

Paolo A. Bolaños

What is Critical Theory?

*Max Horkheimer and the Makings of the Frankfurt School Tradition*¹

Recognizing the Question

This paper is a modest attempt to answer the question “What is Critical Theory?” I recognize the importance and difficulty of this task. Offering an adequate, yet far from definitive, answer to the question will set the tone for an adequate understanding of Critical Theory. Laying down some guideposts is important for this task, especially if Critical Theory is still at its initial stages of appropriation in the Philippines. Answering the question is difficult because Critical Theory has itself evolved into a cacophony of various voices,² making the task of laying

¹An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Philosophical Association of the Visayas and Mindanao International Conference on Critical Theory, May 27-29, 2010, Silliman University, Dumaguete City, Philippines.

²Today, the name Critical Theory has a more encompassing connotation. Apart from the members of the Frankfurt School in Germany, there emerged in France, almost simultaneously, a number of intellectuals who were also concerned with social realities and whose basic tenets could parallel those of the Frankfurt School, e.g., Claude Levi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, and, more recently, Jacques Rancière, Etienne Balibar, and Alain Badiou. Also, in recent decades the writings of the Italians Antonio Negri and Giorgio Agamben and the Slovenian Slavoj Žižek have inspired contemporary debates in social and political philosophy. Moreover, beyond its European philosophical variants, and especially in Anglo-American academic circles after the Second World War, the use of the term Critical Theory has spread to major disciplines such as literary criticism, art

down basic tenets—common conceptual trajectories and political goals—quite a challenge. But since the question—*What is Critical Theory?*—itself presupposes a context, the task of my paper is basically the attempt to contextualize a particular form of engagement with social reality. That is what Critical Theory is basically—an engagement with social reality. It is nevertheless only one among the many ways we engage with social reality—and so the more precise question we should be asking is: what kind of engagement with social reality is Critical Theory?

I will offer a very tentative and schematic answer to the question. I will do this by drawing on some of the ideas of someone whom we may perhaps refer to as the “Father” of Critical Theory: Max Horkheimer (1895-1973). By the mere mention of the name Horkheimer and relating it to Critical Theory, it is already obvious that my paper presupposes that Critical Theory is a philosophical tradition that sprung from the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) established by the wealthy Felix Weil in Frankfurt am Main in Germany and where Horkheimer became a very influential director in 1930. As director of the Institute for Social Research, Horkheimer was instrumental in conceiving and sustaining what is known today as Frankfurt School style Critical Theory.³

history, cultural studies, film studies, media studies, sociology, anthropology, and political science.

³Perhaps it is also important to note that Critical Theory as literary critics understand it has a separate history from that of the Frankfurt School. But somehow there is an intertwining of these histories in the 1970s. Critical theory in literary criticism was originally a reaction in the 1960s against the New Criticism that was prevalent in Anglo-American literary theory during the 1920s to the 1960s. New Criticism sought to read literary texts from a purist standpoint, sans the consideration of the external circumstances that contribute to the writing of texts, especially the socio-historico-political contingencies that make up the texts, e.g., biography, the intention of the author, and the response of the reader. It is this insular attitude towards texts that separated the New critics from, then, a newer breed of literary theorists

I think that it is worthwhile to revisit the origin of the term in Horkheimer's 1937 essay "Traditional and Critical Theory"⁴ so that we may lay down the basic presuppositions of the program he envisioned for the Institute for Social Research. This, then, will provide a basic idea of a Critical Theory of society that is characteristic of the Frankfurt School and, more specifically, characteristic of the works of the first generation of critical theorists, such as, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Horkheimer himself. There are, of course, the second generation (represented by Habermas) and the third generation (represented by Honneth), but they also refer back to Horkheimer's seminal essay despite their misgivings of early Critical Theory.

I will basically do two things. First, I will present the basic idea of Critical Theory by reconstructing the basic presuppositions Horkheimer laid down in "Traditional and Critical Theory." The main point, which will hopefully become clearer in the course of my discussion, is the relation between philosophical thinking and society: how do we engage with reality from a theoretico-practical standpoint. It should be made clear that my purpose is far from reductionist—I am not arguing that Critical Theory, as a model of social criticism, is only exclusive to the proponents of the Frankfurt School. Rather, I wish only to

who emerged in the 1960s. The latter theorists attacked the New critics for their lack of attention to the poetic and political dimension of literary texts. These anti-formalist theorists began to incorporate elements from structuralism, semiotic and linguistic theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and neo-Marxism. Perhaps, more refined examples of anti-formalist theory, especially the marriage of literary and political criticism, which appeared in recent decades, are found in the writings of Edward Said, Frederic Jameson, and Terry Eagleton, to name but a few.

⁴Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1989).

show that the point of origin is Horkheimer's programmatic 1937 essay. Second, I will present a preliminary note on the possible appropriation of Critical Theory, as a form of social and philosophical critique, in the diagnosis of social pathologies in the country. My proposal will involve a somewhat ambitious shift in the way we understand and practice philosophy against the backdrop of what I refer to below as the "crisis of appropriation" here in the Philippines.

Traditional versus Critical Theory

In "Traditional and Critical Theory," Horkheimer speaks of this shift in philosophy in the way "theory" is understood, a shift which entails the reevaluation of the role of philosophizing or of theory making. What Horkheimer had in mind when he assumed Directorship of the Institute for Social Research in the early 1930s is the collective integration of the methodological and critical resources of various disciplines from the social sciences. The theoretical focus of the Institute under Horkheimer's watch radically shifted from the somewhat scientific or empirical Marxism of Carl Grünberg, the first director of the Institute, to a more interdisciplinary program that incorporated the methods of economics, psychology, history, and philosophy. Horkheimer's Institute was to become more openly attuned to the German philosophical tradition beyond Marxism, that is to say, the tradition stemming from Kant, German romanticism, Hegel, down to the works of their contemporaries Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin. Moreover, the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis is also substantive. In contradistinction to Grünberg, Horkheimer's notion of theory is more eclectic and encompassing. But this envisioned interdisciplinary model of critique is not a simple integration of various disciplinary methods; rather, as we shall see later, Horkheimer had a specific program in mind.

Horkheimer distinguishes a particular mode of critical discourse of society from what he refers to as

“traditional theory” predominant in the natural and social sciences in bourgeois society of his time that extends to our day. Horkheimer’s program was, in part, the recovery of theory from “closed philosophical systems.”⁵ This placed Critical Theory, especially during its formative years from the 1930s-1940s, in a position where it was constantly differentiating itself from and aligning itself with other philosophical positions. Because of Horkheimer’s aversion to closed philosophical systems that ignore the social and historical bases of knowledge formation, Critical Theory, Martin Jay notes, “was expressed through a series of critiques of other thinkers and philosophical traditions.”⁶ Horkheimer’s vision was to reinstitute a Critical Theory of society that dialectically engages with the changing currents in society and the philosophical tradition, beyond the confines of scientific Marxism, that is to say, he sought the integration of philosophy and social critique. The very openness, and perhaps one could say universality, of Horkheimer’s formulation has resulted not only in the development of Frankfurt School Critical Theory as we know it today, but also to a myriad of strands of *critical theories* that emerged especially after the Second World War which, one way or the other, are inspired by the basic call for the integration of philosophy and social criticism. The eclecticism of Critical Theory was not simply a rehearsal of the philosophical tradition, but, rather, a sustained reevaluation of the tradition. So, rather than a theoretical groping, the reevaluation of these philosophers and their recasting meant the reorientation of theory to its very own self-understanding. For example, Horkheimer, in his inaugural address “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research” delivered in 1931, bluntly admonishes that those who interpret the Spirit as some sort of quintessential

⁵Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (California: University of California Press, 1996), 41.

⁶Ibid.

principle that slices history and intervenes in human activity seriously misrepresent Hegel; while those who reduce society to the economy while ignoring the psychical and cultural life of human beings have a misguided idea of Marx's insights.⁷ Under Horkheimer's directorship, there was a deliberate movement away from scientific Marxism that characterized the thrust of the Institute during its first decade under Carl Grünberg. It is beyond scientific Marxism, that Horkheimer, together with an extraordinary group of intellectuals (Adorno, Pollock, Lowenthal, Fromm, Neumann, Marcuse), sought to reevaluate the philosophical tradition with new eyes. This did not mean the total rejection of Marxism, but, rather, the recasting of the ideas of Marx. Marx, however, would now be joined by a diverse array of thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Weber, and Freud, to name but a few. This new openness to other philosophical trends would also be corroborated by Horkheimer's program of an interdisciplinary Critical Theory. On the whole, the task of Critical Theory under the Institute's new leadership is the overcoming of the divorce between Absolute Spirit (Hegel) and reality, that is, between the psychical and the material conditions of human existence by means of a dialectical interweaving of these two spheres.

Horkheimer lays down at least three normative assumptions in "Traditional and Critical Theory": 1) the anthropological turn, 2) man's emancipation from slavery and the abolition of social injustice, and 3) the critical perception or description of tensions that exist immanently within societal systems, resulting in a shift from a class-based critique to a kind of social critique that goes beyond any social class.

⁷Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, trans. G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer and John Torpey (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993), 12.

The anthropological turn. Horkheimer attempts to draw a theoretical distinction between “traditional” theory and “critical” theory on the basis of their normative and practical goals. While traditional theory, an approach predominant in the natural and social sciences, is based on the modern valorization of mathematical procedures instigated, partly, by Descartes in his *Discourse on Method*, Critical Theory, on the other hand, “has for its object men as producers of their own historical way of life in its totality.”⁸ In contrast to traditional theory, which regards the social basis of scientific inquiry as external to itself, Critical Theory focuses on “real situations” or social and historical factors that condition the possibility of scientific inquiry in the first place. Here, Horkheimer emphasizes the *anthropological* basis, the first assumption, of the mode of questioning of Critical Theory: “Every datum depends not on nature alone but also on the power man has over it.”⁹ This means that Critical Theory takes seriously anthropological factors that traditional theory takes for granted, e.g., the perspectival basis of the questions, the nature of the questions themselves, and the nature of the resulting answers. In a more Nietzschean gloss, Critical Theory is emphatically concerned with the link between knowledge and human interests (material, social, economic, and ideological). Adorno and Horkheimer develop this Nietzschean line of argument in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, highlighting the human propensity to master and dominate the surrounding environment by means of rationality. In other words, the Critical Theory proposed by Horkheimer is Nietzschean in spirit because it aims to expose the non-rational factors behind human rationality, thereby revealing the subterranean origins of philosophical and scientific discourse. For Horkheimer, all these factors “bear witness to human activity and the degree of man’s power.”¹⁰ Through the anthropological

⁸Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 244.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

turn, the social, political, psychological, and cultural dimensions of life are regarded as grounds for critical analyses. Horkheimer also declares that Critical Theory is based on a “self-reproducing totality”¹¹ announcing its materialist orientation; he follows a Marxist conception of society, by highlighting the material unity of the myriad parts of society, the inherent tensions between these parts, and the role of the historical agent to instigate immanent change within the system.¹² The study of a self-reproducing totality, that is, of society, called for an investigative method that would account for the various contradictory units that constitute the complexity of society without reducing the society into formal mathematical coordinates. In light of this, Horkheimer further sees his program of an interdisciplinary study of society as fulfilling this analytical requirement that counters the predominance of mathematics or what he terms positivism: “a mathematically formulated universal science” that “assures the calculation of the probable occurrence of all events.”¹³ Horkheimer sought the

¹¹Ibid., 242.

¹²John E. Grumley, *History and Totality: Radicalism from Hegel to Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 58.

¹³Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 138. Horkheimer takes issue with the gulf separating philosophy, which constructs “theories beyond the reach of the empirical sciences,” and specialized scientific disciplines, which “split up into a thousand partial questions, culminating in a chaos of countless enclaves of specialists.” With these shortcomings of both philosophy and the sciences in mind, Horkheimer envisions a brand of social philosophy that overcomes this division of labor through “the idea of a continuous, dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and specialized scientific praxis.” What this entails, however, is not simply the emendation of protocols of research, but, rather, a situation wherein the empirical sciences take their cue from theoretical philosophy; while theoretical philosophy, in turn, becomes more open to the results of empirical research. Horkheimer suggests that the task of an organized interdisciplinary group of researchers (philosophers,

liberation of social philosophy from the clutches of classical or formalist philosophy that, he supposed, was being possessed by the blinders of abstract thinking. As opposed to the a-historical and universalist claims to knowledge proliferated by positivism, Critical Theory reorients itself to the social sphere, within which human activity and the contingencies of history take place. Inasmuch as the ontological *terminus a quo* of Critical Theory is the social sphere, its claims to knowledge will never be final.

The emancipation from slavery and the abolition of social injustice. Alongside this shift from the mathematical to the anthropological, Critical Theory, for Horkheimer, does not deny the fact that, like Marxism, it enacts a political claim, which brings us to his second assumption: "man's emancipation from slavery"¹⁴ and the "abolition of social injustice."¹⁵ In this context, the normative claim of Critical Theory is grounded in human *potentiality* and *liberation*: the potentiality of men to create and recreate themselves in society which presupposes an appeal to an idea of human liberation which does not necessarily entail total freedom.¹⁶ The emancipation of men from slavery

sociologists, economists, historians, and psychologists) is "to pursue their larger philosophical questions on the basis of the most precise scientific methods, to revise and refine their questions in the course of their substantive work, and to develop new methods without losing sight of the larger context." See Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 9-10.

¹⁴Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 246.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁶Herbert Marcuse, for instance, maintains that Critical Theory defends "the endangered and victimized potentialities of man against cowardice and betrayal" and "makes explicit what was always the foundation of its categories: the demand that through the abolition of previously existing material conditions of existence the totality of human relations be liberated." "Philosophy and Critical Theory," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: The Penguin Press, 1968), 145.

and the abolition of social injustice constitute the practical aspect of this mode of theorizing. In the context of capitalist society, such a practical goal is only possible when capitalism itself is radically restructured from within, that is to say, when the actors within a capitalist society are able to recognize and question the existence of human slavery and social injustice that result from the system's reified articles of faith. In this context, critique is done immanently in the sense that a comparison between the professed principles, norms, and ideals of a society, on the one hand, and how they are actually manifested in current social practices, on the other hand, can be done. Put another way, the actualization of human potentialities is only possible under certain societal structural conditions—e.g., the radical democratization of capitalism—and that the abolition of social injustice is only possible when these conditions are met.

It is important to note that Horkheimer's characterization of the anthropological basis of Critical Theory, while in a way still rooted in a Marxist critique of alienation,¹⁷ is a conscious movement away from the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, that is, from a notion of alienation and emancipation inspired by the labor movement, to which a somewhat scientific Marxism lends itself. Despite this decisive shift on Horkheimer's part, early Critical Theory is, nonetheless, profoundly indebted to Marxist social criticism, more specifically, via Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1920), specifically to the anti-determinist and anti-positivist stance of this particular work that ran against the status quo of orthodox Marxism in the 1920s.¹⁸

¹⁷For a succinct discussion of the Marxist influence on early Critical Theory, see David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 40-44.

¹⁸See *Ibid.*, 20-21.

The shift from a class-based critique to a kind of social critique that goes beyond any social class. The third assumption of Horkheimer is the decentralization of the role of the proletariat in his version of Critical Theory; the shift is from a *class-based* critique of society to a more encompassing and culturally oriented struggle for emancipation. This shift from a predominantly economic outlook on society to a broader socio-cultural sphere marks the Hegelian influence on early Critical Theory, which is largely due to Lukács' Hegelian reading of Marx. However, in contradistinction to Lukács, who understood historical materialism as having no meaning outside the struggle of the proletariat,¹⁹ Horkheimer asserts that there is no social class that could ultimately guide social theory, because "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."²⁰ It is important that Horkheimer points out that every social stratum is susceptible to ideology inasmuch as every social stratum also has the propensity for self-reflection and emancipation. This, of course, poses serious difficulties for Horkheimer's own position—for, in trying to broaden the sphere of social emancipation, including bourgeois discourse that includes the discourse of theoreticians like Horkheimer, Critical Theory had to struggle to reconcile the ideological tendency of knowledge and its disavowal of the same, that is, it had to justify its normative claim of a critical standpoint that is able to present a more objective or honest appraisal of social pathologies while guarding itself from the aforementioned ideological tendency. The early critical theorists were, of course, openly aware of this difficulty; e.g., the notion of "negative dialectics" was developed by Adorno to precisely address this problem. All revisionists thinking are, after all, susceptible to various forms of theoretical difficulties. Despite this, one of the aims of

¹⁹See *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁰Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 242.

Horkheimer's vision of Critical Theory is the reorientation of the masses to the historical foundation of all human activities and to show that "the idea of a reasonable organization of society that will meet the needs of the whole community, are immanent in human work but are not correctly grasped by individuals or by the common mind."²¹ Emancipation, therefore, begins with this realization; however, for Horkheimer, this evokes not simply the emancipation of the proletariat, but, rather, the possible emancipation of each individual regardless of class. In other words, a Critical Theory of society should always be oriented with the ongoing changes in the material conditions of society; aligning oneself to a single class (proletariat or otherwise) results in a myopic vision of society. "Even to the proletariat," Horkheimer writes, "the world superficially seems quite different than it really is."²² This is not, however, a simple displacement of the proletariat; Lukács' influence is still evident inasmuch as the image of the proletariat as locus of the emancipatory impulse provides a model for a critique of society grounded in such emancipatory impulse. This is still Horkheimer's point of departure. However, early Critical Theory ramifies from the Lukácsian model in, at least, two interrelated ways: first is the expansion of the emancipatory impulse by locating it in groups aside from the proletariat and, second, is the emphatic theorization of the experiences of those who are affected by the pathologies bred within the capitalist form of life, but who are not able to theorize themselves precisely because the conditions do not allow them.²³ With this preoccupation

²¹Ibid., 213.

²²Ibid., 214.

²³This basic tenet of early Critical Theory is rehearsed in the project of Axel Honneth, who develops a theoretico-practical notion of social recognition based on the experience of social pathologies, such as disrespect and misrecognition. See, for instance, the arguments laid down in his *The Struggle for*

with the age-old problem of social representation, Critical Theory assumes the position of a comprehensive social critique. Horkheimer further argues that too much reliance on the revolutionary force of the proletariat results in a false optimism, a “happy feeling being linked with an immense force,” that, when shattered in defeat, turns into an ungrounded pessimism about the redemptive forces in society.²⁴ The task of a critical theorist is not simply to align himself or herself to a single class in society or simply indulge in describing the psychological behavior of a particular group, but, rather, to show that each class, category, or system in society carries within itself the very structural opposition or contradiction that brings about its eventual collapse. But, ultimately, for Horkheimer, the prediction of this collapse, along with the dialectical conflicts that come with it, can be understood by the critical theorist “as a process of interactions in which awareness comes to flower along with its liberating but also its aggressive forces which incite while also requiring discipline.”²⁵ The perception of the structural tension immanent within a social system or discourse could be viewed as a redemptive force, whereby the awareness of an agent is the critical nudge that opposes itself to the defenders of the status quo and to the culture of conformism. More importantly, Critical Theory, in this context, becomes its own self-reflective critique. On the one hand, Horkheimer’s proposed program, as a critique of a complex rationalized society, sought to be interdisciplinary by bringing together the discourses of the social sciences and the humanities, with the hope that such rapprochement is able to provide a more comprehensive analysis of society without being blind to the reality of ideology, power, and social injustice. On the other hand, it was a program that was critical of the supposed

Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts, trans. by Joel Anderson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995).

²⁴Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 214.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 215.

“objectivity” or “neutrality” claimed by traditional theories that ignore actual historical facts.

Critical Theory and the Crisis of Appropriation in the Philippines

Frankfurt School Critical Theory, as we gather from the above discussion, occupies, to my mind, a curious space in the current philosophical circles in the Philippines. For while there is a remarkably small amount of Filipino scholars taking the works of philosophers, such as, Erich Fromm and Jürgen Habermas seriously, they are unfortunately not read against the backdrop of these philosopher’s proper intellectual lineage—that is to say, against the backdrop of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. While we are taught concepts, such as, “existential alienation” (Fromm) and “communicative reason” (Habermas), there is, however, a failure to put these concepts within their proper intellectual historical context. The unfortunate upshot of de-emphasizing or neglecting intellectual history is that we become familiar with philosophical concepts that remain inert, ending in deflated and even sanitized appropriations—e.g., reading Fromm simply as an existentialist or Habermas simply as a philosopher of intersubjectivity. The situation is, of course, more complicated. Our non-familiarity with the Critical Theory tradition is also a result of the general attitude of the Philippine intelligentsia towards materialist or, more specifically, Marxist philosophy. Beyond our worry about the somewhat “horrifying” political tendencies of Marxism is our proverbial inclination towards the safety of ‘scholastic’ metaphysics; our general hesitation to read and understand Marxist philosophy is also an indirect result of this Scholastic bias. We could not, of course, deny the historical context of this hesitation to touch on Marxism or any materialist social philosophy for that matter. This unfortunate situation has rendered the assimilation of new philosophical trends and attitudes inauspicious. Unbeknownst to us, we are at the middle of

an intellectual crisis – the crisis of assimilation – that is, our failure to assimilate new ideas without rendering them mystical, in other words, without “theologizing” them. What is undermined in the process is the thoroughly material, that is, socio-political dimension of all philosophizing. Our crisis as Filipino philosophers, a crisis which we will have to acknowledge and reckon with, is precisely our failure to overcome the language of transcendentalist or essentialist philosophy in the body of Scholastic metaphysics. Against this backdrop, we fail to reconcile with the emphatically socio-political, even visceral, constitution of thought, of philosophical thinking. As such, in the Philippines, philosophy is even more cut off from praxis.

I mentioned the above issues—1) our failure to appropriate Critical Theory because of our neglect of intellectual history, 2) our fear of materialist/Marxist philosophy, and 3) our failure to overcome essentialist philosophy while neglecting the socio-political dimension of thought—because partly they are also issues that the members of the Frankfurt School have emphatically reflected on. For the members of the Frankfurt School, intellectual history constitutes all philosophizing because no philosophy happens in a vacuum. The members of the Frankfurt School come from an emphatically Marxist background; but they are all quite explicit about their revisionist interpretation of the works of Marx. Much of what we fear as the violent political tendencies of Marxism have been addressed by the early critical theorists and they have all resisted these tendencies (they have criticized Stalinism) by reinterpreting Marxist materialism via Hegel, thanks to Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* (1920). Moreover, the members of the Frankfurt School consider all philosophy (from the pre-Socratics to the present) as basically a social and political engagement with reality. As such, they view the philosophical enterprise to be a constant struggle against the fossilization of thinking via the hypostatization of our arbitrary conceptual field.

Ultimately, what the members of the Frankfurt School envision is a revision of the role of philosophy in our socio-political life. This entails, among other things, a critical reading of socio-political normativity. “Normativity” is a key term in Critical Theory which refers to our standard practices that undergird our moral and institutional valuations. Critical theorists are concerned with socio-political normativity in the sense that they locate socio-political “emancipation” in the very practices that are common to us, e.g., communication (Habermas) or social recognition (Honneth).²⁶ Moreover, inasmuch as they acknowledge the possibility of normative practices to fossilize and result in social pathologies (e.g., systemic oppression, etc), they are also concerned with the “critical assessment” of these normative standards so as to question their hypostatization and possibly revise them into new constellations. Philosophy, in a sense for the critical theorists, becomes, on the one hand, the empowerment of socio-political normativity which bents towards emancipation and, on the other hand, a critique of the same socio-political normativity in order to guard them from unnecessary “reification.”

Hence, there should happen a shift in the way the philosophical enterprise is understood. More specifically, a shift from a purely speculative-essentialist stance to a more practical-materialist stance – or, a philosophical stance that is sensitive, not only to the “materialist” (socio-political) dimension of reality, but also to its very own materialist constitution. In other words, philosophy should acknowledge the fact its language is not one of privileged divine or mystical origin (*Logos* – source and fundamental order of the cosmos), but, rather, it is a language that is informed by socio-political realities. To borrow a description from Michel Foucault: discourses are wrought

²⁶See ff. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, Volume One, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) and Axel Honneth’s *The Struggle for Recognition*.

from the very contingencies of “natural” history, by which Foucault means the unacknowledged and unsung causes of historical events. What this entails for philosophy is its reorientation into social and political life—to both the *sanction* and *critique* of our normative standards.

Concluding Note

We now return to the overarching question of this paper: “What is Critical Theory?” The very schematic structure of my paper simply offers the tip of the iceberg and by no means have I exhaustively answered the question. Nevertheless, gleaned from my reconstruction of Horkheimer’s “Traditional and Critical Theory,” we could derive a tentative answer—that Critical Theory is a form of materialist critique of social reality that is normatively informed by the following assumptions: 1) any form of theorizing, including critical theory, presupposes the social world of human beings, 2) critique is normatively grounded in the social emancipation of men from oppression and social injustice, and 3) the revolutionary impulse need not be limited to the bourgeoisie-proletariat structure and could be located in different social structures beyond the system of labor.

If the above assumptions constitute what Critical Theory is, then one could surmise that perhaps, not without qualification, that it is an appropriate theoretico-diagnostic tool in appraising social pathologies in the Philippines. The qualification involves a shift in the way we commonly view the role of philosophical thinking—a shift from the language of Scholastic metaphysics to a, more or less, socio-politico-philosophical standpoint grounded in social reality. Furthermore, there should be a more in-depth prognosis of the roots of oppression and social injustice in the country. Such prognosis should be able to expose the normative—that is to say material—basis of social injustice, such as rampant poverty, and not simply view the issue from a moral-transcendental vantage point. We have to understand that the problem of

poverty has its historical basis, that is, that it is a result of deliberative decisions we have made in the course of our imperial and colonial past. Perhaps Filipino philosophy could gain more mileage if it takes into serious consideration recent literature in Philippine neocolonialism. Lastly, perhaps we should learn from our recent history – especially events of the last four decades – lest what we refer to as EDSA is simply reduced to a meaningless byword or a bustling avenue of heavy traffic, unscrupulous MMDA people, and smoke belching buses. The banalization of EDSA should already remind us of what Benjamin refers to as the “decline of the aura”; our receptivity to the banalization of historical events and symbols should hopefully amount to what Adorno hyperbolically calls the ‘ontology of the wrong state of things.’

Works Cited

- Grumley, John E. *History and Totality: Radicalism from Hegel to Foucault*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, Volume One. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997.
- Held, David. *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Honneth, Axel. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Translated by Joel Anderson. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995.
- Horkheimer, Max. “Traditional and Critical Theory.” In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Translated by Matthew J. O’Connell. New York: Continuum, 1989.
- _____. *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected*

Early Writings. Translated by G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer and John Torpey. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993.

Jay, Martin. *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923 -1950*. California: University of California Press, 1996.

Marcuse, Herbert. "Philosophy and Critical Theory." In *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*. Translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro London: The Penguin Press, 1968.