

## Critical Theory at the Margins

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**Abstract:** In this precis, I schematically reconstruct the idea of “critical theory at the margins” based on two essays of Filipino critical theorists, Jeffry Oca, namely “Philosophy at the Margins: Exploring the Philosophy of Work of the Elderly People in some Remote Areas of Negros Oriental” (2015) and “The Peasant Movement and Great Refusal in the Philippines: Situating Critical Theory at the Margins” (2019). I interpret the idea of critical theory at the margins as *emancipative utopia*—one that is located in the alternative lifeworlds of so-called “marginal” communities outside the fringes of the hegemonic center. In this context, the marginal becomes a critical alternative to the destruction occasioned by globalization. I further echo the argument of Oca that critical theory at the margins is not only a critique of the hegemonic center, but it is also outside the fringes of the ideological discourses of neoliberalism and the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist tradition. As such, critical theory at the margins brings our attention back to what is actually more fundamental: the lifeworld of the peasants, as opposed to the rather tendentious narratives of ideological discourses.

**Keywords:** critical theory, margins, emancipative utopia, Filipino local communities

The basic idea of “critical theory at the margins” was inspired by my friend and colleague, Jeffry Oca, who taught philosophy at Silliman University for many years before transferring to the Eastern Visayas State University in Tacloban. The idea of the “margins” as a critical-practical conceptual apparatus can be drawn mainly from two of Oca’s essays: “Philosophy at the Margins: Exploring the Philosophy of Work of the Elderly People in some Remote Areas of Negros Oriental” and “The Peasant Movement and Great Refusal in the Philippines: Situating Critical Theory at the Margins.”<sup>1</sup> I read Oca’s notion of the “margins” to mean the possibility

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeffry Oca, “Philosophy at the Margins: Exploring the Philosophy of Work of the Elderly People in some Remote Areas of Negros Oriental,” in *Social Ethics Society Journal of*

of *emancipative utopia* inspired by the normative practices of local communities. The “margin” or the “marginal” could be roughly understood as a rich “cultural heritage” that exists outside the fringes of the hegemonic center; by existing outside the center or the periphery, the marginal can be construed as a practical “alternative to the destructive tendency of globalization”<sup>2</sup> or paving the way for “the possibility of redemptive alternatives to the struggle for emancipation.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the margin/marginal could be both a radical critique of systemic oppression and an attempt to realize a utopian vision of a good life.

While the margin/marginal is portrayed as a social-political critique of oppression, I believe that its radicalization is activated by the fact that it is conditioned by the precarity rendered by the hegemonic center. What this means is that the marginal is always under constant threat from this all-too-powerful center. On the one hand, the marginal is truly “marginal” in a sense since it is always under threat, that is to say, it is haunted by the possibility of being canceled out by the center. On the other hand, by virtue of its being marginal, that is, outside the center, it offers an alternative worldview or perspective on the conduct of life: outside the iron cage of the center. In this latter sense, following Ocay, the margin is a fecund resource for a theoretico-practical critique of social and political reality characterized by oppression and suffering.

By taking into consideration the latter sense of the marginal, I argue that there is something fecund, both theoretically and practically, that *mainstream critical theory* could learn from a *critical theory at the margins*. More specifically, at the margins of an already marginal place like the Philippines. The marginal groups that Ocay cites in his essays, for instance, the elderly people of Negros Oriental and the peasant movement in the Philippines, are examples of how the margins offer us normative resources for social and political emancipation. More specifically, Ocay notes that, the elderly people of Negros Oriental exhibit a “work attitude and consumption habit” that “confronts and resists some of the work-related global problems that we are facing today.”<sup>4</sup> Ocay further remarks,

... the privilege of the elderly people in remote localities is that because they have seen better days, they are therefore in the best position to assess how the notion of

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*Applied Philosophy*, 1:1 (October 2015), 1-2; “The Peasant Movement and Great Refusal in the Philippines: Situating Critical Theory at the Margins,” in *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy*, 12:3 (April 2019), 43-67.

<sup>2</sup> Ocay, “Philosophy at the Margins,” 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ocay, “The Peasant Movement and the Great Refusal in the Philippines,” Abstract.

<sup>4</sup> Ocay, “Philosophy at the Margins,” 8.

## 8 CRITICAL THEORY AT THE MARGINS

cooperative work contributed greatly to human flourishing and community development.<sup>5</sup>

By interviewing the locals of Barangay Bato, Ocaj was able to reconstruct their philosophy of work and consumption. His reconstruction was guided by carefully crafted questions that sought to determine the way of life and work of the locals (especially the elders), their notion of work or labor, their normative practice of community organization, and whether their local perspective on work contributed to the development of their community. The following is what Ocaj discovered:

I found out that the people in this remote community continue to practice *dagyawan*, their term for “cooperative work”, which allowed them to live in common with each other. This is evidenced by the practice of “mutual cooperation” these people displayed in organizing community work. For example, in my casual conversation with the people in the community and the schoolteachers, I learned that when an elementary school was built in the community, the entire labor force was mobilized to work without pay. Of course, the people here are already familiar with wage labor; in fact, many of them had gone to the urban centers to work, for example, as house helpers. But what is interesting here is that when it comes to community work, the people in Sitio Pinayun-an do not hesitate to work voluntarily for the common good.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover,

Antero Anadon, one of the elders that I interviewed, claims that any progress in their community directly stems from the people’s practice of *dagyawan*. Antero further said that he could not imagine himself living without the support of the entire community. While it is true that they work individually [on] their own farms and hire once in a while individuals in the community for some paid work, most especially in transporting agricultural products to the lowland, Antero clearly

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

pointed out that when the community needs them, they would not think twice to come together and work for the common good.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, Ocaj explains the practice of *dagyawan* as an instance of what Freud refers to in his *Civilization and its Discontents* as the sublimation of “libidinal energies into productive work.”<sup>8</sup> In this context, work is understood as the byproduct of social necessity that develops into the normative practice of social cooperation. The Hiligaynon term “*dagyawan*” entails social togetherness which presupposes the I in the We. As such, the community fostered by the practice of *dagyawan* is nothing without social cooperation.

By borrowing the notion of work/labor offered by Hegel and Marx, Ocaj is able to argue that a community fostered in social cooperation, as opposed to profit-oriented social systems like capitalism, nurtures the development of “selfhood” among its members.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, work is necessitated, according to Freud, by social need and the satisfaction of individual desires, but, more importantly, work is a form of social recognition, that is, the recognition of one’s individual contribution to the community.

But, what is so special about a community fostered in social cooperation, as opposed to a civilization built on profit and gain? Allow me to quote Ocaj once again:

Sitio Pinayun-an may not be as progressive as other communities in Negros Oriental, in fact it remains a backward community when viewed from the vantage point of Western civilization, but at least with the kind of work attitude and consumption habit that the people in Sitio Pinayun-an displayed, we can rightly say that they have attained a kind of progress that is specific to their own community.

What we can also observe in the way the elderly people in Sitio Pinayun-an organize work is that they did not display a type of work attitude that is reminiscent of capitalist values, that is, a work attitude tied to consumerism. My contention is that because they work mainly for the satisfaction of their basic needs,

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> See *Ibid.*, 14.

## 10 CRITICAL THEORY AT THE MARGINS

their consumption habit is directly antithetical to the capitalist-driven consumerism. As a matter of fact, the people in Sitio Pinayun-an consume only what is necessary and harvest what is enough.<sup>10</sup>

The philosophy work of the locals of Sitio Pinayun-an is not driven by consumption, but rather driven by basic needs. Such traditional work ethic is motivated by an idea of “freedom” or “liberation” that is not grounded in the accumulation of wealth and property, but rather, on the cultivation of selfhood and self-worth. It is interesting that this idea of self-worth is actually tied to an idea of self-respect or, more specifically, one’s respect for the body—the needs of the body. Ocaj also adds that this consumption habit also has profound effects on the environment, as it is not driven by economic gain that results from the massive destruction of nature.

Meanwhile, in his 2019 essay, Ocaj identifies the Philippine peasant movement as “probably the most brutalized of Filipino populations to have suffered from direct or indirect capitalist exploitation.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the peasant movement is situated “explicitly and substantially outside the main ideological discourses of the day, between neoliberal justifications and the classical Marxist-Leninist-Maoist discourse that continues to prevail in the Philippines today, and because it challenges inequalities in terms that are different from the main ideological game.”<sup>12</sup> As opposed to the neoliberal/capitalist and Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideological discourses, the latter the only *wrong* type of Marxism that the Philippine government claims to understand (or lack thereof), paying attention to the plight of the peasant movement brings our attention back to what is actually more fundamental: the lifeworld of the peasants, as opposed to the rather tendentious narratives of ideological discourses. Ocaj emphasizes that the peasant movement offers an alternative logic of work and cooperation:

... the Filipino peasants I am referring to oppose the current capitalistic logic and its forms of domination by reference to an alternative tradition of working, using, and sharing the land collectively and cooperatively. In many parts of the Philippine archipelago, there exists a strong indigenous practice of collective work which is called *suyuanin* Mindoro, *jungos* in Bohol, and *junlos* in many parts of Mindanao. This is a local practice by which the peasants pool their labor together in order to

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Ocaj, “The Peasant Movement and the Great Refusal in the Philippines,” 50.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

get the job done efficiently without the use of money, that is, without paying the labor each member of the *suyuanor* or *jungos* or *junlos* expends.

This cooperative form of work is an effective alternative to a capitalist-oriented type of work because it unties the peasants from surplus repression demanded of them by the capitalist society and frees them from the obligation of maximum individual performance. More importantly, such cooperative form of work enables the Filipino peasants to come up with a viable economic organization that allows them to control the marketing of their produce.

... this indigenous alternative of producing and consuming protects these Filipino peasants from the aggressive and destructive tendencies of technological development, which, according to Marcuse, perpetuates servitude amidst growing possibilities of freedom and which deepens poverty amidst abundance.<sup>13</sup>

What Ocaý's second essay shows is the nature of social struggles at the margins. The refusal of the peasant movement to embrace the logic of capitalist production and consumption is a possible example of what Marcuse terms as the "great refusal." As with the elderly people of Sitio Pinayun-an, the peasant movement presents to us "the possibility of redemptive alternatives to the struggle for emancipation." The most novel contribution of Ocaý's essay is the idea that "the most oppressed of the oppressed" offers us a vision of hope—or what I would term as *emancipative utopia*. According to Ocaý, "Filipino peasants in their plight, but also in their organization and indeed in their struggles, point to a way of life that escapes the apparently inescapable logic of technological domination."<sup>14</sup> The locals of Sitio Pinayun-an and Filipino peasants are victims of the neoliberal system; but while they are under the threat of neoliberalism, they actually exist "outside the established" system. These are ways of life that are not completely contained by the hegemonic center. Ocaý intimates that, while some radical peasant movements have resorted to militant struggle, the point of articulating a critical theory at the margins is to present alternative practices of resistance that do not resort to violence. One example of nonviolent resistance is the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Abstract.

## 12 CRITICAL THEORY AT THE MARGINS

practice of communitarian cooperation which is a more viable system of shared labor and economic organization.

While the birthplace of critical theory is Europe, its normative claims are, nonetheless, universal, inasmuch as it lends an intellectual voice to the voiceless and articulates a notion of hope for the hopeless. In the context of the Philippine society, critical theory may play an instrumental role in analyzing social and political pathologies. Moreover, the complex history of the Philippines, as a postcolonial nation with a neo-colonial culture, has resulted in “marginal spaces” that profoundly inform Filipino identity and culture. As such, the Philippines is a peculiar locus for the possibility of a critical theory of society that is characterized by marginal spaces. Or, as Ocaj puts it, we may articulate a new form of struggle for recognition from the margins of the global system. While we may understand the word “marginal” in its negative form, usually referring to the disadvantaged members of society, it is also possible to construe “marginal” precisely as the obverse of the disadvantaged, as there are subterranean cultures that are thriving, yet largely unrecognized or misrecognized. These subterranean cultures or “alternative rationalities,” when given voice, may inspire new forms of normative modalities that could respond to various forms of social and political crises, thus instigating the possibility of hope and the activation of utopian visions.

Critical theory at the margins forces us to ask the question whether the margins need critical theory or, rather, critical theory actually needs the normative resources of the margins in order for critical theory to become relevant once again.

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