While it is possible to define Critical Theory narrowly, as the tradition that has grown out of self-conscious reference to the authors of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, postcolonialism, which emerged gradually out of different currents on several continents, is a more diffuse project. For the purpose of this chapter, “postcolonialism” will refer to critical writing that studies and seeks to make sense of the social, political, and cultural legacies of Western imperialism and colonialism. Its prefix reflects the fact that postcolonialism follows anti-colonialism, the struggle against Western imperialism, as well as the thinking that emerged with this struggle, in at least two respects: postcolonialism developed after most countries achieved formal decolonization and seeks to understand this new condition, and it often draws intellectual and political inspiration from the struggle and its leading thinkers, such as Mohandas Gandhi, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and C.L.R. James. Postcolonialism explores how the Western colonial and imperial domination that began in 1492 and ultimately encompassed most of the rest of the globe shaped and continues to shape our world—its social, political, and economic structures, but also the knowledge and identities of colonizers and colonized alike. In so doing, it represents a critical effort to understand one of the fundamental structures of power, knowledge, and identity in the modern world, and is to that extent itself a kind of global critical theory (Kerner 2018).

On this basis, we might imagine Frankfurt School Critical Theory and postcolonialism to be kindred, allied, or overlapping projects. On a methodological level, they have much in common. Both reject traditional humanistic and social scientific claims to produce timeless, perspectiveless knowledge. Instead, both assume that, as Horkheimer and Adorno put it in the 1969 Preface to Dialectic of Enlightenment, truth has a “temporal core” (2002: xi) and that their task is to investigate the complex histories and current relations of power in which they are themselves situated. Both enterprises are accordingly highly reflexive, subjecting their own standpoint to endless scrutiny, asking how it is possible to arrive at knowledge that rises above the forces that produced it. In this pursuit, both enterprises reject traditional disciplinary boundaries, ranging widely across the humanities and social sciences in an effort to achieve as inclusive a view on the past and present as possible, even as both deny that a holistic “view from nowhere” is possible. Finally and most importantly, both see themselves as practical, seeking knowledge not for its own sake but in the name of emancipation, in order to help reverse the blindness, domination, violence, and unreason that have marked our history, from within and in light of which they try think about present predicaments and future possibilities.

Yet despite these affinities and despite the fact that postcolonialism usually appears, along with feminism, anti-racism, queer theory, and others besides, on lists of approaches that...
make up “critical theory” in a broad sense, Critical Theory and postcolonialism have had remarkably little to do with one another. On Critical Theory’s side, this is mainly because it was from its beginnings essentially a European or Euro-American enterprise. While Critical Theorists have sought to critically diagnose modernity as a global condition, they seldom if ever questioned the idea, inherited from the philosophical tradition out of and against which they wrote, that they could do so from modernity’s homeland and most advanced point, the West. On the other side, postcolonial writers, observing this, have more often than not regarded Critical Theory as part of the problem. As Edward Said wrote in a seminal text: “Frankfurt School critical theory, despite its seminal insights into the relationship between domination, modern society, and the opportunities for redemption through art as critical, is stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire” (1993: 278). With many of his allies and followers, Said accordingly took his theoretical cues from elsewhere—mostly, like many of his fellows, from Foucault and others then regarded as the Frankfurt School’s “poststructuralist” rivals.

This chapter seeks to illuminate the contours and deeper reasons for the mostly missed encounter between postcolonialism and Critical Theory. While the Frankfurt School’s lack of interest in or appeal to postcolonial critics can be explained in part by their different locations and objects, Critical Theory’s euramerican focus on the West versus postcolonialism’s on the relations between the West and the rest of the world, they are divided by deeper theoretical and methodological issues. On a first approximation, these could be said to revolve around Critical Theory’s pursuit of a project of universal history as against postcolonialism’s hostility to the very idea of one. Yet this difference turns out to reveal deeper lines of affinity and divergence. As I will show, to the extent that the first generation of Critical Theory pursued this project of universal history negatively, the work of Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno has struck deep resonances with postcolonial authors. These resonances were in turn stilled with Critical Theory’s subsequent shift under Habermas and his successors to a more positive construal of modernity’s legacies and potentials. None of this, however, need stand in the way of a productive dialogue between the two approaches today, as I show in the final section by surveying some promising efforts by scholars working within the Frankfurt School tradition to renew and expand Critical Theory by opening it to postcolonial arguments, approaches, and concerns.

Critical Theory

From its beginnings, Critical Theory was founded on a tension. On the one hand, following in the legacy of Western philosophy, German Idealism, and Marxism, Critical Theory has hankered after a view of the whole to apprehend our global situation in all its elements. On the other hand, the very need to be “critical” arose from its conviction that all historical and contemporary attempts to take a universal perspective, be it in philosophy or in science, were fundamentally compromised, founded on their disavowal not only of their own partiality but, worse still, of their deep implication in structures of irrationality and domination. Even Adorno, for whom “the whole is the false” (1974: 50), shared the aspiration to speak of the contemporary condition as a whole.

Adorno continually reflected on the question of universal history, which, as he put epigrammatically in Negative Dialectics, “must be construed and denied” (1973: 320). This suggestion was more fully developed in a 1964 lecture where he acknowledged his debt to Benjamin’s notion of “negative universal history,” with its unforgettable image of “progress” as a single, mounting catastrophe (2006: 89–98). For Adorno a dialectical understanding of universal history must recognize that modern history constitutes a whole, which today takes the form of Benjamin’s catastrophe, yet at the same time seek to do justice to the particulars
that resist it and provide a glimpse of a redeemed world that would escape it. Such a view of modernity as a negative whole, unified in its tendency to assimilate, dominate, and control, always considered in light of the nonidentical particulars it suppresses and excludes, would turn out to resonate deeply with postcolonial concerns (Vázquez-Arroyo 2008). But neither Adorno nor his colleagues ever thought to consider how this negative universal might appear from a non-Western point of view.

To say that early Critical Theory tended to overlook Western imperialism is not to say that its thinkers were ignorant of it. Bruce Baum (2015) has shown how Horkheimer and Adorno, in their analyses of Nazi as well as American society in Dialectic of Enlightenment, The Authoritarian Personality, and other studies of the 1940s and 1950s, were highly sensitive to the role of antisemitism and racism—two of the most important vectors and legacies of the imperial period—in the ideological and psychological structures of modern unreason and domination, even if their analyses did not extend beyond the West. Through the subsequent decades, Adorno in particular continued to assume a Marxian analysis that naturally encompassed imperialism and neo-imperialism, even if this seldom rose to the surface of his writings. In a 1968 lecture, for instance, he noted that “theories of imperialism have not been rendered obsolete by the great powers’ withdrawal from their colonies” and that capitalism continues to ensure that “human beings in large parts of the planet live in penury” (2003: 116, 121). But the observation comes as an aside, a passing example of the pervasive violence and irrationality of the modern world.

The same could be said of other Frankfurt School thinkers of the period: they were not unaware of the Western domination of the rest of the world that reached its zenith in the age of high imperialism and continues in less conspicuous ways into the present, but saw it as one index among others of the violence, irrationality, and hostility to otherness that characterize modernity as a whole. That modernity, however, remains basically Western. Herbert Marcuse, who chose to remain in the United States after the war and adopted an increasingly militant, revolutionary stance in his later years, may be the exception that proves the rule. In the late 1960s, Marcuse became a fierce critic of imperialism, vehemently opposing the US war in Vietnam and trumpeting the revolutionary potential of Third World liberation struggles. Yet he never dwelled on the specificities or long-term continuities of Western imperialism, or on its deeper significance for non-Western societies.

This configuration shifted with the disappearance of the School’s founding generation and the passing of the torch first to Jürgen Habermas and his contemporaries, then to their successors. In the shrinking world that emerged after the 1960s, the blithe Eurocentrism of the first generation became less and less plausible. Throughout his career, Habermas has directly engaged the question of the universality of his theory in a way his predecessors never had, from British debates about cultural relativism in the 1960s and 1970s to American debates about multiculturalism and cultural pluralism in the 1980s and 1990s to more recent discussions about human rights and democracy. In the new century, Habermas has gone farther still, entertaining the “postsecular” idea that modern societies can learn from religious worldviews and positing that the diffusion of modern technical and social forces will produce a world of “multiple modernities” (Mendieta and Habermas 2010). In these discussions, Habermas has tended to articulate a position that defends the validity of modern, rational solutions on a formal level while stressing their contextualism and revisability when it comes to their content. This reflects the architecture of his mature theory as a whole: while his communicative approach, from universal pragmatics (1979) to discourse ethics (1998), argues that truth must result from the testing of arguments in an open-ended discourse, any particular truth is contextual and provisional, just as the moral content of human rights must always be filled out and revised through open debate in particular cultural and political contexts (2001).
Frankfurt School Critical Theory in Habermas’s wake can be seen as running in two quite different directions. One tendency that emerges from his reconstructive approach is to conclude that the lessons, positive and negative, of Western development are specific to particular societies and must be applied with caution, if at all, outside of them. Habermas himself took this tack when asked about the implications of his theory for the Third World. He demurred, allowing, “I am aware of the fact that this is a eurocentrically limited view. I would rather pass the question” (Dews 1992: 183). This strategy has been followed by his immediate successor at Frankfurt, Axel Honneth, who has pursued the Hegelian, reconstructive side of Habermas’s approach. The result in Honneth’s later works such as Freedom’s Right (2014) and The Idea of Socialism (2017) has been to restrict his claims to the sorts of societies whose normative development he reconstructs.

The opposite tendency, to emphasize the universal validity of the logic of communication, is on display in the work of Rainer Forst, who has in effect doubled down on the formal, Kantian side of Habermas’s legacy. In defending the universality of the normative basis of his practical philosophy, the “right to justification,” Forst stresses that general and reciprocal justifications are owed to concrete agents in particular discourses with respect to specific demands (2012). Yet precisely because justifications must always be demanded and offered in particular contexts, the logic of reason-giving transcends them: the principle’s universality is vouchsafed by its contextual realization. On Forst’s approach, context sensitivity thus makes way for robust claims to universality.

Although the Frankfurt School in its second and third generations could be said to have opened itself to questions of social-cultural difference and Eurocentrism in a way its founders never did, a deeper shift in its orientation had an opposite effect. This grew out of Habermas’s frustration with what he saw as the first generation’s one-sided diagnosis of modernity. Whereas Horkheimer, Adorno, or Benjamin submitted modernity as a whole to withering scrutiny, finding it suffused by domination, irrationality, and regression, Habermas became convinced that for Critical Theory to be a constructive as well as a critical enterprise and to avoid sinking into mere moralism or utopianism, it needed to take a more differentiated view. In order to ground the critical enterprise, he undertook in a series of works through the 1970s culminating in his Theory of Communicative Action to reconstruct modern social and cultural evolution as a learning process.

As Amy Allen (2016) argues, with this step Habermas arrived at a developmental account of the social, moral, and epistemic superiority of modern Western societies. In the name of immanent critique, on which claims to knowledge and validity must be shown to arise from within the historical process itself, Critical Theory came to rest on a Eurocentric narrative of superior Western insight. Moreover, although she makes less of this, such narratives, be it in Habermas or in Honneth, tend to present Western development as internally generated, eliding the West’s deep and profoundly asymmetrical relations with the rest of the world. Allen allows that Habermas undertook such an account in order to criticize modernity’s pathological tendencies, but insists that its consequence has been to reinstate a view of Western development as the universal standard of modernity and rationality.

Allen’s assessment of later Critical Theory has been widely shared by postcolonial authors, who tend to regard it as another version of modernizing Eurocentric progressivism, a late representative of a tradition that stretches from the Scottish Enlightenment via Kant and Hegel to Weber and Parsons (Bhambra 2007). The result may appear paradoxical. The first generation of Critical Theory, which of course preceded the emergence of postcolonialism but evinced virtually no interest either in the anticolonial struggles that preceded it or in the non-Western world as whole, nonetheless produced an approach to European modernity that has deep affinities with its postcolonial critique (Spencer 2010). Adorno is a particular
favorite of postcolonial authors (Gilroy 2004; Said 2007), while Benjamin’s dark reflections on history are a staple of postcolonial literature.

Later Frankfurt School thinkers, beginning with Habermas, were much more open to claims from outside the West, and even engaged them. They did so, however, in part by developing a framework that has seemed to many to resurrect the worst tropes of Eurocentric progressivism, erecting the West as the standard of modernity and Enlightenment. It must be observed that this has not prevented generations of scholars from the postcolonial world from absorbing insights from later Critical Theory that they then deployed in creative and productive ways. At the same time, Habermas and his successors have engaged with issues of concern well beyond the West, from cultural and religious pluralism to the universality of human rights and the prospects for democratic global governance, that were entirely unknown by their predecessors. All the same, the long-term development of Critical Theory has produced a lasting fissure between it and postcolonial theory, as I will now outline from the other side.

**Postcolonialism**

Unlike the Frankfurt School, postcolonialism has never had a center. To the contrary, it has developed not as a school but as the convergence of different intellectual currents. The first arose with the emergence in the 1980s in the United States and United Kingdom of scholars who married the continental, especially French, philosophy then being imported into the Anglophone academy with a focus on the legacies of Western imperialism within historical and contemporary thought and culture. Launched by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), this wave was led by scholars working in literature departments in Britain and the United States, such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. A second tributary was a group of Indian historians who called themselves, in homage to Antonio Gramsci, “Subaltern Studies,” whose leading figures include Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Against nationalist and Marxist approaches they found poorly adapted to the specificities of South Asian colonialism and resistance, they adapted Gramsci’s cultural Marxism in order to write “history from below.” While these currents sometimes merged—Guha and Spivak coedited a collection with a foreword by Said in 1988— their interests tended to remain distinct: the postcolonialists worked mainly on Western discourse and culture, the Subaltern Studies group mainly on problems arising from South Asian historiography.

If these literary and historical tendencies represent the historical core of postcolonialism, their interests have tended to converge with a wave of scholars from Latin America, such as Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano, and Walter Mignolo. And any account of postcolonialism today would be incomplete without reference to scholars of postcolonial Africa (Achille Mbembe, Mahmood Mamdani), the African diaspora (Paul Gilroy, David Scott), and settler-colonial states like Canada and Australia (James Tully, Elizabeth Povinelli).

How can authors of such diverse geographical and disciplinary provenance be said to constitute a single approach? While the differences among them are many, an inventory of common postcolonial elements and themes is possible. Following Said’s original gambit, all postcolonialists are concerned with representation, specifically with how the identities of “the West” and its (post)colonial “others” (in Said’s case, “the Orient”) were constituted by the colonial encounter, overwhelmingly through Western imposition. If Said adopted a broadly Foucauldian approach to map the entwinement of power and knowledge in the creation of an exotic but deficient “Orient” whose legacies continue to structure thinking in the West and non-West alike, Spivak’s effort to trace the discursive erasure of subaltern figures from history, literature, and theory owed more to Derrida.
In history and the social sciences, writers like Chatterjee and Chakrabarty explored the ways in which Western social science and theory, despite its pretensions to universality, are in fact deeply parochial, reflecting a specifically European history. To the extent that they structure scholarly and even popular discourse, other histories and experiences are distorted or become inaccessible. On these analyses as well as more speculative philosophical accounts like those of Dussel and Mignolo, this critique extends into an argument that the basic conceptual vocabulary of modernity, from knowledge to history to subjectivity, has been shaped by the West’s elevation of itself and its perspective as the standard for other peoples and cultures, which appear deficient by definition. And this cultural and philosophical diagnosis has in turn rested on a material analysis, especially for Dussel (1998) and other Latin American authors, of the global social, political, and cultural structures that evolved in the wake of 1492—the state-system, world capitalism, patterns of racial and cultural subordination—and continue to operate everywhere, from the metropoles of the world system to its remotest provinces.

Two of the intellectual currents mentioned above can serve to illustrate some of the ways postcolonialism has investigated these issues. The Subaltern Studies group, as mentioned, was founded out of frustration with the failure of Western models of historiography to do justice to South Asian experience (Chakrabarty 2005). Chatterjee, for instance, documents the failure of imported models of community and citizenship to accord with Indian experience, both historically, in displacing indigenous traditions and possibilities at the time of independence (1986), and in the present, as imported models of democratic citizenship and civil society fail to map the ways in which most of the population is integrated into the political system (2004). Chakrabarty addresses similar concerns in the field of history, showing how the categories of Marxist and liberal history fail to capture Indian experience. Postcolonial scholars are thus faced not only with a historical archive but also with present cultural and political realities that are intrinsically resistant to the modern concepts, derived from European experience, that they are nevertheless obliged to use. Chakrabarty’s conclusions leave postcolonialism in an ambivalent relation to modernity not unlike that depicted by Adorno: while postcolonial critics must “provincialize Europe” (2000) by ceaselessly pointing out the particularity and limits of its concepts and frames of reference, they should not imagine they can simply cast them aside. Since it is no longer possible to escape the frame of Western modernity, they can only critically probe its limits.

With postcolonial thinking in Latin America, especially as reconstructed by Mignolo and his colleagues under the banner of “decolonial theory” (2007a), the study of Western imperialism and its legacies followed a different course to different conclusions. Most simply, its analysis starts earlier, since authors focusing on British and French imperialism had tended to overlook the sixteenth-century colonization of Latin America. But there are deeper theoretical and methodological differences arising not only from the region’s distinct experience but also from their disciplinary home in philosophy and the social sciences rather than the humanities. Dussel’s “philosophy of liberation,” for instance, which he has developed since the 1970s, combines a critical reflection on the one-sidedness of European philosophy, from epistemology to ethics to politics, with the lessons of the world-systems school of Marxian political economy (1995). For him, the deficits of Western thought, including Critical Theory, can be remedied by a focus on non-Western experience mediated by Western authors, learning from Levinas to attend to alterity and from Marx to attend to materiality.

This stands in contrast to Quijano, a sociologist hailing from Peru, which has a long tradition of indigenous resistance. Quijano depicts the colonial relation in starker terms, seeing Western modernity as a single, encompassing logic, what he terms the “coloniality of power”
(2000). Developed through Spanish and Portuguese imperialism, this system of “coloniality/rationality” operates primarily at an epistemic level, exercising domination through a thick web of racial, economic, political, and familial categories. Mignolo has generalized this critique into a “geopolitics of knowledge” (2000). On his account, coloniality/rationality effaces the “local knowledges” of subaltern, especially indigenous groups, subordinating them to Western “global designs.” Like scholars from settler-colonial contexts, such as Povinelli and Tully, this decolonial perspective finds in the continued existence of indigenous traditions a critical vantage point and normative resources outside the circuits of Western modernity. Thus, whereas Chakrabarty sees no alternative to “provincializing” Europe by chipping at the limits of its categories, Mignolo has developed strategies for tendentially stepping outside them, from “border thinking,” which seeks to recast modern notions from non-Western perspectives (2000), to “de-linking,” which experiments with throwing off the normativity of Western modernity altogether (2007b).

Other contributions to postcolonial discourse have emphasized other themes, from Homi Bhabha’s argument for the “hybridity” of the cultural products of the colonial encounter (1994) to Achille Mbembe’s focus on the unmediated violence imperialism has bequeathed to the postcolonial world (2001). Postcolonialism has been enriched and complicated by calling attention to gender (Mohanty 1984; Spivak 1988) as well as cultural, ethnolinguistic, religious, and other differences within postcolonial societies, giving an important impetus to the rise of intersectionality within critical theory broadly speaking.

Across its considerable diversity, there can be little doubt that postcolonialism falls under the heading of critical theory in a generic sense. Thus, Mignolo affirms that decolonial thinking is “a particular kind of critical theory”—“assuming,” he adds,

that critical theory in the Marxist genealogy of thought, as articulated by Max Horkheimer, is also a particular kind of critical theory and not the norm or the master paradigm against which all other projects should be compared, measured, evaluated and judged.

(2007a: 155)

All the varieties of postcolonial thought surveyed here are close to the negative model of modernity the Frankfurt School’s first generation inherited from Marx. Postcolonialism, that is, tends to remain at the level of critique, mapping with ever greater specificity the imperial legacies and logics that shape relations, subjectivities, and forms of knowledge. By the same token, it has shown little interest in, with later Critical Theory, finding a universal normative basis for its criticism or prescribing general remedies. Indeed, to the extent that it associates universalism with Western imperialism, postcolonialism has tended to regard it with suspicion and even hostility—even when, in the case of Chakrabarty or Said, it concludes that universalism in some form is inescapable or ethically imperative. And postcolonialism has tended to hew closer to Critical Theory’s first generation in its diffidence concerning practical-political questions, often shying away from the more programmatic stances of Habermas and his successors.

Moreover, insofar as the two approaches have been inclined to exempt any part of social reality from skeptical scrutiny, they have done so in opposite directions. Whereas later Critical Theory has sought to reconstruct the positive potentials of modernity—reflexive science, postconventional culture and morality, postnational and deliberative-democratic politics—certain post- and especially de-colonialists have sought to recover the remnants of non-Western culture that lie at the edges of global modernity. Consequently, when postcolonial writers have sought to open up positive horizons, they have done so by stressing openness to difference. As David Scott put it, borrowing terms Stephen White used to distinguish
Habermasian Critical Theory from its postmodern or poststructuralist contemporaries in the early 1990s,

postcolonial criticism, like other orientations on the cultural Left, has … privileged the “responsibility to otherness” over the “responsibility to act”—the opening up of cognitive space for the play of difference over the affirmation of institutional frameworks that embody normative political values and normative political objectives.


Critics have attributed postcolonialism’s preference for cultural alterity to a nostalgic romanticization of tradition and the non-West. The most forceful criticisms along these lines have tended to come from Marxist critics who regard it as symptomatic of deeper deficits (Lazarus 2011; Parry 2004). Such critics reproach postcolonialism for its narrow focus on culture, that is, on discourses, ideas, and identities, to the exclusion of the material—
in the first instance, globalizing capitalism—that underpin them and brought them into being. Postcolonialism’s tendency to schematize or oversimplify is then said to lead to distortions on both sides of the colonial encounter: on one side, by reifying and homogenizing “the West” or “coloniality,” losing sight of the complexity and internal divisions with Western history and imperialism; on the other side, by idealizing and distorting the non-Western or subaltern “other,” denying not only the complexity but also the modernity of postcolonial societies. According to this line of criticism, isolating “Orientalism” (Said), “coloniality/ rationality” (Quijano, Mignolo), or simply “the West” as a reified structure, even for heuristic purposes, neglects the fact that “modernity” or “the West,” no less than “the Orient” or “the subaltern,” must be understood together as the evolving products of a single, complex, dynamic process.

Postcolonialism’s sympathy for the different and the marginal as well as its alleged propensity to exaggerate and overgeneralize the homogeneity of Western modernity is of course what draws it to early Critical Theory’s portrait of modernity as a bad universal. But a possible objection should be noted. It could be argued that my emphasis on postcolonialism’s totalizing tendencies depends on considering only its most general lines of argument. On a widely held view, it is characteristic of postcolonialism to stress locality, not only the specific origins of ideas and identities, but more deeply the specific location, in space, time, and culture, of different perspectives, including of course the critic’s own. Seen in this way, postcolonialism is first of all concerned with particulars. It is not for nothing that its leading figures are housed in departments of literature, history, anthropology, and geography—sciences of the particular, methodologically committed to starting with concrete objects they then seek to contextualize, historicize, and situate. The corpus of postcolonialism, including even the more generalizing and theoretical work I have privileged here, is overwhelmingly made up of concrete critical studies.

Here we arrive at a deeper difference between postcolonialism and Critical Theory in all its forms, from Marx to Habermas and beyond. While Critical Theory may share with postcolonialism an orientation to the particular in the form of a commitment to reflexivity, an ethical imperative (in the first generation), or a practice of “immanent critique” (in the second and third generations), it has always been devoted to making sense of the whole. Indeed, postcolonialism’s preference for the particular may help explain its affinity with the Frankfurt School’s first generation, to the extent that the bulk of Adorno’s and Benjamin’s oeuvres consist of works devoted to concrete moments and objects, rather than more generalizing philosophical treatises. (This may also help account for postcolonialism’s affinity for Foucault, who, for all his philosophical importance, was a historian.) This feature marks
an important distance from the Frankfurt School, which ever since Horkheimer’s programmatic 1937 essay has sought to develop theory, even as it draws on and seeks to inform history and the social sciences. Postcolonialism, as a theoretically informed approach, has instead favored discrete historical and cultural studies. To this extent, they represent different kinds of enterprise.

Postcolonizing Critical Theory?

All the differences I have pointed out so far between postcolonialism and Critical Theory, and the unbridgeable gap between it and Critical Theory’s more recent generations notwithstanding, in recent decades practitioners of both have noted their affinities and sought to bring them into dialogue, even in some cases to synthesize them. Thus, for example, Dussel, who has engaged in a career-long dialogue with Western critical philosophy from a non-European perspective, invited a group of Frankfurt School luminaries to Mexico City to discuss the commonalities and differences between Critical Theory and his own philosophy of liberation (2011). Eduardo Mendieta, a translator and interpreter of Dussel, has sought to combine the insights of Habermasian Critical Theory, postcolonialism, and pragmatism (2007). And studies of race and racism, two of the most important contemporary legacies of Western imperialism, have been particularly rich fields for scholars drawing on the Frankfurt School tradition, from Lucius Outlaw to Linda Martín Alcoff.

As Critical Theory has expanded—a casual count finds more than a dozen active book series and a score of journals just in English—the number of authors working within this tradition who draw on postcolonialist themes and ideas has grown, producing a field too broad to survey here. Instead, I want to convey a sense of the constructive possibilities at the intersection of the two discourses by considering three recent initiatives by American scholars working within the Critical Theory tradition: Thomas McCarthy, Amy Allen, and Susan Buck-Morss. Their otherwise diverse projects share the aim of reconsidering the terms of Critical Theory in light of issues and problematics taken from postcolonialism and the history of imperialism. In so doing, they converge on perhaps the most sensitive point at which the different generations of the Frankfurt School and postcolonialism meet: the question of universal history.

McCarthy, a translator of and important commentator on Habermas, stepped away from theory and toward real-world problems with his 2009 book, Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development. Much of the volume is given over to the history of racism and imperialism. McCarthy undertakes a selective genealogy of these phenomena through the modern period with a view to their hidden legacies, from the lasting effects of slavery, segregation, and discrimination in the United States to the uses of “development” as a pretext for (neo-) imperialism. Worth noting is the methodological innovation this already represents over the later Frankfurt School. Rather than starting with a positive reconstruction (Honneth) or normative framework (Forst), McCarthy begins with the historical evils he wishes to combat. This genealogical “history of the present” then sets the stage for the more forward-looking parts of the book. In terms he developed in earlier work, he thus puts the critical or “deconstructive” work of theory before its “reconstructive” side, even if he assumes a Habermasian normative framework (2005: 14–15). This brings him in at least one respect closer to the methods of postcolonialism than to the protocols that have tended to prevail in recent Critical Theory.

McCarthy follows these genealogical investigations with more theoretical reflections on how Critical Theory should understand “development” today. Although this idea has been intricately woven through the history of Western imperialism, from the “civilizing missions” of the nineteenth century to the economic and military interventions of the twenty-first,
he insists that it is now critically and normatively indispensable. Instead of abandoning the idea, he therefore proposes a “critical theory of global development”:

the unreasonable, unjust, and undesirable elements of actually existing development—those which owe their establishment and persistence primarily to force and violence, structural and symbolic as well as intentional—are corrected or eliminated, while those which are reasonable, just, and desirable—which evince good reasons, basic fairness, and desirable consequences when examined “from and for the margins”—are retained and revised.

(2005: 184)

Harmful uses of development must be criticized, but the idea can be preserved subject to a critical dialogue open to all, especially its victims. McCarthy thereby shows how Critical Theory can confront Eurocentrism and white supremacy as enduring structures by opening modernity to critical perspectives from outside the West—a move toward which Habermas himself has always in principle been open. While McCarthy’s critical theory of global development does not go as far as some postcolonialists would like as it retains an idea they see as a central plank of modern imperialism (Escobar 1995), it affirms and radicalizes modernity’s openness not only as incomplete, but as always in need of new external as well as internal critics.

Allen, a feminist scholar working at the intersection of Critical Theory and poststructuralism, goes farther. Her 2016 study The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory asks specifically what Critical Theory can learn from its postcolonial critics. Departing from a critique of McCarthy, she takes issue with his defense and reconstruction of the idea of development. Against this, she argues that Critical Theory cannot free itself from Eurocentrism without abandoning the notion of progress on which it has rested since Habermas. Combining painstaking readings of the oeuvres of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst with a range of postcolonial arguments, she shows that, in each case, the validity of the theorist’s critical standpoint relies on a normative framework that takes Western modernity as the standard of social and epistemic development. (Forst’s Kantian approach, which simply posits its own normative ground in practical reason, is somewhat different. Here, Allen worries that his reliance on the authority of reason will reinforce the West’s traditional presumption of its own superior rationality.)

Taking her motto from Adorno, “progress begins where it ends” (2005: 150), Allen argues that “one can be against progress as a ‘fact,’ as a backward-looking claim about what has led up to ‘us,’ while still being for progress as a forward-looking moral and political imperative” (2016: 127). One can do this by adopting a stance of what she calls “meta-normative contextualism”: accepting the contingency of our own moral standards without giving them up. This, she argues, is sufficient for us to engage in what she regards as the first task of Critical Theory: a critical “history of the present” that takes Foucauldian rather than Habermasian inspiration, uncovering hidden mechanisms of domination and unfreedom. A peculiarity of this argument is that it plays out principally on the ground of normative foundations, a concern that only moved to the center of Critical Theory with Habermas and led him to develop a justificatory account of modernity in the first place. Her alternative models, Adorno and Foucault, had little interest in the question of foundations—and neither, one suspects, would a reader convinced by her arguments.

Allen’s proposal may be most interesting, then, for its methodological contributions. On one level, she argues for the same reversal of priorities that McCarthy performs insofar as she suggests that we put critical genealogy ahead of normative construction or reconstruction. But her version of critical history cuts deeper than his. Rather than focusing on instances
of unfreedom and irrationality that can be readily denounced from the perspective of our own agreed-upon morality, such as racism and imperialism, Allen advocates a return to bolder critical projects like Dialectic of Enlightenment, Foucault’s History of Madness, and much work in postcolonialism: critical histories that explore the dark side of central elements of the modern self-understanding, such as reason, Enlightenment, or modernity itself. This version of critical history, which proceeds by assuming, with Adorno, Foucault, and postcolonialism, “reason’s entanglement with domination” (2016: 176), enables us to “problematize” our own horizon and commitments. This greater self-critical purchase, I take it, represents her real case against Forst’s Kantianism as well as McCarthy’s progressivism.

But perhaps the most inventive recent effort to open Critical Theory to postcolonial concerns comes from Buck-Morss, a wide-ranging theorist and highly original interpreter of Benjamin and Adorno. In her 2000 article, “Hegel and Haiti,” Buck-Morss argues that Hegel’s famous “Lordship and Bondage” chapter in his Phenomenology of Spirit, the subject of endless elaboration from Kojève and Sartre to Fanon and Honneth, was in fact inspired by the contemporaneous Haitian Revolution. While Hegel left no record of any such influence, she establishes its plausibility through a deep dive into the historical archive that serves at the same time to upset the orderly, progressive model of Eurocentric history Hegel left us. She thereby takes the opportunity not only, as Benjamin directed in his “Theses on the Concept of History,” to “brush history against the grain” (2002: 392), showing how one of the great monuments of Eurocentric thought opens onto the only successful revolution against colonial slavery. She also uses this episode as Benjamin further suggested, to “blast open the continuum of history” (ibid.: 396), recovering the potentials of past hopes and struggles for the present. As she writes,

If the historical facts about freedom can be ripped out of the narratives told by the victors and salvaged for our own time, then the project of universal freedom does not need to be discarded but, rather, redeemed and reconstituted on a different basis.

(2000: 865)

What the Haitian Revolution—along with its suppression by Hegel and nearly all subsequent Western historiography and philosophy—thus reveals is a hidden history of the irrepressible, unpredictable, explosive desire for emancipation, which can always erupt anew. Methodologically, Buck-Morss’s innovation lies in reaching beyond the alternative of Adorno or Habermas to a version of universal history that would be neither negative nor reconstructive, but redemptive. Such an approach would consist neither simply in critically diagnosing the roots of the bad present with Allen and Adorno, nor in recovering its progressive normative potential with McCarthy and Habermas. Rather, with Benjamin, it would probe the silences and omissions of Eurocentric history, finding in its exceptions, anomalies, missed connections, and thwarted potentials examples that can open us to new possibilities. As she put it in a 2009 sequel to the essay, “universal history engages in a double liberation, of the historical phenomenon and of our own imagination” (149). Such a history reveals that today the universal aspect of the Age of Revolution is not its realization of Spirit in European modernity, which allowed Hegel to consign Haiti along with most of the world to oblivion, but the Haitians’ demand for freedom. With this Buck-Morss implicitly defends Benjamin against Adorno’s appropriation of his lessons on history. For what Adorno erased from Benjamin’s image of progress as catastrophe was the possibility that the historian could sift history’s shards into constellations that enable us to recover their explosive power. Beyond a virtuosic theoretical performance, then, her essay offers another vision for Critical Theory after postcolonialism: a model for returning to universal history from the
standpoint of its victims with a view to redeeming their hopes by creatively reactivating them for the present.

I will not attempt to adjudicate among these visions for a postcolonial Critical Theory. What seems most promising is precisely the distance between the critical-reconstructive project McCarthy adapts from Habermas, the reflexive, self-critical one Allen finds in Adorno and Foucault, and the more expansive, redemptive one Buck-Morris derives from Benjamin, a distance that suggests possibilities beyond what are commonly mooted as Critical Theory’s methodological alternatives. These are of course by no means the only models on offer, but they show how Critical Theory can draw fresh sustenance from the investigation of objects and approaches beyond its customary concerns. One aspect of postcolonialism’s contribution to a future Critical Theory would surely be to “decolonize” it, as Allen suggests—to wean it from an idealized version of Western history as the universal site from which its critical and normative resources must be drawn. Another might be, borrowing Chakrabarty’s term, to “provincialize” it by making it aware of the parochial aspects of its concepts, categories, assumptions, and frames of reference. Certainly, the Frankfurt School’s long history of ignoring the postcolonial world or treating it as an afterthought suggests that postcolonialism could play an important role in these tasks. But, beyond this, these efforts by authors situated within the Frankfurt School tradition to go beyond its traditional and present limits suggest that a still greater contribution of postcolonialism to Critical Theory could be as an impetus to creativity as it seeks new resources to grapple with modernity as a global phenomenon.

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Further Reading


