

Progress, Normativity, and the Dynamics of Social Change.
A conversation with Rahel Jaeggi and Amy Allen
conducted by Eva von Redecker

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Eva von Redecker: I would like to say a quick word to open up the conversation. I think that by moving the notion of progress to the center of your work, both of you accomplish something very interesting, in that you transpose an elaborate and well rehearsed debate in critical theory regarding the foundations of normativity away from the question of critique and into the history of social change and politics. This is what I find really exciting about this whole thematic field.

The approaches each of you offer could easily be construed as a direct clash—progress: for and against—, but I am not so interested in pretending that your positions are even congruent enough to be exact opposites regarding the same question. I think it is more interesting to figure out the constellation in which they stand to each other. (...) To start us off on your separate takes on progress, I want to begin with a question that might seem a bit playful, but might move us to the important details. I'd like to ask Amy why she thinks that some residual notion of progress, despite her many critiques of it, is, at the end of the day, indispensable for critical theory.

Amy Allen: I think I would have to start to answer that question by drawing on the distinction I make between backward-looking progress and forward-looking progress.¹ The idea is that the concept of progress has at least two sides: the backward-looking side is the one we employ when we read history as a story of progress in some sense, which could mean in terms of historical learning processes or social evolution or a more full-blown Enlightenment conception of the betterment of humankind. That's what I call progress as a 'fact', which is in scare quotes because this is obviously a normatively laden notion. (...) The forward-looking conception of progress is the one that we employ when we want to make our politics progressive—when we talk about the goal that we want to achieve, whether that is thought of in terms of a good society or achieving some sort of social ideal or, more negatively, as alleviating some forms of domination or existing conditions of oppression or suffering. The only sense in which I would say the notion of progress is indispensable for critical theory is this more forward-looking sense. I accept the idea that when we engage in the project of critique, we are critiquing existing social relations in light of some kind of conception of the better.

E.vR.: I think we should definitely get to what you think is problematic about that backward-looking story, but I first want to hear why Rahel, in a certain way, also thinks that a straightforward notion of history as progress won't do, and why we need to rethink the concept of progress.

Rahel Jaeggi: What I'm doing with respect to progress right now, and I only have entered this conversation in the last year, is something that is an outcome of what I've tried to develop in my book *The Critique of Forms of Life*.² There, progress appears only at the very end. It might actually be a very weak idea of progress, but let's face it: if we talk about something like a learning process or the process of overcoming problems, and if we talk about it in a way that

includes some kind of an accumulation of experience in a Hegelian way, this is what people would call “progress.” But I hadn’t yet started working on that conception of progress, and it was something that just sat in the background of my book.

Why didn’t I go for a straightforward idea of progress? I was not looking for progress as either an ideal or a fact. Instead, I was interested in establishing criteria for criticizing where we are now, (...) criteria that would somehow be self-standing, where the process itself would give us the criteria for whether a certain form of life is irrational or not or good or distorted in a certain way. (...)

E.vR.: (...) It seems to me that in your work, Rahel, despite saying you started off by looking at local, nearly indisputable instances of progress, a stronger notion of progress—of what Amy calls “historical progress” and not merely “progress in history”—does play a role. (...)

R.J.: Simply put, my take is that in critical theory we have, more or less, three alternatives. The first is Kantianism or Aristotelianism or -some sort of free- standing morality in which we are positively able to spell out what the good is and for which you don’t need a notion of progress or social change. Most Kantians have a notion of progress, and most Kantians in critical theory are optimistic about being able to spell out what the ‘better’ would be. However, they don’t need to elaborate on the change itself because, from a normative point of view, it doesn’t really matter how it comes about, or whether history has a tendency, or whether there are moments in history that destabilize institutions so that some sort of change emerges. The second alternative is some kind of Nietzscheanism or, as it is for contemporary critical theory, Foucauldianism, which (and I’ll put this very cautiously) tends not to be able to rebut the relativism with which it is constantly confronted, or at least they have no strong, genuine idea of how to react to these problems. The third alternative is a version of Hegelianism or Marxism and some kind of immanent criticism of institutions. Here, of course, the Hegelian and the Marxist options are different, as different as the Nietzschean and the Foucauldian and as versions of Kantianism might be.

I suspect that in the end both Foucauldianism and Nietzscheanism need to resort to some sort of Kantian, freestanding morality. Even if they bracket their moral position in a fruitful way, or accept certain notions of equality or freedom as historical and not founded philosophically in normativity, I still think they very much rely on the Kantian position as a result of rejecting the Hegelian-Marxist one. I think of the Hegelian-Marxist position as one in which normativity comes about in and through history, which is an idea that most people think is crazy, especially if history and normativity are understood in their strong Hegelian senses. It is a normative history and a normativity acquired historically. For Marx, it is different because the present does not represent rationality, but irrationality. Yet even that irrationality is in a certain way justified within historical materialism. The possibility of change for the better resides in the inverted version of social institutions that capitalism brought about. Here, the normativity is neither relativistic nor freestanding. That is what I find attractive, apart from the notion of progress, as a critical theorist. Even if this suggests that history has a telos in the end, and even if it’s a crazy story that everything that’s going on is somehow a progressive move toward a rational outcome and should be embraced for normative reasons, the other story would conceive of social change or history as a series of unrelated events. That seems like a mistake to me. (...)

E.vR.: I love how you say that the notion of history that is theoretically attractive is at the same time crazy. According to you, Amy, it is not its craziness that is the problem, but rather that such a notion is dangerous or holds political baggage, and this gives you reasons to move away from

it. These would also be reasons not to embrace what Rahel calls “the third strand of critical theory”; but presumably, you would sort the options differently to begin with?

A.A: I agree that there are three options for grounding normativity and I think it’s interesting that Rahel inverted their temporal order. I think there is a way in which one could understand this debate as unfolding in an interesting kind of dialectic, whereby the Nietzschean-Foucauldian third position actually represents a kind of “determinate negation” of the first two, in the sense of the term invoked by Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.³ (...)

To the main question, I would sort the options for critical theory in a slightly different way with respect to the question of how to ground normativity. I would employ more or less the same categories: Kantian, Left-Hegelian or Hegelian-Marxist, and some sort of genealogical alternative. Perhaps controversially, I would put Adorno in the last category and not with the Marxists, although, of course, he’s complicated.(...) I would say that in the Hegelian-Marxist account, in its classical and in some contemporary formulations (and there is also a question as to whether this criticism would apply to Rahel’s account), there is an attempt to derive an account of normativity that can be trans-historical. (...)

In terms of the problems with that I see with the Hegelian Marxist view: One is a more conceptual problem that can be articulated in a politically neutral way: the problem of self-congratulation. To say that I won’t appeal to any trans-historical, supra-historical, or context-transcendent standards to make large historical claims about progress, but instead derive them immanently in a way that will allow me to draw those broader conclusions, is a little like trying to pull a rabbit out of a hat. I think there is a worry that naturally arises that this reading of history either implicitly helps itself to standards that are trans-historical or context-transcendent in a strong sense, or that it really, in the end, can’t escape conventionalism. So the worry is that either there is a metaphysical standard in the background enabling the trans-historical judgment, or that progress really amounts to telling a story about history that makes us feel better and happy about where we’ve ended up. That’s the self-congratulation worry.

Secondly, there is the more political worry about discourses of progress. This could be thought of as a specific version of a self-congratulatory story that has been told many times throughout the history of the Enlightenment in which European modernity, or Euro-American moderns, have congratulated themselves on their own history and have read their history as a story of progress and development. That particular story is one that is very closely bound with colonialism, neocolonialism, and the civilizing mission—all of these very problematic political positions. The stories of the cognitive or normative developmental superiority of European modernity were (and in many cases still are) used to justify certain kinds of pernicious political arrangements that undergirded colonialism and neocolonialism. That is obviously a very strong charge, and it is not like the concept of progress *per se* necessarily entails this kind of judgment; but conceptions of progress that position European modernity as the outcome of a learning process do, I think, entail that judgment. Unfortunately, in some critical theory, especially in Habermas’ theory of modernity and also in some way in Honneth’s work, which revives and extends that line of Habermas’ thinking, both the conceptual and the political problems are at play.

This brings me to the Nietzschean-Foucauldian or genealogical alternative for critical theory. One difficulty I have about the way Rahel characterized it (and she probably wants to protest the way I characterized the Hegelian alternative) is that it is more than reading history as a series of unrelated events. Alternatively, if that’s part of it, it is for very specific methodological reasons that I think are important. This is the sense in which I’m not kidding when I say that one could

view this as a kind of determinate negation of these kinds of Hegelian views. It's true that there are Kantian and Hegelian elements in this view—Kantian in the sense that, properly understood, my view and the Foucauldian view hang onto some kinds of first-order Kantian normative commitments, such as freedom as autonomy. That is an ideal in the name of which I work.

There's also a very Hegelian (or Left-Hegelian) historicizing move in this genealogical account in which rationality and normativity are seen as thoroughly embedded in history. However, there is a fundamental and transformative break with each of these ways of thinking about normativity, and I think that involves two things. First, it is not a reading of history in terms of decline and fall, but rather a far more ambivalent telling of history as stories of progress and regress at the same time, with neither one really overriding the other. Seeing it in this way, we try to understand both the domination and the promise of the norms and practices that have been handed down to us. Second, reading history as a series of unrelated events is a very specific methodological move that is designed to allow us to get more critical distance on a modernity that is itself structured in terms of an historical consciousness. In other words, it accepts the basic Hegelian idea that something like an historical consciousness is part of the legacy of modernity, and then reads history as a series of unrelated events that come one after another in order to get us to see that as a specific historical *a priori* or form of life. There's an extra-reflexive historicization of historicity in this account..

R.J.: I want to react to Amy's idea that the three versions of critical theory might tell a progressive story of determinate negation. (...) We might say regarding critical theory, and especially with respect to your placement of Adorno in the camp of Nietzsche and Foucault, that the interesting thing about the first Frankfurt generation is that these three options were already simultaneously present. I'm not so sure about Kantianism, but of course you can find in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* both Left-Hegelianism and Nietzscheanism. Maybe critical theory is an interesting mix of these, and maybe we do not have to choose.

But to your remarks, I could have said that whatever the position of Adorno and early Horkheimer, who seemed much closer to Left-Hegelianism and Marxism than Adorno, the most interesting and fruitful question is the way in which the first generation of critical theorists understood, analyzed, and criticized fascism. The notion of regression is present everywhere in their analysis. (...) For me, the reason to think about progress here would be that we need a notion of regression, which is a much more attractive notion to me because it is a clue to historical dynamics. (...) Maybe this opens up another area of discussion regarding your concerns about progress. If we were right about historical progress, would we then also be right to be self-congratulatory? Not that it would ever be commendable to be self-congratulatory, but I want to slightly disentangle a tendency to argue via guilt by association on the side of progress-skepticism. That our western modernity, and German politics in particular, have committed real atrocities and still considered them progressive, or even justified them as measures required for progress' sake, is beyond question. But maybe we get further by saying that those were not progressive. Just like socialism, progress might not even have happened yet, but that doesn't imply that it was impossible, or that we lacked the criteria to identify it.

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E.vR.: you each suggest a different mechanism for how to approach our present and what led up to it. (...) That would raise the next question: What is it that you presuppose as something valuable in the present that we shouldn't let go of or fall back behind? It seems to be a fairly narrow idea of freedom: freedom from domination. Is that what you would see as indispensable, or as something that we have already partly achieved?

A.A.: It presupposes at least that much. There may be other things. (...)

In some of my earlier work I talk about how I think Foucault is transforming this Kantian idea of autonomy from some kind of submission to laws to an idea of understanding, or he's coming to see that what we take to be necessary is in fact contingent.⁴ But the process of coming to see that is a kind of autonomy. It isn't simply a process of binding ourselves to moral laws. You might say that it has the form of Kantian autonomy with different content. I understand it as a kind of radically transformative taking up of a certain Kantian conception of autonomy.

R.J.: But do you consider genealogy necessary for transforming autonomy progressively?

A.A.: When engaging in the work of critique, it is necessary first to free ourselves from our relationships to the institutions and features of our historical *a priori* that set the conditions of possibility for thinking and acting for us. I think the idea of the historical *a priori* is very close to the idea of forms of life, and I'd like to talk about that. I see them as being more or less the same. But again, Foucault situates that idea within this resolutely non-progressive but also non-regressive reading of history. I would frame my interest in the question of progress and history in their relation to normativity, and I see that as different from a question of how to understand how social changes happen. I think the Foucauldian reading of history has a very specific point with respect to critique that enables us to engage in the work of critique by freeing ourselves up in relation to, as he put it, "what thought silently thinks" and thus allowing it to think otherwise.⁵ (...) If you think about the way people engage in a work of individual or collective self-transformation, it's often prompted by a kind of critical reflection on who they are and what they want to be, whether individually or as a community. But again, sometimes transformations happen, and individuals are left trying to figure out what happened, and what they think of it. They get swept up in the tide of events or were busy thinking other things, and then they look back and say, "How do I make sense of this transformation?" That's why I'm trying to separate the causal question from a more normative question, but not to insist on a strict separation; I just see them as different questions.

Considering questions of rationality and power, I would say that I'm skeptical of the possibility of ever really disentangling ourselves from power relations, or from the weight of social and historical circumstance if you don't want to use what sounds like a very pessimistic language of power to talk about it. However, it is true that freeing ourselves up in relation to our historical *a priori* is something like trying to get some distance from that entanglement while recognizing that we can't really get outside of it, and we're always going to be trying to engage in that process of negotiation.

E.vR.: Doesn't that description lend itself to a stronger claim about the conditions of progress? Perhaps as long as we keep our historical past in a language that is self-congratulatory we enter encounters in a way that forecloses progress as an imperative, as you understand it to happen.

This is kind of a proviso: to make any encounter—because I think, for you, the social dynamics come more from encounters between different contexts—happen in an open and progressive way, the parties who are engaged need to undergo this self-distancing. I think it is quite categorical, so I want to sharpen the point a bit.

A.A.: That's true. I would say that telling a certain kind of self-congratulatory story, for example one about European modernity as an instance of moral and political progress, is an impediment to making progress in a certain sense. (...) The stadial model is not only a justification of colonialism but also a reaction to an encounter with indigenous peoples; it was immediately set up as a relationship of superiority by Europeans who heard these stories in which Europeans served as inheritors of that primitive condition. (...)

R.J.: (...) Actually, I think of what I'm doing as something that would work in a pluralist way. The idea that "they" are in some former stage from where we are now is something that would not be applied as a criterion of whatever cultural situation or stage. No matter how far a group is from our ideas of freedom, autonomy, or self-determination, or however one would measure that kind of distance—this distance itself is not the criterion to impose. The focus on past experiences should enable us to analyze the dynamics of change in terms of our learning blockages or absences thereof from within whichever given context. I think that's what Amy's description is grasping, because of course the self-congratulatory version of modernity is a learning blockage. This is exactly the fantasy that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* undermines. (...) What's in the background of my approach, and why I think it's interesting to talk about social change, is that progress is somehow a change within change. My idea (and again, I didn't invent it) is that history is a crisis-driven dynamic of problem solving. I like the idea of problemsolving because it enables us to come up with a more pragmatic, or pragmatic-dialectical, version of what's going on. The main idea, though, is that crises trigger change, and progress is something that takes place within these changes and these dynamics. There are two things that I take from Marx: first, the well-known formulation that we make our own history, but not under circumstances of our choosing, and second, with respect to revolutions and social dynamics, that there is an active and a passive element. This is the kind of thing I'm interested in: the rational and the not-so-rational dynamics, or the agent-related and the not-so-agent-related side of change. (...)

E.vR.: Maybe, since you're agreeing too much, I can drive the wedge a bit further. I think Rahel's notion that a problematic form of life ultimately points one in the right direction is stronger than what we have discussed so far. For Amy, we are driven to go beyond given forms of life because they occlude something. Rahel has something like practical contradictions at the core of her account. I think we can see this difference beautifully in Adorno's view of interpretation. You both see interpretation as contextual and say that we need to interpret problems and that their solutions depend on how we describe them. In support of that you, Amy, quote Adorno as saying, "Interpretation . . . is criticism of phenomena that have been brought to a standstill; it consists in revealing the dynamism stored up in them, so that what appears as second nature can be seen to have a history."⁶ I would say, Amy, that in your genealogical approach you're making clear that "what appears as second nature can be seen to be history." I think Rahel pursues a much stronger reading than the one that you give to the line in your book, focusing on the "dynamism stored up." Because Rahel has this idea that if you get rid of the learning blockage you not only get to something that you didn't see before, to what "thought has silently thought," but actually you already get a direction. The dynamism is really there, and

it propels you in the right direction. That is quite a strong Hegelian investment on the ontological or social-theoretical level. I don't think you could agree with that, Amy.

A.A.: No.

E.vR.: Good!

A.A.: I think that often we don't know what we get. I would be much more cautious about that.

E.vR.: If we stay with the "propelling" element, I'd like to ask each of you what you see as the motor of dynamism. You, Amy, have the passage where you say, with Adorno and Foucault, that unreason, or the non-identical, something that escapes the current frame, moves us.⁷ I think you, Rahel, would have a different frame of what brings us forward—for example, contradictions. Maybe you could say a bit more about your respective investments in historical materialism, which is perhaps the biggest difference between *Critique of Forms of Life* and *The End of Progress*. What is it that resists in reality and moves us forward?

A.A.: I would only say that it "moves us forward" in a very limited sense. (...) One of the things I find attractive about Foucault's understanding of history, and maybe this is related to the dynamics of historical change, is its complete open-endedness. He is quite rightly, in my view—but not entirely consistently, if one reads his overly optimistic writings on the Iranian revolution, for example—making the case that we just don't know what progress is, and so we have to think about the future in an open-ended way. I think that is compatible with the idea of trying to make things better, or to solve problems, if you want to use that language. "Minimize the relations of domination" is, I think, the language Foucault would use, or "respond to suffering," if we want to talk about it in a more Adornian way. But we can't know what the direction of that would be, which is why Foucault says in his "What is Enlightenment?" that the work of critique has to always be ongoing.⁸ I doubt that we would disagree on that point; it's actually pretty obvious, in a way, that if we reject some sort of strong, positive utopianism, then we accept that the work of critique has to be ongoing. (...)

E.vR.: It's interesting that by pointing to non-domination you put more substantial content on the normative side of the directionality than Rahel does. (...)

R.J.: Yes, I feel bad about it. I don't refer to domination or freedom as the basic principle. Amy can at least say that she has some idea of non-domination and a world with less suffering. It seems to be such an impoverished account of progress to say that it's just some way of accumulating experiences..

Returning to Eva's question of what it is that triggers or makes us leave in a certain situation, for me this is crisis and contradiction on the objective side. This also means that, with respect to normative foundations, or the normative foundations of critical theory in particular, a lot of work is done by the idea that there are crises. It's not that critical theorists would disturb this totally beautiful (but under certain criteria wrong) form of life, or would try to intervene in something like a peaceful island where people are unconscious, or would meet a romantic and naive person and tell them to strive for modernity. That's not the kind of critique we are doing. When I said that progress is change within change, I meant it in the same way that I would say critique is a certain movement within a crisis that is already ongoing. It's a certain way to trigger and intervene in a moment of crisis. For me, this work has an objective side, which is also a

material side. My conceptual intervention within critical theory is meant to balance out an ultra-strong focus on the constructivist approach to whatever could count as a problem. I want to move the discussion back slightly toward this historical materialist idea of crisis or contradiction. I'm very aware that contradiction doesn't do all the work. One of the problems with the Marxist idea of contradiction is that everyone thought that contradiction had a logical status, which means that you don't need to criticize something because it's wrong on its own terms and doesn't even need human agency to collapse. This is not the kind of contradiction I have in mind, but I am at least flirting with the idea that there's something that cannot be denied when it comes to crises.

A.A.: I don't disagree with most of what you said, although I might phrase it differently. But the language of contradiction does seem strong. Not only is there the worry that it's objective and logical and does not need agency, but I think it also very strongly implies—though you say that you don't want to hold onto a teleological reading—a kind of teleological directionality. I think the place where our views are really close is in the relationship between the critic and the objective conditions, if you will. I like the way that Foucault characterizes critique as “following lines of fragility in the present.”⁹ (...) It's not as if the critic is just coming in from the outside. The lines of fragility and fracture are there, but there is work done by tracing them and by opening up the space within the present that happens as a result of that work. That sounds quite similar to some of the ways that you're using the notion of crisis, though maybe not exhaustively.

E.vR.: (...) I was wondering what analogous psychoanalytic formulations we might find for your respective approaches. Perhaps for Rahel, progress is this vivid and unblocked appropriation of experience: a model of non-denial, enrichment, and development. Amy's account might be put in this way: for any such development to take place, there needs to occur a decentering of narcissism, so that one sees the crisis of others and not just the crisis one is in. That's why you seem to say that we need to outgrow our form of life, just as we might grow beyond primary narcissism in psychoanalytic terms. I don't know if you agree with that characterization.

A.A.: I like it!

E.vR.: Would you, Rahel, consider it a necessary element for the appropriation of the world, that one sees more than one's own crisis?

R.J.: To me, this resonates with the idea of impoverished experience; (...) There is then the Adornian idea that a strong kind of irrationality is in play if we cannot even encounter “the other” in the world. What I think is interesting is that you said, Amy, that you are much more skeptical, because no matter what we come up with, we don't know whether it will lead to emancipatory or progressive results. I would totally agree. It just came to mind why, in the end, I am more interested in regression than progress. I would say that my idea of progress is based on a retrospective dialectics. It's not something that you could or would even try to have a forward-looking account of, such as an answer to the question of why this step that we do or this kind of problem solving attempt we're engaged in might be progressive. We just want to make sure that it is not regressive. Again, it might turn out later that we haven't seen a whole lot of aspects that would have convinced us that what we thought of as non-regressive was actually regressive. Whether it's progress or not is something you can

only see in retrospect because you never know what will happen. This is the experiential side: you start experiments.

A.A.: I would agree. The content that I give in my own account of what would constitute “forward-looking progress” is not fully worked out in *The End of Progress* but is something I discuss in another recent paper, “Emancipation without Utopia.”¹⁰ The core idea is that what would constitute progress in a forward-looking sense is minimizing relationships of domination and transforming them into non-dominating, mobile, reversible, and unstable power relations. It’s a very negativistic conception of forward-looking progress. I don’t think I’d want to talk about that in terms of preventing regressions. I would agree, though, that whether or not any change that we try to instill turns out to be progressive, even in that negativistic sense, could only be determined after the fact.

E.v.R.: But don’t we want more?

A.A.: Yes. But what about the dream?! When I was in Brazil talking about that paper on emancipation, a student in the audience asked, “What about the dream?”
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¹ See Amy Allen, “Critical Theory and the Idea of Progress,” chap. 1 of *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 1–36.

² See Rahel Jaeggi, *The Critique of Forms of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming); *Kritik von Lebensformen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013).

³ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁴ Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 45–8.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 9.

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, “On Interpretation: The Concept of Progress (I),” lecture 15 of *History and Freedom: Lectures, 1964–1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 135; cited in Allen, *The End of Progress*, p. 195.

⁷ Allen, *The End of Progress*, p. 194.

⁸ See Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” in *The Foucault Reader*, trans. and ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 32–50.

⁹ See Michel Foucault, “Critical Theory/Intellectual History,” trans. Jeremy Harding, in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 109–37.

¹⁰ See Amy Allen, “Emancipation without Utopia: Subjection, Modernity, and the Normative Claims of Feminist Critical Theory,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 30:3 (2015), pp. 513–29.