

The Power of Colonization

1 Introduction

In *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Amy Allen seeks to free critical theory of its commitment to a problematic notion of historical progress, while at the same time remaining committed to progressive and emancipatory politics. Because the most prominent contemporary critical theorists ground their normative commitments in a notion of historical progress that is problematic and in need of historicization, Allen advocates a form of critical theory that substitutes a narrative of historical progress with a method of problematizing genealogy, which serves to highlight that our moral certainties are not only contingent, but forged in relations of power and domination. By historicizing the progressive reading of history endorsed by many critical theorists, genealogy in the tradition of Foucault removes the source of critical theory's Eurocentrism.

In this paper, I build on Allen's systematic account and ask how we can engage in a practice of critical theory that generates substantively decolonized normative projects. My central claim is that this can be achieved by a more robustly decolonial form of genealogy, whose historicization of the present must be accompanied by what Walter D. Mignolo describes as a "shift in the geography of knowledge."¹ Because systems of thought are not only historically, but also geographically situated, critical theory must attend to both the historical and geographical contingency of its normative foundations.

¹ Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 485.

2 From Progressive History to Genealogy

Allen aims to show that critical theory's grounding of normative commitments in a progressive notion of history results in Eurocentrism and imperialism. The problem arises from the project of immanent critique – that is, to reveal social contradictions that serve to reveal normative principles for emancipation rather than stipulate transcendental norms of judgment. Such grounding of normativity in a historically specific social reality, however, poses an important problem. For if standards of normativity are indeed immanent to a changing social world, then it seems that there are no absolute or universal normative principles to which we can appeal to diagnose social pathologies. Such relativism, one might argue, leaves critical theory bereft of justification of the very norms it promoted for emancipatory ends.

One strategy critical theorists pursue to solve this problem is to ground normativity in a Hegelian account of historical progress understood as socio-cultural learning and development. On this view, current normative principles derive justification from the fact that they are the result of historical progress and, as such, superior to normative principles that correspond to prior stages of development. For Allen, the problem with this approach is that it is “bound up with complex relations of domination, exclusion, and silencing of colonized and racialized subjects.”² When Western development and its attendant values are posited as normative, this positing both conceals the West's material and ideological dependence on colonialism and devalues non-Western development and normative principles as inferior. Moreover, what counts as progress is itself measured in relation to Western norms. Therefore, Allen argues that a progressivist reading of history is ultimately an expression of a self-congratulatory attitude critical theorists adopt about European Enlightenment's perceived superiority

² Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 19.

over ostensibly uncivilized and backwards populations. This attitude functions to preserve colonial relations of power.

To free critical theory of this imperialist tendency, Allen proposes to substitute a notion of history as the realization of reason with a historicized account of this very progressivist reading of history. Drawing on Adorno and Foucault, she argues that modern forms of thought and practice are not necessary outcomes of historical progress, but complex formations made possible by the dynamic interplay of practices. Accordingly, dominant normative principles are not the result of a continuous perfection of reason, but effects of relations of struggle and domination. Adorno's negative dialectic and Foucault's genealogy draw attention to the contingent foundations of normativity as well as the dangers inherent in a progressive account of history and show that historical progress can no longer serve as an unproblematic meta-normative foundation of moral values. Rather, they call for modesty about the scope of validity of critical theory and openness towards other normative standards.

For Allen, then, genealogy serves as an antidote to the imperialism and Eurocentrism of critical theory by substituting complacency about its normative claims with an attitude of epistemic humility. By showing that first-order normative commitments to freedom and equality rest on historically contingent foundations, genealogy enjoins us to understand our moral beliefs as dependent on specific historical contexts and acknowledge that different contexts require different norms. The first step in decolonizing critical theory, on this view, happens on the metanormative level of moral epistemology and takes the form of a change in epistemic attitudes from self-congratulation to modesty. Allen further shows that such metanormative contextualism can be reconciled with critical theory's anticipatory-utopian dimension of articulating responses to social pathologies that pursue normative goals for which we can provide justification.

It might be objected that Allen's proposal leaves open the possibility of a practice of critical theory that, while aware of its limitations, nevertheless generates accounts of and solutions to social pathologies that perpetuate Eurocentrism and imperialist tendencies. Indeed, Foucault's own work shows that even the most historically attuned genealogies often produce Eurocentric accounts of the phenomena whose formation they trace. Yet, the Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez has argued that Foucault's analyses are Eurocentric in content, but not in form.³ In fact, genealogy is particularly useful to generate non-Eurocentric accounts of modernity if it is properly operationalized. In what follows, I draw on the work of Castro-Gómez and other decolonial theorists to suggest that decolonizing critical theory by way of genealogy requires a reconceptualization of genealogy as a decolonial archival practice that attends to the historical as well as geographical contingency of modern systems of thought and practice. That is to say, genealogy must find its content – that is, its archive – in a modern world-system that no longer thinks Europe as its center.⁴

3 The Space/Time of Modernity

For Castro-Gómez, Foucaultian genealogy is not Eurocentric in form, even though Foucault's particular genealogies are Eurocentric. We can see this, for instance, in Foucault's emphasis on the emergence of the modern interstate system of security as a key factor in the genealogy of power in modernity. In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault identifies the formation of an equilibrium of states as bound up with the emergence of modern biopolitics. However, for Foucault, this interstate system that

³ For a similar view see Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1995).

⁴ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008); Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

emerged in the sixteenth century is a network of European states, which are in relations of, first, subordination over and, second, competition with *one another*. On this view, even the conquest of the Americas appears as an intraeuropean phenomenon to the extent that it served as the basis for Spain's and Portugal's imperial claims over other European states. Castro-Gómez thus argues that while Foucault clearly recognizes that "biopolitics is 'entangled' with geopolitics" from the start, his geopolitical perspective is an intraeuropean one.⁵

A similar tendency to confine the geopolitics of modernity to Europe is operative in Foucault's account of the disciplines. What is striking in this account is that Foucault highlights the importance of colonialism and developments outside of Europe for the formation of modern power relations in Europe. In *Psychiatric Power*, for instance, he insists that apparatuses of disciplinary power have a history that predates their appearance in Europe. He traces this history to first wave of colonization in the 17th century, which resulted in puritanical societies in America, as well as Jesuit missions in South America.⁶ Foucault concludes that disciplinary power in Europe, as it is materialized in the asylum, is fundamentally shaped by colonialism, which gives psychiatric power its distinct form. This form, he argues, is of two types: first, "the traditional disciplinary power of the asylum, which is negative in a way, since its function is to keep people calm without getting anything positive from them;"⁷ second, "the power of colonization: putting people to work, with the insane divided into squads and brigades, etcetera, under the authority and supervision of those who regularly put

⁵ Santiago Castro-Gómez, "Michel Foucault Y La Colonialidad Del Poder," *Tabula Rasa* 6 (2007): 161.

⁶ See Michel Foucault, "Les Hétérotopies," in *Die Heterotopien. Der Utopische Körper. Zwei Radiovortrräge*, trans. Michael Bischoff (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013), 37–52; Michel Foucault, "Des Espaces Autres," in *Dits et Écrits IV, 1980-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 752–62; Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973--1974*, ed. Jacques Lagrange and Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)..

⁷ Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, 127.

them to work.”⁸ Despite his awareness that colonialism forms the condition of possibility of implementing in Europe disciplinary mechanisms developed in the context of colonization, however, the focus of Foucault’s analyses is on the “disciplining of societies in Europe since the eighteenth century” and, thus, after the first wave of colonization in the 17th century.⁹ In both his accounts of the modern interstate system and the emergence of the disciplines, then, Foucault posits Europe as the center of the history his genealogies are intended to problematize.

This centering of Europe commits what the decolonial theorist Enrique Dussel calls the “Eurocentric fallacy.”¹⁰ By this, Dussel seeks to capture the common assumption that modernity is an essentially European phenomenon, an assumption that not only treats Europe as the center of the world, but also obscures its constitutive relation with the periphery. For Dussel, in other words, modernity is not a historical period that began in eighteenth-century Europe, but a spatial articulation of power that has its beginning in the conquest of the Americas. Modernity appears “when Europe affirms itself as the ‘center’ of a World History that it inaugurates; the ‘periphery’ that surrounds this center is consequently part of its self-definition.”¹¹ It is what Aníbal Quijano describes as a particular “space/time,” that is, a concrete, geographically realized configuration of power he calls “coloniality of power.”¹² By coloniality, Quijano understands a spatial articulation of power that emerges in the sixteenth century and gives rise to a modern/colonial world-system, in which center and periphery cannot be

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 3 (New York: The New Press, 2001), 339.

¹⁰ Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures),” *Boundary 2* 20, no. 3 (October 1, 1993): 65.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, ed. Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008), 228.

disarticulated. Any analysis of modernity that treats it as a historical period rather than a spatio-temporal constellation is, therefore, bound to repeat and reinforce coloniality.

The idea that space is a central organizing feature at least of the twentieth century is also at the heart of Foucault's articulation of a methodological apparatus adequate for his critique of modernity. Consider as the perhaps clearest articulation of this view his 1966 radio talk "*Les hétérotopies*" ("Heterotopias") as well as the 1967 lecture "*Des espaces autres*" ("Of Other Spaces"), where he argues that while the "great obsession that haunted the nineteenth century was ... history," "the current period might instead be the period of space."¹³ Foucault continues,

It is nevertheless necessary to note that the space which today appears to form the horizon of our concerns, our theory, our systems, is not an innovation; in Western experience, space itself has a history, and it is impossible not to recognize this fatal intertwining of time and space.¹⁴

Foucault traces this history from a medieval space of localization to a modern space of extension and today's space of emplacement. By emplacement, he means an understanding of space in terms of places or sites, which are constituted by relations between elements. As a consequence, the space in which we live is fundamentally a "set of relations that define places that are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superposable."¹⁵ Today, then, time is secondary to space, appearing only as "one of the games of possible distributions between elements that are dispersed in space."¹⁶ As a consequence, Foucault calls for a "science"¹⁷ – or, better, "a sort of systematic

¹³ Foucault, "Des Espaces Autres," 752.

¹⁴ Ibid., 752–753.

¹⁵ Ibid., 755.

¹⁶ Ibid., 754.

¹⁷ Foucault, "Les Hétérotopies."

description”¹⁸ – of spaces that train our attention on the contradictions and aporias of modernity. He calls this science heterotopology.

By heterotopias, Foucault means places that do not exist even though they have a particular location in reality. To clarify this notion, it is useful to compare heterotopias to utopias, which are ideal places that only exist in the imagination. Heterotopias, by contrast, are “effectively realized utopias in which real places, all the other real places that we can find inside a culture are at the same time represented, contested, and inverted, the kinds of localities that are outside of all localities, even though they are effectively localizable.”¹⁹ Heterotopias are “counter-sites” (*contre-emplacements*), in which incompatible places are juxtaposed.²⁰ Consider, for example, the ship of fools, which removes the mad from the city while at the same time setting them free on the oceans. Similarly, the prison is intended for the punishment and correction of delinquents, but also for the production of recidivism. Heterotopology is a systematic description of these spaces, which makes obvious their internal contradictions.

Foucault’s acknowledgment of the centrality of space, however, is quite distinct from his understanding of modernity as a historical period – and understanding that, as we saw, occludes and perpetuates coloniality of power. The consequence is that Foucault’s genealogies of power in modernity remain within an intraeuropean geopolitical horizon even as they focus on the spatial materializations of power within this horizon. Foucault’s heterotopology is, thus, a systematic description of such spaces that throw into relief problematizations whose emergence within a particular historical period in Europe his genealogies are intended to trace. Hence the Eurocentrism of Foucault’s work.

¹⁸ Foucault, “Des Espaces Autres.”

¹⁹ Ibid., 755–756.

²⁰ Ibid., 755.

To avoid such Eurocentrism, heterotopology and genealogy have to be brought together in a different way. Specifically, what is needed are genealogies of modernity that is itself understood as a heterotopia, that is, as a site in which incompatible places are represented and contested. In what follows, I conclude by suggesting that the main methodological upshot of this view is an expansion of the geopolitical horizon of Foucaultian genealogy and a concomitant shift in the archive of genealogical inquiry.

4 Decolonizing the Archive

So far, I hope to have shown that Foucaultian genealogy is Eurocentric in content because its content is a fallacious notion of modernity as an essentially European phenomenon. I have also suggested that there are resources in Foucault's work, particularly his notion of heterotopology, which can be productively mobilized to write genealogies that are not Eurocentric. Such a project requires that we understand modernity itself as a heterotopia.

Castro-Gómez supplies just such an account in his book *La hybris del punto cero*, where he examines how, in the eighteenth century, scientific discourse of modernity, whose historically specific forms of thought Foucault describes in *The Order of Things*, were taken up as a means of social control in the colonies through a process of "dislocation, relocation, and displacement."²¹ At the same time as European philosophers argued that no person born in the Americas had the capacity for rationality, the colonial authorities in New Granada established a university to educate an elite of *criollos*, people of European descent born in Latin America. These *criollos* co-opted and transformed Enlightenment science into a discourse of purity of blood, which they weaponized against indigenous people, enslaved Africans, and people of mixed

²¹ Santiago Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero: ciencia, raza e ilustración en la Nueva Granada (1750-1816)* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005), 15.

heritage in order to create an internal social hierarchy. This hierarchy extended the ostensible superiority of Europeans in the colonies and served as the basis for a distribution of privileges and burdens according to a person's race.

For Castro-Gómez, this uptake and reworking of Enlightenment discourse in the colonial context indicates that the Enlightenment is not an "'original text' that is copied by others" or an "intraeuropean phenomenon that is 'disseminated' throughout the world and in relation to which alone one can speak of a good or bad reception."²² Rather, it is a "set of discourses with different sites of production and enunciation which, already in the 18th century, enjoyed global circulation" and a "complex global network of scientific ideas, liberal sentiments, racial attitudes, and imperial ambitions."²³ Consequently, an account of *the* Enlightenment requires attention to the "specificity of Enlightenment in New Granada, that is, to the particular place in which the discourses of the new science were re-located and acquired *meaning* in that region of the world, by the mid-18th century."²⁴

Castro-Gómez's genealogy of the Enlightenment in New Grenada substantiates the claim that modernity is as much a phenomenon of the periphery as it is of the center. It thereby highlights modernity's heterotopic character as a spatial articulation of power (i.e. a modern/colonial world system) in which competing and even incompatible places (i.e. center and periphery) are held together. The question that remains to be answered, then, is what happens to Foucaultian genealogy once it is brought to bear on the problematizations of modernity understood in this way.

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that the main methodological consequence of a decolonial notion of modernity as a modern/colonial world-system is what Denise

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 22.

²⁴ Ibid., 15.

Ferreira da Silva describes as “a different tracing of ‘subjugated knowledges.’”²⁵ As Ann Laura Stoler has argued in her critical reconstruction of Foucault’s account of the formation of sexuality in modern Europe, the problem with Foucault’s work lies not with genealogy as a method. Rather, Foucault’s lack of attention to colonialism and imperialism has the effect that his “history of European sexuality misses key sites in the production of that discourse, discounts the practices that racialized bodies, and thus elides a field of knowledge that provided the contrasts for what a ‘healthy, vigorous, bourgeois body’ was all about.”²⁶ Because the “discursive and practical field” Foucault investigates is itself “situated on an imperial landscape where the cultural accoutrements of bourgeois distinction were partially shaped through contrasts forged in the politics of language and race,” his account of sexuality is not only incomplete, but also selective, exclusive, and flawed.²⁷ As a consequence, Stoler argues that a genealogy of modern European discourses about sexuality “cannot be charted in Europe alone,” and she focuses on the Dutch East Indies to reveal the relational nature of these discourses.²⁸ Thus, Stoler’s response to the Eurocentrism of Foucault’s genealogy of sexuality is not a rejection of genealogy, but a change in content. In sum, decolonizing critical theory via genealogy requires an archival practice that transcends Europe and confronts the problems of modernity as problems of a modern/colonial world-system.

²⁵ Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Before Man: Sylvia Wynter’s Rewriting of the Modern Episteme,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 99.

²⁶ Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.