Decolonizing Critical Theory

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In its emancipatory aims, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School envisioned what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno called a truly human society that would foster the freedom and meet the needs of all members of society. The first generation of critical theorists followed Marx to focus largely on class domination in capitalist societies even as they revised Marxism to meet changes in 20th century capitalism. This focus bequeathed some limitations for contemporary scholars concerned with issues like racism, sexism, and colonialism. Regarding racism and colonialism, Edward Said has insisted that despite its insights into domination in modern society, Frankfurt School Critical Theory “is stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire.”

There is truth to Said’s comment but he overstates his case in consequential ways. Such understandings of the Frankfurt School have led many contemporary critical thinkers to turn away from the Frankfurt School in favor of alternative approaches to critical social theory. I appreciate this impulse. I hope to show, however, that with respect to confronting racism and colonialism, Frankfurt School Critical Theory offers analytical resources that have been underestimated.

As Lucius Outlaw explains, the early Frankfurt School theorists — notably Horkheimer and Adorno — were “not known initially so much for theorizing about racial problems... as for [their] insightful critique of social domination generally.” Yet Critical Theory’s focus shifted in the late 1930s and early 1940s as the Institute for Social Research temporarily moved to the U.S.A. with the rise of the Nazis in Germany. The Institute joined the battle against fascism, with [its] debates centering on the character of the changed nature of the economy in twentieth-century capitalism, that is, the expression of group sentiments were to be understood in the historical context of society.

With their aim “not merely to describe prejudice but to explain it in order to help in its eradication,” Critical Theory, as Outlaw says, “provided a way for getting at the problems of race — more precisely of racism — that was both critical and radical.”

In letter of 1941, Horkheimer strikingly linked the task of a critical analysis of anti-Semitism to the larger project of a critical theory of modern society:

As true as it is that one can understand anti-Semitism only from our society, as true it appears to me to become based on this insight, Horkheimer and Adorno provided a compelling but underdeveloped framework for a critical theory of racism and colonialism.

Based on this insight, Horkheimer and Adorno provided a compelling but underdeveloped framework for a critical theory of racism and colonialism.

Since their initial effort, which focused almost exclusively on European anti-Semitism, subsequent Critical Theorists have belatedly taken up this task. The two most sustained efforts in Critical Theory to theorize racism have followed divergent paths. Outlaw, in a series of essays, initiated the efforts of recent Frankfurt School-inspired critical theorists to analyze the role of racism in shaping socially and politically structured relations of inequality and domination. He looked back to Horkheimer and Adorno but without exploring the depth of their contribution in this area. Thomas McCarthy, in Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development, employs the work of Habermas and Kant to outline a “critical theory of global development” that emphasizes autonomy, moral progress, societal development, and human dignity. Axel Honneth distinguishes these two tendencies as follows. On one side, there is an engagement with mainstream political philosophy that yields “a normative reinforcement of the liberal-democratic tradition”; the other side focuses on “a critical questioning of this institutional arrangement, which is accompanied by the suspicion of a social pathology of capitalist society as a whole.” Without denying the value of the first tendency, represented by McCarthy, this essay is aligned more closely with the second. My analysis returns to Horkheimer and Adorno to recover undeveloped intimations for a critical theory of racism and colonialism. Although they focused on European anti-Semitism, Horkheimer and Adorno began to address the role of racism in shaping modern society, especially how the racial domination of European Jews was intertwined with the perpetuation of the class-based inequalities of capitalism. They recognized that while anti-Semitism was integrally related to class-based inequalities it was not a mere epiphenomenon of capitalism’s class divisions; and they offered insights into the psychodynamics of racism.

That said, Said was correct that the Frankfurt School failed to engage adequately colonial racism and
anti-colonial resistance. The critical theorists’ account of racism was Eurocentric and too narrowly focused on anti-Semitism. They rightly intimated that understanding racism is necessary for an adequate critical theory of modern capitalist society; yet their focus on anti-Semitism was insufficient for this task. As Paul Gilroy says, to realize “a world free of racial hierarchies . . . we will need to reconstruct the history of ‘race’ in modernity.” Anti-Semitism has been just one important part of this larger history.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s failure to address adequately colonial racism went hand-in-hand with shortcomings in their Marxian account of the interplay of capitalism and racism, or “race” and class. Frantz Fanon explained in The Wretched of the Earth that when we consider colonialism, “it is clear that what divides the world is first and foremost . . . what race one belongs to.” As a result, “Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue.” As Fanon recognized, modern capitalism has never been one-dimensionally class-divided, with profits generated in relation to a uniform class of wage laborers; the classes of modern capitalism have been internally fractured by racialized status hierarchies (as well as by gender and other modes of social differentiation). This has been due to racial slavery, colonialism, and the role that racism has played — in the face of transnational flows of people and capital — in shaping states’ immigration policies, and delimiting access to national labor markets.

The constitutive role of modernity’s racialized status orders in shaping the social stratification of capitalist society has important implications for Critical Theory. Fanon’s emphasis on the need to stretch Marxian analysis to address colonialism lends support to Honneth’s claim that group struggles for recognition “normatively underlie the social stratification of capitalist society.” Honneth maintains that modern capitalist society’s “recognition order” — the historically variable “socially constitutive expectations of recognition” — shapes the distribution of power, income, and wealth generated by capitalism. In brief, an adequate critique of political economy for modern capitalist societies must confront their character as fundamentally racialized capitalist societies, or racial states.

At the same time, an egalitarian politics suitable to this history requires, as Outlaw insists, a hermeneutic approach to racialized identity — one that does not dismiss the recognition claims of racialized groups as simply an offshoot of class or status politics. It must also confront the historical injustice that is part of the legacy of modern racism, as Fanon and McCarthy have emphasized.

My notion of decolonizing Critical Theory builds on a remark by Jean-Paul Sartre in his “Preface” to Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, in 1961. In the midst of the decolonization movement of peoples of Asia and Africa, Sartre declared that we in Europe too are being decolonized: that is to say that the settler which is in every one of us is being savagely rooted out. Let us look at ourselves . . . and see what is becoming of us.

Insofar as the early critical theorists failed to address colonial racism and anti-colonial resistance, Critical Theory itself needs to be decolonized.

I contribute to this project by reconsidering Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s critical theory of anti-Semitism. In section one, I highlight the strengths and the limitations of Horkheimer and Adorno’s critical analysis of anti-Semitism and racism. In section two, I draw on ideas from Fanon, Outlaw, McCarthy, and Honneth to outline a more historically attuned and hermeneutic Critical Theory of racism and colonialism — that is, a Critical Theory oriented to the political-historical character and meaningfulness of racialized identities and struggles. Overall, then, this essay is an effort to reconsider what Frankfurt School Critical Theory has contributed to critical theorizing about racism and to indicate what this means for the larger project of critical theory.

I. Horkheimer and Adorno on Anti-Semitism and Other Racisms

The subject of critical thought, Horkheimer wrote, was a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature.

He envisioned a “reasonable organization of society that will meet the needs of the whole community,” with special attention to “the oppressed class” in capitalist societies, the proletariat.

Horkheimer and Adorno reoriented Critical Theory when they undertook their critical analysis of anti-Semitism in the late 1930s and 1940s. They brought together Marxism and psychoanalysis to illuminate the roots of authoritarianism and group dynamics of “social discrimination,” including “religious and racial hatreds.” Their anti-Semitism project first took shape in Horkheimer’s essay “The Jews and Europe” (1939) and in the “Research Project on Anti-Semitism: Idea of the Project,” which Adorno published in 1941. This work came to fruition in the chapter “Elements of Anti-Semitism” in Horkheimer and Adorno’s book, Dialectic of Enlightenment, and in Adorno’s book, Minima Moralia. Adorno signaled how
they understood this work in a letter to Horkheimer in October 1941. He wrote that anti-Semitism had become the “central injustice” of the contemporary world and that Critical Theory should “attend to the world where it shows its face at its most gruesome.” Horkheimer, in early notes for the project, declared that “Hatred of the Jew” was “hatred of democracy” and that organized investigation into the psychology of anti-Semitism is in no way a matter concerning Jews exclusively, but is of the greatest importance for all who are interested in the fate of democratic civilization.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer comprehended the Nazi regime, which killed nearly 6 million European Jews, thousands of Roma, and about 200,000 disabled persons, as part of “the destructive side” of the European Enlightenment’s promotion of instrumental rationality. The Nazis mobilized “society’s domination over nature” to dominate the masses and carry out mass murder. Rather than rejecting “enlightenment thinking” as a whole, Horkheimer and Adorno regarded it as a double-edged sword: alongside its potential for advancing human freedom and well-being, it also “contains the germ of regression.”

They sought to elucidate “why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.” In the rest of this section I summarize their contribution to a critical theory of racism in terms of four sets of themes: (i) capitalism, race, and class; (ii) a tripartite racial schema; (iii) mimesis, difference, and racist misrecognition; and (iv) emancipation, social justice, and “working through the past.”

### 1.1. Capitalism, Race, and Class

Their revisions of Marxism recognized convergences in the politico-economic power structures of different forms of modern industrial societies — post-liberal capitalist, fascist state capitalist, and bureaucratic socialist — with respect to hierarchy, concentrations of power, and the deployment of industrial technologies; yet they did not ignore the differences among these social orders. In *National Socialism*, they argued, these tendencies were manifest in how “rancor” among the “dominated subjects” (that is, subordinated workers) against their domination by the economic and political elite “is always ready to attack the natural minority [that is, minority races], even though it is the social minority which these subjects primarily threaten.” The domination of the “responsible elite” in contemporary capitalism has become obscured:

> The socially responsible elite is . . . far harder to pin down than other minorities. In the murky intertwinement of property, ownership, control, and management it successfully eludes theoretical definition. The ideology of race and the reality of class both equally reveal only an abstract difference from the majority.

Thus, in *National Socialism*, immersed in the ideology of race and the reality of class, “the majority” — that is, the non-Jewish working class and the petit bourgeois Germans — perceived only an “abstract” difference between themselves and the “responsible elite” — that is, German capitalists and allied political elites; the power of the responsible elite was masked.

Nazi race thinking had an ideological purpose beyond its stated aims: it distracted non-Jewish German working people from the class domination basic to capitalist societies and thus divided the working class. “Bourgeois anti-Semitism has a specific economic purpose: to conceal domination in production” — the domination of capitalists over workers; The workers, who are the real target, are understandably not told as much to their face; the blacks must be kept in their place, but the Jews must be wiped from the face of the earth.

Race, Horkheimer and Adorno contended:

is not, as the racial nationalists claim, an immediate natural peculiarity. Rather, it is a regression to nature as mere violence, to the hidebound particularism which, in the existing order, constitutes precisely the universal. Race today is the self-assertion of the bourgeois individual, integrated into the barbaric collective . . . . The persecution of the Jews, like any persecution, cannot be separated from that order.

Two points here are key. First, in their view, “race” does not refer to an actual fundamental difference between human beings. Instead, the ideology of race entails a false belief in fundamental differences between Blacks and Jews and “true” (“Aryan”) Germans. The ideology of race denied the equal human dignity of certain groups and was a means for the Nazi regime to manage violently the inequalities and exclusions intrinsic to capitalism. Nazi anti-Semitism thus was different from old-style anti-Jewish sentiment; it was a full-fledged racial theory.

Second, Adorno and Horkheimer understood Nazism as a pathological reaction to developments in modern capitalist societies but not a mere side-effect of capitalism. Focusing on the anti-Semitism’s idea of “the Jew,” they wrote,

As the bearers of capitalist modes of existence from country to country [the Jews] earned the hatred of those who suffered under the system . . . . Now it is their turn
to bear the brunt of [capitalism’s] exclusive, particularistic character.\textsuperscript{43}

The historical basis for this attribution was that, due to Christian prohibitions on "usury," Jews in medieval and early modern Europe played a prominent role in money lending and finance. Anti-Semitism cast the Jews as archetypical predatory capitalists, thereby insulating capitalism — and capitalists as the dominant class within it — from criticism. It gave working class non-Jewish Germans a target for their frustrations and vicarious symbolic empowerment as part of the Nazis’ "Third Reich," even as capitalism promised them, the "cheated masses," happiness but left them a subordinated class "without power."\textsuperscript{44} The Nazis joined non-Jewish German workers and non-Jewish German capitalists in a cross-class “barbaric collective,” the so-called “Aryan race” — an imagined but politically effective collectivity that aligned racially “proper” Germans violently against Jews and Blacks.

When Adorno and Horkheimer declared “the workers” were the Nazis’ “real target,” they seemed to reduce Nazi anti-Semitism to an epiphenomenon of capitalist class conflict.\textsuperscript{45} Likewise, in related discussions of the sociology of class they failed to address how social classes have been fractured by racism. Adorno suggested in “Reflections on Class Theory” (1942) that, while the development of monopolies “vindicates[d] the doctrine of class struggle,” it “makes people forget the actual existence of hostile classes.”\textsuperscript{46} He discussed reasons for this “invisibility of the classes” but without considering racism.\textsuperscript{47} Horkheimer, in an unpublished work, explored internal fissures within all classes through a theory of “rackets.” “Every ruling class has been monopolistic,” Horkheimer wrote, “to the extent that it excluded the overwhelming majority of human beings.”\textsuperscript{48} Within the working class “the racket of labor functions as a monopoly only for its leaders and for the worker-aristocracy.”\textsuperscript{49} Yet, like Adorno, he did not consider how racism has produced such “rackets.”

\section*{1.2. A Tripartite Racial Schema: “Aryan” Germans, Jews, and Blacks}

While highlighting distinctive features of anti-Semitism, Horkheimer and Adorno offered passing remarks about how other racialized groups fit into the European and global political economies of modern racism. In the “Research Project on Anti-Semitism,” Adorno wrote, “The purpose of this project is to show that anti-Semitism is one of the dangers inherent in all more recent culture.”\textsuperscript{50} Regarding the distinctiveness of anti-Semitism, recall Horkheimer and Adorno’s remark that for the Nazis “the blacks must be kept in their place, but the Jews must be wiped from the face of the earth.”\textsuperscript{51} Adorno elaborated on this thought in \textit{Minima Moralia}. He countered attempts to deflect criticism of modern society with the claim “that things have always been like this” as follows:

He who registers the death-camps as a technical mishap in civilization’s triumphal procession, the martyrdom of the Jews as world-historically irrelevant, not only falls short of the dialectical vision but reverses the meaning of his own politics: to hold ultimate calamity in check . . . . If the Jews as a group were eradicated while society continues to reproduce the life of the workers, then the argument that the former were bourgeois and their fate unimportant for the great dynamic of history, becomes economic sophistry.\textsuperscript{52}

Anti-Semitism revealed its \textit{sui generis} character in the Nazis’ attempt to eradicate the Jews. Adorno recognized that the “fate of the Jews” was associated with capitalism; but he recognized that Nazi anti-Semitism had theological, psychological, and anthropological aspects.\textsuperscript{53}

At the same time, Horkheimer and Adorno noted affinities between anti-Semitism and other forms of “social discrimination.”\textsuperscript{54} “The blindness of anti-Semitism,” they said, lends support to the idea that it serves as "a release valve” for frustrations of working-class non-Jewish Germans:

\begin{quote}
Rage is vented on those who are both conspicuous and unprotected. And just as, depending on the constellation, the victims are interchangeable: vagrants, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, so each of them can replace the murderer, in the same lust for killing, as soon as he feels the power of representing the norm.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

The German working class projected its frustrations on the “alien” ethnic groups that “are transported to different latitudes; [and] individuals labeled ‘Jew’ [who] are dispatched to the gas chambers.”\textsuperscript{56} Adorno, in \textit{Minima Moralia}, identified an array of exclusionary practices, including “the immigration laws that exclude all non-Caucasians from Social-Democratic Australia, . . . right up to the Fascist eradication of the racial minority.”\textsuperscript{57}

Horkheimer and Adorno thus understood Nazism as an extreme form of a pervasive tendency toward social discrimination generated by the inequalities and exclusions intrinsic to capitalist societies. While the victims and perpetrators vary across national contexts, the subordinated classes of the dominant ethno-national or racial groups often vent their rage against “conspicuous and unprotected” groups instead of joining in a pan-ethnic working-class movement to transform capitalism.

Horkheimer and Adorno offered no sustained analysis of anti-Black racism, colonialism, and other forms of racism, however.\textsuperscript{58} Yet their remark that for the Nazis “the blacks must be kept in their place, but the
Jews must be wiped from the face of the earth,” suggests a triadic racial schema with which to begin to comprehend racism globally: a dominant racial group — here the “Aryan race”; elsewhere the so-called “white race” — stands opposed to two differentially subordinated racial status groups — here Blacks and Jews. This general racial schema has had wider resonance. It captures provisionally broad contours of modern racial dynamics, or racial formations that have been manifested where nation-states have governed national economies and populations, partly through the discourse of race in relation to colonial histories and the transnational flows of people and capital.

I.3. Mimesis, Difference, and Racist Misrecognition

In a third aspect of Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of anti-Semitism, they drew on psychoanalysis to illuminate how anti-Semites dealt with their perceptions of nonidentity or difference with respect to themselves and Jews. Adorno thought that the Jews had (in Anson Rabinbach’s words) a “broader significance . . . as representatives of the principle of nonidentity in the modern world.” His concept of mimesis was central to his and Horkheimer’s view of how people deal with difference. Speaking of humanity’s “mimetic heritage,” Adorno wrote, “The human is indissolubly linked to imitation: a human being only becomes human at all by imitating other human beings.” He maintained that “making oneself similar to an Other” is a fundamental aspect of mimesis. Our mimetic capacity has both “true,” or autonomous, and “false,” or repressed, manifestations, and our use of these different forms of mimesis is integral to whether we deal with differences in a respectful or hostile manner. True mimesis, “mimetic behavior proper,” involves “the organic adaptation to otherness.” It requires us to grasp similarity and difference together as “non-identical similitude.”

Adorno and Horkheimer located one version of regressive mimesis in objectifying conceptual thinking, which Adorno called “identity thinking.” They maintained that conceptual thinking could be dialectical, recognizing internal differences within whatever is designated, where each thing is recognized as “what it is only by becoming what it is not.” Dialectical thinking enables people to appreciate the heterogeneity encompassed by our concepts; yet such thinking can be neutralized by the fear of difference. “The cry of terror called forth by the unfamiliar becomes its name.”

Anti-Semites and other racists manifest fearful identity thinking through the psychological mechanism of “false projection,” which “has deep affinities to the repressed” form of mimesis:

If mimesis makes itself resemble its surroundings, false projection makes its surroundings resemble itself. If, for the former . . . the alien becomes the intimately known, the latter displaces the volatile inward into the outer world, branding the intimate friend as foe.

In Nazism, false projective behavior is adopted by politics; the object of the [paranoiac] illness is declared true to reality, the system of delusions the reasonable norm in the world which makes deviation neurosis.

Whereas through mimesis proper the subject accommodates herself to the variegated world of people and non-human nature, false projection represses difference. Subjects try to make their surroundings conform to what they already know — that is, to the limited range of difference with which they are comfortable. In false projection anti-Semites fail to distinguish between traits that they project on to Jews — typically, distorted stereotypes of “the Jew” — and the qualities that actual Jews possess. “The person chosen as foe is already perceived as foe.”

Horkheimer and Adorno’s larger argument was that in industrial society, autonomous “reflecting mimesis” has largely replaced objectifying instrumental rationality:

Social and individual education reinforces the objectifying behavior required by work . . . . In the bourgeois mode of production the ineradicable mimetic heritage present in all praxis is consigned to oblivion.

Nazism radicalized this tendency. It sought to eradicate the “difference” that Jews represented by eradicating the Jews.

The problem was not projective behavior per se, “but the exclusion of reflection from that behavior.” As human society becomes increasingly complex, “individuals must learn both to refine and to inhibit” projection so that it does not degenerate “into the false projection which is essential to anti-Semitism.” Although Jews were the primary targets of “fascist rabble-rousers,” they were not the only targets:

The screamers deliberately use the wail of the victim, which first called violence by its name, and even the mere word which designates the victim — Frenchman, Negro, Jew — to induce in themselves the desperation of the persecuted who have to hit out . . . . The mere existence of the other is a provocation.

As Adorno observed, various groups might become targets of “terrified mimesis”:

Indignation over cruelty diminishes in proportion as the victims are less like normal readers, the more they are swarthy, “dirty,” dago-like . . . . Perhaps the social schematization of perception in anti-Semites is such.
that they do not see the Jews as human beings at all. The constantly encountered assertion that savages, blacks, Japanese are like animals ... is the key to the pogrom ... [T]hose in power perceive as human only their own reflected image, instead of reflecting back the human as precisely what is different.78

Dominant groups thus employ the ideology of race to gauge the extent to which other groups are like or unlike themselves. They rationalize the dehumanization of “alien” races in proportion to the degree that these groups fail to meet their racial standard of humanness, “reassur[ing]” themselves that [their victim] is ‘only an animal.’”79

By examining anti-Semitism in light of psychoanalysis and mimesis, then, Adorno and Horkheimer highlighted how the inequities of capitalist societies foster tendencies to regressive mimesis among vulnerable subjects. Through anti-Semitism and other forms of racism, these tendencies have led to a sometimes violent repression of difference in two respects: a denial of the full humanity of the targets of racism; and the misconstrual of difference in two respects: a denial of the full humanity of the targets of racism; and the misconstrual of religious and cultural — if not merely superficial — differences between groups as racial differences.

I.4. Emancipation and Social Justice

Two remarks by Horkheimer and Adorno convey the gist of their vision of a “truly human state.”80 First, at the end of “Elements of Anti-Semitism” they declared:

Only the liberation of thought from power ... could realize the idea which has been unrealized until now: that the Jew is a human being. This would be a step away from the anti-Semitic society, which drives both Jews and others into sickness and toward the human one. Such a step would fulfill the fascist lie by contradicting it: the Jewish question would indeed prove the turning point of history ... [H]umanity would cease to be the universal antirace and become the species which, as nature, is more than mere nature, in that it is aware of its own image.81

Second, returning to the matter of mimesis and false projection, they wrote,

The individual and social emancipation from domination is the countermovement to false projection, and no longer would Jews seek, by resembling it, to appease the evil senselessly visited on them as on all the persecuted, whether animals or human beings.82

Adorno and Horkheimer’s sense that contradicting the “fascist lie” of anti-Semitism could become a “turning point of history” follows from their claim that “[t]he persecution of the Jews, like any persecution, cannot be separated from” the existing social order.83 The task of overcoming racist degradation of different groups is integrally linked with the goal of undoing the “objective” political and economic conditions that foster “racial prejudices.”84 They envisioned that their “turning point” would require a democratic and socialist political and economic order that would overcome class-based as well as racialized inequalities. The goal would be to affirm the equal human dignity of all persons in political and economic relationships free of domination and exploitation.85 Their conception of equality included due respect for meaningful differences among people (for example, of religion and culture) and some awareness of the need to address the relationship of equality and difference historically.

Adorno addressed the idea of an egalitarian, non-racial respect for differences among people in Minima Moralia. He rejected as “bad equality” the idea that equality demanded treating everyone as being just the same:

That all men are alike is exactly what society would like to hear. It considers actual or imagined differences as stigmas indicating that not enough has been done ... The technique of the concentration camp is to make prisoners like their guards, the murdered, murderers. The racial difference is raised to an absolute so that it can be abolished absolutely, if only in the sense that nothing that is different survives. An emancipated society, on the other hand, would not be a unitary state, but the reconciliation of differences.86

To assert abstractly “that all people and all races are equal” was to invite

the simple refutation of the senses, and the most compelling anthropological proofs that the Jews are not a race will ... scarcely alter the fact that totalitarians know full well whom they do and whom they do not intend to murder.87

Adorno added, “To assure the black man that he is exactly like the white man, while he obviously is not, is secretly to wrong him still further.”88

His contrast between “the black man” and “the white man” is ambiguous — and potentially problematic — given his and Horkheimer’s observation elsewhere that race “is not ... an immediate natural peculiarity.”89 Adorno may have accepted the idea that “white” and “black” people were distinct races even though he and Horkheimer rejected the idea that European Jews constituted a distinct race. This was a commonplace humanist view in the mid-20th century: that there were a few biologically distinct human races but that ideas about racial superiority and inferiority were bogus.90 Alternatively, Adorno may have meant that the different groups that we have come to call “black people” and “white people” historically have been treated as members of distinct racial groups, with often dire consequences, have had different life experiences, and may have (or practice) different customs, traditions, beliefs,
and so on. His deeper point was that “an emancipated,” egalitarian society would neither repress nor ignore differences; it would enable people to “be different without fear.”

Regarding how a society might respect differences among people that have been misconstrued as racial, Horkheimer and Adorno said, “Society’s emancipation from anti-Semitism depends on whether the content of that idiosyncrasy is raised to the level of the concept and becomes aware of its own senselessness.” The various members of society — especially those who have been considered members of the dominant “racial” group, the “universal antirace” — must learn to appreciate the manifold heterogeneity of the human species. In rejecting the “fascist lie” about the Jews’ inhumanity, “humanity” would thus cease to be defined in an exclusionary way. Idiosyncrasy, as anti-Semites understood it in terms of the Jews’ distinctiveness, would thus cease to be regarded as such; humanity would be appreciated in all its heterogeneity. In practical terms, for this sort of democratic politics to be realized, autonomy, or reflective thought and action, would need to become widely manifest in society. This would lead people to understand others — including unfamiliar religious and ethnic groups — in their concrete particularity and, thus, avoid false projection with respect to them.

In “The Meaning of Working through the Past” (1959), Adorno began to address the relationship of equality and difference historically with respect to the challenge for post-World War II Germany of facing up to the legacy of Nazism. He was troubled by the extent to which Germans already were reluctant to accept any responsibility for the atrocities committed by the Nazis. To face the past responsibly demanded historical memory and he discerned an “effacement of memory” already evident among Germans — “the readiness to minimize or deny what happened.”

Through such “collective amnesia” those who had been murdered would be robbed “of the single remaining thing that our powerlessness can offer them: remembrance.”

Adorno suggested that the sense of timeless equivalence basic to capitalist exchange relationships has fostered the effacement of memory: “Bourgeois society is universally situated under the law of exchange, of the like-for-like accounts that match and that leave no remainder. In its very essence exchange is something timeless.” In short, as the subjects of capitalism become accustomed to the immediacy of market exchanges, they become desensitized to the “innumerable societal processes” through which past historical events have shaped the present. In this way, “advancing bourgeois society” ruins historical memory.

Adorno remained hopeful that through civic education citizens of a democratic society could learn to work through the past responsibly to pursue justice. Post-war Germans needed to develop a reflective consciousness on their “entanglement” in the social conditions that have produced racial prejudice. In short, civic education “must transform itself into sociology, that is, it must teach about the societal play of forces that operate beneath the surface of political forces.”

II. Towards a New Critical Theory of Racism

Overall, Horkheimer and Adorno compellingly comprehended Nazi anti-Semitism as an extreme manifestation of pathologies of capitalist modernity. Their focus on European anti-Semitism was understandable given the immediacy of the horrors of Nazism and the Jewish backgrounds of members of the Frankfurt School. Nonetheless, given their aim of attacking the “central injustices” of the contemporary world (see above), it is striking that they largely neglected the history of European colonialism, including Germany’s involvement in this process. Germany had a relatively short-lived overseas colonial empire (from ca. 1884 to World War II) and comparatively limited involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. Yet Germany participated in the wider European colonial project.

Adorno and Horkheimer thus failed to appreciate the extent to which racism, including colonial racism, has been a formative feature of global capitalist development and Western modernity. Consequently, they failed to discern the broader implications of their own observation that collectively contradicting the “fascist lie,” which denied the Jews’ humanity, could become the “turning point of history” towards a “truly human state.” Once we recognize the scope of modern racism, it becomes apparent that this “turning point” must involve more than contradicting anti-Semitism; it must entail rejecting all types of racist norms and practices. Fanon made this connection from an anti-colonial perspective, noting “that the anti-Semite is inevitably a nегrophobe.”

Adorno and Horkheimer’s failure to address adequately the role of European racism and colonialism in global capitalist development entailed notable shortcomings of their effort to reformulate Marxism with respect to the interplay of “race” and class. They failed to appreciate how, as Fanon said, Marxist analysis needed to be revised to address colonialism: “in the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.” “The black problem,” he wrote, “is not just about Blacks living among Whites, but about the Black man exploited, enslaved, and despised by a colonialist and capitalist society that happens to be white.” The political-economic amalgamation of colonial racism and capitalism has divided people from each other by “race” and class — and
also gender — in social relations of status, production, and exchange. In a global perspective, capitalist development fundamentally has involved racialized capitalist societies, or racial states. “Free” wage laborers have been a subordinated class in capitalist societies.10 Yet the class position of the quintessential “free” wage laborer often has entailed a relatively advantaged racialized status among the laboring classes of capitalist modernity, often reserved for laborers racialized as white.111

Fanon’s call to revise Marxism to deal with colonial racism corroborates Honneth’s thesis that the recognition orders of capitalist societies are analytically prior to their “distributional conflicts.”112 Modern racism has been simultaneously a political economic order and a recognition order; it has parcel out recognition and misrecognition, among racialized groups. For instance, in white racism, which has been basic to the modern global racial order, racial whiteness has been the measure of “true human being.”113 White racism has bloated the self-esteem and self-worth those people who have been regarded (and have regarded themselves) as “white” while it has diminished that of non-white people.114 These racist dynamics of recognition and misrecognition simultaneously have shaped social stratification within racial states (for example, the U.S., Canada, Brazil and South Africa) as well as across states and societies in the modern world, especially in relation to European colonialism and imperialism.115 Consequently, the struggles for recognition by historically deprecating racialized groups, such as Black and Indigenous peoples, have been a key part of the larger struggle for liberation and social justice.116

Therefore, to decolonize Critical Theory and develop a critical theory of racism, Horkheimer’s remark that anti-Semitism cannot be comprehended adequately only through a critical examination of modern capitalist society, and vice versa, must be reformulated as follows: modern racism can be comprehended adequately only through a critical examination of modern capitalist society, and modern society itself can be adequately understood only through a critical analysis of modern racism. In the rest of this section I revise Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s Critical Theory to outline a framework for a new critical theory of racism through four constellations of concepts: (i) race, class, and status; (ii) racialized identity and the politics of recognition; (iii) a political-racial schema; and (iv) historical injustice and “working through the past.”

II.1. “Race,” Class, and Status

With their use of psychoanalysis, Horkheimer and Adorno offered insight into the psychodynamics of how anti-Semitism gave the (non-Jewish) German working class an illusion of collective empowerment (see above).117 And as I noted earlier, they developed an embryonic theory of the internal fracturing of classes with their theory of rackets; but they paid too little how racism has produced such rackets. Understanding the racialized fissures within classes is arguably a central challenge for an adequate critique of political economy, and the problem begs for an approach that follows Max Weber in comprehending class and social status as distinct but intersecting modes of social stratification.118 Status, Weber explained, refers to a “position of positive or negative privilege in social esteem” in a given society.119 A “status group” is a group of human beings who . . . effectively claims a special evaluation of their status and certain monopolies [of powers of domination and resources] on the grounds of their status” in relation to other groups.120

A society’s status order thereby entails status-based restrictions on market allocations of land, labor, capital, offices, and other goods, such as housing.121

With regard to racism, dominant groups have employed ideas about racial difference to establish “a privileged and protected status vis-à-vis members of another group or groups.”122 This has produced various hierarchically ranked racialized status orders in different countries.123 Dominant racialized groups sometimes have enacted practices of outright racial segregation and exclusion (for example, whites in the U.S.A. instituted racial slavery and later the Jim Crow system of racial segregation; white South Africans instituted apartheid); racialized status inequalities also have been manifest in more subtle forms of labor market discrimination, discrimination in rental and housing markets, and in states’ racially restrictive immigration policies. Cultural racism has operated in analogous ways.124

These processes structure how members of different status groups are distributed within a given society’s class structure; yet class and racial status are analytically distinct modes of social stratification.125 The interplay of racialized identity and class is manifest in two notable ways. First, racialized status shapes the distribution of income, wealth, educational opportunities, and economic and political power; it shapes who becomes rich and poor, a wage-laborer, a capitalist, or a professional, along with how class positions are experienced.126 One basic aspect of this dynamic has been how European settler states have justified the expropriations of the lands of Indigenous peoples in racial terms.127

Nancy Fraser has elaborated this point by conceptualizing racialized identity as “a bivalent mode of collectivity, a compound of class and status.”128 Racialized identity is indeed bivalent, but it is usually better understood as a compound of status and identity than of
class and status. This is due to the interplay of racialized status and class hierarchy as well as to how racialized identity is not merely a form of status, as I explain below. In relation to racialized slavery and peonage — racial formations that have a caste-like character — racialized identity was basically a compound of status and class: racialized status largely coincided with class positions. But this often has not been the case.

Second, racialized status and class are cross-cutting modes of social stratification. This is particularly evident in our post-colonial world, which is marked by a partial break with the prior white supremacist global racial order.129 This break altered the relationship between racialized status and class, but without severing the linkage. Racism and racialization processes still shape how different racialized groups are distributed across social classes, but racialized identity varies independently of class in new ways. For instance, some members of subordinate racialized groups (but disproportionately few) attain privileged class positions; and many members of dominant racialized groups (but disproportionately few) are poor and working class. This point is further complicated by how in societies characterized by more than two racialized groups the various subordinated or non-dominant racialized groups often experience differing degrees or forms of racism.130

II.2. Racialized Identity and the Politics of Recognition

Adorno and Horkheimer’s hybrid Marxian-psychoanalytic approach to racialized identity and the Weberian status approach share a common shortcoming: neither approach is well suited to address fully how racialized identities are sources of meaning, identity, affiliation, and self-expression. Both perspectives focus too exclusively on the historically predominant side of racial thought and action: “race” as a modality of invidious social categorization that entails a rank ordering of so-called racial groups.131 While Weber’s approach focuses on social stratification, Adorno and Horkheimer illuminate how the enactment of dominating racialized identities, such as Nazi “Aryanism,” exhibits “self-assertion unhampered by reflection.”132 Each approach fails to address what Outlaw calls

the other side of scientific accounts of raciality: . . . the lived-experiences of real persons whose experiences are forged in life worlds in part constituted to a quite significant extent by self-understandings that are in large measure racial, no matter how arguably inadequate scientifically.133

This is so even though Adorno envisioned an emancipated society as a place in people could “be different without fear.”134 While racialized status orders confer unequal social esteem on different racial groups, racialized identities are not reducible to their status aspect. They are “also hermeneutic horizons,” sites “from which we perceive, act, and engage with others.”135 For this reason, a critical theory of racism requires a dual approach to racialized identity, genealogical and hermeneutic: a genealogical analysis of the political construction of racialized identities as modes of domination and structured inequality, along with a hermeneutic account of people’s lived experiences of their racialized identities.136

Since I have focused so far on racialized identities as modalities of domination and inequality, I will now consider their character as sources of meaning. As racialized identities persist, their character as cultural modes of self-identification, affiliation, and self-expression is evident in both laudable and oppressive ways. This self-expressive aspect of racialized identity is evident, for instance, among racialized groups whose cultural practices aim to positively revalue previously demeaned “racial” identities — for example, the Black Power movements in the U.S.A., the Caribbean, and South African in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.137 The self-expressive side of racialized identity has also been evident, however, when dominant racialized groups have expressed their racialized identities through racist cultural practices and modes of identification, such as white supremacism. And problematic cultural enactments of racialized identity also take more subtle forms, including the tacit perpetuation of dominant racialized cultural norms, such as white norms of physical attractiveness.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s Marxian-psychoanalytic approach helps us to make sense of such dominating racialized identifications. The Marxian side turns our attention to the material vulnerabilites and inequities that fuel racist modes of identification and affiliation; the psychoanalytic side illuminates how members of dominant racialized groups can fall prey to false projection with respect to minoritized racial groups. It also sheds light on the unconscious psychological investments of members of dominant racialized groups (for example, white Americans, South Africans, and Brazilians) in national-cultural narratives that minimize the histories of racism in their societies.138

These considerations are consistent with the fact that racialized identities are social constructions with no timeless essences.139 “Black,” “white,” and “Asian” racialized identities, for example, have had specific histories, and where they persist under such designations people experience them in different ways due to their different positions “at the different intersections of various race, class, gender, religious, and geographical axes of identity.”140
II.3. A Politico-racial Schema

Racial states have been made up of differing racial orders. Nonetheless, Horkheimer and Adorno’s remark that for the Nazis “the blacks must be kept in their place, but the Jews must be wiped from the face of the earth,” remains suggestive: it speaks to how systemic racism has been bound up with political struggles in many modern states and globally to negotiate the inequalities and dislocations of capitalist development; to construct and manage “national” populations in the face of modern mass migrations; and to deal with differences, real and imagined, among people. Their rudimentary triadic racial schema would be enriched, however, if we combined it with an appreciation of different forms of racism and Weber’s notion of status groups.

As Adorno noted, modern racial thinking has included a tendency among dominant groups to imagine gradations of similarity between themselves and other groups, ranging from racial kinship to radical difference (see above section I.3). A related insight implicit in his and Horkheimer’s schema is that racial politics often involves an array of racialized status groups, where different groups might experience injuries of racism in different ways. Globally and in various countries, racial politics typically has involved something more than binary divisions — such as between “white” and “black,” colonizer and colonized, anti-Semite and Jew. This has been the case, for example, in Europe, Brazil, South Africa, the U.S.A, and Canada.

Joining Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of the role of false projection in anti-Semitism with the idea of cultural racism sheds light on the persistence of anti-Semitism, on Islamophobia in Europe, North America, and elsewhere, and on other cases where dominant ethno-national groups treat some immigrants as unassemblable “aliens.” Yet even this revised version of Horkheimer and Adorno’s racial schema has limitations: it fails to address what Andrea Smith calls the second pillar of white supremacy: the logic of genocide in white settler states by which that “indigenous peoples must disappear.”

II.4. Historical Injustice and “Working through the Past”

Finally, the notion of historical injustice concerns the injustice inflicted in the past by individuals, groups, and institutions on other individuals and groups that has substantial effects on the descendants of these groups in the present. Adorno elaborated his notion of working through the past in response to one important example of the historical injustice produced by systemic racism — the legacy in post-war Germany of the crimes of the Nazis. The problem, however, is fundamental to the larger legacy of racism, as Fanon indicated when...
he suggested in *The Wretched of the Earth* that European colonial states owed reparations to the peoples they colonized:

-Colonialism and imperialism have not settled their debt to us once they have withdrawn their flag and their police force from our territories . . . . Deportations, massacres, forced labor, and slavery were the primary methods used by capitalism to increase its gold and diamond reserves, and to establish its wealth power . . . . Moral reparation for national independence does not fool us and it doesn’t feed us.\(^{153}\)

Fanon noted that European demands in the aftermath of World War II for “reparations and restitution” for the damage Germany inflicted on the rest of Europe during the war, particularly to European Jews, set a precedent for such reparations.\(^{154}\) European states exploited their colonies through violent expropriation of land and labor; and this has shaped the divergent economic and political trajectories of these regions (for example, North Atlantic versus African societies).\(^{155}\)

Historical racial injustice is also evident in at least two other kinds of cases. First, white settler states in the U.S.A., Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, and South America have inflicted similar racist colonial processes on Indigenous peoples, sometimes in tandem with Black enslavement and its aftermath.\(^{156}\) Second, historical racial injustice is a key aspect of the legacy of racism with regard to other groups in racial states. This systematic racism has been partially overturned by decolonization and civil rights movements of the 20th century. But, in addition to the persisting racism in these states, the histories of racism have had profound effects on the descendants of different racialized groups in the present. Consider, for instance, the apartheid system in South Africa; slavery and anti-Black segregation and discrimination in the U.S.A. and residential schools in the U.S.A. and Canada, into which Indigenous children were forced to root out the “Indian” in them.\(^{157}\) These forms of institutionalized racism have generated ongoing racialized inequalities.

Therefore, a critical theory of racism should address the historical injustice produced by racism with respect to both global inequalities (for example, between colonizing and colonized states) and racialized inequalities within racial states. Globally and in particular racial states there has been only limited support for this ambitious project.\(^{158}\) One significant obstacle concerns the tendency of dominant groups and national populations more generally “to minimize or deny what happened,” as Adorno said of post-war Germans\(^{159}\); another concerns the psychological and material investments that dominant groups have in maintaining their status. Here there is a vital need to work through the past in Adorno’s sense. This task demands that a critical mass of people from various racialized groups (including members of dominant groups that benefit in various ways from historical and ongoing forms of racism) face up to how they are implicated in this history and support efforts to redress it. For educators, this calls for special efforts to reveal these histories.

This is a difficult task for several reasons, and I will briefly mention three. First, people are positioned in relation to the historical legacies of racism not only by various racialized statuses — and in different ways in different racial states — but also by the wider array of intersecting social identities, including class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and able-bodiedness/disability. Therefore, our encounters with the legacies of racism is complicated by our multifaceted identities, which position us each in relation to several axes of advantage and disadvantage. For instance, due to the interplay of race and class the task of working through the past is complicated for some people — say, poor and working-class white people in South Africa, Brazil, and the U.S.A. — by their relatively subordinated class positions: they must face up to their complicity in the legacy of racist injustice even as they themselves experience class-based disempowerment. Other people are relatively advantaged by racial and class hierarchies but disadvantaged due to inequalities rooted in gender, sexuality, or disability.

Second, Adorno discerned a more generalized obstacle to working through the past in capitalist societies: market capitalism tends to liquidate historical memory by habituating people to think that social and political relationships and institutions can be comprehended adequately in their immediacy (see above, I.4). Yet the problem of historical inequality in capitalist society runs even deeper than this. As Horkheimer and Adorno noted, following Marx, in the basic exchange of labor for wages, workers produce a considerable surplus of value for which they are not compensated; this surplus is accumulated by capitalists, generating great inequalities of income and wealth.\(^{160}\) Like the historical injustices of racism, this inequality is passed on across generations through inequalities of social capital and wealth. Consequently, insofar as these systemic class-based inequalities are obscured in capitalist societies, we should not be surprised by the failure of historical memory in these societies of the legacy of racial oppression, which is more historically mediated.

Third, there is a tragic dimension to the historical injustice of racism as it has been experienced by Blacks, uprooted Indigenous peoples, murdered Jews, and colonial subjects, among others. These deep injustices demand acknowledgement, but no reparations could fully compensate for the damage done. As the Black poet and songwriter Gil Scott-Heron asked, “Who’ll pay reparations on my soul?”\(^{161}\)
NOTES


6. Ibid.


10. Outlaw, Critical Social Theory, 81–106. Outlaw maintained that during their stay in the U.S., Frankfurt School theorists became focused less and less on anti-Semitism in particular and “increasingly on prejudice” (ibid., 94).


13. Among major postwar European intellectuals only Hannah Arendt and Jean-Paul Sartre explicitly linked European fascism to European colonial racism. Several pre-war and postwar Black intellectuals analyzed Western imperialism and colonial racism, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, and Frantz Fanon, whom I discuss. See Richard H. King, Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940–1970 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 14.


16. Ibid.

17. I speak of “racialized” identity to signify that “race” is a socially constructed product of “race” ideological processes “whereby social significance is attached to certain (usually phenotypic) human features, on the basis of which those people possessing those characteristics are designated as a distinct collective” (Robert Miles, Racism [New York and London: Routledge, 1989], 74).


21. Racial states, Étienne Balibar explains, are states that are “inscribed in an institutional program of managing race relations or, rather, racist conflicts and representations” (“Racism Revisited: Sources, Relevance, and Aporias of a Modern Concept,” MLA 123, [2008]: 1636).


23. Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, 57–8; McCarthy, Race, Empire, ch. 4.

24. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Preface,” in Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, lvii.


26. Ibid., 213–18.


33. Ibid., xvii, 138.

34. Ibid., xvi.

35. Ibid., xiv.


38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 142.

40. Ibid., 137.

41. Ibid., 138–39.


47. Ibid., 99, 102–05.


49. Ibid.


55. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 140. Adorno later remarked, “Tomorrow a group other than the Jews may come along, say the elderly, who were indeed still spared in the Third Reich, or the intellectuals, or simply deviant groups” (“Education after Auschwitz,” in Adorno, *Critical Models*, 203).

56. Ibid., 167.


60. Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe*, 186.


68. Ibid., pp. 10–11; Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe*, 184.

69. Ibid., 154.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid., 148–49.

73. Ibid., 153, 159, 165.

74. Ibid., 154, 156.

75. Ibid., 155.

76. Ibid., 150.

77. Ibid.


79. Ibid. One feature of the Nazi’s political anti-Semitism was a routinized mimicry of “the Jew” that Horkheimer and Adorno regarded as the “mimesis of mimesis”: “There is no anti-Semite who does not feel an instinctive urge to ape what he takes to be Jewishness” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 151).


81. Ibid., 165.

82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., 139. I leave aside their dubious claim here that Jews sought to “appease evil” by seeking to “resemble” anti-Semitic stereotypes of “the Jew.”
86. Adorno, Minima Moralia, 103.
87. Ibid., 102.
88. Ibid., 103.
89. Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 138.
91. Adorno, Minima Moralia, 103.
92. Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 147.
97. Ibid., 90, 92.
100. Ibid., Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 296.
108. Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, 5.
109. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 178.
110. Sandro Mezzadra, “How many histories of labour? Towards a theory of postcolonial capitalism,” Postcolonial Studies 14 (2011): 151–70. I put “free” in quotes to indicate, following Marx and Messadra, that while wage labor includes an element of freedom compared to coercive labor regimes, it is not fully non-coerced.
111. Howard Winant, The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II (New York: Basic Books, 2001). Racial “whiteness” has had historically shifting boundaries (Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Sandro Mezzadra points out that once we consider the global history of modernity we find “how contested, limited and contradictory the deployment of the abstract standards of citizenship and ‘free’ wage labour” was even within European history (“How many histories of labour?”, 157).
120. Ibid., 60, 61.
123. Winant, The World is a Ghetto, Part II.
129. Winant, World is a Ghetto, 133ff.
131. Outlaw, Critical Social Theory, 90.
133. Outlaw, Critical Social Theory, 97–8.
134. Adorno, Minima Moralia, 103.
136. Outlaw, Critical Social Theory, 101; McCarthy, Race, Empire, 14 n. 26.
137. Ibid.
139. Alcoff, Visible Identities, 179–204.
143. Ibid., 189.
144. Ibid.
145. Adorno, Minima Moralia, 103.
146. Blum, “‘Multiculturalism, Racial Justice,’” 189.
147. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, xiii, 206.
153. Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, pp. 57–8.
154. Ibid.
155. Winant, World is a Ghetto, chaps. 2–3; McCarthy, Race, Empire, chaps. 6–7.

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