



# DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

## SEMINAR

### *On the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*

Felix Yeung  
HKU

Abstract:

If critical theory is meant to be the “*ruthless criticism of all that exists*” (Adorno), on what basis can critical theory ground its evaluative claims without being self-defeating? Is there a ground on which critique must stand? For Jurgen Habermas, critical theory has a ground embedded in the normative logic of communicative interactions. Contrarily, for Michel Foucault, critique can stand on no ground: critique is the *refusal* of any given ground and the opening up of possibilities for “thinking and acting differently”.

The incommensurability between Foucault’s and Habermas’s positions exposes a fundamental tension within critical theory that I will call the “*dialectic of the (engaged) participant and the (critical) observer*”. By spelling out the tension and interrelation between the dual logics of (1) the participant’s *dependency* on social recognition (Axel Honneth) and (2) the critical *distancing* of oneself from the taken-for-granted way of being a social participant (Judith Butler), I hope to show that the *dialectic of the observer and the participant* is a fundamental conundrum in critical theory – a dialectic that can never be sublated, but whose tension is permanently productive.

**Thursday, 30 November**  
**4:00 - 5:30 pm**

For inquiries: **Jennifer Nado**  
[nado@hku.hk](mailto:nado@hku.hk)

**Room 10.27**  
**Run Run Shaw Tower**  
**Centennial Campus**  
**University of Hong Kong**



香 港 大 學

THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG