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## **Unit-20 :      Pertinence of Critical Theory**

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### **Structure**

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### **20.0    Learning Outcome**

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After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- Know the origin and characteristics of critical theory.
- Understand the relevance of critical theory in public administration.

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### **20.1    Introduction**

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Public Administration is a field of knowledge with uncertain boundaries. Public administration scholars are hesitant to call it a discipline due to lack of indigenous theories to the field. They borrowed many of their conceptual frameworks from the areas

of business administration, theories of management, leadership, employee motivation and so on and from political science and economics. In such a field critical theory offers a critique on the functioning of public institutions and provide a vision of a better future. But critical theory appears infrequently in the literatures of public administration. In simple critical theory offers critique of public institutions and possibilities for a better future. In this unit an attempt is made to discuss critical theory in the context of public administration.

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## **20.2 Origin of the concept**

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Critical theory is grounded in the enlightenment, eighteenth century thought in Europe and America that used science, reason, and individual self-determination to cast off religious and governmental authority. Critical theory is associated with the Frankfurt School beginning in the 1920s and extending through the later work of principal members Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, in the 1960s and 1970s.

Frankfurt critical theory recognises the concrete temporal and cultural specificity of the individual. Consciousness-values and perceptions are shaped by the time and society in which we live, but ultimately the measure of society is its effect on people, on their happiness and sense of freedom to determine the future. Critical theory can be described as a “category of sociological thought” that developed from the work of Marx.

The term critical theory is also applied to writers whose work began in the early part of the twentieth century, such as Georg Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci, as well as to later twentieth-century writers such as Jurgen Habermas. Because of differences in approach between authors and changes in the work of individual authors over time, it is

difficult to construct a unitary narrative of critical theory. It will be helpful to identify a few common characteristics in this body of work, recognising that not all authors treat them the same, or even agree on their status within critical theory.

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### **20.3 Characteristics**

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Though critical theory has in important ways moved beyond Marx as times have changed and problems have been identified in his work, it includes the three characteristics discussed below:

#### **Contradiction, Dialectic and Change**

A primary characteristic of critical theory is the idea that social systems change over time because of built-in tensions, or contradictions, between how they are and how they could be. Each such systemic contradiction is inherent in and cannot be solved without modifying, or ‘moving beyond’, the basic structure in which it occurs. Critical theory shows the relationship between ideas and theoretical positions and their social environment, and thus attempts to contextualise, or historicize, ideas in terms of their roots in social processes.

The process of acquiring knowledge of alternatives to the status quo and encouraging constructive change is dialectical. The Frankfurt School’s use of the Hegelian concept of dialectic is not conceptually foundational and does not involve a predetermined outcome. In agreement with writers such as Lukacs, Korsch, and Gramsci, Frankfurt theorists rejected “objectivistic Marxism”, a type of Marxist thought that emphasised “economic laws and objective social conditions.

Frankfurt theorists stressed reason and gave the term a specific meaning. Reason, signified a faculty that went beyond mere appearances, exploring “a deeper reality”,

knowledge of the contradictory opposite(s) of things, people, and situations, into which they may change over time.

Though critical theorists believe that reason have been used in support of systems of domination and control, some also think people can use reason to imagine a different future. Critical theorists who understand the “dialectic of enlightenment” and are committed to a non-foundational, historically based process of change may seek to reconstruct critical reason as a counter to contemporary instrumental rationality. Critical reason in practice involves the dialectical use of imagination and fantasy to envision a better future. For critical theorists to abandon the idea of radical change in societal institutions and practices that would allow for greater human freedom and self-determination.

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## **20.4 Critical Theory in Public Administration**

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The development of critical theory as a philosophical and practical discipline has greatly influenced social sciences in general, public administration in particular reiterating the need for the humanisation of public organisations. It is a post-Weberian conceptualisation of the Frankfurt School. All Post-modern public administration theories have given importance to people in the organisation than to the formal structures of organisations. They also give importance to the subjective as well as inter-subjective aspects of organisations and their functions.

Critical theory provides an opening for conceptualisation and practice that acknowledges the value-based, normative character of public administration. The public professional who perceives contradiction between current public practices and a future

with reduced inequity and oppression may use critical theory as a guide for taking action to create social change.

The communication theory of Habermas is the most commonly used version of critical theory in public administration today. The idea of undistorted communication as a critical tool for social change has been important in public administration. Robert Denhardt suggested that a critical approach to organisational theory would be useful in public administration. Denhardt reviewed the origins of critical theory, from Hegel and Marx to the Frankfurt theorists, but focused on Habermas. He emphasised the Habermasian concern about value-free science and efficiency and urged attention to the larger historical and normative context of public organisations as part of a critical examination of bureaucracy and its relationships with clients.

Critical theory provides an ethical impulse toward substantive equality and democracy. Critical theory has much to offer the field of public administration and its intention is to create consciousness such that theory and practice become one. Several articles and books in public administration related fields have used concepts with critical elements though they are not explicitly built upon critical theory.

Jurgen Habermas, the best-known exponent of critical theory. Like Weber, Habermas refers to the preponderance of technical efficiency in a modern state through the operation of public bureaucracy. As the society gets increasingly bureaucratised, social power and discretion tend to be concentrated in the hands of bureaucratic state apparatus. The expanding role of the public bureaucracy is not matched by its popular acceptance. There is increasing criticism of the bureaucracy as a self-aggrandising force alienated from the public who can rarely repose trust in it. Public interest and bureaucratic interests seem at many places at loggerheads. The trend toward over-

bureaucratisation causes concern about the social role of the bureaucracy that can be inquired into from the critical perspective. The critical theory of public administration urges replacement of the stifling effect of techno administrative domination of bureaucracy through debureaucratisation and democratisation of administration based on free flow of communication and an expose of inherent contradictions in hierarchical relationship.

Despite a great variety of management structures and styles, the common assumption has been that management is basically technical in nature whose primary motive is to produce practicable results by manipulating human beings and materials. A critical theory of public organisation would be interested in improving the quality of organisational life. It would enquire into the conditions of power and dependence in an organisation and try to reveal the inherent contradictions in hierarchical relationships as embedded in a bureaucracy. The critical approach would concentrate on the distorted patterns of communication that characterise present day organisations both in terms of internal and external relationships.

As regards to organisation – client relationship, the alienation takes the form of organisation distrust and occasional hostility to the working of bureaucracy. The organisation tends to look at the client as a burden and the client in turn tends to look at the organisation as unhelpful. In such a situation, the organisational design and operation run counter to the basic purposes of a democratic public service. The critical approach would suggest a different style of management. The basic thrust of critical theory of public organisation is toward reaffirmation of a commitment to the democratisation of all kinds of social relationships by locating and removing the disabilities that have blocked the surfacing of true needs of individuals in social and political spheres.

Critical theory has inspired a movement for improving the quality of organisational life by advocating self-reflection and self criticism on the part of administrators and by pleading for a reordering of priorities so as to give primacy to the growth of individual as against the productivity of organisation. This theory has strong individualistic, subjectivist and anti-bureaucratic thrust.

A critical approach involves a systematic analysis of social conditions and a framework for action guided by normative purpose. Critical social theory encourages academicians and practitioners not only to view social structures and practices as vehicles of domination, repression and manipulation but also as potential starting points for meaningful social change. Critical theory framework of dialectical change, critical imagination, and self-determination may be applied to public service and to local governance.

Recent decades have witnessed a great transformation and upheaval marked by technological revolution and global restructuring of capitalism. It brought issues like heightened exploitation of labour, corporate downsizing, great levels of unemployment, inequality and insecurity. There is instability and violence in many places. All these issues are bearing influence on public governance. In this context critical approach is very much needed to analyse them. Therefore, public administration needed critical theory now more than ever.

Given societal conditions and the nature of research and practice in public administration, the conceptual framework of critical social theory offers promise for those scholars who wish to critique the status quo of professional practice in public organisations, with intent to imagine better options for the future. Critical theory has had limited discussion and application in public administration. This could be because in

one-dimensional society people have become unaware of potential alternative, or they do not want to see contradictions because it could be upsetting or dangerous to challenge the status quo.

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## **20.5 Conclusion**

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Critical theory is grounded during the period of renaissance in eighteenth century in Europe and America that used science, reason and individual self-determination to cast off religious and governmental authority. Critical theory is associated with the Frankfurt School beginning in the 1920's. It recognises the concrete temporal and cultural specificity of the individual.

The development of critical theory as a philosophical and practical discipline has greatly influenced social sciences in general, public administration in particular. It is a post-Weberian conceptualisation. It offers critique of public institutions and provide a vision for a better future. This theory has strong individualistic, subjectivist and audit-bureaucratic thrust. In the present era of globalising world, critical approach is very much needed to analyse the issues that are influencing governance. Critical theory is needed now more than ever.

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## **20.6 Key Concepts**

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**Conservatism:** Adherence to a political disposition that prefers the status quo and accepts change only in moderation.



**Dialectic:** The philosophical system of asserting truth by resolving the references that exist between factors in a particular situation.

**Libertarianism:** A political doctrine holding that a government should do little more than provide police and military protection: other than that, it should not interfere – for either good or ill –in the lives of its citizens.

**Objectivist:** One who believes that reason and logic is the only means to knowledge, that self-interest determines ethics, and that capitalism should prevail in society.

**Patronage:** The power of elected and appointed officials to make partisan appointments to office or to confer contracts, honours, or other benefits on their political supporters.

**Privatisation:** The process of returning to the private sector property or functions previously owned or performed by the Government.

**Reactionary:** A person who supports outmoded ideas of the past. The term is a derogatory reference to political malcontents who yearn for a previous status quo.

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## 20.7 References and Further Reading

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## **20.8 Activities**

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Q.1 Discuss the origin and characteristics of critical theory.

Q.2 Analyse the relevance of critical theory in era of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation.