

Introduction to the *Kritike* Special Issue: The Crisis of Critical Theory? Critical Theory From and Beyond the Margins

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Critical theory is a Western, and distinctly European, intellectual tradition that drew its normative resources from the social and political events that transpired in Europe during the Enlightenment period and over the course of the 20th century. It is relevant to ask the question whether, as a critical-practical tradition with an emancipatory interest, critical theory has anything to contribute outside the Western-European context in the 21st century, given the emergence of globalization and the issues that arose with it? For some, the Eurocentrism of critical theory is symptomatic of its very own crisis, one which challenges the universality of its normative claims, e.g., the abolition of social injustice. Is it possible for critical theory to overcome its Eurocentrism and, therefore, its own crisis? The irony is that critical theory is only able to defend the universality of its normative claims when it is able to renew itself. For this task it is essential that critical theory will be globalized and live up to a cosmopolitan ethos. If it is at all possible to renew critical theory, what does this renewal entail?

While critical theory has asserted its role as the vanguard of protecting the interest of the oppressed, the pursuit of justice, and the abolition of domination and alienation in society, the question of who is the oppressed, what is justice, and who and what is dominated or alienated remains prevalent. The need to critically address, revise, re-align, and remap the trajectories of critical theory becomes an essential call to arms as we continue to experience injustice, domination, and oppression in new forms and across cultural boundaries that displace our traditional ideas of justice, domination, and oppression. From this vantage point, there is a need to move critical theory beyond the margins of its intended scope and look at the possibility where future discourses in critical theory can develop in pursuit

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of its intended normative goals. There is a need to identify contradictions in, renew, revisit, and revise existing conceptions of social justice and emancipatory agency when its possibility entails contrary effects.

On 24 October 2020, the University of Macau (Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies) and the University of Santo Tomas (Department of Philosophy) convened an online forum to tackle questions related to the crisis of critical theory described above. The forum pursued these questions by expanding the scope of traditional critical theory, especially, but not exclusively, by drawing on critical perspectives on modern societies and emancipation movements that have originated in Asia and, more specifically, at the margins of Chinese and Philippine societies. In this special issue of *Kritike*, we have gathered essays that deal with the above issues. The majority of the essays in this special issue were distilled from the forum, but we have also included papers that were not presented in the forum but tackle questions related to the theme: “The Crisis of Critical Theory? Critical Theory From and Beyond the Margins.”

It is worthwhile to note that the cover photo shows two bonsai trees growing next to each other, yet in opposite directions. It is a fitting symbol for our ongoing collaborative initiative between Macau and Manila. The image of the seemingly deformed and yet coevolving bonsai twins captures the unfinished task of rethinking and practicing critical theory from and beyond the margins.

In the short piece, “Critical Theory at the Margins,” Paolo A. Bolaños echoes insights from Filipino critical theorist, Jeffry Oca, on the possibility of conceptualizing an alternative critical praxis grounded in the normative lifeworlds of local communities and peasant movements in the Philippines. Bolaños presents the idea of “critical theory at the margins” as a form of emancipative utopia inspired by the peculiarities of the practical lifeworlds of communities or social groups that are outside the fringes of the hegemonic center of the capitalist system. The main argument of a critical theory at the margins is that the so-called “marginal” communities and groups have much to offer to the discourse on social emancipation—as opposed to the common view that these marginal communities and groups are always at a disadvantage. While, indeed, they are the most oppressed, the peculiarities of their ways of life—already rich in communal practices of labor and social cooperation—provide a radicalization of the notion of the “marginal” as a new source 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.”

In the second piece, “The Kowtow and the Eyeball Test,” Mario Wenning juxtaposes typical practices of showing respect in the Republican and the Confucian traditions. The paper reveals that the Republican ideals of

standing tall and looking one another in the eye have radically different normative implications than the Confucian counterparts. Rather than idealizing upright body postures and eye contact, Confucians engage in bowing and kneeling rituals to express humility. Critical of one-sided interpretations of both, the Republican as well as the Confucian practices and conceptions of respect, the paper pursues the counterfactual question: is it possible to imagine a Confucian Republic in which free citizens would be inclined to perform a kowtow among equals?

Meanwhile, Jovito V. Cariño's "Modernity and the Question of Hope: Some Perspectives through Thomas Aquinas" dwells on the question of hope via a critique of modernity and a reevaluation of the role of theology as a "humane and liberative social imaginary." Cariño's reevaluation of theology comes in the form of a rehearsal or, to be more precise, reconfiguration of Thomas Aquinas's theology of hope. The author prefigures this move as his response to the question of the debate on the crisis of critical theory. There are, however, layers to Cariño's discussion, as he reconstructs a critique of modernity using Charles Taylor's view on the relationship between religion and modernity. Cariño takes Taylor's position, that the history of modernity is necessarily the history of religion—that what the former refers to as "historicism" is a forgetfulness of the modernity-religion relation. This then allows Cariño to present Aquinas's theology of hope as a possible critical-practical response to the pitfalls of historicism.

In the fourth piece, "Academic Discourse of Chinese Philosophy and the 21st Century Chinese Study—The Case of Confucian Views on Retributive War," Lee Ting-mien skillfully engages with the literature on Confucian just war theory and, more specifically, wars of retribution. Lee identifies a fear that draws on alleged Confucian justifications for vengeance to justify current forms of wolf warrior diplomacy. The paper closely engages with the Confucian sources and commentaries to demonstrate that radical pro-vengeance positions do not rest on solid textual evidence. Moreover, the author reminds scholars to stay calm and refrain from utilizing Confucianism to address political issues of the 21st century.

"A Case for a Neutral Narrative of Recognition Through Reconstructive Normative Simulations" is Roland Theuas DS. Pada's attempt to consolidate the important works of the German critical theorist, Axel Honneth, namely, *The Struggle for Recognition*, *Reification*, and *Freedom's Right*. Pada claims that the consolidation of these works will reinvigorate the critical potential of Honneth's recognition theory. This reinvigoration involves tying together Honneth's early insights in *The Struggle for Recognition*—namely, love, rights, and esteem—with the more recent discussions on personal relations, democratic participation, and the market economy. Another important feature of Pada's piece is his introduction of what he terms

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“reconstructive normative simulations,” which are hypothetical narratives that aim to demonstrate the experience of “misrecognized” individuals. More specifically, these simulations “... offer a dynamic approach to recognition theory’s agenda of critique by localizing discourse at the level of the subject’s experience of disrespect and their possible contribution to the cycle of social pathologies.” Misrecognition, as Pada demonstrates, occurs at the levels of personal relations, democratic participation, and the market economy.

In her paper “Enlightenment Toleration: Rereading Pierre Bayle’s Criticism of Religious Persecution in *Commentaire philosophique*,” Hui Xianzhe turns to a little-known argument advanced by an important and often neglected precursor of the Radical Enlightenment and Critical Theory. Bayle proposed an imaginary conference between Christian missionaries and the Chinese emperor. Hui draws on Bayle’s proposal to argue for a promising model of intercultural self-critique that could advance the task of deprovincializing Critical Theory.

Meanwhile, in the article, “Mapping a Precarious Ethics in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Semiocapitalism, the ‘New’ Cognitariat, and Chaosmosis,” written by Raniel SM. Reyes, we read a reconstruction of Franco Berardi’s idea of “semiocapitalism.” Reyes points out, following Berardi, that semiocapitalism is the most contemporary inflection of capitalism. What it does is that it uses the flow of information as the driving force of capitalist production. Semiocapitalism goes beyond the factory and takes over the central nervous system of society at large. “The automatization of mental activity, language, and imagination in this period effectuates novel forms of alienation or what he describes as the precarization of mental labor in cyberspace.” In this sense, the physical world and our various relations therein are now mediated exclusively by the internet. Reyes points out that, despite the fact that this new configuration leads to new forms of oppression, semiocapitalism paves the way for a new virtual social class referred to as the “cognitariat.” The rise of the cognitariat, Reyes argues, has been made more palpable during the COVID-19 pandemic, where traditional social relations have been replaced by virtual meeting rooms and classrooms. Reyes laments that such configuration threatens the loss of community and the exacerbation of psychopathologies.

In “Selfie Politics: The Political Commodification of Yourself,” Hans-Georg Moeller diagnoses a transformation of political activity in recent decades. Especially in the realm of social media, communication increasingly serves the function of staging one’s identity as representing a certain profile. The display of seemingly appealing profiles, Moeller argues, has replaced the earlier search for one’s true self and, one may add, emancipatory forms of politics. The constitution of what Moeller refers to as “profilicity” breaks with

previous branding strategies. This transformation of political agency from authenticity to proficility calls for new forms of critical theory and political interventions.

Finally, in his contribution, “Recognition, Disrespect, and the Rearticulation of Chinese National Identity,” Daniel Sarafinas reconstructs recent forms of constructing Chinese identity in the context of international relations. He identifies a distinctive inferiority complex and discusses attempts to overcome the experience of humiliation in modern Chinese intellectual history and in contemporary debates about Chinese identity, all-under-heaven (tianxia) and the China Dream. Sarafinas extends insights from recognition theory in the Hegelian and Frankfurt School tradition to identify pathologies that are revealed in the self-referential discourses of worrying about China’s past and future position in the world.

In closing, we wish to express our deepest gratitude to the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies of the University of Macau for the financial support that made the online forum possible and to the Department of Philosophy of the University of Santo Tomas for the technical, organizational, and institutional support. We also profoundly thank the editorial board of *Kritike* for providing the venue for publication and for helping us throughout the long process of editing and preparing the pieces included in this special issue.

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