

HABERMAS AND CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

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Amidst the ruins of many a social theory, Jurgen Habermas stands alone in his endeavour to bridge the vast void between theory and practice, transcendentalism and functionalism, and moral-ethical and scientific-technical realms. His communicative competence, and ideal speech situation are all concepts which appear utopian but have historical and situational relevance. The aforementioned factors are not hierarchical postulates but simultaneous processes in any human communication aimed at reaching understanding.

Philosophy, hitherto mired in ontological puzzles and in establishing its fast slipping supremacy over other practical disciplines went farther and farther from the concrete historical situation by earmarking territories for knowledge. It abstracted certain transcendent entities like God and Soul and assigned them exalted and inaccessible status so as to prevent the prying eyes of the natural sciences from scrutinizing them. Thus, the role of being the foundational authority for all knowledge was coveted by philosophy. Habermas clearly holds that such farfetched claims are vacuous and in the present situation philosophy can only be an interpreter and a critique. It is for this reason that he criticizes Kant and Hegel for constructing false paradigms which show philosophy as an overbearing discipline.¹

Habermas was well aware that as philosophy was increasingly viewed as a discipline whistling in the dark about riddles which had no empirical or practical significance, it could be shoved aside with disdain and suspicion. As a believer in the Enlightenment ideals of freedom, justice, and happiness and in the power of reason to transform the society and cleanse the society of the evils plaguing it, Habermas felt that philosophy alone did not have the right to embark upon the redressal of the problems. All disciplines like the social sciences and natural sciences are to work in consort if any headway is to be made from the present impasse.

Habermas wanted to approach the problems from various angles. He was in search of a paradigm which was not only particular to philosophy but also to any praxis oriented activity. A paradigm which would reduce all processes to the principle which it supports, to the neglect of other factors, was not acceptable to him. This was the reason why he decried the paradigm of 'consciousness' as overtly subjective. He plumped for 'language' as a paradigm because it was historically situated and the medium of communication for all strata of the society irrespective of the internal and external differences and class discriminations.² Thus Habermas supplanted Marx's paradigm of 'production' with 'language' which is the reservoir of the past, the prime vestige of the present, and a pointer to the future. It is mutable, discursive, redemptable, and interpersonal in nature which effectively preempts reification and hypostatization.

Critical Theory and its Historical Necessity

Critical theory arose as a result of the upheavals in the mid-twentieth century. Its avowed task was to interpret the scenario which unfolded as a result of the World Wars in which Germany was the key aggressor. Basically, the Frankfurt theorists were appalled by the failure of Marxism to usher in a new dawn in which the workers and the people who were suppressed were expected to participate in a big way. What shocked them beyond recovery was that what ensued after the failure of the workers movement was the alarming rise of Nazism and Fascism. They were worried over a spurt in authoritarian and totalitarian tendencies and the increasing dominance of science over other disciplines.

Ironically, the liberation of reason from the clutches of religion and other dogmatic ideologies held unlimited potential for political and social renaissance which failed to fructify. This made the critical theorists disheartened. Instead of reason serving as the tool for liberation from the self-imposed shackles of man over man it took a different hue in the form of scientific-technical rationality and began perpetrating domination over nature and fellow beings. Hence, the dreams of the Enlightenment period, of which Kant, Hegel, and Marx were the luminaries, proved as a crushing disappointment. The Frankfurt school which acquired its name because of it being founded as a movement attached to the Frankfurt University was at first known as the Institute for Social Research.³

The Frankfurt school viewed the social problems as affecting all strata of

the society and it enrolled as its members sociologists, philosophers, economists, psychoanalysts, and historians and it was expressly non-party. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse were most important among the early critical theorists. They traced the chaos and turmoil in the aftermath of the two World Wars to systematic malady endemic to all closed systems of thought. They strove to break the strangle hold of misconceptions and misrepresentations which were befuddling the reason which was losing its emancipatory potential to the furtherance of domination and rigid systematization in the name of science and technology. In this, the domination of nature was confused with the freedom from the subjective and intersubjective factors blocking the progress towards a society in which freedom, justice, and happiness were expected to reign.⁴

Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse accepted many aspects of German idealism like the apportionment of domain of knowledge into science, morality, and art. Even though all of them accepted Kant's theoretical and practical reason, categorical imperative, critique of ideology, Copernican revolution and the essential nature of man as good, Habermas was critical of Kant for ingeniously separating the domains of operation of various disciplines so that philosophy could have a free run as the arbiter of knowledge. Habermas resented the unilateral allocation of spheres for other disciplines by philosophy.⁵

Hegel, on his part, historically situated the sublation of the consciousness which is epitomized by the brilliant "the owl of Minerva flies only at the dusk."⁶ Once again, his dialectical relationship ends in the "Absolute Idea." While Hegel wished for the conditions to change for the better for the betterment of the society Marx was impatient with the status quo and wanted a complete transformation. The prevalent social and political situation and the plight of the work force made Marx to press for a drastic change in the society in which the bourgeois ideals remained only in theory to be flouted repeatedly by them and to be cited only when dealing with the proletariat. Marx alleged that all the institutions like political state, economy, religion, and tradition were tilted heavily in favour of the upper class. So, false ideology, reification, exploitation, and alienation could be stemmed only if the labourers got their due and their surplus labour should not be converted as profit to do pocketed by the capitalists.⁷

The Frankfurt theorists were in agreement with Marx on his critique of political ideology which they felt very relevant for any social theory. But they

were not pleased by the scientific-technical rationality which had to be used in production assuming instrumental character increasingly. The critical theorists call the expansion of the state into more and more areas of life as "culture industry".⁸ The debacle of reason in the period of Enlightenment was that on the one hand it was a critical arbiter and espoused the ideal of impartial analysis of truth and on the other hand it became the instrument of perpetrating domination of nature and humans by technicalising administrative, political, and bureaucratic processes which thus become the part of *techné*.⁹ Thus, the role of imponderable was eliminated and success became the only goal. This, they feared, led to a structured society. Thus, once again form assumed more importance over the content.

Difference between traditional and Critical Theory

Marx's critique of political economy was the precursor for a critical social science. It broke the shackles imposed on the social theorizing by advocating a different approach from the weather-beaten traditional approach. The Frankfurt theorists were insistent upon the renunciation of a closed approach to the social sciences and advocated an approach in which there was sufficient space for tensions and contradictions so characteristic of the society.¹⁰

Traditional Theory

- 1) Traditional theory is a closed system of statements constructed according to logical rules of deduction and induction.
- 2) It is supposedly value-neutral.
- 3) It is objective and modelled on the lines of natural sciences.
- 4) It is characterized by technical-instrumental rationality.

Critical Theory

- 1) Critical theory firmly says that there is no absolute subject of knowledge and that the coincidence of the subject and object lies in the future

not merely due to intellectual progress but also due to the social progress in which the relationship between the subject and the object is redefined.

- 2) The method of sciences is different because the ends determine the means in their case whereas in the case of critical theory the means also is equally important as the ends. The method of abduction is employed.
- 3) It is a critical reflection on ideology and it accepts that as a historically grounded method it is not itself free from the influences of the societal framework. It also claims independence vis-a-vis existing doctrines including Marxism.
- 4) It also realizes the importance of praxis and reposes faith in the cherished Enlightenment ideals of freedom, justice, and happiness.

Max Horkheimer and Critique of Enlightenment

As far as Marx's critique of political economy remained a critical social science it had a Kantian critical moment of unbiasedly analyzing the economy and laying threadbare the tall claims and bringing to light the lacunas. But when Marx went on to prescribe an economic theory himself, it definitely had an end in mind and lost its critical reflective moment.¹¹ Apart from this, there was no political and social revolution and any sign of capitalism crumbling because of inherent tensions in the capitalism itself. The proletariat uprising also was not forthcoming because they joined the stream of capitalism. The capitalists also saw to it that they were always kept in good humour with the promise of incentives for efficiency and also kept on the tenterhooks by the fear of not being indispensable, with a huge amount of unemployed labour waiting in the wings to replace if any vacancy arises.

Horkheimer and Adorno were particularly critical of the traditional theory for its obsession with classification of various phenomena and identifying them under well defined categories. Horkheimer's thoughts were permeated by the Marxist principle that philosophical, religious, and sociological ideas could be understood only in relation to the interests of the different social groups so that theory was a function of social life. He defended the autonomy of theory thus

acceding that there were truths which could not be validated with the help of analytical judgements or empirical hypotheses. He was careful in not describing the society in terms of individuals or vice versa. He was also wary of reducing the relations to base - superstructure ; subject - object; phenomenon - essence etc. He opined that there was need for constant mediation if one did not want to end in reduction.¹²

The Frankfurt theorists were apprehensive that overt emphasis on technology and science would lead to totalitarian regime by encouraging manipulation of human beings resulting in the destruction of culture and personality. Horkheimer in his essay on critical theory made it clear that the world of science was the world of readymade facts to be ordered as though the perception of these facts were divorced from the social framework. For critical theory, perception cannot be isolated from its social genesis. The society is an active player, even if unconsciously so, because the individual is passive in relation to the object. Critical theory accepts its social dependence and regards itself as a form of social behaviour. Hence, it is more a movement than a concrete philosophical and systematized theory. Eventhough it accepts the overarching spectre of the society whether in the foreground or in the background on any human activity it concedes the possibility of the critical activity vis-a-vis the society. It does not consider the society as a natural creation which can never be touched.¹³ Horkheimer feels that the conciliatory attitude towards the society had been the reason for the edification of the status quo and the people enmasse had been alienated. The sharp polarization of the society into subject and object and internal and external has led to the feeling that society is something alien to the individual. Without aspiring for complete unification or foundational explanation one can effectively address the tensions between the subjective and objective factors which are at loggerheads perpetually.

Critical theory does hold that theory and praxis can come together some time in the future if the 'external' character of the society undergoes a change. It is a critique of the existent society and does not claim any universality and eternity for itself. It is a critique of the capitalistic society which impedes the human growth. It is a critique in that it is a social act as well as an intellectual act. It dreams of a society in which human needs and powers are not externalized and

a life for the sake of human life and not for external necessities, i.e. freedom, justice, and happiness reign supreme.

Theodor Adorno and Negative Dialectics

Theodor Adorno, heartbroken by the disastrous failure of the Enlightenment launched a scathing attack on any type of systematization. He also vehemently criticized all types of categorization and allocation of names and forms. He was convinced that whether it be science or philosophy the attempt is to confine the world within a single principle to assign it an identity.¹⁴ For Adorno, philosophy is the express negation of any attempt to reify or identify human subject. Identification is the violation of the principle since the scope and facets of the object or the subject is limited to the desired level only. This is the reason why he steadfastly opposed Marx's allout emphasis on praxis to the neglect of the theory.

Adorno's allegation against philosophy is that even if its foundational claim to authority is found to be untenable it does not desist from using the contradictions to further its position and arrive at an ultimate identity of everything. Hence, dialectic was a method of repeated negation of any claim to universality. He averred that language was itself a violence to thought because it failed to capture the thought in its entirety.¹⁵ He alleged that by resorting to extreme systematization and identification philosophy and logic were guilty of homogenizing the society and reducing people to anonymity. This engendered only a form of interaction in which humans would be treated as commodities which have 'exchange-value'.

In a stinging attack on capitalism, Adorno accused it of using the facade of relativism to convince the people into accepting the status quo and remain subservient to the dominant class. Always guarded against giving any leeway to exploitation Adorno said that ontology and primacy were used adroitly to further totalitarianistic tendencies. "The principle of dominion, which antagonistically rends human society, is the same principle which, spritualized, causes the difference between the concept and its subject matter." Therefore, for Adorno, any relationship is only dialectical.

He says :

In a sense, dialectical logic is more positivistic than the positivism that out-laws it. As thinking, dialectical logic respects that which is to be thought - the object - even where the object does not need the rules of thinking. The analysis of the object is tangential to the rules of thinking. Thought need not be content with own legality; without abandoning it, we can think against our own thought, and if it were possible to define dialectics, this would be a definition worth suggesting.¹⁶

Adorno holds that the critics cannot find fault with him either logically or factually because he has utter disregard for them. For him any genuine thought is a concerted opposition to any form of identity formation. He has outright contempt for the 'identity principle' because he feels that it reduces objects to what is expressed in words and what is given empirically. Adorno's view is that there are contradictions everywhere and they should not be absolutized so that the concepts are allowed to immobilize objects. In order that society does not become overtly functional or idealistic in which both of them are capable nurturing a structured society Adorno says that most advanced theory and a praxis which weeds out reificatory ideas is imperative.¹⁷

Herbert Marcuse and One-Dimensional Man

Herbert Marcuse was also concerned by the functional and reductionistic attitude of the society and a 'One Dimensionalistic' approach which ignored the normative and critical aspects of philosophy. The critical principle contrasted the day-to-day world from the true world characterized by freedom, justice, and happiness. Marcuse makes a return to the concept of universals. He saw in this a dialectic power of theory to negate the apparent reality and infuse the principle of higher reality. He indicted logic for restricting the sense of the world to 'is' stripping them of their essence. Dialectic maintains the tension between 'is' and 'ought', the former is the social reality and the latter is the ideal. Marcuse resembles Hegel in deriding direct experience as accidental and in holding that only dialectical reason can penetrate into the deeper reality. Marcuse's aim here is to restore the normative 'what ought to be' to the forefront of any social theorizing. The universals like beauty, justice, love etc., have been relegated to the realm of the subjective by the sciences. Marcuse avers :

Scientific-technical rationality and manipulation are welded together into new forms of social control... Outside this rationality, one lives in a world of values, and values separated out from the objective reality becomes-subjective.¹⁸

Thus, Marcuse opines, the ideas of goodness, beauty, and justice are deprived of universal validity and given only the parochial personal sphere. The attitude of science to quantify and systematize the concepts has led to a situation where there is no room for any form of social protest. The success-failure formula makes no one responsible and the failure is explained away as technical short-coming. Even failure is not tolerated and the options are reduced to simply success. But success involves manipulation, domination, narrowing down the options, and particularizing the paradigm.

Marcuse lambasts the field of art as the standing testimony to the consumeristic culture in which the universal ideals are shoved aside for marketability. In the present scenario, instead of the talent of the performer the selling power of the individual is the key to success. The measuring yardstick is not the merit but the ability to ooze with glitz and glamour so that the person can be made into the darling of the masses. Thus, various arms of consumeristic apparatus link together in a wholesale deception of the common man. The common man is made to believe that what he is getting is the best which on the contrary is most untrue. Thus Marcuse laments how the structured society stifles the critical negative reason. In a vivid portrayal of the capitalistic - consumeristic society, he says :

Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate, belong to this category of false needs.¹⁹

The modern economic system is devised to multiply the artificial needs in the name of providing choice of selection. This sort of freedom vested in the individual is a clever mode of domination. Marcuse argues :

The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by individual.²⁰

Jurgen Habermas and the Paradigm Shift

Jurgen Habermas accepted the basic position of his predecessors but he did not stop with the continued reflection and critique of ideology into which critical theory had petered out. Since he had no illusions regarding the role of philosophy he envisioned it to smoothly glide into the role of interpreter and critique. Since he had divided social action into the spheres of labour and interaction, he apportioned cognitive and practical interests respectively to them. As a staunch believer of the ideals of Enlightenment he brought in the emancipatory interest which he thought was immanent in all human beings. As a corollary he divided human approach towards knowledge as objective, subjective, and intersubjective corresponding to empirico-analytical sciences, historico-hermeneutical sciences and rational reconstructive sciences.²¹

In making such classifications Habermas followed Karl Proper's three-world theory which says that we exist simultaneously in : 1) an external world of states of affairs and objects; 2) an internal world of emotions, thoughts, and ideas; and 3) a normative world of intersubjectively determined norms and values. The human beings put forth validity claims regarding the truth of the statements about the objective world, the truthfulness of the subjective world, and the rightness or correctness of the intersubjective world.²² In the case of the objective world, the human attitude is one of the theoretical interest (episteme, knowledge, science, the reflected, critical, phenomenological standpoints). In a practical discourse, the normative validity claims are thematized. The imperative requirements are discursivity, universality, redeemability, and rational consensus. A discourse is more than mere communication because it demands the thematization of all problematic validity claims and unless and until the veracity of the claims are proved they are not accepted as valid. It assumes a commitment on the part of the participants to arrive at a rationally motivated agreement solely based on the the evidence and the force of argument. The validity should be for all rational subjects not to only those involved in the discourse. The participants in a discourse are expected to be receptive and responsive to counter view points. The end in question is not the victory or defeat of any standpoint but the consensual and rational agreement which is the patented property of none. This

briefly is the ideal speech situation.²³

Since Habermas has situated his discourse theory on argumentation and dialogue it becomes necessary for him to provide a universal framework or, at least, general characteristics for speech. With this goal in mind, he set out to construct universal-pragmatics in association with Karl-Otto Apel. Pragmatics deals with utterance or speech. It studies the performative aspect of the language. While the communicative competence part of the language is assumed as universal with phonetics, morphology, and semantics to regulate the learning processes the pragmatic part, is left to the care of concrete circumstances. Habermas seeks to ground his universal-pragmatics on conditions which are common to performative utterances. It is for this reason that he inducts the conditions of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness for linguistic utterances to be validated.²⁴

Since Habermas was particular about the intersubjective realm he became interested in Austin's theory of speech acts. He was also concerned about the yawning gap between theory and practice. He wanted to choose a speech act that would have no tension between intention and declaration of intentions. The illocutionary speech act, which Austin defined as in saying, became the only candidate.²⁵ He went on to qualify his theory of communicative action with illocutionary speech acts. Thus, Habermas invokes both the universal and particular aspects of the utterances. Thus a communicative rationality which is intersubjective in nature starts from the universal pragmatics. This communicative rationality is the driving force behind the yearning for communicative action which aims at an understanding achieved through a rationally motivated consensus. Thus everyday language is armed with the ammunition to criticize history and distortions in communication while having a theoretical framework to fall back upon if called upon to justify its position.

Conclusion

Habermas has developed his theory on the assumption that human beings are driven by interests in acquiring knowledge. Later, he shifted his paradigm to language and focussed on interpersonal interaction as the bedrock of discurs-

sive formation of normative validity claims. Though he was not anti-scientific he opposed the positivistic reduction to empirical testing of facts and decisions. He welcomed scientific approach but he did not accept the universality of scientific method. Habermas' significance lies in rescuing critical theory from the shackles of self-critical negation, which his predecessors like Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse had made it into. Because of their disillusionment with the society and the evaporation of their faith in the ideals of Enlightenment they felt that their task was whittled down to the critique of the totalitarian tendencies.

Habermas gave critical theory a new turn with his new paradigm of 'language' which was free from the subjective bias of the 'consciousness'. The rational critique of the critical theory was assimilated as critical self-reflection and rational reconstruction. In order that the theory-practice problem be effectively addressed and both transcendental and immanent factors of the human life be taken into consideration, he introduced universal-pragmatics which served as the foundation for communicative action. Thus, Habermas successfully brought specialized information into the debates among common folk with the use of everyday language.

Habermas' ideal-speech situation is not utopian because a society torn by strifes longs for a dialogue to settle persistent problems. The relationship between the ideal speech situation and tranquility is circular. An ideal-speech situation is necessary for solving vexatious issues but a harmonious setting is required for an ideal-speech situation to materialize. the ideal-speech situation is therefore a consequence of peace and if it prevails nations could go a long way in cementing friendships and increasing co-operation so that people can benefit mutually. Habermas has been criticized for being too comprehensive in his approach. Unlike in natural sciences, no one expects any solution to be encapsulated in a formula or a method because the problems afflicting the social sphere knows no genesis and no end. There can be no solutions but only moderation of the ill-effects of the consequences because the problems are as natural as natural calamities.

NOTES

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4. *Ibid.*, pp. 352-353.
5. Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, pp. 2-3
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24. Holub, *Critic in the Public Sphere*, p. 13.
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