

From Criticizing Progress to Psychoanalyzing Critical Theory. An Interview with Amy Allen

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Abstract

The importance of psychoanalysis for Critical Theory is unabated, but controversial. Regressive reactions to the crises of capitalism are currently reviving the debate about its relevance for the Frankfurt School. The interview with Amy Allen follows the focus of her book *Critique on the Couch* (2020) through questions about the significance of psychoanalysis for Critical Theory as well as the implications of her arguments for a theory of the subject and a critique of eurocentric concepts of progress.

Keywords

Psychoanalysis; Critical Theory; Frankfurt School; Melanie Klein; Institute for Social Research; Social Critique.

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**From Criticizing Progress to Psychoanalyzing Critical Theory.
An Interview with Amy Allen**

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The importance of psychoanalysis for Critical Theory is as continuous as it is controversial. In the history of the Institute for Social Research, there was great interest in Sigmund Freud's ideas on the nature of the human psyche, especially after Horkheimer became the director of the Institute and proposed the project of a materialist interdisciplinarity. In the decades after Adorno's and Horkheimer's deaths, however, justified skepticism about the tendency of psychoanalysis toward an individualistic perspectivization on the one hand, and to disciplinary unification of Critical Theory on the other, could be seen. Both together led to a visibly precarious status of psychoanalysis in the centers of Critical Theory. However, the crisis dynamics of capitalist socialization and their regressive treatment are currently leading to a revival in interest in psychoanalysis, and not for the first time. Most recently, Amy Allen has presented an extensive defense of the relevance of psychoanalysis to Critical Theory: *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis* (published by Columbia University Press in 2020). This work builds upon Allen's *The End of Progress* (published by Columbia University Press in 2016) by putting the argument from her earlier book into use, developing a model in which subjectivity and critical practice are intertwined. Two central points characterize the conceptual relation between the books, which together interrogate early Critical Theory. Relying on her critique of progress, Allen replaces the notion with that of a melancholic process of maturation. This argument is then connected to a consideration of a progressivist bias in Critical Theory's critiques of society and its underlying framing of social development.

Allen develops her argument in a close reading of Critical Theory's discussion of psychoanalysis. In *Critique on the Couch*, she takes up Axel Honneth's plea for a realist concept of the person. Honneth's argument is informed by psychoanalysis, specifically by Donald W. Winnicott's object relations theory. To strengthen these considerations and in distinction from Honneth, however, Allen draws on the psychoanalytic theorizing of Melanie Klein, Winnicott's teacher. Klein's position differs decidedly from the latter's emphasis on environmental relatedness and connectedness, among other things, through her focus on inner-psychic drive dynamics. Based on her reading of Klein, Allen interrogates the references to psychoanalysis in Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Robin Celikates, and links these considerations to a discussion of Eurocentric notions of progress and progressivist understandings of subjective as well as social development. Allen then links the results of these interrogations to a plea for a form of critique that is informed by a dialogically conceived psychoanalytic setting, that has a high affinity for interaction, and stands in close proximity to a subject-theoretically reflected model of deliberation. The interview published here follows the focal points of Allen's book by asking questions about the significance of psychoanalysis for Critical Theory in general and the philosophy practiced in it in particular, about its relation to other theories of the

subject, and about implications for a critique of domination.¹

TH&JFP: We would like to begin with a question that takes a look at the overall field you treat in your book. You argue against rationalizing tendencies in Critical Theory and in favor of a comprehensive integration of psychoanalytic theory formation. Against this background, we would like to ask: How would you characterize the general theoretical and practical relevance of psychoanalysis today as an approach that aims at comprehending both rational and irrational dimensions of human self-understanding?

AA: My book focuses on the relevance of psychoanalysis for critical social theory as that project is understood and practiced in the Frankfurt School tradition. I don't really take up the broader questions of why and how psychoanalysis remains relevant more generally, either theoretically or practically. This is not because I think such questions are unimportant, but more so because I don't feel that I have much to add to the work of someone like Jonathan Lear, who has argued beautifully for the ongoing theoretical and practical relevance of psychoanalysis for more than twenty-five years. His 1995 essay "On Killing Freud (Again)" is a true classic that has had a significant influence on my understanding of these issues.

One of Lear's great insights is that, like metaphysics, psychoanalysis begins in wonder. But whereas metaphysics begins in the wonder that there is something rather than nothing, psychoanalysis begins in the wonder that human behavior is so maddeningly and frustratingly unintelligible. Why are human beings so messed up, so irrational and inscrutable, above all to ourselves? Although this question is never *not* relevant, either theoretically or practically, it does seem to press upon us with particular urgency now. With recent years marked by one seemingly unintelligible event after another—armed political protests against public health measures; widespread acceptance of outlandish and baroque conspiracy theories; the spectacular sight of U.S. citizens attacking their own Capitol; and all of this against the backdrop of accelerating anthropogenic climate destruction—is it any surprise we find ourselves wondering why human beings persistently act irrationally? Although fields such as behavioral economics and social psychology also dedicate themselves to addressing such questions, Lear makes the compelling point that, however interesting their findings may be, these disciplines restrict themselves to explaining irrational *choices* or *decisions*. But human irrationality is more than the failure to make rational choices; it can also take the form of an entire way of structuring and interpreting our experience of ourselves and others.

As for critical theory specifically, I take my cue here from Axel Honneth, who has argued that psychoanalysis offers a realistic account of the person that can help critical theory avoid the temptation of moralistic idealism. In other words, psychoanalysis helps critical theory remain grounded in an understanding of people as they are—because this is crucial for understanding how and why our best plans for emancipatory futures are so often thwarted—while at the same time offering a vision of our potential for transformation.

TH&JP: Your position on the connection between Critical Theory and psychoanalysis includes not only a model of transformative communication but a model of subjectivity and personhood as well. You focus on the psychological maturation process with an emphasis on the ambivalence of progress in subject-theoretical terms. We are very interested in the implications of this model for current subject-theoretical problem areas. This concerns deconstruction and dissolution tendencies in particular: here, relational approaches can be found that aim at breaking up a clear-cut polarity between the individual subject and an interpersonal or social environment. They do this by entertaining concepts such as transindividuality (as discussed by Jason Read), dividuality (a term coined by Michaela Ott to comprehend human beings from inside their participatory entanglement), or milieu (a term discussed by Maria Muhle to highlight the decisive role of the environment when it comes to giving shape to living non-human and human individuals) in order to do justice to global challenges that concern human beings in their intertwining with their both social and natural habitats. How would you connect your considerations to approaches such as these?

AA: If the general aim of such approaches is to highlight how subjects are formed in relation their social and natural environments, then I think that my work shares some of their motivations. I'm certainly interested—and have been for many years—in the broad question of how individuals are constituted in and through their relationship to society, and yet remain capable of self and social transformation. Indeed, this is the central question of my 2008 book, *The Politics of Our Selves*. However, I approach this question not through the work of Spinoza, Simondon, and Deleuze, but rather through Habermas's theory of individuation through socialization, Foucault's account of subjection, and feminist theories of relational autonomy. Viewed from this perspective, I would say that I've been interested in the question of philosophical anthropology, broadly construed, for at least the last twenty years.

With respect to these questions, Melanie Klein—whose work is central to *Critique on the Couch*—is particularly interesting. Klein is fascinating because her metapsychology is situated between purely intrapsychic and more intersubjective or relational approaches to psychoanalysis. Although Klein takes the opposing, intrapsychic forces of the life and death drives to be fundamental to psychic life, she understands the drives in social or relational terms, as ways of relating to others, either lovingly or destructively. For Klein, the drives are primordial psychic forces, but we are also born into a world of object-relations. So, we find ourselves constantly negotiating the relationship between our inner and outer worlds, between our actual relationships with other human beings and the ways in which those relationships are filtered through unconscious phantasy. In this way, Klein offers a rich, complex, and ambivalent account of the intersubjective or relational subject.

Given her acceptance of drive theory, Klein is committed to making some rather strong claims about human nature. Unlike Klein, I tend to be a bit more cautious on this point. Thus, I understand drives as rooted in certain (apparently) inescapable features of the human condition and as capable of being shaped and re-constituted in relationship to historical and social forces. This is primarily because I'm worried (perhaps overly so)

about opening the door to a biologically reductionistic version of drive theory that ignores the importance of human sociality in shaping the self and that undermines the possibility of human agency. That said, I'm aware that there are more expressivist and processual models of biology that are not straightforwardly reductionistic, and that it would be a mistake to equate biology with biological reductionism. I'm also sympathetic to current attempts to revive the project of what Federica Gregoratto, Heikki Ikäheimo, Emmanuel Renault, Arvi Särkelä, and Italo Testa have called critical naturalism. Although I haven't explored this topic in any detail, I do think that Klein's work could be relevant for such a project.

TH&JFP: In your book, you ultimately argue for a different image of both theory and theoretical practice. In the course of your reflections you come to speak of Adorno's problematization of a cross-disciplinary linkage of philosophy and sociology, which also alludes to the relationship between theory and empirical input. You develop a model for critical intervention along the lines of psychoanalytic practice, but in doing so you move the clinical-empirical dimension of Melanie Klein into the background. Based on this, how do you assess the interdisciplinary challenge the empirical dimension of psychoanalysis poses for a philosophically oriented understanding of Critical Theory?

AA: If I understand your question correctly I think that I might disagree slightly with the terms in which it is posed. I turn to psychoanalysis not so much for an empirical account of the psyche or the person but more for a philosophical anthropology—that is, a theory of the person or an interpretation of the human psychic and social condition. To be sure, that theory or interpretation is informed by and continuously revised in light of clinical experience, but the aim of that process is not the empirical confirmation of scientific hypotheses but rather the refinement of our understanding of human experience in light of the interpretation of unconscious meanings. Although Freud himself was famously very invested in defending psychoanalysis's status as a science, I think this is a mistake. The value of psychoanalysis does not lie in uncovering universal laws of human nature or increasing our predictive powers, but rather in enhancing our understanding of the human condition and in enabling analysts to undergo a transformation in how they relate to themselves, the world, and others. In short, I don't take the value of psychoanalysis to stand or fall by its ability to offer an empirically verifiable account of the psyche.

That said, it would of course be a problem for my argument if psychoanalysis had been definitively clinically superseded or empirically disconfirmed. Fortunately I don't think this is the case. While some might argue that psychoanalysis has been clinically superseded by therapeutic approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy and psychopharmacology, I think that such a claim rests on the mistaken assumption that these are merely different ways of pursuing the same goal. Even if all of these therapies share the aim of alleviating psychological suffering, psychoanalysis also aims at something more: as Lear reminds us, it is not only a means to an end, but also a way of helping us to reconsider, expand, and creatively redefine our own ends. In other words, as my dear friend Mari Ruti has argued beautifully and persuasively in her work, psychoanalysis addresses itself to the classical philosophical question of the good life. To

assume that cognitive behavioral therapy or psychopharmacology offer different—much less: superior—answers to this question is to make a category mistake.

Similarly, with respect to the suggestion that psychoanalysis has been empirically disproven by recent work in empirical psychology, fueled by the rise of neuroscience, I think that the jury is very much still out. The emerging field of neuropsychology is busy investigating whether and how the findings of neuroscience might confirm, illuminate, revise, and extend psychoanalytic concepts—and vice versa. Moreover, if we take psychoanalytic insight to be grounded in the interpretation of unconscious meanings, then it is not at all clear how it could be empirically disproven. This is a bit like saying that poetry could be disproven through recourse to neuroscience. Neuroscience might be able to show us which area of the brain lights up when someone is reading or writing poetry, but does this amount to *disproving* poetry? What would that even mean?

TH&JFP: Let us now turn to the implications of your argument about the practice of Critical Theory. External critique, you warn, can lead to rationalizations of critique-deserving social processes as a defense mechanism of the criticized. You argue for modeling the practice of critique on psychoanalytic practice instead. Within this process, the dynamics of transference and countertransference as well as a shared context of experience allow for a transformation of object relations. This implies for you that critique has to be practiced within social relations. Psychoanalysis, however, can be described as a highly regulated exchange of words among individuals who are ascribed unequal positions. Do these specificities of the psychoanalytic dialogue imply limitations to the analogy of psychoanalysis and critique or do they, on the contrary, potentially contribute to a better understanding of the persisting differences between critical theorists and those criticized, and, if the latter is the case, how exactly can this contribution be understood?

AA: Although it's true that the analyst and analysand are not situated completely symmetrically, we have to be careful on this point. At the very least, it's important to insist that the classical, authoritarian model of the analyst as the expert who is in a position to offer an objective diagnosis of what ails the analysand is outmoded. The key here is the concept of countertransference, which has emerged as a prominent theme in post-Freudian psychoanalysis. As Joel Whitebook has argued, accepting the role of the countertransference means acknowledging that both the analysand's and the analyst's unconscious are in play in the analysis. This has the effect of undermining the authoritarian image of the analyst as the arbiter of health and normality. Although the analyst comes to analysis with a different kind of experience—to paraphrase Lacan, the analyst brings nothing other than her desire to the analysis, but it is an experienced desire—this does not give them an expertise or knowledge that is inaccessible to the analysand. Moreover, as Robin Celikates has pointed out, even if the analyst also draws on a specialized theoretical vocabulary that is not initially available to analysand, it is a language that the analysand can learn to appropriate.

By analogy, the critical theorist should be understood as an engaged participant in ongoing struggles for social and political transformation. The critical theorist may bring a specialized theoretical vocabulary to their understanding of the social world, but this,

too, is a language that can be (and often is) appropriated by social movement actors and social agents. Beyond this, what the critical theorist brings to social struggles is perhaps nothing more—but also nothing less—than the experience of having undergone a change in their relationship to their social world, having come to understand that world as, in large part, a contingent construction that is open to internal transformation.

Moreover, although this issue is not taken up in my book, progressive social movements play a crucial mediating role here. After all, there is an important *prima facie* disanalogy between psychoanalysis and social critique: whereas individuals decide to enter analytic treatment, societies as a whole—even deeply troubled ones, perhaps especially deeply troubled ones—do not seek out critical theory. But social movement actors, by giving voice to the affective outrage, felt suffering, and desire for transformation of marginalized and oppressed groups could be seen as analogous to the analysand seeking out treatment. On this model, the analogue of psychoanalytic dialogue would be not a direct dialogue between critical theorists and the society as a whole, but rather one that is mediated through the collective movements that are engaged in struggles for progressive social change.

TH&JFP: Social domination comes in different forms. The material and ideological foundations for, *inter alia*, antisemitism and racism, are not entirely congruent. Can critique practiced within social relations challenge those (and other) wrongs alike, or would you argue that there are forms of social domination that are either out of reach for Critical Theory or that require adjustments and amendments to your model of critique based on psychoanalytic practice?

AA: Extending a bit the thought behind my previous answer, I suppose that if there are social wrongs that are so insidious that they are neither noticed nor addressed by existing social or political movements, then it would be difficult for critique to find a foothold in such cases. But I think this is a bullet that I'm willing to bite, as it were. I've always been partial to Nancy Fraser's definition of critical theory as the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age. This definition ties the project of critical theory very closely to the work of existing emancipatory social and political movements. That said, given the extremely wide variety of progressive social movements in our age—movements against racism and white supremacy; against imperialism and settler colonialism; against misogyny and heteronormativity; against capitalism; and against ecological destruction—this way of understanding critical theory allows for a very expansive vision of the scope of critique.

TH&JFP: In your book, you argue in favor of a sober concept of democracy. The case of your discussion is populism and you argue that populists as well as some critics of populism both resort to unrealistic conceptions of the change democracy can bring about. Since the publication we have witnessed other conflicts that share aspects with this dynamic, for instance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are, furthermore, critique-deserving actions that are out of reach for democratic processes, such as Russia's war on Ukraine or the political constitution of non-democratic societies such as China,

for instance. Are critical theorists necessarily confined to a contribution to democratic processes? How can critical theorists engage with wrongs that are out of reach for democracy?

AA: I'm not an expert in democratic theory or in international relations, so I want to be cautious here. The brief sketch of depressive democracy that I offer in the book attempts to steer a path between triumphalism and defeatism about democracy. I would not argue that democracy is a normative horizon that critical theorists dare not exceed, but I also do not accept the claim that democratic ideals are wholly tainted by their current inadequate realization. The pressing issue—and this is implicit in your question, I think—is whether a commitment to democracy requires a commitment to realizing democracy only through democratic means. I won't pretend to have an answer to that question, but I do share the concern that if the answer to that question is yes, then true democracy may well remain impossible.

TH&JFP: *Critique on the Couch* concludes a two-book project on the Frankfurt School, beginning with *The End of Progress*. The project revises Critical Theory in light of current social circumstances and challenges the legacies of different rationalist reductionisms within this tradition. How have you continued to think about this project since the publication of both books?

AA: Of all of the criticisms that have been made of *The End of Progress*, there were two that really stuck with me and have spurred on my more recent research. The first was the complaint that, because I turn to Foucault and Adorno as my main resources for rethinking the role that progress narratives play in contemporary critical theory, my book offers a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism. Decolonial critics—including some of my own students!—in particular have contended that a genuine decolonization of critical theory can not be accomplished solely from within, but must entail an engagement with non-European thinkers and traditions. Although it is possible to overstate such a claim—after all, there are non-Eurocentric European thinkers and Eurocentric Latin American or South Asian ones; geography is not epistemological destiny—still, I think this is an important point. If the Frankfurt School project is to continue to be relevant and influential into its second century, we must engage more deeply and expansively with a broader array of critical theories, including non-European perspectives. This is something I have tried to do in my recent work, in a handful of essays that I have published in the last few years on the work of Achille Mbembe, Enrique Dussel, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

The second criticism addresses both books, and it has to do with the almost complete lack of attention in this project to the critique of contemporary neoliberal, financialized capitalism. This is problematic enough on its face, given the importance of capitalism in upholding contemporary structures of oppression and domination, but it is an especially striking lacuna given how central the critique of capitalism was to the early Frankfurt School, whose project I am explicitly recovering and attempting to reanimate. To make matters worse, in *The End of Progress*, I argued that critical theorists would be better off turning to the genealogical tradition than to the Marxist one for the

specific project of rethinking the relationship between history and normativity. In several of the most insightful and incisive responses to the book, critics have taken me to task for my hasty and ungrounded rejection of Marx(ism), which dismisses a vast and varied literature with one brief wave of the hand. Such a move not only fails to account for the important contributions that Marxism has made to the critique of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism, it also deprives me of important resources for developing a critique of capitalism.

My current book project is an attempt to think through some of these issues. Although the project is still very much a work in progress, I can give a few indications of where it is headed. First, although it is undoubtedly true that my dismissal of Marx in *The End of Progress* was not earned through a careful reading of his texts, I would nevertheless contend that a careful reading of those texts vindicates my claim about Marx. Although Marx's theory of history is complex and changes considerably over time, it remains, I contend, resolutely (if ambivalently) progressive. As for *Marxism*: well, that's a longer and much more complicated story, one that I am currently pursuing. The central question animating this project is this: (how) can the critique of capitalism be disentangled from the theory of history in Marxist thought? Although a number of European Marxists—including Benjamin, Bloch, Adorno, Althusser, and Gramsci, to name only the most obvious—have grappled with this question, in my current work I'm also looking to some Marxist theorists of imperialism—especially Rosa Luxemburg—and to non-European Marxist thinkers—including Du Bois and Dussel—for inspiration.

Notes

1 A German translation of the interview was published in *WestEnd. Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 2023 (vol. 2, 155–164). The interview was conducted in written form on the occasion of both the 100th anniversary of the Institute for Social Research and the recent publication of *Critique on the Couch* in German.

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Biography

Judith-Frederike Popp, PhD, is FWF senior post-doc at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Austria, leading the research project *Mediated Autonomy. Ideal and Reality of Aesthetic Practice*. She studied Philosophy, German literature and Psychoanalysis and did her PhD in Philosophy with a thesis titled *Irrationalität als Wagnis. Philosophische Theorie und psychoanalytische Praxis* at Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany (published as a monograph with Velbrück 2019). She was a visiting researcher in Chicago and Vienna in 2015 and 2020 and a teaching and research post-doc at the Faculty of Design Würzburg, Germany from 2018 till 2022. She currently works on her second monograph with the working title *Gestaltete Verhältnisse. Eine Produktionsästhetik des Subjekts*. Together with Lioudmila Voropai, she edited the volume *Adorno und die Medien. Kritik, Relevanz, Ästhetik* (Kadmos 2023).

Tobias Heinze is a doctoral researcher at the Institute for Social Research and a PhD candidate in Social Philosophy at Goethe University Frankfurt. He studied Sociology and Political Theory in Frankfurt, Darmstadt, Münster, and New York and was a visiting doctoral researcher at the School of Philosophy and Art History at the University of Essex in Autumn 2022. In his PhD thesis, he analyses Schelling's, Horkheimer's, and Adorno's contribution to a Critical Theory of Nature. He also researches contemporary and historical challenges of Critical Theory, such as the relationship between psychoanalysis and social philosophy. He is co-editor, with Martin Mettin, of the volume *"Denn das Wahre ist das Ganze nicht..." Beiträge zur Negativen Anthropologie Ulrich Sonnemanns* (Neofelis, 2021).