

POST-COLONIAL HISTORY, SUBALTERN STUDIES AND THE (DEFICITS OF) NEO-HEGELIAN CRITICAL THEORIST. ON AMY ALLEN'S DECOLONIZING PROJECT

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HISTORIA POSCOLONIAL, ESTUDIOS SUBALTERNOS Y LOS (DÉFICITS DEL) TEÓRICO CRÍTICO NEOHEGELIANO: SOBRE EL PROYECTO DE DESCOLONIZACIÓN DE AMY ALLEN

Abstract

The paper takes its cue from Amy Allen's critique of contemporary German critical theory from the perspective of post- and decolonial studies. It takes up the conceptions of history and progress adopted by Jürgen Habermas and, above all, Axel Honneth in light of the neo-Hegelian strategy of "normative reconstruction." In doing so, it shows how this vision of the progressive development of "reason" in history establishes a hierarchy of eras and civilizations in favour of European modernity, a hierarchy strongly contested by subaltern studies. Against this background, the leading role played by subaltern groups, as highlighted in particular by Dipesh Chakrabarty,

is emphasized. The discussion then shifts to the neo-Hegelian model of immanent critique from the perspective of the relationship between the critical theorist and the subaltern. Here, the paternalism and detachment of the traditional critical theorist are contrasted with the listening of the organic intellectual/critic, a theme addressed by Antonio Gramsci and taken up again in subaltern (and cultural) studies.

Keywords

Critical Theory; Subaltern Groups; Antonio Gramsci; Amy Allen; Postcolonial Studies

Resumen

Este artículo toma como punto de partida la crítica de Amy Allen a la teoría crítica alemana contemporánea desde la perspectiva de los estudios poscoloniales y decoloniales. Aborda las concepciones de historia y progreso adoptadas por Jürgen Habermas y, sobre todo, Axel Honneth, a la luz de la estrategia neohegeliana de la “reconstrucción normativa”. Al hacerlo, muestra cómo esta visión del desarrollo progresivo de la “razón” en la historia establece una jerarquía de épocas y civilizaciones en favor de la modernidad europea, una jerarquía fuertemente cuestionada por los estudios subalternos. En este contexto, se enfatiza el papel protagónico desempeñado por los grupos subalternos, tal como lo ha señalado especialmente Dipesh Chakrabarty. A continuación, la discusión se centra en el modelo neohegeliano de crítica inmanente desde la perspectiva de la relación entre el teórico crítico y el subalterno. Aquí, el paternalismo y el distanciamiento del teórico crítico tradicional se contrastan con la escucha del intelectual/crítico orgánico, tema abordado por Antonio Gramsci y retomado posteriormente en los estudios subalternos (y culturales).

Palabras clave

teoría crítica; grupos subalternos; Antonio Gramsci; Amy Allen; estudios poscoloniales; estudios decoloniales

1. Introduction

German critical theory still must overcome a series of assumptions, perspectives, and methods that expose it to objections from post- and decolonial thinking. These theoretical deficits are particularly evident in the neo-Hegelian version of this research tradition, which primarily concerns adopting a conception of history rooted in a sequential model of development and progress. This view implies a clear hierarchy of historical eras, starting with the “myth of modernity,” and of civilizations and their normative orders. We are faced with the classic Eurocentric thesis of the “superiority” of European modernity on several levels—cognitive, moral, ethical, and political—over other civilizations and eras, including colonized peoples. This is therefore a view fully in line with the most strongly felt polemical objectives of post- and decolonial thought, precisely because it has been a constituent part of the theoretical framework that has historically legitimized and justified colonialism. And it is still today a salient theoretical element of “colonial power.”

This issue was firmly raised again by Amy Allen (2016) in *The End of Progress. Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Allen draws on authors such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002, 2000), Edward Said (1978, 1989, 1993), Gayatri Spivak (1999), Homi Bhabha (1994), Enrique Dussel (1993), and Walter D Mignolo (2002, 2007, 2011). She reveals the problematic nature of the notions of progress and modernity used by leading authors of contemporary German critical theory, such as Jürgen Habermas (1987) and Axel Honneth (2014). Both continue to defend a conception according to which European modernity is fundamentally an “unfinished project” to be completed, adopting a cumulative and retrospective conception of progress that Honneth (2014) openly declares teleological.

More specifically, Allen (2016) argues that, in their normative foundation strategies, both Habermas and Honneth use a distinct neo-Hegelian immanentist methodology of “normative reconstruction.” They retrace the “stages” of normative progress achieved in modern history and then argue for the “developmental superiority of European Modernity” (Allen, 2016, pp. 71 ff., 114 ff.). Allen contrasted this approach with Foucault’s historical genealogies and Adorno’s dialectic of progress.

In light of the critiques of the neo-Hegelian conception of progress, as well as of the regressions found particularly in Axel Honneth (2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b) and in various respects, in Rahel Jaeggi (2025), in this paper, I would like to point out a further deficit. This deficit relates to the specificity of the method of “immanent critique.” On this level, which is more properly inherent in the forms of social criticism, critiques from post- and decolonial studies are also applicable.

These start with the paternalism of “progressive” theorists of colonization. I believe these critiques can be directed at the detached, superior stance that the traditional critical theorist assumes toward subalterns when using the neo-Hegelian strategy of immanent critique. It is therefore a matter of advancing the analysis and critical discussion of the deficits identifiable on both levels: that of a teleological philosophy of history, and that of the forms of immanent critique characteristic of the neo-Hegelian turn in contemporary German critical theory (see Solinas 2019a, 2019b, 2021, 2025; Honneth 2019; Jaeggi 2021).

To clarify this issue, we will first examine Dipesh Chakrabarty’s position (Chakrabarty, 2000, 2002). Traditional Hegelian historicism often leads to the classic *paternalism* of the “European colonizer,” whose actions aim to ‘help’ and ‘educate’ the colonized. The theorist who embodies this hierarchical view of historical development places himself on a plane of clear superiority over “non-Europeans,” whom he considers ‘immature’ and at a ‘lower’ stage of civilization. Subaltern studies overturn this approach. They focus on listening *to* the subalterns, and theorists place themselves on an equal footing.

In a second step, we will explore this reversal of perspective in greater depth. The neo-Hegelian model of immanent critique remains tied to a hierarchical view of the relationship between critical theorists and subalterns. In contrast, the position of the theorist outlined in subaltern studies can be traced back to the figure of the organic intellectual outlined by Antonio Gramsci (1992, 2000). The traditional critical theorist adopts a top-down view, focusing their criticism on what they consider to be blocks, interruptions, pathologies, and deformations of the progressive (and teleological) path of reason in history. The organic critic, instead, moves from the demands felt and expressed by the subalterns.

2. Destroying the Waiting Room of History

Amy Allen shows that the concept of progress in contemporary German critical theory reflects a strongly hierarchical view of history that is openly exposed to criticism from post- and decolonial studies. This issue emerges clearly in Axel Honneth’s *Freedom’s Right* (2014). The method of ‘normative reconstruction’ is, in fact, directly anchored in “Hegel’s teleology notion that the present always stands at the forefront of a historical process in which rational freedom is gradually realized” (Honneth, 2014, p. 59).

However, this view is certainly updated in a post-metaphysical form. This conception, as Allen (2016) points out, implies a “moral superiority” of European modernity—openly claimed on several occasions by Honneth (2014) and Habermas (1987). They present European modernity and its forms of life as superior in an evolutionary con-

ception.¹ This supposed superiority is doubly harmful: “not only has the claim of moral and cognitive superiority repeatedly been used as a justification for imperialism and colonialism [...] but this claim to superiority and the developmentalist conception of history used to support it are themselves gestures of the powerful” (Allen, 2016, p. 116 f.).

As Allen (2016) recalls, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) clearly highlighted the link between traditional historicism and colonialism in his now-classic *Provincializing Europe*. For example, referring to John Stuart Mill, Chakrabarty writes:

According to Mill, Indians and Africans were not yet civilized enough to rule themselves. Some historical time of development and civilization (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be considered for such a task. Mill's historicist argument thus consigned Indians, Africans, and other “rude” nations to an imaginary waiting room of history. (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 8)

Chakrabarty (2000, p. 8) points out the morally and politically crucial point of this vision: “That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait.” This is a wide-ranging criticism. It is certainly not directed solely at Mill's paternalism, but contemplates historicism as such. It repeatedly targets the Marxist tradition and its “ideology of progress,” characterized by a structure of global historical time condensed in the motto: “first in Europe, then elsewhere.” (2000, p. 8). This vision, as Chakrabarty (2000) observes, “allowed Marx to say that the 'country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future, and that 'in the colonies, it legitimated the idea of civilization” (2000, p. 8; see Marx 1990, p. 91). We could also include Hegel's (2001) open justification of colonialism here. He can be counted among the founders of historicism *tout court*. For example, when he argued that:

The English have undertaken the weighty responsibility of being the missionaries of civilization to the world; for their commercial spirit urges them to traverse every sea and land, to form connections with barbarous peoples, to create wants and stimulate industry and first and foremost to establish among them the conditions necessary to commerce, viz. the relinquishment of a life of lawless violence, respect for property, and civility to strangers”. (Hegel, 2001, p. 475; see also Hegel 1991)²

² Hegel (1991, §351): “The same determination *entitles* civilized nations to regard and treat as barbarians other nations which are less advanced than they are in the substantial moments of the state (as with pastoralists in relation to hunters, and agriculturalists in relation to both of these), in the consciousness that the rights of these other nations are not equal to theirs and that their independence is merely formal.”

One of the main theoretical fault lines that Chakrabarty (2000) works on is crucial for overcoming *the theoretical and political deficits* of historicism. This applies to both its liberal and Hegelian-Marxian forms. The aim is to overturn this traditional approach, especially regarding the ethical and political role and stature attributed to the subaltern classes. Rather than waiting for the ‘right moment’ or being represented by theorists who consider themselves ‘superior’ to them on multiple levels, these classes must be considered first and foremost “as the makers of their own destiny” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 11). A dialogue must be established on a plane of full moral and political equality. This perspective embodies one of the theoretical traits that shapes this entire tradition of research:

As is well known, an explicit aim of *Subaltern Studies* was to write the subaltern class into the history of nationalism and the nation, and to combat all elitist biases in the writing of history. To make the subaltern the sovereign subject of history, to listen to their voices, to take their experiences and thoughts (and not just their material circumstances) seriously—these were goals we had deliberately and publicly set ourselves. (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 102)

This raises the crucial issue—also highlighted by Allen (2016)—of listening to subalterns, to their voices, and engaging in dialogue. This approach is not only distinct from but also opposed to the traditional position of a theorist. The traditional theorist considers themselves superior and speaks for, or even against, subalterns. This often means denying subalterns the right to speak or dismissing their voices as irrelevant. It is on this level that we see a clear divergence from the figure of the critical theorist who adopts the neo-Hegelian model of immanent criticism.

3. Organic Connections

One salient feature of the neo-Hegelian method of immanent critique lies in the critical theorist’s detachment from the positions locally shared by specific subordinate groups and their cultural formations. As Axel Honneth has often clarified, the methodology of immanent critique, which he sees as defining German critical theory, should be understood as a clear alternative to the “models of social criticism that are constructed in the spirit of Michel Foucault’s genealogical method or in the style of Michael Walzer’s critical hermeneutics” (Honneth, 2009a, p. 19). In other words, it is a question of avoiding the adoption of methodologies that rely on critics closely connected to the demands of specific social groups. These critics often

‘interpret’ the needs and expectations of these groups from a close distance, as in the model of internal or immanent criticism proposed by Michael Walzer (1987). It is also necessary to avoid relying on those who operate ‘locally’, such as the specific intellectual outlined by Foucault (1977, 1980).

On the contrary, Honneth (2009a) argues that the neo-Hegelian model of immanent critique must be anchored in the ideal of the progressive and teleological development of “reason” in history. Critique, for him, takes the form of a diagnosis of the “deformations” and “pathologies” that occur when “the progress of reason is blocked or interrupted,” and is therefore understood in terms of “socially deficient rationality” (Honneth, 2009a, p. 19). The sharing and adoption of criteria that are “immanent” in a given social reality develops in light of the critical theorist’s ability to ‘reconstruct’ the forms in which “reason” is embodied over time in social and institutional life.

Conversely, the theorist must also diagnose the blocks and interruptions in this progressive development. Thus, it is not a question of sharing the demands, needs, and desires embodied in the lived experience of the popular strata and expressed by the subalterns. These demands, on the contrary, can and must be critically commensurate with this teleological path. This explains Honneth’s defence of the perspective of an author such as Marcuse as well as his fierce criticism of (false) “mass” needs and desires (Honneth, 2009b, pp. 44 ff., 2009c).

Conversely, from the perspective of subaltern studies and their convergence with post- and decolonial studies, one of the turning points is represented by the breakdown and reversal of the critic’s/intellectual’s relationship of superiority over the subaltern. It is a question of re-establishing a relationship based on listening, continuing along the path opened by Antonio Gramsci (2021), who criticized traditional intellectuals for their paternalistic attitude. In his words:

Of paternal and divine protection, the ‘self-sufficient’ feeling of one’s undisputed superiority” over the subaltern, whose relationship was thus stigmatized: “like the relationship between two races, one superior and the other inferior; like the relationship between adults and children in old schooling; or worse still, like the relationship of a ‘society for the protection of animals’, or like that of the Anglo-Saxon Salvation Army toward the cannibals of Guinea. (Gramsci, 2021, p. 69)

The criticism was therefore directed at those traditional intellectuals who “do not feel tied” to the people and “do not know and sense their needs, aspirations, and feel-

ings. In relation to the people, they are something detached, without foundation, a caste and not an articulation with organic functions of the people themselves.” (Gramsci, 2000, p. 367).

Certainly, for Gramsci (1992), the organic intellectual must not remain confined to merely recording what exists. Still, it must perform an auxiliary function of clarification and even “direction,” aimed at bringing the demands of the subalterns to a high level of theoretical elaboration and advancing them on the plane of political and cultural struggle. To summarize schematically, there is a need to strike a balance between two poles:

The popular element ‘feels’ but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element ‘knows’ but does not always understand, and in particular does not always feel. The two extremes are therefore pedantry and philistinism on the one hand and blind passion and sectarianism on the other. (Gramsci, 1992, p. 69).

Thus, the mistake of the intellectual “consists in believing that one can know without understanding, and even more so without feeling and without passion” (Gramsci, 1992, p. 418). The intellectual also errs by adopting a position “distinct and separate from the people and the nation” (Gramsci, 1992, p. 418).

Conversely, the organic intellectual establishes a strong connection with subalterns. This connection helps form, at the political-cultural level, a “historical bloc” capable of acting within the framework of power relations in the given historical situation. As Stuart Hall pointed out, “Relations of force,” which “constitute the actual terrain of political and social struggle and development,” are established from time to time (Hall, 1996, p. 411). These occur within a general framework in which “no necessary teleological evolution” is assumed (Hall, 1996, p. 422).

Now, by situating the figure of the organic intellectual within the discussion of two models of criticism in German critical theory and the traditions of post- and decolonial studies, it becomes clear that we face two distinct alternatives regarding the position of the social critic. On one hand, there is the neo-Hegelian model of immanent criticism. This model is anchored in an ideal of the progressive and teleological development of reason. By adopting this parameter, the critical theorist, acting *alone*, so to speak, and sometimes even against the ‘local’ claims of subordinates, has the primary task of identifying those blocks and deformations in the development of reason that he considers to be social pathologies.

Conversely, critics organically connected to subordinates start from their demands,

needs, and desires, interpreting and reworking them on a theoretical level and advancing them in light of the current power relations and conflicts existing at a specific moment in history. Subordinates' demands and positions are understood not in light of a normative ideal of "rationality" (or irrationality), but rather as emancipatory visions, conceptions, and ideologies. The organic critic is committed to making these positions hegemonic within the framework of the struggles that arise from time to time.

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