of her position. But if judgments of progress should only be made sparingly and within one normative framework, then the radical ideal of "liberation" seems either impossible or incredibly far off into the future. Whether the ideal of liberation is either naively utopian, too suggestive of a teleological, metaphysical conception of history, or both, the prospect and rhetoric of liberation often serves as

the basis for the hope that motivates political action, and which supplements the realization that progress is a moral-political imperative. In other words, if we conceive of progress as simply “the avoidance of catastrophe,” as Adorno’s negativistic position prescribes, we are left with little normative philosophical grounding upon which we might imagine radically alternative conceptions of society (e.g., alternative forms of government, social organization, etc.). This problem is not unique to Allen’s position, and it is certainly not a structural flaw that undermines her position as a whole. Nonetheless, I think it is worth pointing out how a largely negativistic theory of progress offers little in the way of political hope, and leaves us with little room to imagine substantially alternative conceptions of society.

There is another sense in which poststructuralist accounts of reason, such as those of Foucault and Allen, hinder the establishment of progressive political goals. This is rooted in the connection between reason and power/domination, characteristic of philosophical movements that fall within the broader category of what Paul Ricoeur describes as the “hermeneutics of suspicion” — Marxist ideology critique (Adorno), Nietzschean genealogical critique (Foucault), and psychoanalysis (Ricoeur 1965/1970, p.33). Both Adorno and Foucault argue that reason is intimately linked, in an occluded or hidden way (hence “hermeneutics of suspicion”) to power and domination. Adorno makes this point by discussing enlightened reason’s tendency toward context-transcendent thinking, along with its connection to the contradictions inherent to late capitalism. Foucault theorizes the inextricable relation between reason and power and aims to demonstrate this relation in his detailed descriptions of the interiorization of the epistemic and normative principles that constitute discourse. Recall that in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that sexuality is not simply an act, but rather a discourse made up of acts, scientific categories, subjectivities, biopolitical functions, etc. Of course, Foucault avoids simplistic, wholesale

normative judgments of concepts like sexuality — but he does aim to situate them and demonstrate how they can be used instrumentally, as well as how they can confine and exclude individuals. For example, those with fluid sexualities do not fit neatly into the discursive regime of sexuality, and the corresponding interiorization of the norms of sexuality can lead such individuals to an internalized sense of confusion, exclusion, and otherness.

Crucially, however, Foucault's point is that *any* discursive regime has exclusionary effects, since reason is inextricably tied to power. There will always be individuals who resist and challenge a discourse's epistemic presuppositions, and in this sense there are always avenues for resistance. However, Foucault's position implies that any form of political organization will have the negative effect of subjectification and alienation. For this reason, many on the left doubt that Foucault's work can be used to make principled structural critiques about existing political institutions. Indeed, Foucault can plausibly be read as a laissez-faire capitalist who would point out that the welfare state and social programs manufacture docile, dependent subjects.<sup>2</sup> Thankfully, Allen foregrounds the importance of adjudicating between normative (political) principles in her discussion of metanormative contextualism. She argues that individuals who inhabit the same cultural lifeworld and share the same epistemic assumptions should be able to settle political debates. It is nonetheless worth noting that, in virtue of the connection between reason and power, Foucault's hermeneutics of suspicion will always lend itself to the unending critique of positive normative principles. Although such a critical attitude certainly has its merits, one might wonder whether it allows for a concrete enough conception of freedom that could enable critical theory to move into praxis. Rather than imagining alternative political arrangements, it seems that Allen's

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this "neoliberal" reading of Foucault, see "Can We Criticize Foucault?" in *Jacobin*, 2014, online.

metanormative contextualism is more well-suited for the individual task of changing our own subjectivities, or as Foucault once put it, changing “our relationship to ourselves” (Cook 2018, p. 141). The apparently muted political potential of critical theory is concerning, as Allen herself thinks that critical theory ought to provide routes to both reform and more widespread social change, writing:

[C]ritical theory has to be open to both kinds of social transformation — not just reforms, whether radical or not, but also radical social change — and it has to be careful not to prejudge the outcome of such radical transformations, for to do so would necessarily be to presuppose that our own historical form of life is not only superior to all that came before it but also unsurpassable, that it constitutes the end point of history. (Allen 2016, p. 188)

Although Allen thinks that broadening Enlightenment’s normative horizons leaves open the possibility for radical social change, it is unclear how one could decide which radical direction to take in light of the deep skepticism of positive political ideals that her view entails. Again, I think this skepticism is valuable insofar as it (1) prevents us from positing utopian, teleological progress narratives, and (2) foregrounds the importance of historicizing and contextualizing the situation we find ourselves in. The one ideal Allen does explicitly formulate is a that of freedom, which she takes to be the normative inheritance of the Enlightenment. Yet, metanormative contextualism seems to require that critical theory only work with a negative idea of freedom — as the avoidance of domination and catastrophe — rather than positive formulations of freedom, which political realities often seem to demand. In Chapter Three, I will ultimately defend Allen’s negativistic conception of freedom. In this section, however, I have hoped to raise some concerns about the abandonment of positive political ideals.

My objections thus far may be taken as a concern for how metanormative contextualism can ground substantive political action. At this point, I would like to consider how Allen's conception of epistemic humility differs from Habermas' notion of fallibilism. Allen takes great care to historicize the concepts of history, reason, and progress so as to avoid the Eurocentrism found in the quasi-transcendental account of dialogical reasoning developed by Habermas. Both conceptually and in practice, however, it is unclear how Allen's notion of epistemic humility differs from Habermas' fallibilism. For example, recall that Habermas argues that practical reasoning must occur through dialogue. In making this point, Habermas attempts to avoid the metaphysical foundationalism and transcendental orientation of Kant's moral philosophy, which suggests individuals can, on their own, reason to moral truths. For Allen, too, reasoning is a kind of communicative practice that occurs in social space. This points to the functionally similar orientation of Habermas' and Allen's approaches: reasoning about norms must occur through honest and open dialogue between individuals.

Of course, Allen points out that Habermas' method of rational reconstruction and his conception of modernity is Eurocentric. But if the Habermasian approaches dialogue with an open mind and with the conviction that one may be wrong, it is unclear how this differs from Allen's plea to approach dialogue with an openness to having one's normative horizons challenged. The metanormative contextualist may respond that epistemic humility requires an active problematization of one's own point of view — but Allen fails to demonstrate how this explicitly plays out as a subject engages in intercultural dialogue. And again, the active problematization of one's own point of view does not seem that different from reflexivity, self-criticism, and a conscious openness to the other. Even if there is a difference, Habermas would likely agree with

Allen that the active problematization of one's worldview is a worthwhile fallibilistic practice. For these reasons, Habermas and Allen essentially share the same position on intercultural dialogue.

My final objection has to do with Allen's goal of "decolonizing the normative foundations of Critical Theory," referenced in the subtitle of the text. In spite of her goal of taking critical theory to task for how it reinforces the civilizing mission of the West, Allen opts to ground her own critical theory almost completely in the thought of two Western thinkers, Adorno and Foucault. To be fair, she acknowledges that both thinkers failed to take seriously the problem of imperialism and Eurocentrism in Western philosophy (Allen 2016, p. 200). Despite this, she fails to consider how this fact might implicate their own projects. For example, Adorno locates the origins of reason in ancient Greece, exemplified in *The Odyssey* (Adorno 1947/1972, p. 43; Cook 2018, p. 154), while Foucault's genealogical project ultimately serves to draw a deep historical thread between modern disciplinary discourses and the ancient Christian practices of penance and confession (Foucault 1978, p. 113-4). In short, both Adorno and Foucault fail to consider how real, material relations between the West and its (post-)colonial counterparts play a role in the development of Western discourses. This certainly does not imply that the theoretical resources of Adorno and Foucault cannot be used in service of decolonizing critical theory, and many postcolonial thinkers do draw heavily upon Marxist and post-structural thinkers (for example, Edward Said was heavily influenced by Foucault's conception of discourse). But Allen's failure to critique the palpable Eurocentrism in the work of Adorno and Foucault, along with her failure to substantively engage with postcolonial thinkers, runs counter to her goal of fully and completely coming to terms with the connection between Western philosophy and Western colonialism.

Unsurprisingly, many postcolonial thinkers foreground this concern for the implicit Eurocentrism found in Western discourse. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues



that postcolonial writers outside of the West are better off writing in their native tongues. Language serves not just as a means of communication, he argues, but also as a carrier of culture. Since the cultural history of non-Western subjects is not rooted in the colonial language, colonial languages “are only a means of communication [for non-Western subjects, that is] ... It is not a carrier of their culture” (wa Thiong’o 1986, p. 13). In intercultural communication, using languages that are historically associated with colonialism might function to prevent non-Western subjects from fully communicating the rich normative dimensions of their lifeworlds. If the vestiges of colonialism can be said to exist even on the level of language, then surely Allen should more fully account for the explicit Eurocentrism found in the works of her ideological forefathers.

In light of this point, I would like to reframe Allen’s project within the broader context of philosophical social theory. *The End of Progress*, in my reading, is not a text about developing a new critical theory by engaging postcolonial criticism. It is only tangentially a text about decolonizing the normative foundations of critical theory. Rather, Allen’s project is an attempt to find normative grounds for critical theory in light of her commitment to (1) the problematization of reason and (2) the antifoundationalist, contextualist epistemologies/ethics of Adorno and Foucault that follow.

In this chapter, I have summarized the critical theories of Adorno, Foucault, and Allen. I have also attempted to raise several objections to Allen’s position of metanormative contextualism, including: its lack of substantive political content, its functional indistinguishability from Habermas’ dialogical approach to intercultural communication, and its lack of engagement with postcolonial studies. Despite these flaws, I think that Allen’s overall attempt to foreground the role of genealogical problematization in critical theory is successful. Moreover, this theoretical orientation is successful in decolonizing critical theory, even if she fails to utilize postcolonial

resources to accomplish task. In the next chapter, I adopt many features of Allen's metanormative contextualism.

### Chapter 3: The Political Turn

In this final chapter, I will continue to explore a number of the tensions within contemporary critical theory that I raised in the previous chapter. I do not intend on answering all of the questions that have been raised; rather, my primary goal is to resolve some of the aforementioned problems and lay the groundwork for future projects in critical theory. Further, I hope to explicitly connect critical theory to political action. I will begin by returning to my objection that Amy Allen's notion of "epistemic humility" is functionally the same as Jürgen Habermas' notion of "fallibilism," and will explain why this is not a problematic result. I will then consider the relation between postcolonial and critical theory in light of my reframing Allen's project as an attempt to ground critical theory in antifoundationalist accounts of history and reason, rather than as an attempt to decolonize critical theory. Finally, I will conclude the essay by attempting to respond to my objection concerning critical theory's ability to ground political action by foregrounding the explicitly political roots of postcolonial theory, and by taking up Adorno's negativistic theory of progress as the avoidance of catastrophe. Further, I will attempt to show that by "politicizing" critical theory — by bringing it to bear on the existing political problems of our time — we can pursue political action in the hopes of achieving progress.

#### *Fallibilism and Epistemic Humility in Intercultural Dialogue*

In the previous chapter, I argued that Allen's approach to intercultural dialogue, which she calls epistemic humility, does not differ functionally from Habermas' approach to intercultural dialogue, which I have referred to as fallibilism. Habermas argues that the transcendental-pragmatic moral principles inherent in communicative discourse require that moral reasoning occur on the basis of honest dialogue between subjects who are open to the possibility that they

may be wrong. Despite Allen's criticisms of how Habermas grounds his conception of normativity, her own approach to intercultural dialogue, I have argued, is quite similar to that of Habermas. Allen argues that applying the method of genealogical problematization to one's own cultural and normative inheritance can cultivate a kind of "epistemic humility," in which the subject gains a critical distance from their own normative lifeworld. This enables the subject to fully consider alternative normative viewpoints, allowing for a greater possibility that one's own normative horizons may shift through dialogue. This process, Allen believes, allows individuals to more thoroughly consider the arguments of their intercultural interlocutors.

Whether Habermasian fallibilism or epistemic humility, the takeaway for both thinkers is the same: reasoning about norms must occur through honest and open dialogue between individuals. Further, apart from Habermas' own failure to problematize communicative rationality, it is unclear why the Habermasian subject cannot engage in an active problematization of their worldview. In this way, Allen's genealogical method and the epistemic humility it produces are reconcilable with Habermasian fallibilism. As I said in the last chapter, the reflexivity and self-criticism involved in Habermas' discourse ethics serves the same function as epistemic humility in Allen's approach: both approaches cultivate an openness to having one's normative horizons challenged. Allen thinks her approach is better, since it lacks the developmentalist understanding of communication found in Habermas' method of rational reconstruction. Because of this *metanormative* Eurocentrism, Allen writes that the Habermasian interlocutor "can never be sure she is disagreeing with the content of [her interlocutor's] views for good reasons or dismissing them out of hand because she views their adherents as developmentally inferior..." (Allen 2016, p. 75). I am unsure about the extent to which the metanormative Eurocentrism of the Habermasian theorist might figure into actual intercultural dialogue, but I am attuned to Allen's concern. And

since her position is functionally the same as Habermas', it is unclear how any latent Eurocentrism in the thinking of Western subjects may be avoided, even with the practice of genealogical problematization. Habermas himself questions the extent to which methods like genealogical problematization can create the critical distance between oneself and one's normative lifeworld:

Participants can distance themselves from norms and normative systems that have been set off from the totality of social life only to the extent necessary to assume a hypothetical attitude toward them. Individuals who have been socialized cannot take a hypothetical attitude toward the form of life and the personal life history that have shaped their own identity. (Habermas 1990, p. 104)

Allen's commitment to the Foucauldian belief that an individual's identity is deeply informed by the lifeworld that one inhabits suggests that Allen would willingly concede this point about the limits of genealogical problematization. Ultimately, I think that the inability to know if or when one has overcome one's own Eurocentric biases, or normative biases more generally, is unavoidable.

At this point, however, we may shift the focus away from the potential Eurocentrism in either theorist's position, and conclude this discussion by considering the pragmatic necessity of intercultural dialogue. That Habermas and Allen share the same functional approach to intercultural dialogue suggests a shared, underlying commitment to the belief that dialogue ought to involve humility, fallibilism, and an openness to the other's point of view. This shared commitment also suggests that when it comes to intercultural dialogue, the careful critical theorist has no functional alternative. In fact, Habermas' insightful point that practical reasoning must occur through dialogue should also be applied to Allen's method of genealogical problematization. That is, Habermas would say that Allen's own method of genealogical problematization, which

cultivates epistemic humility, is best accomplished through dialogue rather than through monological thinking. Finally, I should also note that humility is different from uncritically accepting the interlocutor's position; such an approach would be dangerous for the same reason that closed-mindedness is. The subject engaged in dialogue should problematize both their own point of view and that of their interlocutor, and proceed with normative deliberation from there. Fallibilism and the cultivation of epistemic humility — through the problematization of both one's own and the interlocutor's point of view — is the only legitimate and responsible starting point for intercultural dialogue.

I will now briefly consider an example of how intercultural dialogue might fruitfully occur in the vein of Habermas and Allen. The first essay in Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* is addressed directly to the reader, a hypothetical tourist in Kincaid's native Antigua. In an explicitly accusatory tone written in the second-person, Kincaid argues that the tourism and vacation industry in the "Third World" is largely premised upon the aestheticization of poverty, and that it is necessarily extractive and exploitative. The feeling of boredom in everyday life prompts vacation and travel to tourist destinations, and leads you, the reader, "to being a person marveling at the harmony (ordinarily, what you would say is backwardness) and the union these other people (and they are other people) have with nature" (Kincaid 1988, p. 16). Kincaid goes on to point out the Eurocentric attitude that often accompanies such travel, writing about "that joyful thought that will swell inside you: their ancestors were not clever in the way yours were and not ruthless in the ways yours were, for then would it not be you who would be in harmony with nature and backwards in that charming way?" (ibid)

I read this critique of the tourist industry as a harsh yet genuine incitement to rational engagement, an attempt at problematizing the aesthetic and normative lifeworld of the tourist.

Though the accusatory tone might seem like a counterproductive attack against the Western subject, it draws out an important feature of intercultural dialogue that I have discussed: the lack of overlap between normative lifeworlds can make cross-cultural critique hard to swallow. In this way, Kincaid calls upon the Western reader to interpret her claim with a kind of epistemic humility. And surely, in a process of intercultural dialogue, the Western reader may respond with her own defense of the tourism industry. However, Kincaid goes on to note that the problematic relation between the tourist and the native is not a personal one. Situating the native by appealing to the banality of everyday life across the world, she says:

For every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere. Every native everywhere lives a life of crushing banality and boredom ... every native would like a tour. But some natives — most natives in the world — cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. (Kincaid 1988, p. 18)

In this paragraph, Kincaid claims that the impulse to travel is universal (this invocation of universality runs contrary to the theoretical assumptions of many postcolonial theorists, which I will describe later, but Kincaid herself is not wedded to a strong philosophical position), but only wealthy subjects have access to tourism. Kincaid also describes how tourism to postcolonial societies relies on other extractive and exploitative industries. This exploitative relationship forged by predominantly Western tourists, then, is itself only a contingent material relation that is grounded in the recent history of neocolonialism. The reader — the Western tourist — is called to respond to the ethical orientation of Kincaid's charges, and is simultaneously made aware of both the exploitative tourist-native relationship and the contingent, neocolonial relations between wealthy nations and those on the economic periphery.

Later in *A Small Place*, Kincaid goes on to problematize the position of native Antiguan, too, taking particular aim at corrupt elected officials who help prop up neocolonial industries. More broadly, though, Kincaid notes that the relationship between native Antiguan and formerly colonial powers is no longer that of master and slave. The end of slavery means that native Antiguan are now in a position in which they, too, can be expected to critically problematize their own position just like the Western subject, who previously held a position of complete power:

Of course, the whole thing is, once you cease to be a master ... you are just a human being, and all the things that adds up to. So, too, with the slaves. Once they are no longer slaves, once they are free, they are no longer noble and exalted; they are just human beings. (Kincaid 1988, p. 81)

As I understand it, by describing slaves as “noble,” Kincaid implies that people in positions of complete subjugation cannot be expected to reason out of their oppressed condition. The main point, however, is that in the post-slavery, postcolonial situation that Kincaid describes, native Antiguan are in a position to critically engage and problematize their own normative lifeworlds.

I have analyzed Kincaid’s creative nonfiction piece *A Small Place* in order to animate Allen and Habermas’ approach to intercultural dialogue. However, I should make the cautionary note I do not intend for the reader to take *A Small Place* to be an example of postcolonial *theory*, which I will consider shortly. Rather, I have simply appealed to Kincaid’s text as a case study in intercultural dialogue. This being said, the dialectic shape that Kincaid’s criticism of tourism takes is an example of how intercultural exchanges may take Eurocentrism to task while also maintaining a critical, dialogical structure that requires the genealogical problematization of both interlocutor’s points of view. As I have argued, epistemic humility and fallibilism are the most readily available and thorough approaches to intercultural dialogue. Allen and Habermas’



functional similarity on this topic points to the necessity of an approach to intercultural communication rooted in openness, reflexivity, and the active problematization of one's own normative horizons.

### *The Postcolonial*

In the last chapter, I argued that Allen's project should not be framed primarily as an attempt to develop critical theory through an engagement with postcolonial theory. Nor is it mainly about decolonizing critical theory, though I think it does largely accomplish this task through the method of genealogical problematization. Rather, Allen's main goal is to find normative grounds for critical theory on the basis of a postmetaphysical, antifoundationalist, Adornian/Foucauldian approach to history, progress, and reason. I read her project in this way for the following reasons. First, Allen fails to thoroughly engage with postcolonial theory. Second, she roots her project in the thought of two European thinkers, Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault, and fails to fully consider how their projects relied on Eurocentric metanarratives. Finally, although Eurocentrism in Western philosophical thought is one of Allen's primary targets, it seems that Allen is concerned with Eurocentrism only insofar as it figures into developmentalist conceptions of history and progress. Since Adorno and Foucault (from whom Allen draws her theoretical resources) take critical stances toward developmentalist narratives of history, Allen's critique of Eurocentrism is only a tangential result of her broader postmetaphysical project.

In this section, I will briefly explore the concepts of universality and genealogy within postcolonial theory in an attempt to demonstrate the merits of Allen's method of genealogical problematization. I also do this to point to the rich theoretical merit of postcolonial theory. At its core, postcolonial theory shares several of the same assumptions that Allen invokes to ground her

metanormative contextualism. To some readers, this may be obvious. For example, the Subaltern Studies Group (led by Gayatri Spivak) is deeply influenced by poststructural thinkers like Foucault and Derrida, and some theorists within the postcolonial tradition argue that the Subaltern Studies Group simply (though fruitfully) applies poststructural thinking to non-Western locales, serving to supplement poststructuralism with a local, non-Western valence. Kwame Anthony Appiah famously argued that the “post-” in “postmodernism” (roughly the same as “poststructuralism”) is essentially the same as the “post-” in “postcolonial,” implying that postcolonial theorists largely make use of the same critiques of historical metanarratives that are central to poststructuralism (Appiah 1991). This being said, I should also mention that debates about the place of poststructuralism and Marxism are ongoing within postcolonial studies, and that the theoretical orientations within postcolonial theory vary widely. Lastly, I should note that there is a problematic tendency to relegate postcolonial theory to the footnotes and subsections of critical philosophical work, and I hope that future projects set out to more adequately approach the task that Allen claims to begin in *The End of Progress*. Again, in this section I hope to gesture toward the use of genealogical problematization in postcolonial theory. Finally, through my brief and admittedly simplistic consideration of a few postcolonial thinkers, I also suggest that postcolonial theories have a decidedly political orientation that can inform critical theory more generally. So far in this essay, I have considered the philosophical foundations of critical theory without much attention to its political potential. For example, my exploration of metanormative contextualism up to this point has mostly focused on the “metanormative.” Through an engagement with postcolonial theory, and more specifically through a consideration of its origins in the necessity to overcome colonial oppression, I hope to foreground the political nature of critical theory. I do not intend to suggest that Habermas, Allen, or other Western thinkers are unable make this political turn. Nonetheless,

I think postcolonial theory offers substantial resources that facilitate this turn. Before I consider these resources, though, I begin with a consideration of the theoretical roots of postcolonial theory.

To begin, postcolonial theorists are generally deeply skeptical of the way that the concept of universality has been deployed. In his essay “Colonialist Criticism,” Chinua Achebe demonstrates how many Anglophone literary critics of African literature in the 20th-century equate the notion of ‘universality’ with Eurocentric themes and settings. To get at something ‘universal’ within the Western academy is to simply confirm the normative frameworks and narratives that already speak to the Western imagination. Achebe writes that Western authors are “automatically informed by universality,” while non-Western authors “must strain to achieve it” (Achebe 1988, p. 57). Achebe avoids a wholesale critique of the concept of universality itself, and instead takes issue with how Western authors alone are taken to have access to universality through literary works. Other theorists, such as Chandra Mohanty, are more skeptical of the concept of universality in itself. This poststructural orientation comes to the fore in Mohanty’s analysis of Western feminism. Mohanty argues that when Western feminists attempt to carry their critiques of patriarchy over to non-Western contexts, they fail to recognize the heterogeneities in the lives of women around the world and thereby enforce an abstract, impossible conception of non-Western womanhood:

An analysis of “sexual difference” in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogenous notion of what I call “Third World Difference” — that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppressed most if not all the women in these countries. (Mohanty 1984, p. 335)

Third World Difference is reductive because it flattens the cultural diversity of women's experiences, and correspondingly, fails to confront patriarchy in its different forms. Mohanty goes on to argue that there is "no universal patriarchal framework which [feminist] scholarship attempts to counter and resist — unless one posits an international male conspiracy or a monolithic, ahistorical power hierarchy" (ibid). Although it may be correct to say that patriarchy exists across societies on a general level, it is incorrect to approach feminist critique with an assumption of what patriarchy, or even womanhood, looks like across those societies.

For these reasons, feminist critique must be historically and culturally situated. In the vein of Allen's method of genealogical problematization, Mohanty believes that male violence must be "theorized and interpreted within specific societies" in order to both understand and overcome it (ibid, 339). Within the context of intercultural dialogue, this suggests that Western interlocutors may maintain a critical eye toward patriarchy and its analogous forms in non-Western society, but with an attention to specific cultural features that constitute patriarchy in a given place. In my view, this requires an attunement to the cultural specificity of the category of 'woman', along with a kind of epistemic humility and openness to the fact that what may be understood as patriarchal in one society or historical moment might not in another. For example, although the hijab is often taken to be a symbol of oppression since it is institutionally mandated for women and legally enforced in many Islamic countries, the hijab has also historically been employed by anti-colonial movements to resist colonial surveillance (e.g., in the Algerian Revolution). Understanding the history of the hijab provides the unfamiliar Western feminist with a subtler reading of its symbolic meaning. Conversely, a critical problematization of cultural norms within a non-Western context allows women to conceive of freedom from patriarchy in new ways. For example, recent strides in women's rights in Saudi Arabia are evidence of an ongoing process of self-scrutiny (in terms of

historical problematization), intercultural dialogue, and reevaluation of patriarchy on the part of Saudi women. Ultimately, an attunement to cultural specificity opens up the possibility for cross-cultural solidarity.

Having described some of the ways that postcolonial theory overlaps with Allen's metanormative contextualist position, I would now like to briefly point out one of the central features of postcolonial theory: its explicitly political orientation. Although critical theory on the whole may be understood as a form of political critique, postcolonial theory historically emerged out of colonial societies where the imperative to overthrow oppressive regimes was seen as a moral and existential necessity. In his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon theorizes what it means to be a colonized subject and how the fight for decolonization must proceed. To be colonized is to be dehumanized and gazed upon as an object, to be fabricated into a "thing" rather than recognized as human. Colonization and imperialism involve the constant subjection of colonized peoples to violence, checkpoints, demonization, epistemic delegitimization, condescension, etc. "With his back to the wall, the knife at his throat ... the colonized subject" is incited to respond to the inescapably brutal political situation he finds himself in (Fanon 1963, p. 20).

Fanon's response to colonial oppression is an unflinching commitment to violent resistance: "The colonized subject discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation" (ibid, p. 21). Though this response is particularly tailored to colonialism, the postcolonial situation that followed the era of decolonization — in which postcolonial theory itself was explicitly theorized — is no less political. Arif Dirlik criticizes some postcolonial theorists, such as those in the Subaltern Studies Group, by arguing that their deeply poststructural orientation produces a pessimism that prevents

them from forging more explicit, large-scale political analyses, and Appiah warns of this same tendency (Dirlik 1994, p. 335; Appiah 1991, p. 353). Although I think Dirlik's heavy appeal to structuralism is a step too far (this particular debate is not worth hashing out in this essay), he recognizes the contributions of Subaltern theorists for their incisive application of poststructural theory to the postcolonial context. He argues for a synthesis of this rather abstract philosophical approach with a more scaled-up sociological and cultural analysis aimed at political and economic institutions. This, in my view, helps reinforce and reclaim the explicitly political potential of postcolonial theory. Dirlik problematizes the local focus of the term 'postcolonial' by situating it within the framework of global capitalism and the exploitative, neocolonial relations that structure social life around the world. For example, Dirlik locates this extractive relationship in the transnational corporation and the outsourcing of production, which function to both connect (and in a sense unify) territories around the globe, while also fragmenting and decentering the capitalist mode of production (Dirlik 1994, p. 349). Wanting to avoid the error of "render[ing] into problems of subjectivity and epistemology concrete and material problems of the everyday world," Dirlik's turn to economic analysis helps foreground the material, political stakes of critical theory (ibid, p. 356).

Ultimately, I think that the poststructural position and the turn to economic analysis are reconcilable. In response to Dirlik, I think critical analyses of subjectivity are necessary, for the problematization of our own normative lifeworld and its psychological correlates facilitates an openness to reimagining both the self and political life. After all, a consideration of exploitative economic relations helps further situate and historicize forms of social life around the world today in a way that helps us better understand ourselves and the structural forces that impede freedom on a local level. However, I understand Dirlik's concern for how an incessant focus on

“subjectivity and epistemology” can prevent one from ever making this turn to the criticism of material social and economic institutions. Dirlik’s argument gestures toward a fruitful reconfiguration of postcolonial theory that enables us to consider the local and the subjective, along with the broader political forces that have global reach. In this way, postcolonial theory helps cultivate a political turn within critical theory. With an understanding of both the theoretical value and political roots of postcolonial theory, I will now conclude my discussion with a final consideration of critical theory’s ability to ground political action.

*Political Ideals and the Specter of Catastrophe*

With a heightened attention to the political stakes and potentials of postcolonial and critical theory, I now return to the question of how metanormative contextualism can ground political action. In the last chapter, I raised the concern that the metanormative contextualist is unable to ground any positive political ideals. This is concerning insofar as it may in turn suggest that metanormative contextualism cannot ground political action at all. In this section, I will argue that positive political ideals are not necessary for grounding political action.

First, I should reiterate that the utopian rhetoric of “liberation” and “emancipation” on a global level is dismissed by Habermas and Allen alike, and for good reason. The idea of global liberation suggests that once liberation is achieved, political problems will have largely been solved and history will have reached an endpoint. This is the same teleological understanding of history found in traditional Marxism, which, as we have seen, is undermined by critics of historical metanarratives and metaphysical understandings of history. Beyond the ideal of liberation, however, Foucault’s point that any discursive regime must necessarily have exclusionary effects seems to undermine the metanormative contextualist’s ability to delineate any positive political

ideals — let alone large-scale, structural changes that critical theory seems to hope for. Further, Allen notes that Adorno was deeply skeptical of individuals' ability to imagine positive political ideals under the conditions of late capitalism, because of its distorting effects (Allen 2016, p. 196). This skepticism is nonetheless accompanied by Adorno and Foucault's affirmation of reason's ability to critique itself and to reflexively improve upon the Enlightenment conception of freedom. Ultimately, Allen seems to adopt Adorno's negativistic conception of progress as the avoidance of catastrophe, for this position reflects the kind of epistemic humility and openness that metanormative contextualism requires. This negativistic conception denies the formulation of positive ideals, but also engenders political pessimism. On the one hand, it is regrettable that metanormative contextualism allows for almost no prospect of political hope, and for no adoption of positive political ideals. However, in light of my discussion about the material, political impulse behind postcolonial theory, I would like to point out that a similar political impulse can ground action in the hopes of avoiding catastrophe. In the absence of political ideals, avoiding catastrophe and combatting the systems that produce catastrophe are the best we can hope for.

Recall Fanon's description of how the colonized subject is moved to action: "With his back to the wall, the knife at his throat ... the colonized subject ... discovers reality," and is moved to transform it (Fanon 1963, p. 20-1). In the realization of colonial oppression (surely catastrophic in nature), there is the imperative to act, for oppression entails both suffering and a lack of freedom. That is, in the case of the colonized subject, the consistent threat and application of physical violence on the part of the colonist makes armed resistance legitimate where it otherwise might not be. Moving beyond colonialism, on a first-order normative level (within the United States, for example), a politics rooted in the avoidance of catastrophe will function to satisfy normative commitments to life, freedom, etc. In the face of impending catastrophe, the prospect of avoiding



catastrophe is therefore enough to ground political action. This is because we may pinpoint the sources of impending catastrophe and identify ways to combat those sources. In the case of Fanon's colonized subject, the source of oppression is immediately apparent and the threat of physical violence makes armed resistance legitimate. Indeed, the source of impending catastrophe often can be made apparent. For example, take the most immediate threat to human existence: global climate change. It is at this point widely accepted that without a large-scale transition to non-pollutant, renewable energy, many parts of the world will become uninhabitable within a few decades. Already, many people need not look far to see the catastrophic effects of the widespread, industrial use of fossil fuels. On a local, national, and international level, then, there must be a push away from pollutant forms of energy (especially against those institutions that use pollutant energy on a large, industrial scale, as these institutions accelerate climate change to the greatest degree) toward those that will mitigate the impending effects of climate change. This push can exist both on the levels of policy and activism. Consider, for example, the 2016 Standing Rock protests against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline on indigenous land in North Dakota, which involved protestors physically occupying the space upon which the large oil pipeline was to be built. The focus of the protest was to protect indigenous land and to prevent the construction of the pipeline, which posed threats to the environment (both the immediate threat of the oil pipeline affecting the region's drinking water, and the broader threat of climate change). In this case, the threat of the continued erasure of indigenous culture and of climate change legitimized the peaceful but intentionally disruptive protest. In summary, the threat of impending catastrophe serves as grounds for political action.

Of course, critical theory must also connect the immediate sources of catastrophe to broader structural systems. The threat of climate change would not exist without industrial

pollution, perpetrated by multinational corporations that lobby against environmental regulation. These entities must therefore also be combatted, through internal reform, where possible, as well as through explicit political opposition — on the level of policy and activism. This in turn opens up the space for a broader (but culturally and historically situated) critique of the economic and political ideologies that legitimate corporate lobbyism, or the ideal of unchecked, infinite growth through the extraction of natural resources. This example shows how a politically-contextualized materialist analysis has, in the current global scheme, a definite place within the metanormative contextualist framework. Of course, large-scale structural transitions that are shown to be legitimate means of avoiding catastrophe or oppression should themselves be problematized and scrutinized. If Foucault is correct, any structural change will entail new problems and new forms of exclusion, for this is the nature of discourse. However, this kind of problematization is not nihilistic. Rather, it lends itself to a critical self-awareness that may be used in the service of combatting catastrophe and its correlates — the domination of subjectivities, totalitarianism, and oppressive violence. In our postmetaphysical situation, we should welcome the realization that what works now might not work later, and that new problems will arise that require further adjustments, whether small scale or structural.

In this chapter, I have hoped to conclude my discussions of the problems raised in this essay. I pointed out the need for epistemic humility and fallibilism in the realm of intercultural dialogue, gestured toward the value of postcolonial theory in understanding and reconfiguring the normative foundations of critical theory, and attempted to “politicize” critical theory by pointing to the political roots, meanings, and material realities of catastrophe and oppression. I conclude, now, with a final reflection on the question of progress.

I have argued against teleological narratives of progress, since they depend on metaphysical understandings of history and suggest that political struggle will one day come to an end. Similarly, I have rejected the view that there is a “universal” way that the world should be (e.g., universal claims about which social arrangements are the best ones across cultures and time periods, or universal claims about the good life), both for this view’s utopian sensibility and because of the Foucauldian insight that any discursive regime comes with its own exclusionary effects. The method of genealogical problematization therefore leaves us with little room to develop positive political ideals. Does this preclude the hope for progress? I do not think so. Although the rhetoric of progress through “liberation” or “emancipation” should not be tied to utopian ideals about society, progress can be achieved, contextually, through the avoidance of catastrophe. We may therefore strive to “liberate” ourselves within a specific, contextualized space, from the material and discursive conditions which are revealed to hurdle us toward catastrophic ends. Through this process, progress is possible. Of course, a sustained problematization of (1) what is meant by “catastrophe,” and (2) the existing institutions and normative assumptions that facilitate catastrophe is necessary and should be pursued through the practice of dialogue. Indeed, this negativistic conception of progress compels us to continually reassess our normative lifeworld and our material conditions in the hopes of securing a less disastrous situation, one which is more just and more conducive to human flourishing and happiness. To the extent that we are able to identify catastrophe, we have the grounds to act to prevent it, and to replace its sources with alternatives. The Sisyphean task laid out by critical theory precludes hope for an end to political struggle. But in making clear the political stakes of the here and now, critical theory helps us realize and confront the catastrophic condition we find ourselves in, dire as it may be.

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