

# THE CHALLENGE OF PROGRESS

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CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY  
VOLUME 36

**THE CHALLENGE OF  
PROGRESS: THEORY  
BETWEEN CRITIQUE AND  
IDEOLOGY**

EDITED BY

**HARRY F. DAHMS**  
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*This volume is dedicated to the memory of  
Moishe Postone (1942–2018), member of the  
Editorial Board from 2002 to 2018 and  
contributor to volumes 19 and 33.*

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# CONTENTS

*List of Contributors* xi

**Introduction**  
*Harry F. Dahms* 1

**PART I**  
**IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGE: A CRITICAL**  
**DISCUSSION OF *THE END OF PROGRESS:***  
***DECOLONIZING THE NORMATIVE FOUNDATIONS***  
***OF CRITICAL THEORY* (2016), BY AMY ALLEN**

**History, Critique, and Progress: Amy Allen’s “*End of Progress*”  
and the Normative Grounding of Critical Theory**  
*Reha Kadakal* 15

**Inheriting Critical Theory: A Review of Amy Allen’s**  
***The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative***  
***Foundations of Critical Theory***  
*George Steinmetz* 37

**Back to Adorno: Critical Theory’s Problem of**  
**Normative Grounding**  
*Karen Ng* 49

**Decolonizing Critical Theory**  
*Kevin Olson* 61

**Progress, Normativity, and the “Decolonization” of**  
**Critical Theory: Reply to Critics**  
*Amy Allen* 73

**PART II**  
**ASSESSING THE CHALLENGE: PROGRESS,**  
**POLITICS, AND IDEOLOGY**

**Nietzsche after Charlottesville**  
*Robert J. Antonio* 95

<b>“How Can [We] Not Know?” <i>Blade Runner</i> as Cinematic Landmark in Critical Thought</b>	
<i>Lawrence Hazelrigg</i>	111
<b>Sociology at the End of History: Profession, Vocation and Critical Practice</b>	
<i>Daniel M. Harrison</i>	133
<b>PART III</b>	
<b>CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGE: THE DYNAMICS OF PROGRESS IN THE MODERN AGE</b>	
<b>Las Vegas as the Anthropocene: The Neoliberal City as Desertification All the Way Down</b>	
<i>Timothy W. Luke</i>	159
<b>Exchanging Social Change for Social Class: Traditional Marriage Proposals as Status and Scrip</b>	
<i>Patricia Arend and Katherine Comeau</i>	179
<b>Sociology’s Emancipation from Philosophy: The Influence of Francis Bacon on Émile Durkheim</b>	
<i>Shawn Van Valkenburgh</i>	199
<i>About the Contributors</i>	217
<i>Index</i>	221

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# INTRODUCTION

Harry F. Dahms

In 2016, two books appeared that shared two aspects: both addressed issues pertaining to the future, and the covers of both books showed a white man in a dark suit in a precarious situation.

One book is about “imagined futures,” and the cover shows a white man standing at the edge of a concrete overpass whose construction must have ended abruptly, since there is no evidence in the photo of a continuing construction effort; the overpass ends with a clean cut, in midair, and the man is looking straight ahead, into the distance; we (the observer/reader/photographer) are standing at ground level, looking up. The person at the precipice where the overpass should continue is carrying a briefcase and wearing a business suit, with a white shirt and a reddish tie. The sky above is blue and clear, without a hint of clouds.

The other book promises to address “the end of progress,” and its cover shows a man in motion, striding from left to right across a flat concrete surface that has cracked; the photo was taken as the person is moving across a crack that is a few inches wide, which extends beyond the upper edge of the book cover and splits into two cracks in the bottom part of the image, extending beyond the lower edge of the cover. This man also is dressed in a dark suit (black, as far as one can tell) and a white shirt; it is not clear, however, he does not appear to be wearing a formal business suit, and he certainly is not wearing a tie. Like the person on the other cover, he is looking straight ahead, in this case in the direction in which he heading, to a point beyond the (right) edge of the cover. We (the observer/reader/photographer) are hovering slightly above the scene; all the angle of vision allows for is the concrete floor with cracks extending beyond sight, and the man in suit.

On the one hand, it is highly likely that the choice of images for the two books covers (by different publishing houses, to be sure) is purely accidental. On the other hand, as the saying goes, there are no accidents. In this instance, the coincidence is not merely that both books were published during the same year

on related topics – in essence: the future, especially the future of the modern world – but more so that the themes of future and progress visually are tied to a sense of precariousness, of no way forward or of the ground under one’s feet coming apart, especially the real or imagined precariousness of the position of white men in black suits in today’s world, as the privileges they have enjoyed up until now appear to be threatened. The most intriguing coincidence between the two book covers, however, is the fact that corresponding books appeared in 2016. Numerous political and cultural trends had been underway up until then which highlighted the weakening commitment to, and waning appeal and deepening crisis of, democracy as well as modernity, among substantial segments of the population in a growing number of countries, such as Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, and Poland. Yet, the Brexit referendum and the US Presidential election in 2016, on June 23 and November 8, respectively, sent shock waves around the world, among individuals and groups that share, implicitly or explicitly, a constructive and forward-looking perspective on progress and the future. Much has been made of the fact that both the Brexit referendum (e.g., Outhwaite, 2017) and the most recent US Presidential election (e.g., Kivisto, 2017) at least in part were expressions of the intensifying anger on the part of white men in the face of eroding privileges; one might add that modern societies as they emerged historically, with regard to social and economic structures of inequality and as systems of power, resulted from or were strongly influenced by the privileged actions and choices of white men, or rather, by the actions and choices of privileged white men. After all, the privileges of the latter do not just compare to those who are not white or minorities or women, but also to other white men whose identities, however, are wrapped up with their whiteness and the concurrent categorical possibility of their having the potential of becoming privileged as well, or of it having to be someone else’s fault that they are not privileged. To be sure, this is neither to suggest that white men determined and controlled the direction of the evolution of economic and social structures, nor that white men were responsible for *creating* capitalism and the kind of progress that came with it, nor that white men do not also constitute their own social and economic structure. Yet, it is undeniable that overall, white men – especially white men *in suits* – benefitted more greatly from the social, political, and economic configurations of modern capitalist societies than any other group.

The books I have been referring to are Amy Allen’s *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (2016) and Jens Beckert’s *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* (2016). The man hurrying across the cracked cement floor adorns Allen’s book, and the man standing on the edge of the incomplete overpass in on the cover of Beckert’s book. Both books, in very different ways, acknowledge the fact that we live in a world in which capitalism has become “normal,” the singular reality to reckon with, regardless of whether we are envisioning or dreaming of capitalism’s impending demise, whether modern capitalist societies constitute an increasingly *destructive* rather than productive totality (if we employ as the relevant reference the planet, humankind, or the biosphere as a whole, rather than modern capitalist societies only), or whether we defend capitalism with fervor. After all, from the outset,

“capitalism” was not a static socioeconomic and political system but, more precisely, a system in which static and dynamic dimensions and forces translate into and sustain a reality which – in terms of social theory – constitutes both a moving target of sorts, and a social context that continually must reinvent itself – or rather, its material foundation. As Marx and Engels formulated one of modern societies’ defining paradoxes, the bourgeoisie maintains its predominant position in modern society by continuously revolutionizing the means of production. As a consequence, modern societies perpetually are involved in multiple processes of more or less far-reaching adjustments which, in many regards and at the same time, resemble a vast evolutionary process that constitutes a “cosmos” (Weber) that, on the one hand, is resistant to illumination and rational representation and, on the other, is against consistent observation in any meaningful sense. Neither Allen, nor Beckert expects or dreams of capitalism’s impending demise, nor do they defend it with fervor, and both are highly cognizant of the fact there is no simple stance to adopt that would provide certainty with regard to “progress,” to the fate of modern societies and democracy, or to the future in the broader sense.

Beckert’s book is at the intersection of social theory and economic sociology. In the introduction, he writes that:

The capacity to imagine counterfactual futures is [...] a human characteristic that exists independent of capitalism. Imagined futures are crucial to understanding the development of modernity in general; and they exist, though in different forms, in traditional societies as well. Religious eschatology, for instance, projects futures unrelated to the economy. By the same token, the capitalist economy’s orientation toward an open economic future does not exist solely at the level of action orientations: the capitalist economy institutionalizes specific systemic pressures that enforce a temporal orientation toward future economic opportunities and risks. Only by closely examining these institutionalized pressures may we comprehensibly shed light on the role of actors’ temporal orientations with regard to economic processes. (Beckert, 2016, pp. 3–4)

The innovative aspect of Beckert’s book pertains to the fact that actors in modern economies and societies are not motivated exclusively by the rational pursuit especially of their set economic interests, but that they must make, as it were, leaps of faith regarding the future, in order be able to act and decide and choose at all. Indeed, the book is a sustained argument, based on a related thorough analysis:

that imaginaries of the future are a crucial element of capitalist development, and that capitalist dynamics are vitally propelled by the shaping of expectations. Institutional trajectories from the past are not irrelevant to outcomes [...] but [...] sociologists [and, we might add, social theorists; H.F.D.] would do well to shift more of their attention to the future, particularly to the images of the future that actors nourish. Furthermore, temporal orientations and perceptions of the future are relevant far beyond the economic realm investigated here [...] “history matters,” but the future matters just as much. (Beckert, 2016, p. 6)

The book concludes as follows:

Modern capitalism entails much more than instrumentally rational actors and calculative devices – it includes the creativity expressed in imagined futures. The infinite new paths they propose are an indispensable part of the eternal process of capitalist renewal, which is fully contingent in its content, and is sporadically interrupted by crisis. This mixture of creativity and destructiveness was described many decades ago by the German-American theologian Paul Tillich in a single word: demonic. (Beckert, 2016, p. 285)

Inevitably, Beckert includes in his considerations and analysis the issue of progress without which modern society would not have emerged and could not function. It is a concept loaded with a broad range of connotations and implications that point in a variety of directions and raise an array of issues.

While Beckert's argument and the object of his investigation are infused with diverse notions of and perspectives on progress, the starting point of Allen's book is Adorno's observation that "progress occurs where it ends," and it is located squarely at the point of tension between the critical theory of the early Frankfurt School and subsequent incarnations of this tradition, especially those of Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst.<sup>1</sup> Yet, *The End of Progress* (Allen, 2016) is not about progress approaching its end – empirically, theoretically, or in terms of the imaginaries that guide individuals', social groups' and societies' actions, aspirations, and public policies. Rather, the argument is both more subtle and more disconcerting, as it pertains to the fact that the notion of progress as it informed, legitimated, and accompanied the rise of modern societies has been entangled with colonialism not just in many traditional approaches to telling and analyzing the story of the historical trajectory of modern societies, but in critical approaches also, including in critical theory:

My main *critical* aim is to show that and how and why Frankfurt School critical theory remains wedded to problematically Eurocentric and/or foundationalist strategies for grounding normativity. My primary *positive* aim is to decolonize Frankfurt School critical theory by rethinking its strategy for grounding normativity, in such a way as to open this project up to the aims and concerns of post- and decolonial critical theory. [...] such an opening up is crucial if Frankfurt School critical theory is to be truly critical, in the sense of being able to engage in the ongoing self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of our postcolonial—by which I mean formally decolonized but still neocolonial—age. (Allen, 2016, p. xii)

The critical theory of the early Frankfurt School started out with the aspiration to spell out standards for, and to attain the most advanced critical consciousness of, its own time (the 1930s and 1940s in the industrially most advanced societies), and to do so for modern society more generally, in a manner that required critical reflexivity with regard to their own positionality. Yet, for its current proponents to continue to be captives of an understanding of and perspective on progress in the twenty-first century that warrants rigorous scrutiny, this does not bode well for the state of social theory, more generally including the social sciences and philosophy, and even less for modern societies. It is in this regard that the events of 2016, Brexit and the US Presidential election, and many elections that have followed, such as in the Philippines, Austria, Italy, and most recently Brazil, are cause for concern, as they highlight in a variety of ways the continuing crises of modernity and democracy. Allen's book is a sustained and rigorous critique of how the writings of *recent* critical theorists that followed in, but also in important ways departed from, the footsteps of Theodor W. Adorno (arguably the most sophisticated and committed representative and promoter of "first-generation" critical theory), continue to adhere to an inherently western European understanding of progress, focusing on Jürgen Habermas as the main representative of the "second generation," Axel Honneth for the "third



generation,” and Rainer Forst for the “fourth generation.” In addition, Allen’s perspective is both inspired and informed by the writings of Michael Foucault.

In this volume of *Current Perspectives of Social Theory*, a set of contributions addresses the current state of affairs, in different ways. What we are facing is not just a crisis with regard to the internal functioning and widespread support of democratic values and institutions as it is tied to the dynamics of capitalism, and as far as the commitment to maintaining social, political, economic, cultural, organizational, and technological achievements of the modern age is concerned, but an array of challenges to many dimensions of progress. Part I of this volume assembles four review essays regarding Amy Allen’s *The End of Progress*, by sociologists George Steinmetz and Reha Kadakal, philosopher Karen Ng, and political theorist Kevin Olson, followed by a response by Amy Allen.<sup>2</sup> Part II brings together historically situated analyses of challenges to progress, including an examination of the role of the philosophy of Nietzsche in the resurgence of right-wing thought and activism, an analysis of Ridley Scott’s 1982 movie, *Blade Runner*, and a re-evaluation of Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century. Part III, finally, presents analyses of the dynamics of progress, focusing on desertification processes in and around Las Vegas, Nevada, of the changing dynamics of traditional marriage proposals in the United States, and of the influence of Francis Bacon on Emile Durkheim.

Among the theorists whose work is included in his volume are several authors who have been actively involved in *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* for some time, whose writings have appeared here before, or whose work is published here for the first time. Robert Antonio, Lawrence Hazelrigg, and Timothy Luke have been associate editors and members of the editorial board for many years, and have each contributed several essays over the years. Especially noteworthy is a well-known essay by Robert Antonio on climate change, which appeared in volume 26 and which sparked two responses and Antonio’s reply (in the same volume). Hazelrigg has functioned as coeditor for volumes 27 and 30. Amy Allen’s previous book, *The Politics of Our Selves* (2008), was discussed in a special section in volume 29. Previous volumes have included a chapter each from Kevin Olson, Reha Kadakal, and Daniel Harrison, as author or co-author. Karen Ng has been a member of the editorial board since 2015.

Reha Kadakal’s chapter is the first review essay in the section on Amy Allen’s *The End of Progress*. It constitutes an effort to clarify further the normative foundations of critical social theory by means of a close reading of Allen’s critique of current Frankfurt School theory and the alternative methodology it presents. The combination of “problematizing genealogy” and “metanormative contextualism” presents the opportunity to examine whether such a methodology constitutes a viable alternative for the normative grounding of critical theory, focusing on whether Allen’s rendering of philosophy of history accurately characterizes related problems in recent Frankfurt School critical theory; whether problematizing genealogy and the notion of “unreason” qualify as true alternatives; and whether the distinction between metanormative and normative levels is tenable for critical theory. Drawing on Allen’s reiteration of the

mediated nature of categories, Kadakal suggests that the strong distinction between forms of thought underlying first and second-generation Frankfurt School critical theory should be framed against the backdrop of the specific context of the European historical present that informs its normative universe, rather than in terms of philosophy of history.

George Steinmetz's review examines claims made by Allen about the affinity between postcolonial theory and the approaches of Adorno and Foucault for purposes of criticizing the notion of historical progress, as well as her alternative approach to decolonization. He also addresses the status of Habermas' aim to put critical theory on a secure normative footing, Honneth's claim regarding the history of an ethical sphere that constitutes an unplanned learning process kept in motion by a struggle for recognition, and Forst's attempt to reconstruct Critical Theory's normative account via Kant rather than Hegel. Is Allen's claim that her approach is fully in the spirit of Critical Theory and may be seen as a continuation of Critical Theory's first generation, as in Adorno, justified? How does it a "genealogical" approach that draws on Adorno's negative dialectics and critique of identity thinking, along with Nietzsche's conception of genealogy, as developed by Foucault? Steinmetz then focuses on Allen's partial compromise with the idea of progress, critical theory's ability to benefit from engagement with other critical theories and theories of ethics, aside from postcolonial theory, and nonwestern theories that shed a different light on Allen's critique, thus drawing attention to the gesture of decolonizing, the distinctions between colonialism and empire, and the sociology of knowledge production that undergirds a "decolonizing" critique.

Karen Ng recognizes Allen's work as an important intervention in the narrow sense of critical theory *after* the early Frankfurt School, as it set out to reconcile and redeem the philosophies of history found in Kant and Hegel, and regards the book as a sophisticated and compelling challenge to critical theories that are normatively grounded in Eurocentric conceptions of progress. The two-fold aims of Allen's book are to extricate the critical theories of Habermas and Honneth from a conception of historical progress that takes European modernity as both exemplary and authoritative, and to rethink the relation between the historical and the normative for purposes of identifying an alternative approach to normative grounding. Ng contends that Allen's positive thesis that critical theory's normative foundations can be reconceived along the lines of metanormative contextualism inspired by Adorno and Foucault is problematic, and that more modest and narrowly focused conceptions of progress would be more productive. Furthermore, Honneth's social ontology as it is central to his early recognition theory can be separated from his stronger statements concerning the teleological progression of history and is more central for his project of normative grounding.

Kevin Olson's essay is motivated by similar intuitions as Allen, despite paths that diverge at times. Allen's critique of the Frankfurt School's tendency toward Eurocentrism, progress-thinking, and historical teleology should be situated in a broader project directed at addressing the struggles and wishes of our age. Olson welcomes Allen's ability to put in stark contrast some significant problems of

Frankfurt School critical theory, and he commends her effort to renew the tradition. Allen's reliance on postcolonial theory to demonstrate how the recent work of the Frankfurt School is entwined with notions of progress. He then asks what can be salvaged from Frankfurt School social theory, beyond its teleology and normative foundationalism, whether it is possible to imagine a theory of the public sphere inspired by Habermas but released from the normative bounds placed on public discourse by the idea of "regulative presuppositions of speech," and what might happen if Honneth's conception of freedom were to be freed from universalistic historicism centered in European modernity, if supporting Forst's notion of public discourse would not come at the prize his approach to justification.

In her response, Allen restates the motivation for and rationale of the book to defend her interpretive claims regarding Adorno, Foucault, Habermas, Honneth, and Forst. Her application of standards drawn from Adorno and Foucault, as they jive with postcolonial critical theory, to the perspectives, claims, and theoretical contributions of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst show how they presume a historical present that has shaped successive generations of Frankfurt School critical theorists. This historical present is characterized by relative social and political stability as it has come to be typical of the United States and Europe (and, one might add, initially West Germany, and then unified Germany), but not many other societies where anti-colonial struggles, proxy wars, and even genocides occurred in response to persistent legacies of European colonialism, during the twentieth century. According to Allen, critical theory must move beyond its implied second-, third- and fourth-generation sociohistorical reference frame and admit, in productive fashion, how its own critical perspective is situated within the postcolonial present.

As the first contribution to Part II, Robert Antonio's chapter on "Nietzsche after Charlottesville" starts out from the observation that Nietzsche's texts entail diverse and at times contradictory themes that are resistant to straightforward summation and open to conflicting interpretations, not least because Nietzsche was prone to deploying puzzling and disorienting statements intended to provoke readers. Thus, there is not likely to be "one true Nietzsche." Antonio points out that Nietzsche's sociocultural and social psychological arguments regarding German antisemitism and nationalism contradict current *alt-right* views, and theorizes conditions that give rise to this distinctive type of demagoguery. Contentious appropriations of Nietzsche have been part and parcel of conflicts over capitalist crises and reactionary populist revivals for more than one hundred years. Moreover, rampant growth and the expansion of the global economy, especially when compared to the biosphere, have increased material throughput and production of waste, in the process generating a host of increasingly urgent global environmental problems, not least climate change. It is telling that under such circumstances, members of the *alt-right* contend that cosmopolitan people are deracinated, devoid of their cultural particularity, and spiritually lost. By contrast, progressives insist that a stronger commitment to cosmopolitanism will increase diversity, enhance the ability to put oneself in the shoes (and positions) of others, and increase communicative capacities and powers of cooperation. Nietzsche encouraged individuals as human beings to

respect nature, and it is important to protect his thought from *alt-right* efforts to utilize his thought and writings, especially for the sake of new political-economic alternatives and forms of collective action that are more conducive to the reconciliation of the natural and social world, including the worlds of politics, culture, and economy.

Lawrence Hazelrigg's essay situates Ridley Scott's 1982 film, *Blade Runner*, which was an adaptation of Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* ([1968]1975) (and which, if I might add, arguably was one of the few adaptations in the history of film that improved upon the literary original) within a general context of critical theory, with two goals in mind: to draw attention to the affinity between themes raised in the film and a set of specific issues that have been important to critical theory, and to examine, criticize, and expand on some of the later issues, specifically the dialectic of identity/difference. The essay is intended as a contribution to studies of specific films in terms of social, cultural, political theory, e.g., considering scenarios and sequences of a plotline and assessing degrees and types of realism at work in cinematic format. Hazelrigg concludes that *Blade Runner* highlighted the evolving meaning of prosthetics and related practical and conceptual-semantic boundaries of what it means to be "human" — a common trope in science-fiction films.

The third contribution to Part II is by Daniel Harrison, who examines the peculiar situation of sociologists at the current historical juncture. As human civilization appears to be threatened by collapse in the medium or long term, the social and natural worlds are in a process of rapid reconfiguration. Individuals are forced to rely on themselves to an increasing extent, the function of government is being redefined, state power is becoming more distant and terrifying at the same time — how are sociologists and social theorists to respond? Harrison's immanent critique of sociology as a profession, vocation, and critical practice points out how sociology is a perilous choice as a vocation, for independent researchers as well as for the contracting professoriate, even though some sociologists are becoming more critical in and of this context. As well they should: as plans in Brazil to shut down sociology and philosophy departments demonstrate, sociology there and elsewhere is especially necessary in the early twenty-first century as both a mode of intervention and a method of inquiry.

Timothy Luke's essay is the first chapter in Part III and an exercise in applied social theory. Las Vegas, Nevada, serves as an indicator for transformations in the age of the Anthropocene. Focusing on the process and threat of desertification, Las Vegas illustrates the logic of such processes in many other places that provide examples for biopolitical spaces and geophysical places that replicate the so-called resonance dilemma of people in search for sustainable lifestyles in global spaces under strain. With human factors that are situated in historical contexts resembling "forces of Nature" in geological history, Luke scrutinizes systems of organized growth that are linked to challenging processes like commercial degradation, urban demography, military development, and nuclear devastation responsible for desertification. Treating Las Vegas as exemplifying the "globalizing neoliberal omnipolitanization" of the surface of the Earth, the