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**THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**University of Santo Tomas**  
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## ABOUT THE COVER

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### “Opposing Bonsais”

The cover photo shows two bonsai trees 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

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15:3 (December 2021)

Photograph by Mario Wenning,  
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Caption taken from the  
introduction

# About the Journal

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**KRITIKE** is the official open access (OA) journal of the Department of Philosophy of the University of Santo Tomas (UST), Manila, Philippines. It is a Filipino peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary, and international journal of philosophy founded by a group of UST alumni. The journal seeks to publish articles and book reviews by local and international authors across the whole range of philosophical topics, but with special emphasis on the following subject strands:

- **Filipino Philosophy**
- **Oriental Thought and East-West Comparative Philosophy**
- **Continental European Philosophy**
- **Anglo-American Philosophy**

The journal primarily caters to works by professional philosophers and graduate students of philosophy, but welcomes contributions from other fields (literature, cultural studies, gender studies, political science, sociology, history, anthropology, economics, inter alia) with strong philosophical content.

The word "kritike" is Greek from the verb "krinein," which means to discern. Hence, kritike means the art of discerning or the art of critical analysis. Any form of philosophizing is, in one way or another, a "critique" of something. Being critical, therefore, is an attitude common to all philosophical traditions. Indeed, the meaning of philosophy is critique and to be philosophical is to be critical.

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# K R I T I K E

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

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***Paolo A. Bolaños and Mario Wenning***

**C**ritical 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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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## Critical Theory at the Margins

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**Paolo A. Bolaños**

**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.

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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.



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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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## The Kowtow and the Eyeball Test

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*Mario Wenning*

**Abstract:** Taking its departure from the kowtow controversy following the Macartney embassy to the Chinese emperor, the paper illustrates the ethical and aesthetic challenge of expressing respect between people from different cultural traditions. The ethics of humility in Confucianism is contrasted to forms of respect among free and equal citizens in the liberal republican tradition from Kant to Pettit. Republican conceptions of respect, paradigmatically expressed by standing tall and looking one another in the eye as part of an “eyeball test”, reflect a specific European history. Culturally inflected forms of showing respect should not be naively universalized. The paper argues that radically different expressions of respect and civility, paradigmatically expressed in greeting rituals and the normative grammar they exemplify, are a major challenge for cosmopolitan forms of political and ethical theorizing.

**Keywords:** Confucius, kowtow, Kant, Pettit

### Introduction

The first part of this essay will reconstruct the metaphors used to characterize respectful encounters among free and equal citizens in the republican tradition from Immanuel Kant to Philipp Pettit (I). These metaphors, one might object, can be easily ignored as insignificant with regard to the normative core of republican theorizing. And yet they strongly inform what we have in mind when imagining how free and equal citizens who are respectful of one another and can command respect think, feel and act. These images capture the imagination and play a crucial role in conceiving of what a republican utopia, including ideal conceptions of republican forms of civic life, ought to be like. The paper aims to challenge the assumption that the guiding metaphors – metaphors of standing tall and looking one another in the eyes without fear and deference – are as neutral and independent of specific cultural presumptions as republican theorists suggests they are. The culturally refracted root of these images poses a

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challenge with regard to the transcultural and cosmopolitan scope of the republican project. To further expose the normative implications of greeting rituals, the second part of this paper juxtaposes republican notions of respect among free and equal citizens with Confucian conceptions of respect expressed in acts of deference and humility (II). For Confucians, in contrast to the republican tradition as it emerged in Europe, certain types of deference and humility are not only legitimate, but also form an integral component of a harmonious society (*hexieshehui* 和諧社會). The deep-seated cultural difference between societies shaped by republicanism and those significantly influenced by Confucianism poses a distinct challenge as well as a significant opportunity that any republican theory with a cosmopolitan vision should take seriously (III).

Before addressing these challenges let me begin with an anecdote. On September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1793, the British Diplomat George Macartney petitioned for an audience with the Chinese emperor. Sent by king George III of England, Macartney was to congratulate and extend gifts to the emperor Qianlong on his 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday. The underlying motivation for this mission to the imperial court was the British crown's desire to expand trading rights from Canton in the South to the entire Chinese empire and to establish a permanent diplomatic presence in Beijing. The meeting at the emperor's mountainous summer palace in Chengde turned out to be nothing short of a diplomatic disaster. Judging in hindsight, it marked the turning point in the relationship between the British and the Chinese Empire and initiated the latter's decline that was accelerated during the opium wars and sealed in the unequal treaties. The touchstone of the discord was the question how to receive visitors from afar.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the meeting, Macartney was asked to perform the ceremonial kowtow (叩頭) ritual - in Cantonese, "kautau" -, a traditional greeting rite that consists of throwing oneself three times on one's knees and touching the ground with one's forehead nine times in front of the "son of heaven."<sup>2</sup> Macartney, a proud diplomat of Irish descent who was educated according to the convictions of the Enlightenment and recently elevated into the aristocracy, was challenged by how to deal with "genuflexions, prostrations and other idle oriental ceremony."<sup>3</sup> While or precisely because

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<sup>1</sup> See James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 1995) and Austin Coates, *Macao and the British: 1637-1842* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2009), chapter 4.

<sup>2</sup> An alternative form of kowtowing is dedicated to one's parents, spouse, or close friends. It has survived in contexts such as traditional wedding rituals or reunions among friends until today and usually consists in kneeling and touching the head to the ground four rather than eight times.

<sup>3</sup> Henrietta Harrison, "The Qianlong Emperor's Letter to George III and the Early-Twentieth-Century Origins of Ideas about Traditional China's Foreign Relations," in *American Historical Review*, 111 (2017), 688.

Macartney was aware of the importance of protocol and keen on placing his sovereign as the equal of the Chinese emperor, he refused to engage in what he considered to be a demeaning ritual that would have put George III into a lower position than that of the Chinese emperor. Instead of performing the kowtow as other delegates paying tribute to the emperor next to him, Lord Macartney ingeniously offered to perform what one could call a kowtow among equals: he would kowtow to the Chinese emperor only if a Chinese representative of equal rank would simultaneously kowtow in front of a picture of king George III. What would have turned out to be a truly memorable - as well as unintendedly humorous - episode of an East-West ritual of respect did not come about. The Chinese side considered the proposal utterly unacceptable. As a result, rather than throwing himself to the ground just like the other foreign solicitors next to him, Macartney only bent one knee while slightly lowering his head before the seated Chinese emperor, a respectful gesture he would have also performed in front of his own king. Interestingly, the Chinese records state Macartney had indeed kowtowed. While both sides thus dealt with the situation somewhat flexibly, the failed encounter triggered significant repercussions. This event developed into a kowtow controversy in which Europeans came to reflect on what the kowtow means and whether one should or should not engage in it without, from the British perspective, losing one's honor and dignity.<sup>4</sup>



James Gillray, "The Reception of the diplomatique and His Suite at the Court of Pekin," 1792. National Portrait Gallery, London.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Buddhists, who usually only bow to the Buddha and to Buddhist monks, also had difficulty of performing the kowtow ritual in front of the emperor. On the parallel between the controversies of Christians and Buddhists on this issue see Eric Reinders, *Buddhist and Christian Responses to the Kowtow Problem in China* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

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From the Chinese perspective, what was at stake in failing to perform the ancient kowtow ritual was the threat of undermining the quasi-colonial tributary system centered around the middle kingdom, if not the continuity of the cosmic order with the emperor, the son of heaven, at its exclusive center. In his letter of response to king George III, the highly cultivated Manchu emperor responds to the solicitor from the small island off the Western periphery of the Eurasian continent as if dealing with an imposing child. The celestial emperor acknowledges that “the earnest terms” in which the King George’s proposal was presented “reveal a respectful humility.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, emperor Qianlong did not concede an inch with regard to the proposal to expand diplomatic and economic relationships and rebukes George III by harshly dismissing the requests to intensify Sino-British commerce, stating that he neither had use for nor interest in strange and costly British goods. As Macartney had just demonstrated, the British, even if they were to try to acquire the rudiments of Confucian civilization, would prove themselves incapable of correctly implementing Chinese ceremonial rites at the Western periphery of the middle kingdom. Emperor Qianlong concluded by asking king George III to “respect my sentiments and to display even greater devotion and loyalty in the future” and to “tremblingly obey and show no negligence.”<sup>6</sup> For the longest time the emperor’s rejection of the British embassy’s request has served to ridicule Chinese arrogance and its inability to acknowledge the rising power of the West. Confronted with the rise of China and the geopolitical but also philosophical implications it has, we might also reinterpret what is at stake in the kowtow controversy. During his lecture tour in China in the 1920s, Bertrand Russell suggested that “no one understands China until this letter has ceased to seem absurd.”<sup>7</sup> The encounter between the British crown and the Chinese emperor demonstrates how to miscommunicate by exchanging insults.<sup>8</sup> At a deeper level, the episode of a marvelously failed encounter raises significant questions concerning the proper degree and expression of respect when individuals

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Paul U. Unschuld, *The Fall and Rise of China: Healing the Trauma of History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 16-17.

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

<sup>7</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problem of China* (George Allen & Unwin, 1922), 51.

<sup>8</sup> Austin Coates contends that the Macartney embassy’s result was not as disastrous as it might appear from the British perspective since “to have elicited a business letter from the Dragon was, like being presented to him without the kowtow, a unique achievement.” See Austin Coates, *Macao and the British: 1637-1842* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2009), 89. Henrietta Harrison has argued that “up until the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the focus on diplomatic protocol during the Macartney embassy was a primarily Western concern, while published Chinese accounts emphasized the British threat and the military measures taken to deal with it.” See Harrison, “The Qianlong Emperor’s Letter to George III and the Early-Twentieth-Century Origins of Ideas about Traditional China’s Foreign Relations”, 690.



from radically different cultural backgrounds meet. What forms and expressions of respect should be adopted between people from different cultural traditions? Is it at all legitimate to speak of respect in an intercultural context? Who is setting the terms for what counts and what does not count as a respectful encounter?

Following the Macartney embassy, the kowtow became the symbol of a despised ritual gesture of submission that was unacceptable for free men and women (from Europe). In 1777, the Vatican declared the kowtow as intrinsically superstitious and thus forbidden. Especially in the tradition of republicanism, the kowtow came to symbolize the very opposite of how free and equal citizens would meet and greet. This has not changed until today. Philip Pettit, a contemporary republican political philosopher, elegantly summarizes the ideal of the free and independent person when he writes:

In the received republican image, free persons can walk tall, and look others in the eye. They do not depend on anyone's grace or favor for being able to choose their mode of life. And they relate to one another in a shared, mutually reinforcing consciousness of enjoying this independence. Thus, in the established terms of republican denigration, they do not have to bow or scrape, toady or kowtow, fawn or flatter; they do not have to placate any others with beguiling smiles or mincing steps. In short, they do not have to live on their wits, whether out of fear or deference. They are their own men and women, and however deeply they bind themselves to one another, as in love or friendship or trust, they do so freely, reaching out to one another from positions of relatively equal strength.<sup>9</sup>

The republican tradition that cherishes the image of the free person that does not need to bend has been built on two connected ideals, one negative and one positive. The negative ideal is expressed in the principle of non-domination: *human beings should not be subjected to arbitrary forms of subjugation at the will of others*. Republicanism goes beyond this protection of individual liberties by stipulating the positive normative ideal: *human beings should be capable of determining their own lives on an equal basis*. The kowtow seems to violate both of these connected convictions in that it appears to involve subjugation to others and appears to be at odds with free and equal

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Pettit, *On the People's Term: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 82.

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self-determination. Philip Pettit, who is in this respect closer to the cosmopolitan republicanism of Kant than to, say, Machiavelli, defends the trans-cultural reach of the joint ideals of non-domination and equal liberty.<sup>10</sup> Despite the historical roots of republicanism in Roman antiquity and early European modernity, more recent republicans, including Pettit, tend to consider themselves cosmopolitan. While vast diversity exists among cultures, the transculturally valid ideals of non-domination and equal liberty respond to a structural, interpersonal need that one can find in otherwise highly diverse cultural contexts. This universal need is, for Pettit, a need for respect: “there is neither a geography nor a history in our deepest, interpersonal needs, and nothing is deeper than our need to be able to command the respect of others, in particular the respect that ensures us a publicly acknowledged realm of ability and authority.”<sup>11</sup>

In broad agreement with the normative pillars of equality and freedom that are rooted in a shared human need for respect, this article pursues the question what is involved in, to use Kant’s familiar terms, treating the other, including persons from other cultural traditions, as an “end in itself” (*Selbstzweck*) with dignity (*Würde*), a member of a shared kingdom of ends (*Reich der Zwecke*). It will raise questions about the transcultural reach of the specific imagery as well as the suggested practices in characterizing what such respect entails.

### Standing Tall and the Eyeball Test

The cultural roots of political theories are most obviously expressed in the metaphors employed to represent their guiding normative ideals. Pettit introduces a number of images to illustrate what it means to be a free citizen among equals. Under conditions of republicanism, he contends, “you can walk tall and assume the status of an equal with the most powerful in the land. At least, you can do so provided that you do not count under local criteria as excessively timid or paranoid.”<sup>12</sup> The metaphors Pettit repeatedly employs for the republican kind of life that free and equal citizens enjoy - subjectively and objectively - include “walking tall”, “standing on par with

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<sup>10</sup> See *Ibid.*, and Phillip Pettit, “Republicanism across cultures” in Jun-Hyeok Kwak and Leigh Jenco, eds., *Republicanism in Northeast Asia* (New York: Routledge 2015). On the parallels and differences between Pettit’s and Kantian republican conceptions of non-domination see Rainer Forst, “A Kantian Republican Conception of Justice as Non-Domination,” in Andreas Niederberger and Philipp Schink, eds., *Republican Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 154-168.

<sup>11</sup> Pettit, “Republicanism across cultures”, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Pettit, *Just Freedom: A Moral Compass for a Complex World* (New York, W.W. Norton and Co, 2014), xxvi.

others”, and “standing on equal footing.”<sup>13</sup> Conversely, the greatest evil for a free citizen of a republic, a *liber*, consists in being subjugated to the will of another person perceived as master or *dominus*.<sup>14</sup>

These vertical metaphors, which characterize the ideal form of an upright body posture during a respectful encounter between equal citizens, are complemented by a visual metaphor. Equal citizens, on Pettit’s account, stand “eye to eye” with their fellow citizens; “(t)hey can look the other in the eye; they do not have to bow and scrape.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps with a touch of irony, Pettit elevates to the level of a test the ideal of standing tall and especially highlights the practice of looking into the eyes of the other as a yardstick for social relationships free of domination. What he calls “the eyeball test” is remotely similar to Rawls’s heuristic device of the original position insofar as both devices are supposed to provide a method for determining what is required in a just socio-political order. However, in contrast to Rawls’s image of free and equal subjects who stand behind a veil of ignorance, Pettit’s eyeball test is supposed to map on to existing intuitions and real-life practices. Drawing on this test is supposed to determine what it means to live a free life of respect among equals. Rather than an abstract philosophical thought experiment, Pettit’s eyeball test is supposed to be rooted in and applicable to evaluating actual political decision-making processes. To take one of his examples, determining the laws governing same-sex marriage during the Spanish government under the Zapatero presidency involved the evocation of an imagined eyeball test between legislators and those fellow citizens whose lives would be significantly affected by same-sex marriage legislation.<sup>16</sup>

The eyeball test is supposed to determine whether citizens are indeed equal:

At the level set by this test, the safeguards should enable people, by local standards, to look one another in the eye without reason for fear or deference. The achievement of that discernible and applicable ideal would make, intuitively, for the equality of people in their status as

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 57 and 99; 60; and 80.

<sup>14</sup> In the preface to his *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Pettit recounts that his conception of freedom as nondomination is a reaction to his early education as a seminarian who was prevented from being able “to look the authorities in the eye” as well as his reading of Mary Wollstonecraft writing on the subjugation of women “who learned to bow and scrape, and to achieve their ends by ingratiation.” Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), viii.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 and 87.

<sup>16</sup> See José Luis Martí and Philip Pettit, *A Political Philosophy in Public Life: Civic Republicanism in Zapatero’s Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 79.

free persons or citizens: that is, in the free status that has long been an ideal in republican thinking.<sup>17</sup>

Pettit insists that local standards are supposed to determine whether minimal conditions of being able to command respect among equals are being met. The test is intended to combine universal as well as local dimensions. It is intended to be both culturally deep and interculturally wide. In addition to identifying an ideal republican society, the test is supposed to allow for an evaluation, comparison and even a ranking of cultures: “While we can use the principle for identifying an ideally just society – say, a society that is just enough to pass the eyeball test – we can also use it to evaluate and rank the rather less than ideal systems with which the real world presents us and to track piecemeal progress within them.”<sup>18</sup> One could think that the very search for a test to determine the degree of intracultural as well as intercultural respect is a nonstarter that could only be evoked in an ironic way. Assuming it is intended as a serious suggestion how to measure a culture’s level or extent of freedom, Pettit’s proposed testing device raises a number of questions as previous commentators have worked out:<sup>19</sup> How can the presence of rational fear and devotion be measured? From which perspective would an evaluative ranking take place? Can ranking be performed only by someone who already lives in situations in which the eyeball test would turn out to be successful? Does the evaluator have to be part of – or at least closely familiar with and immersed in – the local cultural environment of the compared societies? I will not discuss these technical questions in any detail here and will leave aside the possibility that the eyeball test is set up in a viciously circular way. Instead, by way of a detour, I will focus on whether the ideal of walking tall and looking another in the eye is indeed a transcultural expression of what it means to show respect among equals.

A quick genealogical review shows that the ideal of rectitude and the corresponding dismissal of lowness and bending are deeply rooted in the European imagination. In the Allegory of the Cave from book VII of Plato’s *Republic*, the prisoners are bent over, shackled and ignorant of the mechanisms producing the shadows they consider to be true. The philosopher, by contrast, stands up and turns his head around, leaves the shadow-world of the cave and, directing his gaze upwards to the sun,

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Pettit, *On the People’s Term: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 47.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>19</sup> Frieder Bögner, Jörn Elgert and Carolyn Iselt, “Focusing on the Eyeball Test: A Problematic Testing Device in Philip Pettit’s Theory of Justice”, in S. Derpmann, D.P. Schweikard, eds., *Philip Pettit: Five Themes from his Work*, Münster Lectures in Philosophy 1, Springer (2016), 123-131.

contemplates the idea of the Good. Ever since Plato, verticality became the default posture for a liberated form of life that is capable of standing tall. As Heidegger has argued, the Allegory of the Cave marks the transition from the notion of truth as the unhiddenness (*ἀλήθεια*) of the immediately disclosed world of shadows to that of “orthotes”, truth understood as, literally, straightness and, in its Roman derivative, rectitude or correctness (*rectum*).<sup>20</sup> This new conception of truth rests on a distinction between what is true and what is false and privileges the former over the latter.

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle emphasizes that obeisance in the form of lowering oneself is a sign of honor only among barbarians.<sup>21</sup> In Roman times kneeling was identified with the discriminated-against religious practices of Jews and Christians. Jews and Christians bowed and prostrated themselves while free and equal Roman citizens stood tall.<sup>22</sup> As a consequence of emancipation processes, the practice of lowering oneself in acts of bowing, genuflection or prostration has been criticized and became largely extinct from the public realm, especially in modern republican societies.<sup>23</sup>

In republican theorizing, Immanuel Kant has been most influential in identifying inclination (*Neigung*) with the moral immaturity of following one’s natural desires rather than acting out of duty and respect for the moral law. Autonomous subjects are those who relinquish their natural instinct to bend over, an instinct that frequently is associated by Kant with children, women and Asians. In a republican spirit Kant object not only to the acting out of inclination, but to servility more generally. In a section of *Metaphysics of Morals* titled “*Kriecherei*”, servility, or “on the crawling that is genuine to worms and other insects”, being servile (*knechtisch, animo servili*) violates self-esteem (*Selbstschätzung*), which is a duty of humans against themselves (*Pflicht des Menschen gegen sich selbst*). The capacity of being able to command respect rests, for Kant, on one’s capacity for self-esteem. Since human beings partake in a sublime grandeur (*Erhabenheit*), acts of kneeling or, in his expression, crawling violate their sense of dignity: “Kneeling down or groveling on the ground, even to express your reverence for heavenly things,

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<sup>20</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, trans. by Ted Sadler (New York: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> See Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1361a36.

<sup>22</sup> Especially the New Testament recounts numerous cases of (1) prostration in front of God, (2) falling to one’s knees before another as well as (3) kneeling while praying. It mentions the word for kneeling, “proskynein” (*προσκυνεῖν*), alone fifty-nine times to characterize a liturgical gesture that was performed by Jesus and whose significance transcends, according to Christian belief, any merely cultural practice.

<sup>23</sup> The outdated phenomenon of genuflection survives, if at all, in the private realm, i.e. in the self-consciously old-fashioned – and also predominantly male – practice of proposing in marriage rituals.



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is contrary to human dignity .... Bowing or scraping before another seems in any case to be unworthy of a man. ... Whoever makes himself a worm cannot complain when he is then trampled underfoot.”<sup>24</sup> Kant does emphasize a moral justification for politeness and especially humility. He distinguishes two senses of humility (*Demut*). False humility (*humilitas spuria*) is distinguished from true moral humility (*humilitas moralis*) in virtue of the relationship to the moral law. The “false” form consists in submissiveness (*Unterwürfigkeit*) to others, which undermines self-esteem that is essential for an ethics of autonomy. Subjects who determine their lives first need to possess a sense of their own dignity that contradicts submissive forms of self-humiliation. Even the true form of humility can easily succumb to arrogance or an excess of ambition (*ambitio*). This happens when a sense of pride for possessing virtue (*Tugendstolz*) replaces the process of measuring oneself against the structurally higher moral law. True self-esteem consists of an unfinalizable elevation (*Erhebung*) to the moral law rather than a comparison with others. Kant prefers to speak of reverence (*Achtung*) rather than respect (*Respekt*) or awe (*Ehrfurcht*) when it comes to intersubjective relationships of recognition since the latter two notions are based on a sense of fear. Awe, in particular, denotes an unbridgeable distance that is characteristic of relationships to the vastness of nature as well as the moral law.

Another instance documenting the association of genuflection with pre-modern or pre-Enlightenment culture comes from Hegel. The defender of Prussian constitutional monarchy, in a slightly melancholic tone of voice, claims that the epitome of veneration’s decay in modernity is most visible in the realms of art and religion: “our knee does not bend”<sup>25</sup> in front of even the most religious artworks after they have ceased to be the highest expression of a culture of advancing equal freedom. To be modern, on this account, means to be no longer capable of keeping one’s self-esteem and sense of dignity while genuflecting.

This tour de force shows that the metaphor of standing or walking tall is no doubt prevalent especially, even if not exclusively, in the European

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<sup>24</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten*, (Königsberg: F. Nicolovius, 1798), 436ff. It was a common trope to identify such expressions of servility with Asian cultures influenced by Confucianism. For example, the anthropologist Ruth Benedict writes about the bowing gestures in Japanese families, “the one who bows acknowledges the right of the other to have his way in things he might well prefer to manage himself (...). Hierarchy based on sex and generation and primogeniture are part and parcel of family life.” Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Cleveland: Mariner Books, 2005), 49. In addition to the imperial ritual of the kowtow and the various forms of bowing in different social contexts, Asian practices of meditation was also commonly interpreted in the European tradition as an undignified desire to make oneself small that.

<sup>25</sup> Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 3 vols., trans. by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975), vol. 1, 142.

republican tradition that Pettit holds dear.<sup>26</sup> Republicanism has repeated, in a normative register, the anthropological evolution from forms of bent-over four-legged animals to current forms of bipedal standing humans. Four-legged pre-humanoids have been superseded by the seemingly more progressive homo erectus, homo habilis and, ultimately, homo sapiens. Uprightness, being straight and having rectitude are only a few of the many metaphors that suggest a correlation between one's vertical corporal posture and the possession of dignity and moral integrity. And indeed, it can hardly be denied that human practices of kowtowing, kneeling, and bowing have most often served the purpose of providing symbolic expression to hierarchical power relationships. Subjects usually kneel before superiors such as emperors, who are more important – and thus in need of more respect – than their subalterns. They might also kneel before their God who is imagined infinitely greater than them and bow to religious authorities who claim legitimacy within religious institutions. In the European tradition, the ideal of walking tall has been closely linked to the process of the emancipation of self-conscious citizens who have liberated themselves by rising up and becoming steadfast in their struggles against the powers of domination.<sup>27</sup> The citizens demanding a republic broke with the yoke of older traditions of deference that required its practitioners to make themselves small in front of elites such as the aristocracy.<sup>28</sup> Bowing or kneeling, as well as other acts of publicly displayed deference, are the behavioral codes that have been increasingly regarded as forms of non-republican subjugation and domination, in which hierarchies were established and protected by elites against egalitarian aspirations. In extreme cases of domination, the enforcers of such political systems, metaphorically and even literally, break the backs of their subjects. To cut a long story short, the assumption that the person who does not stand tall is subjected to an illegitimate hierarchical relationship in which he or she is systematically dominated by others has been deeply

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<sup>26</sup> In Chinese cultural contexts it is also common to praise great human beings (大人) while “small” or “petty human” (小人) is a demeaning term. However, in spite of this figure of speech, normative achievement consisted in the seemingly paradoxical practice of making oneself small in practices revealing humility (see next section).

<sup>27</sup> A different kind of emancipation consists in the democratization of the right to be seated. In pre-republican times, the right of sitting in public and political ceremonial contexts was reserved to officials of superior rank such as kings and popes while citizens had to bow and stand below the throne. Nowadays the inflation of sitting and the transformation of *homo erectus* into *homo sedens* is identified as a major civilizational health risk. See Hajo Eickhoff, *Himmelsthron und Schaukelstuhl: Die Geschichte des Sitzens* (Munich: Hanser, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> Kurt Bayertz, *Der aufrechte Gang: Eine Geschichte des anthropologischen Denkens* (Munich: Beck, 2013) and Bernd Jürgen Warneken, “Biegsame Hofkunst und aufrechter Gang,” in Ludwig-Uhland Institut, ed., *Der aufrechte Gang: Zur Symbolik einer Körperhaltung* (Tübingen: Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde, 2010) and “Bürgerliche Emanzipation und aufrechter Gang: Zur Geschichte eines Haltungsideals,” in *Das Argument*, 32, no. 179 (2010), 39-52.

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rooted in the Western political imagination and the republican tradition in particular. Acts of lowering oneself are connected to an aristocratic ritual that has become empty of meaning while continuing to protect hierarchies.

The modernist artist Paul Klee created an ironic rendition of a “kowtow among equals”. In his etching “Two Men Meet, Each Believing the Other to Be of Higher Rank”, Klee depicts two naked men who engage in referential rituals. The informed spectator is able to identify them as the Austro-Hungarian emperor Franz Ferdinand I and the German emperor Wilhelm II. Since both are nude, they are incapable of determining the other’s rank. Rather than dismissing protocol, they show excessive forms of ritualistic deference. Klee ridicules the emptiness of aristocratic rituals and thereby makes fun of the submissiveness that characterizes aristocratic regimes from head to toe.



Paul Klee, “Two Men Meet, Each Believing the Other to Be of Higher Rank”

These examples confirm: free and equal citizens walk tall.<sup>29</sup> But is this depreciation of deferential rituals indeed shared across cultural boundaries? As the opening anecdote about the (failed) kowtow during the Macartney Embassy in China suggests, deference has been an integral part of the Confucian tradition to which I shall now turn.

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<sup>29</sup> One noteworthy exception are Sartre’s reflections on being seen. The ambivalent consequences of becoming visible through self-rectification have been largely ignored by philosophers. The person who looks the other into the eye becomes visible, vulnerable and at the same time intransparent in that his intentions do not need to coincide with his facial expression. See Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993), 340-400 and Hans Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2006).

## The Challenge of Confucian Deference

While one needs to be careful not to introduce an East-West dichotomy and to simplify a manifold of internally complex and pluralistic traditions, a look beyond the Western political imagination to the classical - and recently revived - Chinese tradition of Confucianism shows that the emphasis on standing tall and looking someone in the eye without deference is far from self-evident.<sup>30</sup> The kowtow anecdote referred to at the beginning of this paper illustrates the centrality of ritualistic forms of deference in traditional Confucian culture. After Maoism had identified modernization with an overcoming of traditional Chinese culture during the “cultural revolution”, more recently we can witness a return, some speak of a renaissance, of the classical Confucian tradition. This return is not simply state orchestrated but is also rooted in grass roots initiatives such as the founding of Confucian academies devoted to studying and applying the Confucian classics throughout China.<sup>31</sup> In the most recent wave of modernization, China is rediscovering its ancient traditions, especially Confucianism, which are being branded as promoting distinctively Asian values. This renaissance of the old no doubt draws on a sense of Chauvinism connected to the rise of China and a self-assertive differentiation from supposedly Western values including excessive forms of individualism. However, the cultural renaissance is also being fueled by a critical diagnosis of a one-sided process of modernization in terms of an expansion of markets and the destructive consequences of an economy exclusively based on ambition and competitiveness.<sup>32</sup> One can witness a widespread sense of existential void and lack of identity as a consequence of the latest stage of Chinese development after the Maoist promise of equality has been overshadowed by a widening gap between rich and poor.

There is not one single equivalent to the notion of deference in Confucian sources, but a number of related notions that fall under the broader umbrella concept of deference. They include *ci* 辭, to decline politely, *rang* 讓, to yield or defer to others, *shun* 順, to be compliant, *xiao* 孝, to practice filial

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<sup>30</sup> Recent reconstructions of the political dimensions of the Chinese Confucian tradition include Stephen C. Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); and Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Mario Wenning and Jinting Wu, “The postsecular turn in education: Lessons from the mindfulness movement and the revival of Confucian academies,” in *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 35, no. 6 (2016), 551-571.

<sup>32</sup> Evan Osnos, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

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piety, *ti* 悌, to hold brotherly respect, *jing* 敬, to show reverent respect, as well as the entire rituals collectively known as *li* 禮. The rituals take on a significant role in the recent renaissance of Confucian culture and political philosophy. As Herbert Fingerette has argued, Confucianism can be understood as conceiving of the secular as sacred by way of attributing a transformative role to everyday rituals, especially civil rituals expressing politeness. Interestingly, Fingerette's key example for a social ritual's binding force is a handshake. He was keenly aware of the role of greeting rites, but unfortunately borrowed the ritual greeting that is associated primarily with Western culture. Handshakes emerged in ancient Greece and served the purpose of showing to the other person that one was not carrying a weapon.

Different modes of deference were not only seen as being instrumentally efficacious in sustaining a harmonious society but were also considered to possess intrinsic value by Confucians.<sup>33</sup> The kowtow belongs to the classical ritual system that is laid out in the three Rites canons, the *Yili* 儀禮, the *Liji* 禮記, and the *Zhouli* 周禮. It goes beyond mere custom in that it, when conducted in a sincere manner, expresses a sense of humility and modesty that is considered an important comportment of human excellence independent of cultural background. Confucianism conceives of human beings as inherently bound by social relationships which need to be cultivated. Learning to properly bend one's body to the other person as if done in a natural manner takes on a central role in this distinctive form of subjectivization. The etymology of the Chinese character for human being, *ren* 人, is often claimed to represent a walking person. However, if one traces the etymological roots in the Shang dynasty bronze scripts used since the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, one sees that the character originally resembles a bowing person:



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<sup>33</sup> Robert Cummings Neville, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008) and Aaron Stalnaker, "Confucianism, Democracy, and the Virtue of Deference," in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 12, no. 4 (2013), 441-459.



Acts of bodily inclination are a major component of a traditional Chinese mode of life. Their importance has been particularly emphasized in the tradition of Confucianism. In the most influential collection of Confucian sayings, the *Analects*, Confucius emphasizes the importance of performing the kowtow ritual even against trends to transform or overcome it:

A subject kowtowing on entering the hall is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety (*li*). Nowadays that one kowtows only after ascending the hall is a matter of hubris. Although it goes contrary to accepted practice, I still kowtow on entering the hall.<sup>34</sup>

The modification of the rituals known as *li*, while sometimes justified, is not to be taken lightly, especially when it comes to the cultivation of moral competences.<sup>35</sup> While some flexibility in performing rituals is not only allowed for, but also recommended, what should be the motivating reason when making such changes is that the performance of rituals is to be conducive to the cultivation of one's moral character. For Confucius, ritual is important in the process of self-cultivation because it allows the person engaging in it to step back from and thereby curb immediate individual desires.<sup>36</sup> The cultivation of genuine humility and modesty expressed in a deferential attitude and practice is a central component of self-cultivation, which is identified as a taking-oneself-back or, literally, a lowering of oneself. In analogy to the eyeball-test, one could conceive of an analogous Confucian testing device, a "kowtow test" that would determine the degree and scope of Confucian forms of respect in a society in a harmonious society. The scope of respect would be reflected in the degree of practices of humility which citizens cultivate to varying degree of virtuosity in a variety of social as well as other contexts differentiated according to the addressee of respect.

According to the classical Chinese and especially the Confucian tradition, one ought to be deferential to the standards of heaven (*tian* 天) and the course of the world (*dao* 道) because they exceed the individual's will and control while providing a normative reference point for evaluating one's ethically relevant performance. One owed respect to one's ancestors and more mundane forms of respect within the five significant human relationships (*wulun* 无论) between government and citizens, parents and children, spouses, siblings, and friends. For a Confucian, the inability to

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<sup>34</sup> Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. (New York: Ballentine Books, 1999), 9:3.

<sup>35</sup> Karyn Lai, "Li in the 'Analects': Training in Moral Competence and the Question of Flexibility," in *Philosophy East and West*, 56, no. 1 (2006), 69-83.

<sup>36</sup> See Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, 12.1.

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genuinely feel and adequately express deference in front of one's parents and ancestors, but also to people holding a certain rank or office worthy of esteem, is a serious character flaw. It is considered an impediment to moral development and a flourishing community. Respect, as expressed in greeting rituals, is not limited to intersubjective relationships, but extends to the natural world. One example are depictions of the famous artist and critic Mifu (1051-1107). Mifu is said to have reacted to a stone by greeting and bowing to it out of a sense of respectful awe and referring to the stone as *shixiong* 石兄 (elder brother stone).<sup>37</sup>



Chen Hongshou, Mifu praising a rock  
(First half of the 17th century)



Jen Po-nien, The Poet Mifu (19th century)

The capacity of being polite and deferring to others worthy of respect is a sign of an exemplary person and extends to all areas of life, including those that do not appear to be characterized by ritual encounter. In *Analects* 3.7. Confucius states about the *junze* 君子, the exemplary person or gentleman, i.e., the one who has cultivated virtuous manners and learned to be polite within ritual encounters such as archery competition:

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<sup>37</sup> See Wolfgang Welsch interprets Mifu's respectful encounter as an example of overcoming of self-assertive arrogance by acknowledging nature to the point of "becoming rock" (*Fels werden*). See Wolfgang Welsch, *Blickwechsel: Neue Wege der Ästhetik* (Stuttgart: Reclam 2012), 161-164.

Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) are not competitive, except where they have to be in the archery ceremony. Greetings (*zui yi*, i.e. bowing with hands folded in front of the chest, MW) and making way for each other (*rang*), the archers ascend the hall, and returning they drink a salute. Even in contesting, they are exemplary persons.<sup>38</sup>

Practices of deference involving bending and bowing to the other were very common and an integral part of showing respect. In the archery ceremony, the winner was expected to prepare the drink for the person who lost. For the Confucian, deference as well as a trusting commitment to the other person and a faith in the possibility of goodness precedes the striving for recognition that has been dominant in the Western ethical tradition at least since Hegel.<sup>39</sup> The striving for recognition and competition was to be constrained and replaced by an aptitude for learning and for being humble.

In classical Chinese culture, looking another person straight in the eye would violate a sense of respect, which is closely associated to shame. Performing the eyeball test, as Pettit suggests, would put unnecessary pressure on the other and could be perceived as, if not disrespectful, at least tactless or rude. Even in English, “to eye” or “to eyeball” someone suggests either a degree of suspicion or indicates an excessive (often sexual) interest concerning the person that is the object of one’s gaze. The very setup of the eyeball test closely resembles a duel in which two people measure each other with piercing stares while always remaining ready to strike if needed. From a Confucian perspective, respect as measured in the eyeball test, would be a continuation of warfare by other means. In contrast to engaging in staring contests, Confucian cultures have often been characterized as shame cultures in which it is considered paramount not to lose face or make the other lose face by engaging in direct visual confrontation. In contrast, Western guilt cultures focus on direct face to face confrontation.<sup>40</sup> In the contemporary world, it is highly problematic to uphold such binary conceptions of cultural difference centered around the notions of shame and guilt.<sup>41</sup> It makes more sense to conceive of shame and guilt as different dispositions that are

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<sup>38</sup> Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, 3.7.

<sup>39</sup> See Alexei Procyshyn and Mario Wenning, “Recognition and Trust: Hegel and Confucius on the Normative Basis of Ethical Life,” in: *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 18 (2019).

<sup>40</sup> Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, 222-227.

<sup>41</sup> The simplistic juxtaposition of an inward-directed sin- vs. an outward-directed shame cultures does not even hold true for classical formulations of Chinese ethics. Heiner Roetz, “Chinesische Schamkultur vs. westliche Schuldkultur? Ein Versuch zur Korrektur eines Klischees,” in Michael Fische and Kurt Seelmann, eds., *Körperbilder: Kulturalität und Wertetransfer* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011).

developed to a lesser or greater extent in different cultural contexts and, perhaps more significantly, in different social settings and different personalities. Yet, in our context of inquiring into different cultural expressions of as well as different normative grammars of what respect entails, it is important to note that shame-based ethical codes that flourish in cultures that have been strongly influenced by Confucianism are to be distinguished from the unreasonable forms of fear, timidity and paranoia that Pettit mentions as potential obstacles for performing the eyeball test. Not being inclined to look the other into the eye could be an expression of existential humility rather than a sign of unreasonable fear, timidity or paranoia. In contrast to fear, timidity or paranoia, shame is closely linked to a distinctively moral sensitivity. It emphasizes the desire not to violate one's own and, even more so, the other person's sense of being exposed, visible and thus existentially vulnerable. A person with a capacity for shame organizes her life by anticipating and keeping in mind the feelings and evaluations of others, real or imagined. It is precisely out of deep respect of the other person that a direct encounter at eye level is being circumvented.

It might be objected to an insistence on ritualized forms of deference that it can easily be misused to establish and protect privileges of elites while it is blind to those at the bottom of hierarchies. Deference, its critics argue, is an obstacle to bottom-up emancipation movements. It is incompatible with democratic forms of contestation and dissent. Paying respect by performing deferential rituals would violate the egalitarian spirit of modern republicanism. Admittedly, from the perspective of republicanism, the Confucian insistence on rituals of deference could appear like an outdated ethic of a subservient feudalistic society stratified into distinct social classes with the son of heaven at its center. It seems to be at odds with the egalitarian spirit of modern republicanism. An anecdote has it that Sun Yatsen, the founder of the Republic of China, raised to his feet a visitor saying that one need not kowtow to the president of a republic.<sup>42</sup>

As Eske Møllgaard has argued, the main function of Confucian ritual consisted in enforcing those social hierarchies, which were already outdated remnants of the Western Zhou dynasty when being promoted by classical Confucianism.<sup>43</sup> According to Møllgaard, Confucian ritual is incompatible

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<sup>42</sup> Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in in China 1911-1929* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 54.

<sup>43</sup> See Eske Møllgaard, "Confucian ritual and modern civility," in *Journal of Global Ethics*, 8, nos. 2-3 (2012), 227-237. The emphasis on ritualized forms of lowering oneself and taking oneself back has been one of the primary reasons for the contested thesis of the existence of an "oriental despotism" that prevented Asian societies from democratization and from embracing republican principles as well as genuinely civic virtues. See August Karl Wittfogel, *Die orientalische Despotie: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung totaler Macht* (Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1957).

with the salient features of modern civility. Modern civility, in contrast to traditional forms of family loyalty that are praised by Confucians, consists in a bond among free and equal citizens.<sup>44</sup> And yet, it seems that the Confucian insistence on cultivating interpersonal forms of deference are at least remotely related to and compatible with civility in that both are responses to the fact that human beings depend on each other, including the good will of others, in a degree which can never be discharged or paid back.

Some of the intuitions concerning deference, when it is being understood as reverence to fellow humans one depends on, are not fully foreign to the republican tradition. Republicans too have emphasized the importance of cultivating interpersonal bonds, most notably in the form of civic virtues, including a sense of civility with regard to others.<sup>45</sup> Simple acts of civility do not have to count as kowtowing or submissiveness in the derogatory republican interpretation of the term analyzed above. Civility can manifest itself in being considerate of others such as when holding the door open or letting the other person speak first. Such acts of politeness or kindness cannot be demanded in that civility is not a duty or an entitlement. Yet, being civil does not merely reflect a free choice of subjects independent of each other. Civility involves, in Robert Pippin's terms, an "appreciation of the dependence of my life on others within some community of dependence and the enactment of social forms appropriate to that dependence."<sup>46</sup> Such an appreciation is an important good that is cherished as much as it is not a moral or legal entitlement. Civility is not identical with morality and yet it can be efficacious in contributing to a shared social space in which agents express and cultivate mutual respect.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Robert B. Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 231.

<sup>45</sup> See Pettit, *Republicanism*, chapter 8.

<sup>46</sup> Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 231.

<sup>47</sup> See Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*, chapter 6. Perfectionist reconstructions of Confucian civility have argued that it is necessary to assign different degrees of respect according to merit as well as a person's contribution to the common good. See Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*, 93-94. This proposal contradicts widely shared egalitarian conceptions of moral worth. The perfectionist assumption of the common good as a yardstick for measuring whether a person is worthy of more or less respect can hardly be defended in highly complex civil societies marked by a plurality of conceptions of the good among citizens who participate in democratic forms of life, i.e., citizens who are free and equal while acknowledging their mutual dependence.



### A Confucian Supplement to Republicanism

Are republicanism and a Confucian ethics of humility thus incompatible just as the paradoxical formulation of a kowtow among equals seems to suggest? The answer to this question depends on whether it is possible to imagine a society that would cherish the normative ideals of equality and freedom as non-domination while also inviting the cultivation of virtuous forms of deference.

From a republican point of view, the most significant drawback of an ethos of deference appears to be that it prevents contestation and dissent, which are integral parts of democratic civil societies. It is difficult to imagine emancipatory movements that grow out of overly deferential practices such as kneeling and deference might even help sustain problematic forms of hierarchy. And yet such practices of expressing dissent by way of bodily deference do exist. Acts of kneeling, for example, have been used to express political resistance.<sup>48</sup>

The Confucian could respond to the objection that practices of deference, while they may not always be symmetrical, are nevertheless not one-dimensional. Practicing deference puts the recipient of the deferential act into a relationship of bearing responsibility for the role or office with which he or she is being identified. For example, if one shows a deep level of respect to someone who holds an official office, such as a judge, the person who holds an office imbued with this status will likely be reminded of the responsibilities and expectations that come with performing his or her position well, for example listening to multiple perspectives without bias and considering human beings as innocent unless proven guilty.

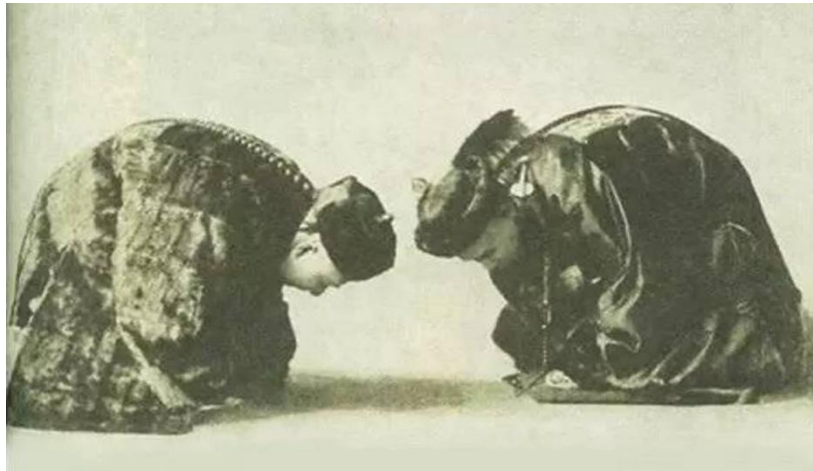
In an imagined Confucian republic, it would be essential that citizens are able to refrain from being deferential if the office holder fails to live up to his or her responsibilities or if one has other convincing reasons to do so. Acts of defying rituals of politeness can for example involve the refusal to accept gifts where receiving the gift would put oneself into a potentially unwanted situation of forced gratitude to a donor who could then use his wits to bribe the recipient. Mengzi, one of Confucius successors, mentions that one of his role models, Zisi, refused to accept repeated gifts from the duke because it would have involved kowtowing to the duke's messenger, which he preferred not to do. Similarly, we read in the *Kongzi jiaoyu*,

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<sup>48</sup> To demonstrate against police brutality and racial inequality in the United States, the NFA player Colin Kaepernick knelt during the playing of the US national anthem. Other athletes have emulated this practice to express solidarity with and respect for the victims of inequality and excessive forms of police violence. The kneeling has been interpreted as a sign of disrespect by some, including president Trump, while President Obama emphasized the right to kneel and not to stand as a form of legitimate protest.

Zengzi (Zeng Shen) in his worn-out clothes worked in the fields in Lu. When the Duke of Lu heard of this, he offered him a domain. Zengzi refused it with polite, yet determined words. Somebody said to him, 'The ruler wants to give it to you by his own initiative without your having asked for it. Why do you refuse it so determinedly?' Zengzi said, 'I have heard: He who accepts the favors of another, will always live in awe before him. And he who gives something to another will always look down upon him. And even if the ruler graciously should not look down upon me—would I myself be free of awe before him?' When Confucius heard of this he said, 'Shen's words suffice to keep his moral integrity intact.'<sup>49</sup>

From a republican perspective, these Confucian accounts suggest that what is essential when engaging in acts of deference is that (1) those acts are being performed in a voluntary manner and (2) that the rituals engaged in preserve or help to establish equality or at least significant levels of reciprocity among those that show respect to each other.




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<sup>49</sup> Cited in Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 298.

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In *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes characterizes the act of bowing and gift giving as follows:

in order to give a present, I bow down, virtually to the level of the floor, and to answer me, my partner does the same: one and the same low line, that of the ground, joins the giver, the recipient, and the stake of the protocol, a box which may well contain nothing—or virtually nothing, a graphic form (inscribed in the space of the room) is thereby given to the act of exchange, in which, by this form, is erased any greediness [...] The salutation here can be withdrawn from any humiliation or any vanity, because it literally salutes no one; it is not the sign of a communication—closely watched, condescending and precautionary—between two autarchies, two personal empires (each ruling over its Ego, the little realm of which it holds the “key”); it is only the feature of a network of forms in which nothing is halted, knotted, profound.<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, for Barthes the performance of rituals as both void constitutes a substitution of religion by politeness. Rituals of radical politeness are subversive of the tendency to humiliate others or to worship oneself in acts of vanity.

As the above image demonstrates, radical rituals such as bowing to the floor do not need to preserve the status quo. Indeed, they can level hierarchies. As Michal Nylan has argued, rituals can have a transformational and even utopian impact: “The ritual proper highlights the aura of change by its temporary inversions of the social order [...] ritual practices, because of this attempt at union, tend to evoke a coherent picture of ideal worlds in which hierarchy is always offset by reciprocity, so that the social order may become entirely equitable, if not entirely equal in the modern Euro-American sense.”<sup>51</sup> The transformative power often derives from placing the other person into a position where he or she is invited to take on an obligation. The obligation is not necessarily fulfilled, but the ritual context creates the possibility for its realization. It establishes a context in which the participants of the ritual are measured by how well they fulfill the duties they take on as part of being treated in a respectful and reverential manner.

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<sup>50</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, The Noonday Press, 1989), 65-66.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2001), 191.

By way of conclusion, some of the directions in which an imagined contemporary version of Confucian republicanism could justify the inclusion of deferential practices include:

1. The Confucian notion of deference is rooted in the fact that, under usual circumstances, human beings depend on and owe more to others, especially their parents and ancestors, than they are capable of returning directly. Deference is the proper expression of a sense of existential humility, modesty and gratitude in light of being born into forms of life that are being passed on. These forms are open to even radical forms of revision and transformation.
2. While bowing, kneeling, or kowtowing are classical expressions of deferential rituals, deference comes in different degrees and shapes and is closely connected to civility. Expressions of civility include handshakes, giving way to another person and other gestures of reverence. While one might initially cultivate forms of deference and civility in small circles such as families, under favorable conditions the interpersonal level can gradually spread outward to include forms of curtesy and friendliness and care to distant strangers.
3. In contrast to classical Confucianism, deference in a modern Confucian republic would not presuppose fixed hierarchical relationships. This does not preclude that some expressions of deference are asymmetrical, for example gift giving or treating the elderly with respect. At a transgenerational level, however, these forms of asymmetrical deference are part of a reciprocal process of taking turns.<sup>52</sup> Each generation is burdened with the task of appropriating, preserving, transforming and passing down traditions and forms of life that they have inherited.
4. Genuine deference is performed out of a sense of voluntariness. To count as genuine, deference flourishes in contexts free of domination as well as free from the blind following of rituals. Everyday ritual invocations such as saying “please” or “thank you” recognizes the other person’s power to decline. In many contexts declining might not be a real option and yet acts of speaking and acting in a civil manner is essential to create the illusion of a shared civil space that is necessary for a flourishing community of free and equal citizens.

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<sup>52</sup> See Matthias Fritsch, *Taking Turns with Earth: Phenomenological and Deconstructive Approaches to Intergenerational Justice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

Such illusions, in contrast to lies or ideologies, are not intended to deceive, but create a shared “subjective” space of reciprocity in which human beings can feel and act as free and equal players.<sup>53</sup> The cultivation of playful forms of deference could serve as an important corrective in many social contexts. Understood as a spiritual exercise of taking-oneself-back by stepping-back-from-oneself and making-oneself-small, it could counteract the pernicious tendency of “standing tall” to appear as snobbery and self-assertiveness. The Confucian emphasis on deference is a radicalized version of such acts of cultivating a culture of humility and respect. It invites us to imagine a republic in which the kowtow would indeed be performed among equals.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21-22

<sup>54</sup> I am grateful for receiving constructive comments on earlier drafts of this article from the participants of presentations at the Free University of Berlin, Nankai University and Sun Yatsen University (Zhuhai). Particular thanks are due to Georg Bertram, Nahum Brown, Dina Emundts, Guangxin Fan, Hans Feger, Stefan Gosepath, Yong Huang, Jun-Hyeok Kwak, Hilge Landwehr, Kai Marchal, Philip Pettit, Alexei Procyshyn and Wolfgang Welsch.



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## Modernity and the Question of Hope: Some Perspectives through Thomas Aquinas

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**Abstract:** I dwell on the question of hope qua a critique of modernity and theology's role in this, arguing that authentic hope cannot but include a theological horizon that is necessary for a humane and liberative social imaginary. Two insights are drawn from such: a critique of modernity is not exhausted by a historicist discourse, and an alternative reading of Aquinas' theology of hope may be developed via a discussion of the crisis of critical theory. I forward my argument in three parts: 1) I rehearse an account of the congeniality between modernity and religion developed by Charles Taylor; 2) I discuss the distinction between Taylor's perspective and the historicist reading of modernity; and 3) I try to reconstruct Aquinas' theology of hope within the framework of its reflexive unity with the two other theological virtues, faith, and charity. I use the three virtues' grounding in grace's radicality to counter the dominant historicist bias in interpreting both the question of hope and modernity. The whole discussion promises to be an alternative reading of modernity and Aquinas' theology of hope, guided by the question: *What different account of modernity and hope can be drawn from a re-reading of Thomas Aquinas' theology?*

**Keywords:** hope, Aquinas, theology, critical theory

### Introduction

In the standard Thomist literature, hope is regarded as a theological virtue. The term *theological* has a strange gravitas to it. For some, specifically, the believers, it inspires a sense of awe and reverence; for others, it only suggests something ethereal, that is beyond terrestrial and therefore, as they say, irrelevant. And yet, ironically, because precisely it is a theological virtue that, per Aquinas, hope is well attuned to the materiality of our human experience. In his definition of hope, Aquinas speaks both of "difficulty" and

“possibility.”<sup>1</sup> Our fragile and fallible nature requires it. A theological virtue like hope is a necessary stimulus for us to transcend ourselves and to strive for a purpose larger than our egocentric horizon.<sup>2</sup> It is a virtue because it disposes us towards ethical maturity; it is theological because it elevates our limited human capacities. Critics frown at Aquinas’ tact of calling this elevation of human nature *theological*. The use of the term makes it appear as if one can become more than human, a prospect which, besides being superfluous, is also farcical. Aquinas however, does not think of human flourishing in this manner; he never considers one can be more human than she should be. For Aquinas, human flourishing simply involves becoming fully human by attaining what one is yearning for.<sup>3</sup> He calls this human completion, *beatitudo* or *beatific vision*, his version of *eudaemonia* inspired by his reading of Aristotle, St. Paul, and St. Augustine.<sup>4</sup> Becoming fully human, for Aquinas, is a theological experience, but it is not transgressive. He does not think of humanity and divinity as two unrelated principles, with each trying to outdo the other. As he sees it, there is in every human person a trace of God, and one consummates her being human when, in various episodes of her mortal struggles, she gets to see the unfolding of that hidden divinity, vaguely in the beginning until such time that she beholds it face to face.<sup>5</sup> Towards this end, a human person requires hope.

This account of human flourishing, however, is not peculiar to Thomas Aquinas alone. Various wisdom and religious traditions—Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, among others—abound with the same testimony. This only goes to show that Aquinas is in good company when he suggests that the theological mooring of becoming human cannot be disregarded. I will develop this theme further in the first part where I will rehearse Charles Taylor’s account of the continuity between religion and modernity. While Taylor does not explicitly take up the question of hope, I will use his theologically suggestive injunction as an opening to explore the place of hope in imagining the future of humanity.

It is one thing however to speak of hope within a religious frame and another to employ it as a motif of socio-political critique. Conventional opinion has it that one can only do such via an account of hope developed within a historicist framework. The influence of this historicist bias is such that when one speaks of human destiny in its modern sense, the prospects

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947), IIaIIae 17.1 Reply, <<https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/summa/>>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, IIaIIae, 17.6 Reply to Obj. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, IaIIae 1.6 Reply.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Supplement, 92.1 Reply.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.2 Reply.



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seem to be confined only either to an expectation of triumph or anticipation of defeat. The former is represented by optimism; the latter, by pessimism. Both optimism and pessimism are dominant worldviews and each in its own ways has the potency to undermine one's understanding and practice of hope. In the second part, hence, I will try to trace the contours of optimism and pessimism as I chart their common lineage to the historicist hermeneutic of modernity. This is an important step towards the recovery of a notion of hope capable of resisting and deviating from historicism's reductive proclivity.

This kind of hope, as I would suggest in the third part, can be gleaned from a re-reading of the theology of Thomas Aquinas. As indicated in my title, this paper contains perspectives on modernity and the question of hope, not *from* but *through* Aquinas. The third part, in other words, will showcase not so much the classical rendition of Aquinas's teachings on hope but a reconstructive appropriation of his thought. Such an attempt will highlight what I describe as the reflexive character of Aquinas's reflections on hope. Understanding the reflexive element of Aquinas's thought is crucial as it is necessary for making sense of the liberative and humanistic potency of hope's theological groundwork. The reconstructive approach is also important in bringing Aquinas to some degree of proximity to the contemporary critique of historicism.

Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to convey a theoretical proposal that can moderate the current historicist thinking on modernity and its interplay with our sense of the divine in the context of our shared disenchantment. An important aspect of this attempt is the appeal not so much to restore enchantment wholesale but to re-ignite the thought that modernity might have not outgrown enchantment after all. Hope in this scheme may serve as an invitation to remember what was rather than foresee the things yet to come. If only for this, I would say, Aquinas's theology of hope would always have a place in the vision of an alternative modern social imaginary.

### **On The Continuity Between Religion and Modernity**

"Catholic" and "modernity" are terms that, historically and culturally, are segregated by antagonism on various fronts. The execution of Giordano Bruno, the condemnation of Galileo, and the publication of the Index of Prohibited Books continue to remind us of the chilling consequences of this fierce animosity between the two. Pius X, in his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici*, underscored the insurmountable gap that separated the two in no uncertain terms. The enmity of the Catholic Church towards modernity did not, of course, go unrequited. Intellectuals like the French philosophes Denis

Diderot and Voltaire were among those leading the charge against the church and religion. Both philosophers exulted science and naturalist thinking while others, like David Hume, deplored ecclesiastical authority for amassing political power and ruining Europe by sowing the seeds of superstitious belief. Closer to home, we can recall the repercussions of this anti-modernist campaign by the Catholic Church in the persecution suffered by Rizal and his fellow ilustrados at the Propaganda Movement. Their espousal of ideas and practices identified with modernity led to their vilification as enemies both of the church and the state; on that account, they suffered torture, destitution, deportation, and in Rizal's case, martyrdom. This complicity between Rizal and modernity would haunt him long after his death leading to a large-scale ban of his novels, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, in Philippine Catholic schools as late as the 1950s.

We often hear this version of the story. Charles Taylor, however, offers a different account contained in a lecture he delivered on the occasion of his receipt of the Marianist Award from the University of Dayton in 1996.<sup>6</sup> The said lecture was entitled *A Catholic Modernity?* The notion of Catholic modernity, as Taylor himself explained, had nothing to do with making modernity Catholic or Catholicism itself modern. It is a term he used to underscore the challenge for an honest self-criticism among Catholics against the background of our changing moral and cultural landscapes. The whole aim of this self-criticism, according to him, is "... to see what it means to be a Christian here, to find our authentic voice in the eventual Catholic chorus ...."<sup>7</sup> An important aspect of this Catholic self-understanding is the acknowledgement of the context which sets the condition for this task. Taylor alludes to this context in his hermeneutic proposal, which takes Catholicism and modernity not as divergent strands but as overlapping episodes of the same modern cultural evolution. Catholicism and modernity need not be seen hence as mutually canceling each other. A Catholic believer, in other words, should contend with modernity as keenly as she would examine her religious identity if she must come to terms with the demands of her faith today. This Catholic self-criticism acquires an even greater urgency at the frontier of the so-called "ordinary life."<sup>8</sup>

The phenomenon of "ordinary life" described by Taylor refers to the modern lifeworld inhabited by the average folks who view and practice

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<sup>6</sup> Per tradition, the Marianist Award is given by The Society of Mary or the Marianists (the French congregation behind the founding of University of Dayton) to a Catholic public intellectual who has shown remarkable achievement in demonstrating the constructive interface between religious faith and scholarly practice.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 234-302.

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religion as a core feature of their day-to-day commerce. It is generally agreed that modernity is responsible for elevating the common station of the everyday person that was once considered second-rate compared to the contemplative life of priests and monks inside the monasteries and convents. Through the efforts of Reformist leaders like Luther and Calvin, it became possible for a baker or a shop owner to imagine that he too could live a blessed life without donning a religious habit and locking himself up inside the cloister. The privileging of contemplative life dates back to ancient Greece, specifically to the tradition propagated by Plato and Aristotle. In such tradition, philosophy was hailed as a contemplative activity in relation to which all other pursuits were deemed inferior. The person who proves himself capable of this contemplation was held in the highest esteem and was recognized as an exemplar like Aristotle's *megalopsychos* or Plato's Philosopher-King. The chasm between contemplation and ordinary life, however, was challenged, first by the Hellenistic schools and then later by an outlier religion to be known later as Christianity. Hellenistic thought drew a large following from the populace just as Christianity became the religion of the multitude. It is true that during the medieval period, something of this original Christian charisma was sidelined with the increase of Catholic institutional power. But even during the Catholic Church's heyday, there have not been inadequate attempts to bring religion closer to the realm of the ordinary. The Dominicans tried to bring contemplation outside the monasteries, while the Franciscans made great strides preaching to the unchurched. Ahead of them, there were also the Benedictines who baptized manual labor as a form of spiritual exercise. We also cannot discount the witnessing of heroines like St. Catherine of Siena, who mastered the ordinary as a religious without a convent, and St. Therese of Lisieux, who gave the ordinary an extra-ordinary twist within the convent's walls. Modernity did indeed transform the way we value ordinary life but to say it was its own doing may be giving it undue credit. The ordinary life did flourish with the advent of Protestant modernity because the conditions that enabled it had been set and prepared by Catholic culture.<sup>9</sup> As shown above, the ordinary was as much a part of the Catholic religiosity from its early origins among the early Christians down to the migration of Christianity to countries like the Philippines. This is the same flavor of ordinariness that permeates the contemplative thought of the philosopher-mystic Simone Weil and the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Georges Bernanos' classic novel, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, is also a subtle but very powerful account of how grace could find a place in the mundane.

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<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity*, 17-19. See *Ibid.*, 268.

By conceiving the boundaries between Catholicism and modernity as overlapping, Taylor subtly managed to repair the disjunctive perspective that commonly kept the two apart. This contiguity makes it now possible for one to consider a modern social imaginary without abandoning its theological or religious roots. As Taylor puts it: “Modernity is secular, not in the frequent, rather loose sense of the word, where it designates the absence of religion, but rather in the fact that religion occupies a different place, compatible with the sense that all social action takes place in profane time.”<sup>10</sup> Despite its conciliatory tone, the foregoing statement should not be taken as saying that the tension between Catholicism and modernity has been overcome; on the contrary, precisely because religion and modernity are sharing borders, Taylor is suggesting the need for an approach that can take into account their complex relationship. As will be seen, my argument in this paper is dependent on the careful negotiation of this complexity given modernity’s pronounced inhospitality to a theologically grounded hope. In the next segment, I shall turn to the discussion of hope as a question that is at once urgent yet difficult against the backdrop provided by modernity. I shall also try to examine the ineliminable place of theology in this consideration. This process should eventually pave the way for a return route to Aquinas as a reprieve to modernity’s problematic valuation of hope.

### **Beyond Optimism and Pessimism**

There is actually nothing new nor staggering with the view that modernity has not outlived theology or religion. Taylor definitely is not the first to recognize and theorize about it. Before him, one can find the same line of thinking in the likes of Spinoza, Hobbes, Hegel, and much later, Weber. Unlike these theorists, however, Taylor does not consider religion in modernity as a mere historical outcome but the very phenomenon which opens up or transfigures history itself. Something of this can be gleaned from his other voluminous work, *A Secular Age*, where he alludes to the contrast between the closed and open frames of reading modernity; the closed reading is represented by the so-called death of God; the open reading, however, sees in modernity an occasion for new ways of meeting God in its alleged absence.<sup>11</sup>

The closed frame of reading modernity is a variant of a perspective that draws from historicism. As critics, like Popper and Parsons, see it, historicism conditions us to think that human destiny is largely shaped by

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 194.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 551-556.

history, not to mention its ascent or descent towards some fixed end.<sup>12</sup> The optimists see the ascent in the possibility of global progress; the pessimists, on the other hand, find in history's unfolding nothing but moral and cultural decadence. Billionaires like Elon Musk and Bill Gates are optimists; they believe that technology and financial capital can be put at the disposal of human ends towards global prosperity. The subtle inclusion of human development in the overall scheme of profit-making is a marked improvement of capitalism, hence the ironic allusion to *capitalism with a heart* or, as others say, *a human face*. Optimists look at this bright prospect as progressively linear, and they find no reason to delay or derail this horizontal advance. This optimism is shared by theorists like Max Weber, who finds in capitalism a fitting environment that allowed religion to endure and prosper within modernity. Weber's historicist reading of modernity sees congruence rather than a divide between belief in God and making money.<sup>13</sup> In the political sphere, this transference between modernity and religion, under the same auspices of historicism, finds its clearest articulation in the political theology espoused by Carl Schmitt. Schmitt drew from the insights of early modern theorists like Spinoza, Hobbes, and Hegel in formulating a notion of politics anchored on a secularized theology, that is, on the ontology of political power deemed as pervasive and as dominant as theology once was.<sup>14</sup> Today, the impact of Schmitt's political theory may be seen in the optimism exhibited by what I would call *political messianism*, which characterizes the contemporary populist and authoritarian regimes. Modern democracy itself has had the unfortunate fate of being reduced to a theatre of optimism where politics is often performed as a simulated drama of salvation history. In a democratic electoral contest, for example, candidates often project themselves as the messiah whose time has come; their pronouncements are delivered as prophetic intimations of the coming of the kingdom or the conquest of the promised land. In most cases, aspirants who deliver this message with the most intense optimism eventually end up victorious.

Religion and modernity remain conjoined even in the pessimistic tenor of the writings of other thinkers like Sigmund Freud. For Freud, modernity is inevitable, but he finds nothing celebratory with the dislocation that it engenders. Disorders are very much in keeping with the character of modernity. Modernity is transformative, but, as Freud observed, it also has

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<sup>12</sup> See Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 71-76; Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers* (New York: The Free Press, 1949), 478-479.

<sup>13</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2005), 102-125.

<sup>14</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 49-52.



its way of generating its own discontents. He attributes this duplicitous character of modernity to the inability of the modern person to release herself from the lure of transcendence or divinity. In the words of Freud:

Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God ....  
Future ages will bring with them new and probably  
unimaginably great advances in this field of civilization  
and will increase man's likeness to God still more ... we  
will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy  
in his Godlike character.<sup>15</sup>

Not only does Freud see conjunction between modernity and religion, but he also detects a link between religion and existential pathology. In contrast, a thinker like Etienne Gilson, himself a Thomist scholar, looks at this deified humanism not so much as a result but the actual cause of the problem, which stems from what he calls the "Western creed."<sup>16</sup> He sees this tragic slip of anthropology to anthropolatry as a by-product of the cultural climate in the West, which bred the fantasy of the humanistic alpha and omega.

Exponents of critical theory are also cognizant of the modernity-religion intersection and are openly adversarial to both. While the rejection of religion is not explicitly included among the so-called normative assumptions of critical theory echoed by Paolo Bolaños from Max Horkheimer,<sup>17</sup> critical theorists themselves have not really kept a secret their antithetical stance towards institutional religion, specifically Christianity, and its subalterns like metaphysics, human nature, revelation, and providence. Marcuse did take issue with Christianity in *Eros and Civilization* in the same fashion he adopted from Freud.<sup>18</sup> Adorno embedded his critique of Christianity in his dismissal of metaphysics, given their common fractured history. In Adorno's view, the rupture of these fractures has made it imperative for metaphysics to give way to contingency and for religion to embrace its own fragility. In an emphatic remark, Adorno wrote: "No recollection of transcendence is possible any more, save by way of perdition; eternity appears, not as such, but diffracted

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<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. by James Strachey <<https://www.stephenhicks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FreudS-CIVILIZATION-AND-ITS-DISCONTENTS-text-final.pdf>>

<sup>16</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 272.

<sup>17</sup> Paolo A. Bolaños, "What is Critical Theory? Max Horkheimer and the Makings of the Frankfurt School Tradition," in *Mabini Review*, 2, no. 1 (2013), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 69-73.

through the most perishable.”<sup>19</sup> This statement is important because it suggests a sensitivity on the part of critical theory towards some form of theology or religion but in a guise opposed to what it is reacting against. Ernst Bloch refers to this as “a religion of human Utopia, the Utopia of religion’s non-illusory elements.”<sup>20</sup> This brand of atheological discourse has been invariably described as *negative*, *semblance*, or *cipher* theology.<sup>21</sup> In a recent work, Bolaños prefers the term *inverse theology* to explain the discursive tact employed by Adorno in subverting the dominant religious thought via the latter’s own version of a “negation of negation.”<sup>22</sup> Through their different preferred strategies, Marcuse, Adorno, and Bloch succeeded in showing the viability of turning the established theological discourse and its truth claims on its head. Despite these modest gains, however, it is hard to tell how far critical theory has gone in addressing its complicity with historicism and, ultimately, the question of hope. Benjamin’s religiously inspired theorizing did provide some stimuli for re-thinking history but not to the extent of re-thinking historicism itself.<sup>23</sup> Hardly also did Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*, despite its literary acclaim, provide any relief to this quandary. Bloch’s narrative flourish, it appears, did more in turning away potential advocates of a Marxist utopia rather than winning them. As Eagleton wrote in a comment on Bloch’s prose: “If his style prefigures utopia in its imaginative brio, it also does so in its obscurity.”<sup>24</sup> Erich Fromm’s *The Revolution of Hope* did not do much help either in repairing critical theory’s entanglement with historicism and its reticence about hope.<sup>25</sup> One might infer, as Nicholas Smith did, that hope’s close association with religion has much to contribute to this deep discursive silence.<sup>26</sup>

It is this subdued treatment of hope and the devaluation of its religious origins which supply the motivation for this paper. What makes the

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<sup>19</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2004), 360.

<sup>20</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. by J.T. Swann (London: Verso, 2009), 69.

<sup>21</sup> Rudolf J. Siebert, “Toward a Dialectical Sociology of Religion: A Critique of Positivism and Clerico-Fascism” in Warren S. Goldstein (ed.), *Marx, Critical Theory, and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice* (Boston: Brill, 2006), 62.

<sup>22</sup> Paolo A. Bolaños, *Nietzsche and Adorno on Philosophical Praxis, Language, and Reconciliation: Towards an Ethics of Thinking* (London: Lexington Books, 2020), 110.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, <[https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/books/Concept\\_History\\_Benjamin.pdf](https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/books/Concept_History_Benjamin.pdf)>.

<sup>24</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 91; see also Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope, Volume II*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 619-624.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas S. Smith, “Hope and Critical Theory,” *Critical Horizons*, 6, no. 1 (2005), 46; see also Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Towards a Humanized Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 6-24.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, “Hope and Critical Theory,” 48.

reckoning of hope difficult within modernity is the dominant sway of historicism such that any discourse, be it for or against modernity, usually obtains its validation from the historicist framework. I tried to suggest how this historicist bias plays out in the tenuous relationship between modernity and religion as seen by the theorists surveyed. The historicist thinks human destiny can only be portrayed either as an uphill climb to the heights of progress or a free fall to the depths of catastrophe. I maintain that hope can be located in neither. There should be a way through which one can think of hope beyond the polarity of a rainbow-colored utopia and the dark specter of despair. Either of these persuasions draws from the historicist fiat, which takes history as the final and only arbiter of human destiny. The linear complexion of this perspective, however, does more to conceal rather than reveal the intricacies of our human situation. For as long as the historicist purview prevails, the champion and the critic of modernity will be both incapacitated by self-deception in the face of the question of hope. The former will be misled by its wishful certainty; the latter, by its presumed impossibility. One needs then to break this historicist impasse if the possibility of hope must be confronted squarely. In other words, to be emancipatory, hope must be freed from the restrictive hermeneutic impositions of historicism. This is what I intend to do in the next segment, where I shall try to turn to theology, specifically, the Thomist kind, to overcome this roadblock and come to terms with the question of hope.

### **The Question of Hope: A Response Through Thomas Aquinas**

Earlier in this paper, I put forward a claim gleaned from Charles Taylor that a hermeneutic of modernity cannot but be inclusive of a theological perspective. Given the undeveloped nuance of such a claim, I mentioned in the preceding that I shall attempt to flesh out Taylor's suggestion via a reconstructive reading of Aquinas' theology of hope. I began pursuing this task in the foregoing paragraphs by problematizing hope within the context of the interplay between optimism and pessimism and suggested that these two attitudes represent the extremes of what hope is not. Both optimism and pessimism are engendered by modernity, whose dominant reading is shaped by historicism. I have also proposed that the way out of the reductive prospects of optimism and pessimism is to contest, not each of them separately, but historicism itself. Any discourse on modernity, as long as it is hinged on the linear trajectory of historicism, will always involve some question-begging in the face of the projected end of history. Hence, though their content and manifestation may be drastically contrasted, both optimism and pessimism are actually one and the same outcome of the same eschatological view. It is this horizontal and determinist perspective of

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historicism that must be disrupted to accommodate a sense of hope that is ethically relevant and theologically grounded. The general direction of my prospective Aquinas-mediated response to the question of hope is anchored on this view.

Readers at this point may ask what exactly is this response *through* Aquinas constituted of? There are those who probably expect to read in my discussion a string of textual citations of Aquinas to consolidate my arguments for hope. I apologize to them if they realize later that my paper is rather short of their expectations. The exegetical strategy of reading Aquinas, I admit, has its own uses in traditional Thomist scholarship<sup>27</sup>, but, despite its merit, I suppose it is not one that suits my purpose and the problem I wish to sort out. And so, rather than merely invoking the authority of the Thomistic canon, I will try to demonstrate instead an alternative approach to Aquinas' oeuvre without losing sight of his fundamental theological commitment. In a nutshell, this project aims at opening up a hermeneutic vista that could help the reader appreciate Aquinas' works with fresh eyes. There really is nothing exceptional with this alternative interpretive undertaking other than the attempt to enlarge the context in which one may read Aquinas' corpus. And by enlargement, I mean the introduction of themes or issues that are not traditionally identified with Thomistic scholarship like this response to the question of hope via a tangential critique of modernity. This "unThomistic" mode of engaging Aquinas is unfamiliar, but it is not necessarily novel. Aquinas himself showed, and quite successfully that taking on the masters like Aristotle or St. Augustine may sometimes require reading them against the grain. Orthodoxy, so it seems, is not necessarily dependent on a singular, exclusive channel.<sup>28</sup> We can read in his numerous *disputatio*, *quodlibetales*, *opuscula* not to mention his Biblical and Aristotelian commentaries, the multiple cultural and intellectual geographies that Aquinas traversed to trace and flag new routes in aid of his truth-seeking. The task of the Thomist today hence is to extend this pursuit towards the same direction in which his writings are only one of the pathways. From this vantage point, one can sense the complexion of the Thomist response I wish to articulate, inspired to a certain degree by such contemporary Thomists like Norris Clarke with his proposed creative retrieval of Aquinas,<sup>29</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre through his

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<sup>27</sup> See Dominic F. Doyle, *The Promise of Christian Humanism: Thomas Aquinas on Hope* (USA: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> In the Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Aquinas wrote to paraphrase the Greek philosopher: "...we must respect both parties, namely, those whose opinion we follow, and those whose opinion we reject. For both have diligently sought the truth and have aided us in this matter." See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Metaphysics*, trans. by John P. Rowan (Chicago, 1961) <<https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/Metaphysics.htm>>.

<sup>29</sup> W. Norris Clarke, SJ, *Creative Retrieval of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Essays in Thomistic Philosophy, New and Old* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 4-5.

suggestion of a Thomistic scholarship via unThomistic means<sup>30</sup> and Herbert McCabe's self-styled out-of-the-box Thomism.<sup>31</sup> Clarke, MacIntyre, and McCabe are aware that Aquinas himself was not a Thomist and that he was a theologian who dedicated his entire life to the pursuit, not of Thomism, but of truth itself.<sup>32</sup>

My theoretical exploration on hope then shall proceed informed largely by Aquinas' theological vision. It goes without saying that, for Aquinas, any talk of hope is inherently theological. This means that a discourse on hope involves a reference to the fulfillment of the deepest human longing, which, for Aquinas, as it was for St. Augustine, is what the word God is all about.<sup>33</sup> It would be inaccurate, then, to think of "theology" or "theological" as something that relates only to the divine as Aristotle conceived it.<sup>34</sup> The distinction made by Aquinas between *natural theology* attributed to Aristotle and *revealed theology* to which he was committed spells the difference between *the God of philosophers*, the distant and impersonal deity, and *the God of believers* who reveals itself in an act of love.<sup>35</sup> In the Christian tradition, this self-communication of God is likewise a human affair since the recipient of revelation is herself a human person. For Aquinas, Theology is a discourse that brings both God and the human person into an interface.<sup>36</sup> In this scheme, the self-understanding of the human person has undoubtedly a theological element. What this suggests is that the self-knowledge bannered by both Socrates and Plato as key to living well is not attained by the human person directly and autonomously; she does this via a mirror which reflects to her an image of who she is. In Aquinas' framework, such a mirror is God. As one who encapsulates the best possibility for the human person, God is also the disclosure of who we are and what we can be.<sup>37</sup> On this score, a Cartesian who presumes that self-knowledge can be intuited on one's own is either deceived by hubris or trapped in a dreamy

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<sup>30</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophic Issues* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995), 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> Franco Manni, *Herbert McCabe: Recollecting a Fragmented Legacy* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), 36.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, ed. by Joseph Kenny, O.P., trans. by Anton C. Pegis, James F. Anderson, Vernon J. Bourke, and Charles J. O'Neil (New York: Hanover House, 1955-57), Book 1, Chapter 1, Par. 2, <<https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/ContraGentiles.htm>>.

<sup>33</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae 17.2 Reply.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by Richard Hope (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), Book Epsilon, 1026a10-30.

<sup>35</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I 20.1 Reply.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Aquinas, introduction to *Commentary on Boethius' On Trinity*, trans. by Rose E. Brennan, S.H.N. and Armand Mauer (1946-1953), <<https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/BoethiusDeTr.htm>>.

<sup>37</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.44.4, Reply to Obj. 3

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state. Aquinas, in contrast, would say that recognition of one's existence is never achieved through self-validation. Awareness of one's existence is never unilaterally personal; it's something that Aquinas would qualify as analogous. To look at existence as analogous is to see it in relational terms.<sup>38</sup> To say it differently, becoming a human person is not a stand-alone experience; it's something one encounters within the context of a meaningful relation. Humanity hence coincides with relationality. Human connection is a constant feature of any person's story from birth to childhood to maturity down to the terminal stage of life. And as far as Aquinas is concerned, this relationality of the human person takes its origin from her union with the very cause of her existence, whom, for lack of a better term, Aquinas prefers to call God.<sup>39</sup>

It is fair to say then that theology, as Aquinas would have it, is both sacred and human. It is sacred because it invites us to "know" God; it is human because it inspires us to pursue such an aim in the very act of knowing ourselves. Aquinas' emphasis on the latter part is unmistakable, as evidenced by the space, rigor, and depth he devoted to the question of becoming human in the two segments of the Second Part of *Summa Theologiae*, undoubtedly its longest section. Those who read (or misread) Aquinas' theology as a discourse removed from the pathos of human becoming are also those who miss the reflexive element of his theological thinking. The charge, then, that the theological and the terrestrial in Aquinas' mind are mutually exclusive is faulty as it is naïve. His elaborate discourse on what it takes to be a human person in the Second Part of *Summa Theologiae* bears witness against this claim. Among other questions, it is in this lengthy Second Part of *Summa* that one can find Aquinas' discussion of hope.

Aquinas takes up the question of hope in two separate places at the Second Part of *Summa*. In the first part of the Second Part, hope figures in his discussion of habits;<sup>40</sup> in the second part of the Second Part, he dwells on hope in a more detailed fashion alongside the other theological virtues, faith, and charity.<sup>41</sup> The discussion of hope as a theological virtue is important as it allows us to see the intricacies of Aquinas' experiment to bring to a closer dialogue the Greek and Christian traditions. The notion of virtue as something enacted by choice and determined by the mean is drawn by Aquinas from Aristotle via the latter's *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>42</sup> The tripod, however, of faith, hope and charity is an inheritance from St. Paul the Apostle,

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, I 13.5 Reply.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, I.13.8 Reply to Obj. 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, IaIIae 62. 1-4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, IIaIIae 17-22.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Book II, 1107a, 31.



specifically from his first letters to the Thessalonians<sup>43</sup> and Corinthians.<sup>44</sup> It would seem at first glance that marrying the two distant strangers is an impossible task. On the one hand, you have Aristotle, who deems virtue as a product of choice; on the other, there is Aquinas, who maintains that theological virtues are infused, that is, outside the realm of human choosing.<sup>45</sup> Added to this is another layer of difficulty from the fact that hope hardly figures in Aristotle's list of prescribed virtues. The closest parallel of hope in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is the idea of *wish*, which he nonetheless dismisses due to its weak link to rational decision making.<sup>46</sup> There seems then a reasonable ground to disqualify hope as a virtue, all the more as a theological virtue, when one examines it in purely Aristotelian terms. One should note, however, that Aquinas is not just rehearsing Aristotle's ethics in the Second Part of *Summa*; neither is he merely baptizing him, as others are wont to say. A number of things are happening in this important segment of Aquinas' magnum opus. Thus, unless one reckons with this bigger picture as well as the larger context of hope's connection with the other theological virtues, the arguments for hope as a virtue would seem to fail.

The Second Part of *Summa* may be considered Aquinas' counterpoint to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is, in fact, tempting to call it a Thomist *Nicomachean Ethics* except that, in the said segment, Aquinas was working on purposes that far exceeded Aristotle's own. And as it would turn out, the theologian who started as a mere commentator of "The Philosopher" became the author of an opus that, to a great measure, would go beyond Aristotle's work. If readers check on its structure and organization alone, they will see a longer and more detailed menu of virtues in the Second Part, a huge part of which are absent in the Aristotelian corpus. Besides faith and charity, they will also discover themes that are most unlikely Greek in origin like sin and grace as well as actions and virtues that Aristotle might cringe at finding like almsgiving, virginity, humility, including clemency and meekness. The Second Part of *Summa* also bears witness to Aquinas' attempt to render a more seamless continuity between ethics and politics incorporated in his own theological anthropology and his account of divine providence. Even with a cursory reading then, the evidence of Aquinas' intent to extend and expand *Nicomachean Ethics*, along with his subtle maneuver to moderate the latter's rationalist core, is hard to miss. As mentioned earlier, the dependence of

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<sup>43</sup> "We always give thanks to God for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly keeping in mind your work of faith and labor of love and perseverance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father..." 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3, *NASB*.

<sup>44</sup> "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I also have been fully known. But now faith, hope, and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love." 1 Corinthians 13:12-13, *NASB*.

<sup>45</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae 62.1 Reply.

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1111b-1112a.

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choice and the determination of the mean by practical reason is clearly pronounced in Aristotle's ethical treatise.<sup>47</sup> Aquinas sustains Aristotle on this score but is likewise cautious on granting reason too wide a leverage when it comes to the attainment of human flourishing. It should be remembered that for Aquinas, the movement towards happiness is not just a rational undertaking; it is also a commitment of faith and faith, he would tell us, belongs to the province of desire which finds its seat in the human will.<sup>48</sup> This very delicate supersession of reason by will is adopted by Aquinas from both St. Paul and St. Augustine for whom knowledge of God, the wellspring and aim of Christian *eudaemonia*, is gained not so much by *episteme* but by longing or yearning. For Aristotle, the good which defines human flourishing is best achieved through philosophic contemplation; for Aquinas, as it is for his predecessors, St. Paul<sup>49</sup> and St. Augustine,<sup>50</sup> we meet the good which alone can satisfy our most intense seeking via the surprising ways of revelation. Revelation is both a prompting or provocation or, in theological parlance, a call. The longing or yearning comes with one's affirmative response to this call via an act of faith. The associated term for faith is *credo*, which in its roots means, "to put one's heart."<sup>51</sup> It is probably in St. Anselm, specifically in his *Proslogion*, that one can find the most moving expression of this kind of faith. As Anselm wrote: "Let me look up at your light, whether from afar or from the depths. Teach me how to seek you, and show yourself to me when I seek. For I cannot seek you unless you teach me how, and I cannot find you unless you show yourself to me. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you. Let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you."<sup>52</sup> With *episteme*, as taught by Aristotle, the good is attained through knowing, which he restricts to reason; faith, on the other hand, is also a form of knowing, but unlike philosophic knowledge, it approaches its object through some degree of unknowing. Unknowing is the disruption of symmetry, or in medieval expression, adequation, between the knower and the thing known. Faith preserves the space between the two. A thinker and theologian like St. Anselm sees in that space a unison between faith and love. Unlike reason, faith does not find its consummation in capturing the form or seizing ideas in perfect clarity. The element of opacity or distance is never an obstacle when one knows by way of faith. As attested by anyone who has

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 1113a

<sup>48</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae 4.2; see also IIaIIae, 40.1, Reply and Reply to Obj. 1.

<sup>49</sup> See Acts 17:16-29

<sup>50</sup> See Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2019), Book XI, 2.4., 204.

<sup>51</sup> See Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "credo" <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/credo>>.

<sup>52</sup> Anselm, *Basic Writings*, trans. by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 81.

witnessed sundown or beheld the face of a newborn or received kindness from a stranger, what escapes the mind or overcomes language or resists rational demonstration is sometimes our only clue about that which we can only know in its utter unfamiliarity. The reflexive character of Aquinas' theology is unmistakable in the notion of faith he articulated. As he underscored: "... that which is proposed to be believed equally by all, is equally unknown by all ...."<sup>53</sup>

This character of reflexivity underlying Aquinas' understanding of faith is as well pronounced in his notion of hope. The important outcome of Aquinas' move to juxtapose faith and hope is the clarification of hope's groundwork in Aquinas' theology of desire. The phrase "theology of desire" does not figure in any of Aquinas' works, but what it suggests can be conveniently gathered from his discussion of hope both as an irascible passion and as a theological virtue.<sup>54</sup> From a larger perspective, one may say that hope, herewith proposed as Aquinas' theology of desire, complements suitably Gabriel Marcel's formulation of hope as "ontology of desire." Marcel does recognize the association of religion with hope, but his reactive portrait of it vis-a-vis despair tends to understate its motivating power.<sup>55</sup> Aquinas' edge over this account of hope, as previously pointed out, is his emphasis on hope as a theological virtue. Because it is theological, it partakes of the reflexive dimension of Aquinas' theological thinking; the same theological framework also gives it a teleological orientation that goes beyond the desire to overcome despair. And because it is a virtue, it falls within the larger framework of practices that govern the totality of human life. The element of practice in Aquinas' notion of hope shifts the emphasis from *acting against despair* to *acting for a purpose despite despair*. Hope as virtue aims at transforming a person to be hopeful, that is, at directing herself towards a good that is difficult but possible to attain.<sup>56</sup> It is such good that prompts hope and not despair, as suggested by Marcel. Aquinas is not minimizing the debilitating effect of despair, aware as he is of its potency to weigh down the human spirit. By choosing to re-locate the notion of hope from its contrariety to despair to the larger context of grace-inspired action, he succeeds in displacing the instrumental role of hope as a mere means of coping.<sup>57</sup> This is a point that needs underscoring for better appreciation of Aquinas' move to establish hope within the reflexive continuum, which links the human passions and the life of practice aided by grace.

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<sup>53</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIa 1.5 Reply.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, IIaIIae, 18.1 Reply.

<sup>55</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), 36.

<sup>56</sup> Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae, 17.1, Reply.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, IIaIIae, 17.2 Reply to Obj. 3.

Further demonstration of the reflexive nature of Aquinas's understanding of hope is also palpable in the ritual and narrative dimensions of the Christian life. The ritual aspect, experienced through liturgy and sacraments, and the narrative aspect, mediated through the study of and reflection on the Sacred Scriptures, highlight the reflexivity that accompanies not just the human-divine interaction but also the personal-communal encounter fostered by the said ritual and narrative practices. The ritual celebration of the sacraments affords the faithful an opportunity to memorialize the various episodes of the incarnation of grace as when a person is initiated to the Christian life (baptism), commissioned to discipleship (confirmation), joined by the community in worship and thanksgiving (Eucharist), sanctified in spousal love (matrimony), consecrated to pastoral ministry (holy orders), renewed (reconciliation) and spiritually healed (holy unction). On these occasions, the sacraments serve as channels of hope, being themselves mediators of grace. Through their distinct efficacy, the divine and the human are brought to a closer unison through an interface that likewise links the material and the spiritual, singular and the plural, the individual and the community in a unique, reflexive bond. The same reflexive character may also be obtained from the reading of the Sacred Scriptures, from where one can derive an idea of narrativity expressive of Aquinas's notion of hope. As the central narrative of the Christian life, the Bible has the natural (and supernatural) capacity to disclose a vista of human destiny on earth as it is in heaven. When a believer reads the Scriptures or listens to a reading of them, he comes in contact with a story that is her own but not hers alone. It is a tale of all her fellow pilgrims, from ages past, present, including future. This kind of reflexivity is possible for a text like the Sacred Scriptures, whose telling is very much a part of its constant creation and re-creation. No one listens to the Word of God, in other words, passively; the hearer becomes simultaneously a co-author of the very message addressed to her when she receives the seeds of faith sown through the very act of proclaiming the Word. Here lies the close connection between *kerygma* and *kenosis*, between preaching and moral change. The Biblical injunction that says faith comes through hearing can be useful when we use it in reference to hope. Hope also comes from hearing, that is, receiving the Word in its narrative embodiment. Something similar may be likened to a theory espoused by Paul Ricoeur, who considers the text as revelatory of becoming instantiated in the reader's imagination via the narrative hermeneutics.<sup>58</sup> The narrative dimension of hope I am here attributing to Aquinas may be comparable to some degree to Ricoeur's theory but shorn of the latter's hermeneutic immediacy. Because when read, unlike

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<sup>58</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 104.

other texts, what the Sacred Scriptures disclose to a reader or listener is not yet becoming, but simply another narrative—the story of Ruth, the tale of Job, the parable of the good Samaritan, the account of Mary’s finding of the empty tomb or perhaps only my own personal narrative but seen in a new light, that is, in the light of the Word that speaks to me and prompts me to turn to a different horizon. Only when I recognize and receive the Word in the encounter of these narratives can I perhaps begin to imagine the possibility of becoming it offers. Hope is about that possibility.

This brings me to the last aspect of my exploration of a theological response to the question of hope via Aquinas, that is, hope’s relation to charity. Hope, for Aquinas, provides a hermeneutic horizon for human existence in the same manner that time does for Heidegger. This hermeneutic function of hope, however, does not emanate solely from hope but its reflexive link with another theological virtue, the virtue of charity. As a theological virtue, it belongs to hope to inspire us towards the good to which we have a natural proclivity. Such good, which is also our end, is offered in charity. The transference between hope and charity can perhaps be best illustrated by the encounter between Jesus and the alleged adulterous woman narrated in the Gospel of John.<sup>59</sup> As recounted by the Gospel, a woman accused of adultery was brought to Jesus for his judgment. Her accusers wanted to hear from Jesus what to do with her, aware as they were of his reputation as a moral teacher. It was a dilemma on the part of Jesus, who was caught between upholding the Jewish law at the expense of the woman’s life and saving the woman at the risk of being seen as unfaithful to the Mosaic tradition. The crowd wanted to stone to death the woman as is fitting to the faults ascribed to her. In response, Jesus urged the angry mob, composed mostly of self-righteous male Jews, to cast the first stone if they thought anyone among them was sinless. The Gospel reported the silence that prevailed after Jesus finished speaking. At the sight of her accusers leaving the scene one by one, Jesus, says the Gospel, turned to the woman and asked her to go and sin no more. What one may find in this specific episode is indicative of the reflexivity between hope and charity. Jesus knew the sins of the woman but chose to see the person instead (charity). The woman felt herself forgiven and embraced the possibility of moral change (hope). Jesus did not doubt in his mind that the woman could find her way towards a better life (hope); his words were meant to open to her the path to self-reconciliation and, ultimately, finding grace (charity). As a hermeneutic horizon, hope does provide a genuine incentive for moral transformation but as shown in the Gospel story recalled earlier, hope needs to be accompanied by the radicality of charity so a person can find the courage to seek what is good. Time as a

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<sup>59</sup> See John 8:1-11.

hermeneutic horizon does not and cannot do this. As Heidegger himself stipulated, the only completion that discloses itself to the human person at the end of the temporal spectrum is death.<sup>60</sup> Time also activates self-understanding and discloses other constitutive elements of existence like care and anxiety, but within and outside time, the Dasein in Heidegger's world has nowhere to go. Temporality also heightens a person's awareness of the short timeline of human existence; one who knows she does not have enough time will try to make only the best choices and will ensure that every moment, every chapter of her temporal experience is worth the ride. Time, in other words, can either be a window or a blinder; it is a window when it shows the existential ground of human possibility; it is a blinder when it restricts the human possibility to the limited range of temporality.

In the discussion above, I suggested that historicizing human existence can yield either a phantom optimism or unwieldy pessimism. I also argued that none of these prospects could sustain the human person in her struggles against the pervasive meaninglessness bred by modernity. Hence, I wish to underscore, at this juncture, the need to recover the hermeneutic horizon drawn from hope animated by charity. The role of charity cannot be overstated. In the writings of Aquinas, as it is in St. Paul's and St. Augustine's, charity represents the anti-historical. What I mean by anti-historical is the force or the drive that breaks open the restrictions of time to reveal what is possible, not at the end of it as historicists suggest, but from within its fractured and restricted confines. Grace is this kind of anti-historical, the grace embodied by charity and dramatized by the testimony of Christ's Incarnation. Grace, as the anti-historical, does not deny time or history but only the presumption that human destiny is exclusively determined by either of them. It ruptures time to create a space where it is possible for the human person to see the possibility of an unexpected, unanticipated good. The Gospel story about the accused woman is a tale of such an encounter with grace. She received grace at the moment she thought she deserved less. She found a fresh start where it seemed there was nowhere else to go. The encounter between Jesus and the disgraced woman discloses the possibility of the *gift*, which Derrida himself thought was unthinkable.<sup>61</sup> Not only can the *gift* undo any kind of symmetry or reciprocity, it can likewise override the linearity of time. Because it is non-linear, the *gift* can leap from the past as in the experience of the disciples on their way to Emmaus; it can appear in the present as in the case of the Samaritan woman, or it can reach out from the future in the form of hope as the sinful yet forgiven woman can attest.

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<sup>60</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2001), 276-277.

<sup>61</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time. I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7.



This disruptive, non-linear character of grace qualifies the relevance of theological discourse in the critique and understanding of modernity against the views dominated and configured by historicism. The sad outcome of this historicist fixation, as stated above, is the restriction of our choices to either a pollyannish portrait of the future or the fatalistic acceptance of defeat. In shaping my argument for hope, I tried to veer away from the historicist trap and relied instead on the cogency of Aquinas' theology to demonstrate how the perceived ahistoricity of his thought can in fact be an advantage to mitigate the predominant historicist reading of modernity and its pathology. In recent years, there have been a growing number of scholars who have embarked on this theological turn to engage historicism and explore new frontiers for critical engagement. Noted scholars like Badiou, Agamben, and Zizek, provoked in different ways by their reading of the antinomian theology of St. Paul, are prime examples of this theologically inclusive anti-historicism experiment.<sup>62</sup> Regardless of their creedal qualifications, they are convinced that the vital questions engendered by modernity cannot be left to the exclusive determination of a historicist discourse. The conversation, to date, remains open-ended; such is the kind of conversation we should indeed strive to foster when it comes to things that matter like justice, religion, humanity, modernity, including the question of hope.

## Conclusion

I started this paper with a borrowed claim from Charles Taylor that a critique of modernity cannot but include a theological horizon. Taylor himself did not provide a theological explanation to validate his insight hence the decision on my part to fill in a perceived lacuna in his reading of modernity. In my discussion, I tried to show that the dominant discourses on modernity are configured within the framework set by historicism. This historicist, linear perspective sets the ground for the two competing worldviews on the proverbial end of history, namely, optimism and pessimism. At first glance, it would appear as if the two are choices

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<sup>62</sup> Colby Dickinson, "What Christians Need No Longer Defend: The Political Stakes of Considering Antinomianism as Central to the Practice and History of Theology," in *Crisis and Critique*, 2, no. 1 (2015) <[https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1062&context=theology\\_facpubs](https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1062&context=theology_facpubs)>; Vassilios Paipais, "Already/Not Yet': St Paul's Eschatology and the Modern Critique of Historicism," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 44, no. 9 (2018), <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453718769455>>; see also Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005); Slavoj Zizek et al., *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2010).

alternative to each other. A closer look, however, would reveal their superficial contrariety as both are but mere outcomes jointly lending credence to the same historicist hermeneutic. In my view, neither optimism nor pessimism provides a condition conducive to the attainment of a humane and emancipatory social imaginary. Banking on the thin theological texture of Taylor's suggestion, I articulated a notion of hope drawn from the thought of Thomas Aquinas. My reading of Aquinas' theology of hope is framed within its unity with the two other theological virtues, namely, faith and charity and their shared rootedness on the radicality of grace. In my discussion, I hazard a contention that the grace's radicality is coincident with its being anti-historical. By describing grace as anti-historical, I emphasized the potency of grace to break free from the linearity of time and to rupture from within time itself the different possibilities of human becoming like receiving forgiveness, finding God, and regaining the distinct joy of being human. Time and again, we hear and read theories depicting modernity as a graveyard of God. Taylor finds the idea unwarranted and seeks to repair the flaw. Prodded by Taylor, I turn to Aquinas, partly, to extend the aforementioned stance and partly, to recapture an intellectual sensitivity which remains hospitable to the divine which, in the modern milieu, has been given up for dead. The curious thing is that the phenomenon of a dead God is neither a modern nor a secular making. St. Paul's canticle (Phil 2:6-11) tells us that the death of God is God's own way of appearing in history. The Pauline text suggests that the only way for the divine to fit in temporality is for God to cross himself out in the very act of his self-donation; his is an advent in his own vanishing, a presence surpassing the banality of vulgar visibility. The closest, though frail, analogy would be that of light which gives illumination as it expends itself. No, God is not the light but the expending that comes with it, the same way divine presence expends itself in its seeming absence as the soul agonizes in its own dark night. It could very well be that the death of God is the necessary silence that accompanies the utterance of the Word. With this thought, we can perhaps reckon hope not as a vision of the foreseeable but a memory of what we have been unknowingly missing.

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Article

# Academic Discourse of Chinese Philosophy and 21st Century China Studies—The Case of Confucian Views on War of Revenge

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*Ting-mien Lee*

**Abstract:** Concomitant to the rise of China is an increasing interest in Chinese philosophy. Some scholars have focused on Confucian views on international order and war to interpret or predict Chinese foreign policies. Regarding Chinese military culture, due attention has been paid to Confucian just war theory. However, the topic of retributive war remains little studied. A few works have been published on this topic. They tend to concentrate on exceptional and controversial cases, arguing that Confucianism zealously advocates war of revenge. This paper argues that although Confucianism approves blood vengeance, it does not approve of war as a means of revenge. The attribution of extreme punishment theory of just cause to Confucianism without adequate evidence might alert us of the changing roles of Chinese philosophy in the intellectual and political arenas today.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, just war theory, war of revenge, China studies

## Introduction

Following the rise of China, the 21st century witnessed an increasing scholarly interest in Chinese philosophy. As China plays a more significant role in international affairs regarding economic and military engagement, the task of interpreting and predicting Chinese foreign policies becomes more important.<sup>1</sup> To perform the task, an analysis of realpolitik is no

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<sup>1</sup> See Alan Hunter, "Soft Power: China on the Global stage," in *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2, no. 3 (2009); Horst J. Helle, *China: Promise or Threat?: A Comparison of*



doubt necessary. As China is also a country with an ancient civilization, many scholars believe it is equally necessary to examine Chinese culture, especially traditional Chinese views on world order and war.<sup>2</sup> Scholars of China studies, therefore, draw on classical Chinese philosophy (mainly Confucianism) to hypothesize the moral norms that might dictate Chinese foreign policies and military decisions. This, intriguingly, drives the study of classical Chinese philosophy to the frontline of the study of international relations.<sup>3</sup>

As the narrative of “Thucydides Trap” was construed and is gaining currency, how Chinese philosophy would answer the question of when and how to fight a war becomes especially relevant.<sup>4</sup> Many academic works have been published on Confucian just war theory or Confucian wartime morality.<sup>5</sup> They speculate on what moral grounds China would consider sending troops to another country justified or what moral codes would constrain China’s use of force. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to Confucian views on retributive war or war of revenge,<sup>6</sup> a topic that speaks directly to the unceasing worry that underlies the Western narrative

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*Culture* (Brill, 2017). See also, Evan Osnos, “Making China Great Again,” in *The New Yorker*, 8 (2018).

<sup>2</sup> See Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, Vol. 178 (New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press, 1998); Daniel A. Bell, “War, Peace, and China’s Soft Power: A Confucian Approach,” in *Diogenes*, 56, no. 1 (2009), 26-40; and Robin McNeal, *Conquer and Govern: Early Chinese Military Texts from the Yi Zhou Shu* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> A notable example is the emergence of “Chinese school of international relations” or a “theory of international relations with Chinese characteristics”, whose most representative work is Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia de dangdaixing: shijie zhixu de shijian he xiangxiang [A Possible World of All-under-the-Heaven System: The World Order in the Past and for the Future]* (Beijing: Zhongxin, 2016). For more discussions, see Bettina Hüchel, “Theory of International Relations with Chinese characteristics,” in *Gesellschafts-und geisteswissenschaftliche interventionen* (2013), 34-64; Ge Zhaoguang, “Dui ‘Tianxia’ de Xiangxiang” [An Imagination about “all under Heaven,” in *Sixiang* 29 (2015), 13-34; and Salvatore Babones, “Taking China Seriously: Rationality, Tianxia, and the ‘Chinese School’ of International Relations,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2017), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.602>>.

<sup>4</sup> See Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: are the US and China Headed for War?,” in *The Atlantic*, 24, no. 9 (2015) and Helle, *China: Promise or Threat?*

<sup>5</sup> See Johnston, *Cultural Realism*; Xinzhong Yao, “Conflict, Peace and Ethical Solutions: A Confucian Perspective on War,” in *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies*, 4, no. 2 (2004), 89-111; Bell, “War, Peace, and China’s Soft Power;” Sumner B. Twiss and Jonathan Chan, “The Classical Confucian Position on the Legitimate Use of Military Force,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 40, no. 3 (2012), 447-472; McNeal, *Conquer and Govern*; Ping-cheung Lo, “Chinese Traditions on Military Ethics,” *Johnson, JT, Patterson, ED, The Ashgate Research Companion to Military Ethics* (2015), 399-414.

<sup>6</sup> Morality of revenge is a marginalized topic in the study of Confucianism and the field of Chinese philosophy in general. The most comprehensive and detailed study, to my knowledge, remains Longxian Li, *Fuchou Guan de Shengcha yu Quanshi* (An Examination and Interpretation of the Views on Revenge: from Pre-Qin through Han and Weijin to the Tang Period) (Taipei: Taida chuban zhongxin, 2012).

of China as a “threat” or the narrative of “Thucydides Trap.”<sup>7</sup> Prevalent in such narratives is the narrative of China’s “century of humiliation” or victimhood nationalism.<sup>8</sup> It typically depicts China as conceiving of itself and living with resentment as a victim of colonialism and imperialism.<sup>9</sup> A repetition of such a depiction *insinuates* that once China becomes a superpower, it will *probably* seek revenge. So far, little study has been done on whether traditional Chinese thought, or Confucianism, would consider retributive war justified. Yet, intriguingly, the existing academic discourses on the topic tend to resonate with Western concerns; they selectively concentrate on a few eye-catching yet protean accounts from a Confucian text and argue that Confucianism zealously advocates war of revenge against other “countries.”<sup>10</sup>

The current article is a preliminary attempt to present this intriguing phenomenon, illustrating how some scholars infer Confucian advocacy of war of revenge from its advocacy of blood vengeance. It first reconstructs the Confucian argument for *blood vengeance*. Next, it presents academic discourses that portray Confucianism as a philosophy that endorses *war of revenge*. Finally, it argues that Confucianism does not approve of war of revenge. The Confucian argument supports vengeance for direct-blood relatives on the level of individuals (in situations where there is no political authority to minister justice). However, it does not support that war is a justified means of revenge and that a polity (the sovereignty and the people collectively) can be an agent of revenge.

## 1. Confucian Arguments for Blood Vengeance

Some Confucian classics express explicit advocacy (sometimes even glorification) of blood vengeance.<sup>11</sup> In the discussion of the Confucian perspective on vengeance, the *Gongyang Commentary* (*Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳) on the classic *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) and the *Book of*

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<sup>7</sup> Denny. Roy, “The ‘China Threat’ Issue: Major Arguments,” *Asian Survey* 36.8 (1996): 758-771. See Allison, “The Thucydides Trap.”

<sup>8</sup> He, Yinan, “History, Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 16.50 (2007): 1-24. See Hilton Yip, “China Doesn’t Have to Keep Playing the Victim” <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/27/china-doesnt-have-to-keep-playing-the-victim-huawei-canada-sweden-meng/>> (accessed September 22, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> This does not suggest that the victimhood narrative is not popular in China in Chinese language discourses. It is tempting to examine the Chinese root of it and how it circulates in Chinese context, but the topic is beyond the scope of the current paper.

<sup>10</sup> Jiang Qing, *Gongyang xue yinlun* 公羊學引論 (An Introduction to Gongyang Tradition) (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995). See Kam-por Yu, “Confucian Views on War as Seen in the Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals,” in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 9, no. 1 (2010), 97-111.

<sup>11</sup> Li, *Fuchou Guan de Shengcha yu Quanshi*, 9-10.

*Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) are most frequently cited because they explicitly advocate blood vengeance. Their main argument is derived from Confucian ethics, which has *ren* 仁 (often rendered as “kindness” or “benevolence”) as the core value.<sup>12</sup> This *ren*-centered ethics promotes the universality of natural sympathy and humanity, but it also prioritizes the gradation of love because the ethical theory is built upon the thesis that filial piety (*xiao* 孝) is the most primitive moral feeling. According to the thesis, filial piety is the foundation of human morality: one’s attachment and moral feelings toward one’s parents enable one to extend the feeling (e.g., empathy) toward others. Therefore, Confucian moral theory holds that one has moral obligations toward all members of society, yet one’s obligation should be proportional regarding one’s relationship with others.<sup>13</sup>

Considering filial piety as the most natural moral emotion and the foundation of morality, Confucianism also considers blood vengeance morally acceptable (when certain requirements are met). The *Gongyang Commentary* and the *Book of Rites* state respectively:

If a ruler is assassinated, and his ministers fail to punish the murderer, then they are not ministers, just as a son failing to avenge his father is no son.<sup>14</sup>

Zixia asked Confucius, saying, “How should (a son) conduct himself regarding the man who has killed his father or mother?” The Master said, “He should sleep on straw, with his shield for a pillow; he should not take office; he must be determined not to live with the slayer under the same Heaven. If he meets with him in the

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<sup>12</sup> Scholars have specified that the *Gongyang Commentary* and the *Book of Rites* approve of blood vengeance, but the actual arguments—the argument for blood vengeance and the argument for including warfare as a form of blood vengeance—remain unexplored. Luís Cordeiro Rodrigues and I have made an initial attempt elsewhere to reconstruct the Confucian argument for blood vengeance and indicated some historical narratives about wars launched in the name of blood vengeance. This study will not repeat the details of our reconstruction; it will only summarize and explain how the Confucian argument for blood vengeance would be applied to retributive war. See Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ting-mien Lee, “The Morality of Vengeance: Confucianism and Tutuism in Dialogue” (Under review).

<sup>13</sup> See Li Chenyang, “Shifting Perspectives: Filial Morality Revisited,” in *Philosophy East and West*, 47, no. 2 (1997), 211–232 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1399875>>; Yong Huang, “Why You Ought Not to Turn the Other Cheek: Confucius on How to Deal With Wrongdoers,” in *National Central University Journal of Humanities*, 55, no. 1 (2013), 1–40; David Wong, “Chinese Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/ethics-chinese>>.

<sup>14</sup> Harry Miller, *The Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals: A Full Translation* (Springer, 2015), 26.

marketplace or the court, he should not have to go back for his weapon but (instantly) fight with him.”<sup>15</sup>

Gongyang’s stories and the *Book of Rites*, a son cannot be qualified to be a son if he fails to avenge his father. He must sacrifice his comfortable life and determine to eradicate the perpetrator. He should not prioritize his safety when he must fight.

However, not every act of retaliation for direct-blood relatives’ injury or death is morally justified. For an act of revenge to be justified, it should meet some restriction requirements. For example, a son has the moral duty to avenge his parent only if the parent was wrongfully harmed or murdered, and there is no institutionalized justice enforcement.

If the father is wrongfully executed, then it is quite permissible for the son to avenge him; if the father is rightfully executed, and the son chooses to avenge him, then he is starting down the path of endless vengeance and counter-vengeance.<sup>16</sup>

Assuming there was an enlightened Son of Heaven, would Duke Xiang have been able to act as he did? The answer is no. How, then, are his actions justified? With no Son of Heaven above or leader of states rulers below, one is subject only to the pleasure and pain of his ancestors.<sup>17</sup>

According to the fragments from the *Gongyang Commentary*, an act of revenge is permissible only when the parent is wrongfully harmed or killed, and no justice system will punish the wrongdoer.

The Confucian argument for blood vengeance and the restrictions it lays out to regulate the act of revenge are general principles regarding the actions on the level of individuals. However, the actual historical events the above two fragments allude to are the most well-known *Gongyang*’s stories of wars of revenge: the story that Wu Zixu 伍子胥 assisted the state of Wu 吳 to attack the state of Chu 楚 to avenge his father and the story that Duke Xiang of Qi 齊襄公 invaded the state of Ji 紀 to avenge his ancestor. This perplexing situation gives rise to the question of whether Confucianism would approve carrying out blood vengeance *via* inter-state wars.

<sup>15</sup> Wang Mengou, *Liji jinzhuzhu jinyi* (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2006), 44.

<sup>16</sup> Miller. *The Gongyang Commentary*, 251.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

## 2. Does Confucianism Approve War of Revenge?

Confucian view on war of revenge has been a marginalized topic in the study of Confucianism. The main reason is that discourses from Confucian texts on the topic are scarce, and they tend to be controversial. There are a few fragments that explicitly address the topic. Yet, they are mostly from the *Gongyang Commentary*, which is also known for the Sino-Barbarian dichotomy.<sup>18</sup> This dichotomy is often emphasized as the Chinese cultural root of nationalism. Since it is embraced by some Chinese cultural conservatives, many may keep a vigilant eye on this branch of “traditional thought” and its relevance to today’s Chinese perspective on international relations. The combination of the Sino-Barbarian dichotomy and zealous advocacy of vengeance renders the *Gongyang Commentary* a good recipe for breeding distrust and paranoia between China and other countries.<sup>19</sup>

Chinese nationalistic and cultural conservatives tend to focus on certain fragments of the *Gongyang Commentary* and reconstruct a radical Confucian view on war of revenge. Some would even present the reconstruction as the authoritative voice of Confucianism. Jiang Qing 蔣慶, for example, claims that Confucius enthusiastically advocates revenge, and this stance is the spirit of the Chinese nation. To defend this claim, Jiang devotes an entire section of his monograph on *Gongyang* scholarship to “Grand Vendetta” theory: a theory holding that waging wars for avenging one’s distant ancestors is morally acceptable.

The Grand Vendetta theory refers to the pro-vengeance theory advocated by the *Gongyang* scholarship. When it comes to events of revenge in the classics of *Spring and Autumn*, Confucius always wrote a great deal about them to elaborate on the morality of revenge.<sup>20</sup>

The type of revenge that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* considers justified, Jiang argues, includes war of blood vengeance:

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<sup>18</sup> Yuri Pines, “Beasts or humans: Pre-imperial origins of the ‘Sino-Barbarian’ dichotomy,” *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, 11 (2005), 59-102.

<sup>19</sup> This is perhaps why Pines thinks Jiang Qing should say more on the topic in his translated book on the *Gongyang Commentary*. As Pines states in his review on Jiang Qing’s book: “The *Gongyang zhuan* does contain many interesting (albeit highly controversial) ideas, which Jiang Qing never addresses. What should be made of the highly pronounced Sino-barbarian dichotomy in the text? How should the idea that nothing is external to the True Monarch (*wangzhe wu wai* 王者無外) be related to the modern system of international relations?”

<sup>20</sup> Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 260.

In the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, this type of revenge refers to the event of Duke Xiang's eradicating Ji state for avenging an ancestor from nine generations ago, who was murdered because of the slander by the then Duke of Ji, and to the event of the battle Duke Zhuang of Lu had with Qi troops for avenging his father, who was murdered by Duke Xiang of Qi. These two revenge events share two features: both revenge acts were intended to avenge murdered blood relatives, and the other is that both avengers are state rulers; hence, their revenge acts became political events between states.<sup>21</sup>

The first case is the war launched by the Duke Xiang of Qi against Ji. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* refers to the war in a very terse and obscure way. Rather than saying that the Ji state was eradicated, it says that "the Marquis of Ji took an ultimate leave from his state," as if the Marquis of Ji himself left his state, and the state of Ji remained intact.<sup>22</sup> The *Gongyang Commentary* explains why the classic uses such an expression of "took an ultimate leave" (*da qu* 大去), saying:

What is suggested by the phrase "took an ultimate leave"? It means that [the state of Ji] was destroyed. Who destroyed it? The state of Qi destroyed it. Why does not [the record] say that Qi destroyed it? To euphemize [the behavior of] the Duke of Xiang. The *Chunqiu* euphemizes for the worthy. What was worthy about Duke Xiang? He [was worthy in that he] avenged a wrong. What was the grudge? It was done to a distant ancestor. Duke Ai [of Qi] was boiled alive by the Zhou because [the then] Marquis of Ji slandered [him]. Duke Xiang did this because he [wanted to] exhaust his devotion to the service of his ancestors. How did he exhaust his devotion? When Duke Xiang was about to avenge the state of Ji, he performed divination, which read: "Half the army will be lost." [Duke Xiang replied, saying,] "Even if I will die for it, I will not regard it as inauspicious."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Miller, *The Gongyang Commentary*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*



The *Gongyang Commentary* believes that the euphemistic wording is intended to gloss over Duke Xiang's act because the classic approves the morality of Duke Xiang's act of avenging his distant ancestor.

“As to the ‘distant ancestor’, at what remove was he?”  
 “Nine generations.” “Is a vengeance at a removal of nine generations still permissible?” “Even at a removal of one hundred generations, [vengeance] is still permissible.”<sup>24</sup>

The *Gongyang Commentary* even expresses an extreme perspective that avenging an ancestor at removing one hundred generations is still permissible.

As such a perspective is too radical to be defended, a natural question would be if the *Gongyang Commentary* indeed thinks that it is morally acceptable for one to avenge his ancestor when the perpetrator had already died, and it is morally acceptable to take vengeance in the form of inter-state war. For Jiang Qing, the answer is positive. He argues that because the avengers are state rulers, “the revenge acts became political events between states.”<sup>25</sup> Yet, being a state ruler does not mean one must resort to wars to take revenge. Also, that blood vengeance is justified does not imply that war is a justified means for avenging one's direct-blood relatives, not to mention launching a war to avenge an ancient ancestor. Jiang is also aware of how strange the perspective is, so he says, “One can avenge a wrong made a hundred years ago is indeed extreme and peculiar and thus requires theoretical elaborations to convince people.”<sup>26</sup> He thus constructs a theory to support the advocacy of war for avenging ancestors:

Gongyang scholars utilize the theory of “state and the ruler are of one body” to support the extreme view that “one can avenge a wrong made a hundred years ago.” From Gongyang's perspective, a state differs from a household in that a state is the territory of a regional ruler; once a state is established, it is permanent and will be succeeded by offspring generation by generation: a state is hereditary. Since the one who inherits the state is the state ruler, the state ruler and the state are one body. [...] The state of Qi today inherits the glory and shame from the state of Qi in the past, so the duke of Qi is responsible not only for today's Qi but also for the Qi in

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 260.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

history. For this reason, the Gongyang thinks the shame of the death of Duke Xiang of Qi's nine generations ago ancestor Duke Ai is Duke Xiang's shame. Therefore, Duke Xiang must inflict harm on Ji state to wipe out the shame. Only by doing so could he be responsible for the Qi state and fulfil his duty as the state ruler.<sup>27</sup>

Jiang draws on the "one body" (*yi ti* 一體) thesis in the *Gongyang Commentary*, arguing that the state and the state ruler are unified, and so do the present and past state rulers. Therefore, the shame of a previous ruler should be the shame of the present ruler and his state. Therefore, the present ruler of Qi should revenge on the present Ji because a previous ruler of Ji had a previous ruler of Qi killed.

This is indeed how the *Gongyang Commentary* defends Duke Xiang's case. However, as Jiang concedes, and as other scholars have declared, the *Gongyang Commentary* does not consistently subscribe to this radical view: it does not apply the view consistently to all cases.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, other commentaries of *Spring and Autumn Annals* do not attribute this radical view to the classic, nor do other Confucian texts approve of war of revenge. The extreme advocacy of vengeance occurs in the tradition of New-Text classicism, almost exclusively in the *Gongyang Commentary*.<sup>29</sup> As Jiang suggests, the *Gongyang Commentary*, perhaps out of some ulterior political motives, uses blood vengeance as an excuse to sugarcoat Qi's military act for territorial expansion.<sup>30</sup> More importantly, as mentioned earlier, the *Gongyang Commentary* defends the case of Qi's invasion with the principle that an act of revenge is permissible only if there is no authority to administer justice. The authority to enforce justice in the case was the Son of Heaven. Yet, the ancient ruler of Qi was executed by the Son of Heaven, not by the then Ji ruler, but due to the Ji ruler's slander. However, the *Gongyang Commentary* justifies Qi's revenge with a rhetorical question: "Assuming there was an enlightened Son of Heaven, could Duke Xiang have acted as he did?" It answers the question immediately: "The answer is no. How, then, are his actions justified? With no Son of Heaven above or leader of states rulers below, one is subject only to

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>28</sup> See *Ibid.* and Li, *Fuchou Guan de Shengcha yu Quanshi*.

<sup>29</sup> See Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 277; Li Hanji, "Fuchou de xian zhi: cong Guliangzhuang de zhengzhi guandian kan" (Restrictions on revenge: from the political perspectives of Guliang Commentary), in *Zhongguo zhaxue shi*, 1 (2017), 67-72; and Zhao Kuang, "'Zhao shi guer' de liang ge mianxiang: 'da fu chou' yu kaoguxue'" (Two dimensions of the story "The Orphan of Zhao": Grand Vendetta and Archeological Investigation), in *Lanzhou daxue xuebao shehui kexue ban*, 46, no. 3 (2018), 116-126.

<sup>30</sup> Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 265-266.

the pleasure and pain of his ancestors.”<sup>31</sup> So, what is unspoken is that the *Gongyang Commentary* does not consider the Son of Heaven “enlightened.” Even more strangely, it holds that with the absence of an enlightened Son of Heaven, the Ji state should be the target of revenge. This shows that the *Gongyang Commentary* does not recognize the authority of the existing sovereignty and that what it actually supports is powerful states annexing small states.

As Jiang also concedes, what distinguishes the *Gongyang* scholarship from other strands of Confucianism is its rebellious nature.<sup>32</sup> This, I believe, is the main trait of original Confucianism: it does not recognize the existing political system and wishes to replace it with a “morally superior” true King (*wang zhe* 王者). This is the reason why it approves wars of annexation, so long as they were launched on moral grounds and could potentially lead to the unification of all under Heaven under one ruler. This is the Confucian approach of ending the situation of constant inter-state wars.<sup>33</sup> In other words, what this strand of Confucianism advocates is not war of revenge but war of annexation and total unification. As Jiang suggests, “blood vengeance” is more of a pretext. Remember that the *Gongyang Commentary* uses the “one body” thesis to argue that Duke Xiang of Qi could legitimately invade Ji to avenge his distant ancestor. Because he and the ancestor and their state are of “one body,” Duke Xiang must avenge his ancestor and could take vengeance with the state. This “one body” argument seems to suggest that Confucianism, at least *Gongyang* Confucianism, would approve the idea that “state” can be an agent of an act of revenge and inter-state war can be a means of retaliation. However, it should be noted that the “one body” is a key notion in the early masters’ debate concerning whether a state ruler could use his people to fight the battles for his ambition of annexing other states. In the debate, Mohists and Yangist masters argued that a state ruler could not use his people to fight such wars in the name of caring for all under Heaven because the ruler of the state and the people of the state are not of the same body. For one thing, the people and the ruler were not blood relatives. For another, the people were not really owned by the state; they could move to

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<sup>31</sup> Miller, *The Gongyang Commentary*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> See Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 275.

<sup>33</sup> See Ting-mien Lee, “Benevolence-Righteousness’ as Strategic Terminology: Reading Mengzi’s ‘Ren-Yi’ through Strategic Manuals,” in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 16, no. 1 (2017), 15-34 and “To Become the King of All under Heaven: Mengzi as a Strategist of Regime Subversion,” in *Critique, Subversion, and Chinese Philosophy: Sociopolitical, Conceptual, and Methodological Challenges*, ed. by Hans-Georg Moeller and Andrew K. Whitehead (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). I am therefore sympathetic to the New-Text Confucian thinkers’ (such as Kang Youwei) insight about original Confucianism. While I disagree with most of Jiang Qing’s generalized claims about China’s national spirit and the essence of Chinese culture, I second his New-Text interpretation about the rebellious nature of original Confucianism.

other states to bear no more tyranny. However, the *Gongyang Commentary* utilizes the “one body” principle to argue that at least a state ruler could claim to be of one body with his ancestors and justify his wars for blood vengeance on this moral ground.<sup>34</sup> If the “one body” principle could be extended across one hundred generations, a war could be justified as long as it is between hereditary regimes.

Given all this, a possible explanation is that the *Gongyang Commentary* does not really advocate retributive war as it is understood today. On some occasions, it uses blood vengeance as an excuse to support a military invasion for a hereditary state when the invasion could optimize the opportunity for the reunification of all under Heaven and the usurpation of the ultimate power. Even if we are to assume that the *Gongyang Commentary* is the most authoritative interpretation of the Confucian classic *Spring and Autumn Annals* (this is still in question) and that it does hold that it is legitimate for a state to wage wars against another state if the ancient ruler of the state was wronged by the ancient ruler of the other state (this is also in question), this perspective is not germane to today’s China and its relationship with the international community. Under the current political system, none of the contemporary Chinese rulers is of “one body” with previous rulers; the rulers of most other countries are also not of “one body” with their previous rulers. Therefore, theoretically, there should be no wars China would declare for blood vengeance even if *Gongyang* Confucianism largely determines its military decisions.

Interestingly, Jiang Qing and some other scholars argue that *Gongyang’s* radical perspective on revenge war is the representative and authoritative opinion of Confucianism, and it is still relevant today. They even “extend” the principle to modern “countries” and “nations” and their “people,” while the *Gongyang Commentary* applies the “one body” thesis to rulers of hereditary states only. Yu Kam-por, for example, argued that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is “a particularly authoritative text in the Confucian tradition,” and it “provides a much richer and more systematic picture of Confucian views on war.”<sup>35</sup> He then argued that the classic is a sourcebook of practical political ethics, which is still relevant today because “in many ways, the historical background of the Spring and Autumn period is similar to the world situation today: There is no central world government.”<sup>36</sup> “[T]he *Spring and Autumn* regard a country that has been the victim of past injustice as having a legitimate reason to initiate a war against

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<sup>34</sup> Regarding the debate of the “one body” principle in the Warring States period, see Lee (forthcoming).

<sup>35</sup> Yu, “Confucian Views on War as Seen in the *Gongyang Commentary* on the Spring and Autumn Annals,” 98.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

those who have wronged them.”<sup>37</sup> This claim squares neither with the *Gongyang Commentary* nor with the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The wars of revenge recorded in the texts were not launched by “countries” or “victims of the past.” Also, the states did not initiate wars against “those” who have wronged “them.” Such wording yields an impression that Confucianism holds that it is legitimate for a country, or a victim of the past, to declare a war against another country who victimized it because the “they” of the victim country were wronged by the “they” of the other country.

Yu’s portrayal of Confucianism is tricky in many ways. First, the wars recorded in the *Gongyang Commentary* were launched by rulers of hereditary states in the name of their blood relatives rather than by countries in the name of their people. Second, the “victims” in the Confucian texts are not the people of the states but rather the ancestors of the state rulers. Third, the pro-vengeance perspective appears only in the *Gongyang Commentary*, but Yu attributes it to the classic of *Spring and Autumn Annals* and Confucianism in general, arguing that this classic is “a particularly authoritative text in the Confucian tradition” and that it is especially relevant to today’s international situation. Finally, he argues that this *Gongyang* perspective is particularly relevant to the contemporary situation regarding the lack of central world government, whereas the *Gongyang Commentary* defends the case by saying that there was no enlightened Son of Heaven.

The aforementioned academic discourses are as eye-catching as Jiang Qing’s. For example, to conclude his discussion of *Gongyang*’s “Grand Vendetta” theory, Jiang claims:

Since ancient times, the Chinese nation has been a nation that values a sense of shame. What does it mean? It means that [the nation] takes the shameful events very heavily and considers it the most basic standard for one’s integrity as a person in the society. If a person does not have a sense of shame, Chinese people would not consider this person a human; the person should lose the right to be seen as a human.<sup>38</sup>

Based on *Gongyang*’s interpretation of some instances recorded in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Jiang Qing makes a provocative claim about the Chinese nation’s basic moral requirement for a person to be treated as a human being. Intriguingly, when not many Chinese books on classicism are translated into English, Jiang’s work has been translated and published in

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 271.

English and is widely circulated in the West. Its peculiar marketability in the West, or an English context, perhaps tells us something about the changing nature or function of the academic discourse of Chinese philosophy at the turn of the Chinese rise.<sup>39</sup> Paradoxically, when the academic discourse of Chinese philosophy is expected to provide some guidelines or consultations for policymaking or strategy planning, it is shaped or selected according to what is expected to be heard. Some academic discourses on the Confucian perspective on revenge war, as illustrated above, are formulated to resonate and fuel the unceasing worry underlying the Western narrative about China as a “victim” and as a “threat.” As Ge Zhaoguang (2017) once comments on the recent trend of Chinese cultural conservatism, some academics of Chinese philosophy become impetuous; they are eager to utilize Confucianism to create proposals for Chinese domestic and foreign policies on little textual basis. Some Confucian views on world order are based more on an “imagination” about Chinese history and thought. However, since this is a trend that gains a broad audience, it gradually becomes a “science”: a serious academic research field.<sup>40</sup> It is difficult to assess this ongoing trend and predict with any academic rigor how it will influence the study of Chinese philosophy or China studies. However, it may be a question worthwhile to explore: what is the nature of the task of utilizing Chinese philosophy to address contemporary questions?

## Conclusion

As China is playing an increasingly important role in the world arena, some academics are paying more attention to Chinese philosophical discussions on world order and warfare. Confucian texts offer abundant discourses about just war. According to them, some wars might be permissible or even morally justified. One of the most controversial cases is retributive war. For one thing, retribution has been a contested issue in ethics, let alone being exhibited in the form of war. For another, in the context of wide acceptance of the narrative of China as a “threat,” the claim that Confucianism advocates war of revenge might grab international attention.

With inadequate textual evidence, some contemporary scholars of Confucianism defend a zealous account of war as a form of vengeance. They attribute Confucianism a radical view that it is morally acceptable to wage wars to seek revenge against a wrongdoer who has already passed away. However, in this study, it was argued that such an account is mainly based

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<sup>39</sup> David Elstein, “On Jiang Qing: Guest Editor's Introduction,” in *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, 45, no. 1 (2013): 3-8.

<sup>40</sup> Ge Zhaoguang, “Dui ‘Tianxia’ de Xiangxiang” [An Imagination about “all under Heaven,”] in *Sixiang*, 29 (2015), 13-34.



on a *Spring and Autumn Annals* commentary, and the commentary does not really subscribe to this radical perspective.

The analysis points to the potential problem of the recent academic trend of utilizing Confucianism to address contemporary issues. Such attempts sometimes treat Confucianism as a homogeneous system of thought and concentrate excessively on radical, eye-catching statements. For example, in the case of the Confucian perspective on war of revenge, it is an overstatement that Confucianism glorifies war for rehabilitating national humiliation. Nevertheless, it is still a popular interpretation. The case study suggests that due to the rise of China and the increasing relevance of Chinese philosophy, the scholarly rigidity of the academic discourse of Chinese philosophy became a tricky issue. As it might have potential substantial impacts, the academic discourse of Chinese philosophy is susceptible to (conscious or not) manipulation or exploitation. This study is a preliminary attempt to describe the phenomenon with a case study. More studies are needed to explore the peculiar interplay between academic discourses of Chinese philosophy and China studies in the changing situations of international relations.

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## A Case for a Neutral Narrative of Recognition Through Reconstructive Normative Simulations

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**Abstract:** Axel Honneth's recognition theory has had some recent development and revision from his seminal work *The Struggle for Recognition*, his response to critics in *Reification*, and his Hegelian reworking of ethical life in *Freedom's Right*. There is an urgent theoretical need to consolidate these works to articulate the neutral tendencies of Honneth's recognition theory. A consolidated overview of Honneth's works will provide the necessary renewal of its critical potential. My objective in this paper is threefold: 1) to provide a reconstruction and consolidation of Honneth's recognition theory; 2) to demonstrate the critical potential of this consolidated theory that merges the spheres of love, rights, and esteem vis-à-vis personal relations, democratic participation, and market economy; and 3) to use this methodology to provide a critical social simulation of the condition of migration in the Philippines. My proposed methodology is to provide "reconstructive normative simulations" to demonstrate social pathology's narrative from the perspective of misrecognised subjects, covering both internal and external migrations that have been exacerbated by factors emerging from personal relations, democratic participation, and the market economy. I aim to provide some examples of narratives based on a reconstructive normative simulation to elicit a sense of rational dialectical empathy.

**Keywords:** recognition theory, reconstructive normative simulation, *sadbox*, critical theory

### Introduction

One of the challenges posed with an expository discussion of Axel Honneth's recognition theory is the aversion of the current socio-political climate with the idea of normativity. While normativity

might be aligned to the maintenance of the status-quo, any revolutionary or emancipatory ideology is inevitably tied to strive or struggle for the possibility of implementing its normative agenda to replace the status-quo. Much of the difficulty in presenting Honneth's recognition theory is the theoretical ambivalence towards emancipatory movements and its positive outlook towards social solidarity. While normativity provides an internal and structural critique of a social system's pathological tendencies, it is also the goal of any critical theory to re-align and reconfigure existing norms to attain an emancipatory objective. Normativity, much like Derrida's logocentrism, is thus both the source of critique and the object of critique in critical theory. Honneth's theoretical ambivalence towards emancipatory or revolutionary movements traces its root back to his reading of Hegel's *System of Ethical Life*.<sup>1</sup> Honneth notes that the dilemma of the French Revolution lies in the conflict between the merger of revolutionary praxis and expanding market system against the social isolation or *atomistic* tendencies of modern law.<sup>2</sup> What is at stake in any modern democratic society is the constant tension offered by the possibility of universal unity from the law and the constant recalibration of this universal umbrella to constantly reintegrate atomistic subjects to the folds of society. The tension is notable when the issue of freedom becomes articulated as the source of assent of a norm and social atomism.

In this paper, I will attempt to consolidate Honneth's recognition theory through its development over the last three decades. *Atomism and Ethical Life* provides a brief glimpse of Honneth's reconstructive effort to articulate Hegel's vision of social solidarity that is autonomously validated by individual social subjects in a democratic society. I assert that the overarching theme of Honneth's work is to provide a glimpse into the possibility of a theoretical praxis that enables individual subjects to attain a certain degree of self-realisation of their necessity in the spheres of social interaction. While this may seem to sound pollyannish and might raise some questions as to whether one might have forgotten to remove one's rose-tinted glasses, I also argue that this goal is far from the smooth utopian vision when we begin to enumerate the innumerable steps that need to be taken. This is one of the reasons why Ricoeur raised the issue of the possibility of presenting possible alternatives to a "violent" or agonistic mode of struggles for recognition.<sup>3</sup> Much of this issue, however, lies with the segmentary nature of

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<sup>1</sup> See Axel Honneth, "Atomism and Ethical Life: On Hegel's Critique of the French Revolution," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (1988), 359-368.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 361-362.

<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur's reading of Honneth's recognition theory (which is limited to *The Struggle for Recognition*) criticizes Honneth's choice of the word 'struggle' insofar as it implies violence and force. See Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. by David Pellauer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 186. A response from Honneth's interview can be seen in Gonçalo



Honneth's work. While most scholars are familiar and are limited to Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition*, commentators are at a loss to the overarching goal of recognition theory.<sup>4</sup> Recent efforts to consolidate Honneth's recognition theory yields an insight into the continuity of Honneth's *Freedom's Right* and its relation to other books such as *Critique of Power, Struggle for Recognition*, and *Reification*. Zurn's *Axel Honneth*,<sup>5</sup> for example, provides a consolidated outlook of Honneth's recognition theory highlighting the addition of antecedent recognition and the expansion of Honneth's social theory in *Freedom's Right*.

On the other hand, my recent attempt to consolidate Honneth's recognition theory focused on the themes of freedom, identity, and normativity.<sup>6</sup> A consolidated outlook of Honneth's recognition theory provides a solution to a lingering problem of the dynamics of recognition and how we deal with the normativistic tendencies of a theory. Zurn's approach provides a resolution of the possibility of reified normativity in the initial phases of recognition in love, rights, and esteem. This approach further expands the context of normativity in a broader social condition that calls for a constant renewal of normative values in modern democratic societies.

The goal of this paper is threefold. Firstly, I will briefly discuss the necessity of a consolidated outlook of Honneth's recognition theory. As mentioned earlier, the pressing matter of validating the issue of normativity is an immediate concern for asserting the viability of recognition theory as an immanent critique. The second goal of this paper is to look at recognition theory's viable theoretical praxis in a thought experiment I have concocted called "reconstructive normative simulations" (RNS). RNS is my way of identifying the resources that are necessary for a functioning social system and how certain deficiencies from the lack of these resources can give rise to pathological relations. This brings me to the third goal of the paper where a critical juncture could be raised in recognition theory's intersubjectivist approach. The renewal of critical theory's vision of social justice is made possible through the constant effort of triangulating the deficiencies in normative resources found in the spheres of private relations, the market economy, and democracy. My goal is to affirm that the dialectical relationship

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Marcelo, "Recognition and Critical Theory Today: An Interview with Axel Honneth," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 39, no. 2 (2013), 217.

<sup>4</sup> In a previous work, I have documented Nikolas Kompridis' critique of Honneth's recognition theory. While the former has written several essays as a critique of recognition theory, the latter, to the best of my knowledge, has written any response. See Roland Theuas Pada, *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 133-158.

<sup>5</sup> See Christopher Zurn, *Axel Honneth: A Critical Theory of the Social* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> See Pada, *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition*.

between individual identities and the social spheres presents a productive mode of renewing the normative goals of critical social theory.

### Recognition Theory: A Consolidated Outlook

Two approaches are possible with Honneth's recognition theory. The first approach is to follow the route provided by developmental psychology's methodology of how norms progress and enable subjects to integrate into already-existing societal norms. Such a method is similar to Freud, Piaget, and even Kohlberg's developmental theories. This route is a common outcome of an isolated reading of Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition*. As much as it provides a developmental framework of understanding the function of recognition in the integrative process of socialisation, the linear understanding of the development does not clarify how pathologies are rectified. Although pathological features are identified in each mode of recognition,<sup>7</sup> the critical potential of the work is limited to an intersubjectivist model that allows a viable form of communicating instances of disrespect. While there are some indications that *Struggle for Recognition* is only one of the parts of Honneth's broader project of investigating the possibility of social solidarity (can be found in *Atomism and the Ethical Life*, *Critique of Power*, and his discussion of Hegel's idea of crime), the stages and piecemeal delivery of Honneth's work led to the prevalence of this approach to commentators and critics. My proposed approach is similar to Zurn's consolidated outlook which relies on four of Honneth's essential works, namely *Critique of Power*, *Struggle for Recognition*, *Reification*, and *Freedom's Right*. This approach provides a continuity in Honneth's theory that supplements the fundamental concepts of the modes of recognition under the context of critical theory and modern democracy. This approach avoids a linear reading of recognition theory where norms are in the constant process of renewal where dialectical tensions between forthcoming and new identities are constantly engaged in a productive process of revisiting norms.

A linear reading of Honneth's recognition theory would involve looking at the developmental stages of *love/care*, *rights*, and *esteem*. Love provides the first encounter of the subject with an initial receptivity from parents, siblings, and caregivers. While the initial engagement between the baby and the mother or caregiver is that of immediate dependency,<sup>8</sup> the baby would also begin to understand and recognise the mother's independence.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Axel Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*, trans. by Joel Anderson, (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), 129.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

This recognition of independence, while maintaining a continuity of love,<sup>10</sup> provides the necessary scaffolding for further future social relations. Love and care undergird the entire structure of social relations insofar as it recognises that the self and other individuals are rightful recipients of care. This recognition of individual independence leads to the development of the understanding of reciprocal social relations. Insofar as the self understands that he or she is a subject deserving of love and care, he or she also recognises that others are likewise deserving of love and care.<sup>11</sup> As a bearer of this right, we understand that the value of reciprocating this form of recognition with others is a necessary function of any productive social relations. The third stage of recognition theory is the social currency that motivates communal unity towards shared goals and objectives.<sup>12</sup> Esteem provides value to individuals insofar as their contributions to the community elicit a graded response of affirmation by others. This linear and developmental reading of Honneth's recognition theory can provide an understanding of normative practices in a community and at the same time explain why certain social pathologies exist. As a neutral narrative, Honneth's readers will have to understand that the idea of normativity in recognition theory accounts for already existing normative practices within a community. However, this does not exclude the possibility and necessity of a community to revise and reconsider existing norms to adapt to social changes such as the inclusion of new identities, crises, and rectification of social pathologies. The force of normativity does not terminate simply in the reproduction and practice of a community, it is subject to constant re-evaluation and scrutiny where mis-recognised individuals can either re-align themselves to the norm or contribute to the change of norms. Social solidarity, in the case of growing and expanding communities, must therefore take into consideration the asymmetric nature of norms despite their need to maintain symmetry among the community of individuals. Honneth notes that this issue was not sufficiently addressed in Hegel and Mead:

In thus sharpening the normative point of the category of a community of value, this move yields two theoretical advantages, the extent of which was clear to neither Hegel nor Mead: on the one hand, because it contains the possibility of further equalization and individualization, the course of development that is already laid out in the recognition relationship associated with social esteem only needs to be extended

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

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

*beyond the present into the future* for it to reach the idea they outlined; on the other hand, however, this idea is itself so constituted as to admit only community-generating values that are structurally compatible with the moral conditions of modern law, that is, with the individual autonomy of every individual.<sup>13</sup>

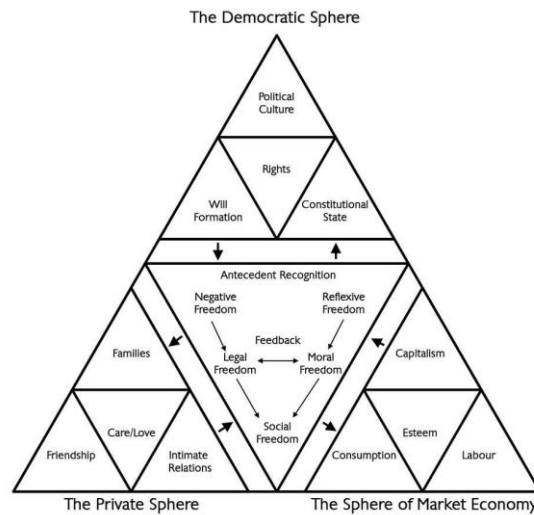
The dynamic approach of reading Honneth's recognition theory begins where the linear approach ends. The modes of recognition of the spheres of love/care, rights, and esteem are already established in their developmental progression, supposing for example that we situate the context of normativity in a modern democracy. Individuals at this point are already engaged in a variety of social interactions, with their personal relations, the market economy, and the democratic sphere. Individuals in a modern democratic society participate in a give-and-take relationship where they take and receive the initial three modes of recognition (care/love, rights, and esteem). The context of normativity in these modes is subject to what Honneth refers to as *antecedent recognition*.<sup>14</sup> This means that in the case of our established experience of norms from the initial engagements with either family, personal relations, and friends are evaluated, revised, and recalibrated to accommodate new identities and reintegrate each other to expected norms of social interactions. Antecedent recognition plays an important role in filling up the gap left between the possibility of reified norms and the linear approach of recognition theory. Moreover, Antecedent recognition also addresses a long-standing criticism of optimism in Honneth's recognition theory by confronting the actual danger of norms that are left to linger as a habit and convention of social interactions.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, I assert that the function of antecedent recognition is present in all the modes of recognition as an adaptive core that allows love/care, esteem, and rights to compliment the specific functions of each mode. Here is an illustration of the overarching structure of recognition theory:

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 178. My emphases

<sup>14</sup> Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56.

<sup>15</sup> See Christopher Zurn, *Axel Honneth*, 193. See also Nikolas Kompridis, "From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the 'Ethical Turn' in Critical Theory," in *Critical Horizons*, 5, no. 1 (2004), 347.



From this illustration,<sup>16</sup> we can locate the various functions that individuals have in varying modes of recognition. As social beings, we engage in relations with families, friends, and intimate partners. We are also participants in the sphere of the market economy as producers, consumers, and investors. As members of democratic societies, we participate in the formation of discourse, opinion and will be forming activities, and cultivating political culture not only in voting for government officials but also in the function of influencing legislative activities that affect society. The vantage point offered by this perspective is that individuals are not merely bound by the burden of an intersubjectivist demand for recognition of other subjects, but also of our introspective responsibility of regulating what we can take or contribute to the modes of recognition from these spheres. Exhaustion or depletion of normative resources from the modes of recognition creates conditions of pathological relations for subjects that draw from the necessary resources to maintain stable social relationships. For example, if left without legislative intervention, the sphere of the market economy will function amorally or with anomie since its primary concern is to accumulate wealth.<sup>17</sup> Private relations if left unchecked by the market and the legal democratic sphere can elicit an infinite amount of demand for resources to meet its agenda. Likewise, a democratic legal sphere, if not bound by its responsibilities to the sphere of private relations and the market economy, will be detrimental to the functions of the latter-mentioned spheres.

<sup>16</sup> Pada, *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition*, 164.

<sup>17</sup> Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right* (New York: Polity Press, 2014), 192.

While Honneth appears too optimistic in certain aspects of his theory, I argue that the dimension of social pathologies is often left unscrutinised since it places both burdens on subjects that demand and dispenses recognition. In other words, identities that demand recognition are also duty-bound by the covenant of social relations to reciprocate this demand for recognition. Following Honneth's early 1988 essay evokes an unspoken intention of his works, it seems to indicate that the general object of Honneth's social theory is focused on the dynamics of social atomism and social solidarity. My take on the matter is that Honneth is pursuing a contemporary reconstruction of Hegel's system of ethical life that encompasses the common foundational structures of contemporary democratic societies. Whether my assumption is false or correct, the lesson that can be gleaned from this approach is that the burden of social pathologies can be alleviated by continuous participation in the production and dispensation of normative resources from the modes of recognition.

### **Reconstructive Normative Simulations: An Intersubjectivist and Introspective Proposal**

In my most recent work, I have outlined a method of identifying social pathologies through the triangulation of normative resources that are deficient in the modes of recognition. My objective was to provide "simulations" of pathological or *atomised* subjects that are unable to receive and/or dispense normative resources in the modes of recognition. I drew inspiration for this idea from Honneth's constant use of literary and historical characters ranging from Ralph Ellison's unnamed protagonist from *The Invisible Man*,<sup>18</sup> Kleist's *Michael Kolhaas*, to Ulrike Meinhoff, the left-leaning West German militant. Other sources of inspiration, on my part, came from local literary works such as F. Sionil Jose's *Ermita*<sup>19</sup> and the Filipino penchant for entertainment based on the suffering of other people. The goal of reconstructive normative simulations is to construct conditions that would simulate the consequences and the cause of pathological social relations or what I would refer to as a *sad-box*.

Reconstructive normative simulations offer a dynamic approach to recognition theory's agenda of critique by localising discourse at the level of the subject's experience of disrespect and their possible contribution to the cycle of social pathologies. While my initial intention was to promote the intersubjectivist and introspective dimension of recognition theory, I can see further development of this approach in empirical sociological studies. What

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<sup>18</sup> See Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952).

<sup>19</sup> See F. Sionil Jose, *Ermita (A Filipino Novel)* (Manila: Solidaridad, 1994).



we can explore at the moment is the potential of renewing critical theory to address contemporary forms of social atomism. Social atomism is a condition that dates as far back as Hobbes' depiction of the human condition to our contemporary incredulity towards the social, political, and economic status quo. Not only are we prone to neglecting our intersubjectivist duties towards our social relations we are also prone to the dereliction of our introspective responsibilities. I mention Hobbes in this juncture to specifically address the unstable societal expectations in contemporary modern democracies. We expect too much, give too little, or give too much, and expect a paltry recompense for our effort. Part of the difficulty that we encounter is the fact that the modern development of democracy has led to the strong emphasis on the need for subjects to self-actualise and societal mechanisms have evolved to encourage the exploration of these possibilities for self-realisation. While there has been a radical growth in the development of freedom for individuals at the turn of the century, little attention has been given as to whether this growth could be sustained by existing normative resources. Thomas Sowell, for example, makes a case with the issue of minimum wage laws. He argues that although minimum wage laws might appear beneficial to disadvantaged minorities or racial groups, their viability remains problematic because employers might in turn opt not to hire new employees.<sup>20</sup> Sowell's argument against minimum wage laws presents an interesting scenario where an RNS of institutions shows a possible reaction to deficits in the resources dispensed in the modes of recognition. One can imagine a scenario where unemployment is raised despite a high rate imposed by minimum wage laws. The demand of the mode of rights to pressure the market economy creates a deficit in resources needed by the sphere of private relations. Outcomes may vary depending on the socio-cultural contexts while the affected sphere of private relations is no longer receiving the proper normative resources to sustain stable relations. In this scenario, younger adults might no longer opt to seek independence from their parents, families might become burdened by the lack of material resources to sustain everyday expenses, or worse, people might turn to illicit and criminal activities to sustain a living wage.

The above scenarios are highly viable for the analysis offered by RNS. While they are not necessarily new scenarios that we encounter in different cultures, nations, and socio-economic conditions, it does point out that an introspective approach is required to balance the demands of intersubjective awareness. While subjects of recognition are always free to demand their need for societal affirmation, they also need to consider how certain demands for recognition may have detrimental effects on other social participants in

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Sowell, *Knowledge and Decisions* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 73.

the sphere of private relations, the market economy, and the democratic state. A popular trope in the Philippines that merits the attention of RNS is the *taguyod* trope experienced by Filipino families. *Taguyod* is a Tagalog word for support or establishment of a goal, usually involving the need to fulfil great economic demands in an impoverished scenario. The popularity of *taguyod* tropes in film, literature, and television lies precisely in its accurate reproduction of the social dynamics of modern Filipino families. The pathological relationship developed under these conditions usually involves deficits in the three spheres, namely the inability of the democratic sphere to intervene in individual rights, the lack of resources dispensed by the market economy, and the insatiable demands of private relations.

A common formula for the *taguyod* trope is that there is a struggling, minimum-wage, family with multiple children. In their escape plan against poverty, they consolidate their meagre resources to facilitate the education of one of their children, usually the eldest, to a labour career that could be exported to a first-world country. In our RNS, let us suppose that the preferred export career for Filipinos is in the field of nursing. The parents, or in most cases, *one of the parents*, will scrape every bit of resources that they can muster to pay for the education and training of the child with the hopes that their *investment* will bring some comfort for the rest of the family. During this process, the child's siblings are neglected, because the attention was focused on the education and development of the chosen child. Supposing that the chosen child succeeds in securing a career as a nurse in a first-world country, the parents at this point have already expended their productive capacities, and the siblings are in no position to secure a stable source of income. Consequently, the chosen child will be obliged to pay for the expenditures of the entire family. This involves the parents, the siblings, or in most cases, even the children of the siblings.

The outcome of this RNS or *sad-box* is the social entanglement of the chosen child's private relations, which prevents any further self-realisation among the parties involved. The siblings were denied the possibility for self-actualisation, and the chosen child is burdened with the economic responsibility of providing resources for the rest of the family. Some anecdotal variations with the *taguyod* trope may not involve export friendly careers, it might involve taking over a family business, or a financially rewarding career that can uplift the family's economic status. Despite these variations, the trope employs foregoing the autonomy of an individual to pursue the individual needs of the family to the extent that it damages the capacity of the altruistic individual to self-actualise. It is a common occurrence in Filipino families, joint families, or even generational families to rely on a singular resource earner to sustain the needs of the entire family. While this may provide a picture of a success story of 'Filipino resiliency'

amidst the difficulty of economic survival, it also presents a chain of social pathologies as its consequence. On the level of personal relations, the migrant worker might find himself or herself socially alienated from his or her family, friends, and intimate partner. In the case of the market economy, the contribution of the migrant worker as a skilled labourer might deprive his or her home community of products and services that he or she might have made locally available. Finally, in the democratic sphere, the migrant worker's distance (perhaps, also the lack of direct participation) from their community might lead to apathy and reliance on aggregated information that would in turn influence their interaction with the democratic sphere. The case of a migrant worker's participation in the democratic sphere presents an asymmetrical value for their home community. On the one hand, migrant workers spend most of their time away from their home community which deprives them of the necessary experience and information that can aid them in their political participation in their respective home community such as electing a public official or a referendum. On the other hand, migrant workers are also burdened with a much pressing concern of aligning themselves to a foreign community.

While it is important to note the pathological effects of social alienation on private relations, the market economy, and the democratic sphere, we should take into consideration that these areas of social interaction are also possible sources of social alienation. I have already noted the effects of a pathological relationship that is latent in personal relations, notably, social pressures emanating from the needs of a migrant worker's family. The market economy can likewise add pressure to the migrant worker. A devaluated workforce will seek other labour opportunities in other places where their services are appreciated. To compound things further, the government acting on behalf of the democratic sphere might even encourage work migration as a quick solution to undervalued labour. These pathological responses can cascade to other areas of society, creating norms that further amplify anomie between individuals and institutions. In Japan, the phenomenon of *Hikikomoris* or social recluses is a cascade effect of various societal pressures and circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Zimbardo and Coulombe, likewise observe that modern demands on families, specifically single-parent families, create a condition of detachment and purposelessness.<sup>22</sup>

My intention with the migrant Filipino worker as an example is not to valorise any national pride or uplift the Filipino spirit through a localised trope. The reason for this excursus is to highlight the necessity of a reciprocal

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<sup>21</sup> Takahiro Kato et al., "*Hikikomori*: Multidimensional understanding, assessment, and future international perspectives," in *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 73, no.8, 427-440.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Zimbardo and Nikita Coulombe, *Man Interrupted* (Massachusetts: Conari Press, 2016), 39-62.

outcome of recognition. Heroic acts of sacrifice and altruism are only heroic when the story of heroism is declared as an abrupt end to a narrative. What happens after the heroic act is often spliced out of the narrative to leave a palatable conclusion to the story. My point is that social interactions are sustained through continuity of stable relationships through the three modes of recognition. This is the reason why Honneth would prioritise the necessity of a reciprocal outcome of recognition above the infinite demand of altruism.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, an emphasis on the necessity of an introspective should at least be prioritised equally with the intersubjective aspect of recognition theory. Pathological tendencies in social relations can be resolved if subjects are willing to engage dialectically and negotiate their demands for recognition. With the popularity of asserting the demands for recognition for minorities and the oppressed, considerations should be made as to whether these demands could be met or if they could lead to a sustainable outcome for stable social relations. A neutral narrative for recognition provides a fecund ground for critique by acknowledging the pathological conditions of affected parties and institutions involved that may negotiate for a symmetrical outcome.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Critical theory's capacity to renew its approach towards attaining its normative agenda relies on its dynamic ability to adjust its trajectories and maintain its productive discourse. The question whether critical theory can overcome its Eurocentric tendencies or the viability of its theory in developing nations is an issue that requires careful consideration for recognition theory. I think that the Eurocentric accusations of critical theory merit some consideration of how philosophical inquiry has sustained itself through its continuity of discourse. I find the accusation of Eurocentrism in critical theory as the symptom of a problem rather than the cause of the problem that haunts the viability of critical theory. The ancient Greeks were never embarrassed by acknowledging ideas from the gymnosophists. In the case of the scholastic thinkers of medieval philosophy, they were able to find a renewal of their theory from pagan and Arabic sources. Likewise, I find that the renewal of the energies of critical theory relies on the creative appropriation of theory and the willingness of a thinker to take risks with innovation. Such innovation should be guided by the emancipatory agenda of critical theory that remains consistent with its thinkers despite the differences in its approach.

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<sup>23</sup> Marcelo, "Recognition and Critical Theory Today," 217.

To conclude this paper, I would like to go back to the emphasis on the dialectical tradition of critical theory. I think that the preservation of the viability of critical theory lies in its ability to dismantle itself and adjust to the dynamic nature of contemporary social contexts. Considering the current social-economic-political climate of our time, arguing for the necessity of introspective reflection is difficult or might even appear naive. While we often become outraged and fight battles for the infinite demands of the oppressed and underprivileged, we might also need to consider the possibility of its juxtaposition as foresight to possible pathological outcomes that these demands might incur. While it is an acceptable cause to fight against the possibility of fascism for those who are in power, we might also benefit from looking at fascism in the direction of those who demand power. In a similar vein, I propose to look at the fine balance between critical theory's intersubjective demands and its introspective requirements. If we are not careful, our emancipatory theory could also become our prison. As Adorno would say, "the splinter in the eye is the best magnifying glass."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 50.

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Article

## Enlightenment Toleration: Rereading Pierre Bayle's Criticism of Religious Persecution in *Commentaire philosophique*<sup>1</sup>

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*Xian-zhe Hui*

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the debate concerning the justification and scope of tolerating differing religious beliefs in the work of the Radical Enlightenment philosopher Pierre Bayle and discusses his potential contribution to deprovincialising Critical Theory. It firstly analyses Bayle's project of reciprocal toleration for reconciling the tension between moral universalism and cultural particularity in *Commentaire philosophique*. Next, it examines Bayle's critical analysis of the China Mission so as to argue that the principle of reciprocity can be applied to cultural/religious groups. Finally, it argues that Bayle develops the model of intercultural self-critique in the European Enlightenment to counteract the threat of being blinded by cultural provincialism. In offering an extensive discussion of Bayle's criticism of persecution, the article highlights the need to reveal a certain epistemic humility that is manifested in processes of testing the prejudices and value commitments in a cultural or religious group.

**Keywords:** Pierre Bayle, Enlightenment, Persecution, Conscience, Toleration

### Introduction

At the international Symposium on "The Reception of the Frankfurt School in China" the German theorist Axel Honneth pointed out an important crisis in Critical Theory: Eurocentrism.<sup>2</sup> When the

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<sup>1</sup> My sincere appreciation goes out to Prof. Mario Wenning of Loyola University for his comments and suggestions on the early draft of this article

<sup>2</sup> See Axel Honneth. "Opening remarks at the international symposium on the Reception of the Frankfurt School in China," in A Mei Long and Liu Senlin, eds., *Frankfurt School in China*

central figures of the Frankfurt School formulated their own theories, they only cited European – primarily German – philosophers, such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Weber. In other words, the historical experience as well as philosophical traditions outside of Europe were not taken into account. Despite the increasing attention given to non-European cultures in recent years, there are structural prejudices and stereotypes in the intercultural research undertaken by The Frankfurt School. As Fabian Heubel argues, when non-European cultures are involved, serious criticism of European culture fades away, giving way to contempt for others and defense of one's own position.<sup>3</sup> Thus it can be seen that Critical Theory is characterized by not being sufficiently intercultural or global in terms of the experience of modernity and thinkers it considers to be worthy of study. This lack of the intercultural perspective is still one of the biggest challenges to Critical Theory.

As the most important theorist who anticipated core ideas of the Enlightenment Encyclopedists and the Critical Theory tradition, Pierre Bayle's theory of toleration still serves as a critical contribution to the task of deprovincializing Critical Theory. Responding to the contemporary crisis of Eurocentrism in Critical theory, this article restores Bayle's attempt to reflect the prejudice in European culture so as to show that there is an intercultural as well as a self-critical lens in one of the source figures of Enlightenment Philosophy and Critical theory.

Before further discussing Bayle's potential contribution to deprovincializing Critical Theory, it is crucial to recall Bayle's prominence as a philosopher of tolerance. Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) was a French Protestant who is best known for his *Commentaire Philosophique* (1686) and *Dictionnaire historique and critique* (1697). As a notable advocate of religious toleration Bayle's treatment of religious questions has significantly influenced many philosophers in the development of the European Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, Diderot, Feuerbach and Marx.<sup>4</sup> The fundamental goal of Bayle's

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(Social Science Academic Press, 2012), 1-4 and Zhu Guohua and Meng Xiangchun, "From the 'Other' to the 'Master Narrative': the Chinese Journey of the Frankfurt School," in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 20, no. 3 (2018). On the problem of Eurocentrism in Critical Theory, please also see Tom Bailey, ed., *Deprovincializing Habermas: Global Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2014) and Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See Fabian Heubel, "Cross-cultural Criticism: Critical Theory's challenge from Chinese modernity," in A Mei Long and Liu Senlin, eds., *Frankfurt School in China*, 12-28.

<sup>4</sup> On Bayle's influence, see Ludwig Feuerbach, *Pierre Bayle: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Menschheit, in Gesammelte Werke*, vol. iv, ed. by W. Schuffenhauer (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1967); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 137-169; Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 145-155; and Richard H. Popkin, *History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2003), 301-302.

works is to combat religious persecution, which is defined as the use of force rather than persuasion or guidance in religious dispute. According to his work, people who hold different beliefs should be tolerated and treated equally, including Protestants, Catholics and even atheists.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, by using imaginary conferences between Christian missionaries and the Chinese emperor in *Commentaire Philosophique* (CP), Bayle illustrates the principle of reciprocity, according to which different religions or groups should follow commandments with which they agree. According to Jonathan Israel's typology, Pierre Bayle may be considered a figurehead of the Radical Enlightenment, because he attempts to justify religious toleration theory on a universal rational basis rather than on certain religious assumptions.<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Habermas claims that Bayle urges people to adopt the perspective of others and in this respect he can be regarded as a forerunner of Kant.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Rainer Forst argues that Bayle opens the way for a conception of toleration based on mutual respect and the justification of one's own claim. For Forst, Bayle's arguments on the limits of reason raise Bayle above Kant.<sup>8</sup> From where I stand, although there is a consensus among philosophers and scholars on Bayle's significance, the importance of the intercultural perspective embodied in Bayle's work has been underappreciated. It should be noted that Bayle discusses reciprocal toleration in an intercultural context rather than just as a topic among individuals in a state or society in CP. To

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<sup>5</sup> Bayle proposes a decent society of atheists is possible in his work. See Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. by Robert C. Bartlett (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 90. About Bayle's ambiguous attitude towards atheists, please refer to Alex Schulman, "The Twilight of Probability: Locke, Bayle, and the Toleration of Atheism," in *The Journal of Religion*, 89, no. 3 (2009), 329-360. Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 176-189.

<sup>6</sup> According to Jonathan Israel, there are two major schools of Enlightenment regarding the theme of religious toleration: Radical and Moderate Enlightenment. The moderate mainstream is exemplified by John Locke's approach, which is concerned with the freedom of individual conscience and the restricted role of the state in religious affairs. However, this approach is grounded on certain theological premises because philosophers who embrace it refuse to tolerate those who reject the divine foundations. See Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 65 while for discussion on religious toleration in the Enlightenment, see Juan Pablo Domínguez, "Introduction: Religious toleration in the Age of Enlightenment," in *History of European Ideas*, 43, no. 4 (2017), 273-287.

<sup>7</sup> See Jürgen Habermas and Ciaran Cronin, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 252-253 and Giorgi Areshidze, "Taking Religion Seriously? Habermas on Religious Translation and Cooperative Learning in Post-secular Society," in *American Political Science Review*, 111, 4 (2017), 724-737.

<sup>8</sup> See Rainer Forst, *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Rainer Forst, "Religion, Reason, and Toleration: Bayle, Kant—and Us," in Cécile Laborde u. Aurélie Bardón, ed., *Religion in Liberal Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 249-261; Rainer Forst, "Religion and Toleration from the Enlightenment to the Post-Secular Era: Bayle, Kant, and Habermas," in *Normativity and Power: Analyzing Social Orders of Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

my knowledge, Forst and Habermas perceive Baylean toleration as an attitude of persons towards each other while not clearly pointing out Bayle's perspective on the toleration of cultural/religious groups. My aim, however, is to show that mutual perspective taking among cultural/religious groups is vital to understanding Bayle's toleration theory, which continues to be significant at a global level today.

In this paper I shall argue that Bayle applies reciprocal toleration to cultural/religious groups rather than just individuals. In the first part I shall reconstruct Bayle's argument concerning religious toleration and focus on his defense of moral rationalism and erring conscience. I shall engage in analyzing Bayle's attempts to reconcile the tension between moral universalism and cultural particularity.<sup>9</sup> I shall then critically examine the image of Christian missionaries and the Chinese emperor in Bayle's theory in order to show how Bayle's project of reciprocal toleration can be applied to Europeans encounters with other cultures or groups. Finally, I examine Bayle's view of how reciprocal toleration can be achieved in an intercultural context. I argue that, according to Bayle, an imagined or real reversal of perspectives, secured by conducting a conference-like discourse, contributes to becoming self-reflective of our consciences and contributes to reciprocal toleration. I conclude that Bayle's proposal to replace persecution with open engagement and dialogue with significantly different cultural/religious others contributes greatly to tolerance both during the age of early Enlightenment and in times of contemporary crisis, positioning Bayle as a central figure in the emergence of a critical form of comparative philosophy and comparative religious studies.

### **Bayle's project of toleration in *Commentaire Philosophique***

During the seventeenth century the repeated religious wars among different sects in Europe and the influx of non-European cultures created a severe problem.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, religious persecution in Europe resurfaced,

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<sup>9</sup> Olivier Abel uses the phrase "veil of ignorance" to designate Bayle's description of the condition of human beings instead of referring to the hypothetical state in a Rawlsian sense. See Olivier Abel, "The Paradox of Conscience in Pierre Bayle," in *Reformation & Renaissance Review*, 14, no. 1, Routledge (2012), 40-55.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Hazard uses the term "Crisis" to describe this time, which centers on the dispute between the orthodoxy and religious liberals. He also gives a detailed description of the exchanges between Europe and other cultures including China, Arabia, Persia, et al, during this period. See Paul Hazard, A. Grafton, and J. May, *The Crisis of the European Mind: 1680-1715* (New York: New York Review Books, 2013), 3-25. Concerning the exchanges between China and Europe in the seventeenth century, see Simon Kow, *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought* (London: Routledge: 2018), 57-67.

particularly in France.<sup>11</sup> The revocation of the Edict of Nantes offers a paradigmatic example of political support for religious persecution. In 1685 Louis XIV of France repealed the Edict of Nantes, which had guaranteed the civil rights of French Protestants. The French Convertists, who commit themselves to converting others to Catholicism, adopted the Augustinian principle of “*compelle intrare*” (Luke 14, 23) as justification for their violence against Huguenots.<sup>12</sup> One example is that of the Bishop of Meaux, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet.<sup>13</sup> Facing the clash of different perspectives and the resurrection of persecution, Bayle advocates holding a tolerant attitude towards diverse religious beliefs. The main purpose of Bayle’s discourse is to demonstrate that the literal sense of the words “*compel them to come in*” is contrary to the law of reason and “*the spirit of the Gospel*”. His arguments can be divided into two major stages. The first concerns the principle of reciprocity, and the other defends the right of erring conscience. In this section I shall reconstruct Bayle’s defense of tolerance in *CP*.

### *The rationalistic position*

In the first part of *CP*, in investigating the light of reason, Bayle proposes the principle of reciprocity to oppose the literal interpretation of scripture adopted by persecutors and provide a rational basis for toleration. The metaphors “*light of reason*” or “*light of nature*” are prominent in the Enlightenment tradition and used to designate the capacity to perceive self-

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that persecution and intolerance were not unique to the Catholic side in the counterreformation, but also characterized protestant reformers. See Pierre Bayle, “Reply of a New Convert (1689),” trans. by John Christian Laursen, in *History of European Ideas*, 43, no. 8 (2017), 857-883; Elisabeth Labrousse and Potts Denys, *Pierre Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 8; Paul Hazard et al, *The Crisis of European Mind*, 62-63; Mara van der Lugt, “The left hand of the Enlightenment: truth, error, and integrity in Bayle and Kant,” in *History of European Ideas*, 44, no. 3 (2018), 277-291; John Kilcullen, “Bayle on the Rights of Conscience,” in *Sincerity and Truth: Essays on Arnauld, Bayle, and Toleration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1-49.

<sup>12</sup> Bayle clarifies the question of what a Convertist is in the preliminary discourse of *CP*. Due to the situation in France, Bayle holds a negative attitude towards Convertists, because he believes that Convertists’ zealotry in propagating the truth will bring some bad consequences. Bayle reminds us to notice the similarities between Convertists and persecutors. See Pierre Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14.23, ‘Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full’*, ed. by John Kilcullen and Chandran Kukathas (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), 35-37 and also van der Lugt, “The left hand of the Enlightenment,” 277-291.

<sup>13</sup> The original passage in the Bible states, “And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.” On Bousset’s view see the fourth part of second volume in Hazard et al., *The Crisis of European Mind*, 182-224.

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evident truth claims in the context of human concerns.<sup>14</sup> Bayle regards the light of nature or reason as the genuine, original and infallible rule when judging essential truths in philosophical controversies, such as in the domains of mathematics and moral issues.<sup>15</sup> Bayle states in *CP*:

Every [philosophically attentive] mind clearly conceives that this lively and distinct light which waits on us at all seasons, and in all places, and which [shows] us that the whole is greater than its part, that it is honest to be grateful to benefactors, not to do to others what we would not have done to ourselves, to keep our word, and to act by conscience. [...] That all particular doctrines, whether advanced as contained in scripture, or proposed in any other way, are false, if repugnant to the clear and distinct notions of natural light, especially if they relate to morality.<sup>16</sup>

For Bayle, the light of reason, as a criterion of moral truths, can help us to judge the incorrect interpretation of “the spirit of the Gospel”. And the literal interpretation of “compel them to come in”, as seen by Bayle, should precisely be rejected. As Bayle claims, the light of reason is mainly manifested in the moral principle of reciprocity, which stipulates that different religions or other groups should follow shared regulations or commandments. However, the literal interpretation of “compel them to come in” adopted by persecutors undermines this principle, thus making their arguments just “sophisms”.<sup>17</sup> To be specific, the persecutors’ argument can be presented as follows:

It is God’s literal command that the true religion should force conversion by persecution;

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that philosophers, such as Descartes and Locke, have different views on the connotation of the natural light in European Enlightenment. See Martin Hollis, *The Light of Reason: Rationalist Philosophers of the 17th Century* (London: Fontana, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> Bayle gives us some examples of philosophical controversy in the first chapter of *CP*, like “that the whole is greater than the part; That if from equal things we take things equal, the remainder will be equal; That it is impossible [that contradiction] should be true; or, that the accidents of a subject should subsist after the destruction of the subject.” See Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary* and John Laursen, “Skepticism against Reason in Pierre Bayle’s Theory of Toleration,” in D. Machuca, ed., *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 131-144.

<sup>16</sup> Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 73-75.

<sup>17</sup> About the detailed argument on persecutors’ side in Bayle’s theory, see *Ibid.*, 333.



Now we force those whose beliefs differ from ours to  
come over to our side;

Therefore we do nothing wrong.<sup>18</sup>

Bayle points out that the persecutors' argument is premised on the assumption that their religion is the only true religion. However, this premise will not be accepted by other religions because each religion believes it is the true religion. Therefore, persecutors commit the logical fallacy "petitio principii" in their argument.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Bayle frequently uses "reductio ad absurdum" to refute the persecutors' argument.<sup>20</sup> According to the principle of reciprocity, if persecutors universalize their argument, they will find the contradictions in their theory and practice, and fail to achieve their goal of protecting the true religion. If one sect (A) adopted the method of persecution to compel members of other sects (B or C) to convert to A's beliefs, then other sects (B or C) would have the same right to persecute A. Thus, each religion has the right to persecute others, and perpetual struggle and violence between religions would be unavoidable. Their force may result in the dissolution of society as well as acts of hypocrisy, imposture, and outright revolt against conscience due to the incapacity of changing one's inward conviction by external constraint. The persecutors' argument would conceivably lead to the absurd results that the true religion should also be persecuted. This is the result that persecutors do not want to accept. Therefore persecution, as seen by Bayle, is criminal and counter-productive, even for propagating the "true" religion.

### *The Defence of Erring Conscience*

In a second step, Bayle discusses the limits of reason and the unknowability of religious truths in order to provide the epistemological basis for toleration. Bayle clearly articulates the scope and limits of faith and reason. Religious truths, according to Bayle, are inaccessible to human beings and beyond the reach of rational judgment, unlike the principles of metaphysics or geometrical demonstration. Bayle notes that people live under a certain level of ignorance, which has two causes. The first is the very condition of human beings. In Bayle's view, people live in a world shaped by

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Their argument fails because they use a premise no one will believe unless they already believe the conclusion. See *Ibid.*, 580.

<sup>20</sup> "Reductio ad absurdum" is a method of reputation, which used to demonstrate a statement is false by showing that an absurd result follows from its acceptance. See *Ibid.*, 72, 211, 512, and 581.

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passions and habits of childhood, the prejudices of education, etc. This immediately leads to individuals' different presuppositions in judging things and deciding their beliefs. As Frances Bacon said, people live in the cave, which brings on "the Idols of the Cave".<sup>21</sup> For Bayle, it is difficult for people to overcome the influences of presuppositions in their life when seeking truth. Secondly, the meaning of religious texts is often conveyed in a metaphorical and equivocal sense. Each religion, - and denomination - therefore, has its own interpretation of scriptures. Theologians would engage in permanent debate on the equivocal doctrines of religious texts. Accordingly, it is impossible for men to know absolute religious truths which can only be known by God. The limits of reason cause people to arrive at a skeptical position in religious disputes.<sup>22</sup>

Despite Bayle's view of religious truths' being almost impossible to access, this does not mean that he thinks people should abstain from making judgments and decisions on religious matters in their whole life. Since people, influenced by their prejudice, cannot know religious truth, how can they at least make well-informed or largely unbiased decisions in religious affairs? Bayle's - Protestant - response is that our conscience is the touchstone of moral truth. It is inevitable that our conscience would take "the appearance of truth" as "the absolute truth" when making a decision. One's conscience determines one's religious preferences, which are usually affected by education, custom, grace etc. "for a papist is as fully satisfied of the truth of his religion, a Turk of his, and a Jew of his, as we are of ours. [...] in short, man has no characteristic mark to discern the persuasion of the truth from the persuasion of a lie."<sup>23</sup> As Bayle argues, there's no possibility of attaining a certain knowledge of the church's infallibility, either from Scripture or from natural Light, or experience.<sup>24</sup> Hence we must admit that religious diversity does exist and might always exist. People's religious beliefs are based on a strong possibility rather than infallibility. The weakness of the human mind leads to invincible ignorance. In other words, our conscience will inevitably make errors. All one can and needs to do as a responsible religious, epistemic or moral agent is to try to limit the sources of ignorance in order thereby to increase the chances that one may approach what is true in a given domain.

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<sup>21</sup> Bacon said, that "The idols of the cave are those specific to individual men. For besides the errors common to human nature in general, each of us has his own private cave or den, which breaks up and falsifies the light of nature." See Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1994), 54.

<sup>22</sup> In Forst's view, Bayle was the better Kantian because he notices the finitude of reason regarding questions of religion. See Forst, "Religion, Reason, and Toleration," 249-261 while for Bayle's view on faith and reason see Simon Kow, "Enlightenment Universalism? Bayle and Montesquieu on China," in *The European Legacy*, 19, no. 3 (2014), 347-358.

<sup>23</sup> Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 262.

<sup>24</sup> See *Ibid.*, 264.

Given the invincible ignorance and error of human beings, Bayle proposes an exact identity between the rights of an erroneous conscience attended with sincerity and an orthodox conscience. According to Bayle, one should follow the dictates of one's own conscience, even if the dictate of conscience is erroneous in the eyes of God or others. As God considers people's will to obey their conscience, false persuasion should also oblige people. As long as their errors derive from sincere obedience to the dictates of their conscience, they should be tolerated. According to Bayle, the greatest sin is to do something against one's own conscience instead of obeying the dictates of one's erroneous conscience. As Mara van der Lugt argues, Bayle's defense of erring conscience illustrates an important transformation in Enlightenment that consist in prioritizing sincerity over objective religious truth.<sup>25</sup> The things that offend God are persecution and hypocrisy rather than the presence of religious plurality and sincerity.

### *The paradoxical relationship between reason and conscience*

The rationalists of the Enlightenment, like the Encyclopedists, highlight the role of reason in replacing God's claim to absolute truth /knowledge and the light of reason becomes the touchstone of moral truth claims. Thus, rationalists advocate the discovery of a universal morality of humanity. Beyond the general rationalist position, Bayle identifies the other polarity of the human condition: it is difficult for people to escape presuppositions in making decisions. Bayle does not disregard the individual conscience: on the contrary, he hopes that people can retain a sense of their own particularity. Therefore, he aims to keep a place for the subjective conscience. In Bayle's view, the inner feelings that differ from rational knowledge help us to make decisions in practical affairs and avoid the pitfalls of radical skepticism.

Bayle claims that people have universal moral obligations when adhering to their conscience. Moral obligations require that we should put aside prejudice and follow moral law. Our consciences, however, are

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<sup>25</sup> We can also see this transformation in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's play *Nathan der Weise*. Here there are three rings but we do not know which one is real. Hannah Arendt comments that "truth gets lost in the Enlightenment -indeed no one wants it anymore." Bayle plays an essential role in this process, because he emphasizes the role of sincerity in religious affairs. See van der Lugt, "The left hand of the Enlightenment," 277-291. Concerning Arendt's view, see Hannah Arendt, "The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question," in *The Jewish Writings*, ed. by Jerome Kohn and Ron Feldman (New York, 2007), 4. About the transformation, also see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 260; Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 137-169; Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 1-52.

influenced by education, region, custom and other factors, leading to a great deal of prejudice and ignorance. The most extreme example is the persecutor with a good conscience. If conscience tells us that we should persecute others, should we obey it? While persecuting others violates our universal moral obligation, Bayle's defense of the erring conscience implies that we are obliged to persecute others if our conscience so dictates. The defense of erring conscience in religious affairs leads to a paradox in Bayle's theory, "the aporia of the conscientious persecutor".<sup>26</sup> Bayle's colleague Pierre Jurieu argues that Bayle provides a justification for violence by defending the right of erring conscience.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the modern scholar Gianluca Mori asserts that Bayle fails to provide moral justification for toleration, because a morally bad action can be excusable, given Bayle's claims on the sanctity of the conscience and the persistence of invincible ignorance discussed above.<sup>28</sup>

Actually, Bayle notes the possible challenge to his theory and admits that this problem is the most perplexing difficulty in his theory.<sup>29</sup> Therefore he appeals to inexcusable error to resolve the aporia in the supplement part of *CP*. On the one hand, he admits that our conscience will invincibly err due to the limitation of reason in the domain of doctrinal controversy, for instance, the Incarnation, Eucharist, and Trinity. As these "speculative truths" are impossible to be discovered by the light of reason, people must rely on the judgement of their consciences to make decisions on relevant questions, while

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<sup>26</sup> The term "aporia" is used by Jean-Luc Solère. See Jean-Luc Solère, "The Coherence of Bayle's Theory," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 54, no. 1 (2016), 21–46. The problem of the conscientious persecutor in Bayle's work has been discussed by many scholars. See Gianluca Mori, "Pierre Bayle, the Rights of the Conscience, the Remedy of Toleration," in *Ratio Juris*, 10, no.1 (March 1997), 45-60; Olivier Abel, "The Paradox of Conscience in Pierre Bayle," in *Reformation & Renaissance Review*, 14, no. 1, (2012), 40-55; John Kilcullen, "Bayle on the Rights of Conscience," in *Sincerity and Truth: Essays on Arnauld, Bayle, and Toleration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1-49; Oscar Kenshur, *Dilemmas of Enlightenment: Studies in the Rhetoric and Logic of Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 78-112.

<sup>27</sup> Pierre Jurieu, *Histoire du Calvinisme* (Rotterdam: Reiner Leers, 1683), II: 279.

<sup>28</sup> Gianluca Mori believes that unforgivable error and bad consequences are insufficient to explain why the defence of erring conscience cannot justify persecution. Mori points out that if our errors derive from education or invincible ignorance, which would never be culpable, then the core question here is whether persecution is invincible ignorance? In my opinion, it seems that Mori just focuses on the invincible side and the influences of education on children, but he ignores the situation of adulthood in Bayle's theory. Therefore, Mori misinterprets Bayle in viewing his defence of erring conscience as an ethics of conscience associated with intolerance and religious fanaticism. I think Kristen Irwin, Robert Sparling and Jean-Luc Solère have already provided the strongest argument to refute the challenge from Jurieu and Mori. See Mori "Pierre Bayle, the Rights of the Conscience, the Remedy of Toleration," 45-60; Solère, "The Coherence of Bayle's Theory," 21-46; Robert Sparling, "Religious Belief and Community Identity in Pierre Bayle's Defense of Religious Toleration," in *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 5 (2014), 33-65; Kristen Irwin, "Bayle on the (Ir)rationality of Religious Belief," in *Philosophy Compass*, 8, no. 6 (2013), 560-569.

<sup>29</sup> Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 242, 228, and 512.

their consciences are influenced by education, custom, passions, etc. That is, the inability of people to overcome their own prejudice leads to inevitable misjudgment in the domain of “speculative truths”. Thus, such an error should be excused and free from being moral condemnation.

On the other hand, Bayle argues that everyone can access moral truths by consulting their reason. For Bayle, since the natural light is so strongly opposed to persecution, the error of persecutors, therefore, differs from an invincible error, because their error could have been avoided by consulting the light of reason. When people reach a certain age, they should consult reason in order to duly weigh and thoroughly meditate on the dictates of their conscience to avoid committing inexcusable errors in moral domains. Both neglect of information and yielding to passions are antithetical to the clear notions of reason, equity, and humanity. Thus, such error or ignorance is inexcusable.<sup>30</sup>

In light of what we have discussed, while Bayle respects subjective conscience and different religious traditions, he still adheres to the core rationalist position that people of differing belief are capable of reaching a rational consensus on moral matters. Bayle argues that people should reflect on their prejudices, making them better informed through their own efforts and to avoid the inexcusable error of persecution. Doctrinal controversy in religions, as elaborated by Bayle, is handled by our consciences, while moral questions can be answered by rational knowledge. Thus, Bayle’s project of reciprocal toleration is grounded on rational acceptance of subjective conscience.<sup>31</sup>

### **Sincerity or Hypocrisy: Bayle’s Critique of the China Mission**

Bayle turns to a global perspective and examines the inexcusable error among religious/cultural groups in the fifth chapter of the first part, C P. This point can clearly be seen in his account of the China Mission. Bayle takes the example of Christian missionaries and the Chinese to explain the problem of religious persecution and the principle of reciprocity in early Sino-

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<sup>30</sup> “That if there be errors, as without doubt there are, to which we ourselves are accessory, through an inexcusable neglect of information, and too great a complaisance for criminal passions. The error of those who are persuaded of the literal sense of the words, ‘compel them to come in’, is obviously [of] this kind: so necessary is it to tread underfoot a thousand ideas of reason, and equity, and humanity, which present daily before our eyes, [that we can] ever persuade ourselves that God has enjoined such a kind of violence.” Please see Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 513 and Solère, “The Coherence of Bayle’s Theory,” 21–46.

<sup>31</sup> See Sparling, “Religious Belief and Community Identity in Pierre Bayle’s Defense of Religious Toleration,” 33–65. For the relationship between faith and reason in Bayle’s theory, see Forst, “Religion, Reason, and Toleration,” 249–261 and Forst, “Religion and Toleration from the Enlightenment to the Post-Secular Era.”

European encounters. Christian missionaries, as elaborated by Bayle, are guided by the inexcusable ignorance and blind passions in their own religion. This makes them potential persecutors whose zeal in propagating the truth will lead them to use persecution to convert Chinese when the time comes. Thus, Bayle criticizes the Christian missionaries from both political and moral perspectives. In order to better illustrate this point, I shall employ an essential but often neglected thought experiment in *CP*.

### *The Imaginary Conference*

In chapter five of the first part, *C P*, Bayle conducts an imaginary conference in which he stages a hypothetical discussion between Chinese ministers and Christian missionaries. Here the emperor of China wants to examine the nature of the new religion that will be preached in his dominion, in order to preserve the public peace of his nation. The emperor is presented as a representative of reason and tolerance, willing to hear the missionaries' views. He can propose arguments against the missionaries' problematic claims. Although the emperor holds an erroneous belief in the eyes of the missionaries, he is capable of judgment according to the law of reason and justice.

Christian missionaries, according to Bayle, would act as meek and the humble subjects in the initial phase of their mission. They pursue a cunning strategy of partial accommodation in order to gain influence and then, once strong enough, pursue their true goals by force if necessary. When the time comes, they will seek to "convert" the Chinese through persecution, including military, deprivation of property and imposing constraints on freedom. Bayle lists all the dangerous consequences which result from the missionaries and their strategy. Accordingly, Bayle arrives at the conclusion that the intolerant missionaries cannot be tolerated by a tolerant emperor. The Chinese emperor should, Bayle stipulates, expel these missionaries from his dominions in order to protect the public peace and perform his moral obligation. After describing the interview, Bayle says that "this Sincerity, which I suppose in the missionaries, is but a Chimera;"<sup>32</sup> Bayle also makes a general comment on humanity and Christianity: "Let's rather say that mankind very rarely [acts] according to its principles. Christians have happened [as if accidentally] not to act by theirs; and they [have] exercised violence, at the same time [as] they preached meekness."<sup>33</sup>

This thought experiment reveals Bayle's true feelings towards the China Mission. He is obviously critical of the China mission that was

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<sup>32</sup> Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 95.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.



primarily conducted by Jesuit missionaries. Despite his appreciation of the efforts of some missionaries, including Matteo Ricci, Adam Schall and Ferdinand Verbiest, Bayle maintains a negative attitude toward Jesuit missionaries, which is reflected in various sections of his works.<sup>34</sup> This attitude arises partly because Bayle in the Rites Controversy expresses his mistrust of Jesuit missionaries' view that Christianity is compatible with Confucian rites and teaching.<sup>35</sup> The more important reason for Bayle's criticism is that Christian missionaries try to impose their beliefs on people in the East and the Americas.

### *Christian missionaries vs The Chinese emperor*

In Bayle's elaboration missionaries attempt to convert the Chinese by force and violence rather than persuasion and preaching, and this is clearly a form of persecution. The discussion of this imaginary conference firstly leads to a sure conclusion that Christian missionaries should be punished by secular authority for their actions that harm, have bad consequences that cannot be excused by political law. Persecution and intolerance, rather than pluralistic religion, are the main factors that disturb social order, according to Bayle. Therefore, the Chinese emperor is justified, on grounds of public peace, in expelling missionaries from his dominions.

Missionaries, as potential persecutors in Bayle's view, should also be morally condemned for their inexcusable errors. Bayle asserts that, on the one hand, missionaries, relying on a mindset of cultural superiority to force people to disregard their own conscience, will promote hypocrisy on the persecuted side and endless violence against moral principles. On the other hand, missionaries themselves are also hypocritical, because they practice violence while preaching meekness. Bayle regards missionaries as hypocrites, due to the discrepancy between the declared dictates of their conscience and their actual conduct. To better understand Bayle's depiction of missionaries, we need to clarify the motives of the missionaries' behavior.

On Bayle's observation persecutors are driven by two main motives. The first is to preach the true religion. People are easily affected by ignorance and prejudice in their religions, nations, and communities. For instance, some

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<sup>34</sup> See Pierre Bayle, *Bayle: Political Writings*, ed. by Sally L. Jenkinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 128-135; Charlotte Stanley and John Christian Laursen, "Pierre Bayle's The Condition of Wholly Catholic France Under the Reign of Louis the Great (1686)," in *History of European Ideas*, 40, no. 3 (2014), 351; and Kow, *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought*, 49-50.

<sup>35</sup> On Bayle's position in the Rites Controversy, see Virgile Pinot, *La Chine et la Formation de l'Esprit Philosophique en France* (Paris, 1932; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1971) while on the Rites Controversy, see Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, trans. by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

people have been taught that persecution is morally justified in parents' and tutors' preaching the true religion. Consequently, they believe that persecution is the right thing to do and is dictated by their conscience. With such belief, they will persecute others once they have the opportunity. These persecutors merely follow biased doctrine without consulting their reason. However, as previously stated, when a person reaches the age of reason and liberty, he/she does not use reason to investigate his/her conscience. Rather, the person neglects or is indifferent to observation of the law of nature, which is definitively an inexcusable error in Bayle's opinion, given its original avoidability.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, people may also be motivated by criminal passions, indiscreet zeal, temporal advantage (earthly glory), etc. This leads them to disregard the declared dictates of their conscience and persecute others. One of the best examples, as seen by Bayle, is the court of France, including the Bishops of France, the Jesuits, and monks. Bayle asserts that the court of France has been infatuated with the spirit of persecution. People who approve of persecution in France are just flatters, mercenaries, parasites, etc.<sup>37</sup> For Bayle, these people fail to consult their reason and conscience. They are exclusively concerned with personal advantage.

As for Christian missionaries, Bayle points out that their desire for temporal power and imperial expansion make them disregard their conscience and the light of reason.<sup>38</sup> Therefore they are hypocrites. Bayle elaborates that missionaries preaching the Gospel while guided by the Machiavellian spirit and blind passion. He even uses terms such as "Ruffian", "Cheat", "Cruelty", "murderous" and "tyrannical insolence" to describe the missionaries. As a result, missionaries are depicted in a ridiculous and diabolical role in Bayle's discourse:

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<sup>36</sup> A good example of such a persecutor is Adolf Eichmann, who, according to Hannah Arendt's interpretation, acted like a machine during the Nazi era when he no longer reflected his conscience and did not think about moral standards. An ignorant persecutor is also a thoughtless persecutor. The sin of ignorant persecutors was an inexcusable error for Bayle, a "banality of evil" in Hannah Arendt's controversial interpretation. See Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> About Bayle's comments on the court of France, see Pierre Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 185 and Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, 193-195, 293.

<sup>38</sup> On this point, Kow comments that "Like Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Protestant reformers, Bayle saw the popes as temporal princes who interfered with the affairs of legitimate sovereigns, as discussed in the Dictionnaire articles on 'Grégoire Ier' and 'Grégoire VII'. The early papacy saw Gregory I seek to direct the minds of sovereign princes in such a way as to further both the temporal and spiritual interests of the church. Their assumed right of punishing dissenting rulers as rebels indicated that the pope 'would have more power than the most despotic princes ever exercised.'" See Kow, *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought*, 50.

Ridiculous, as being founded by an author, who on [the] one hand requires all men to be humble, meek, patient, dispassionate, ready to forgive [injury]; and on the other hand, bids them drub, imprison, banish, whip, hang, give up as a prey to soldiers, all those who won't follow him. And diabolical; because, besides its direct [repugnancy] to the lights of reason, he must see that it [authorises] all [kinds] of crime, when committed for its own advantage; allows no other rule of just and unjust, but its own loss and gain; and tends to change the whole world into a dreadful scene of violence and bloodshed.<sup>39</sup>

The Chinese emperor, in contrast to the missionaries, is portrayed as a tolerant, rational and moral exemplar. In Bayle's view the Chinese emperor is capable of understanding the law of justice and performing the "indispensable duties of humanity". This tolerant emperor shows full respect and patience to the missionaries in holding discussion and conference with them. According to Simon Kow, Bayle is impressed by travelers' accounts that the Chinese emperor is tolerant of the Jesuits and treats them humanely. Actually, Bayle even blames the Chinese emperor for being too tolerant to notice the danger lurking behind the Jesuits' mission.

And there is no doubt that the same laws of humanity oblige an honorable man to inform the emperor of China what has just happened in France, so that he can take his measures to receive suitably the missionaries whom the king has just sent into that country on the footsteps of some great mathematicians. One is conscience-bound to warn that emperor that those people, who begin by asking merely to be tolerated, have as their real goal to become the masters and then compel everybody with a knife to their throats to be [baptized] without heed of any oath, edict, or treaty made for the safekeeping of the old religion.<sup>40</sup>

In Bayle's view, missionaries expect the Chinese emperor to implement a policy of tolerance that they do not accept. It is obvious that missionaries' actions violate the rules of reciprocity. Hence the intolerant missionaries should not be tolerated by the Chinese. Bayle argues that the

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<sup>39</sup> See Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 98.

<sup>40</sup> Stanley and Laursen, "Pierre Bayle's The Condition of Wholly Catholic France Under the Reign of Louis the Great (1686)," 351.

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Chinese should follow their consciences and adhere to what they sincerely believe in religious issues, rather than being manipulated by missionaries. Aside from China, Bayle also takes Japan as an example.<sup>41</sup> Christian missionaries condemn the Japanese government for persecuting Jesuits and Christian converts when, at the same time, they conduct the bloody slaughter of the indigenous people of the East and the Americas. Bayle points out that if persecution were permitted to Christianity, then Japan's persecution of Christianity could also be justified. By using the example of China and Japan, Bayle illustrates the principle of reciprocity among cultures or groups and demonstrates that the results of persecution are absurd and morally reprehensible.

In criticizing Christian missionaries Bayle makes the point that their mindset of cultural superiority causes them to be blinded by prejudice and ignorance, and the ignorance of universal moral obligations thereby renders their errors inexcusable. Bayle argues that all parties were equal in intercultural exchange, which obliges them to fulfil duties based on the universal rational morality. He also claims that, without violating moral laws, everyone should follow their own conscience in making decisions, and every culture or group should be respected. There is no right for any individual, group or culture to persecute others who hold different convictions. Accordingly, the project of reciprocal toleration, in Bayle's elaboration, is applicable not only to individuals within a state or society but also to Europeans' encounters with other cultural or religious groups.

### **Intellectual Humility: The Model of Intercultural Self-Critique**

At this point there is still an important issue to be addressed. It is a fact that people are prone to ignorance and prejudice which causes them to disregard the universal morality of humanity, leading to violence. Therefore, the crucial question is what can be done to avoid inexcusable error in religious and moral issues. How can believers or groups avoid being blinded by their cultural prejudice? What can we do to achieve reciprocal toleration and discuss religious truth claims in an intercultural and interreligious context such as that of the early Sino-European encounter?

As Bayle argues in *Commentaire philosophique* and *Dictionnaire historique and critique*, errors are ubiquitous due to the human condition. For Bayle, the invincible ignorance provides the basis of religious toleration, so people should follow their conscience in making decisions in religious controversy. However, people may also be led into inexcusable error if their

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<sup>41</sup> See *Ibid.*; Bayle, *Political Writings*, 128-135; and Kow, *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought*.

actions are carried out on the mere assumption of being moral, without consulting reason as well as deliberating with others. In that case a plea of invincible ignorance will be invalid, as they failed to do everything they could to consult beforehand. Bayle asserts that, due to the ubiquity of error, we should maintain humility and diligence in seeking truth. According to Bayle, it is important for each group or culture to liberate itself or at least attempt to make explicit and critically reflect on its prejudices, so he points out the significance of self-critique in the encounter between cultures or groups. Consulting the light of reason and debating with different cultural/religious others, as seen by Bayle, are equally important to self-critique.

For one thing, as Bayle's analysis points out, for the ability of reason to enlighten human beings to perceive truth, especially moral truth claims, it is essential to consult their reason when dealing with the information they receive in daily life so that they can distinguish truth from error.

since every man living, be he ever so ignorant, has it in his power to give one sense or other to what he reads or hears, and to perceive that such a sense is the true; and here's what renders it truth to him. It's enough if he sincerely and honestly [consults] the lights which God has afforded him; and if, following its discoveries, he embraces that persuasion which to him seems most reasonable, and most conformable to the will of God.<sup>42</sup>

The meaning of religious texts, as an example in Bayle's analysis, should be critically examined. Bayle criticizes religious dogmatism by reminding believers to be skeptical of the popular meaning and the literal sense of scripture. According to Bayle, if persecutors who believe the literal sense of "compel them to come in" consulted the tradition of Christianity, they would find the principle of persecution was not held by the early church fathers.<sup>43</sup> Clearly there are opposing views about persecution in Christianity. In this case people should ask themselves what they sincerely believe in and reflect the dictates of their conscience to make sure their inward conviction is well justified, rather than execute a command like a machine without reflecting on religious affairs. Although the light of reason, as a criterion of moral truths, does not necessarily provide a positive interpretation of scriptures, but it can help us to judge the incorrect interpretation.<sup>44</sup> Therefore self-examination through the light of reason, Bayle asserts, is an essential step

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<sup>42</sup> Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 264.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.; Bayle, *Political Writings*, 131.

<sup>44</sup> See Kenshur, *Dilemmas of Enlightenment: Studies in the Rhetoric and Logic of Ideology*, 78-112.

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for individuals and cultural/religious groups to avoid making inexcusable errors.

For another, Bayle does not restrict examination to the internal realm but extends it to an intercultural sphere. Changing perspectives, as elaborated by Bayle, is imperative for a culture or religion to overcome error and ignorance in resolving complex moral and religious controversies. To be specific, taking others' perspectives by conducting a conference-like discourse among people from different cultures is of great significance in completing the internal task of critically reflecting on one's beliefs and thereby reaching considered judgments. Bayle does not merely discuss conflicts between Catholics and Protestants but also focuses on a clash of cultural perspectives between China and Europe. Thus, his claim of mutual perspective-taking engages in reflection and exchange on both an intracultural and intercultural level.

Bayle is obviously aware that different perspectives or beliefs coexist due to the finitude of reason, so he points out the importance of maintaining humility for an individual, a group, or a culture. And one sign of such humility is the willingness actively to listen to and openly engage with significantly different cultural/religious others. Communication with the cultural other, as seen by Bayle, enables us to see the blind spot of our own culture. It is requisite to hear different religions' or cultures' views so that we can be better informed of our own convictions and discover truths afterward. One could argue that Bayle has thus indirectly given rise to the field of a constructive as well as a critical form of comparative religious study. For Bayle, discussion and debate will help resolve the disagreement in religious and philosophical controversy, even if mutual understanding can never be taken for granted. Therefore, Bayle always discusses the importance of listening, persuasion, instruction, critique, and dialogical conference in his works:

That every man living, having experienced his own proneness to error, and that he sees, or [fancy] he sees, as age comes on, the falsehood of a thousand things which had passed on him for true, ought to be always disposed to hearken to those who offered him instruction, even in matters of religion. I don't except Christians out of this rule. [...] It would not be amiss to hear them out, not only as this might be a means of delivering them from the errors we should certainly think them in, but also because it is not impossible that we should benefit by their knowledge. It's plain their obligation must be founded on a principle obliging



universally, to wit, a duty in all of embracing all occasions of enlarging their knowledge, by examining those reasons which may be offered against their own, or for the opinions of others.<sup>45</sup>

Historically, debate and discussion have played an important role in Christianity. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there were many denominations and schools of thought among Christians who engaged in these, such as the debates between Bossuet and Claude.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Bayle places a high value on debate and conference. Bayle's project of reciprocal toleration is aimed to replace religious persecution with conference-like debate. In fact Bayle views an imagined or real reversal of perspectives/roles, secured by conducting a conference-like discourse, as a technique for critically examining presumptions in one's own culture. The process of shifting perspectives in religious and philosophical disputes includes arguing from others' perspectives and being ready to criticize the perspective of one's own culture.

The image and knowledge of China during the seventeenth century provides a chance for missionaries in European contexts to reflect on their beliefs by way of performing an imagined or real shift in perspective and trying to see the Christian mission from the perspective of the Chinese. This is clearly revealed by two imagined conferences in *CP*. In Bayle's depiction the first, between European missionaries and the Chinese government, suggests that if persecutors were to engage in discussion with people of differing beliefs, they would find their own arguments grounded in rotten foundations. In the second supposed conference Bayle even regards Chinese philosophers as judges competent to decide the controversies among different sects of Christianity, which aims at explaining that the missionaries' work is futile when Christians cannot even have a clear answer to the controversies of religious doctrine in their own religion. For Bayle, it is problematic that missionaries expect others to do what they are unable to do. Bayle's comments also apply to the situation regarding the encounter between Japanese and European missionaries. Chinese and Japanese, as the intercultural others, help missionaries to reflect their own biases. If European

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<sup>45</sup> Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 93.

<sup>46</sup> "The Catholic Jacques-Béigne Bossuet, bishop of Meaux, published a record of his conference with Jean Claude, a prominent Protestant theologian, held before a noble lady who was considering which denomination she should belong to; in reply, Claude published his *Re'ponse au livre de M. de Meaux intitulé: Confé'rence avec M. Claude* [Answer to a book by M. de Meaux entitled *Debate with M. Claude*], 1683." See "Appendixes" in Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, 582. See Hazard et al., *The Crisis of the European Mind*, 206-217.

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missionaries could change their perspective, as pointed out by Bayle, they would find the ignorance and prejudice present in their religion/culture.

It would be very entertaining to read an account of the West written by an inhabitant of Japan or China who had lived many years in the great cities of Europe. They would indeed pay us back in our own coin. Missionaries returning from the Indies publish accounts of the deceptions and frauds they have observed in the worship of these idolatrous nations. They laugh at them, but they should worry lest they are reminded of the saying 'quid rides? mutato nomine de te fabula narratur' ['Why do you laugh? Just change the name and the same tale can be told about you'] and of the deserved reproaches and reprisals to which they are exposed when they ignore their own faults but reveal in the most minute detail the vices of others.<sup>47</sup>

European missionaries believe in their own superiority over other religions or cultures, Bayle claims, which leads them to disrespect the individual conscience and vain attempts to impose their views on people of different cultures. Such intolerant attitudes of missionaries have led to persecution that violates universal moral duties. By contrast, Bayle appreciates the tolerant attitude of the Chinese ministers and philosophers in dealing with intercultural and interreligious issues. It is the Chinese emperor who exemplifies a tolerant sovereign whose attention is both on universal morality of humanity and subjective conscience.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, in the entry on "Spinoza" in *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, Bayle refutes some negative attitudes towards Chinese culture by reevaluating the learning of *foe kiao* (Buddhism), *Vu Guei Kiao* (Daoism), and Confucianism.<sup>49</sup> Through the study of Chinese culture, he underlines the view that atheists can be moral while religious believers can commit immoral acts due to being misled by

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<sup>47</sup> Bayle, *Political Writings*, 131.

<sup>48</sup> See Kow, *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought*, 67-73.

<sup>49</sup> About Bayle's discussion on China, please refer to Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, 90 and Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, ed. by Richard H. Popkin, and Brush Craig (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1991), 288-338. Scholars also notice the image of China in Bayle's theory. See Kow, *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought*, 57-67 and "Enlightenment Universalism?," 347-358. Yu Liu, *Seeds of a Different Eden: Chinese Gardening Ideas and a New English Aesthetic Ideal* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 136-160.

superstition and fanaticism.<sup>50</sup> Clearly, Bayle explains the need to engage in self-critique by shifting perspectives when facing the tensions arising from clashing cultural perspectives.

Following Bayle's observations, it is crucial that we admit our weaknesses and be open to discussion, dispute, and critique in pursuing truth. As Adam Sutcliffe argues, the radicalism of Bayle lies in his adamant stance in favor of debate and discussion, denouncing all constraints on exchanges, as well as any illusory harmony between different viewpoints or beliefs.<sup>51</sup> It is essential to consult the light of reason and engage in intellectual exchange with the cultural other in order to critically examine prejudice and ignorance in one's own culture. Consequently, the model of intercultural self-critique appears in Bayle's toleration theory and significantly influences the Enlightenment age in Europe and beyond.<sup>52</sup> As interest in cultural pluralism has grown, Bayle's advocacy of mutual perspective-taking and self-critique has become increasingly important to modern thinkers.

### Concluding Note

This essay presents Bayle's attempt to apply the project of reciprocal toleration to cultural/religious groups so as to reconcile tensions between moral universalism and cultural particularity. Bayle's theory enlightens us in that if we are seeking a universal morality while ignoring people's real living conditions, then we will produce unattractive and unrealistic theories, but if we do not reflect on the prejudice of a particular culture or religion, then it will reach the other extreme, bringing violence and persecution. Our consciences, according to Bayle, are prone to error due to ignorance and prejudice in our cultures or groups. In order to meet the danger of fanaticism that is sometimes associated with an ethics of conscience, Bayle points out the significance of self-critique when facing the tension caused by different modes of understanding in an interreligious or intercultural context. An imagined or real shift in perspective can effectively help us reflect the prejudice in cultural/religious groups, and this point is well illustrated with Bayle's focus on other cultural traditions, such as those of China, Japan, and Siam.

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<sup>50</sup> The Chinese, according to Bayle, are well-behaved atheists. It should be noted, however, that there are a variety of indigenous religious beliefs in China.

<sup>51</sup> Adam Sutcliffe, "Spinoza, Bayle, and the Enlightenment Politics of Philosophical Certainty," in *History of European Ideas*, 34, no. 1 (2008), 66-76.

<sup>52</sup> For example, Habermas argues that religious citizen should try to make their viewpoints accessible to those who do not share their faith and prepared to learn from others in post-secular society. See Habermas and Cronin, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*.

Bayle reflects on Europe through using non-European culture as a mirror, not to demonstrate the cultural superiority of the West over the East, but rather to highlight the equal status of both, showing the possibility of self-critique of European civilization. Moreover, Bayle has given a positive plan that we should be open to debate and discussion on the basis of mutual respect between European and other cultures. Debate and discussion among cultures can help us better understand other cultures while reflecting on prejudice in our own culture and identifying possible blind spots. Bayle's discourse provides valuable insight on responding to the crisis of Eurocentrism in Critical theory. The East is described by Bayle in a highly positive and constructive manner, which is different from what Edward Said describes in *Orientalism* as stigmatized in Western intellectual history. Bayle's model of intercultural self-critique invites assessment of underlying prejudice in Europe through exploring non-European cultures and experiences, which inspires us to go beyond the ideological framework of Eurocentrism or Orientalism. This contributes greatly to the task of deprovincializing Critical Theory.

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Article

## Mapping a Precarious Ethics in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Semiocapitalism, the “New” Cognitariat, and Chaosmosis

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*Raniel SM. Reyes*

**Abstract:** This article seeks to map out a precarious ethics in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic. Primarily, I reconstruct Franco Berardi’s theorization of Semiocapitalism. The post-Fordist configuration of semiocapitalism has introduced novel forms of production, relations, and oppression, as well as spawned the emergence of a new virtual class—the ‘cognitariat.’ I expand the cognitariat’s scope by including the students and teachers. In aiming to provide a more nuanced chronicle of the plight of the cognitariats, I seek the help of Byung-Chul Han, specifically, his diagnosis of the contemporary disappearance of community. Against the backdrop of the pandemic and the comprehensive utilization of virtual education, semiocapitalism strengthens and the cognitariat’s precarity exacerbates. As such, the proliferation of psychopathologies, such as fatigue, depression, and suicide, especially in Third World countries, aggravates. Lastly, I diagram some pathways of becoming-chaoides that can serve as vectors of mutation and emancipation from the different forms of barbarism today. Diagramming a precarious ethics today necessitates the creation of minoritarian refrains, ruptures, and novel forms of subjectivation in the “new normal.”

**Keywords:** semiocapitalism, cognitariat, COVID-19 pandemic, becoming-chaoides

### I. Semiocapitalism: A Differential Semiotic Engine

**I**n the contemporary epoch, alienation bears a peculiarly complex configuration and force. From its classical orientation during the 1960s, it is now determined by the mentalization of the labor process and the

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enslavement of the soul, which is not “simply the seat of intellectual operations, but also the affective and libidinal forces that weave together a world: attentiveness, the ability to address, care for and appeal to others.”<sup>1</sup> Our souls or desiring energy, Berardi elucidates, “is trapped in the trick of self-enterprise, our libidinal investments are regulated according to economic rules, our attention is captured in the precariousness of virtual networks: every fragment of mental activity must be transformed into capital.”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, our contemporary world can be described meaningfully through Jean Baudrillard's theorization of hyperreality or the simulacrum. In this novel reality, models and abstractions are not merely produced without any geographic reference; instead, they are generated in a way that they precede or engender any sense of territoriality.<sup>3</sup> Berardi adheres to this claim and further argues that simulacrum serves as the nerve center, if not the central element of what he calls ‘semiocapitalism.’

Berardi's theorization of semiocapitalism is greatly influenced by his friend Felix Guattari. In *Soft Subversions*, the latter opines that “capital is a semiotic operator that seizes individuals from the inside.”<sup>4</sup> and seeks to totalize the whole society. Meanwhile, Berardi conceptualizes semiocapitalism as a differential machine where “capital flux ... coagulates semiotic artifacts without materializing itself.”<sup>5</sup> As a post-Fordist regime of production, semiocapitalism's incessant generation of information flows acts as the driving force of capital valorization. Furthermore, this new system subjugates society's nervous system and not only the physical energy of the workers in the factory.<sup>6</sup> 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 other words,

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<sup>1</sup> Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, trans. by Francesca Cadel and Guiseppina Mecchia (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2009), 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. by Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 166.

<sup>4</sup> Felix Guattari, *Soft Subversions: Text and Interviews 1977-1985*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer, intro. by Charles J. Stivale, and trans. by Chet Wiener and Emily Wittman (California: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, 2009), 212; cf. Gary Genosko, ed., *Felix Guattari in the Age of Semiocapitalism*, *Deleuze Studies*, 6, no. 2 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 149.

<sup>5</sup> Franco Berardi, “Schizo-Economy,” in *Substance*, 36:1 (2007), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Generally, Critical Theory advocates a more culturally oriented struggle for social criticism and emancipation. It decentralizes the proletariat's role as the only revolutionary class. As such, there is no longer a single social class that would ultimately guide social theory, criticism, and struggle. Since all social class is susceptible to oppression, Horkheimer claims that “it is possible for the consciousness of every social stratum today to be limited and corrupted by ideology, however much, for its circumstances, it may be bent on truth” [See Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1989), 242]; cf. Raniel Reyes, *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of 'Becoming-Revolutionary'* (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 162-189.

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semicapitalism utilizes the radical potentials of the digital revolution towards its exponential and unremitting evolution.

Today, many of our daily activities and intersubjective relations are mediated, expedited, and operated through infomachines, such as online banking, buying, and learning, to name a few. Moreover, the rise of the digital revolution has dramatically transfigured our psyche and mental environment. While it expands our psycho-cognitive imagination and perception, it also radicalizes human sensibilities. Berardi cogently explicates this observation in *Heroes*: “The fact that human beings learn more vocabulary from a machine than from their mothers is undeniably leading to the development of a new kind of sensibility. The new forms of mass psychopathology of our time cannot be investigated without due consideration of the effects of this new environment, in particular the new process of language learning.”<sup>7</sup> In my view, the effects of excessive exposure to techno-devices do not only curtail the individual’s language learning. More importantly, it spawns psychiatric symptomology, particularly attentional problems and hyperactivity, anxiety disorders, and depression. Of course, these effects should not be merely seen as linguistic or neurodevelopmental problems, for they engender individual and community debasement.

Additionally, excessive exposure to techno-devices decreases the individual’s bodily relation or communication with others. In the case of children, they experience virtual communication with non-territorialized entities and images. Since these bodies evade territoriality, their ability to understand non-verbalized signs and recognize and empathize with other people is not cultivated and enhanced.<sup>8</sup>

Semicapitalism pathologizes sensibility, sensitivity, and empathy, not only of the young, but more importantly, of the cognitive workers. This mutation of the psychic and linguistic interaction may also be at the root of the contemporary precariousness of life. The financial deterritorialization that occurs in the age of semicapitalism fashions a post-bourgeois class—the ‘cognitariat.’ Whereas Hardt and Negri theorize the multitude as a revolutionary class,<sup>9</sup> Berardi defines the cognitariat as a non-territorialized

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> See Flecha, R., C. Pulido, B. Villarejo, S. Racionero, G. Redondo, E. Torras “The effects of technology use on children’s empathy and attention capacity,” NESET report (2020), doi:10.2766/947826. NESET is an advisory network of experts working on the social dimension of education and training initiated by the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define the multitude as the singularities that elude totalization because they act in common and are characterized by incessant becoming and internal multiplicity [See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 100].

class responsible for cognitive labor (net trading, business process outsourcing, and high-tech immaterial production).

Precarity or precariousness does not only depict the state of labor in the age of global deterritorialization. Instead, it also represents the fragmentation of the social body, the fracturing of self-perception, and the perception of time. Time no longer belongs to the cognitive workers, for they are already erased from the workspace, and time is turned into a vortex of depersonalized, fragmentary substance which can be acquired by the capitalist and recombined by the network-machine.<sup>10</sup> In other words, labor's precarization vanishes the cognitariat in exchange for abstract fragments of time. Thus, a semioproductive life is defined and overwhelmed by symbols characterized by operational, affective, emotional, imperative values. Indeed, the sophisticated assemblage of these signs cannot work without unbridling networks of elucidation, decoding, and conscious responses. Echoing Berardi in *The Soul at Work*, "Each producer of semiotic flows is also a consumer of them, and each user is part of the productive process."<sup>11</sup>

The cognitariat's nervous system is manipulated and totalized by semiocapitalism. In Berardi's words, "Cognitive workers were motivated to invest their creativity in the process of production, in expectation of the success and profit that would be their reward—they were persuaded that work and capital could be forged together in the same process of mutual enrichment. Workers were encouraged to think of themselves as free agents."<sup>12</sup> The plight of cognitive laborers does not only include the exhaustion of their cognitive faculty or intellect. More importantly, it likewise affects their concrete existence, i.e., their bodies, sexuality, and the unconscious. Unlike the explicit violence rendered by traditional oppressive systems or organizations, semiocapitalism inculcates somatic habits and norms where blind obedience acts as the greatest virtue and competition and acceleration comprise the game's rules. At the same time, creativity and critical thinking, among others, serve as the supreme vices.

Precariousness invades every space of social life and permeates the expectations and the emotions of individuals, whose time is fragmented, fractalized, cellularized.<sup>13</sup> The precarization of labor is the nemesis of sensibility, creativity, and critical thinking. Moreover, the *other* mutates into a disembodied adversary, and the self becomes its own butcher. Therefore, solidarity and resistance, in Berardi's words, are merely possible through "the

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<sup>10</sup> See Franco Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 49-50.

<sup>11</sup> Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 107.

<sup>12</sup> Berardi, *Heroes*, 137.

<sup>13</sup> See *Ibid.*, 203.

spatial proximity of the bodies of laborers and the continuity of the experience of working together.”<sup>14</sup>

## II. The Birth of “New” Tragedies

### *Students and Teachers: The Cognitarians of the “New Abnormal”*

Since its origin in Wuhan, China, the COVID-19 virus has engendered multifaceted physiological, psychological, economic, and political problems that recognize no sociocultural boundaries. In several advanced societies, such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America, its populace’s accelerated mobility has aggravated the spread of the virus and has strengthened surveillance capitalism. Meanwhile, in some Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia<sup>15</sup> and the Philippines,<sup>16</sup> the virus has exposed not only the poverty of their health care systems, but also the fragility and danger of political power. The politicization and militarization of the pandemic have resulted in blatant human rights violations, billions of debts, massive unemployment, and alarmingly high cases of coronavirus infections and deaths, among others.

Although the sociopolitical aspects and consequences comprise a research route worth pursuing, I wish to pursue a different direction in analyzing the effects of the pandemic. Scholars from psychology, medicine, and public health disciplines etc., have already done their fair share in exploring the different psychopathological impacts of the pandemic on people, especially students and teachers. My contribution lies in diagnosing the problem spawned and aggravated by the pandemic, in conjunction with semiocapitalism, from the perspectives of philosophy and cultural studies.

One of the most affected sectors during the pandemic is the education sector. Prior to this global tragedy, practices, and policies related to accreditation, pedagogical retooling, and research productivity, to name a few, are relatively justified since they comprise integral parts of the academic playing field. However, not everything that can be quantified in the academe matters.<sup>17</sup> As such, practices and policies must only be configured based on

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<sup>14</sup> See *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>15</sup> “Indonesia: Weak Public Health Response to Covid-19 Greater Efforts Spent on Law Undermining Labor, Environmental Rights,” (13 January 2021), <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/indonesia-weak-public-health-response-covid-19>>.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Robles and Raisa Robles, “Late and slow motion: where the Philippines’ pandemic response went wrong,” in *South China Morning Post* (1 February 2021), <<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3122257/late-and-slow-motion-where-philippines-pandemic>>.

<sup>17</sup> See Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2012), 120.



some quantifiable objectives and measurable outcomes. As Filip Vostal lucidly explains in *Accelerating Academia: The Changing Structure of Academic Time*, “Academics today ... must cultivate a metric mindset, adopt performance, and productivity discipline, publish in the right journals, ... get cited and learn to exist and thrive in regimes of audit, surveillance, ‘excellence’, ‘accountability,’ and business-driven administration structures, often justified by neoliberal assumptions.”<sup>18</sup> Excessive positivization of educational instruction, processes, and pedagogy purges meaning, creativity, and other learning possibilities. In other words, positivistic education repels and operationalizes experiences, ideas, and social behavior.<sup>19</sup>

The various contingencies engendered by the pandemic become more problematic and nuanced because of the compliance *ethos* or metricized educational system enforced on the people of the academe, specifically the teachers and students. From fractalization of labor time, the cognitariats are hunted by an omnipresent obligation to perform, submit, and achieve, against the backdrop of this desolate time. The magnitude of the pandemic is certainly unthinkable in those areas where people only live from hand to mouth or experience various forms of impoverishment. In a newspaper article, “Caring, not conforming, is what schools need now,” the Filipino Dominican priest Jesus Miranda writes, “Education does not have to stop. But it has to change from being a high-maintenance repository of combustible papers back to its original form of being a noble vehicle of learning and caring. ... One advantage in the education sector is its being a community. No one has to be alone in suffering physically, emotionally, and psychologically.... Indeed, schools must relearn to become caring communities.”<sup>20</sup> Miranda earnestly reminds us that education presupposes a community—a space of solidarity, compassion, and holistic development. However, when the compliance *ethos* or metricized educational system serves as the sole regulative fuel of instructions and learning, the possibility of authentic relations and critico-creative pedagogy, grounded in an ethical sense of community, is besmirched or obliterated.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Filip Vostal, *Accelerating Academia: The Changing Structure of Academic Time* (United Kingdom: Palgrave, 2016), ix.

<sup>19</sup> See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Jesus Miranda, OP, “Caring, not conforming, is what schools need now,” *Manila Times* (18 April 2021), <<https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/04/18/opinion/columnists/caring-not-conforming-is-what-schools-need-now/865077/>>

<sup>21</sup> See Edberto Villegas, “Liberalism, Neoliberalism and the Rise of Consumerist Education,” in *Mula Tore Patungong Palengke: Neoliberal Education in the Philippines*, ed. by Bienvenido Lumera, Ramon Guillermo, and Arnold P. Alamon, 19–30 (Quezon City: IBON Foundation, 2007).

I agree with Thomas Sergiovanni's argument in saying that relationships in a community are defined by "personalization, authenticity, caring, and unconditional acceptance—found in families, extended families, neighborhoods, and other social organizations."<sup>22</sup> In this noble objective, the cultivation of an encouraging, creative, and fluid *agora* among all the community members, and not only among the teachers and students, is imperative. A more specific articulation of Sergiovanni's argument can be found in David Cormier's article, "Rhizomatic Education: Community as Curriculum." In this article, he opines that the community should in fact act "as the curriculum, spontaneously shaping, constructing, and reconstructing itself and the subject of its learning in the same way that the rhizome responds to changing environmental conditions."<sup>23</sup> If isolated from the larger society, the fate of the academe is imperiled because it can pliantly convert into a repressive capitalist mechanism fecund in manufacturing oedipalized subjectivities.<sup>24</sup>

However, contrary to Sergiovanni's assertion, the project of a community in this challenging time is nearly impossible, especially if the resources that would define our quest remain conventional and myopic. If our traditional ethical values, such as sensibility and empathy are already debased *ab initio* due to people's excessive exposure to digital technology, how is a community possible today? Likewise, I suppose that reducing all the social problems into a community problem, disregards other issues intricately embroidered in the assemblage of semicapitalism, the pandemic, and other societal predicaments. Given these complexities, clamoring for the return of the "old" community appears as a futile venture.

During the pandemic, people from different walks of life converted their homes into workplaces. Effortless as it may seem, this adjustment has resulted in myriad problems, especially to the marginalized and the Third World populace. More specifically, they are encumbered by the scarcity of resources, such as a decent study space, electronic gadgets, and a stable internet connection. This daily misfortune is fairly illustrated by Athira Nortajuddin in "Philippines: Crisis in Education?":

In a dining room of a house in a city, a nine-year-old  
child sits in front of his laptop, engaging in a class

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Sergiovanni, *Building Community in Schools* (San Francisco: Josse-Bass Publishers, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Dave Cormier, "Rhizomatic Education: Community as Curriculum," in *Innovate: Journal of Online Education*, 4, no. 5 (June/July 2008), <<http://davecormier.com/edblog/2008/06/03/rhizomatic-education-community-as-curriculum>>.

<sup>24</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 84-105.

through Zoom or Google Meet. Next to him is his little sister ... on her new tablet ... attentively listening to her English teacher. All her 15 classmates are connected as well. At the same time, a 10-year-old boy, miles away, is taking turns with his five other siblings to use the only tablet they own to connect to his online classroom .... His teacher sometimes sends him homework through *WhatsApp*, but he can only access it at night through his father's smartphone when he returns home from work. He has not seen most of his classmates for many months and has not even heard from some of them as they are rarely online.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, the above description would even appear as ideal compared to those whose families have almost nothing. As such, many students dropout from school, while some secure part-time jobs while enrolled in a limited number of units. In a 125-page report prepared by the Human Rights Watch, “‘Years Don’t Wait for Them’: Increased Inequalities in Children’s Right to Education Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic,”<sup>26</sup> the internationally-renowned organization emphasizes the massive inequality engendered by school closures. The heavy reliance on virtual learning amplified the unequal opportunities, resources, and internet access that students experience during the pandemic. Although the modular distance learning practice acts as an alternative to online education, it is still hampered by numerous problems magnified and aggravated by the pandemic. For those non-reader students residing in mountainous areas where electricity, food, and illiteracy are the primary problems, the effects of the pandemic are unimaginable.

Moreover, the pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to improve the education system through timely infrastructures, proactive and practicable mechanisms, and humane policies. Last March 2020, student governments from the top four universities in the Philippines, namely: Ateneo de Manila University, University of the Philippines - Diliman, De La Salle University - Manila, and the University of Santo Tomas, submitted a petition to the Commission on Higher Education voicing out their concerns on the complex transition from Face-to-Face to online learning at the middle of the pandemic. According to the said group, “Adding more workload for

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<sup>25</sup> Athira Nortajuddin, “Philippines: Crisis in Education?” (17 March 2021), <<https://theseanpost.com/article/philippines-crisis-education>>.

<sup>26</sup> “Years Don’t Wait for Them’: Increased Inequalities in Children’s Right to Education Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic,” (17 May 2021), <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/05/17/years-dont-wait-them/increased-inequalities-childrens-right-education-due-covid>>.

the students increases their burden and contradicts the purpose of the lockdown, which is to help their families prepare and adjust to the situation at hand .... [T]here is an issue about the lack of environments conducive to learning at home and the effectiveness of the online lectures."<sup>27</sup>

The pandemic does not only disclose the fragility of human existence, but it also exposes the negligence and failures of governments in addressing inequalities in society, especially in the education sector. The lack of adequate infrastructures to confront these matters serves as a microcosm to the inability of governments to address various societal problems. The Duterte administration, for example, fuses incompetence with militarism in dealing with the pandemic. As Michael Beltran describes, "since the lockdown went into effect, he [Duterte] has peddled the narrative of ... 'undisciplined' citizens as responsible for the ensuing problems; brought up unsubstantiated activities of guerrilla groups as threats to government aid efforts without conceding any missteps in his management. On top of deploying thousands of police and soldiers ... to enforce the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Duterte has on two occasions threatened the public with all-out martial law."<sup>28</sup> A parallel strain of ineptitude is likewise observable in the Indonesian government because of its inadequate efforts in confronting the pandemic, especially in its failure to seriously invest in testing and tracing. Ahmad Utomo, one of its molecular biological consultants in Jakarta, says that the Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus is being utilized to obscure the Indonesian government's mishandling of the pandemic.<sup>29</sup>

The enormous interruption to students' education has underlined the need for governments to devote serious attention and use sufficient resources to mitigate and eradicate the prevailing injustices in the educational system. Another dimension of the education system's impoverishment worth looking into is the plight of the teachers. They need to deal with personal struggles at home on top of their problems at work. According to Caroline Rayco of the Philippine Mental Health Association, teachers "don't get to express their struggles and emotions because they are expected to always be strong, because their students and community depend on them. It is important to

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<sup>27</sup> Samantha Bagayas, "Students of Top 4 PH Schools Urge CHED to Suspend Online Classes," (25 March 2020), <<https://www.rappler.com/nation/students-top-schools-philippines-call-ched-suspend-online-classes-coronavirus-outbreak>>.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Beltran, "The Philippines' Pandemic Response: A Tragedy of Errors," (12 May 2020), <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/the-philippines-pandemic-response-a-tragedy-of-errors/>>.

<sup>29</sup> Al Jazeera Staff, "'It will get very bad': Experts warn on Indonesia COVID surge," (18 Jun 2021), <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/18/indonesia-covid>>.

strengthen their resiliency in dealing with the normal stresses of life.”<sup>30</sup> There was an instance when a professor needed to murmur while lecturing because he was in the computer shop due to an internet connectivity problem at home. More unfortunate news narrates a professor who turned emotional during an online class after knowing that one of his family members tested positive for COVID-19.<sup>31</sup> The same goes for students who missed classes and submission deadlines because they got infected, someone from the family tested positive, and someone died due to the coronavirus.

Furthermore, school closures are accompanied by massive displacements among teachers, which add another layer to the menacing effects of the pandemic. Some displaced teachers are compelled to look for other jobs for daily survival. Of course, the contingencies and experiences that emerged from these problems, especially those living below the poverty line, are unthinkable.

### *Becoming a Pandemic Zombie*

Inculcated in the students’ and teachers’ minds is the idea that sleep is antithetical to hyperproductivity and progress. The attempt to prolong social attention is one of the capitalist strategies towards endless expansion and fortification. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary opines that “it should be no surprise that there is an erosion of sleep everywhere. Over the course of the twentieth century, there were steady inroad made against the time of sleep.”<sup>32</sup> I fully agree with Crary in asserting that the very activity of sleep elicits resistance or interruption to capitalism’s robbery of the cognitariats’ waking life. Miserably, insomniac individuals comprise most of the contemporary social demography. Although these so-called zombies may appear as the most desirable entities of the semiocapitalist labor force, their mental and somatic energies are already exhausted.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Mariejo Ramos, “Educators confront mental health problem amid pandemic,” <<https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2020/07/20/educators-confront-mental-health-problems-amid-pandemic.html>>.

<sup>31</sup> Catalina Ricci Madarang, “Academic woes: Stories of teachers keeping up with online classes while caring for COVID-19 patients at home,” (April 12, 2021), <<https://interaksyon.philstar.com/trends-spotlights/2021/04/12/189438/academic-woes-stories-of-teachers-keeping-up-with-online-classes-while-caring-for-covid-19-patients-at-home/>>.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 11.

<sup>33</sup> According to Han, “The contemporary compulsion to produce robs things of their endurance [Haltbarkeit]: it intentionally erodes duration in order to increase production, to force more consumption” [Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2020), 3].

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From the outside, semiocapitalism has mutated into a parasite that callously subjugates and totalizes the different aspects of the soul (creativity, expressiveness, affection, emotion) through continuous evaluation and surveillance. As Berardi notes:

Exploitation, competition, precariousness, redundancy are not perceived as the effects of a conflictual social relationship, but are internalized as deficiencies of the self, as personal inadequacies.... Cognitarians have been lured into the trap of creativity: their expectations are submitted to the productivity blackmail because they are obliged to identify their soul (the linguistic and emotional core of their activity) with their work. Social conflicts and dissatisfaction are perceived as psychological failures whose effect is the destruction of self-esteem.... Solidarity is rare. All of them feel isolated while pushed to compete.<sup>34</sup>

The internalization of external pressures and oppression as personal 'lack' resembles what Deleuze and Guattari describe in *Anti-Oedipus* as 'ethical fascism,'— "the fascism that causes us to ... desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us."<sup>35</sup> The phenomenon of ethical fascism is one the most venomous aspects of the cognitariat's precarity. Given the pandemic and the comprehensive practice of an enriched virtual mode of learning, the seismic wave of self-oppression strengthens. Of course, the fact remains that external exploitation emanating from semiocapitalism and other forms of societal or Statist repression, still exist.

Since the internalization of exploitation is cunningly engineered, i.e., aestheticized by a delusion of freedom, the effects are more subtle and detrimental. Han perceives this event as the crucial moment that gives birth to what he calls the 'achievement subject'—a kind of subjectivity that provides Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of ethical fascism and Berardi's notion of exploitation's internalization more creative articulation. In *The Burnout Society*, Han explains:

Unlimited *Can* is the positive modal verb of achievement society. Its plural form ... 'Yes, we can'—epitomizes achievement society's positive orientation. Prohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects,

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<sup>34</sup> Berardi, *Heroes*, 166-167.

<sup>35</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, xiil.



initiatives, and motivation.... Achievement society creates depressives and losers.... Clearly, the drive to maximize production inhabits the social unconscious.... Therefore, the social unconscious switches from *Should* to *Can*. The achievement-subject is faster and more productive than the obedience-subject.... *Can* increases the level of productivity, which is the aim of disciplinary technology.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, the grave prohibition to sleep is accompanied by the attitude known as multi-tasking. Like sleeping, the ability to multi-task depicts an 'excess of stimuli, information, and impulses.'<sup>37</sup> In addition, multi-tasking is a microcosm of semiocapitalism's radicalization of the configuration of attention, as well as the fragmentation of perception and cognition. Again, echoing Han, "the structural change of wakefulness is bringing society deeper and deeper into the wilderness .... Concern for the good life, which also includes ... the community, is yielding more and more to the simple concern for survival."<sup>38</sup> In other words, the pandemic escalates our struggle for survival. The coronavirus converts the global village into a quarantine facility where bare life,<sup>39</sup> or something worse than it, serves as the normalcy.

In the beginning of *The Burnout Society*, Han argues that our time is not anymore determined by viruses, but by neurons.<sup>40</sup> Even though I agree that Han's formulation of the achievement society acts as a more elaborate appropriation of semiocapitalism, I think his aforesaid assertion should be partially contemporized. Pathologically speaking, what he considers as the incipient character of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, i.e., of depression, burnout syndrome, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), among others, are worsened by the pandemic. These infarctions are also caused directly or indirectly by the COVID-19 virus and its different variants.

The "work-from-home" scheme has converted the home into a new space where the self-exploitation, in the guise of self-cultivation or freedom, occurs. Since the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel separating work from home has already vanished, work becomes 24/7. Although the cognitariats are already isolated

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<sup>36</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. by Erik Butler (California: Stanford University Press, 2015). 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Simply put, 'bare life' refers to the sheer biological fact of life; it is the opposite of a life creatively lived, i.e., shaped by incessant contingencies and possibilities. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 1.

in their home office, their tasks and obligations continue through interminable emails and Google/Zoom meetings. As they continue to epitomize the curse of achievement subjectivity, they constantly attempt to scourge themselves.

Every time an important deadline is fast-approaching, such as a final term paper or a feasibility study, sleeping is deemed as heresy. Even though it is a natural human activity, sleep is interpreted as counter-intuitive to the principles of acceleration, productivity, and progress. In this vein, caffeinated and energy drinks, game addictions, and anti-sleeping pills, among others, function as the cognitariats' armaments. In the eyes of Berardi, this paves the way for the emergence of Prozac culture as a novel yet disconcerting character of the new economy.<sup>41</sup> Aside from becoming awake and multi-functional, hyper-excitation or -expressivity is another significant aftermath of today's semiocapitalist culture. Nonetheless, the mental energies of students and teachers are subjected to extreme mobilization and exploitation, "of a saturation of attention leading people to the limits of panic,"<sup>42</sup> amidst a society of disproportionately productive, multi-functional, and hyper-expressive individuals.

Although the competition between classmates and colleagues relatively declines due to the work-from-home arrangement, self-competition/exploitation increases enormously, in the form of panic, fatigue, depression, and even suicide. In *Heroes*, Berardi defines the exuberant state of panic as the "anticipation of a depressive breakdown of mental confusion and disactivation."<sup>43</sup>

### *The Pandemic's Uncharted Terrains (Tiredness, Depression, and Suicide)*

What is really tiring is not only the cognitariats' self-competition/oppression, but the solitude involved in the work-from-home arrangement. In one of Han's newest articles, "The Tiredness Virus Covid-19 has driven us into a collective fatigue," he writes: "We are confronted with our selves, compelled constantly to brood over and speculate about ourselves. Fundamental tiredness is ultimately a kind of ego tiredness. The home office intensifies it by entangling us even deeper in ourselves."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 166.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> See Byung-Chul Han, "The Tiredness Virus Covid-19 has driven us into a collective fatigue" (12 April 2021), <<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/pandemic-burnout-society/>>.

During synchronous online sessions, for example, it is common among teachers to wonder what their students are doing behind those black boxes, especially when the latter's cameras are turned off. They know that several students are not listening. As Galit Wellner observes: "I said my goodbyes to the students and many of them replied in kind and left the digital classroom. Shortly after, a few black boxes remained. Texting them via the chatbox did not yield any answer. Calling their name through the microphone was in vain. I realized they were like zombies, digitally present but apathetic about the course."<sup>45</sup>

Sartre is correct to underscore the necessity of the other's gaze either in the classroom or community. However, in an online class, gaze is limited to the webcam or built-in camera. Indeed, this small electronic gadget only promotes quasi-presence.<sup>46</sup> Despite the repetitive instruction to always turn the cameras on during lectures, most students still close them. Aside from a black box, the teachers only perceive the students' profile pictures. According to Nicola Liberati, the profile picture "is a face of the subjects, but, at the same time, it excludes any other 'face' of the user by limiting the perception of the other to just the selected elements."<sup>47</sup> In front of a black box or a motionless profile picture, the experience of disembodiment is accompanied by fatigue to both parties and the possibility of tarnished pedagogy and learning.

In the pandemic, the *other* is absent symbolically and physically. Today, Deleuze's pronouncement in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* that the 'people are missing'<sup>48</sup> achieves a paradoxical historicization. Even before the pandemic, the symbolic ties or activities that connect people's elbows are superseded by digitalized information and hypercommunication. Unfortunately, the 'social distancing' health protocol aggravates the already ravaged organic composition of communal life. The pandemic not only estranges the *other*, but it also converts them as potential virus carriers. The lockdowns pushed people to further compete against themselves while in the solitary confinement of their home-offices.

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<sup>45</sup> Galit Wellner, "The Zoom-bie Student and the Lecturer Reflections on Teaching and Learning with Zoom," <<http://www.spt.org/the-zoom-bie-student-and-the-lecturer-reflections-on-teaching-and-learning-with-zoom>>.

<sup>46</sup> See Helena De Preester, "Technology and the Body: The (Im)Possibilities of Re-embodiment," in *Foundations of Science*, 16, no. 2-3 (2011), 119-37, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-010-9188-5>>.

<sup>47</sup> Nicola Liberati, "Achieving a Self-Satisfied Intimate Life through Computer Technologies?" In *The Realizations of the Self*, ed. by Andrea Altobrando, Takuya Niiikawa, and Richard Stone (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 240, <[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94700-6\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94700-6_13)>.

<sup>48</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-mage*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London, Athlone, 1989), 215.

The culture of doing things corporeally and communally are indispensable factors in educational learning and pedagogy. Haplessly, the pandemic has worsened the rupture of these symbolic practices and ties. For this reason, the indispensable proximity of the students, teachers, other academic personnel, and even nonhuman objects (school facilities and equipment, for instance) are clamored and underscored. Even the presence of stubborn students, neoliberal-minded colleagues, power-tripping superiors, and dilapidated classrooms, to name a few, are ironically missed.

Despite infrastructural modifications and rigorous attempts to fuse educational learning and technology in making instructions and pedagogy more technologically mediated, many teachers still perceive virtual teaching and learning in an ancillary manner. But as the rapid surge of virus infections is followed by lockdowns, class disruptions, and suspensions, students, teachers, and academic staff have no choice but to be technologically prepared. This abrupt transformation inexorably and ideally presupposes digitally advanced electronic gadgets, fast internet connection, and a decent working space, among others.

In addition, the home transforms into a prison cell to students longing for the presence of their friends and peers—the same students who experienced and understood education and human development as collective pursuits, i.e., or against the backdrop of a community and ethical practices. For those who are already distressed by mental health problems before the pandemic, their havens convert into an Alcatraz despite being with their family members almost 24/7. This is also true for those who started experiencing mental health problems during the pandemic. While in solitude, the cognitariats perpetually compete against themselves. The world of hyperconnectivity and hypercommunication paradoxically produces narcissistic, solitary, and fatigued individuals. Communication without community engenders the cognitariat to break apart. The cognitariat, Han contends, “exploits itself voluntarily and passionately until it breaks down. It optimizes itself to death.”<sup>49</sup>

In Slavoj Žižek’s *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World*, a complementary view of what Han describes as global tiredness, is elucidated. Like Han, Žižek claims that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused fatigue to everyone. In the chapter “Why Are We Tired All the Time?”<sup>50</sup> Žižek cites Han’s *The Burnout Society* only as a springboard in traversing a different pathway in juxtaposing the relationship between advanced capitalism, the pandemic, and the pathology of tiredness. Notwithstanding their convergent

<sup>49</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 14; cf. Han, *The Burnout Society*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York and London: OR Books, 2020), 26. He extends this oppressive current to those whose works are inevitably “outside,” such as the mall sales agents, hospital front liners, and public transport drivers.

perspective on humanity's tiredness, Žižek asserts that the epicenter of exploitation is relocated to Third World countries. While Žižek thinks that Han's disquisition on the new form of subjectivization is such a profound remark, it is not the only headline of the story in the context of the Third World: "struggle and antagonisms are in no way reducible to the intra-personal 'struggle against oneself.' There are still millions of manual workers in Third World countries, there are big differences between different kinds of immaterial workers .... A gap separates the top manager who owns or runs a company from a precarious worker spending days at home alone with his/her personal computer—they are definitely not both a master and a slave in the same sense."<sup>51</sup>

Žižek opines that by looking at the case of the Third World we are provided with a nuanced configuration not only of tiredness, but also of labor-relation and oppression. In Indonesia, for example, the outsourced labor remains loyal to the old Fordist assembly-line rubric; side-by-side with the mounting domain of human care workers (nurses, caregivers, caretakers, etc.) in the Philippines. For Žižek, only the self-employed precarious workers can be classified under Han's notion of subjectivization.<sup>52</sup>

Although Žižek's observations are critically noteworthy, the semicapitalist regime remains the fulcrum of everything and social media access serves as the workers' common habitat during the pandemic. Consequently, precarity (external and internal repression) continues to mutate precipitously. In response to Žižek, Han explains, "social media turn all of us into producers, entrepreneurs whose selves are the businesses. It globalizes the ego culture that erodes community, erodes anything social. We produce ourselves and put ourselves on permanent display. This ... ongoing 'being-on-display' of the ego, makes us tired and depressed."<sup>53</sup>

In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari describe depression as the state where thought escapes itself ... already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into other that we no longer master."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, semicapitalism engenders a world of chaos. Chaos comprises a world of "infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colorless and silent nothingness they traverse, without nature or thought."<sup>55</sup> The emergence of chaos mobilizes the

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

<sup>52</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Han, "The Tiredness Virus Covid-19 has driven us into a collective fatigue," (12 April 2021), <<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/pandemic-burnout-society/>>.

<sup>54</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham, 1994, 201; cf. Alan Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, trans. by Enrico Caoutte, Jacob Homel, David Homel, and Don Winkler (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

world in an ungraspable speed that blights people's appreciation and understanding of societal events, meanings, and relations.

Chaos fortifies in a world of hyperconnectivity and hypercommunication without community. In this habitat, symbolic principles and activities, such as rituals, are banalized or exterminated. Memory presupposes communal rituals, which are corporeal in nature. Rituals, as Han explicates, "are processes of embodiment and bodily performances .... They are written into the body, incorporated, that is, physically internalized. Thus, rituals create a bodily knowledge and memory, an embodied identity, a bodily connection. A ritual community is a communal body [Körperschaft], and there is a bodily dimension inherent to community."<sup>56</sup> Integral to the miscarriage of community and subjectivity is the adulteration of memory. In the semiocapitalist world, symbolic rituals, metaphors, and refrains that stabilize life or moderate a world of pure velocity and narcissism, vanish.<sup>57</sup>

As a human faculty, memory enables us to establish bodily constellations of meaning and relations with the world, with our fellowmen, and ourselves. Under the comprehensive utilization of virtual education, these capacities and values are pathologized, and as such, provides the cognitariats more opportunities to render self-exploitation through excessive positivity and ego-obsession. Writ large, the pandemic amplifies the degeneration of community, rituals, and memory, among others that define individual and collective identity. More dismally, it upheaves semiocapitalism's exhaustive totalization of the cognitariats' *soul*. Following Berardi, "there is chaos once the flows are too intense for our capacity to elaborate emotionally. Overwhelmed by this velocity, the mind drifts towards panic, the uncontrolled subversion of psychic energies premise to a depressive deactivation."<sup>58</sup>

The swift transition to a purely online mode of learning and teaching have aggravated and spawned complex problems. Indeed, I find the efforts of schools and universities to conduct online re-tooling activities and evaluations commendable. They are praiseworthy and important initiatives in preparing all academic staff to become technologically resourceful and innovative, especially in responding to the needs of its technologically savvy stakeholders. However, when teachers attend trainings simultaneously with

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<sup>56</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> See *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 125. As Berardi adds, the cognitariats' depression "comes from the fact that our emotional, physical, and intellectual energy can't bear the rhythm imposed by competition and chemical-ideological euphoria inducers for long. The market is a psycho-semiotic space, where one can find signs and expectations for meaning, desires and projections. There is an energetic crisis that affects mental and psychic energies" (*Ibid.*, 167).



meetings, deadlines, online classes, alongside the looming threats of financial instability, state-authored violence, and virus infection, different psychopathologies emerge. Even though depression and suicide are more common among young people, teachers also experience panic or extreme fatigue. But most of the time, they simply neglect, conceal, or sublimate it, for they always need to be resilient in front of their hopeful students and loved ones.

The prevalence of suicide among the youth is one of the alarming faces of our contemporary time. According to the World Health organization, “suicide is the fourth leading cause of death in 15-19-year-olds. 77% of global suicides occur in low- and middle-income countries.”<sup>59</sup> In Asian countries, the suicide rates in South Korea and Japan are among the highest in the world.<sup>60</sup> The social pressure to achieve in professional career and succeed in family life are the most common reasons for suicide in those countries.

Generally, suicide pertains to the reaction of individuals confronting the collapse of their cultural foundations and the ignominy of their dignity.<sup>61</sup> In 1977, a mass youth suicide was committed in Japan. This year, Berardi elucidates in *Heroes*, characterizes a year of turbulent and radical events not only in Japan but in the entire world: “I see the premonition of a new landscape of imagination marked by the consciousness of a future without evolution, and by the exhaustion of physical resources and of progressive energy.”<sup>62</sup> He further opines that at the inner core of this period, a deeper malady was brewing, i.e., of the unceasing exhaustion of the social nervous system—a catastrophe that paradoxically fuels the relentless ascendancy of semiocapitalism.

In the last fifty years, suicide rates have increased drastically. Suicide is spreading epidemically as an aftermath of societal fatigue, emotional deprivation, and the constant assault on attention. As Berardi lucidly elucidates it:

The epidemic of unhappiness infecting the world in the  
epoch of capitalism’s triumph has generated a wave of  
aggressive suicide in every area of the world.

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<sup>59</sup> See <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide>, 1 July 2021.

<sup>60</sup> See <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/suicide-rate-by-country>, 1 July 2021.

<sup>61</sup> For the Japanese, especially the youth, Hikikomori is a pathological variant of suicide. As a form of total social withdrawal, it serves as an effective means to avoid the dismal consequences of coercion, disgrace, self-violence, and misery engendered by disproportionate competition [See “Hikikomori: understanding the people who choose to live in extreme isolation,” (30 October 2020) <<https://theconversation.com/hikikomori-understanding-the-people-who-choose-to-live-in-extreme-isolation-148482>>].

<sup>62</sup> Berardi, *Heroes*, 156-157.

Advertising reasserts at every street corner, at every moment ... the freedom of infinite consumption, the joys of property and of victory through competition. In the 1990s, capitalism mobilized an immense intellectual, creative, and psychological energy to start the valorization process of the collective intellectual network. But by imposing unlimited systematic exploitation on the human mind, the productive acceleration created the conditions for an extraordinary psychological breakdown.<sup>63</sup>

Semiocapitalism mutates into a biopolitical system in such a way that it penetrates the cognitariat's nervous systems with the ghoulish sentiment that exceptionally totalize the collective unconscious and cultural sensibility. Psychosomatic violence acts as semiocapitalism's primary weapon against the cognitariats' political solidarity. In the pandemic, this technology of domination worsens as everyone is imprisoned in their home offices and socially distanced from the others. Solidarity or the community disappeared and the cognitariats continue to practice self-flagellation and experience various psychopathologies.

Gone are the days when suicide is merely seen as a cultural and political means of killing one's life. Despair and unhappiness currently know no nation or society. Even economic growth in societies does not decrease suicide rates or does not eradicate people's discontents. In advanced economies, such as Japan and South Korea, suicide rates continue to rise every year. In Japan, the people formulated the word 'karoshi' (death from overwork)—a pathology that engenders work-related pressures, depression, and suicide.<sup>64</sup>

Suicide is likewise widespread in Third World countries. It's rampancy in India and the Philippines, for instance, is marred by more serious predicaments—further aggravated by the pandemic. On June 2, 2020, a brilliant 15-year-old student from India committed suicide.<sup>65</sup> Coming from a financially challenged family, the student failed to attend her online classes both through a smartphone and a television. Worried and depressed about her absences, she killed herself. The pandemic intensifies the fatal alliance

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<sup>63</sup> Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 166.

<sup>64</sup> Danielle Demetriou, "How the Japanese are putting an end to extreme work weeks," (18 January 2020), <<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200114-how-the-japanese-are-putting-an-end-to-death-from-overwork>>.

<sup>65</sup> "First Case of Suicide in India," <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>>, 2 July 2021; cf. Depression to suicide: India battles mental health crisis amid Covid-19 (September 13, 2020), <[https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/stress-self-injuries-and-suicide-india-battles-mental-health-crisis-as-covid-tally-spikes-120091300331\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/stress-self-injuries-and-suicide-india-battles-mental-health-crisis-as-covid-tally-spikes-120091300331_1.html)>.

between economic and mental health impoverishment. Meanwhile, a 22-year-old college student from Iloilo City, Philippines, deliberately ended his own life last January 25, 2021. According to his mother, the student keeps on complaining about his difficulty in dealing with online classes, specifically with respect to numerous class activities and rapid submission deadlines.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, these are only some of the faces of suicide in the Third World. The fact remains that various cases of suicide and other psychopathologies stay outside the radar of the family, the school, and different governmental agencies. From a macro-perspective, the drastic surge of suicide cases in the Philippines is strengthened by the imprudent and unsuccessful governmental response to embattle the pandemic, in conjunction with the pre-existing economic and mental health malaise plaguing the Philippine society.

### III. Becoming-Chaoide in the Age of Spasm

Berardi defines ‘spasm’ as a painful vibration that compels the individual to an accelerated mobilization of nervous energies. In his words, “it is the effect of a violent penetration of the capitalist exploitation into the field of info-technologies, involving the sphere of cognition, of sensibility, and the unconscious.”<sup>67</sup> During the pandemic, the exploitation of the cognitariats’ spasmic vibration or mental and physical energies worsens.

For Guattari, the aestheticization of spasm is the function of ‘chaosmosis.’ It signals the creation of novel and non-normative forms of order—a “harmony between mind and the semioenvironment.”<sup>68</sup> Hence, chaosmosis involves a shift in the soul’s mobility towards the creation of new orders of subjectivation. For this to be possible, Guattari proposes the necessity of ‘chaoide’—an enunciation that elaborates, decodes, and averts the destructive consequences of chaos.<sup>69</sup> Through chaoide, chaosmosis envisions to re-syntonzize the cognitariats’ corporeal body of social solidarity and reactivate their creativity and sensibility. However, this initiative should not be interpreted as a means of overcoming chaos. Berardi warns us in *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*: “those who wage war against chaos will be defeated, as chaos feeds on war.”<sup>70</sup> So instead of seeking to overthrow chaos,

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<sup>66</sup> “College student commits suicide over arduous online classes,” (26 January 2021), <<https://www.dailyguardian.com.ph>>; Cf. M. L. Tee, C. A. Tee, J. P. Anlacan, K. J. G. Aligam, P. W. C. Reyes, V. Kuruchittham, et al., “Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines” in *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2020), 277, 379–391, <10.1016/j.jad.2020.08.043>.

<sup>67</sup> Berardi, *Heroes*, 220.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> See *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>70</sup> Franco Berardi, *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* (CA: Semiotext(e), 2015), 48.

we should befriend and struggle with it through the diagramming and the formulation of chaoides.<sup>71</sup>

The miscarriage of the Occupy Movement and the relentless fortification of capitalism prompted Berardi to envision the philosophy of ‘poetry’ as “the excess of the field of segmentation, as premonition of a possible harmony inscribed in the present chaos.”<sup>72</sup> So from the Occupy’s goal of reactivating the social body, this novel philosophy aims to revitalize the erotic body of the general intellect towards emancipation from the capitalist oppression.<sup>73</sup> Through the metaphor of poetry, our suffocation in this chaotic world can liberate us from paralysis towards breathing and solidarity. Meanwhile, in the language of Han, rituals can safeguard us from chaos—from burnout or depression. It is but an ethical imperative therefore to re-calibrate our symbolic practices and structures that promote stability, repetitions, and resonances against the backdrop of the contemporary crisis of community and ego-obsession.<sup>74</sup>

Another possible way to critically befriend chaos is via what I call ‘becoming-slow.’ Inspired by the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy, becoming-slow exhibits a minoritarian movement, which elicits prudence in confronting chaos to avoid self-destruction and capture.<sup>75</sup> As Berardi recounts in *The Soul at Work*: “It is necessary to slow down, finally giving up economic fanaticism and collectively rethink the true meaning of the word ‘wealth.’ Wealth does not mean a person who owns a lot, but refers to someone who has enough time to enjoy what nature and human collaboration place put within everyone’s reach.”<sup>76</sup>

In the context of the contemporary academe, semiocapitalism, and the pandemic, a resonance exists between becoming-slow and what Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber in *The Slow Professor* theorize as ‘slowing down.’ In a world hampered by acceleration, disembodiment, and competition, slowing down highlights the significance of the act of contemplation and the value of connectiveness and complexity. In the realm of research, for example, slowing down allows “the research the time it needs to ripen and makes it easier to resist the pressure to be faster. It gives meaning to thinking about scholarship as a community, not a competition. It gives meaning to periods of rest ... there are rhythms, which include pauses and periods that may seem

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<sup>71</sup> See Franco Berardi, *And: Phenomenology of the End* (California: Semiotext(e), 2015), 11.

<sup>72</sup> Berardi, *Breathing*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> See Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 6-15.

<sup>75</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. by Constantin Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 157-158.

<sup>76</sup> Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 169.

unproductive. It allows us to shift from worrying about the annual report to thinking about what is sustainable over the long haul.”<sup>77</sup>

In terms of classroom management, moreover, becoming-slow can translate into an exercise of prudent compassion among students who are inexorably burdened by metricized principles and accelerated procedures in the academe. As a catalyst, it can likewise earnestly re-educate us that a university not centered on values formation, knowledge democratization, and cultural transformation, is no university. Similarly, it can critically remind us that a university that enhances its panoptical apparatus, rather than enhances its moral compass and moderates its movement in this tragic time, is no university. Things essential and noble cannot be accomplished overnight because they necessitate adequate time and deep contemplation. Echoing Han: “it is only contemplative lingering that has access to phenomena that are long and slow.”<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, the whole academic community should flexibly explore emancipatory potentials in both virtual and actual platforms. The “new normal” discourages any sense of nostalgia or conservatism. The virtual classroom should be transformed into a space of critico-creative educational encounter. Specifically, the intersubjective relation between the teacher and the student should be expanded into a ‘self-other-object relationship’ where they metamorphose into educational agencies whose task is to uncover and understand the meanings and complexities of the technologically mediated object of study or learning materials.<sup>79</sup> This encounter must be continuously shaped by disruptive crises and irregularities inside and outside the virtual classroom.

Since the plight of the people of the Third World is an integral part of this research, it is crucial to interrogate how education can become accessible to them in both virtual and actual platforms. Perhaps, we can begin the struggle by creating localized ways and diagramming molecular initiatives that can act as beacons of hope and vectors of transformation in the community. Instead of arriving at a one-size-fits-all solution in addressing the pathology of educational accessibility (which is intertwined with other societal problems), we should start by sharing our personal stories of redemption, formulating creative strategies, and radical projects toward novel forms of pedagogy, subjectivity, and solidarity.

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<sup>77</sup> Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 8.

<sup>78</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 14.

<sup>79</sup> See Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Crisis and New Beginning*, trans. by Donald Moss and Nancy Moss (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1966); Cf. K. Natalier, and R. Clarke, “Online Learning and the Education Encounter in a Neo-Liberal University: A Case Study,” in *Higher Education Studies*, 5, no. 2, (2015).

## 142 MAPPING A PRECARIOUS ETHICS

Ultimately, all these tasks and initiatives should inflate as a radical and interstitial challenge to the systemic neoliberalization of the university, the digital configurations of advance capitalism, the precarization of the cognitariat's soul, and to the different socioeconomic problems hounding the Third World.

The things I provided here only comprise some of the ways to map out a precarious ethics or maintain a creative discord with chaos. These forms of becoming-chaoide can only find their meaningful concretization and cultivation through nomadic alliances not only among the cognitariats, but also among other people of the community, disciplines, machines, and rhythms, among others.<sup>80</sup> I suppose that any attempt at redemption in the "new normal" is only possible by collectively and meticulously moving forward, mapping territories, and formulating concepts that would incessantly challenge the complex and plural enemy. This minoritarian slowness I am proposing is continuously defined by paradoxicality and disruption, on the one hand, and mutation and transversality, on the other. As Murakami aesthetically puts it:

And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure if the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's the storm's all about.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> In *The Plague*, Albert Camus opines that overcoming the plague necessitates "a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotions was the sense of exile and deprivation, with all the crosscurrents of revolt and fear set up by these" [Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), 151].

<sup>81</sup> Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, trans. by Philip Gabriel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 5-6.



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Article

## Selfie Politics: The Political Commodification of Yourself<sup>1</sup>

*Hans-Georg Moeller*

**Abstract:** This essay suggests that the purpose of political activity today, especially in the context of mass and social media communication, is not simply the promotion of political agendas, but often also, if not primarily, the construction of identity. It is argued that the public display of political action serves the curation of personal or collective profiles. The display of political attitudes contributes to the constitution of “proficiency,” a profile-based and post-authentic mode of identity. By means of an analysis of images posted on social media, the essay shows how political profile curation occurs on all sides of the political spectrum. Building on Naomi Klein’s critique of “branding,” the essay outlines how the profile has replaced the brand as a more dynamic type of identity symbol.

**Keywords:** proficiency, Naomi Klein, branding, identity politics

These two pictures<sup>2</sup> show both difference and sameness. They show two different and sometimes violently opposed political stances: A Trump supporter at a rally representing the right, and a protester against the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, representing the left. But they also show sameness: Two attractive people taking a selfie to display their political activism—selfie politics. Selfie politics is not simply a case of narcissism, as some have said, but an increasingly common, and effective, way of being political today—a kind of “political commodification of the self.”

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<sup>1</sup> This was earlier published as part of *Metaporika Denkbild* (March 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See Alexi Bayer, “Donald Trump the devil?,” in *Kyiv Post* (23 July 2017), <<https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/alexei-bayer-donald-trump-devil.html>> and Don, “Riot Hipster,” in *Know Your Meme* (2017), <<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/riot-hipster>>.

A third picture shows influencer Kris Schatzel.<sup>3</sup> She was widely criticized for having posed for it at a Black Lives Matter protest. She defended herself against her critics by saying on Instagram: “I hope we can all focus on the true cause as to why we are all here.”<sup>4</sup> Sure, Kris, let’s do that.

Political conflicts involve two moments: the conflicting “objective” political issues at stake, and the personal commitment of the political activists to them—their “subjective” identification. In Hegel’s language the first is the *in-itself*, and the second the *for-itself* moment of politics. For a conflict to arise, the mere existence of different political causes is not enough, people must make these causes *their own* to form competing factions. But which comes first and which comes second? Do I make the cause mine for the sake of the cause or for the sake of myself? Or are these just two moments of the same thing? In Hegel’s terms: Politics is both *in-and-for-itself*.

The degree of difference between conflicting political causes does not determine the level of intensity with which these conflicts are personally experienced. Relatively small political differences can still be personally experienced as huge. It seems clear that the political difference between the left and the right has considerably shrunk in recent history. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century the left and the right fought for radically different political and economic systems: The right once stood for monarchy and authoritarian rule while the left stood for a republic and democracy. Later, the right stood for private property rights and capitalism, and the left for a communist mode of production. Speaking in Marxist terms, the “base structure” was at stake: the economic and political foundation of society. Today, this is hardly the case anymore: Even mildly socialist reformers like Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn were sidelined by their own leftist parties as too radical. And the emblematic figurehead of the right used to be Donald Trump, the populist former TV host hardly able to formulate any meaningful ideological position in his twitter tirades which instead often consisted in petty personal attacks.

Today’s mainstream left and right, at least in the “West,” no longer fundamentally disagree on sociopolitical issues. They all embrace liberalism: a free-market economy and the political preference of individual over collective interests. Many find it difficult, for instance, to detect any significant political shift from the right to the left after the recent American election. And yet, political identifications are as intense as ever. On the personal level, the divide is viscerally experienced: I am sure that some viewers with strong political convictions will emphatically disagree with

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<sup>3</sup> TextThom Waite, “An influencer responds to backlash for a Black Lives Matter protest selfie,” in *Dazed* (6 June 2020), <<https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/49469/1/influencer-responds-backlash-staging-photos-during-black-lives-matter-protest>>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



what I just said: They will perceive the shift from Trump to Biden as momentous—either as a sort of overdue liberation if on the left, or as a horrific setback if on the right.

Who is to say what the “right” degree of personal investment in political differences is? This lack of a fixed proportionality is exploitable: Any seemingly trivial political or ideological difference can result in tremendous personal differences. Just think about the relatively minor, sometimes apparently just “technical” differences between Protestantism and Catholicism, or between Sunni and Shia Islam—and the centuries of brutal bloodshed they resulted in.

We can learn about how to exploit trivial technical differences for constructing huge personal differences from capitalist marketing. Apple’s “Get a Mac” campaign is a good example. Some viewers may still remember this advertising campaign which helped Apple to gain a substantial market share at the expense of Microsoft. The ads did talk about technical differences between Apple and Microsoft products, but in a highly personalized manner. Two actors represented Macs and PCs, and the ads consisted mainly in contrasting them. At the beginning of each ad, the actors would say: “I am a Mac” and “I am a PC” declaring personal identification with the products. The Mac character was a good-looking and laid-back progressive guy, and the PC character a boring, conservative nerd presented as less attractive. The message of the ads to computer buyers could not have been clearer: Make no mistake: The difference between Macs and PCs is not just about technology— it is about your personality. Along with a computer, you’re buying a personal profile. The purchase of a PC will make your profile dork-like. If you buy a Mac, though, you’ll get a cool profile boost.

The Get A Mac campaign was a major step in the history of profile-oriented advertising. Computers became a personal profile marker to an extent they hadn’t been before. After the Mac campaign it was no longer possible to buy a computer without reflecting on the consequences that this decision has on one’s persona. It attached to a relatively minor technical difference—after all people do more or less exactly the same things with Macs and PCs—a distinctive personal difference. The technical became personal.

The Mac campaign not only shows how the technical became personal; it also shows how brands became profiles.

The brand is an old-fashioned concept. It goes back to the branding of livestock by human owners ages ago. Later on, the logic of a brand changed. It indicated no longer an owner of something, but its manufacturer. Ford or Buick were brands of cars made by the company of a Mr. Ford or Mr. Buick. The effect of such brands was to create a certain prestige—they represented the reliability of a product by attaching it to the personal name of the maker who thereby vouched for its quality. The brand added a quality

sign to a product which increased its market value. In turn, this quality sign—and this is the essence of the brand—became a *status symbol*. A *symbol* is a sign that matches or corresponds to something. A status symbol is a sign that matches and publicly expresses social status. Brands turned products into such status symbols. People were willing to pay more for a brand-name car because it was not just good for driving, but also for representing, as a symbol, one's social status. The logic of the brand is that it is attached to a commodity to transform it into a status symbol.

The logic of the profile in marketing is different. It is more immediate, more direct. It functions as a short cut to the buyer and avoids, at least to an extent, the detour via the thing. When the actor in the Get a Mac campaign says, "I am a Mac," he impersonates not so much the computer, but its buyer. As a profile marker, "Mac" refers less to the qualities of what is bought and more to the qualities of who buys it.

Crucially, the profile does not function as a symbol—in the strict sense of this term as a *matching* sign. It does not seek to complement a social quality—a status—people already have, like a Buick which was marketed to people already in a certain class. Instead, the profile functions more like a *signal*. A signal, like a fashionable shirt, *makes* you fashionable. You weren't fashionable if you wouldn't wear it. Unlike a symbol which matches a quality you already have, a signal gives you this very quality. The difference between a Mac and a PC owner is not a status difference—it's a difference in personality. Apple is not a brand symbolizing class status, it's a profile signal producing individual coolness. Nike expresses the logic of profile marketing perfectly: "Make yourself!" Instead of your shirt, you become the commodity.

This being said, brands have by no means disappeared. In China for instance, a country where hundreds of millions of people have emerged from poverty in recent years, they are in great demand. Luxury brands are highly successful here. They serve the desire of many to symbolically match and represent their newly acquired middle- or upper-class status.

To the contrary, in countries like the U.S.A. where the economic trend goes in the opposite direction, where the younger generations is now often poorer than the older, and where the middle-class is in decline, the economy of the traditional brand no longer makes much sense. There, Apple or Nike do not symbolize upward social movement—there simply isn't that much such movement—but are curated as marketable signals of, for instance, being sufficiently progressive or socially conscious. The old-fashioned brand served class status—and is now of little use when products need to be marketed to people whose class status, along with their real wages, has been stagnating or declining. Instead of status symbols, however, you can sell these people valuable profile signals which, quite miraculously, make them more attractive despite getting poorer.

In her book *No Logo*, first published in 1999, Naomi Klein offered an excellent critique of the contemporary economy. She showed in great clarity, how corporations in advanced capitalism are no longer primarily concerned with producing and marketing things. Instead, they manufacture and curate logos, and through these they deal in personal lifestyles. Thereby, they *commodify personhood*—especially for younger consumers *No Logo* in fact describes the shift from traditional branding to modern profiling—but Klein did not use this terminological distinction. For her, the logo is just another word for brand. Today, however, we may regard the logo as indicating a more intense and invasive commodification of identity that follows the logic of the profile rather than the old logic of the brand.

In a new introduction to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *No Logo*, Klein hints at the implications of her economic critique for politics: Politics, too, she points out, now increasingly functions like what she conceives of as “branding.” She called President Obama the first political “superbrand.”<sup>5</sup> Maybe we can say: Obama is, if not the first, then at least, an outstandingly successful political “superprofile.” Political election campaigns use the same campaign strategies as commercial advertising, employ sometimes the very same people, and pursue the same aim: making profiles. These days, as Niklas Luhmann put it, “politics *essentially* consists in arranging how one is seen by public opinion—so that one is observed more favorably than the competition.”<sup>6</sup>

The ideological difference between the mainstream left and right today may be not much more decisive than the technological differences between Macs and PCs. But just as marketing campaigns have succeeded in establishing significant personal profile differences between the owners of Macs and PCs, political campaigns have succeeded in establishing remarkable profile differences between those who identify as left and as right. In marketing, the shift from the brand to the profile cut the detour over the product short and aimed right at the identity of the buyer. Similarly, selfie politics is weak on political theory and instead zooms in on the identity of voters. The difference between left and right, like the difference between Macs and PCs, is not so much a difference of the object, or the “in-itself”—but of the subject—the “for-itself.” The difference is you.

The two photos of the Trump supporter and G20 protester show: Both on the right and on the left, political activism is often inseparable from profile work. In the liberal societies of the West, politics is in a more or less constant election mode. Permanent political campaigns advertise different

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<sup>5</sup> Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, 10th Anniversary Edition with a New Introduction by the Author (London: Picador, 2009), xix.

<sup>6</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press), 115. (translation modified)

personality styles, different gestures, different vocabularies, different attitudes that enable their supporters to stand out, and to be more attractive to one another. In the age of the profile, politics, too, is about increasing profile value.

To make even small political differences personally relevant, and what is more, to make them emotionally appealing, politics employs a rhetorical tool proven to be most effective over millennia: outrage. It may be difficult to point out what exactly is so dramatically worse about the other side's politics (especially, if, as it seems the case with the current Biden administration, there is no desire to change much when taking over political power). However, if outrage is politically utilized, amplified, and publicly validated it creates political loyalty—like brand loyalty. Protest selfies show that protests are highly photogenic—at least as much as pop concerts, parties, or holiday trips.

In the old days of the brand, marketing was based on producing class-related status symbols. Similarly, political differences tended to reflect differing class interests. In the age of the profile, liberal marketing and politics woo a middle class that has lost hope of getting richer any time soon but craves being more visible and more interesting. Politics today, like marketing, produces an endless supply of self-profiling opportunities. No wonder then that at political protests, the very same people who display their political cause, tend to display their fashion profiles at the same time. Where there is Black Lives Matter, Nike isn't far away—that's "political commodification."

The slogan "the personal is political" was coined by the feminist activist Carol Hanisch at the end of the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Hanisch pointed out that many of the seemingly personal problems experienced by women—especially psychological and sexual problems—were actually effects of the problems of a patriarchal society that systematically oppresses women. They were, in fact, political problems and not personal problems at all. Thus "the personal is political" for Hanisch meant: The personal is not the issue—the real issue is the political.

Much to Hanisch's dismay,<sup>8</sup> the slogan took on a completely different meaning when identity politics as we know it today emerged in the 1970s. Identity politics tended to regard personal identity—especially race and gender identity—as the essential foundation of political action. From this perspective, personal identity is not only the source but also the point of

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<sup>7</sup> Carol Hanisch, "The Political Is Personal," in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* (8 March 1970), 76-77.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Hanisch, "Introduction," in *Writings by Carol Hanisch* (2006), <<https://webhome.cs.uvic.ca/~mserra/AttachedFiles/PersonalPolitical.pdf>>.

politics. Politics is supposed to be all about the personal—so that the real political issue, contrary to what Hanisch meant, *is* indeed the personal.

Today, under conditions of prolificity, identity is formed through the curation and validation of profiles, Hanisch's slogan can now be understood in a third sense: The political is personal because politics can boost personal profiles. In the age of the profile, politics is not so much a symbolic expression of what we already are—of our class status for instance. Instead, it can be a signal we send out to “make ourselves.” It is through the political performance, that a genuine political identity is created and achieved. When you identify with the cause in the age of the profile, the cause is, also, your profile.

In liberal democracies, political parties and movements often operate similar to corporations. They manufacture and advertise differing personal profile signals. This is effective. Profile synergies emerge between parties, movements, and voters. People can become more attractive by displaying political signals. This is the “political commodification of yourself.” Political parties are busy exploiting such commodification potentials. Arguably, in times of prolificity, it is actually their core business.

## Afterword

A day after we posted our first video on Philosophy Tube,<sup>9</sup> the presenter of that channel came out as trans woman, declaring that she's presenting her real self. A day after the first draft of this script was written, Intel published an ad, titled “Justin Gets Real” where Justin Long, the actor who previously claimed, “I am a Mac” declares “I am Justin, just a real person doing a real comparison between Mac and PC.” There's difference and sameness in these declarations about being a real person. The point of the notion of prolificity is to understand them.

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<sup>9</sup> See <[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2PA-AKmVpU6NKCGtZq\\_rKQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2PA-AKmVpU6NKCGtZq_rKQ)>.

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Article

# Recognition, Disrespect, and the Rearticulation of Chinese National Identity

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*Daniel Sarafinas*

**Abstract:** Throughout a wide realm of discourses in contemporary China, from official propaganda projects to online discussions amongst netizens, rearticulations of Chinese national identity are ubiquitous and conspicuous. Rather than depict these phenomena as simply manifestations of nationalism fomented by authoritarian rhetoric as is often the case in Western media, this paper will offer a more nuanced interpretation through the Hegelian notions of recognition and disrespect insofar as they operate in the construction of identity, in this case, Chinese national identity. The social theory of the struggle for recognition and identity formation as articulated by contemporary recognition theorist Axel Honneth will be used as a framework to explore 1) recognition and disrespect in the construction of identity, 2) the possibility of utilizing such a framework within international relations, and 3) how the contemporary rearticulation(s) of Chinese national identity can be understood through the notions of recognition and disrespect.

**Keywords:** Honneth, Chinese identity, recognition, disrespect

## I. Recognition and Disrespect

There are a few other things that are emotionally as effective as our claims to identity and demands for its recognition by others, or as Charles Taylor put it “due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.”<sup>1</sup> Why then should claims to national identity be treated differently? The utilization of an overly instrumental approach to understanding and reporting on international politics can often lead to

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in Amy Gutmann, *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 26.

incomplete, misleading, and often dangerous international conflicts as a result of questions of identity not being taken seriously. This is a glaring shortcoming in the reporting on China's domestic and international activity in major Western media outlets, or as it pertains to this paper, American media in particular. With the international relationship between these two countries being central for global stability yet increasingly strained, the need for mutual recognition on the international stage has also become increasingly urgent. The framework and vocabulary utilized for an exploration of some of the ways according to which we can understand some of China's actions functionally operating as a demand for recognition will be briefly outlined below.

Following the Hegelian and Meadian traditions, Axel Honneth's work emphasizes self-realization as a vital need achieved through social conditions of mutual recognition, a need which gives rise to individual and social struggles when its fulfillment is prevented or obstructed. Identity-formation takes place within a matrix of social conditions and intersubjective experiences, and it is precisely the refusal of these conditions, or 'disrespect,' which Honneth interprets as a major motivation for individual and social conflict. Francis Fukuyama likewise recognizes the emotional need for recognition more specifically amongst collectivities in what he refers to as "the politics of resentment":

In a wide variety of cases, a political leader has mobilized followers around the perception that the group's dignity had been affronted, disparaged, or otherwise disregarded. This resentment engenders demands for public recognition of the dignity of the group in question. A humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing their economic advantage.<sup>2</sup>

Honneth inherits and creates terminology to describe those conditions of mutual recognition which must be met for the possibility of social identity-formation, or 'practical relations-to-self,' as well as those forms of disrespect which incite sometimes violent conflict on behalf of those who are denied those conditions.

Three modes of intersubjective recognition which serve as the conditions for identity-formation are extrapolated upon in terms of the

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 7.

individual's practical relations-to-self. The most primary of these is 'basic self-confidence,' a mode which is generally limited to the initial stage of socialization between child and significant other, and the denial of which is referred to as 'abuse.' Beyond the realm of love and care, yet indeed a result of the basic self-confidence which emerges from it, Honneth describes the practical relation-to-self conditioned by the inclusion of individuals into the public realm through legal recognition as 'self-respect.' The extension of legal rights demonstrates to the individual that they are recognized as partners to interaction in the public sphere and thus "in the experience of legal recognition, one is able to view oneself as a person who shares with all other members of one's community the qualities that make participation in discursive will-formation possible."<sup>3</sup> Disrespect in the form of a systematic denial of rights implies that the individual is marginalized from the political community and "signifies a violation of the intersubjective expectation to be recognized as a subject capable of forming moral judgements."<sup>4</sup> Whereas this second mode of practical relation-to-self relies on being treated as equal partners to interaction *universally* according to laws applied to all members in *general*, the third mode, 'self-esteem,' relies on recognition of that which makes one unique, distinctive, or particular, implying a pluralistic or expanded social value-horizon such that a wide variety of contributions might resonate as valuable. This ideal set of social conditions is described as "solidarity," or a society in which "every member of a society is in a position to esteem himself or herself."<sup>5</sup> As such, an individual who is denied recognition of their own particularity such that they feel that their potential contributions to the community as a unique individual would not be ascribed value is subject to the form of disrespect referred to as 'denigration of a way of life.'

## II. The Nation as Subject and National Identity

In addition to the formation of individual identity, sociologists and philosophers also utilize recognition theory to interpret the ways in which social groups, movements, or smaller collective identities participate in the struggle for recognition. This is generally the case when collectivities are oriented around a relatively narrow set of interests, a set of interests which in many cases serves as the *raison d'être* for that collectivity as distinct from others in the first place. The Black Lives Matter movements and National Organization of Women are constructed around political, legal, and social

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<sup>3</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 120

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 134

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 129

demands on behalf of specifically black people and women respectively who feel unrecognized or disrespected *as* black people and women. To what degree, then, can this discourse be extended to a nation as a subject with unified intention and will capable of mutual recognition? Honneth argues that applying the terminology of the struggle for recognition to interactions between nations can be inaccurate as “the psychological concepts we use when we speak of ‘strivings,’ ‘needs,’ and ‘feelings’ are inappropriate for describing international relations. State actors do not have mental attitudes but are authorities charged with carrying out politically determined tasks.”<sup>6</sup> Mattias Iser likewise problematizes ascribing a psychological dimensions to the nation, pointing out that “such an account faces the problem that states cannot suffer psychologically the way persons do.”<sup>7</sup> Ruth Wodak takes a different approach, claiming that “the primarily individual-related category of ‘selfhood’ cannot be applied to concepts such as ‘nation’... [because] the nominalisation ‘selfhood’ would create a substantialised entity from a construct of ideas.”<sup>8</sup> Mistaking the nation, an imagined community,<sup>9</sup> as a reified, unified, and often sanctified subject is not only intellectually problematic, but potentially turns the symbolic representation of the nation into a Lady Guinevere for whom many, enthused by odious forms of nationalism, are willing to die, oppress, or kill.

While denying subjectivity to the nation or state as a political entity, Wodak relocates the substantialized ‘nation’ into an element of the identity of individuals, or national identity, in the sense of a “complex of common or similar beliefs or opinions internalized in the course of socialization.”<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hall likewise explores collective identities insofar as ‘identification *with*’ collectivities is “constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation.”<sup>11</sup> In order to establish solidarity and create the perception of common and shared origins and characteristics that are most often neither common nor shared, national identity is discursively constructed and

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<sup>6</sup> Axel Honneth, “Recognition Between States: On the Moral Substrate of International Relations,” in Thomas Lindemann and Erik Ringmar, *The International Politics of Recognition* (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Mattias Iser, “Recognition between States? Moving beyond Identity Politics” in Christopher Daase et al., *Recognition in international Relations: Rethinking a Political Concept in a Global Context* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2015), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Wodak et al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 26.

<sup>9</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Wodak, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?,” in Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 2003), 2.

symbolically reproduced through highly selective historical narratives. Symbolic representations of a unified nation and what are presented as its 'essential' characteristics, values, and ideals, however inconsistent they may be with reality, are necessary for the formation of a sense of national identity. These serve as the conditions for solidarity on a wide scope by transforming that merely imagined community into an emotionally effective imagined community of individuals for whom "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>12</sup> The abstract idea of the nation thus serves as a repository of images, narratives, and relations which the citizen internalizes as an element of her own individual identity in the form of a national identity.

While nations may not be subjects or possess selfhood in the same way individual actors do, individual citizens' sense of national identity allows nations to be regarded as participating within the struggle for recognition, if not as actual intersubjective actors, as *functionally* intersubjective actors. Reinhard Wolf emphasizes how a sense of national identity within the citizenry and the concomitant desire on behalf of citizens for recognition or redress for perceived disrespect influences that nation's behavior on the international stage:

sooner or later, even ordinary citizens will be confronted with foreign views and actions that either confirm or challenge their own sense of their countries place in history or contemporary international affairs. When this happens, (dis)respect between nations and their states can become an important political issue, sometimes as important as recognition between closely interacting individuals.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of *nations* as partners to interaction these interactions occur on the international stage through, for example, national media, individual artists, or more directly through state or national political representatives. Honneth makes the case that the need for recognition on behalf of the citizens underlies how political actors perform their state tasks on the international level:

because political representatives must preserve legitimacy by acting as interpreters of the experiences and desires of their own respective citizenries, all encounters and relationships between states stand under

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Reinhard Wolf, "Prickly States? Recognition and Disrespect," in Lindemann and Ringmar, *The International Politics of Recognition*, 48.

moral pressure generated by a conflict over recognition.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of individuals and social groups' reactions to disrespect targeted towards the nation with which they identify and the pressure hence exerted on leaders, nations can be said to at least functionally "care" about receiving social recognition and reacting against perceived acts of disrespect.

As such, it is reasonable to propose that the nation, a mere abstract idea symbolically representative both of and for its constituent population of individuals, might also develop practical relations-to-self through the international struggle for recognition insofar as it is internalized by its citizenry and that on behalf of which state leaders fight to gain recognition. The development of the nation's practical relation-to-self in this case always refers, not to a construct of abstract ideas substantialized and reified into a singular 'nation,' but to the individual's own demand for recognition on behalf of their national identity and that of their compatriots. Individuals have a wide range of emotional stances towards their nation, from a strong identification with and internalization of official or hegemonic historical narratives to low levels of identification or even antipathy in the case of minority groups who feel marginalized, disrespected, or oppressed. The dissemination of dominant narratives in the service of constructing national identity is perhaps most notably conspicuous in the case of China. The following will provide a brief overview of China's official historical narrative of the process of becoming a modern state and this historical narrative's relation to the Chinese struggle for international recognition.

### III. Historical Narrative(s) and Chinese National Identity

The primary historical narrative used in the service of constructing a modern Chinese national identity begins with the circumstances surrounding the First Opium War in 1839 during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). Before the events of the First Opium War, China had developed an awareness of Western countries "opening markets" in East Asia, but this did not significantly influence their sinocentric model of the world, or *tianxia guan* (天下觀, View of all under Heaven).<sup>15</sup> After the Qing emperor demanded the British cease selling opium to Chinese traders, the British military captured fortresses from Hong Kong to Nanjing enforcing its will until the Chinese agreed to accept all terms for surrender. Such an act of disrespect can be said to correspond to, at least metaphorically, "violation of the body" and, like the

<sup>14</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Yao Dali 姚大力. "華夏邊緣'是怎樣被蠻夷化的" [How the 'Frontiers of the Huaxia' Were Barbarized] in *sixiang zhanxian*, 44, no. 1 (2018), 1.

denial of autonomy over one's own physical body "causes a degree of humiliation that impacts more destructively than other forms of respect on a person's practical relation-to-self."<sup>16</sup> Within China's historical consciousness the events following the First Opium War until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 is referred to as "the century of humiliation" (*bainian guochi* 百年國恥) and to this day carry a strong emotional weight.

The treaty of Nanjing (1842) inflicted further disrespect. Erik Ringmar describes the lack of recognition afforded to the Chinese with this treaty such that

China did not want to be a part of the European international system, but this was unacceptable to the Europeans who demanded access to Chinese markets. The Treaty of Nanjing stipulated the conditions on which this access would take place: mutual recognition was henceforth to be granted on Europe's terms... for China it meant that the country had to transform itself according to Europe's directions.<sup>17</sup>

This treaty and the subsequent Treaty of Tianjin (1858) corresponds to the second form of disrespect described by Honneth, that of "denial of rights" or "exclusion." The British, insofar as they unilaterally dictated the terms of the treaties withheld recognition of China as an intersubjective partner to interaction in legal relations, denying them "qualities that make participation in discursive will-formation possible" and the corresponding practical relation-to-self "self-respect." In future generations the Treaty of Nanjing would exist in the Chinese historical consciousness as the first of many "unequal treaties" which would symbolize the disrespect China was forced to endure and the injury to the Chinese people's identity. China was again forced to sue for peace after a modernized and nationalistic Japan invaded Manchuria and Shandong province in 1894-1895, signing yet another "unequal treaty."

After the Opium Wars and the first Sino-Japanese War a generation of progressive intellectuals such as Hu Shi 胡適 and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, motivated by both a sense of inferiority and resentment, would engage in formulating a national identity symbolized by the "New Culture Movement" (*xin wenhua yundong* 新文化運動). An inferiority complex regarding traditional Chinese culture manifested in accusations of the Confucian socio-political framework as one of the reasons for China's cultural, political, and

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<sup>16</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 133.

<sup>17</sup> Erik Ringmar "China's Place in Four Recognition Regimes," in *The International Politics of Recognition*, 12.



technological stagnation, with reformist figures like Yi Baisha 易白沙 and a young Liang Qichao 梁啟超 advocating adopting Western models of governance and education to replace the traditional Chinese models. In his journal *New Citizen* (*Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報) Liang proposed the idea of “destructionism” (*pohuai zhuyi* 破壞主意) in order to clear away the “thousands of years of corrupt and gentle doctrines”<sup>18</sup> for a ‘new citizen,’ which “included a strategy to criticize old traditional thought and absorb ideas of Western civilization.”<sup>19</sup> The idea of the “new citizen” represented an attempt on behalf of this collection of intrepid thinkers to transform the consciousness of the Chinese people and establish a new form of national identity.

The humiliation endured by China led intellectuals and political leaders “to abandon the high culture of the *tianxia* system for the base survival-driven nation-state worldview” and also fueled “the all-consuming fire needed for China to rise like a phoenix from the ashes and overcome the West on its quest for glory.”<sup>20</sup> Resentment toward the aforementioned “unequal treaties” was a particularly important driving force in the establishment of a modern nation-state, the Republic of China (ROC), and a newfound national identity. With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the disrespect represented by events of the previous hundred years would be utilized in the construction of national identity primarily articulated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Perhaps the most symbolic and frequently utilized representation of the sense of disrespect and demand for recognition internalized within Chinese national identity is the phrase “never forget national humiliation” (*wu wang guochi* 勿忘國恥).

Through the discourse of the struggle for recognition, the CCP’s official historical narrative can be interpreted as constructed primarily around resentment and disrespect. The denial of the first mode of recognition (violation to the body) is represented by the rulership of the non-Chinese Qing dynasty, the widescale opium addiction resulting from British opium trade, and Western and Japanese colonization and atrocities. Denial of the second mode of recognition (legal relations) is represented by the “unequal treaties” China was forced to sign by foreign powers and the United Nations not recognizing the PRC until 1971. Denial of the third mode of recognition (community of value) is symbolically represented by denigrating terms like

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<sup>18</sup> Liang Qichao, *Drinking Ice Room Collection Yinbing shi heji* 飲冰室合集, volume 4.

<sup>19</sup> Xi Zhiwu 席志武, “Destructionism: Liang Qichao’s Early Strategy for the New Citizen (破壞主意：梁啟超早期的新民策略)” *Dongfang luntan*, no. 2 (2014), 22.

<sup>20</sup> Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 77.

“the sick man of Asia”<sup>21</sup> (*dongya bingfu* 東亞病夫)<sup>22</sup> and accusations of human rights abuses by Western media and intergovernmental political organizations like the G7. The latter are widely seen within China as hypocritical and politically motivated attacks meant to subvert China’s moral standing on the international stage, and thus within the process of national identity formation, they serve as forms of misrecognition and denials of China’s potential contributions to the world community by marginalizing them outside of the dominant Western liberal democratic international system.

Reactions to each of these cases of disrespect can likewise be interpreted as demands for recognition, demands which are not only directed towards partners to interaction on the international stage, but also to the Chinese citizenry, affirming China’s rights and thereby affirming Chinese national identity. The PRC’s national anthem, for example, officially adopted in 1949, puts the previous one hundred years of invasion by foreign powers and the future of the Chinese people in terms of a life-and-death struggle: “when the Chinese people reach the most dangerous period, each person is compelled to give a final roar. Rise up, all the people with one mind face the artillery barrage of the enemy.” Such language can easily be interpreted in terms of the struggle for recognition as representing a resolve to fight for national self-determination, to engage in “a struggle, into which the attacked subject forces its partner to interaction, in order to demonstrate to the other the unconditionality of its will and thereby to prove that it is a person worthy of recognition.”<sup>23</sup> In the last two decades, the rearticulation of Chinese national identity has shifted significantly from narratives that are *primarily* oriented around victimization and resentment to those which project and affirm those qualities that make Chinese national identity unique and valuable. This new articulation of Chinese national identity can be interpreted according to recognition theory insofar as is at once much more forceful in its demands to not be disrespected and also promotes those characteristics which make Chinese national identity unique and valuable to the international community.

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<sup>21</sup> See Zhou Yingjie 周英傑. “The Misreading of “Sick Man of Asia” 被誤讀的“東亞病夫”, in *Da lishi de xiao qiemian- zhongguo jindai shi de linglei guancha, Small Cross-sections of Big History- An Alternative Examination of Modern Chinese History* (Guangxi Shifan daxue Chubanshe, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> The term “sick man of Asia” is misremembered by many within in China today as having been used by Westerners to mock the health and physical stature of Chinese people, and despite this not being historically accurate, is nevertheless still maintained within the Chinese historical memory as a great insult which thereby has effective power.

<sup>23</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 47

#### IV. The Demand of Recognition and the Rearticulation of Chinese National Identity

##### *Representations of Demands for Recognition in the Media*

Although nations may ultimately be “imagined communities,” they nevertheless possess effective power to the extent that individuals internalize what the nation signifies to them in the form of national identity. What informs one’s national identity may be a sense of shared culture, values, or historical consciousness, and thus when a nation is publicly disrespected, denied recognition, it can arouse a sense of both individual and *shared* hurt, anger, and urge for retribution. In a globalized world connected by the immediacy of the internet negotiating the struggle for recognition increasingly occurs in the public sphere, oriented around the indignation of citizens rather than by national leaders and politicians behind closed doors. Mass media thus serves as a battlefield of contestation, be it through news outlets, social media, or popular culture. The following will explore three examples of the contemporary rearticulation of Chinese national identity as it manifests in mass media.

##### A. Biden Administration First Meeting with Chinese Officials

From March 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> of 2021 Chinese officials met for the first time with officials from the newly elected Biden administration in Anchorage, Alaska. The preliminary meeting between the two administrations quickly became contentious as the American delegation made comments regarding a number of politically, culturally, and historically sensitive topics, such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea.<sup>24</sup> Central Committee Politburo member and director of foreign affairs Yang Jiechi 楊潔篪 responded,

The United States has no right to speak to China condescendingly and the Chinese people will not eat this set. Interacting with China must be conducted on the basis of mutual respect. History will prove that those who adopt the method of squeezing the throat of China will in the end be the ones who suffer.”

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew Lee and Mark Thiessen, “US, China spar in first face-to-face meeting under Biden,” in *APNews.com* (March 19, 2021), <<https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-alaska-antony-blinken-yang-jiechi-wang-yi-fc23cd2b23332fa8dd2d781bd3f7c178>>.

China's response represents an example of China's international strategy having changed from Deng Xiaoping's method of "keep a low profile and bide our time" (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光養晦) to a new era described by Xi Jinping as "an era in which China is getting closer to the center of the world stage, ceaselessly making contributions for humankind."<sup>25</sup> Rather than meekly accepting unequal agreements as during the 'hundred years of humiliation' or completely removing oneself from the Western- and Soviet-dominated international economic systems as during the Maoist years, China would now assert itself as a partner-to-interaction within the international legal/political community under the conditions of mutual respect and recognition

From state-run news outlets to netizens throughout China, what was perceived as America's disrespectful attitude was met with hostility and Yang Jiechi became somewhat of a national hero, portrayed as standing up for China's sovereignty and dignity. The phrase "the Chinese people will not eat this set" (*zhongguoren buchi zhe yi tao* 中國人不吃這一套) quickly became a meme, emblazoned on t-shirts, tote bags, phone covers, and cars in a wave of nationalistic pride. In direct relation to the unequal treaties, memes spread through the Chinese internet comparing China of one hundred years ago to China today in various forms. Many news outlets and blogs, for example, contrasted a photograph of the Qing government alongside foreign diplomats signing the 1901 "Final Protocol for the Settlement of the Disturbances" alongside a photograph of the 2021 Anchorage meeting with the headline "China is already not the China from one hundred years ago."<sup>26</sup> Wolf describes such cases of outrage and resentment from perceived disrespect on behalf of national identity as

Whoever disparages my group's values, achievements, or features calls into question my own feeling of self-worth to the extent that I share and take pride in those values, achievements, or features... Fervent nationalists, both within political elites and the public at large, will often react with outrage if other nationals insult their nation.<sup>27</sup>

Jiechi's acerbic response is a testament to the role national leaders play as representatives for the general population's demands for recognition.

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<sup>25</sup> "习近平在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告" in *people.cn*, (October 28, 2017), <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1028/c64094-29613660-2.html>>.

<sup>26</sup> 蘭琳宗 Lan Linzong, 两个辛丑年的对比刷屏背后：底气在这, in *thepaper.cn*, (March 20, 2021), <[https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_11802935](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_11802935)>.

<sup>27</sup> Wolf, "Prickly States?," 46.

What might be considered as ‘touchy overreactions’ by the Chinese state often surround perceived disrespect regarding sensitive elements of Chinese national identity which in large part relates to historical consciousness.

### B. Wall Street Journal and the ‘Sick Man of Asia’

Whereas the vocal reaction from Chinese political representatives in the above example was in the context of preliminary political negotiations, and thus might be interpreted as political and rhetorical one-upmanship in the service of practical instrumental ends, there are occasions in which acts of misrecognition incite strong reactions with less concern for pragmatic or utilitarian interests. Being largely informed by historical consciousness and narratives, national identities are particularly sensitive to perceived insults that carry reminders of periods of national insecurity, weakness, or humiliation. An article published by the Wallstreet Journal soon after the Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan entitled “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia”<sup>28</sup> prompted the Chinese government to revoke the press credentials of three Wallstreet Journal journalists and expel them from China. References to the “sick man of Asia” is not taken as an ordinary insult in China but is a reminder of what is considered by many Chinese as the bleakest period of their history, a period during which they were unable to defend themselves from foreign military incursions, had no voice in the international community and were forced to replace their Chinese cultural norms and traditions with those of the Manchus, West, and Japan. To use the vocabulary of the struggle for recognition, they were denied certain modes of recognition which prevented the development of practical relations-to-self in the forms of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem respectively. Furthermore, as this was an article in a foreign publication that cast aspersions on China’s handling of the epidemic and promoted global companies to “de-Sinicize” supply chains, it replicated the sense of being publicly disrespected, of being excluded from the international community of potential partners-to-interaction.

The Wall Street Journal editorial board expressed incredulity, responding to the Chinese government’s reaction “President Xi Jinping says China deserves to be treated as a great power, but on Wednesday his country expelled three Wall Street Journal reporters over a headline. Yes, a headline.”<sup>29</sup> Beyond the fact that a similar response to a racist or anti-Semitic

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<sup>28</sup> Walter Russel Mead, “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia,” in *The Wall Street Journal* (February 3, 2020), <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-the-real-sick-man-of-asia-11580773677>>.

<sup>29</sup> WJS Editorial Board, “Banished in Beijing,” in *The Wall Street Journal* (February 19, 2020), <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/banished-in-beijing-11582157934>>.

joke (“it was just a joke”) would be completely unacceptable in any serious American publication, their response and defense of the headline is testament to the unwillingness of much of Western media to recognize China according to any horizon of value, narrative, or terms of mutual recognition other than that of the Western liberal democratic variety. While China’s reaction was certainly that of a ‘prickly state,’ it is also precisely this unwillingness to engage with China as intersubjective partners-to-interaction that engenders much resentment within China and will likely perpetuate hostilities between China and the Western liberal democratic world.

### C. China’s Demand for Recognition of Particularity: My People, My Country

The struggle for recognition is most apparent in the form of conflicts in which resentment is expressed. A less obvious, yet equally important element of the struggle for recognition is also found in the expectation or demand that unique or particular characteristics, achievements, or abilities be recognized as valuable. The possibility of esteem or value being conferred onto that which makes one’s national culture particular or unique is likewise central in the construction of national identity. Yet along with affirmations of the value of that which is particularly Chinese by foreign nationals, those national ‘narratives of the self’ must also be validated internally for any rearticulation of Chinese national identity to resonate, and thus the Chinese citizenry must be convinced of their own value afforded to them on the basis of their national identity.

A shift from the articulation of Chinese national identity through the utilization of historical resentment toward that which places greater emphasis on positive and valuable achievements made by China as a modern nation-state has been particularly evident since China’s international “coming out” at the 2008 Olympics. The celebration of uniquely Chinese modern stories is used in this sense in the well-received movie “My People, My Country” (*wo he wode zuguo* 我和我的祖國), released in 2019 commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PRC. The film is comprised of seven short stories taking place between 1949 and 2015 which provoke national pride rather than resentment, or as Haiyan Huang notes, “in recent years, Chinese intellectuals and elites have freed themselves from decades-long focus on humiliation and start to acknowledge the achievements China has attained.”<sup>30</sup> While this film is an example of the way in which “Chinese national identity and nationalism propagated in the

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<sup>30</sup> Haiyan Huang, “How My People My Country Reconstructs Chinese National Identity,” in *Diggit Magazine* (October 20, 2020), <<https://www.diggitmagazine.com/academic-papers/my-people-my-country>>.

current age have shifted from traditional victimization and humiliation towards pride and happiness,"<sup>31</sup> these stories and the demands for recognition they represent all make both narrative and emotional sense only in the context of China's relationships with the international community. This occurs either directly, such as Shanghainese neighbors watching the Chinese women's volleyball team win gold at the 1984 Olympics and the handover of Hong Kong by the British to the PRC in 1997, or indirectly, such as the story of the sacrifices made by a scientist who worked on China's first atomic bomb.

The narrative of pride and achievement represents the mirror image of the victimization narrative within the formation of national identity. The latter constructs a Chinese national identity in contradistinction to the 'other' who denied recognition to China, thereby establishing a kind of negative identity, a "we who are against *them*" identity. The former, on the other hand, constructs a positive identity, a "we who represent these achievements and values" identity, but one which is also nevertheless always informed by the other insofar as those achievements and values are contextualized by those of the international community. Indeed, this articulation of a 'positive' national identity by ascribing virtues and values that were previously left unspecified in the phrase "socialism with Chinese characteristics" has been a central part of the "China Dream" (*zhongguo meng* 中國夢) project.

### *The China Dream*

The phrase "China Dream" began appearing in China around 2006 in blogs, television shows, and in printed state media, spurred on by the question "if America has the American Dream, what is the China Dream?"<sup>32</sup> General Secretary Xi Jinping 習近平 adopted this term to frame a long-term policy, using it in a 2012 speech entitled "Realizing the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation in the Coming Years is the Greatest Dream for the Chinese People."<sup>33</sup> Like Jiang Zemin 江澤民 and Hu Jintao 胡錦濤 before him, he used the term "rejuvenation" (*fuxing* 復興) to imply a sense of returning to the preeminent position of power and wealth China had when it sat at the center of *tianxia*, a memory consistently reproduced within Chinese historical consciousness. General Secretary Xi juxtaposed the current period of

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> See 南之默 Nan Zhimo, "meiguomeng yu zhongguomeng 美国梦与中国梦, in *China Daily* (July 16, 2010), <[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/jjzg/2006-11/29/content\\_745731.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/jjzg/2006-11/29/content_745731.htm)>.

<sup>33</sup> Xi Jinping 習近平, "實現中華民族偉大復興是中華民族近代以來最偉大的夢想," in *CPC News* (November 29, 2012), <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0717/c397563-27322292.html>>.



rejuvenation with the historical humiliation and bullying of the recent past to frame the China Dream:

The severe suffering and great sacrifices made by the Chinese people has rarely been seen in history, but the Chinese people never surrendered and continuously resisted and fought, finally taking hold of our own destiny and beginning the great process of building our own nation... After more than 170 years of continuous struggle since the Opium War, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has shown bright prospects.

The continual reminders of the bleakness of China's recent past, the achievements of today, and promises of the future is a powerful method of arousing triumphal nationalistic emotions, creating ever stronger shared bonds of national identity amongst the Chinese citizenry and the citizenry with the CCP. A sense of resentment engendered by negative experiences with the outside world being utilized internally to strengthen national identity, or in the case of the CCP to legitimate their position, is emphasized by Wang Zheng, who argues that Chinese leaders "utilize China's past history of humiliation to awaken people's historical consciousness and build cohesion"<sup>34</sup> "for the glorification of the party, for the consolidation of national identity, and for the justification of the political system of the CCP's one-party rule."<sup>35</sup>

The 'other' is certainly an important element within the construction of any identity, yet interpreting the function of the 'other' within the development of national identity as exclusively oriented around internal political needs disregards the importance of the *intersubjective* struggle for recognition within the formation of identity. Identity is not constructed in a vacuum, and the China Dream narrative which informs the new articulation of Chinese national identity likewise requires recognition by external or foreign actors to have currency. The interplay between bestowing recognition and the demand for recognition is present in the conceptual life of "China Dream" itself. As noted, it was originally formulated in reaction to the notion of the American Dream, indicating China's recognition of some positive characteristic of another nation, an equivalent of which it sought in itself. Books adopting 'the Chinese dream' in their titles were published by foreign

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<sup>34</sup> Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 117.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

publishing houses from 2008 onwards<sup>36</sup> and the term was adopted by American journalist Thomas Friedman in 2012.<sup>37</sup> This element of Chinese national identity being publicly recognized by a high profile foreigner led the Chinese media to proudly celebrate, presenting it as “from [within China] to abroad... the ‘China dream’ has become a hot topic.”<sup>38</sup> A month later General Secretary Xi Jinping gave his 2012 speech formally establishing the China Dream within Chinese national identity and the ideological landscape. The celebration within China of foreigners recognizing Chinese achievements is not merely a form of vanity or pride in the nation’s accomplishments but is necessary for self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem regarding national identity. These acts of recognition serve as a precondition for a sense that one’s nation has something to contribute, and more importantly is *able* to contribute on the international level rather than being silenced or ignored.

The China Dream phenomenon not only expresses itself in passively waiting for other’s esteem but insofar as misrecognition or denial of recognition for particular claims to identity is destructive to practical relations-to-self, it “can provide the motivational impetus for social resistance and conflict, indeed, for a struggle for recognition.”<sup>39</sup> Like Hegel’s Master-Slave analogy, that violent conflict may ensue if a subject’s demands go unmet hold particularly true for those who have been denigrated in the past. In a speech at the centennial anniversary of the founding of the CCP in July 2021 Xi reiterated the “rejuvenation” of China and historical memory:

After the Opium War in 1840 China progressively became semi-colonial and semi-feudal. The country was deceived, the people met with disaster, and its civilization was turned to dust... Since then realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has become the greatest dream of the Chinese people.<sup>40</sup>

Distinguishing this speech from that of 2012, however, was an even stronger emphasis on China’s relation to the international community in the

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<sup>36</sup> See Neville Mars and Adrian Hornsby, *The Chinese Dream – A Society under Construction* (Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers, 2008) and Helen H. Wang, *The Chinese Dream: The Rise of the World’s Largest Middle Class and What It Means to You* (Bestseller Press, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Friedman, “China Needs Its Own Dream,” in *The New York Times* (October 2, 2012), <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/opinion/friedman-china-needs-its-own-dream.html>>.

<sup>38</sup> Ye Zaichun 葉再春, “Thoughts on the China Dream” 中國夢“隨想, *qianxian*, no. 1 (2013), 58.

<sup>39</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 132.

<sup>40</sup> Xi Jinping, 在庆祝中国共产党成立100周年大会上的讲话, in gov.cn, (July 1, 2021), <[http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-07/01/content\\_5621847.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-07/01/content_5621847.htm)>.

form of a more forceful demand for recognition and declarations of its unique contributions, that is, demands to be respected within a community of values, or solidarity. Examples of this within Xi's speech include:

The Communist Party of China and the Chinese people solemnly declare to the world with brave and tenacious struggle that the Chinese people have stood up and the era of the Chinese nation being slaughtered and bullied is gone forever!

China has always been a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development, and a defender of international order!

The Chinese people are people who uphold justice and are not afraid of violence. The Chinese nation is a nation with a strong sense of national pride and self-confidence. The Chinese people have never bullied, oppressed, or enslaved people of other countries... At the same time, the Chinese people will never allow any foreign forces to bully, oppress, or enslave us.

The influence of problematic relationships with the West, Japan, the USSR, and other states can be seen quite clearly in the development of China and Chinese national identity from the Opium wars onward. To treat this as a one-sided process, however, is to disregard how the formation of identity and self-realization is preconditioned by the establishment of relations of mutual recognition. If we are to gain any insight or benefit by the use of this Hegelian framework, the phenomena surrounding China's rearticulation of national identity must be understood as also a need and a demand that China be recognized on the international stage, no longer by the legal, financial, and political institutions devised and enforced by the West, but by institutions in which they have a say, no longer misrecognized by the outdated stereotypes which humiliate and denigrate like "sick man," "backwards," or "despotic," but by those particular "Chinese characteristics" which can make contributions to the world.

### *Tianxia system*

The struggle for recognition is in part defined by the demand for equal participation within a community of partners to interaction, a common field within which intersubjective recognition in the form of legal relations is

contested, conferred, and claimed, and an increasingly unified horizon of values is formed between subjects. China having been historically denied equal participation in the international community is symbolized most strikingly by the “unequal treaties” and the UN refusing membership to the PRC until 1971. The world order dominated by the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R (first world nations) was criticized by Mao Zedong 毛澤東 in his “Three World Theory” (*sange shijie de lilun* 三個世界的理論) and China reacted by participating Non-Aligned Movement as an alternative to the UN. With China’s diplomatic strategy oriented around fostering relationships with developing nations, “it was easier for China to gain recognition under this alternative description. When Prime Minister Zhou Enlai presented himself at the first meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Bandung in April 1955, he was treated as a figure of world-historical significance.”<sup>41</sup> While today China is a permanent member of the UN’s security council and enjoys a great deal of power within the international community, the resentment toward a system that is seen as favoring one part of the world (the West) and its allies and disregards much of the rest maintains a strong presence within the national ideology. The desire to transform the international system of legal relations such that recognition be conferred more equitably can be found perhaps most directly in the form of the popular “*tianxia* system.”

The notion of *tianxia*, or “all under Heaven” which served as the ancient Sino-centric model of the world for millennia has enjoyed a renaissance in recent decades since Zhao Tingyang’s 趙汀陽 publications on the subject. Unlike the traditional notion, however, Zhao describes *tianxia* as not only a socio-political worldview and ideology, but a framework for international relations intended to provide an overarching identity beyond that of national or even civilizational, but a “world” identity. Zhao says of *tianxia*:

*Tianxia* defines the “world” in a categorical framework and an irreducible unit of reflection used to think about and explain political-cultural life and institutions. It implies a methodology that is completely distinct from Western methodology.<sup>42</sup>

With this concept, Zhao proposes a new way of thinking about the international community and its individual nations in which identity does not go beyond national borders. As such it represents a way of thinking about international order insofar as “its importance is expressed in the way this

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<sup>41</sup> Ringmar, “China’s Place in Four Recognition Regimes,” 54.

<sup>42</sup> Zhao Tingyang 趙汀陽, 天下體系：世界制度哲學導論 *The System of Tianxia: A Philosophical Introduction to a World Institution* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005), 46.

philosophical concept creates a 'yardstick for the world' and creates the possibility to measure large scale problems that cannot be measured using the concepts of nation of country."<sup>43</sup>

Such themes of collective world identity, a reformulation of more equal legal relations, and a unified horizon of values can also be found in the teleological model for international relations proposed by Alexander Wendt, the endpoint of which he refers to as the "World State." Whereas Hegel limits the formation of overarching collective identities produced through the struggle for recognition between individuals within a state, Wendt argues that this does not go far enough, and that "the struggle for recognition between states will have the same outcome as that between individuals, collective identity formation and eventually a state."<sup>44</sup> There are several important similarities between Wendt's description of a world state achieved through the struggle for recognition and Zhao's notion of *tianxia*. In the interest of creating equal legal relations between the world state's member nations, Wendt proposes the establishment of institutions similar to those found in Western models. Zhao, on the other hand, proposes establishing equal legal relations through traditional Confucian concepts and authority figures like the Duke of Zhou, who advocated a system of relations between the states such that "*tianxia* is viewed as shared property and that *tianxia* functions as the guarantor of the security and benefits for every state and household."<sup>45</sup> According to Wendt, achieving a world state would require global sovereignty in the form of a 'universal supranational authority,' thereby providing a Weberian 'monopoly of legitimate force.' Zhao again uses an ancient Chinese idea in the form of "the Son of Heaven" (*tianzi* 天子), which is related to *tianxia* insofar as "they both form the theoretical foundation for *tianxia*/empire, *tianxia* being primarily a world institution concept and the Son of Heaven being primarily a world government concept."<sup>46</sup> Perhaps most important for both thinkers, however, is the emphasis on a global collective identity. For Wendt an overarching collective identity and the world state which conditions it is the inevitable outcome of the teleologically dialectic struggle for recognition, while for Zhao an overarching world identity is presented not as inevitable, but as a practical curative to the central problem of "how do we develop from a place of universal conflict to that of universal cooperation?"<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Why a World State is Inevitable," in *European Journal of International Relations*, 9, no. 4 (2003), 493.

<sup>45</sup> Zhao Tingyang, *All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, trans. by Joseph E. Haroff (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 68.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.

While the notion of establishing an overarching world collective identity is admirably sanguine and optimistic, it is also highly problematic. This, however, is perhaps not such a problem for Zhao, for it appears the formulation of a new institution for public relations and “world identity” may not be the primary intention of the *tianxia* system. While it does provide a framework for international legal relations and global security, it, more importantly, offers a vision for Chinese national identity, both of which correspond to the resentment felt within China’s historical consciousness due to having been denied equal legal relations within the international system and community of values. In proposing a new way of thinking about world order according to traditional Chinese concepts it is an attempt to replace or at least influence Western modes of thinking about international relations with those particular to China. Furthermore, adopting traditional concepts and expressions of a Chinese vision of world order is important for the rearticulation of Chinese identity because

the historical significance of ‘rethinking about China’ lies in attempting to recover China’s ability to think, allowing China to start thinking again, reconstruct our own thinking framework and fundamental notions, recreate our own worldview, value set, and methodology, reconsider ourselves and the world, and to consider ideas about China’s prospects and future and our use and duties in the world.<sup>48</sup>

The *tianxia* system represents a need to reconsider China’s role in the international community and, as it pertains to recognition theory, it also reflects the demand for greater recognition of Chinese national identity on the international stage. As Zhang Feng 張鋒 notes “from Zhao’s works one can also glimpse the rising intellectual tide among Chinese scholars in rethinking China’s international role. Zhao’s project itself remains incomplete. But it has at least succeeded in stirring up a Chinese imagining of the future world order.”<sup>49</sup>

## V. Conclusion

The articulation of any national identity must always be done in relation to the international community or particular members within it as

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Zhang Feng 張鋒, “The Tianxia system: World Order in a Chinese Utopia,” in *Global Asia*, 4, no. 4 (2010), <[https://www.globalasia.org/v4no4/book/the-tianxia-system-world-order-in-a-chinese-utopia\\_zhang-feng](https://www.globalasia.org/v4no4/book/the-tianxia-system-world-order-in-a-chinese-utopia_zhang-feng)>.

identity must always be constructed against an ‘other.’ Likewise, the China Dream, examples from the Chinese media, and the *tianxia* system mentioned above might be more coherently interpreted as not *only* attempts to enhance China’s international influence but also as manifestations of the struggle for recognition insofar as it orients the rearticulation of Chinese national identity. Not only is national identity constructed around historical narratives as Wodak and others argue, but these narratives themselves are conditioned upon and operate within the continuous struggle for recognition in contradistinction, comparison, and community with an ‘other.’ Understanding these conditions upon which national identity is constructed may help to both alleviate pathological tendencies as well as appreciate the solidarity and community that comes with being a part and product of a nation, an aspect of our identity which is both constructed and thus ‘imaginary,’ yet emotionally effective and thus ‘real.’ Identification with the constellation of meaning or values represented by the idea of one’s nation is a part of national identity construction, yet a lack of critical awareness of these meanings and values internalized through the socialization process can lead to *over*-identification. This often expresses itself in pathological tendencies like nationalism and xenophobia, such as the 2012 anti-Japanese protests throughout China after an incident involving the contested the Diaoyu Islands 釣魚島, the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea justified by Russia according to historical and ethnic nationalistic claims, and the 2021 storming of the Capital in Washington D.C. during which American nationals regarded other American nationals as the ‘enemy other.’ Unhealthy relationships with national identity stemming from *over*-identification can also express themselves in very different, yet equally unhealthy pathological tendencies, such as inferiority complexes or oikophobia.

Such an inferiority complex is to this day present in China, evident in the existence of phrases used to derisively describe Chinese nationals who, for example, “revere foreign things and pander to foreigners” (*chongyang meiwai* 崇洋媚外) and for whom “the moon in foreign countries is rounder than in China” (*waiguo de yueliang bi zhongguo yuan* 外國的月亮比中國圓). This in part stems from the Qing dynasty during which the Chinese attitude towards Western “barbarians” went from contempt, to fear, and eventually, as Lu Xun wrote in his 1934 essay “we no longer boast of ourselves nor believe in the League of Nations... we have nostalgia for the past and suffer in the present.”<sup>50</sup> Scholars and officials like Guo Songtao’s 郭嵩燾<sup>51</sup> portrayal of

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<sup>50</sup> Lu Xun 魯迅, “Have the Chinese people Lost Their Self-Confidence” 中国人失掉自信力了吗.

<sup>51</sup> See Guo Songtao 郭嵩燾, *lundun yu bali riji* 倫敦與巴黎日記 (Diaries From London and Paris) in which Guo bemoans what he perceives as the loss of Chinese moral principles.



traditional culture as degraded and Liang Qichao's claims that "Confucian autocracy" has led China to its current state are expressions of the lack of basic self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem resulting from their abuse, exclusion, and denigration during the 'century of humiliation.' After the reform movement of the 1980's and China's "economic miracle," pride in China's history and uniquely "Chinese" heritage has led to a stronger sense of basic self-confidence, respect, and esteem, and therefore a healthier national identity. It certainly may be true that the CCP is encouraging historical resentment towards the West and Japan, dangerously flirting with unleashing a widespread nationalistic frenzy to bolster its own legitimacy. It is also the case, however, that the current rearticulation of Chinese national identity is in a sense resolving an equally pathological inferiority complex caused by the denial of that "vital human need," recognition.

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