

## **Pada, Roland Theuas DS., *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition: Freedom, Normativity, and Identity*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Jovito V. Cariño**

**P**ada's book on Axel Honneth's recognition theory is the latest contribution to the growing number of philosophic literature in the Philippines dedicated to critical theory in general and Axel Honneth in particular. Recent titles like Ranilo Hermida's *Imagining Modern Democracy: A Habermasian Assessment of the Philippine Experiment* (2014) and Renante Pilapil's *Recognition: Examining Identity Struggles* (2015) are cases in point. Aside from them, one may also consider Agustin Martin Rodriguez's works such as *Governing the Other: Exploring the Discourse of Democracy in a Multiverse of Reason* (2009) and *May Laro ang Diskurso ng Katarungan* (2014) as well as Paolo Bolaños's *On Affirmation and Becoming: A Deleuzian Introduction to Nietzsche's Ethics and Ontology* (2014) as explorations closely aligned with the general problematic of critical theory. Of these materials, Pilapil's *Recognition* distinguished itself as the only text to have devoted itself to Honneth's recognition theory and this it did by examining actual political struggles and identity claims of Muslims in Mindanao. In his review, Paolo Bolaños acknowledged Pilapil's work as "the first book on recognition theory in the Philippines and it is also the first to use the Moro struggle in Mindanao as a test case for examining the normative validity of recognition theory."<sup>2</sup> Pada, an emergent Honneth scholar in the Philippines, counted himself as a worthy conduit of Pilapil when he pursued the same question of recognition albeit via a different narrative style, hermeneutic approach, and overall complexion of discourse. Pilapil, for example, did include a discussion of the actual experiences of identity struggles in Mindanao to give his book the necessary local slant. Pada did not follow the same route but succeeded nonetheless in bringing Honneth's recognition theory closer to home. This he did by citing

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<sup>1</sup> New Castle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Inc., 2017, 199 pp.

<sup>2</sup> Paolo A. Bolaños, "Pilapil on the Theory and Praxis of Recognition," in *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, 20:3 (2016), 132-33.

examples from local scene like the highly controversial Lina Law and by allowing the perspectives of fellow Filipino scholars like Altez, Bolaños, Mercado, and Pilapil himself to speak through his text. Reference to the works of these academics was greatly enriched by Pada's citation of the eminent Florentino Hornedo whose memory he honored in the book's dedication page. Pada utilized Hornedo's reading of Philippine culture and history to underscore his views on Filipinos' chronically interrupted struggle for recognition vis-à-vis our congenital inability to develop enabling social norms.

A narrative account of the struggles for recognition, be it historical or fictive, is crucial in any discussion of recognition theory. In this regard, Pada must be credited for his ability to supplement his discourse with literary allusions from works such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Rogelio Sikat's *Impeng Negro* as well as F. Sionil Jose's *Ermita*. He also used examples from popular culture like the Philippine television series *Nita Negrita* and Slayer's cover of the song *Guilty of Being White* to drive home a point. A cross-disciplinary effort like this is useful both for its illustrative and interpretive benefits. Reading Pada's work, one is inspired to realize that recognition can function both as a theory and as a story. As a theory, it owes its provenance from the philosophic tradition built around the likes of Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Habermas; as a story, it serves as a chronicle of the struggles which mark an individual's existence in a given society. Honneth's emphasis on the individual as rehearsed by Pada cannot be overstated. Respect for the individual coincides with the element of difference which in turn animates one's aspirations for freedom. Freedom in turn is either enriched or negated by its normative context which itself is informed by the actions and interactions of individuals themselves. The operative word for Pada is either "loop" or "looping" whenever he describes the dynamics underlying normativity and freedom. The employment of these words is Pada's casual way of suggesting the kind of reflexivity that must apply on both individuals and norms within the continuum of social reproduction. The emphasis on social relations is, for Pada, what gives Honneth's brand of critical theory an edge over the proposals of the likes of Adorno, Foucault, or Habermas. The accent on relations provides the project of social emancipation not only a solid grounding but moreso, a real fighting chance. In Pada's words: "Personal relations serve a very important role in the everyday practice of recognition. Since personal relations are points of learning and receptivity for individuals, they produce a surplus of normative resources for sustaining identities ... While Honneth does not claim a revolutionary form of social movement, he does look at the possibility of social change from within. I think that the emancipatory potential of this perspective, while neither poetic nor romantic, hold a stable and viable potential for initiating changes from within society

itself.”<sup>3</sup> Pada’s strategy to provide what he terms as “reconstructive normative simulations,” featuring the fictive characters of Elise, Diego and Nolan, is instructive of this point. Each character is intended to dramatize not just a particular sphere of recognition (Elise for personal relations and love; Diego for democracy and rights; Nolan for market economy and esteem) but also specific forms of pathologies which impinge on individuals’ struggle for recognition and fuller participation in the life of the society or *Sittlichkeit*. Pada, echoing Honneth, says that pathologies are debilitating but they are nonetheless instrumental for the impetus they provide in ensuring that norms are constantly reproduced, and that recognition is relentlessly pursued with the vision of solidarity and freedom in mind.

The good news is that readers who are uninitiated with Honneth or with his recognition theory will find in Pada’s book a helpful tool to get acquainted with the fundamental arguments, hermeneutic structure as well as the basic grammar and vocabulary of Honneth’s ethico-political thought. The bad news is that a book as extensive and as nuanced as Pada’s may not easily lend itself to the uninitiated. This is not to say that a newbie has little to gain from reading the book. I only mean to suggest that Pada’s text is a serious philosophic work which requires focus, deliberation and an expansive interpretive range. In his first foray into international book publication, Pada tried to establish himself as a reputable recognition theory scholar proven no less by his ability to navigate through Honneth’s extensive oeuvre. From *The Struggle for Recognition*, to *Critique of Power*, to *Freedom’s Right* and all other works in between, Pada sought to identify and mend any theoretical gap in Honneth’s discourse while he put together the scaffolds of his own contentions. This is particularly true in Part 4 of the book where he presented a reconstructed critical theory of Honneth against the critique of one of the latter’s leading interlocutors, Nikolas Kompridis. Unlike Honneth, Kompridis has little regard for the role of normative resources when it comes to the formation of the self. He believes that the disposition towards self-understanding is an ontological given available to any individual. By bringing in a contrary voice like Kompridis’s, Pada elevated his text beyond the level of exegesis and further enhanced the critical character of his study of Honneth. Recognition is a relatively novel theme in the Philippine intellectual scene. Pada, along with his fellow critical theory scholars, should be acknowledged for espousing this as a way of promoting the more vital causes of freedom and justice.

*Department of Philosophy, University of Santo Tomas, Philippines*

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<sup>3</sup> Pada, *Axel Honneth’s Social Philosophy of Recognition*, 169-70.

**References**

- Bolaños, Paolo A., "Pilapil on the Theory and Praxis of Recognition," in *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, 20:3 (2016).
- Pada, Roland Theuas DS., *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition: Freedom, Normativity, and Identity* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).