

55th Frank Fraser Potter Memorial Lecture in Philosophy - Amy Allen

MATT STICHTER: Good evening, everyone. My name is Matt Stichter. I'm a Professor of Philosophy in the School of Politics, Philosophy, and Public Affairs here at WSU. My colleagues and I would like to welcome you all to the 55th Memorial Lecture celebrating the Potters and their legacy.

For those of you who it's the first time here, this annual Memorial Lecture series serves to commemorate the accomplishments of Professor Frank Potter, and his wife Irene, and what they gave to WSU and the community. Frank Potter was actually the first philosopher here at WSU, and was instrumental in starting the Philosophy Department here.

In addition, he and his wife Irene regularly hosted students at their home over on B Street for intellectual discussions, for music. They'd play chess. Apparently they'd also get very well-fed. And this intellectual stimulation and generosity on behalf of the Potters really made a deep impact on their students.

Furthermore, another accomplishment of the Potters can be seen in the mentoring that Frank Potter did with his students, because he mentored 10 Rhodes scholars over the course of here at WSU. And this Potter lecture series was actually started and funded by one of their students, Mildred Bissinger. And over the years, people who knew the Potters or know about their legacy have generously donated to help keeping this going now in its 55th year.

And overall, I think this program helped serve some of the university's grand initiatives challenges with respect to social political issues, creating a more equitable and just society. So with that, I'd like to give a quick introduction for Dr. Allen, our 55th memorial Potter lecturer.

She's currently a Professor of Philosophy and Women and Gender and Sexuality Studies at Penn State, where she's also the department chair. Prior to that, she was at Dartmouth College, where she was the parents' distinguished research professor in the humanities. She is well-known for her work in critical theory, in feminist theory, and in political philosophy and theory.

She is the co-editor-in-chief of the journal *Constellations*, which is an international journal of critical and democratic theory. She's also the series editor of the Columbia University Press book series *New Directions in Critical Theory*. And furthermore, she serves as the executive co-director of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.

She's the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including from the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation, the American Association of University Women, the Whiting Foundation, and the NEH. She's also been named as one of the 100 most notable alumni of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University. She's the author of numerous journal articles, book chapters, far too many for me to list here.

But also of special note are the books that she has. One is on *The Power of Feminist Theory-- Domination, Resistance, and Solidarity*. And another is *The Politics of Our Selves-- Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*.

And then tonight, she will be presenting material from her latest book, which is also from Columbia University Press, which I believe just came out in paperback on Amazon. Get yourself a copy after this. And that book is *The End of Progress-- Rethinking the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. So please help me in welcoming Dr. Allen to the stage.

[APPLAUSE]

AMY ALLEN: OK. So before I get started, let me just ask if I do this without the mic, can people in the back hear me or not? Yes? Good, OK. Because I've already got this live stream mic, and I don't want to have to deal with two. So I first just want to say thank you very much to the School of Politics, Philosophy, and Public Affairs for this invitation. It's really a great honor to be joining this incredibly distinguished group of philosophers who've given the Potter lecture.

And I also want to thank Matt Stichter, who has organized the visit and been a great host the last couple of days. I've had a great time meeting with colleagues and students in the department. So I'm going to try to keep track of my time here.

So as Dr. Stichter just mentioned, my most recent book-- hang on one second here. Can't figure out how to run my timer. Oh, here we go. OK-- is titled, *The End of Progress*. And that's the topic of my lecture tonight.

There was actually, though, before the book came out, a slight change in the subtitle. Originally, it was going to be, *Rethinking the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, and I changed it. And the actual published title is, *Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. And I mention that because I'm going to start out by talking a little bit about what I mean and what I don't mean by decolonizing.

So this lecture tonight and the book that it's drawn from seeks to contribute in a way that I'm going to spell out in a moment to the project of decolonizing critical theory. But given that both the concepts of critical theory and of decolonizing are contested, I think, and complicated, it's important, I think, to say a few words at the beginning about what I mean by both of these terms.

So the term "critical theory" can refer to a wide variety of theoretical projects and agendas. In its most narrow usage, critical theory refers to the German tradition of interdisciplinary social theory inaugurated in Frankfurt in the 1930s and carried forward today in Germany by such thinkers as Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst, and in the United States by theorists such as Thomas McCarthy, Nancy Fraser, and Seyla Benhabib.

In a more capacious usage, critical theory refers to any politically-inflected form of cultural, social, or political theory that has critical, progressive, or emancipatory aims. So understood in this more capacious way, much, if not all of the work that is done under the banner of feminist theory, queer theory, critical philosophy of race, and post and decolonial theory is also critical theory.

A distinct but related capacious usage of the term refers to the body of theory that is mobilized in literary and cultural studies, otherwise known simply as theory. In this usage, critical theory refers mainly to a body of French theory spanning from post-structuralism to psychoanalysis, and including such thinkers as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Lacan.

Now obviously, there are significant overlaps and cross-fertilizations between these latter two senses, in particular. And my point here is not to attempt to draw hard and fast distinctions between them. Rather, my point is simply to try to map some of the complicated and shifting theoretical terrain on which my project is situated. Because once we at least provisionally have mapped the terrain in this way, it's striking how fraught and contested are the interactions and dialogues between critical theory in the narrow sense and critical theory in these two wider senses of the term.

So although critical theory in this narrow sense, referring to the Frankfurt School tradition of critical social theory, has gone some way toward incorporating the insights of feminist theory, primarily through the work of Fraser and Benhabib, and to a lesser extent, of critical Philosophy of race, particularly through the recent work of Thomas McCarthy, it's a long-running feud with French theory is well known.

Moreover, up to now, critical theory in the narrow sense of that term, the Frankfurt School sense, has largely failed to engage seriously with the insights of queer theory and post and decolonial theory. And I think these last two points are related in so far as French theory and the work of Foucault in particular has been informative for the fields of queer and post-colonial theory.

So I'm starting with this map of the terrain because the project that I'm presenting tonight attempts to work across the divide between these different understandings of critical theory, particularly the divides between the Frankfurt School approach to critical social theory, the work of Michel Foucault, and at least some of the concerns of post and decolonial theory.

The specific aim of the project is to contribute to what I call the decolonization of critical theory in a pretty narrow and specific sense of that term by diagnosing critical theory's problematic reliance on a conception of progress that is vulnerable to powerful objections from post and decolonial theory for grounding its normative perspective.

I also aim to develop an alternative conception of normativity, one that can, I think, address the charge of relativism that is frequently leveled against postcolonial theory. But it's also a

conception of normativity that remains compatible with the critical aims and perspectives of post and decolonial theory.

So in that sense, the sense in which my project is aiming to be a decolonizing project is rather narrow. I don't pretend to develop either a critical theory of post-colonialism, or of decolonization, or something like a fully decolonized critical theory, whatever that might mean. Rather, my aim is much more modest, but in my view, no less important.

Namely, the aim is to decolonize the normative foundations of critical theory by confronting its strategies for grounding normativity with conceptual and political objections drawn at least in part from the literature of post and decolonial theory, and then developing an alternative strategy for thinking about normative foundations in critical theory.

It seems to me that doing this is a necessary first step in order for critical theory in the narrow Frankfurt School sense of that term to be able to enter into productive dialogue with other important contemporary critical theories, including post and decolonial theory, critiques of settler colonialism, and so forth. And in so far as Frankfurt School critical theory has a distinctive and highly fruitful methodology, and a valuable conceptual and normative repertoire, such a dialogue promises to enrich both sides, I think.

So that's just a sort of preface in a way to try to clarify, I hope, how I'm using some of the key terms in the title of my project. The actual title rather than the subtitle, *The End of Progress*, is inspired by Theodore Adorno's lectures on progress, in which the claim that progress occurs only where it comes to an end is a recurring motif.

Though Adorno's particular concerns with claims to progress are somewhat different from mine-- his concerns have to do with the horror of Auschwitz and the threat of nuclear war-- I'm nonetheless in fundamental sympathy with what I take to be the core animating idea of his proposal, namely that jettisoning false ideological readings of history in terms of progress is necessary if we are to make moral or political progress in the future.

In other words, the key idea is to decouple claims about the possibility of progress in the future-- what I call progress as a moral political imperative-- from readings of history as a story of progress, which I call progress as a fact. And fact, there, is in scare quotes because it's obviously when you want to talk about history as a story of progress, that's not an empirical judgment. It's a normative judgment. But I take the term from Tom McCarthy, who talks about what he calls the facts of global modernity, and so that's why I use that language.

As I see it, this way of thinking about progress-- namely a way that tries to decouple the idea of the possibility of progress in the future from reading history as a story of progress-- this way of thinking provides an important corrective to the role that progress plays in contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory, which tends to adopt a broadly speaking, Neo-Hegelian strategy for grounding normativity, by which I mean that it roots its vision of progress as a moral or

political imperative in a claim about progress as a fact, or in other words, in a backward-looking reading of history as a story of progress.

This strategy, I argue, is vulnerable to both conceptual and political objections that I'm going to discuss in a few minutes.

Crucially, however, Adorno's alternative vision that I want to develop a little bit also avoids appealing to foundationless trans or non-historical claims about normative validity in order to ground its future-oriented conception of moral or political progress. And as such, it provides an alternative to Neo-Kantian strategies for grounding normativity, according to which progress is a normatively-dependent concept indexed to a fundamental moral right.

In so doing, Adorno's idea of the end of progress, I think, stays true to the methodological aims of critical theory, and is better able to avoid the conceptual, political, and methodological problems that plague alternative critical theoretical accounts of normativity and of progress.

So that's an overview of what I'm going to try to sketch out tonight. I'm going to start by discussing a little bit the role that the idea of progress has played in some versions of contemporary critical theory.

So first generation critical theorists of the Frankfurt School-- and here I have in mind, particularly Walter Benjamin and also Adorno-- were famously extremely skeptical of the discourse of progress. In his ninth thesis on the Philosophy of history, Benjamin depicts what we call progress as "merely an ongoing catastrophe, hurling wreckage at the feet of the angel of history."

Similarly, in his lectures on the philosophy of history, Adorno notes that the catastrophe of Auschwitz, quote, "makes all talk of progress towards freedom seem ludicrous, and makes the affirmative mentality that engages in such talk look like the mere assertion of a mind that is incapable of looking horror in the face, and that thereby perpetuates it," end quote.

In their skepticism toward the discourse of progress, Benjamin and Adorno we're joined by two other major political thinkers of the 20th century, both of whom deserve to be called critical theorists in the broader sense of that term. And here I have in mind both Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault.

These theoretical critiques of progress, which tended to focus on the highly metaphysical nature of the philosophy of history that undergirded such claims, dovetailed with the political critique of progress in the work of post and anti-colonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, CLR James, Aime Cesaire, and others, all of which uncovered the highly ideological role that claims about progress and development have played, and arguably continue to play, in justifying projects of imperialism and colonialism.

Indeed, the chorus of voices critiquing the idea of progress in the 20th century was so strong that one might think that the concept had been relegated to the dustbin of history. And yet, the idea of progress has been quietly making a comeback in contemporary Frankfurt School critical social theory.

Starting with Jurgen Habermas, critical theorists have reformulated the concept of progress in a more post-metaphysical, deflationary, differentiated, and pragmatic vein in an effort to detach it from the traditional philosophy of history in which it was previously embedded. They have also attempted to respond to the political critique of progress as inherently Eurocentric or imperialistic.

So in the remainder of this paper, what I'm going to try to do is to survey some of the main strategies that critical theorists have employed for rethinking progress, argue that they are still vulnerable to conceptual and political objections, and then drawing on the work of Adorno and also Michel Foucault, sketch out an alternative.

So recent reformulations of the concept of progress are motivated at least in part by the thought that critical theory in some way crucially depends on the idea of progress. Namely, that one cannot be a critical theorist without being committed to some understanding of progress. So before I survey recent reformulations of progress in critical theory, I want to sketch out the general reasons that have been given in support of this claim, and also say a bit more about what I mean by progress. So let me start with progress.

One can talk about progress with respect to many different goals or benchmarks. Given any particular aim or goal that I might have, I can understand myself as getting closer to or further away from attaining-- in other words, progressing or regressing with respect to it. In that sense, I can talk about making progress in my training for a marathon or finishing my book manuscript. And all that I need to make sense of such claims is a clear sense of the standard by means of which progress is being measured.

The traditional discourse of historical progress as it emerged in the European Enlightenment tradition tended, however, to make a much broader claim about the overall advancement of humankind from some primitive or barbaric condition to a more developed, advanced, enlightened, or civilized state.

As Reinhart Koselleck reminds us, the term "progress" as it was used by Kant, for example, quote, "neatly and deftly brought the manifold of scientific, technological, and industrial meanings of progress, and finally, also those meanings involving social morality, and even the totality of history under a common concept," end quote. Traditional notions of progress such as Kant's thus depend on a robust metaphysical idea of the totality of history, and at least posit a point of view from which this can be comprehended, this totality can be comprehended.

Now, I want to emphasize that more recent reformulations of the notion of progress are much less metaphysically ambitious and much more internally differentiated. Although some

defenders of the notion of progress in the critical theory tradition still hold on to the claim that there has been demonstrable progress not only in technical scientific, but also in moral political domains, they nevertheless view these as disaggregated phenomenon.

For Habermas, for example, there is no reason to think that technical scientific progress should lead to moral political progress, or vice versa, much less that progress in either domain should lead to an increase in human happiness. And even within the moral political domain, economic progress may be decoupled from moral progress, moral progress from cultural progress, and so on.

Finally, across all these different domains in the critical theory tradition, progress is understood in a post-metaphysical vein as a contingent historical achievement, the result of human agency, thus subject to reversals and regressions. Still, what I want to try to suggest is that as much as this idea of progress has been kind of stripped of its metaphysical baggage, there's still a core to the idea of progress that is problematic, and plays a problematic role in contemporary critical theory, but I'm going to come to that in a minute.

So two distinct kinds of arguments have been offered for the claim that critical theory needs an idea of progress in order to be genuinely critical. The first argument is that we need an idea of progress toward some goal in order to give us something to strive for politically, in order to make our politics genuinely progressive.

Progress understood in this sense is connected to Kant's famous third question, what may I hope for? In order for a theory to be critical-- so the argument goes-- it must be connected to the hope for some significantly better, more just, or maybe even just less oppressive society. Such hopes served to orient our political strivings. And in order to count as genuine hopes, they must be grounded in a belief in the possibility of progress.

This claim can be defended in a kind of transcendental argument that says whenever a theorist is critical of some existing feature of the social or political world, she must necessarily be presupposing an ideal in light of which she makes that criticism. Hence, she must further be committed to the assumption that achievement of that ideal would constitute some sort of moral or political progress.

The second reason that critical theory is thought to rely on an idea of progress involves a distinct but related kind of transcendental argument. The idea here is that insofar as critical theorists celebrate or cheer on certain political events in their own time, they necessarily commit themselves to viewing those events as better than what came before. And in so doing, they commit themselves to the idea that at least certain features of their social and political worlds are the result of a progressive developmental or historical learning process.

Now, these two arguments are often closely intertwined in ways that I want to discuss in a minute. But for now, I want to highlight that there are actually two distinct conceptions of progress implicit in these two arguments. The first conception is forward-looking, oriented

toward the future. From this perspective, progress is a moral political imperative, a normative goal that we are striving to achieve, a goal that can be captured under the ideal of the good, or of the more just, or maybe even of the less oppressive society.

The second conception is backward-looking, oriented toward the past. It's a way of reading history or thinking about how we should understand history. From this perspective, progress is a judgment about the developmental process that has led up to us, to our current historical moment, a judgment that views our conception of reason, or our moral political institutions, our social practices, or our form of life as the result of a process of sociocultural development or historical learning.

So as I already mentioned briefly, I call the forward looking conception of progress, progress as an imperative, and the backward looking one progress as a fact. Both of these conceptions of progress are obviously deeply bound up with claims about normativity and the possibility of standards or principles that could enable transhistorical normative judgments. And in that sense, they necessarily converge to a certain degree. Although as I said already, I want to try to pull them apart.

Moreover, both of the arguments for why critical theory needs a conception of progress turn on the possibility or actuality of a specific kind of progress. Namely, moral political progress, or we might say more broadly, normative progress, rather than on technical scientific progress or some sort of progress toward happiness overall. And so I'm going to focus on or restrict my focus to normative progress or moral political progress.

I think we can have a conversation about whether normative progress and technological progress can really be pulled apart, but that's something we could talk about in the discussion, if you'd like. In any case, I'm not going to talk about technical progress in what follows.

So in a lot of recent work in recent critical social theory-- and here's my kind of main critical argument-- what I'm calling the backward looking conception of progress as a fact plays a crucial if often unacknowledged role in grounding the normativity of critical theory, and thus in justifying forward looking notions of progress as an imperative.

I think this follows more or less directly from the combination of two commitments on the part of critical theorists. First, the commitment to the idea that the normative perspective of critical theory must be grounded imminently, which means in the actual social world, not in some transcendent conception of pure reason or something like this. And second, the desire to avoid the twin evils of foundationalism and relativism.

So these two commitments are in some tension with one another in as much as the resolution to ground the normative perspective of critical theory within the existing social world somewhat inevitably raises worries about conventionalism or a form of cultural relativism.

And my view is that the broadly speaking Neo-Hegelian strategy for grounding the normativity of critical theory that's favored by critical theorists like Jurgen Habermas and Axil Honneth constitutes an attempt to resolve this tension.

The basic idea is that the normative principles that we find within our social world, as inheritors of a certain kind of European Enlightenment project or the legacy of European modernity, those principles are themselves justified on this view insofar as they can be understood as the outcome of a process of progressive social evolution or sociocultural learning. That is, of a process of progress.

Thus, this conception of normative progress enables critical theory to understand the normative standards that it finds within its existing social world as not merely contingent or arbitrary framework relative standards, but rather as justified in so far as they are the result of a process of historical learning.

So the idea is that this notion of progress kind of enables critical theorists to split the difference between some sort of appeal to pure reason, or a kind of transcendent grounding for critique on the one hand, and a form of conventionalism, or cultural relativism on the other hand. It's by saying, look, we have to take our normative standards from the existing social world. But those are not arbitrary standards because they are the result themselves of a historical learning process that is developmental and progressive. And so therefore, we can take them to be defended, in that sense.

But if that's the case, then this means that the two conceptions of progress that I've delineated, the forward looking conception of progress is an imperative and the backward looking one of progress is a fact, are really closely related, in the sense that the forward looking one is being grounded or justified with reference to this backward looking story.

So on this account, the normative perspective that serves to orient the forward looking conception of progress is itself justified by a backward looking story about how our modern European Enlightenment moral vocabulary and political ideals are developmentally superior to pre-modern principles, and institutions, and ideals.

So this suggests, I think, that at least as far as the idea of progress is used in contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory, these two conceptions of progress cannot be easily pulled apart. It isn't going to be possible for this version of critical theory to hang onto its understanding of progress as a moral political imperative without its commitment to reading European Enlightenment modernity as a progressive developmental process, because that story is how the normativity of critical theory is being secured.

And that suggests further that contemporary critical theory as it's conceptualized and defended by Habermas and some of his followers could only be disentangled from its commitment to progress by also simultaneously rethinking its understanding of normativity.

But so you might be wondering, well, why think that such a disentangling is necessary? I mean, what, after all, is problematic about the idea of what I'm calling progress as a fact, and of the role that this idea is playing and justifying the normativity of critical theory? There are two sorts of objections that are particularly salient here that I want to talk about. The first conceptual, and the second political.

So the conceptual objection turns on the following question. On what basis can we claim to know what counts as progress in our readings of history? Does a judgment about normative progress not presume some knowledge of what counts as the endpoint or goal of historical development? And in that sense, don't all judgments about normative progress either presuppose some independent non-historical context-transcendent normative standard or else collapse into the very conventionalism that they seek to avoid?

So the worry here is that without some kind of independent extra or super historical standard, judgments about progress become irredeemably parochial, not much more than instruments of self-congratulation, so that they're ways of patting ourselves on the back for what we have learned. But unless we're going to posit some kind of transcendent or extra historical standard by means of which those judgment could be made, then they're going to be necessarily circular judgments of self-congratulation. So that's the conceptual objection.

The political objection concerns the entwinement of the idea of progress as a fact with the legacies of racism, colonialism, and imperialism, and their contemporary informally imperialist or neocolonial forms. The idea that the normative ideals of the European Enlightenment are the result of a progressive developmental learning process by means of which modernity emerged out of traditional forms of life is the very same Eurocentric logic by means of which colonialism and the so-called civilizing mission were justified.

In other words, so this objection goes, the language of progress and development is the language of oppression for 2/3 of the world's people. In other words, the notion of historical progress as a fact is bound up with complex relations of domination, exclusion, and silencing of colonized and subaltern subjects.

And I want to emphasize that this is not a kind of guilt by association argument. So the point is not that we have a concept of progress that has kind of accidentally been used to serve colonial or neocolonial ends, and therefore, that all conceptions of progress are suspect.

Rather, the point is that this particular narrative of European modernity as the result of a progressive learning process as developmentally superior to the traditional forms of life that came before it, that very narrative is precisely the same story that was used to justify European colonialism. So I don't think it's like a misapplication of a concept or something. It seems to me it's like intrinsic to the logic of this particular story of progress that it serves to justify a kind of imperial logic. Whether one implemented that logic or not, it has that logic embedded into it.

Now, these two sorts of objections, the conceptual and the political, can and often do come together, particularly in post-colonial critiques of progress that take their cue from Foucault and the idea of the intertwining of power and knowledge. Indeed, there's a way in which the political objection could be viewed as a kind of specific version of the conceptual objection, that is, as a specification of the particular form of self-congratulation that has been endemic to European conceptions of progress.

That said, I think the conceptual objection could also stand on its own. So you might think it's enough of a problem with this idea of progress that it's hopelessly circular. So if you're kind of wary about the political objection, then I think the conceptual objection is pretty powerful, actually, on its own.

So in light of these kinds of objections, one might favor a different strategy for thinking about the relationship between progress and normativity. So that kind of strategy has been advanced by Rainer Forst, who's a Neo-Kantian critical theorist who retains the idea of progress as an imperative, but without relying on a backward looking story about progress as a fact.

His strategy is to articulate a universal moral political standard-- what he calls the basic right to justification-- that's grounded not in a backward looking story about historical progress, but rather in what he characterizes as a free standing account of practical reason.

And then he goes on to argue that progress is a normatively dependent concept in the sense that it's dependent upon a universal normative standard that can provide a clear benchmark for claims about historical progress. So that strategy enables judgments about progress as a fact, but it doesn't rely on them for the justification of its standards.

Now, I'm not going to say that much about that strategy other than to say, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, critical theory, I think, has arrived at this progress narrative as a way of justifying its normative point of view because of its commitment to an imminent form of social criticism that draws its normative standards from the existing social world. And so to my mind, the most powerful objection to this Neo-Kantian strategy is just that it violates that methodological aim of critical theory by appealing to a kind of transcendent pure conception of practical reason.

Now, it's a different conversation to say, well, why should we accept that methodological constraint? I think that's a different story. But I'm trying to operate within what I take to be the methodological constraints of critical theory. And it seems to me that that rules out appealing to some sort of strong transcendent notion of practical reason to solve this problem. So for that reason, I have a different strategy, which I'm now going to try to sketch out.

So in light of these kinds of objections, I want to argue for a different way of disentangling progress as a moral political imperative from progress as a fact. This strategy is not only inspired, as I already said, by Adorno's claim that progress occurs where it ends. It also draws on his attempt to develop a philosophy of history that is neither progressive nor a regressive

[INAUDIBLE] story of decline and fall, and also by his attempt to root his understanding of history in an anti-foundationalist historically situated approach to normativity.

And on these latter two points, I find Adorno's work to be very compatible with Foucault's conception of history and normativity. So really, I'm drawing on both of them to try to develop my own understanding.

So the key to my strategy is to try to get by with a much more contextualist and anti-foundationalist understanding of normativity in order to avoid either appealing to a problematic understanding of progress as a fact or to foundationalist premises to ground the normativity of critique-- that is, to the kind of transcendent understanding of practical reason.

Such a conception, a contextualist and anti-foundationalist conception of normativity could, I think, still enable forward looking aspirations of moral and political progress. But it would also understand all claims to progress as highly provisional, very local and specific, and rooted in a contextualist metaethical or metanormative position, and as such, always standing in need of ongoing genealogical problematization.

Thus, I think that this account could accept the argument, the transcendental argument that one can only be against progress by being for it. This is an argument that Rainer Forst makes, actually, in some of his work. And he says, look, the problem with this post-colonial critique of progress is that it implicitly relies on a certain understanding of progress even as it's rejecting the concept of progress. So there's some kind of internal contradiction involved in it. So Forst says, you can only be against progress by being for it.

And my view is yes, that's true. But you have two very different understandings of progress there. So one can be against progress as a fact, the backward looking story, and still be for progress in the sense of some kind of moral political imperative. But that's not contradictory, because these are two different understandings of progress that can be pulled apart.

So if we accept the idea, this methodological constraint that critical theory is an imminent and reconstructive project that draws its normative content from within existing social reality, and if we want to reject the kind of Neo-Hegelian strategy for the conceptual and political reasons that I've outlined, then I argue that this necessarily pushes us in the direction of a much more contextualist understanding of normativity at the kind of metaethical or metanormative level.

Now, I think the difficult thing about this position that I want to sketch out is how you can maintain it without collapsing into relativism. So I said earlier that the whole appeal of the Neo-Hegelian strategy is that it helps to try to avoid a collapse into relativism. And so I think the hard challenge for my view is how I can adopt this contextualist view without collapsing into relativism.

And on this point, I want to say that I think we have to be really careful to resist the conflation of first order normative theory with meta ethics that's prominent in a lot of the critical theory

literature on normativity. So as I see it, just as particular truth claims can be grounded in a variety of different epistemological positions, normative principles can also be grounded in a variety of metaethical positions, including contextualist ones.

At the same time, working from the other direction, one could argue that critical theory's first order normative commitments to equal moral respect, inclusion, and so forth actually push us in the direction of a more modest and kind of self-effacing metaethical position than either the kind of Neo-Hegelian learning process story or the Neo-Kantian story about practical reason.

So the thought here is that if we start with a kind of provisional normative commitment to equal moral respect, inclusion, and openness to the other, and then we try to think about what kind of metaethical position is most compatible with those commitments, and with our taking of those commitments to be provisional, then what we end up with is what I'm calling a contextualist and epistemically humble metaethical position.

And such a position would acknowledge, as Judith Butler puts it-- and here, she's actually kind of glossing Adorno-- that, quote, "If the human is anything, it seems to be a double movement, one in which we assert moral norms at the same time as we question the authority by which we make that assertion," end quote.

So this kind of metaethical position requires a kind of epistemic humility that I think goes beyond mere fallibilism. It goes beyond the idea that we have to acknowledge the fact that we may turn out to be wrong because it entails an active and ongoing critical problematization of our own point of view in the name of more fully realizing its normative ideals of freedom, equal respect, openness, and inclusiveness, and so on.

So as for the idea of progress as a fact, the backward looking story about progress as a way of reading history, I think the kind of contextualized account of normativity that I just sketched out does, in fact, allow for backward looking claims to progress as a fact. But these wouldn't necessarily be modest claims-- again, very local and contextual claims-- about progress by our lights or for us. That is, progress in light of certain normative standards to which we take ourselves to be committed.

Moreover, although such claims may well be conceptually coherent, according to the position that I've just sketched out, I do think they could still be vulnerable to the kinds of objections about the tendency toward conservative self-congratulation, and even potentially Eurocentrism that I discussed earlier. It would depend on what was being cited as an instance of progress, of course, but I think that could still be a problem.

So I argue that the proper antidote to that tendency to self-congratulation is a different understanding of genealogy and its role within critical theory. As I understand it, genealogy aims neither at the straightforward subversion or debunking of our normative concepts or principles, nor at their straightforward vindication. Rather, it aims at what I have been calling the critical problematization of our normative point of view, where this problematization

requires a combination of both vindicatory and subversive, or progressive and regressive readings of history at the same time.

So the point there is just about what is the point of engaging with history from the point of view of critical theory? So I'm not talking about what historians do or should do in their own work, but just how is history relevant for critical theory? And my claim is that if what we want to do is engage in a critical approach to understanding our own present, it's a mistake to try to reconstruct history as a story of progress, because that leads to this dangerous self-congratulation.

At the same time, we don't want to engage in some sort of romantic nostalgia for some kind of distant past. So we have to avoid collapsing into some kind of subversive reading of history where the whole point is that this romantic nostalgic past was wonderful. And now, everything since then has been a story of decline and fall.

So the idea is to try to think about how we can read history and engage with history in a way that preserves this ambivalence between the progressive than the regressive aspects of it, and brings both of those strands together in the service of a critical problematization of the present.

So the point is to try to, again, from the point of view of critical theory, to reread history in such a way that it allows us to gain a critical distance on our own present. That's what I mean by critical problematization. So it opens up a space for rethinking our present rather than vindicating, or defending it, or rejecting it entirely.

So drawing on Foucault and Adorno then, I argue that the proper scope of problematizing genealogy includes not only the kind of empirical applications or instantiations of our normative ideals, but also the kinds of epistemic violence contained within those ideals themselves. However, in a further reflexive twist, I claim that this problematizing mode of genealogy plays an important role in realizing the kind of genuine respect for an openness to the other that are arguably central to the normative inheritance of the Enlightenment.

Somewhat paradoxically then, I argue that problematizing any and all claims to progress as a fact is actually a way of living up to the normative legacy of modernity, particularly to its notions of freedom, inclusiveness, and equal moral respect.

Now although one might see this as a kind of problematic partial compromise with the idea of progress, or like retaining too much of the original concept, one that would open my approach up to a further decolonization, I want to emphasize that I make no claim to the developmental superiority of this normative inheritance vis-a-vis the normative positions that undergird traditional so-called traditional or non-modern forms of life.

Rather, my point is simply that if we are to draw normativity from within our existing social world, this means that we have to start from where we are, drawing on the normative resources of our form of life. I take it that that's what's meant by thinking about critical theory

as drawing on norms that are immanent to the social world. So we start from where we are, drawing on the normative resources that we find in our form of life.

For those of us who are socialized and educated into Euro-American context, this means drawing on the legacy of Enlightenment thought, though it doesn't mean that we can only draw on that legacy or exclusively draw on that legacy. Nor would I want to claim that only people who are raised in that context are entitled to draw on that legacy. Simply that this is a resource that we find within our form of life or our social world in order to engage and critique, and that's where we start.

Moreover, as I see it, I'm advocating a way of taking up this normative inheritance by transforming it radically from within. Precisely by radicalizing and pushing it to its limits-- sorry-- by radicalizing and pushing to its limits the emphasis on openness and reflexivity, until this becomes a motivation not for defending the superiority of modernity, but rather to borrow a phrase from Rolando Vasquez, for humbling modernity.

The thought here is the following. Assuming that the political objection to the discourse of progress as a fact is persuasive-- and I think that it is-- then accepting the developmental progressive notion of progress as a fact is inconsistent with embodying the value of equal moral respect, because it commits us to viewing some of our fellow global citizens as immature, undeveloped, and hence, not yet capable of autonomous self rule

Genuine respect for and openness to the other thus demands the ongoing critical genealogical problematization of our self-understanding as inheritors of the normative project of the Enlightenment. It requires in other words what Gayatri Spivack has called the ongoing vigilant and persistent critique of what we cannot not want.

So I just have a few brief words in conclusion. That's what I have to say about the overall view that the book lays out. I think that the approach that I sketched out here constitutes a promising way for critical theorists to respond to the post and decolonial critique of the concept of progress.

The approach that I sketched out thinks the normative horizon of modernity not as an ever expanding circle that has by now become global, but rather as a historical a priori that claims universality, but that is internally fractured or fragmented, including but not only by lines of post-colonial difference.

So by disentangling progress as an imperative from progress as a fact, I attempt to disrupt the progressive linear temporality implicit in Frankfurt School critical theory's appeal to conflictual and crisis-ridden, but nonetheless cumulative historical learning processes.

Now, in response to the book, some critics have complained that my approach doesn't actually go far enough, partly because the alternative vision for critical theory that I try to sketch out draws on European thinkers, namely Adorno and Foucault. And because of that, some critics

have suggested that in order to be fully decolonized, critical theory would have to undergo a more radical decolonial turn.

And so I want to just say quickly in closing, respond briefly to that criticism. I think it's true-- and I tried to emphasize this at the outset in explaining what I mean by decolonizing that the aim of my project is actually quite limited. So the aim is not to try to develop a kind of decolonial critical theory, not because I don't think that's a valuable project, but just because that's not my project.

So in that sense, I think that the book could really be understood as a kind of prolegomena or first necessary step to developing a decolonized critical theory rather than a full blown attempt to develop such a theory.

Still, I think one might worry that my approach is too inward-looking, too focused on mining the insights of European thinkers to address the legacies of colonialism, and thus, too committed to a kind of decolonization from within, when you might think that what we need is a more radical decolonization from without. So why, after all, do I turn to Adorno and Foucault rather than to CLR James, or Frantz Fanon, or Enrique Dussel?

By keeping the focus on European thinkers, I think some might worry that I am ultimately just offering a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism, and thus repeating the very gesture that I claim to be criticizing. So I take that concern really seriously.

But I want to say in response-- and here I'm following Walter Mignolo-- that although what we might call the Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism may well be insufficient for the project of fully decolonizing critical theory, this does not mean that it's unnecessary. It may be true that what I have offered and what I just sketched out for you is a largely internal or immanent critique of European critical theory.

Partly, this is a function of my own social, institutional, and intellectual formation as someone who was trained in the critical social theory tradition in institutions of higher learning in the United States and Germany. As I said a few minutes ago, I think we have to start from where we are, and that's my own intellectual formation.

But I think the point of engaging in this kind of immanent critique of the critical theory project is to try to show that even starting from the tradition of European critical theory by compelling critical theory to decenter its own critical perspective, perhaps it can become something else. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]