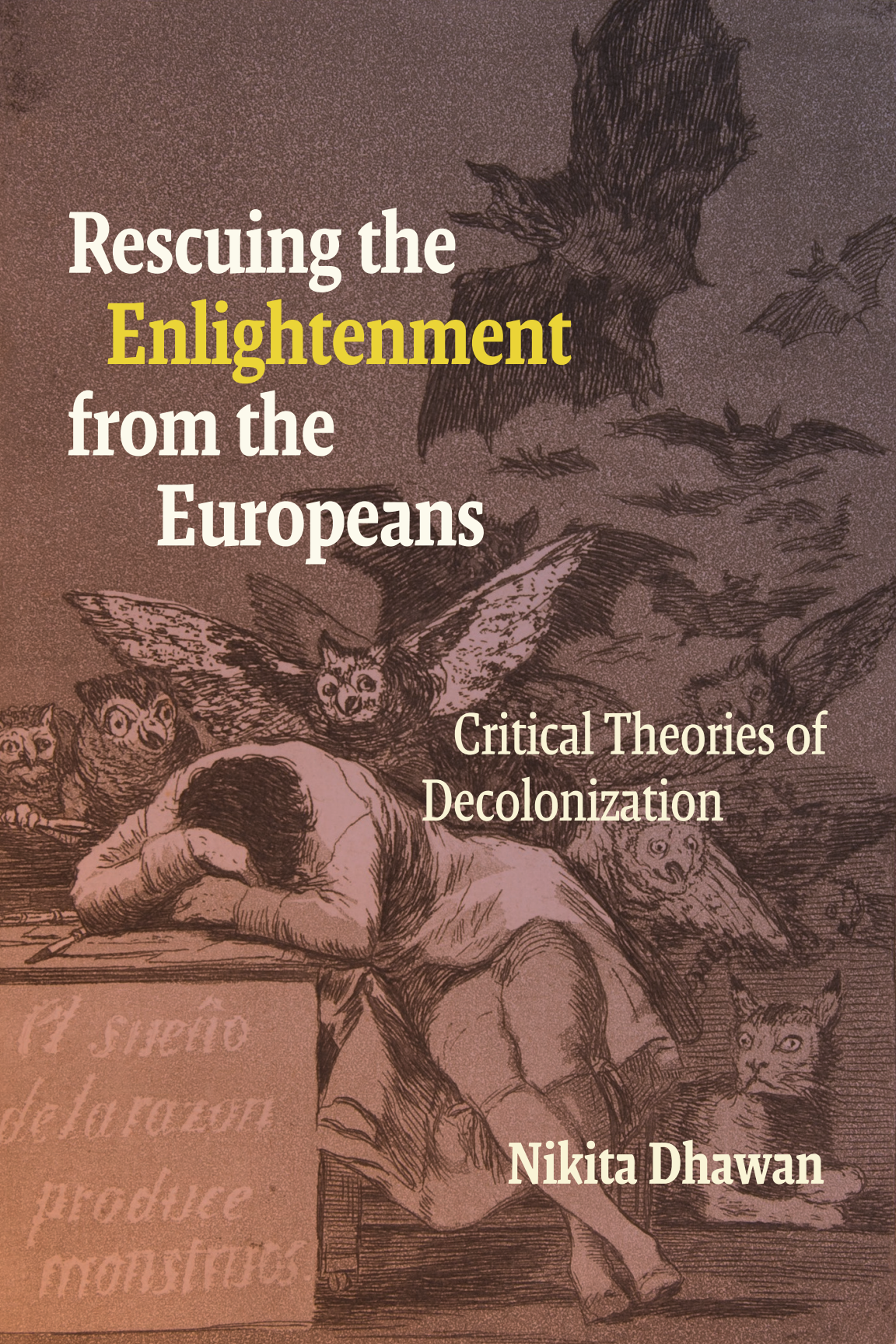
Rescuing the
Enlightenment
from the
Europeans
Critical Theories of
Decolonization
Nikita Dhawan
El sueño
de la razon
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Critical Theories of Decolonization

NIKITA DHAWAN

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For Nimmi and María do Mar

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.—WALTER BENJAMIN

The Enlightenment is sick at home.—GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

We dreamed of nothing but Enlightenment.—MOSES MENDELSSOHN

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To Renounce or Rescue the Enlightenment?

We live in a world where the rapists are in charge of the rape kit.
—GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK (private conversation)

Learning from the Germans?

Germany is considered exemplary in how a country can come to terms with its historical wrongdoing. Susan Neiman (2019) famously asserted that no other land has come close to facing the crimes of its history as Germany has, and that it is a model for other nations. The United States and Great Britain, in Neiman's view, could learn from Germany in confronting their racist history of colonialism and slavery. In their effort to atone for the crimes of the Holocaust, the Germans faced the long and difficult path of coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*). Progress, it is argued, is evident in educational initiatives and memory politics, as well as laws and foreign policy. While Neiman's focus is on Germany's Nazi past, the German colonial past remains a bone of contention.

In April 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, a huge controversy erupted in Germany on the relationship between postcolonial and Holocaust studies. Previously, in 2012, Judith Butler, on the occasion of being

awarded the Adorno Prize, was assailed for their support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. This time, the philosopher Achille Mbembe, from Cameroon, the former German colony, was accused of antisemitism.[1] His comparison of Israel with the apartheid state in South Africa and his critique of Palestine's occupation as a form of settler colonialism were condemned by his detractors for questioning the Israeli state's right to exist. In the aftermath of the Mbembe controversy, a nonbinding resolution was passed by the German parliament that barred the use of federal funds for groups with ties to the BDS movement, which was declared antisemitic in its argumentation, patterns, and methods (Rosen 2019).

The imputation of so-called postcolonial antisemitism resurfaced in the context of the documenta fifteen exhibition.[2] Held quinquennially, Documenta is considered one of the art world's most important events. Documenta fifteen, which took place from June to September 2022, was curated by ruangrupa, an Indonesian art collective. Months before it opened, ruangrupa was accused of antisemitism, supporting BDS, and conducting a silent boycott of Jewish Israeli artists. Ruangrupa vehemently denied these allegations and in turn accused the German media and civil society of racism.

Four days into the show, a nearly sixty-foot-long painted banner called "People's Justice," created by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi in 2002, was removed because of inexcusable antisemitic imagery. Documenta fifteen was declared "postcolonialism's Waterloo" (Fanizadeh 2022) and triggered larger accusations of antisemitism against postcolonial studies and the global South. The respected art critic Bazon Brock (2022) had the following comment: "All these states of the 'global south' are not only religious fundamentalist in orientation, but compared to the welfare states of Western Europe, they virtually allow asocial (*asoziale*) attitudes to be taken for granted" (my translation from German). Ironically, Brock uses Nazi vocabulary to describe the postcolonial world. The inverted black triangle was an identification badge used in Nazi concentration camps to mark prisoners designated *asozial*. The Roma and Sinti people, as well as disabled people, alcoholics, homeless people, beggars, nomads, prostitutes, murderers, thieves, pacifists, and lesbians, were all tagged as *asozial*.

The metaphor of the boomerang was (once again) deployed to explain how European antisemitic imagery traveled to the global South through colonialism and returned to Documenta in the form of what the curators averred to be anti-imperial art (Moses 2022; Rothberg 2022; Weizman 2022). The entanglements and intricate complicities of colonialism, Nazism,

militarism, and capitalism indicate the impossibility of unraveling antisemitism and racism, imperialism and totalitarianism. This nexus complicates straightforward understanding of power and resistance, free speech, hate speech and censorship, agency and vulnerability, perpetrators and victims.

It has been repeatedly emphasized that the blanket condemnation of the global South as antisemitic diverts attention from the serious global threat posed by right-wing antisemitism (Doughan et al. 2022a). Furthermore, efforts to decouple antisemitism, racism, and other forms of discrimination go against an intersectional approach and pit one minority against the other, in line with the divide-and-conquer strategy. This contributes to a toxic climate of censorship and mutual hostility, which makes solidarity and cooperation arduous. While the German state and civil society are condemning BDS and its supporters as antisemitic, funding is being withdrawn from events that invite Jewish and Jewish Israeli scholars who either support BDS or are critical of Israel (Weizman 2022). From the innumerable Jewish persons censured for their support of calls for a ceasefire in the 2023 Israel-Hamas war, the controversy surrounding Masha Gessen serves as a cautionary example of how efforts to combat antisemitism can inadvertently suppress critical thinking. Gessen was to receive the prestigious Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought, but their comparison of the Gaza strip with World War II–era ghettos drew ire in Germany. As was insightfully pointed out, even Hannah Arendt would be censored in Germany today for her political stance on Israel and her views on contemporary Zionism, rendering her ineligible for the Hannah Arendt Prize (Hill 2023). It is ironic that in Germany, the arsonists are in control of putting out the fire, to restate Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, considering, for instance, that Documenta's cofounder Werner Haftmann was a Nazi war criminal (Weizman 2022).

Given Germany's shameful history of genocidal antisemitism, one can only commend the commitment of the German state and the civil society to be vigilant about antisemitism and to combat it. However, the strategy to "boycott the boycotters" (Cooper and Herman 2019) through a sweeping indictment of antisemitism against the postcolonial world threatens to censor postcolonial critical thought. A. Dirk Moses (2021) triggered a new *Historikerstreit* by condemning what he called "German catechism."[3] He explains that any interconnection between the Holocaust and colonialism is made impossible by this dogma, which disallows comparative approaches and engagement with colonial genocides as a relativization of the Holocaust and thus as antisemitic (Traverso 2022). In her more recent

interviews and talks, Neiman has described the situation in Germany as "atonement gone haywire" (cited in Kane 2022) and "philosemitic McCarthyism" (Neiman 2023).

In the aftermath of these controversies, there have been calls in the German media and even in the German parliament (the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland [AfD] party submitted a petition) to defund postcolonial studies and make the nonbinding anti-BDS resolution legally enforceable, which would disallow state-funded institutions and events from inviting speakers who support BDS (Deutscher Bundestag 2022). Given that the majority of academic, cultural, and arts institutions not only in Germany, but also in other parts of Europe, are state-funded, the repercussions of these disputes are grave. Such controversies raise fundamental questions about the freedom of critical scholarship: the relationship between antisemitism and other forms of discrimination, between postcolonial and Jewish studies, and, finally, between Europe and the postcolonial world.

Throughout the debate, the silence of scholars of the Frankfurt School, the birthplace of Critical Theory, has been deafening. The Israeli German philosopher Omri Boehm (2015), for instance, chastised Jürgen Habermas for his reticence on Israel. In an interview in 2012, Habermas stated that, while "the present situation and the policies of the Israeli government" do require a "political kind of evaluation," this is not "the business of a private German citizen of my generation" (quoted in Limone 2012). As Boehm (2022) compellingly argues, the critical engagement with the Holocaust should contribute to global solidarity and the strengthening of universal norms of human rights and international law, instead of feeding ethnonationalistic ideologies, which exclude other forms of memorialization. Although sympathetic to Habermas's unwillingness to criticize Israel, Boehm nevertheless warns that when the master of discourse ethics and public intellectual par excellence avoids the public exercise of one's reason, he is betraying the Enlightenment critical tradition of having the courage to think for oneself. The reluctance to exercise critical judgment and deliberation in the public sphere has far-reaching consequences, presenting the ultimate test of Enlightenment thinking itself. It is not a coincidence that Habermas has been silent on colonialism and its consequences for Critical Theory. As will be discussed later, when asked about the relevance of his theory for the Third World, Habermas similarly declined to respond (Habermas, quoted in Morrow 2013, 128–29). Habermas broke his silence during the 2023 Israel-Hamas war to make a statement that the "Never again" principle entails German commitment to protecting Jewish life and

Israel's right to exist. This is in line with the Merkel doctrine that the security of Israel is German *Staatsräson* (reason of state) (Deitelhoff et al. 2023). In a sharp critique of the German discourse on protecting Jewish life, Yossi Bartal (2024), in his article "Die Wiederkehr des 'Schutzjuden'" (The Return of the "Protected Jew"), warns against the "instrumentalization of Jews" (*Funktionalisierung von Juden*). Bartal (2024) argues that historically, the policy of so-called Jewish protection as a state goal in the fight against antisemitism is part of a troubling tradition, as it paternalistically reduced Jews to passive objects, stripping them of agency. This is why the German constitution, following Enlightenment principles and the concept of equality (*Gleichberechtigung*) for all, does not elevate the rights of Jewish minorities above those of others. Rather than viewing the current German "instrumental philosemitism" (*instrumenteller Philosemitismus*), which includes the positions of Habermas and his colleagues, as a positive gesture, Bartal (2024) emphasizes that making Jews objects of protection risks the future withdrawal of that protection, as has been the case with other minorities deemed undeserving of the state's benevolence. Another astute analysis is provided by Enzo Traverso (2024), who explains that *raison d'état* (reason of state) involves invoking a "state of exception" and violating the law, for instance, in times of war for the sake of national security. He traces the historical development of the concept, which, in fact, represents a state's admission that it is undermining its own norms and values. Traverso concludes provocatively that when Germany supports Israel in the name of *Staatsräson*, it ironically and implicitly acknowledges the immorality of its own policy.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Germany moved to end its long dependence on Russian gas and sought alternative suppliers, including Qatar. If Hamas receives financial and nonmaterial support from Qatar, what does this imply if Germany buys billions of cubic meters of gas from Qatar? German Chancellor Olaf Scholz did not visit documenta fifteen amid the antisemitism controversies in June 2022, but he went to Saudi Arabia and Qatar in September 2022 to deepen the energy partnership with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Both these countries have not recognized Israel since the latter's independence in 1948 and do not accept Israeli-issued passports. The repeated betrayal of Enlightenment norms in a country that portrays itself as a protector and promoter of universal principles of equality and freedom—by both its public intellectuals and its politicians—is one of the motivations for this book. I have chosen Germany as a starting point, as I agree with Neiman that the world can indeed

learn from the Germans about the crucial importance of coming to terms with one's past. However, Germany also stands as a cautionary example of how, in its attempt to prove it has overcome genocidal antisemitism, it ironically undermines its commitment to the universal principles of the Enlightenment. Stuart Hall (1991, 16) astutely observed, "The English are racist not because they hate the Blacks but because they don't know who they are without the Blacks." Similarly, Germans cling to the figure of the antisemitic migrant and the postcolonial world to reinforce their own moral righteousness.

The Postcolonial Scare

What was previously dismissed as a provincial German controversy has, since the gruesome attacks by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, had widespread consequences for postcolonial studies. On October 13, 2023, the right-wing activist Christopher Rufo (2023) posted the following message on X: "Conservatives need to create a strong association between Hamas, BLM [Black Lives Matter], DSA [Democratic Socialists of America], and academic 'decolonization' in the public mind. Connect the dots, then attack, delegitimize, and discredit. Make the center-left disavow them. Make them political untouchables."

One detects a certain schadenfreude in outing the postcolonial world as "closet antisemites" (Daub 2024). From prestigious film festivals such as the Berlinale (Goodman 2024b; New Arab 2024) to the glamour of the Oscars (Middle East Eye 2024), from tech giants such as Google (*Democracy Now!* 2024a) to grassroots movements such as the Abandon Biden Campaign (Abandon Biden 2024), and from Eurovision (*Democracy Now!* 2024c) to PEN America (2024), the spotlight on the idea of decolonization has never been brighter or more widespread. Regardless of the distinct historical and geographical framings of the debates, in my view, a postcolonial scare is being drummed up by the global right. There is a systematic strategy to smear postcolonial studies and other critical theories, including gender and queer studies, diversity, intersectionality, and critical race theory by demonizing them as antisemitic (Goodman 2023). For instance, despite differences among the United States, Germany, and France, in all these contexts postcolonial studies stands accused of providing the ideological foundation for legitimizing the atrocities committed in the name of decolonization. Notwithstanding geographical and historical disparities,

it is, ironically, the far right that stands to benefit the most from the assaults on postcolonial critical thought. It diverts attention from their own antisemitism while simultaneously tarnishing progressive critical thought and practice. Consider the role played by pro-Trump politicians during the congressional hearings of university presidents who were grilled about antisemitism on campus (Goodman 2024a). Although most encampments and protests across the United States, as well as in countries such as France, the Netherlands, Chile, Australia, and Japan, have been peaceful, they are being characterized in the conservative media as dangerous and disorderly. Disproportionate coverage of conflictual encounters between demonstrators and the police or counterdemonstrators, along with biased media reporting, has resulted in a distorted portrayal of students' demands. Ironically, Jewish staff and student protesters were beaten by police, despite the educational institutions' claim that law enforcement was needed to protect Jewish people on campus (*Democracy Now!* 2024b).

On May 1, 2024, the US House of Representatives voted to pass the Antisemitism Awareness Act. Sponsored by a New York Republican, it requires the Department of Education to use the working definition of antisemitism put forward by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). In response, Kenneth Stern, who was involved in drafting the IHRA's definition of antisemitism, warned that "when everything is antisemitic[,] then nothing is antisemitic, and it makes it harder to fight it" (CNN 2024). Critics point out that federal law already prohibits antisemitic discrimination and harassment. The fear is that instead of mitigating antisemitism, this bill will chill free speech and bolster the backlash against critical theories.

These are but few in a series of controversies worldwide, where postcolonial scholarship is backed into a corner to defend its emancipatory credentials. In addition, the postcolonial world is once again being portrayed as purportedly barbaric and prone to violence, with the West bearing the burden of upholding norms of tolerance and equality. In my view, we need to undertake a Foucauldian "history of the present" to understand how we arrived at a point at which it is once again seen as the manifest destiny of the Europeans to fulfill what is referred to as the white man's burden and enlighten the non-Western world. This is possible only through a convenient historical amnesia about colonialism.

In view of these developments, this book aims to address the daunting challenges facing postcolonial queer feminism. Its very credibility seems to be at stake, for it is pilloried for legitimizing violent resistance. Whereas

previously Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela were considered symbols of nonviolent decolonization, now writings by Frantz Fanon (Beckerman 2024) and Malcolm X—and Malcolm X's famous assertion, "By any means necessary" (quoted in *Revolution* 2024)—are produced as evidence of so-called terrorism washing (Montefiore 2023). To counter this, I outline how, to offset this divisive narrative that pits the suffering of one minority against another, we must embrace the Holocaust survivor Jean Améry's (2005 [1968], 15–16) concept of *Schicksalsverwandtschaft* (kinship of fate). This idea highlights the collective experiences of dehumanization and brutality endured by victims of both European colonialism and Nazism. Further, the goal is to challenge the delegitimization of the term *decolonization* by highlighting the diversity and complexity of its strategies and tactics.

While some might argue that the accusations against postcolonial studies are so facile, and postcolonial studies' contributions to critical thought are so obvious, that they don't warrant discussion—let alone an entire book—in my view, the severe imputations against postcolonial studies continue to proliferate. Therefore, it is imperative to set the record straight. In light of these considerations, this book has the following main concerns. First, I address the charge that postcolonial theory abets normative nihilism by being anti-Enlightenment. In my view, it is a contention whose ghosts deserve to be exorcised if we are to obtain the sort of clarity about the critical impetus of postcolonial thought. As I show, it is not postcolonial studies that violate universal Enlightenment principles of tolerance and freedom; rather, the norms themselves have been flawed since their inception. Second, I strive to trace the missed encounters between postcolonial studies and the first generation of Critical Theory, which are both charged with performative contradiction due to their respective critique of Western reason. Third, I seek to highlight the differences between postcolonial and decolonial approaches to resolve the case of what I call mistaken identity. Postcolonial studies and decolonial studies share the goal of decolonization; however, their understanding of how to achieve this sets them apart. This dispute remains at the core of the continuing theoretical slugfest about what decolonization signifies. Finally, I endeavor to examine the contribution of postcolonial studies in rethinking the nature and scope of critical thought. Despite decades of postcolonial scholarship and its laborious efforts to hold Europe accountable for its crimes against humanity, postcolonialism continues to be censured for falling into the irrationality of identity politics and perilous anti-universalism. Against

these accusations, this book mounts a defense of postcolonial studies by foregrounding the coercive legacies of the Enlightenment while outlining how postcolonial studies might perform the exigent task of salvaging it. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno planned to write a sequel to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002 [1947]), titled "Rescuing the Enlightenment" (*Rettung der Aufklärung*) (Horkheimer 1985b [1946], 598). This recovery project was, however, not undertaken. My book is inspired by their unfulfilled efforts. Unlike the decolonial scholars' boycott of modernity and Enlightenment, I focus on the normative dilemmas that haunt postcolonial engagements with the Enlightenment. I show how critical theories of decolonization seek to contest the coercive aspects of the Enlightenment while rescuing its emancipatory norms.

Argument and Outline of the Book

Since its inception with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a recurring and grave allegation against postcolonial studies has been that it is anti-Enlightenment. From the fatwa against Salman Rushdie to Boko Haram's denunciation of Western modernity as sinful, evidence is presented of the postcolonial world's anti-Enlightenment proclivities and the dangers of postcolonial mistrust of the Enlightenment and its norms. This has serious implications, for even as colonialism is grudgingly acknowledged as indefensible, postcolonial perspectives are dismissed as uncritical and ultimately unemancipatory insofar as they fail to provide normative foundations with universal validity. While some respond to these accusations by declaring that decolonization does, indeed, necessarily entail rejecting modernity, my first objective is to outline the complex relationship between postcolonial studies and the Enlightenment. This may seem like a foregone conclusion; however, as I meticulously argue in the various chapters, this is not self-evident. Any contestation of the Enlightenment and its legacies stands accused of forfeiting emancipatory ideals of human rights, secularism, free speech, and democracy. It is my worry that the distortion of postcolonial critique as anti-Enlightenment deflects attention from the nuanced analysis of postcolonial scholars who hold the Enlightenment accountable for its failures without categorically rejecting it. Furthermore, regardless of decades of fact-checking by postcolonial feminist scholars, in which the racism and sexism of Enlightenment thinkers are exposed, we are encountering revisionist readings of scholars such as Immanuel

Kant. Champions of the Enlightenment dismiss Kantian racism, sexism, and antisemitism as banal irrational prejudice that is marginal to the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment. As I show, it is imperative to contest this whitewashing of the Enlightenment as unequivocally anti-Empire, for the stilted stereotypes about the non-European world propounded by Enlightenment thinkers still hold sway. Contrary to claims by neo-Kantians, I contend that racism, sexism, and antisemitism are not extraneous to Kantian thought but deeply entrenched in Western reason and the normative understanding of who qualifies as human and who is considered a legitimate political, ethical, and legal subject. To counter the trivialization of postcolonial critique, I devote careful attention to how these practices of dehumanization are deeply ingrained in Enlightenment norms of cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and equality. For instance, I show how Kant's idea of "unjust enemies" encompassed not only the so-called uncivilized people in the colonies but also European Jews. The Enlightenment promise to convert Jews into citizens of European nation-states was another version of Europe's civilizing mission. The alleged civic improvement of Jews was to be achieved by turning them into enlightened citizens and transforming Judaism into an apolitical religion. Drawing on such examples, the book focuses on the entanglements among different forms of discrimination and challenges the disavowal of the link among the Enlightenment, colonialism, and Nazism.

The second objective of the book is to address the unfinished conversations between postcolonial and Holocaust studies and the convergences of concerns and strategies between the first generation of Critical Theory and postcolonial studies.[4] This book, for instance, is unthinkable without Horkheimer and Adorno's masterly *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Against the charge of so-called postcolonial antisemitism, it is my hope that, instead of being played off against each other, postcolonial and Jewish studies can mutually enrich each other. I further demonstrate how many of the accusations against Adorno, Horkheimer, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, especially by Habermas—one of the most powerful and reputable defenders of the Enlightenment—are ironically also deployed to discredit postcolonial studies. The astonishing lack of scholarship on the ambivalent affinities among the first-generation of Critical Theory, poststructuralism, and postcolonial studies motivated me to address this research gap.

The third task set in this book is to clarify the issue of mistaken identity, as postcolonial studies is often confused with the decolonial approach. As I discuss in detail, decolonial scholars categorically reject

the Enlightenment and Western reason. The Latin American decolonial approach emphasizes how modernity's supposedly emancipatory claims are intertwined with the erasure of colonial genocide and the deceptive rhetoric of progress. Ironically, they, too, accuse postcolonial studies of being uncritical and unemancipatory to the extent that postcolonial critical thought draws insights from poststructuralism and Marxism. Postcolonial and decolonial approaches are often used synonymously; however, it is crucial to recognize the differences between them, particularly in their distinct understandings of decolonization and the nature of critique. Walter Mignolo (2007, 163), for instance, speaks of a "radical difference" between postcolonial and decolonial approaches. While some make tepid attempts to bridge the postcolonial-decolonial divide (Bhambra 2014), others take a more assertive stand on the dispute between the two (Colpani et al. 2022). I conduct a critical analysis of both postcolonial and decolonial arguments, positioning myself in relation to the decolonial claim that they offer a corrective to the "ideological blind spots of postcolonial theories" (Moraña et al. 2008, 5). Postcolonial studies, due to its reliance on the European critical tradition, is often accused of being compromised from its inception, with the *post* in *postcolonial* signifying its political inefficacy. In contrast, the decolonial option's raison d'être lies in positioning itself as epistemically transgressive, asserting its ability to transcend the European canon (Colpani et al. 2022, 3–4). The decolonial option stakes a claim to being more radical and activist, while postcolonialism is declared passé because of its guilt by association with so-called old white men. What is at stake in these turf battles is the ability of postcolonial theory to provide critical impetus for the task of decolonization.

Given that postcolonial studies is accused of being both anti-Enlightenment *and* Eurocentric, it may seem counterintuitive to propose critical theories *of* decolonization, as the notion of critique is deeply entrenched in the European Enlightenment tradition. Despite the burgeoning scholarship on postcolonialism, as well as new trends in normative political theory, the link and discontinuity between the two have rarely been addressed. This book brings a much needed perspective on postcolonial critical thought, which is neither simply oppositional to nor incommensurable with the Enlightenment. In rethinking the nature and scope of critical theories of decolonization, the book outlines how normative principles such as human rights, global justice, and democracy are negotiated *from* and *for* the postcolonial world. In place of offering an ideal theory of justice or democracy, this volume responds to discussions on citizenship

and cosmopolitanism, social movements and alter-globalization, human rights, and sovereignty from postcolonial-queer-feminist perspectives. Taking inspiration from the European critical tradition while questioning and contesting its blank spots, the effort is to discern how critical theories of decolonization are heuristic practices rather than a set of principles. Postcolonial critical practice hones the ability to differentiate, to ask probing questions, and to judge the exclusionary and coercive impulses of the Enlightenment. However, in contrast to a "diagnostic quality of critique" (Anker and Felski 2017, 4), wherein the critic functions as a detached expert who identifies the forms of malaise afflicting society and the defects plaguing its institutions, critical theories of decolonization involve a persistent questioning of one's presumptions and biases that renders critical practice as an open-ended endeavor. An important step toward understanding the aspirations and strategies of critical theories of decolonization is to acknowledge the extent to which the addressee of postcolonial critique—namely, the Enlightenment—also inspires the task of interrogating its coercive legacies.

Accordingly, the final objective of this book is to demonstrate that desubalternizing non-Western epistemologies is unattainable without demonopolizing Europe's dominance in critical practice. This would involve rethinking the normative idea of critique as defined during the Enlightenment. Without democratizing access to intellectual labor, particularly for subaltern groups, the violence exercised in the name of emancipatory norms of the Enlightenment will endure. As the quotes by Walter Benjamin and Spivak at the beginning of this book indicate, the nonperformativity of the Enlightenment—namely, the discontinuity among the rhetoric of freedom, equality, and rights and the reality of slavery, genocide, colonialism, and Nazism—makes it incumbent on us to rescue the Enlightenment from the Europeans, who, in many ways, are its worst betrayers. In addition to the important task of investigating the omissions and gaps in European political thought, my effort is to rescue the best of the Enlightenment to realize the project of decolonization. I show that decolonizing the Enlightenment does not imply repudiating it; nor does engaging with it imply endorsing it unconditionally.

In *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, 5) argues that, almost by definition, postcolonial thinkers are obliged to engage with the principles forged during the Enlightenment, which continue to shape the theorizing of historical, social, and economic phenomena in the postcolonial world. It is not so much the European origins (*Genese*) of the ideas

of human rights or democracy that compromise their validity (*Geltung*) as it is the "normative violence" (Butler 1999, xx) that is exercised on those who violate the hegemonic framings of these norms. Postcolonial, queer, and feminist theorists aim to reimagine the values of equality, freedom, and justice to create new possibilities for negotiation, appropriation, and transformation of these ideals, all while challenging their Eurocentric and androcentric biases (Dhawan et al. 2016). Though inadequate, Enlightenment norms are nonetheless indispensable in understanding the postcolonial condition (Chakrabarty 2000, 4). At the same time, the postcolonial world is not a passive recipient of these principles; it is actively involved in reconfiguring key concepts such as universality, liberty, and equality, which were and are created and re-created in the interaction between colony and metropole. The task is to thread the needle between negotiating the Enlightenment legacies of democracy, justice, and rights and avoiding the reproduction of the constitutive violence that has marked the emergence of these ideals.

The irony of Europe's self-interpellation as an alleged civilizing force is that this positive self-assessment is possible only if one incurs historical amnesia regarding the costs of this mission in the forms of fascism and colonialism. Europe has done its best not to be held accountable for its colonial past, but history has a way of catching up with its culprits. As Derrida (1998, 64), drawing on Sigmund Freud, observes, what is most interesting about repressed memories is what cannot be forgotten and obliterated in the process of *Verdrängung*, or repression. Critical theories of decolonization mark the return of the repressed.

Taking inspiration from Jewish ethics, it is my firm belief that, in the interest of repairing the world (*tikkun olam*), Europe must be held accountable for its betrayal of the Enlightenment's values of freedom, equality, democracy, justice, and emancipation. Although Europe is accused of exploiting and oppressing the rest of the world, it claims in its defense that its tradition of self-critique and self-evaluation enables Europeans to reflect on their crimes and failures and, through self-correction, emerge as more ethical and responsible. This special critical tradition is repeatedly celebrated by Europeans, in all major discourses about Europe. Europe's practice of questioning itself is considered its greatest strength and the most significant legacy of the European Enlightenment; this supposedly sets it apart from other cultures, which are deemed incapable of self-scrutiny. The imperative of relating to oneself in a critical fashion and the ensuing self-improvement in both thought and action is proclaimed to be

singularly and uniquely European. But, as Adam Phillips (2015a) astutely points out, self-critique can function as an "unforbidden pleasure" because it is unimaginative and narcissistic. Europe bewitches us with its claim of being able to be self-reflective through self-reproach; I question Europe's self-interpellation as critical. In my view, European self-critique is nonperformative (Ahmed 2006). As Sara Ahmed argues, the nonperformativity of an utterance does not indicate its failure; its very success lies, rather, in not doing what it claims, even if it is read as performative—namely, as doing what it pledges. The farce of European claims of self-improvement through the practice of self-critique is that there is a negative relationship between rhetoric and reality. For all the talk about European commitments to equality and freedom, self-critical rhetoric does not deliver a postimperial politics or ethics.

However, instead of polemically dismissing European critical thought, the book attempts to conceptually reposition its role within processes of decolonization. This is by no means a straightforward task of undoing the legacies of Enlightenment and colonialism; it is a more arduous undertaking of reclaiming and reconfiguring the Enlightenment's "strange fruits."[5] Following Foucault (1984, 44), who encourages us "to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism . . . ; or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality," I strive to explore the possibility of re-enchantment with the Enlightenment while acknowledging the costs and risks involved. Thus, the question of our relationship to the Enlightenment is marked by the impossibility of categorically locating ourselves beyond it (Cascardi 1999, 5). If, as insisted, the Enlightenment *is* critique, the postcolonial challenge is to reconfigure the Enlightenment's legacies and make them work for the non-European world.

This book is not a puzzle box in which the answers click into place, providing us with a blueprint at the end for how to decolonize. Nor is it a study of any one idea, person, or approach. Rather, a number of thinkers, such as Kant, Fanon, Adorno, Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, Spivak, Butler, and Mbembe, are the main focus of my analysis as I often position myself vis-à-vis them. They present an important foil for my arguments and perspectives. I also engage with concepts such as subalternity, critique, reason, cosmopolitanism, public sphere, freedom, equality, human rights, justice, and democracy to understand how the postcolonial world negotiates the ambivalent legacies of the Enlightenment. In particular, the writings of Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak are central to my project, as she has been a foremost proponent of the double-bind relationship between postcolonial feminism and the Enlightenment. In my view, she has tirelessly devoted sustained attention to tracing the inadequacy, but also the indispensability, of Enlightenment thought for postcolonial critique. It is my firm belief that the process of decolonization is incomplete without desubalternization.

An important clarification regarding my use of Critical Theory in the singular with a capital *C* and critical theories in the plural with a lowercase *c* (Allen 2016) is necessary. The former is marked by a well-defined geographical location—namely, Frankfurt am Main—as its birthplace. The latter is multilocational and multiperspectival, referring to interventions in cultural, social, and political theory that contest global relations of power and domination. Thus, even though the first generation of Critical Theory provides important impulses for this book, critique, in my understanding, is not reducible to the European tradition. Despite claims of universality, Critical Theory, when projected as a global perspective, remains regrettably provincial due to its narrow European focus. In contrast, the more general category of critical theories—including feminist theory, post- and decolonial theory, queer theory, and critical race theory—eschews claims of universality. These theories are aware of their historical, social, cultural, economic, and geographical situatedness. By acknowledging that differences in experiences, perspectives, and locations matter, postcolonial queer feminism illustrates how normative principles are formulated and operationalized in the non-European world. Thus, critical theories contribute significantly to addressing the gaps in Eurocentric and androcentric critical thought.

Transdisciplinary in its approach, the book is primarily theoretical while drawing on historical and contemporary examples to illustrate its arguments. In comparing and contrasting rival theories, the aim is not only to open up new perspectives in postcolonial studies, in broader scholarship on the Enlightenment, and in contemporary Critical Theory, but also to contribute to fields such as gender studies, queer studies, and critical race theory.

The book is divided into two sections. The first part encompasses three chapters that examine the normative dilemmas involved in decolonizing the Enlightenment. The focus is on the colonial and anticolonial aspects of eighteenth-century political thought, the first generation of critical theorists' critique of the Enlightenment, and the past and future relationship between Europe and the postcolonial world. The second part, also

comprising three chapters, explores the political, ethical, and aesthetic legacies of the Enlightenment. It analyzes the role of critique in contemporary social movements, the relationship between resistance and nonviolence, and the importance of aesthetic education in the process of desubalternization.

Chapter 1 traces the ongoing debate between the defenders and critics of the Enlightenment and its most prominent proponent, Immanuel Kant. In recent decades, there has been a surge of revisionist scholarship (Flikschuh and Ypi 2014; Muthu 2003) that aims to correct what is perceived as a misrepresentation of the Enlightenment's epistemological investment in imperialism by recovering critical perspectives within European canonical political thought. As a counterpoint to the postcolonial critique of the Enlightenment, some argue that the Enlightenment was, in fact, anti-imperialist. Conversely, Latin American scholars such as Mignolo (1995) and Ramón Grosfoguel (2007) express disenchantment with the Enlightenment and categorically reject European modernity, questioning its emancipatory claims. They advocate a return to Indigenous cosmologies as a path to achieving decolonization. Critical scholarship—including postcolonial, queer, and gender studies—that draws on insights from Enlightenment thought is accused by decolonial scholars of reproducing Eurocentrism. In response to accusations that postcolonial studies are both anti-Enlightenment *and* Eurocentric, chapter 1 seeks to outline the middle ground taken by critical theories of decolonization and address the normative dilemmas facing the project of decolonizing the Enlightenment.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the first-generation theorists of the Frankfurt School and their critique of the Enlightenment. Their analysis of instrumental reason and its association with Nazism parallels postcolonial studies' critique of Western reason. Much like Horkheimer and Adorno's efforts in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, postcolonial studies can be seen as an attempt to "enlighten the Enlightenment about itself" (Habermas 1982, 21). This chapter explores the relationship between the first generation of the Frankfurt School and anticolonial and postcolonial projects, as well as the unfinished conversations between postcolonial and Holocaust studies. In a counterintuitive move, the final section of the chapter employs postcolonial perspectives to defend Adorno and Horkheimer against Habermas's charges of "performative contradiction" directed at *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Chapter 3 examines the issue of colonial amnesia and its repercussions for postcolonial Europe. The more Europe is confronted with its violent

past, the more it tends to inflict violence on those who remind it of its historical crimes. I argue that an ethical engagement with Europe's past is essential for shaping its future. Therefore, merely undoing European colonialism is insufficient to create a world free from injustice and oppression. To reimagine nondominant futures, we must rethink Europe's relationship with the postcolonial world.

Part II of the book shifts focus to the role of critique in contemporary politics, ethics, and aesthetics. In line with these goals, I explore how Enlightenment concepts such as statehood, sovereignty, and aesthetics can be reconfigured and harnessed for emancipatory politics. Chapter 4 examines whether current social movements can achieve progressive goals or whether oppositional thought might be nonperformative, thereby hindering rather than facilitating social change. Under late capitalism and neocolonialism, protest politics aim to inspire hope and optimism. However, as Adorno (1997 [1955], 35) warns, there is a danger in radical action that "calls everything into question and criticizes nothing." The chapter investigates the complex relationship among international civil society, counterpublic spheres, and postcolonial states. I outline how the will to resist and the state phobia of transnational elites ironically exacerbate rather than mitigate the disenfranchisement of subaltern collectives. Project 2025, an initiative by the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing think tank in the United States, is a troubling example of a vision aimed at dismantling certain organs of the state. Targeting policies concerning education, abortion, pornography, diversity, immigration, civil service, climate change, and taxes, its stated agenda is "to deconstruct the Administrative State" (Dans and Groves 2024, xiv). By foregrounding the importance of postcolonial sovereignty, chapter 4 argues that, for progressive and emancipatory politics, it is crucial to distinguish between criticizing the state and harboring state phobia.

Postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment reveal how the imperative to be critical can sometimes be coercive and violent rather than emancipatory and counterhegemonic. Chapter 5 explores how, instead of fostering a nonviolent world, critical practice may perpetuate cycles of violence. It examines the works of Fanon, Arendt, Gandhi, Butler, Mbembe, and Bhimrao Ambedkar to address the enduring question of whether emancipation can be achieved through coercive means or whether violence merely perpetuates itself, with each act of violence reinforcing its own force. In addition, the chapter analyzes the ambivalent and contradictory nature of both state and anti-state violence and its relation to critical practice.

Chapter 6 explores the intersection of politics, ethics, and aesthetics within the context of decolonization. For Kant, tutelage is an inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. Ironically, colonialism made it impossible for the natives to exercise intellectual labor autonomously. To move from the sublime to the obscene, Donald Trump (2016), after a decisive win in the Nevada primary, remarked, "I love the poorly educated." This chapter pays particular attention to how education can enable or hinder critical thinking. The focus is on Spivak's interpretations of Kant and Friedrich Schiller, as well as her argument that aesthetic education, which cultivates the imagination, is crucial for desubalternization and, by extension, decolonization.

The conclusion argues that critically engaging with the disenchanted present requires reimagining our understanding of change and transformation. Given the endemic problems of economic, social, and political inequality in the postcolonial world, along with the rise of authoritarian and antidemocratic forces, critical practice is closely linked to concerns of disenfranchised subjects and their struggles. The moral-political predicament of postcolonial oppositional criticism is that it must be articulated within the very grammar of Enlightenment discourses of human rights and democracy (Dhawan 2014). The postcolonial condition is plagued by unfulfilled promises and underscores the precarity of hope. While Kant's formula for Enlightenment focuses on exiting self-incurred tutelage, my reading of postcolonial studies draws on Moses Mendelssohn's insight that, for certain vulnerable groups, this tutelage is not self-incurred but systematically imposed. This makes it nearly impossible for these groups to escape it. Mendelssohn's quote at the beginning of this book echoes the postcolonial yearning for Enlightenment. However, rather than offering resolution and guarantees, critical theories of decolonization are shaped by contingencies and dilemmas, where the challenge lies in whether and how to employ the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (Lorde 2007, 110).

Notes

Introduction. Postcolonial Dilemmas. To Renounce or Rescue the Enlightenment?

1 Throughout the text, I use the unhyphenated form of the term (except in direct quotes), as the hyphenated form seems to suggest the existence of something called Semitism, which anti-Semitism opposes.

2 For a critical analysis of the debate, see Brumlik 2021; Rothberg 2020.

3 The *Historikerstreit* (Historians' Dispute) was an intellectual and public debate in West Germany during the late 1980s, involving scholars such as Ernst Nolte and Jürgen Habermas, about how to interpret and represent Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. The controversy centered on questions of historical responsibility, the uniqueness of the Holocaust, and whether it should be studied comparatively.

4 I thank Doreen Mende for reminding me of *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), a three-screen installation by John Akomfrah that explores the work of Stuart Hall. It was initially shown at Tate Britain, London; see https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/akomfrah-the-unfinished-conversation-t14105.

5 Written by the Jewish American songwriter Abel Meeropol under his pseudonym Lewis Allan, the poem *Strange Fruit* was a protest against racist lynchings and was inspired by Lawrence Beitler's photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana. Billie Holiday's iconic rendition of the song is considered a rallying cry of the Civil Rights Movement (Wikipedia 2024a).