
UNIT 4 CRITICAL THEORY

Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Historical Context of Critical Theory
- 4.3 The Character of Critical Theory
- 4.4 Critical Theory: The Marxian and Hegelian Legacies
- 4.5 Max Weber and the Enlightenment Tradition
- 4.6 The Critical Theory of Horkheimer and Adorno
- 4.7 Neo-Marxists and Orthodox Marxists: Towards Revised Marxism
- 4.8 Habermas and Critical Theory
- 4.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.10 Key Words
- 4.11 Further Readings and References
- 4.12 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we attempt to understand what is meant by critical theory. Critical theory, it should be emphasized, does not form a unity, it does not mean the same thing to all its adherents. The tradition of thinking which can be loosely referred to by this label is divided into at least two branches – the first centered around the Institute of Social Research and the second around the more recent work of Jurgen Habermas.

Therefore, this Unit introduces one to:

- the historical context and the character of critical theory
- explain how the critical theorists follow the Marxian and Hegelian legacies
- understand the contribution of Max Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno
- the effort of the Neo-Marxists and orthodox Marxists to revise Marxism
- the way Habermas attempts to give a new look to the basic objectives and goals of critical theory

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Critical theory in its loose reference centered firstly around the tradition of the Institute of Social Research, established in Frankfurt in 1923, and secondly around the more recent work of Jürgen Habermas. There are many prominent figures associated with the above Institute. The founders of critical theory placed history at the center of their approach to philosophy and society. However, their

preoccupation over certain issues included those of the past and looked forward to future possibilities.

After the example of Marx 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. Thus their main concern was with interpretation and transformation. The critical theorists were of the view that although all our knowledge is conditioned and shaped by historical circumstances, we can at the same time adjudicate the truth claims independently of our immediate social interests. Having defended the possibility of an independent moment of criticism, they also tried to justify critical theory on a non-objectivistic and materialistic foundation.

4.2 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory developed itself around the axes of various political and historical events. These events had a profound effect on the Frankfurt school and Habermas, directly or indirectly. The prevalence of class-conflict prior to the World War I was successfully subdued by the German nation-state although for a temporary period.

The years that followed World War I witnessed to the turbulent period of crumbling of many of Europe's oldest political systems. After the fall of Tsarism in Russia in 1917 Bolshevik Party seized power within nine months. This revolution saw the Marxist program as a near possibility. At the end of the World War I the German imperial systems were undermined. A republic was declared in Berlin on November 9 and a coalition of Majority Social Democrats and Independent Social Democrats took office. A Soviet Republic was created in Hungary after the abdication of the bourgeois government. In Italy and Austria strong worker's councils were formed. However the success which was seen in the Russian revolutionaries was not witnessed by those of the central and southern Europe, in that, they proved quite inadequate against the strength of the dominant classes. Then impetus of the Russian revolution was checked and isolated. The end of 1920s saw the repression of European socialist movements and due to various other factors the Russian revolution deviated itself from the path set by Lenin. After the death of Lenin in 1924 Stalin took over the reins of rule.

With the rule of Stalin, there emerged centralized control and censorship and many European communist parties were subjugated to Moscow. The Communist Party, in Germany, the KPD proved ineffective and its allegiance to the International-Bolshevik line, contributed to its failure to win and organize a minority of the working class. Later on, the divisions among the German working class resulted in the rise of the Second International and the German Democratic Party. The Social Democrats in 1914 formally committed themselves to an international struggle against capitalism. But in 1917 the left wing of the Social Democrats formed radical and revolutionary movements. The following decade was marked by massive inflation, unemployment, failed peace settlement, international capitalist crisis of 1929, social and class struggle etc.

With the rise of Nazism and fascism during the period from 1924 to 1933, the liberal and democratic were unable to counter the above movements. Noticing the crumbling force of the Communists, Hitler exploited his chances in Germany and in 1933 the Nazis seized power. The signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in August 22, 1939, proved end of an era.

4.3 THE CHARACTER OF CRITICAL THEORY

The events between 1920s and 1930s had surely shaken many a Marxist followers. Their conception of socialism as an inevitable part of history's plan had received a severe blow. There emerged divergent views within the Marxist followers between those who held on to the importance of history and those who held on to the centrality of the party. 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 it. The adherents of Marxist theory had to answer the following urgent questions; namely, how could one conceive a relationship between practice and theory? How could one justify the revolutionary ideal in changing historical circumstance? And how could a theory preserve hope for the future?

In the early 1920s Lukács and Korsch by their publication of *History and Class Consciousness*, and *Marxism and philosophy*, respectively challenged Marxist orthodoxy. By trying to rethink Marxism in relation to contemporary events, they set up a basis for a re-examination of Marxist theory and practice. Their basic conviction was that, followers of orthodox Marxism had violated concepts, theories and principles contained in Marx's writings. They thus sought to rectify the mistakes of orthodox Marxism. In order to do this, they were convinced that the examination of the origins of and nature of Marx's thought was essential and inevitable. This, they hoped would help all, whether Marxists or non-Marxists, in the process of their reconstruction of Marxism.

The determinist and positivist interpretation of historical materialism were the main issues for Lukács and Korsch. They argued that the positivist interpretation, that is, the suitability of the methodological model of the natural sciences for understanding the stages of historical development, was rejected by Marx himself. This form of materialism corresponds to 'contemplative materialism' in Marx's understanding, but it neglects the central importance of human subjectivity. They were of the view that the traditional standpoint of orthodox Marxism failed to comprehend the significance of examining both the objective conditions of action and the ways in which these conditions are understood and interpreted. Another prominent drawback of the Marxists was their underplaying of human subjectivity and consciousness and missing of those factors which were so crucial to prevent the emergence of revolutionary agent.

It is important here to note that though the critical theorists retained many of Lukács' concerns, they however were highly critical of his use of certain terms. The critical theorists, in general were inspired by the variety of intellectual currents. German idealism, Kant and Hegel were looked upon to retrieve the philosophical dimensions of the Marxist tradition. They examined Marx's early works, especially the 1844 Manuscripts, and assessed the contributions of Heidegger and Husserl to the contemporary philosophy. Freud's works helped them to reinvestigate human subjectivity while Weber's writings were considered to be important in

contemporary sociology. Among the members of the Institute of Social Research, the impact was reciprocal, in that, Horkheimer and Adorno impressed each other. While Benjamin influenced Adorno, the latter along with Marcuse left a lasting impact on Habermas.

4.4 CRITICAL THEORY: THE MARXIAN AND HEGELIAN LEGACIES

The primary concerns of critical theory are rooted in the writings of Kant, Hegel and Marx. Kant in his extensive literature on the epistemology aimed at inquiring into the nature and limits of human knowledge. For Kant such an inquiry must not be limited to the analysis of the contents of consciousness, because they are already organized and interpreted by the knowing subject. Kant intended his epistemology to be a critique which elucidates and explicates the forms and categories of knowledge. However, for Kant these categories of knowledge had to be understood in line with the ideals of mathematics and natural science, and the status of the knowing subject remained unclear. Having noticed these objections Hegel located epistemology within the context of a historical self-formative process. Here mathematics and science were mere stages in the progress towards truth.

For Hegel the progressive path to the absolute is possible only through an immanent critique of human experience. The aim of such a critique is to unveil conditions of possibility, unmask illusion and error. He visualizes that its driving force is the dialectic, which opens up and exhibits the contradictions involved within each successive mode of experience. The primary task of the dialectic is to show that the sense impressions are not a primordial object of knowledge due to the fact that sense certainty presupposes a subject who, through a struggle for recognition with others, attains self-consciousness. In the process of this self-consciousness subject reaches a certain point at which the self may be seen as an emancipation of spirit. From this point of emancipation of spirit, according to Hegel, the truth may be grasped and understood in its totality and entirety.

Marx learned his lessons from Hegel but was convinced that Hegel's attempt to justify the existing modern state as a manifestation of Reason was deeply wrong. At the time when Marx developed his theory of capitalist society, he was very well aware of the dehumanizing, catastrophic and alienating aspects of the prevailing and emerging capitalist societies of his time. Hegel considered the reconciliation of the universal and the particular and the establishment of a *polis* without slaves as a major achievement of the modern state. This achievement for Hegel was gradually being realized. But for Marx all the above was still to be brought about as a historical task in a communist revolution. Hegel's vindication of the modern state as the highest manifestation of Reason and his concept of the reconciliation of the opposites were merely the ideological formulation of a problem and only a reconciliation in thought.

Hegel once claimed that the greatest contribution of philosophy was the simple ideas of reason, the idea that the world is governed and ruled by reason. For him the world history is nothing but a rational process. Though he took several years to make his claims plausible to the philosophical world, a glimpse at the horrors and disasters both in the political and moral spheres in the last two decades would prompt any reasonable mind to dismiss statement like the above as naive and

irresponsible. Marx on his part, besides exposing the negative sides of modern societies, had to show how, the true nature of emancipated society was already prefigured in the dynamics, the crisis, and the logic of development of capitalist societies. Marx envisaged that the end of capitalism results in the emergence of a classless, communist society. The future emancipation of humankind, human society which Marx envisages is construed in terms of a historical dialectics.

Marx had criticized Hegel for justifying some negative features of the prevailing modern state as being in accordance with a fuller co-operation of reason. Marx believed that with his critique of the ideological justification of capitalist property he could tear down the whole edifice of Hegel's political thought, while at the same time finding an alternative explanation of all the phenomena of alienation seen in modern societies. Marx thought that with this new conception he could pave the way for the complete abolition of the dehumanizing features, functional differentiations of the modern state. Subsequently, he hoped that there would emerge unity and solidarity among all human beings in a communist society. However, Marx's historical dialectics seems implausible even for Marxists. Max Weber has reconstructed historical dialectics, that is, negative dialectics of progress and enlightenment.

4.5 MAX WEBER AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT TRADITION

Max Weber in his analysis of the progressive rationalization of modern life posed a problem which became the central preoccupation of western Marxists, since the early 1920s. Weber, known for his conception of rationalization attempted to comprehend a whole complex of tendencies coming under the purview of scientific and technical progress and subsequently its influences of the institutional framework of traditional society. This process of progress included also the extension of the areas of society subject to criteria of rational decision, the progress of industrialization and its consequences, the bureaucratization of administration and the devaluation of tradition, and the progressive secularization and disenchantment of the world. As Thomas McCarthy notes, "whatever the ambiguities in his own feelings toward this process, Weber clearly regarded it as irreversible: modern man was fated to live in a "shell of bondage." According to Weber, socialist revolution is not an adequate alternative, for it leads to further extension of bureaucratic control.

Max Weber, described as bourgeois Marx, held the world-historical process of modernization as a progressive rationalization. To an Enlightenment tradition history presented itself as a progress toward Reason and in this respect Weber was rightly described as the heir of an Enlightenment tradition. Weber's conception of rationality has three aspects, namely, purposive, formal, and discursive. For Weber, rationality in its narrowest sense, means *Zweckrationalität*, that is, purposive rationality. This sort of rationality is seen in the capability to choose efficient means for realizing predefined goals. Rationalization here refers definitively to the rise in economic or administrative efficiency. In its broader sense rationality implied the application and imposition of a coherent and systematic order presupposes that there exist myriads of different chaotic situation, beliefs, and experiences, alternatives of actions etc., which have to be rectified and replaced by the former. Here in this case rationalization means formalization and universalization of law in

modern society. Further, rationalization with regard to modes of action and interaction signifies a transition from communal to associative forms of social action.

Weber critically analyzes the transition to modernity as a process of rationalization. He held that in this process of rationalization the social sciences are bound to play an increasingly important role. His concept of progressive rationalization sheds all utopian perspectives. Weber's disciple Lukács termed reification, i.e., dehumanized systems of new kind into which the progressive rationalization led the modern man. One clearly notices here a paradox in Weber's conception of progressive rationalization as it connotes both emancipation and reification simultaneously. Later on Adorno and Horkheimer through their conception of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* tried to resolve this paradox.

4.6 THE CRITICAL THEORY OF HORKHEIMER AND ADORNO

Horkheimer maintained that capitalism, besides other disadvantages, imposes suffering on a massive scale. It breeds the feelings of guilt and inadequacy and this process, while blocking the progressive political change contributes to a new barbarism. Modern science, technology and production, certainly have opened up various possibilities for human beings. Yet, a realistic note to caution would lead to the conclusion that what comes out of all these various possibilities, in Adorno's language, is nothing but a 'real hell'.

True, this already sets the tone of the main concern of Horkheimer and Adorno in their famous *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Their task was nothing less than to discover why mankind instead of entering unto a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism. They both tried to focus on the nexus of rationality and social actuality, and upon what is inseparable there from- that of nature and the mastery of nature. Horkheimer and Adorno believed that the fundamental intention to dominate nature is that which underlies the way our world is appropriated and apprehended in its social and natural realms.

Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* addressed one of the prime concerns of the Frankfurt school, namely, the rise and domination of instrumental reason. They examined the importance of instrumental reason in the context of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and various forms of enlightenment. While the Enlightenment is understood as referring to the intellectual trends in the closing decades of the eighteenth century in Europe, enlightenment is understood as referring to more encompassing principles. By doing so, Horkheimer and Adorno hoped to prepare the way for a positive, emancipatory notion of enlightenment released from entanglement in blind domination. Horkheimer and Adorno argued that the seeds of the triumph of *Zweckrationalität* are already contained in the origins of western rationality. Though they were staunch opponents of Heidegger, there is a striking affinity in their analyses of the fate of western rationality.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) How did the founders of critical theory conceive rational institutions?

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2) Write a short note on Lukács and Korsch's criticism of Marxism.

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4.7 NEO-MARXISTS AND ORTHODOX MARXISTS: TOWARDS REVISED MARXISM

Following Marx's death the orthodox Marxists attempted to generalize historical materialism into what is called, a universal outlook. They considered that the emergence and the continuance of capitalism would end up in economic crises and armed conflicts. The revisionists however, stressed the evolutionary aspects of the materialist view. They maintained that the proletariat within the ambience of democratically organized capitalistic society could improve its own economic and political position. Both camps found support in certain passages of Marx's writings, but Engel was a main source of inspiration for them.

In an effort to revise Marxism, the Neomarxists incorporated some of the insights of Weber into the Marxian framework. The philosophers of the Frankfurt school, though they adopted the negative dialectics of progress from Weber, criticized his notion of instrumental reason. For them his notion of rationality which they saw as truncated and prejudiced did not provide even the least possibility of organizing society rationally in accordance with the emphatic conception of reason. For them, the important ideas of freedom, justice and happiness etc., would come under the purview of emphatic conception of reason and this latter concept is the point of reference to criticize the 20th century societies as irrational. In sharp contrast to this aspiration of the Frankfurt school critical theorists, Weber found no possibility of rational justification of norms, values or forms of social organization in a world which he termed, disenchanted world. Therefore the idea of rational organization of society was mere nonsensical to Weber.

The philosophers of the Frankfurt school however, did agree that though Weber's notion of rationality was practical or truncated, it portrayed the true nature of the existing advanced industrial societies. They also acknowledged that this truncated conception of rationality was sufficient enough to articulate the actual process of

modernization as occurred in European history and it further exposed the deplorable consequences of capitalism, namely, the ideological deformation of consciousness and the reification of social relationships.

The Marxian perspective of a liberated, rationally organized, classless society enabled the thinkers of Frankfurt school, to reconsider the historical dialectics of progress and revolution. Characterizing the dialectic of progress as a negative one, they thought that the former, instead of aiming at the realization of reason, would aim at the destruction of reason. As a result, one could not conceive of a liberated society as the logical or natural unfolding of the contradictions of capitalism. Ultimately, its realization is the break from the bad continuum of progress and a lead into the realm of freedom. The form of critical theory that developed around the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* identifies the objective historical and social tendencies and mechanisms that point toward the emergence of a post-capitalist society which is liberated.

4.8 HABERMAS AND CRITICAL THEORY

At the inception it is appropriate to note that Habermas's project is in the direction of developing a theory of society with a practical intent. Habermas's abiding concern has been offering a systematic and theoretically adequate account of the relation of theory to practice. By this project he intends to counter the hegemony of scientism on all fronts. From the practical point of view, Habermas's work emerges from extended reflection on the nature of cognition, the structure of social inquiry, the normative basis of socio cultural tendencies of the age. Habermas undertakes the project of systematically investigating the relationship between theory and practice in the social sciences. We can reiterate this statement in his own words regarding what he said of his aim as to develop the idea of a theory of society conceived with practical intention, and delimit its status with respect to theories of different origins.

No doubt that we must situate Habermas's reformulation of critical theory to the history within which he is identified. Habermas was clearly aware of the major events that characterized the twentieth century history. He took note of the substantial changes in the capitalist and socialist societies which have cast doubt on the validity of Marx's work. Habermas noticed also that the major traditions of social thought have hardly any bearing on the contemporary societies. Therefore he saw in himself an urgent call to assess and reformulate these major traditions and make them relevant. One of the apparent features of his philosophical project has been from the very beginning its radical democratic character in order to expand the sphere of freedom aimed at harmony between theory and practice.

Habermas takes into account various events that shaped the course of history. The 20th century is a witness to numerous major developments and transformations both in the socialist and capitalist societies. However one must realistically question whether all these developments have brought about developments in the notions of freedom, justice, happiness and self-realization. Habermas is more than aware that the rise of nihilism and antimodernism has greatly threatened to impede the project of modernity and the illusions of Enlightenment have given birth to dogmatism and superstition. Further, fragmentation and discontinuity and loss of meaning have crept into the very heart of human history.

In the political sphere one of the major events of this period was the degeneration of the Russian revolution into Stalinism. Added to this, Marxism proved ineffective in the West and the Marxist theory often fell into either deterministic objectivistic science or a pessimistic cultural critique. With regard to capitalism one could say that state intervention and profit oriented market became the norm of the time. Though capitalism came to be organized rigorously day by day, public sphere came to be threatened by the growth of instrumental reason and bureaucracy. This growing feature of rationalization of administration has curtailed the freedom and self-determination of human being. Though there are a number of reasons in order to consider technical progress a blessing, there are also equal numbers of reasons to the contrary opinion. At this juncture Habermas thinks what we need to do is not the wholesale abandonment of the achievements of modernity but a careful analysis of the maladies and the pathologies of progress in modernity.

During the course of his intellectual journey, Habermas choked out his primary concerns. First to occupy his interest was the need to develop a concept of rationality which is beyond the individualistic and subjectivist premises of modern philosophy and social theory. Secondly he sought to construct a two-level concept of society and thirdly his preoccupation was to sketch out a critical theory of modernity which analyses and accounts for its pathologies in a way that it suggests a redirection rather than an abandonment of the project of enlightenment. Habermas was convinced that with Horkheimer and Adorno, the critical theory had reached its dead end. In order to get over this dead end he proposed a shift of paradigm for critical theory away from the philosophy of consciousness.

From 1920s through 1960s Critical Theory moved in a direction which was very different from Marx's development. There was a turn to more generalized critique of instrumental rationality which finally culminated in Adorno's "negative dialectics." But for Habermas this development threatened the explanatory-diagnostic function of Critical Theory. By virtue of its ability to specify those real potentialities in a concrete historical situation which would further the processes of human emancipation and overcome domination and repression, the Critical Theory had distinguished itself from traditional social theory. In order to achieve this objective it was necessary to undertake the task of a scientific understanding of the dynamics of contemporary society. At this point, the need of the hour for Habermas was to root out the errors in the Marxist legacy and show how it was insufficient in the twentieth-century. He sought to appropriate the most promising developments in the social sciences and integrate them into a critical social science.

In spite of the differences between him and Horkheimer and Adorno, he however shared their preoccupation with the way in which enlightenment (in the form of instrumental or means-end rationality), turns from a means of liberation into a new source of enslavement. We can mention three directions in which this preoccupation of Habermas took and which we can clearly notice in his early works. First of all, he took to the thorough reading of the classical philosophical texts. Secondly, due to his preoccupation with technology, he attempted to construct an alternative to the technological determinism. Thirdly, he engaged himself with rational political discussion or practical reason in modern technocratic democracy.

Habermas started to chart a course for himself, beginning in the 1960s. He sought to retain the power of his predecessor's critique of modern life. This affinity required that one has to clarify a distinctive conception of rationality. He worked

towards the notion of just or “emancipated” society. In general Habermas’s philosophical journey commences with a clear cut departure from the positions of Horkheimer and Adorno.

Habermas’s views have changed over time and, indeed, are still in the process of development. He often gives his positions a tentative and programmatic status – they are part of an ongoing project. A major concern of Habermas has been the spread of instrumental reason to many areas of social life. The rise of technocratic consciousness, with its disintegrative effect on the public sphere, is discussed at two fundamental levels. At the level of social theory Habermas argues that the increasing tendency to define practical problems as technical issues threatens an essential aspect of human life; for technocratic consciousness not only justifies a particular class interest in domination, but also affects the very structure of human interests. Accordingly, reflection on this state of affairs must, penetrate beyond the level of particular historical class interests to disclose the fundamental interests of mankind as such.

At the level of the theory of knowledge, Habermas investigates the way instrumental reason has dominated modern thought. Focussing on the dissolution of epistemology and the ascendance of positivism during the last century, he examines the way the significance of the epistemic subject – and the capacity for reflection by the subject on his or her activities – has been gradually eclipsed. He argues, that if emancipation from domination is to remain a project of humanity, it is essential to counter this tendency and to reaffirm the necessity of self-reflection for self-understanding.

Habermas contends that knowledge is historically rooted and interest bound. He develops a theory of cognitive interests (or knowledge – constitutive interests) and this is the first stage in his elaboration of the relationship of knowledge to human activity. It is his contention that the human species organizes its experience in terms of *a priori* interests. He argues that there is a basis of interests. He understands humans as both toolmaking and language – using animals. They must produce from nature what is needed for material existence through the manipulation and control of objects and communicate with others through the use of intersubjectively understood symbols within the context of rule-governed institutions. Thus, mankind has an interest in the creation of knowledge which would enable it to control objectified processes and to maintain communication.

There is however, a third interest: an interest in the reflective appropriation of human life, without which the interest-bound character of knowledge could not itself be grasped. This is an interest in reason, in the human capacity to be self-reflective and self-determining, to act rationally. As a result of it, knowledge is generated which enhances autonomy and responsibility. Hence it is an emancipatory interest.

The theory of cognitive interests, as developed in *Knowledge and Human Interests* represents Habermas’s initial attempt to specify the relation between knowledge and human activity. He has however, recognized the need to examine this relation further, particularly, the distinction between processes of constitution and justification. This he has attempted to do in the theory of communicative competence. In this theory he argues that all speech is oriented to the idea of a genuine consensus – a discursively achieved consensus – which is rarely realized.

The analysis of consensus, he claims, shows this notion to involve a normative dimension, which is formalized in the concept of what he calls an ideal speech situation. 'A consensus attained in this situation, referred to as a rational consensus, is, in his opinion, the ultimate criterion of the truth of a statement or of the correctness of norms. The end result of this argument is that the very structure of speech is held to involve the anticipation of a form of life in which truth, freedom, and justice are possible. On Habermas's account, the critical theory of society makes this its starting point. Critical theory, therefore, grounded in the normative standard that is not arbitrary, but inherent in the very structure of social action and language. It is just a normative standard for a critique of distorted communication. It is Habermas's contention that in every communicative situation in which a consensus is established under coercion or under other similar types of condition, we are likely to be confronting instances of systematically distorted communication. This is, in his view, the contemporary formulation of ideology. The process of emancipation, then, entails the transcendence of such systems of distorted communication. This process, in turn requires engaging in critical reflection and criticism. It is only through reflection that domination, in its many forms, can be unmasked.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Explain briefly Habermas' theory of cognitive interests.

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2) What do you understand by distorted communication?

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4.9 LET US SUM UP

Critical theory in its loose reference centered firstly around the tradition of the Institute of Social Research, established in Frankfurt in 1923, and secondly around the more recent work of Jürgen Habermas. After the example of Marx 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 itself around the axes of various political and historical events. The events between 1920s and 1930s 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 it.

The primary concerns of critical theory are rooted in the writings of Kant, Hegel and Marx. Horkheimer and Adorno, Max Weber and Benjamin Marcuse, these latter personalities had tried to make Marxism more viable and suited to their own time. However, their conception of what a critical theory should be was implausible for Habermas. He tries to revise Marxist tradition and reformulate it. Habermas was clearly aware of the major events that characterized the twentieth century history. One of the apparent features of his philosophical project has been from the very beginning its radical democratic character in order to expand the sphere of freedom aimed at harmony between theory and practice. He basically understands that knowledge is historically rooted and interest bound. In this theory of communication he contends that all speech is oriented to the idea of genuine consensus. For him critical theory is grounded in a normative standard that is inherent in the very structure of social action and language.

4.10 KEY WORDS

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| Materialism | : | It is an understanding of the reality as matter. The fundamental principle is considered under this theory to be material. |
| Historical Materialism | : | It is materialistic interpretation of history that states history is a product of human beings, men and women make history but they make it under given conditions. |

4.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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4.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. After the example of Marx the founders of critical theory 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. Thus their main concern was with interpretation and transformation. The critical theorists were of the view that although all our knowledge is conditioned and shaped by historical circumstances, we can at the same time adjudicate the truth claims independently of our immediate social interests. Having defended the possibility of an independent moment of criticism, they also tried to justify critical theory on a non-objectivistic and materialistic foundation.

2. The determinist and positivist interpretation of were the main issues for Lukács and Korsch. They argued that the positivist interpretation, that is, the suitability of the methodological model of the natural sciences for understanding the stages of historical development, was rejected by Marx himself. This form of materialism corresponds to 'contemplative materialism' in Marx's understanding, but it neglects the central importance of human subjectivity. They were of the view that the traditional standpoint of orthodox Marxism failed to comprehend the significance of examining both the objective conditions of action and the ways in which these conditions are understood and interpreted. Another prominent drawback of the Marxists was their underplaying of human subjectivity and consciousness and missing of those factors which were so crucial to prevent the emergence of revolutionary agent.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. The theory of cognitive interests, as developed in *Knowledge and Human Interests* represents Habermas's initial attempt to specify the relation between knowledge and human activity. He has however, recognized the need to examine this relation further, particularly, the distinction between processes of constitution and justification. This he has attempted to do in the theory of communicative competence. In this theory he argues that all speech is oriented to the idea of a genuine consensus – a discursively achieved consensus – which is rarely realized. The analysis of consensus, he claims, shows this notion to involve a normative dimension, which is formalized in the concept of what he calls an ideal speech situation. 'A consensus attained in this situation, referred to as a rational consensus, is, in his opinion, the ultimate criterion of the truth of a statement or of the correctness of norms. The end result of this argument is that the very structure of speech is held to involve the anticipation of a form of life in which truth, freedom, and justice are possible.
2. It is Habermas's contention that in every communicative situation in which a consensus is established under coercion or under other similar types of condition, we are likely to be confronting instances of systematically distorted communication. This is, in his view, the contemporary formulation of ideology. The process of emancipation, then, entails the transcendence of such systems of distorted communication. This process, in turn requires engaging in critical reflection and criticism. It is only through reflection that domination, in its many forms, can be unmasked.