

# The Relevance of Critical Theory Amidst COVID-19 Situation: A Philosophical Sketch

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This short essay is an attempt to make a philosophical sketch that delves into the question of the relevance of critical theory in time of pandemic like what we are all experiencing right now. In order to elucidate my answer, I shall first invoke the general principle of the Frankfurt School of critical theory: its nature, if we wish to call it, and its *telos*. Second, I shall analyze the alienating effect of the pandemic with Walter Benjamin's notion of "the aura" with the hope of rescuing the diminishing sense of authentic intersubjectivity. And third and last, I shall bring to the fore Jürgen Habermas' idea of communicative action in an attempt to bridge all the related parties to come up with a better policy making in the educational system during the time of the pandemic.

In a broad sense, from its conception, Frankfurt School exists as a philosophical tradition that draws its main inspiration from the works of Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx and other German and non-German thinkers in order to engage with the culture that we are in: its ideologies and different social pathologies, power structure, communication and also culture industry. Every cultural phenomenon—often perceived through the lens of the critique of domination, exploitation and alienation—that directly affects the dynamics of human society becomes a worthy subject for critical theory. In consonance with this, one cultural phenomenon that we are dealing with right now is the COVID-19 situation or the pandemic. It is categorized as a cultural phenomenon in this essay due to the fact that it is not merely a medical concern but it is also largely a social, moral and political issue. This pandemic has unlocked the dynamics of human conditions in a way that most of us have never seen before.

With the advent of the pandemic, flaws in the different sectors of our society were slowly exposed:

the government's incompetency in dealing with the threat of the virus; the academic unpreparedness that reveals the loopholes in the curricula and the educational system as a whole; the phenomenon of panic buying and hoarding of goods to the detriment of the marginalized sectors of the society and many others reflect the social injustices that are still rampant in modern societies. The critical theory tradition becomes more relevant especially during this time of pandemic as it is to apply its 'critical knife' in scratching the surface of this cultural phenomenon in order to find beneath it the lingering social pathologies that cripple our society. We come to realize that politics or leadership that is not based on competence and reasonableness but 'vote buying' and nepotism will only lead to many setbacks in crucial decision making. Partiality in the implementation of laws and regulations against the violators of the COVID-19 protocol which only favors the rich and the powerful becomes imperative for critical theory to continue struggling for the transformation of a society without injustice. The alienation that many of us experience due to the loss of jobs or the students' grappling with the insufficiencies of cyber education constraints us from having the full blossoming of our human existence and experience, in our case through labor and education, urges critical theory to propose forms of social norms that can safeguard the well-being of every citizen.

Those are the areas of concerns among many others, in my humble opinion, that critical theory can deal with and find solutions for. The next thing that I would like to point out in elucidating the relevance of critical theory during this time of pandemic is the diminishing sense of 'the aura' upon our intersubjective relation as an effect of the COVID-19 protocol. Walter Benjamin focuses his works on "the question of the connection between specific areas of culture and the culture's self-understanding". He is critical of the changing landscape of humans' relationship to culture, e.g. a work of art, in the age of mechanical reproduction. This decline in authentic human reflection towards culture or art is what Benjamin calls the decline of the *auratic* character of art. The negative implications of the democratization of art through mass production erode the innate capacity of our individual reflection toward certain original artworks that in effect what we encounter are merely the replicas of the original.

If we could stretch further Benjamin's understanding of culture and art, we can fairly categorize every human encounter as a kind of art. Fundamental to Benjamin's idea of the decline of the aura is the view that modern civilization is slowly losing the sense of the original and its reflective power or self-understanding is gradually weakened in the face of the practical functionality and the substitutive character of technology. This is precisely what many of us are dealing with in this time of pandemic, especially in the religious and academic institutions. In the case of online learning for example, it is important to note that I am not suggesting that the persons across the computer screen are non-rational beings and therefore learning process cannot possibly happen. However, the fundamental threat that I notice in this present state of affairs that we are dealing with here is that the communicative processes that are taking place during online learning arguably are far less enriching and dynamic as compared to the face-to-face encounter. We must admit that embodied human encounters bring more rich elements to the process of teaching and learning. While I am fully aware that at present many of us are still inevitably 'trapped' in this pandemic bubble and

praying that it will burst soon, what can be so alarming is when people gradually succumb into the routine of alienation as an effect of the pandemic and eventually opt to live their lives as convenient as possible away from *humanizing* human realities and human suffering. It is when we prefer convenience over authenticity, then we as a global society are moving toward the wrong direction. The thought of Benjamin is a reminder that we must not fall into the trap of the forgetfulness of the aura.

And lastly, with the kind of political milieu that we are now in during this COVID-19 situation, critical theory could aid us in finding the proper tools to address the concerns of policy making by exercising our communicative power. Jürgen Habermas with his theory of communicative action suggests that in seeking to reach a mutual understanding, all parties involved are to be perceived as subjects capable of speech and action who are willing to set aside their personal interests for the sake of mutual understanding, or better to align their interests with the agreed common good. As the pandemic urges us to come up with spot-on decisions and provisions that can keep the social, political and moral wheels running, all sectors of our society must come together to work for the attainment of an orderly society founded upon reasonableness. One concrete example is how educational system is being conducted amidst the uncertainties brought by the pandemic. We realize that to demand a quality education while everyone is coping with the pandemic is deemed to be impractical and insensitive. Both the stakeholders and the school administrators have to come to terms on how to render the most suitable means of teaching and learning process that do not run the risk of affecting the very objectives of intellectual endeavors, more especially when it comes to the mental health of the learners. The execution of the specially designed curriculum must not become an added burden to both the educators and the learners but should always consider the viability of the learning conditions, adjustable especially to the present needs of the learners in different localities. Such agreement and honest assessment can be achieved, for Habermas, when all the involved parties are open to continuous dialogical processes founded on the principles of rationality, autonomy and solidarity.

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