KRITIKE VOLUME NINETEEN NUMBER THREE (JANUARY 2026) 215-222

Book Review

Ocay, Jeffry, *Critical Theory at the Margins: Applying Herbert Marcuse's Model of Critical Social Theory to the Philippines*[1]

Allison Cruyff V F. Ladero

Inspired by the critical social theory of Herbert Marcuse, the book under review called *Critical Theory at the Margins: Applying Herbert Marcuse's Model of Critical Social Theory to the Philippines,* by Jeffry Ocay, is an important piece of work that may serve as a starting point in expanding the normative claims of critical theory to non-Western spaces. The book is an attempt to situate Marcuse's critical theory in the Philippines in order to analyze the mode of social control as well as the possibilities for emancipation in a "country at the margins." The intention is not to force Marcuse's rich and potent analysis to a country "at the margins" but to simply indicate the way in which his critical theory, for the most part, complements, but also warrants correction to a certain degree when situated in a given society that is not located at the center.[2] This is significant in that it boldly diverges from the European origin of critical theory and makes it adaptable and applicable to a non-European context without compromising the cohesion, consistency, and cogency of Marcuse's model of critical social theory.

The book is divided primarily into two parts, and the discussion is spread out into six chapters. Part 1 of the book deals with a straightforward reconstruction of Marcuse's critical social theory, which he does in the first 3 chapters of the book. In these chapters, Ocay traces the philosophical foundations of Marcuse's critical theory, which include Heidegger, Hegel, Marx, and Freud. Then he moves to an explanation of Marcuse's general critique of the advanced industrial society and how his notion of the Great Refusal provides a framework for the possibility of emancipation. From

[1] Davao, Philippines: Aletheia Publishing, 2023, 229pp.

[2] Jeffry Ocay, *Critical Theory at the Margins: Applying Herbert Marcuse's Model of Critical Social Theory to the Philippines* (Davao, Philippines: Aletheia Publishing, 2023), 18–19.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.3.br1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026a/ladero2_january2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

reconstructing Marcuse's model of critical theory, he moves to identifying the empirical realities of domination and resistance in the Philippines as a country "at the margins" in the second part. From chapters 4 down to the epilogue, Ocay articulates the dynamics of domination and resistance in the Philippines through a historical tracing of the notable events that took place in pre-colonial Philippines, Spanish, and American periods in an attempt to show the emergence of critical consciousness in the country. A discussion on technological domination, as a result of neocolonialism, and its impact of one-dimensionality ensues. Ending with a more hopeful tone, Ocay reintroduces the Great Refusal contextualized in the peasant movement of the Philippines as a prime example of attempts to radically resist the capitalist system of social organization.

To start with, the first chapter hinges on a reconstruction of Heidegger, Hegel, and Marx in order to establish Marcuse's notion of historicity. This is fundamental because any discussion on Marcuse's theory of emancipation must first start with the idea of historicity. According to Ocay, it is the concept of historicity that Marcuse uses in his "search for such historically and critically conscious individual, who can be the potent agent of social transformation."[3] It is historicity that "defines history … and signifies the meaning we intend when we say of something that is historical."[4] More importantly, Ocay notes that it is precisely historicity that "makes 'history' history."[5] Because historicity suggests the world is historical, i.e., determined by social and material conditions, the possibilities for domination but also for change and liberation become available. It is from this vantage point that Marcuse appropriates Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*. This appropriation is predicated on the fact that it was no longer compelling for Marcuse to rely on the proletariat, especially with the ideology espoused by Soviet Marxism during his time. As such, Marcuse politicizes the concrete individual or *Dasein*. Following Heidegger, Marcuse picks up the idea that humans are shaped by history, that is, "dasein is in the present, indebted to the past, and oriented toward the future (death) … the human being is a being in time."[6] This affirms, notes Ocay, *Dasein*'s possibility of creating a project geared towards an authentic existence in the future.[7] Viewed this way, the concrete individual or dasein bears the capability for radical action, allowing him to reshape the historically conditioned world he has been thrown into.

Heidegger's *Dasein*, however, is both apolitical and asocial. Consequently, Marcuse supplies this lack using Hegel's concept of the

[3] *Ibid*., 21.
[4] *Ibid*.
[5] *Ibid*.
[6] *Ibid*., 29.
[7] *Ibid*., 30.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.3.br1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026a/ladero2_january2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

dialectic and master-slave relations. Ocay shows this by explaining that Marcuse's use of Hegel gives a character to *Dasein* that is both "active and reflective, that is indeed capable of radical action."[8] For Ocay, Marcuse was convinced that by complementing Heidegger's *Dasein* with Hegel, a conceptual tool capable of engaging with the logic of capitalism would spell out the inherent possibility of emancipation and a qualitatively new society. Ultimately, this becomes even more robust with the addition of Marx in the picture. The book considers Marcuse's engagement with Marx to be particularly important because it clarifies that labor is "man's act of perfecting himself."[9] In other words, labor is not the problem to begin with but has simply taken a perverted form, i.e., alienated labor, maintained by the existence of private property. But as Ocay, following Marcuse, will argue later in Chapters 4–6, alternative models of labor can also promote self-realization and fulfillment.

The second chapter, titled "Eroticizing Marx, Revolutionizing Freud: Marcuse's Psychoanalytic Turn" works on the role of psychological domination both in the context of domination and liberation. This is important because, as the book explains, by borrowing conceptual tools from Heidegger, Hegel, and Marx, Marcuse was convinced that radical social transformation can happen. Yet, advanced industrial societies have only become formidable and indomitable. Marx's prediction that capitalism would transition into socialism did not materialize. Additionally, the status quo has succeeded in co-opting the proletariat. As such, Marcuse sought to rework his theory by looking into the ways the system of control effectively neutralizes any form of opposition. This is where Freud's psychoanalysis becomes particularly useful for Marcuse.

While some might find the fusion of Marx and Freud idiosyncratic and, perhaps, theoretically incompatible, the book clarifies that capitalism is not simply an economic system that manipulates solely at the level of political economy. Rather, it operates in other areas of life, even in the psychological dimension. This is why Marcuse, while not in agreement with all aspects of Freud's analysis, found it imperative to use the latter's concepts in his critical analysis of society. The book presents a comprehensive and nuanced discussion on this and notably highlights the position in which Marcuse both converges and diverges from Freud. To be sure, because Marcuse's social context is different from Freud's, he departs from Freud's notion of repression to a certain degree. From the perspective of Marcuse, "the antagonism between life instincts and restrictions of civilization is socio-historical in nature … not given for all times."[10] Ocay sees this as Marcuse's attempt to

[8] *Ibid*., 33.
[9] *Ibid*., 42.
[10] *Ibid*., 58.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.3.br1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026a/ladero2_january2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

recognize the legitimacy of Freud's original claim as well as an expansion of such a notion in the context of a highly technological society. Considering that late capitalist societies function on the basis of overproduction, aggression, and accumulation, the consumption habits, as well as the labor required, are also altered. Instead of having more free time—thanks to technology—the system exacts more time from individuals in order to manufacture false needs, resulting in lavish consumption, subsequently sustaining social control and domination chiefly on the level of the psyche. Indeed, it is hard to militate against a system that satisfies, drowns, and seduces you with options in the market.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the technological aspect of the system and how Marcuse identifies both the dominative and emancipative aspects of it. From explaining the role of technology in dissolving the individual's critical impulse in the previous chapter, Ocay now proceeds to a more focused discussion on Marcuse's critical analysis of technological domination as well as the prospects of radical alternatives found in his concept of the Great Refusal. Here, he emphasizes that technology for Marcuse is value-neutral in that it can either be a tool for heightening the speed and domain of social control or advance ideals that embrace real human freedom and happiness.[11] Apparently, for Marcuse, the way in which technology is used in advanced industrial societies is characterized by an intense technological rationality that promotes an extractivist and productivist logic through the creation of false needs that compel individuals to conform to the dictates of the status quo. For Ocay, as for Marcuse, this is concerning insofar as it anesthetizes the critical and negative spirit of thought, and, as an upshot, creates a one-dimensional society.[12] Despite this, the book affirms Marcuse's position that technology can still be reoriented toward more liberating directions, especially when called to question by what he terms the Great Refusal. Ocay identifies this Marcusean concept as a "negativity both in thought and action."[13] And because it does not take a singular form, Ocay reads Marcuse to be suggesting that it can be expressed in the form of confrontation politics, a united front, or even through art. By establishing Marcuse's notion of the Great Refusal, Ocay hints at efforts from movements in the Philippines, especially the peasant movement, as legitimate representatives of the ethos of this refusal.

Having reconstructed Marcuse's critical social project, the fourth chapter signals the overarching thrust of the book's second part, which is on the empirical justification of Marcuse's model of critical theory in the context of the Philippines, identified as a country at the margins. In particular, this

[11] *Ibid*., 70.
[12] *Ibid*., 71.
[13] *Ibid*., 79.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.3.br1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026a/ladero2_january2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

chapter revolves around the history of domination and resistance in the Philippines, beginning from the pre-Hispanic to the Spanish and American periods. Ocay justifies this historical presentation to be necessary in that it gives the reader a glimpse of how the domination and critical resistance back then operated in a country like the Philippines. For example, he describes the primitive form of economic activity during pre-colonial Philippines as one that is heavily influenced by the barangay system, wherein cooperative labor, instead of wage labor, was the norm, which he elaborates in the 6th chapter. It only drastically changed when Spanish colonizers arrived and started systematically restructuring Philippine society into a feudal one as part of their colonial expansion. Writing a comprehensive account of this transformation, Ocay drives the reader to the fact that as the Spanish regime intensified its colonial project, so did the critical dimension of the Filipinos. In fact, he notes that at least 200 independent and regionalized revolts unfolded across the country, notably, the Dagohoy revolt, the Diego Silang revolt, to name a few.[14] Eventually, the aggregate of this critical consciousness would culminate in the founding of the *Kataas-taasang, Kagalang-galangang Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan* (KKK). Unfortunately, these revolutionary attempts did not end the colonial experience in the country and have instead only brought in the Americans as its next colonial masters. While resistance movements remained present during this time, Ocay posits that the American project of Americanizing Philippine society was too strong a force that suppressing attempts of resistance was not a concern at all.

It is in the fifth chapter that the book analyzes more extensively the effects of imperialism and neocolonialism, especially the emergence of one-dimensionality in the country. According to Ocay, domination in the Philippines comes in different forms: militaristic, economic, political, and cultural. But he asserts that technological domination—a characteristic feature of cultural domination—functions as the most commanding in decimating the critical consciousness of Filipinos. By bringing light to these expressions of control, the reader is taken to the realization that Ocay's appropriation of Marcuse in a country at the margins exposes both the relevance as well as the theoretical deficits of the latter, specifically on the nuances of the material conditions between countries at the center and those at the margins. In contrast to Marcuse's focus on the advanced industrial societies, less developed countries, that have been captured by a colonial power like America, experience a host of issues that include foreign military presence and indebtedness to institutions like the World Bank and, International Monetary Fund, to name a few.[15] He notes that the influence of

[14] *Ibid*., 106.
[15] *Ibid*., 128.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.3.br1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026a/ladero2_january2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

American consumerism has greatly modified the consumption habits in the country, as more artificial or false needs are sold in the market to command an illusion of choice. More importantly, wage labor became even more necessary, and the revolutionary spirit that used to be alive dissipated.

At the heart of the book's thesis is the quest for redemptive alternatives in a country like the Philippines. As such, the epilogue frames the conversation toward exploring several forms of the Great Refusal, with more emphasis on the peasant movement. This crystallizes the book's thesis that countries at the margins, like the Philippines, are a fertile ground for and rich source of emancipative possibilities. Indeed, in contrast to the countries at the center, those at the periphery experience domination and resistance in different ways. In the Philippines, for example, domination is two-fold: 1) modern technological form that results in one-dimensionality; and 2) more "direct, brutal, and primitive forms of oppression that sustain imperialist rule."[16] While Marcuse did touch on the developing countries being critical sites of revolutionary struggles, especially in their anti-colonial resistance, Ocay argues that the former did not touch on the nuances specific to these spaces. For sure, the Philippines has a plethora of oppositional and militant groups that contribute tremendously to countervailing the capitalist force, such as Anakbayan, Gabriela, Makibaka, to name a few. However, Ocay maintains that it is the "oppressed of the oppressed" that provide a unique narrative of refusal.[17] This he particularly identifies with the Filipino peasant movement, which bears both the real experience of violence and destruction as outsiders of the system, as well as the ways of life and social organization that outright reject the capitalist paradigm. These social conditions that are specific to countries at the periphery expose some of the limitations of the more Western orientation of Marcuse's critical analyses. Yet, Ocay does not entirely depart from the latter. Locating his critical theory at the margins does not at all contradict Marcuse's analyses but actually expands and deepens them in more ways. The Great Refusal is given a fresh perspective when you consider the indigenous ways of organizing society among various peasant communities. He cites the *Suyuans* in Mindoro, *Jungos* in Bohol, and *Junlos* in various areas of Mindanao as clear examples of peasant communities that practice alternative modes of existence. While different in certain ways, these communities all embody a cooperative form of work where wage labor is not the rule. As such, their work ethic is not informed by surplus repression. He notes that "they pool their labor together in order to get the job done efficiently without the use of money, that is, without paying the labor each member of the *Suyuan* or *Jungos*, or *Junlos* expends."[18] More importantly, he

[16] *Ibid*., 163–164.
[17] *Ibid*., 164.
[18] *Ibid*., 178.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.3.br1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026a/ladero2_january2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

alludes to the fact that these communities are not marred by consumption habits that obsess over imported goods or succumb to the insatiability of acquiring false needs. Apart from this unique mode of social organization, peasant movements, writes Ocay, have also been radically involved in actual militant political confrontation against the state, as seen in the case of the Higaonon tribe farmers from Sumilao who successfully won the fight for land rights by going on a hunger strike in Manila.[19]

In the end, the reader is made to understand that the intention for recognizing the alternative mode of existence in these peasant communities is not a naïve gesture or a way to promote a sentimental and regressive solution that calls for discarding technology altogether. Rather, it is a useful piece of writing that offers insights into the plausibility of transforming technology to more humane ways by looking into radically alternative means of organizing social life that are not derivative of the capitalist paradigm. Consistent with Marcuse's utopian project, the work qualifies the possibility of emancipation from social control by moving away from the conventional confrontational resistances and instead acknowledges the equally enduring emancipative power of indigenous practices of a country at the margins. More importantly, it highlights the existence of emancipative forces at the periphery that have not been coopted and integrated yet into the capitalist system—a site that has conveniently been categorized as "voiceless" and "powerless" but actually holds immense liberating tendencies that bring about hope. One could question, on the contrary, Ocay's notion of emancipation—whether the cooperative work practiced in these peasant societies is enough to push for a radical transformation to the more mainstream Philippine society—insofar as real emancipation probably requires the reach also of masses outside of small communities and villages in real ways. Indeed, the book does not go that far. But as the first major Filipino work on critical theory at the margins, the book serves as a starting point in identifying movements that remain uncaptured wholly by the system, which is a value in itself. And as Bolanos mentioned in the foreword, the book is an invitation to address "marginal spaces as fecund resources for critical theory, as opposed to critical theory being the solution to marginalization."[20]

Department of Philosophy
Research Center for Culture, Arts, and the Humanities
University of Santo Tomas, The Philippines

[19] *Ibid*.
[20] *Ibid*., iv.

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.3.br1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026a/ladero2_january2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

Reference

Ocay, Jeffry, *Critical Theory at the Margins: Applying Herbert Marcuse's Model of Critical Social Theory to the Philippines* (Davao, Philippines: Aletheia Publishing, 2023).

https://doi.org/10.25138/19.3.br1
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2026a/ladero2_january2026.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330