

**CRITICAL THEORY OF JURGEN HABERMAS:
A CRITIQUE OF ENLIGHTENMENT RATIONALITY**

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Critical Theory of the Frankfurt school is one of the philosophical schools of the much broader philosophical movement known as 'Postmodernity'. Other such schools are structuralism of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, the cultural semiologist Ronald Barthes, the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan, the post-structuralist Michel Foucault, the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida besides Richard Rorty, Lyotard, Levinas and others. These representatives of postmodernity, each in his own way, have attempted to go ahead of Kant and Hegel, either by offering an emendation to Kantianism and Hegelianism or by making Kant and Hegel relevant in the changed intellectual climate in Europe and America. In this paper, I shall re-assess the basic charges levelled by the Critical Theory of Habermas on the enlightenment rationality developed by Kant and Hegel.

Before I come to re-assess the charges levelled by Habermas. I would like to dwell on the question of what is the relation of postmodernity critical theory to modernity? No postmodernist will say that postmodernity is a denial of modernity. They say: 'it is a reconstruction', 'a reinterpretation', 'an attempt to give a new meaning to modernity', etc. This is what the spokesman of postmodernity, Jean-Francois Lyotard says, "The whole idea of postmodernism is perhaps better rethought under the rubric of rewriting modernity". Postmodernity of the Critical Theory and the Post-Structuralist deconstructionist retain, many aspects of the Cartesian - Kantian - Hegelian

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modernity yet they reject the norms of strict logic and rationality which characterise the latter. This relationship could further be analysed on the basis of the *Central* and the *Marginal* issues in modernity.

At the centre of modernity are such issues as human subjectivity (the *cogito*, the transcendental consciousness and the *Geist*), rationality, unity, science, morality, freedom and so on; whereas at the margins of modernity are such issues as madness, fantasy, demon, sexuality, pluralism, discontinuity, irrationality and fragmentation. Postmodernity underestimates the *central* issues of modernity and overestimates the marginal issues. In postmodernity, reality follows diverse models which are rich in conflicts, history is viewed from ruptures and mutations, and there is a radical negation of totalitarian thinking. In marginalizing, delimiting, disseminating and decentering the *central* works of modernist inscription, the postmodernists, I feel, have expanded the horizons of modernity.

Modernity breaks with the endless reiteration of traditional (classical) themes, topics and myths; and postmodernity operates at the places of closure in modernity, at the margins of what proclaims itself to be new and a break with tradition. To be modern means to search for new self-conscious expressive forms. To be postmodern is to marginalize, delimit, disseminate and decenter the primary and often secondary works of modernist inscriptions. It implies that the line of demarcation between modernity and postmodernity remains a matter of uncertainty because postmodernity operates at the edge of modernity.

Postmodernity could be defined as an 'attitude' or a 'mood' or a 'Movement'. Modernity could be defined as an 'ism', i.e., 'a clear set of ideas' and a programme based on it. Postmodernity is not a systematic thing where you can develop concepts and relationships, precisely that is what the postmodernists' are against. In modernity, everything is a system like 'foundationalism', 'essentialism', 'teleology', 'rationalism', 'freedom', 'logocentrism' and so on.

The Critical Theory of the postmodern philosophy is the most important reaction to Kantianism and Hegelianism. Its advocates like Horkheimer,

Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas attempt to go ahead of the 'closed', 'systemic' thinking of Kant and Hegel. It is the first major criticism of modern science and the enlightenment rationality. Adorno and Horkheimer attempt to lay out, "The discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism"². Adorno's 'negative dialectics' or the 'immanent criticism' or the 'critical theory' is neither a 'pure scientific theory' nor a 'pure philosophy'. Critical theory is located 'between philosophy and science'. This makes the critical theory as negative dialectics which sets out not only to describe but also to criticize vigorously the existing social norms without recourse to either the fundamental concept of the enlightenment rationality (i.e. reason, freedom, truth) or the Value-free model of science. With these clarifications about postmodernity and the critical theory, I shall come to Habermas.

The range of Habermas' theorizing is extra-ordinary. He deals with most of the themes developed by earlier critical theorists, including epistemological questions raised by Adorno. He has sought to achieve a thorough going synthesis of developments in social science and philosophy-including analytical philosophy, the philosophy of science, linguistics, political science and systems theory. In 1969 Goerge Lichtheim, one of the most perceptive commentators on European cultural life, wrote about Habermas, "It is not easy to assess the work of a scholar whose professional competence extends from the logic of science to the sociology of knowledge, by way of Marx, Hegel and the more recondite sources of the European metaphysical tradition... (At) an age when most of his colleagues have painfully established control over one corner of the field, he has made himself master of the whole, in depth and breadth alike. There is no corner-cutting, no facile evasion of difficulties or spurious enunciation of conclusions unsupported by research: whether he is refuting Popper, dissecting the pragmatism of Charles Peirce, delving into the medieval antecedents of Schelling's metaphysics, or bringing Marxist sociology up to date, there is always the same uncanny mastery of the sources, joined to an enviable talent for clarifying intricate logical puzzles. He seems to have been born with a faculty for digesting the toughest kind of material and refashioning it into

orderly wholes."³

Habermas was forty years of age and was already recognized as a leading younger social theorist in postwar Germany. The most striking and impressive feature of Habermas's approach to the range and complexities of human inquiry is the way in which he weaves whatever he analyzes into a coherent *whole*. There is a *unity* of vision that informs his work. To this extent he is greatly under the influence of Hegel, Schelling, Fichte, Kant, Marx, and the young Hegelians. Even before Habermas became fully aware of the Critical Theory of the 1930s, he was recreating the experience and pathway followed by Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and other members of the Frankfurt School. Recalling these intellectually formative years, Habermas has written, "In retrospect, I sometimes have the impression that a student can recreate a segment of the critical theory of the 1930s, if he systematically works his way from Kant through Hegel, including Schelling, and approaches Marx via Luckac's."⁴

In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968 & English edition in 1971), Habermas outlines his first systematic philosophical exposition. His major theses were succinctly summarized in the inaugural address he gave at Frankfurt University (published as an appendix to the book).

In the Preface, Habermas announced, "I am undertaking a historically oriented attempt to reconstruct the prehistory of modern positivism with the systematic intention of analyzing the connections of knowledge and human interests. In following the process of dissolution of epistemology which has left the philosophy of science in its place, one makes one's way over abandoned stages of reflection. Retreating this path from a perspective that looks back towards the point of departure may help to recover the forgotten experience of reflection. That we disavow reflection is positivism."⁵

By 1968 the positivist tradition, from August Comte to logical positivist like A.J.Ayer, was already under severe attack. But one cannot underestimate the extent to which the positivistic thinking pervaded and dominated the intellectual and cultural life. Habermas, in this context, is speak-

ing of 'positivism' in a broad encompassing manner. He wants to identify that tendency to which many philosophical schools have contributed. This formulation is very close to issues that preoccupied thinkers of different philosophical positions. He advanced a provocative interpretation of a movement of thought that encompassed Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Dilthey, Peirce, Nietzsche, Comte and Freud. But I would like to emphasize the point that at the roots of Habermas's philosophical formulation to reconstruct the prehistory of modern positivism, there lies an essentially Kantian paradigm of 'reason'. Habermas has derived from Kant that 'reason is self-reflective' or 'the self-reflection of reason upon the conditions of its employment'. This is the thrust of Kant's *Critiques* - where 'pure reason' can self-reflexively come to grasp the universal and necessary conditions for the very possibility of theoretical knowledge, i.e. synthetic *a priori* proposition; 'practical reason' can give rise to categorical imperatives and 'judgement' can provide aesthetic judgements. Further the 'critique' is the self-critique. This is the emancipatory sense of self-critique and self-reflection. This concept could further be elaborated with the help of Kant's article in 1784 "*Answer to the Question : What is Enlightenment?*" "Enlightenment is the coming out of Man from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the unwillingness (unvermogen) to serve one's own understanding without direction from another. This immaturity is self-imposed, because Reason itself languishes, not in lack of understanding, but only of resolve and courage to serve oneself without direction from another. *Sapere aude*, Think boldly, take courage, use your *own* Understanding to serve: This is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment."⁶ The attempt to get rid of 'self-imposed immaturity' is both self-critique and self-reflection with the aim to attain emancipation. Emancipatory self-reflection is dependent on giving a rational reconstruction of the universal conditions for reason.

In other words, Enlightenment develops reason to the extent that it becomes autonomous and gets rid of restraints from tradition and authority. The way to Enlightenment, Kant emphasizes, is not to seek a mentor or authority in Thinking, in Willing and in Feeling. Kant has placed freedom and maturity (*Muendigkeit*) at the centre of Enlightenment and contrasted it from

tutelages. In an uncharacteristic manner Kant says, "when the question is asked: do we live in an enlightened epoch (*Aufgeklärten Zeitalter*) then the answer is: No, but rather in an epoch of Enlightenment (*Zeitalter der Aufklärung*)".⁷ This is possible only by regarding 'Reason' the supreme faculty.

Kant first discusses 'Reason' in general, "All our knowledge starts with the senses, proceeds from thence to understanding, and ends with reason beyond which there is no higher faculty to be found in us for elaborating the matter of intuition and bringing it under the highest unity of thought".⁸ The distinction manifested in Kant's philosophy between 'reason', 'understanding' and 'sensibility' constitutes a landmark in the whole movement of German idealism along with the German Enlightenment. Let us elaborate the nature and status of 'reason' within the general Kantian epistemological situation. As a matter of fact, Kant distinguishes 'reason' from 'understanding'. Reason is never in immediate relation to objects given in sensibility. It is understanding that holds sway in Kant's epistemology. Reason is concerned with the understanding and its judgements. The understanding throughout the use of categories and principles unifies the manifold supplied by the sensibility. Reason seeks to unify the concepts and judgements of understanding. Whereas understanding is directly related to sensibility, reason relates itself to sensibility only indirectly through understanding. As perceptions are unified by understanding with the categories, so understanding needs a higher unity - the unity of reason in order to form a connected system. This is supplied to it by the ideas of reason - freedom of will, immortality of soul and existence of God. These ideas have their use and value as the guides to the understanding. In Kant's terminology, the ideas of reason are 'regulative' rather than 'constitutive'. They do not constitute knowledge but merely regulate it. Critical theorists before Habermas reacted sharply to it.

Against Kant, both Adorno and Horkheimer say, "From now on, matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers (in it), of hidden qualities. For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect."⁹ This is first

major criticism of European Enlightenment in this century. "Enlightenment is totalitarian", declared both Adorno and Horkheimer, "the implication was that Nazi totalitarianism was a product of Enlightenment Liberalism, whose central thrust is to establish human domination over everything, and to eliminate that which resists such domination."¹⁰ They have also said, "The fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant. The Enlightenment's attempt was to captivate Nature and to Keep it in the strait jacket of abstract Reason, which it misinterpreted as Scientific Reason."¹¹

As stated earlier, Adorno recognizes the difficulty in establishing any system of knowledge on an indubitable basis of certainty. It was Kant who had declared that Scientific knowledge was synthetic *a priori*. As synthetic, the subject is amplified in the predicate, And as *a priori*, the relationship between subject and predicate is universal and necessary. What we require in science is an ampliative element with the characteristics of universality and necessity. Kant went to the extent that "... the order and regularity in the appearances, which we entitle nature, we ourselves introduce. We could never find them in appearances, had not we ourselves, or the nature of our mind, originally set them there."¹² The constitution of knowledge by means of categories is regarded by Kant as the activity of human mind, because, "... it is, after all, we ourselves who are responsible for the formation of general concepts... our ability to render the given intelligible to ourselves, and to describe it under the guidance of general words, is an expression of genuine intellectual activity."¹³ Without going in to the details, I may just point out that Kant's position on scientific knowledge is very close to Newtonian physics which in turn has developed out of the Cartesian Galilean mechanics. But we have gone ahead of Newtonian physics. "Now we know that all proof is inductive, and therefore tentative, and can be questioned by subsequent experience. We know also that there is no such thing as a non-subjective objectivity, that all perception involves subjectivity, that the perceiver is always part of the reality perceived. No scientific theory is handed down by the objective reality; it is human subjectivity that formulates scientific hypotheses and then tests their validity by experimentation. Science is neither non-subjectively objective nor finally proven."¹⁴ Science

as something existing and in certain respect complete is the most objective thing known to man. But science *in the making* is as subjective as any other branch of human endeavour.

Within this rather larger perspective that the reactions of Habermas could be reassessed. Like Hegel, Habermas takes the split between science, morals and art as the 'fundamental philosophical problem of modernity'. Habermas sees that Hegel "solves the problem of the self-assurance of modernity too well", because the philosophy of Absolute spirit "removes all importance from its own present age ... and deprives it of its calling to self-critical renewal."¹⁵ He sees the popularity of 'end of philosophy' thought as an over-reaction to this over-success.

Habermas thinks that we need not be restricted as Horkheimer and Adorno were, to such mere socio-historical forms of social criticism. He views Horkheimer, Adorno and Foucault as working out new versions of 'the end of philosophy' ... no matter what name it (philosophy) appears under now-whether as fundamental ontology, as critique, as negative dialectic, or genealogy - these pseudonyms are by no means disguises under which the traditional (i.e. Hegelian) form of philosophy lies hidden; the drapery of philosophical concepts more likely serves as the cloak, for a scantily concealed end of philosophy".¹⁶

Habermas's account of such 'end of philosophy' movements is offered as part of a more sweeping history of philosophy since Kant. He thinks that Kant was right to split 'reason up into science, morality and art and that Hegel was right in accepting this as "the standard (*massgeblich*) interpretation of modernity."¹⁷ He also thinks that Hegel was right in believing that "Kant does not perceive the ...formal divisions within culture...as diremptions. Hence he ignores the need for unification that emerges with the separations evoked by the principle of subjectivity."¹⁸ It may be recalled that unification was the fundamental philosophical preoccupation for Hegel. In a very remarkable manner in his early fragments entitled *Glauben und Wissen*, Hegel has said, "Unification and Being (*sein*) are equivalent; the copula 'is' in every proposition expresses a unification

of subject and predicate, in other words, a Being."¹⁹ In the process of unifying the opposites 'reason', for Hegel, touches every part of reality; 'reason' *sublates* the finite and its negation, so that they are revealed as moments of a more inclusive whole. Habermas agrees with Hegel that there is a need for Unification, He wants to go back to Hegel and to start it again. He thinks that, "in order to avoid the disillusionment with the philosophy of subjectivity which produced Nietzsche and the two strands of post-Nietzschean thought which he distinguishes and dislikes (the one leading to Foucault, and the other to Heidegger) we need to go back to the place where the young Hegel took the wrong turn. That was the place where he still held open the option of using the idea of uncoerced will formation in a communication community existing under constraints of cooperation as model for the reconciliation of a bifurcated civil society... it was the lack of a sense of rationality as *social* that was missing from the philosophy of subject which the older Hegel exemplified from which the 'end-of-philosophy' thinkers have never really escaped."²⁰

Habermas thinks that the philosophical requirement which 'the philosophy of the subject' gratified is as real as it was during Hegel's own time, and can perhaps be fulfilled by his (Habermas's) own focus on a 'communication community'. With Hegel's overemphasis on the *Geist*, philosophy has become 'an isolated monastery/sanctuary' in which an individual forms an isolated order of priests untroubled by how it goes with the world. This position has certainly come from Kant's 'three-sphere' picture of culture which Hegel tries to resolve. On this latter view, Kant's attempt to deny knowledge to make room for faith (by inventing 'transcendental subjectivity' to serve as the function for the Copernican revolution) was provoked by an unnecessary worry about the spiritual significance or insignificance of modern science. "Like Habermas, Kant thinks that modern science has a theoretical dynamic, one which can be identified with (at least a portion of) the nature of rationality. Both think that by isolating and exhibiting this dynamic, but distinguishing it from other dynamics (e.g.,) practical reason or the emancipatory interest, one can keep the results of science without thereby disenchanting the world. Kant suggested that we need not let our

knowledge of the world *qua* matter in motion get in the way of our moral sense. The same suggestion was also made by Hume and Reid, but unlike these pragmatists, Kant thought that he had to back up this suggestion with a story which would differentiate and 'place' the three great spheres into which culture must be divided.²¹

Despite being greatly under the influence of Kantian paradigm, Habermas remains a critical theorist. One of Habermas' most basic and challenging thesis is that "we cannot even make sense of the concepts of meaning, understanding and interpretation unless we rationally evaluate the validity claims that are made by participants in these forms of life. We must be able to discriminate what participants themselves count as reasons for their actions, and this requires a performative attitude on our part where we assess what 'they' count as good reasons for action with reference to 'our' standards of rationality."²² To illustrate it, we can say that we are essentially embodied beings. We are embodied in the family - the property, language and the value systems-, in the tribal community and in the ethnicity. At the same time, we are able to transcend this infra-structure and bracket all judgements of the validity claims made by participants in a form of life. It is this dialectic that lies at the centre of Habermas's critical theory. Habermas says, "A critical social science will not remain satisfied with this. It is concerned with going beyond this goal to determine when theoretical statements grasp invariant regularities of social action as such and when they express ideologically frozen relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed... thus the level of (non-reflective) consciousness which is one of the initial conditions of such laws, can be transformed. Of course, to this end, a critically mediated knowledge of laws cannot through reflection alone render a law itself inoperative but can render it inapplicable. The methodological framework that determines the meaning of the validity of critical propositions of this category is established by the concept of *self-reflection*. The latter releases the subject from dependence on hypostatized powers. Self-reflection is determined by an emancipatory cognitive interest."²³

Habermas's critical theory is a dialectical synthesis of the empirical - analytic and the historical hermeneutical disciplines. It is a constant cogni-

tion and vigilant criticism and this process always goes on and never reaches to any finality. There are also issues and their criticism, further issues and further criticism; but there is no final issue and no final criticism. Habermas's synthesis comes into clear focus when we turn into the third type of cognitive interest: the emancipatory interest: This interest is at once derivative and the most fundamental cognitive interest. If we reflect upon the forms of knowledge and the disciplines guided by the technical and practical interests, we realize that they contain an internal demand for open, free, non-coercive communication. The validity of knowledge claims in empirical-analytic sciences and the historical - hermeneutical disciplines always allow of further testing, challenge and rational evaluation."²⁴

Habermas agrees with Kant that there are basic structures, rules and categories that are presupposed by reason (Kant) and communicative action (Habermas). But he is skeptical of pure transcendental philosophy which cannot transcend itself. Habermas takes the help from Hegelian dialectic which can break with the legacy of pure *apriori* transcendental philosophy. It is this synthesis of Kantian *apriorism* and Hegelian *dialectic* that has given rise to Habermas's critical theory of communicative action.

Although the details of Habermas's communicative action are subtle, complex and controversial, we can sketch some of its basic features: "Communicative action is a distinctive type of social interaction - the type of action oriented to mutual understanding. It must be distinguished from other types of social action and non-social action which are oriented to 'success', to the efficient achievement of ends. These latter action-types exhibit the form of purposive rational action where we seek to achieve an end or goal by appropriate means".²⁵ Habermas elucidates, "... the goal of coming to an understanding (*Verstanding*) is to bring about an agreement (*Eiverstandis*) that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another. Agreement is based on recognition of the corresponding validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness and rightness".²⁶ All communicative action takes place with two operative terms - consensus and disagreement. Habermas argues that anyone acting communicatively must, in performing a speech action,

raise *universal validity* claims, and must suppose that such claims can be vindicated. As indicated in the above quotation, there are four types of validity claims - comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness (sincerity) and normative rightness. In most empirical situations, we resolve our conflicts and disagreements with these validity claims. But there may arise a situation where validity claims can breakdown or be challenged by one of the participants in the communicative context. To resolve a breakdown in communication, Habermas proposes to have a discourse and argumentation or dialogue where we explicitly seek to warrant the validity claims that have been called into question and replace it with a new model of validity claims which could be higher, more comprehensive than the earlier one, and to see that there is no dispute above a validity claim beyond rational argumentation by the participants involved.

To bring this paper to a close, we can say that enlightenment reason of both Kant and Hegel is at the centre of the Critical Theory of the postmodern philosophy. Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas, each in his own way with certain common features, attempt to go ahead of 'closed', 'systemic' thinking of Kant and Hegel. Habermas synthesises dialectically the empirical - analytic and the historical-hermeneutical studies. It is a constant cognition and vigilant criticism and this process always goes on. Habermas takes the help from Kantian *a priorism* and Hegelian dialectic to formulate his communicative action. He has made an effort to develop a validation criterion in communicative action. It is quite uncharacteristic to Frankfurt Scholars to develop a validation criterion. The validation criterion for physical sciences is different from the validation criterion for social sciences. This is because what is actually practised in science is different from the ideology formations.

NOTES

1. Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Reecrire La Modernite" in *L'Inhumain*, (Galilee, Paris, 1988) pp. 33-34.

2. T.W.Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York : Herder & Herder, 1972) p.xi.
3. George Lichtheim, "From Historicism to Marxist Humanism" in *From Marx to Hegel* (New York, 1971), p. 175.
4. Jurgen Habermas, "The Dialectic of Rationalization: An Interview with Jurgen Habermas, " *Telos*, 49 (Fall, 1981), p.6.
5. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston, 1971) Preface, p.vii.
6. Immanuel Kant, *was ist Aufklaerung : Thesen and Definitionen*, Reclam, Stuttgart, 1986, p.9, English translation by Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Enlightenment : East and West*, (Delhi, B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1989) p.61.
7. Kant, *was Ist Aufkluerung*, etc. *op. cit.*, p.96.
8. Smith, N.K., *A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (MacMillan & Company, 1918) p. 428.
9. Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* Quotation from Paulos mar Gregorios "Foreword" to *Philosophy : Modern and Postmodern*, by R.P.Singh (New Delhi, Intellectual Publishing House, 1997, p. vii.
10. *Ibid.*, p.vii.
11. *Ibid.*, p.vii.
12. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N.K. Smith (London, The MacMillan Press Ltd. 1973)p. 147.
13. Cassirrer, H.W., *Kant's First Critique : An Appraisal of the Permanent Significance of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960) p.55.
14. Paulos Mar Gregorios, "Foreword" to *Philosophy : Modern and Postmodern*, etc. p.viii.
15. Habermas *Paris lectures* II, p. 28. Quotation from Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on postmodernity" in *Habermas and Modernity* (ed) R.J. Bernstein (Polity Press. 1985) p.168.

16. Habermas, *Paris lectures*, III, p. 3. Quotation from *Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity*, etc., p.166.
17. *Ibid.*, I, p.17.
18. *Ibid.*, I, p.17.
19. Hegel, *Theologische Jugendschriften*, p.383. Translated and quoted by Herbert Marcuse in *Reason and Revolution* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1976), p.35.
20. Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity" in *Habermas and Modernity* (ed) R.J. Bernstein (Polity Press, 1985) p.167.
21. *Ibid.*, p.168.
22. Richard J. Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, etc., Introduction, p.10.
23. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, (Boston, 1971) p.310.
24. Richard J. Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity* etc. pp. 10-11.
25. *Ibid.*, p.18.
26. Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston, 1974), p.3.