UNIT 4   CRITICAL METHOD

Contents

4.0   OBJECTIVES

- To introduce a method of philosophizing that was prevalent in the twentieth century;

- To familiarize the students to the world of critical thinking, social critique and ideological structuring; and

- To have an overall picture of Critical theory developed and promoted by Frankfurt school of philosophy which has a tremendous impact in the continental philosophy of our times.

4.1   INTRODUCTION

Critical Method is the critical theorist approach to the study of society. As a theory, it was developed between 1930-1970 by 'Frankfurt school' group of theorists and philosophers like Max Horkheimer, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Habermas. It begins by critiquing the modern Western societies that became closed and totalitarian societies where all individual freedom and autonomy were at stake. As a result of the capitalist mode of production, they believed early, that the societies would turn into totalitarian. Later they focused on the role of science and technology in modern society, and the 'instrumental' conception of reason. This conception denies the possibility of inherent rational ends of human action and affirms reason as exclusive choice

of effective instruments for achieving arbitrary ends. If 'instrumental rationality' is not subordinated to a more encompassing notion of rationality, it would bring in disastrous consequences. Critical theorists reflected on the impossibility of leading a good life in the contemporary world. Critical method is a form of cultural criticism and more a theoretical commitment than action for radical social change.

4.2 BASIC FEATURES OF CRITICAL THEORY

Many critics and intellectuals in Frankfurt School adapt Marxism to the theoretical and political needs of their time. The distinguishing feature of their approach is their theoretical orientation in social sciences for a critical theory of society. Method of the Critical theorists was to offer an internal or immanent criticism in the form of resistance to the contemporary society. For them, every society claims to have substantive rationality and allows its members to lead a good life. Critical method takes such claim as a standard for criticism. Critical theory method exposes such societies that fail to live up to their own claims. Understanding of good life from the beliefs, cultural artefacts and forms of experience present in the society is analysed and criticised in critical method. This serves as a basis for internal criticism. However, they find in the contemporary society a particular difficulty of finding these traditional substantive conceptions of the good life. These have been replaced by a justification that modern society needs no legitimation beyond its actual efficient functioning and to its 'instrumental' rationality. Hence 'instrumental rationality' itself becomes a major target for critical theory. (Geuss 1998)

Citical theory began with a social theory guided by an interest in the normative goal of human emancipation. They were skeptical of the enlightenment assumption of scientific and technological progress as an unproblematic human good. Empirical science was based on 'instrumental rationality,' which is inherently manipulative. It has brought in disastrous social and moral consequences.

They rejected a commonly held view of a 'theory' as a set of formally specified and interconnected general propositions which is used for successful explanation and prediction of the phenomena. This conception is extremely misleading. It takes away the social context in which theory arose, tested and applied. Without the context theories are not fully comprehensible. For the critical theorists, the term 'theory' designates a form of social activity. Human societies are engaged in a constant process of assimilating nature through labour in order to reproduce themselves; they develop forms of cognitive activity in order to make this self-reproduction more secure and more efficient. Cognitive activity is 'traditional theory,' from which the so called scientific theories are derived. Such cognitive activity not only directed at reproducing society but also at changing the existing society radically. (Geuss 1998)

4.3 ON INSTRUMENTAL REASON

'Reason' was objective in ancient world and was thought to refer to a structure or order inherent in reality. Human beings were thought to have a subjective faculty to perceive and respond to that objective structure of the world. It was used to determine goals of humans. In the post-Enlightenment world the 'objective' conception of reason becomes increasingly implausible. Reason comes to be conceived as essentially a subjective ability to find efficient means to

arbitrarily given ends. Reason becomes subjective, formal and instrumental. It is identified with the kind of reason used in natural science. Scientific reason, obtained from the instrumental understanding of reason, is used to manipulate the world towards human ends. Reason becomes a guide to life only in a very limited sense. But reason goes beyond those limits and retains its internal and immanent critical character. (Geuss 1998)

4.4 CONCEPTION OF SOCIETY

Positivists held that the human societies are just bundles of separates facts, events and institutions. Social facts and institutions are what they are objectively. The concepts of society are purely descriptive and defined in terms of observable properties. These concepts are just tools that humans can define in whatever way seems convenient. Critical theorists totally reject all these understanding of society. For them, every society is a 'totality' in which each feature is essentially connected with all others. Social reality is partly constituted by forms of belief, understanding and evaluation. The facts and institutions are not objective but inherently oriented towards the realization of specified conception of the good life. As each society has an objective concept of itself as an ideal form of itself, every institution in it is to be evaluated in relation to that concept towards the realization of the good life. To discover the concept is a very complex, constructive, theoretical activity. The method of critical theory is to elicit the concept of a given institution in a given society, formulate it and confront the actual reality of the institution with this ideal concept. If there are discrepancies, it would be exposed and analysed. Such method is called internal or immanent criticism. Adorno says that one cannot extract from reason the image of a good society as reason cannot describe utopia.

4.5 HUMAN HISTORY AS DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

For Horkheimer and Adorno, human history is a dialectic of 'enlightenment' on the one hand and 'myth/barbarism' on the other. 'Enlightenment' is a certain theory, a specification of goals for society, a set of views about individual morality the nature of knowledge, rationality and so on. It is also the actual state of society resulting from the above. 'Myth' is 'barbarism' opposed to 'enlightenment'. Enlightenment as a theory has commitment to certain ideals like autonomy, individuality, human happiness, genuine knowledge, according to it, is knowledge that is objectifying, identifying and inherently technologically efficacious. Increase in such genuine knowledge in a society would lead to the realization of ideals. Nothing is taken on faith or authority or tradition.

Critical theorists claim that all formulations of enlightenment as seen in the previous paragraph, is false. Enlightenment is not utterly and radically different from myth. The relation between myth and enlightenment is dialectical. Both have a common origin as reactions to the same phenomenon: primeval terror, to deal with fear of what is unknown. Myth is a mimetic reaction by making ourselves like that which we fear, by identifying with it. It is an attempt to do away with its primitive. The other way of reacting to fear is by separating it fully from the self and subjecting it to have control over it. The latter becomes enlightenment. In myth we make ourselves like the other; in enlightenment we

try to make the other like our category by subsuming it. Myths are only historically superseded forms of enlightenment. Moreover, myth and enlightenment are not given absolutely once and for all, but is historically relative.

Enlightenment has its own negative impact on humanity with its instrumentally manipulative attitude in terms of relation between human and nature and with fellow human beings. The effective instrumental control led to repress the spontaneity, which is human's capacity for happiness. Modern subjectivity in which self-preservation is ensured at the cost of happiness, is the best example as a result of enlightenment. Enlightenment has an inherent tendency to destroy itself. The ideals like autonomy, individuality and so on are not exempt from the demands of the principle of universal criticism. The increase in technological control over the world and the spread of scientific knowledge has not made people more autonomous, more highly individuated or happier. Finally, enlightenment is potentially totalitarian and has an inherent tendency to absolutize itself. Therefore, critical theorists have the task of enlightening the enlightenment itself, by analyzing its inherent tendency towards totalitarianism, by saving its ideals and by preventing it from turning itself into a form of myth and barbarism.

4.6   SUBSTANTIVE REASON

Adorno gave an account of a thinking that is a form of substantive reason. It is a kind of thinking constitutive of his critical theory. For enlightened reason some false beliefs are subjective projections. The medium of those projections like senses, social practices and history, are systematic sources of error. So for true knowledge the only condition is complete independence from these mediums. The autonomy of reason and meaning-independence of concepts is explicitly identified with the spontaneity of the 'transcendental' subject. This subject and the philosophical concept of system from it are driven by self-preservation due to both fear and rage against their objects. Adorno appropriates this conception of idealism as rationalized rage which is directed at anything that refuses to fit or non-identical with the demands of autonomous reason. This autonomy of reason is secured through the meaning-independence of concepts from concrete experience and its mediums. The particulars and contingents are incommensurable with this reason. Adorno tries for the 'rescue' of nonidentity - the thing in itself in its concrete, historically mediated sensuous particularity by the use of dialectic.

We usually subsume particulars and individuals under generality. Asserting of identity between the two individuals and between each individual and the concept is taken for granted in every day thinking and generally in science too. This Adorno calls as 'identity thinking,' which is not true as in every individual there is a difference. 'Identity thinking' in a way crushes or suppresses difference. For instance, X is a cow and 'Y' is another cow. We subsume these two particulars as a general concept of 'cow,' and the third one 'Z' is also linked to this concept of 'cow.' By engaging 'identity thinking' we tacitly try to make these three animals identical. In fact what is there is that there are three particular animals which are different from one another. Hence, it overlooks the differences. Critical theory tries to resist such identity tactics and to remain aware of 'non-identity.' There are instances where any given two are not identical with the concept that is already made of subsuming one to the other.

Adorno demonstrated that the rationalized concept of an object does not exhaust

the thing conceived. The sensory images and other mediums that are stripped away in the attainment of autonomy are the necessary mediations through which knowing subjects come into relation to objects known. Such a project of Adorno is called 'Negative dialectics' which continually points out the concrete differences. It becomes a kind of cognition of the non-identical and it goes on back and forth. It would not stop in some positive or more adequate concept but a continual negative dialectics. In applying this critical method in philosophical writing, Adorno even rejected the usual standards of clarity and communicability which he feared as forms of repression. It prevents, according to him the novel thoughts and critical ideas from being 'thoughts.' Hence, we find that he adopted an elusive style in writing and claimed that his philosophy could not be summarized.

In summary, the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno maintained that capitalism, enlightenment and the scientific era brought in mangy disadvantages and suffering to humanity in the modern period. No doubt they brought in various changes. Nevertheless, they led people to have guilt, inadequacy and progressive political change contributing to a new barbarism. As Adorno calls, they brought in nothing but a 'real hell.' From critiquing the impact of enlightenment movement their concern was to expose the nexus of rationality and social actuality. The ulterior dominating attitude of the humans upon nature underlies the project of instrumental reason. Critical theory exposed the rise and domination of instrumental reason while examining the philosophy of the Enlightenment. By doing so, they hoped for a positive and emancipatory notion of enlightenment. Their method in critical theory was to release humanity from the entanglement and domination of philosophy of instrumental reasoning which hailed enlightenment. The critical method is directed at a particular society that stunts the possible realization of the good life. It is inherently negative, and it depends on a conception of substantive reason. Critical method paves the way for the play of free, spontaneous, human subjectivity in an increasingly regimented world. It remained as part of the 'self consciousness of a revolutionary process of social change.'

4.7 HABERMASIAN CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory took a turn to more generalized critique of instrumental rationality which finally culminated in Adorno's "negative dialectics." For Habermas, with Horkheimer and Adorno, the critical theory had reached its dead end. He sketched out a critical theory of modernity that accounted for its pathology. He suggested a re-orientation of modernity rather than abandoning the project of enlightenment. He proposed a shift of paradigm for critical theory away from the philosophy of consciousness.

He had his interest in developing the concept of rationality, which is beyond the individualistic and subjectivist premises of modernity. He shared with other critical theorists that enlightenment in the form of instrumental rationality became more a source of enslavement than a means of liberation. By his investigation of instrumental rationality that dominated the modern thought, Habermas examined the loss of significance of the epistemic subject and the capacity for reflection by the subject on his or her activities. In the present effort of making rationality for emancipation, we need to counter this tendency and reaffirm the

necessity of self reflection for self-understanding.

Critical theory of society for Habermas is inherent in the very structure of social action and language. If in any communicative situation a consensus is established under coercion it is an instance of systematically distorted communication. In proposing for the contemporary formation of ideology and the process of emanciapation, Habermas advocates the transcendence of such systems of distorted communication. Here again, what is required is engagement in critical reflection and criticism where domination is exposed.

4.8   HABERMAS' THEORY OF SOCIETY

Habermas tried to develop a theory of society with a practical intention. His concern was to offer a systematic and theoretical account of the relation between theory and practice in all social sciences. By doing this he intended to challenge the domination of scientism. He reflected on the nature of cognition, the structure of social inquiry and the normative basis of socio-cultural aspects of the society. He wanted to develop the theory of society with practical intention. He was critical of the developments and changes in the capitalist and socialist societies in the twentieth century history that raised lots of doubt about the validity of Marxian analysis and theory. It also posed a major concern about the traditional social thoughts and values perpetuated by many traditions, as they seemed to be bearing no impact on contemporary society. It called for an assessment and reformulation so as to be relevant today. The developments through scientific revolution and enlightenment are juxtaposed with the developments in the notion of freedom, justice, happiness and self-realization. The Western society has witnessed rather the rise of nihilism and anti-modernism threatening the project of modernity and enlightenment. It also paved the way to dogmatism and superstition, fragmentation and discontinuity with loss of meaning, as reactionary response to modernity. According to him, the growth of rationalization has curtailed the freedom and self-determination of human being. Technological progress brought in both blessings and difficulties. One cannot think of abandoning the achievements of modernity. One needs to have a careful analysis of the outcome of the progress of modernity. Critical theory, for Habermas had real potential to overcome domination and repression and to further the process of human emancipation. It is the distinguishing factor for Critical method from traditional social theory. It is necessary, therefore according to him to undertake the task of a scientific understanding of the dynamics of the society. One has to appropriate the developments in the social sciences and integrate them into a critical social science. He worked towards the notion of a just and emancipated society.

4.9   HABERMAS' CRITIQUE OF SCIENTISM

Habermas attempted to construct an alternative to the technological determinism. The technocratic consciousness in the social theory has made people to have a tendency to define practical problems as technical issues. Such technocracy justifies a particular class interest in domination and does not disclose the fundamental interests of humankind. It threatens an essential aspect of human life and affects the very structure of human interests. In his systematic critique of positivism and scientism Habermas says that positivism insists that only the

sciences constitute genuine knowledge and believes that science does not need any further critical analysis. It is a mere 'scientific self-misunderstanding,' which Habermas challenges. He attempts to secure an independent basis for critique that all forms of knowledge are rooted in fundamental human interests, namely 'anthropologically deep-seated cognitive interests.' These interests are vivid as technical interest in natural sciences, as practical interest in historical-hermeneutic sciences and as emancipatory interest in critical sciences. "The human interest in autonomy and responsibility is not mere fancy, for it can be apprehended a priori. What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language" (1968: 314).

For Habermas the growth of technocracy was not inevitable but the result of a failure to preserve the classical distinction between theory and practice, and between practical wisdom and technical skill. He traced this loss of distinction in modern political theories of Hobbes to Hegel as well as of Marx. Marxian concept of praxis blurred the distinction between labour and modes of social interaction. Habermas argues that the end of alienated labour does not alone ensure social emancipation. (Baynes 1998)

For Habermas, knowledge is historically rooted and interest bound. Human beings are both toolmaking and language-using animals. They had to produce from nature what is needed for their existence. It was done by manipulation and control of objects and necessarilly communicated with each other through the use of intersubjectively understood symbols of language. Humankind has an interest in the creation of knowledge to control objectified processes and to maintain communication. This is a basis of interests that human beings had to organize their experience in terms of *a priori* interests. There is also an interest in reason, in the human capacity to be self-reflective and self-determining, to act rationally. It results in to generation of knowledge enhancing autonomy and responsibility. It is an emancipatory interest. His theory of cognitive interests elaborates the relationship of knowledge to human activity.

Further for examining the distinction between processes of constitution and justification, he developed the theory of communicative competence. All speech is oriented to the idea of a genuine consensus which involves a nomative dimension. This is formalized and attained in an ideal speech situation, where consensus becomes a rational consensus and the ultimate criterion of truth. Here the very structure of speech is held to involve the anticipation of a form of life in which truth, freedom and justice are possible.

4.10 THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

The Theory of Communicative Action (1981) is Habermas' *magnum opus*. It is a major contribution to social theory with reflections on the basic concepts of social theory along with observations on the methodology of the social sciences, hypotheses about modernization as a process of societal rationalization. Habermas does not see social rationalization as a process that culminates in the loss of meaning and freedom in the world, but as potential for societal learning and human emancipation. He makes a distinction between communicative action and purposive-rational actions. The former is 'content-oriented,' whereas the latter is 'success-oriented,' and goal oriented. The latter instrumental actions are appraised from the standpoint of efficiency adhering to the technical rules. They are strategic actions aiming at influencing others for the purpose of achieving

some end. Communicative action constitutes an independent and distinct type of social action. The goal is not to influence others but to reach an agreement or mutual understanding about something in the world. The goal of the agent is subordinated to the goal of achieving a mutually cooperative process of interpretation of the life-worldly situation. The individuals with communicative action aim at understanding by relating their interpretations by three basic types of speech acts: constative, regulative and expressive. (1981, vol. I: 319-). Habermas forms it as communicative rationality as it tries to criticize its own validity claims.

By communicative rationality Habermas does not see society as sort of large-scale debating club. The agents' interpretations are taken for granted and form the background of knowledge and practices which is called the life-world. Social integration is achieved in this way. Habermas' distinction between society as life-world and society as system is a unique feature in critical method. The society is an outcome of process of rationalization and societal differentiation. Habermas emphasizes the potential for emancipation through his theory of communicative action. Social pathologies are not just because of rationalization but rather from a one-sided process displacing modes of integration based on communicative reason with that of the market and administrative state's functional rationality. This is 'colonization of the life-world.' (Baynes 1998)

4.11 DISCOURSE ETHICS OF HABERMAS

Discourse ethics is communicative ethics. Habermas develops this as an important corollary of theory of communicative action. This ethics is a formulation of a post-conventional moral theory and an alternative to utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. Discourse ethics is centered around the basic idea of principle of universalizability that functions as a rule testing the legitimacy of norms. The principle is as Habermas puts it, "Every valid norm must satisfy the condition that all affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities)." (Habermas 1983: 65)

This principle is derived from the general pragmatic presuppositions of communication and argumentation. In every commincation the speakers have validity claims with ideal speech situations. The principle of universalizability is an attempt to formulate counterfactual ideal. Accordingly, the norms or maxims of action are only morally legitimate if, when contested, they could be justified in a moral-practical discourse.

Discourse ethics does not presuppose substantive moral content beyond the idea of practical reason. It specifies a formal procedure which any norm must satisfy if it is to be morally acceptable. It supposes an independent order of moral facts. Discourse ethics is a deontological moral theory as it assumes the priority of the right over the good. For Habermas morality consists not just of categorical imperatives but of obligations in terms of communicative action. The valid norms are morally binding as there is an intimate connection with processes of social interaction and communication. (1983: 109).

Habermasian ethics differs from Kantian ethics as it breaks the Kantian two-world metaphysics (phenomenal/noumenal) and rejects the monological

interpretation of the categorical imperative. Habermas favours an intersubjective or communicative version of the principle of universalizability, even though in Kant's kingdom of ends one finds an inter-subjective dimension already. In communicative ethics the ideal is in practical discourse. Discourse ethics makes good its claim with a notion of rational consensus or rational acceptability as the best general account of more ordinary moral intuitions. The abstract notion of equal respect implicit in the idea of communicative action is in contrast to Kantian and Utilitarian attractive claims of respecting individual autonomy or integrity and concern for the welfare of others or solidarity. Habermas understanding of communicative rationality enhances agreement between subjects rather than instrumental control of thing.

In his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), Habermas criticizes postmodern thought for resting modern philosophy of consciousness against which its criticism is directed. The modern and contemporary philosophy dwells either of the following positions: Subject is regarded as one object among others in the world, or as a 'transcendental' subject. The paradigm shift is necessary with a model of communicative action in which subjectivity is first approached through the intersubjective relations of individuals with one another. In short, modernity remains an 'unfulfilled project,' which is not to be abandoned but to be amended. (Baynes 1998)

4.12   LET US SUM UP

Critical theory emerged from a group of intellectuals in Frankfurt, Germany, who studied social and economic issues in contemporary society from a socialist perspective. Critical theory is designated as the approach to social theory developed initially by people like Max Horkheimer, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Herbert Marcuse and later by Habermas. They involved themselves with the forces, which moved society towards rational institutions. They conceived of these rational institutions as ensuring a true, free and just life, while at the same time being aware of the obstacles, which rendered radical change untenable and difficult. Critical theory developed in the background of various political and historical events in the West especially between 1920s and 1930s that had surely shaken many a Marxist followers. The Marxist theory of the day let down the expectations of the followers, for, political events and revolutionary practice had not coincided with the expectation derived from the Marxist ideals.

Marcuse claimed that the modern world had brought into existence a 'new sensibility,' with its demand for aesthetically satisfying forms of immediate experience and its refusal to participate in consumer society. It represented a significant new political force in the world. The social change is necessary to accommodate the 'new sensibility.' Adorno in particular was uncompromising in his opposition to the idea that philosophy should consist of a closed system of interconnected propositions that rested on a purportedly firm foundation and claimed universal validity. Habermas, has tried to develop further some of the central components of critical theory. In the second generation of critical theorists a return to the kind of Neo-Kantian philosophy is witnessed. In the work of Habermas we find the Kantian themes of finding a fixed universal framework for theorizing, giving firm foundations for knowledge claims of various sorts, and investigating the conditions of the possibility of various human activities. The critical theorists had tried to make Marxism more viable and suited to their

own time. Habermas, tried in particular, to revise and reformulate Marxist tradition. His project had a radical democratic character looking forward to expand the sphere of freedom and aiming at harmony between theory and practice. For him knowledge is historically rooted and interest bound. His theory of communication claims that all speech is oriented towards the idea of genuine consensus. In all, Critical method had contributed to philosophy in its criticism of positivism and its demand that social theory be reflective. (Geuss 1998)

4.13 KEY WORDS

Instumental Reason : Rationality of humans defined only in terms of domination and control of objects of nature, especially in science.

Discourse ethics : is communicative ethics where the norms are deliberated in the society and validated.

Communicative Action : Habermasian theory of ideals with due emphasis on practices being deliberated in ideal speech situations with speech acts.

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