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Dissertation Abstract

Critique and the Ambivalence of Colonial Modernity: Towards a Postcolonial Genealogical Critique

This dissertation aims to develop conceptual and methodological tools from the tradition of critical theory, especially Michel Foucault's thought, that can serve the development of a postcolonial genealogical critique, that is, a critique that rethinks the relationship between colonial history and the present and problematizes the postcolonial political order and its hold on our subjectivities. Situated in the field of social political philosophy, my inquiry aims to answer questions that pertain to critical thinking in our times: How are we, as subjects living in a world shaped by the afterlives of colonialism, inheriting and reproducing colonial orders and hierarchies? How can rethinking our relationship to colonial histories transform our present, and how can philosophy facilitate such transformation?

The first two chapters develop and propose genealogical postcolonial critique as a method for studying the normative ambivalence of colonial modernity, i.e., the entanglement of enlightenment and violence. Genealogical critique, a philosophical method of critique based on studying the history of the present and developed mainly by Nietzsche and Foucault, is an especially apt method for postcolonial critique, but I suggest that it needs to be modified due to its Eurocentric bias. The last two chapters articulate the possibilities of feminist and ethical self-transformation in postcolonial times by drawing inspiration from Foucault's work on ethical self-practices. I suggest that a postcolonial philosophical perspective can problematize the legacies of colonialism in our times and create through such critique an alternative political and ethical horizon.

At the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies (ZtG), I will be focusing on the feminist philosophical dimension of this research which studies the gendered implications of colonial afterlives and argues for a genealogically informed feminist theory that takes its own historical and political situatedness, and its possible entanglement with colonial power structures, seriously. In this research, I study the affinity between colonial modernity and Islamic fundamentalism in their discourse about Muslim woman and explore the implications of this affinity for the analysis of the contemporary woman life freedom movement in Iran.