

HABERMAS' PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERATION

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Jurgen Habermas (1929-) is a radical and systematic thinker who has made a remarkable attempt to formulate a radical philosophy of liberation. The intellectual environment of Habermas' thoughts is the critical social theories of the famous Frankfurt School of which he is perhaps the most prominent member. The other important thinkers of this School are Herbert Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, Friederick Pollock, Erich Fromm, Franz Newmann, Loe Lowenthal; Walter Benjamin and Karl Otto-Apel. They were trying to establish a critical social theory (or philosophy) drawing inspiration from the classical critical thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, Max Weber and so on.

Dismantling the Capitalist Ideology

One of the important concerns of the Frankfurt thinkers was the positivistic dissolution of the Enlightenment. According to Max Weber, the Enlightenment movement resulted in the triumph of what he calls *Zweckrationalitat* (=purposive instrumental rationality) leading to the domination of the majority by a few privileged capitalists in the society. In the wake of Max Weber's critique of the Enlightenment, the Frankfurt thinkers opposed instrumental rationality; in its stead, they advocated a dynamic emancipatory reason as envisaged by Hegel. Another source of inspiration for the critical theory of the Frankfurt thinkers was the Marxian critique of the capitalist society. Marx had attempted a dialectical synthe-

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sis of philosophy and scientific understanding of society as was evident in his critique of religion, philosophy, political economy and the nineteenth century capitalism. Habermas' critical philosophy of liberation followed the line of these critical traditions not, of course, as a blind imitation but as a radical critique of these philosophies.¹

In his critique of the Enlightenment, especially in his early writings, Habermas analyzes the problematics of theory and practice, which were held as belonging to two distinct realms in the classical philosophy. In Habermas' view, however, a radical transformation happened in the understanding of theory and practice (*theoria and praxis*) during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as can be noticed in the writings of Machiavelli, More and Hobbes, where one can discern a progressive unravelling of the notion of reason as capable of uniting theory and practice through enlightened self emancipation which they called 'committed reason'. This view was preserved in the writings of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel and it was more radically perceived in Marx who found it actualized in the human self-formative process.²

Marx shows how human beings realize themselves through labour, their work with matter and how the labouring subjects realize themselves as social beings, which serves as a kind of synthesis in the Kantian sense. This is how man enjoys freedom. This emancipatory force in the society is, however, obstructed by social ideologies. He held, therefore, that committed reason can be actualized as the critique of ideology, for the forces that obstruct the emancipatory function of reason is ideology. However, whereas Marx saw the dominant ideology as rooted directly in the process of social labour, Habermas sees it as mediated through the objectivistic understanding of the sciences. Thus Habermas pursues the task of committed reason in "the methodology of the sciences intertwined with the

¹ A very recent study on Habermas has been published in English by the Cambridge University. See Stephen K. White, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

² See J. B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics. A Study in the Thoughts of Paul Ricoeur and Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 76-78.

objective self-formative process of the human species,"³ which is conspicuously absent in Hegel, Marx and the positivistic philosophy in general.

The main task of Habermas' critical theory is the dissolution of relations of power and ideology. Though Habermas is influenced by Marx's critique of Ideology, he feels that the latter's critique of ideology is inadequate for an effective critical social theory. For,

In his empirical analyses Marx comprehends the history of the species under categories of material activity *and* the critical abolition of ideologies, of instrumental action and revolutionary practice, of labour and reflection at once. But Marx interprets what he does in the more restricted conception of the species' self-reflection through work alone.⁴

Habermas contends that the self-realization of man (human species) must include both his self-generation through productive activity and his self-formation through critical revolutionary activity. Correspondingly, he wants the synthesis to be reformulated so as to integrate the dimensions of both labour and interaction. Such an integration is attempted by incorporating the insights of Freud's metapsychological writings.

Unmasking Systematically Distorted Communication

The aim of Freud's psychoanalysis, which Habermas calls depth hermeneutics, is to decipher the distorted symbols of the psychic patients through a socio-psychological reconstruction of their genesis. The reconstruction is facilitated by inviting the patient to go through his/her infantile experiences and combining the fragmentary information obtained in the analytic dialogue into a coherent narrative. Psychoanalysis revealed to Freud man's conflict between necessities of self-preservation, and the surplus potential of libidinal and aggressive needs. Man tries to meet the former through the collective subjugation of external nature and the latter

³ Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest* tr. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

through the institutional suppression of internal nature. In the light of his psychoanalysis, Freud conceived man as a drive-inhibited as well as a tool-making animal. Habermas could find in Freud the institutionalization and dissolution of relations of power and ideology with a more fundamental role than they have for Marx.

In the course of psychoanalysis the subject overcomes his/her illusion and is thereby freed from dependence upon reified relations of power. Habermas sees the same as the task of a social scientist, namely, bringing the people to become aware of the distortions that are at work unconsciously in the functioning of the society, which will automatically lead to the emancipation of the people from those forces of ideology once they are brought to the knowledge of the people.

Here he sees not just an ordinary distortion that has occurred in the communication but systematically distorted communication which people in the society are subjected to by the dominant capitalists. As Habermas observes, Freud has shown

how the relations of power embodied in systematically distorted communication can be attacked directly by the process of critique, so that in the self-reflection, which the analytic method has made possible and provoked, in the end insight can coincide with emancipation from unrecognized dependencies — that is, knowledge coincides with the fulfillment of the interest in liberation through knowledge.⁵

Hence the aim of his critical theory is to bring to light the deviations from the recognized system of linguistic conventions and the discrepancies between various levels of communication, such as the conflict between linguistic symbols, expression and action patterns, on the one hand, and the barrier between the publicly participating ego and the repressed realm of the unconscious on the other, which are manifested in the incongruity between professed motives and the real intentions. Usually the public remains unaware of the distorted communication. Those who resort to this strategy covers it and projects it as something beneficial for the soci-

⁵ Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, tr. John Viertel (London: Heinemann, 1974), p.9

ety. That is the opaque nature of distorted communication. It is done by means of deceptions which conceal the mechanisms of repression. In Habermas's view, the simultaneous disguise and defence of systematically distorted communication is inevitable, as this kind of deliberate and systematic distortion in communication is the essential characteristic nature of ideology.

The main concern of critical theory, therefore, is a critique of ideology to elucidate the mechanism of repression that works clandestinely in the society. These mechanisms are dependent upon the development of forces of production and the institutionalization of relations of power. So the guiding principle of the critique of ideology is:

How would the members of a social system, at a given stage in the development of productive forces, have collectively and bindingly interpreted their needs (and which norms would they have accepted as justified) if they could and would have decided on organization of social intercourse through discursive will-formation with adequate knowledge of the limiting conditions and functional imperatives of their society.⁶

Thus, just as psychoanalysis attempts to eliminate behavioural symptoms in the psychic patient, critical theory seeks to unmask systems of power hidden in ideologies.

Dream of an Ideal Social Order

In his early writings Habermas maintained that the validity of human discourse is governed by the particular kind of interests behind the validity claims. But later he began to place the validity of human discourse on the kind of action a discourse engenders. Here he distinguished between instrumental action or purposive rational action and communicative action.

⁶ Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, tr. Thomas McCarthy (London:Heinemann, 1976), p.113

Instrumental action governs the empirical sciences. Its aim is to dominate the objects in the world including man. Communicative action, on the other hand, is aimed at genuine communication in the social world leading to genuine social interaction promoting harmony and freedom in the society.

In Habermas' view, it was false communications or distortions in the communications that led to the subjugation of the majority of the people in the society by a few capitalists. His ambition, therefore, was to free the society from all kinds of distortions of communication and thus to create an ideal society where people could freely exchange their views without any danger of being dominated by anybody else. He calls it an ideal speech situation, which is characterized by the absence of any barrier which would obstruct a communicative exchange among the participants of a discourse. Here all participants in the discussion are considered dialogue partners of equal rights and opportunities without anybody trying to dominate or deceive any other. Such an ideal speech situation is created by ensuring the equality of all the partners in the dialogue.

In the ideal speech situation conclusions will be arrived at by the force of the better argument alone. He admits that the ideal speech situation is not a realized one; it is only a hoped for situation, only a possibility. But he argues that under certain favourable conditions such an ideal speech situation could be transformed into a reality.

For Habermas, truth lies in the validity claims of a speech-act. Accordingly, a statement is true only if it gets the consent of all the others in the discussion. This is his consensus theory of truth, according to which truth of a discourse is determined by the consensus arrived at through the better argument among the dialogue partners.⁷ A true consensus formation is possible only in the context of an ideal speech situation.

⁷ See Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien", in *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion: Walter Schultze zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Helmut Fahrenbach (Pfullingen: Neske, 1973), p.219

Towards a Hermeneutic Social Philosophy

Habermas saw that the social sciences lack a proper philosophy of language and he sought to overcome this weakness by incorporating insights from the language philosophies and hermeneutics. He realized that

in its very structure hermeneutic understanding is designed to guarantee, cultural traditions, the possible action-orientating self-understanding of individuals and groups as well as reciprocal understanding between different individuals and groups. It makes possible the form of unconstrained consensus and the type of open-intersubjectivity on which communicative action depends.⁸

So he tried to introduce hermeneutics into the methodology of the social science in order to combat the objectivism in the scientific approaches to the social world. He found that there is a hiatus between subjectively intended and objectively realized meaning, which can be tackled only by adopting a hermeneutical approach in social science. So he attempted to work out a hermeneutical social science but which is emphatically critical. It was with this end view, that he entered into a serious dialogue with Gadamer's hermeneutics and tried to incorporate a lot of insights from the latter into his critical theory. Now, Gadamer's hermeneutics is concerned about the accessibility of meaning which Habermas found particularly relevant to his critical theory. Gadamer's hermeneutics also impressed upon him the importance of language for understanding the dynamics of social interactions.

Habermas was, nevertheless, highly critical of Gadamer's hermeneutics on a number of points. He accused Gadamer for the latter's opposition to methodological procedures and for accepting authority and tradition uncritically. Whereas Gadamer regards language as a transcendental absolute, Habermas views the systems of labour and domination as more important and language as only a medium in which the former two forces work. So he wanted to pay more attention to the fundamental distortion operative in man's self-understanding. Gadamer makes light of economic and political factors; but Habermas finds no value for lan-

⁸ Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, p.171

guage without them. In Habermas' view, Gadamer's hermeneutics is incapable to expose the mechanism in which man represses socially unacceptable motives and channels them into acceptable forms of expression, that is to say, it is incapable of deciphering psychological as well as social forces that are hidden in the social behaviour. He contends, therefore, that only a therapeutic analysis of the social structures will expose the events and agencies behind those 'distorted communication' and will thereby identify the illusion in the self-understanding of the individuals or groups in the society.

How Liberative is Habermas' Philosophy of Liberation?

Here our aim is to evaluate the liberative potential of Habermas' philosophy which is variously known as Critical Theory or Critique of Ideology or Ideology-Critique. I am inclined to do so by following Paul Ricoeur's appraisal of Habermas's philosophy.

Ricoeur reads in Habermas' critical theory an opposition between theory and praxis, for Habermas views everything prior to Marx as theory. Praxis is supposed to be something of the post-Marxist thought. Ricoeur finds this distinction rather arbitrary.⁹ Habermas also maintains a strict distinction between hermeneutics and critical social sciences. Each of them is governed by its particular interest, historical-hermeneutic interest governing the hermeneutics and emancipatory interest, the critical social sciences. But Ricoeur contends that one cannot conceive of a hermeneutics without a critical stance neither can one establish a critical science without hermeneutical principles. He argues, therefore, that the critical dimension must be as much a characteristic of hermeneutics as it is of critical sciences. He also asserts that hermeneutics has a very radical, critical power.¹⁰

Regarding Habermas' opposition to tradition, Ricoeur's appeal to Habermas is that critical theory must have a more sympathetic reabsorption

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. G. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.233

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Ethics and Culture. Habermas and Gadamer in Dialogue", *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973), p.163

of past traditions. The past, he says, is more than a distortion of communication. The communicative action, which is so important in Habermas' critical theory, can be strengthened only by absorbing what is valuable in our cultural memory (past tradition). Otherwise our emancipatory task would just be an illusory dream, declares Ricoeur.¹¹

He views ideology as symbolic representations of human action at the social and political level. It is an epistemological and political concept. He emphasises three points in the concept of ideology. First, it brings integration in culture by means of symbolic mediation. Second, this symbolic mediation and integration is to be related to power. Third, the whole area of human praxis must be correlated with ideology. Ricoeur also points out four other traits of ideology. (1) The dynamism of ideology is derived from its role as a social motivator. Its function is to keep the community alive in the light of its foundation. (2) It retains this motivating force by mobilizing people to work together. It is in this way that ideology develops into 'isms' such as socialism, liberalism, capitalism, etc. (3) Ideology is fundamentally not critical. The adherents of an ideology follows it unconsciously and uncritically. (4) The adherents of ideology are therefore intolerant to those who are opposed to it.

Besides being a symbolic mediation of social integration, ideology is an instrument by which a given system of authority tries to legitimate itself. Ideology interprets and justifies a given system of authority and power. The strategy of legitimation never works transparently. In fact, ideology tries to legitimate itself and therefore motivates best when it is not perceived as legitimation.

Ricoeur has raised serious objections against Habermas' attempt to take Freud's psychoanalysis as a model for the latter's critical theory. He agrees that there are some common ground between psychoanalysis and critical theory such as self-recovery or self-understanding, the problem of distortion in communication. But he points out a number of crucial

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences. Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, tr. J.B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.97

differences between psychoanalysis and Habermas's ideology-critique, the most important among which is that there is not much in the critique of ideology that is comparable to the psychoanalytic relation between the patient and the physician. He contents, therefore, that the social analyst can never take the role of a therapist, as he is part of the society that he tries to emancipate.

For Marx, ideology is always a distortion and the reversal of the real into an illusion which takes place first in religion. He sought therefore to reverse this reversal. Habermas followed more or less this negative idea of ideology.¹² For Ricoeur, as we have seen above, ideology has not just this pejorative sense, but it also means an indispensable praxis for social existence which is founded upon a symbolic constitution and requires therefore an interpretation of itself in and through the images and representations of its social links.⁷ In this sense ideology is not just a strategy of distortion and legitimation but a mechanism of integration of the society as well.

In addition to the Marxian and Freudian elements, Ricoeur identifies a third factor in Habermas' critique of ideology implied in the latter's theory of communicative competence or communicative action, namely, *utopia*. In Ricoeur's view, the communicative competence is an utopian construction, an ideal speech situation, the possibility of undistorted communication. Whereas the fundamental function of an ideology is to establish identity (of group or of individual), the role of utopia is to upset the system of self-preservation and to urge toward utopian fulfilment. In Ricoeur's view, "The utopian fantasy is that of an ideal speech act, an ideal communicative situation, the notion of communication without boundary and without constraint."⁸ Thus Ricoeur considers Habermas's critical theory or critique of ideology as the result of a confluence of the Marxian theory of ideology, Freud's psychoanalysis and the enlightenment idea of utopia.

¹² Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action Essais d'herméneutique, II* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), p.381.

¹³ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, pp. 103-108.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 253.

Ricoeur maintains that there is a dialectical relationship between ideology and utopia. Utopia does not hide as ideology does. Utopia, as described by Thomas More, is the 'no-where' (*u-topia*), where a different social order is established. It is a project of imagination that creates a new space and time from which one looks at existence as it is ruled by the dominant symbolism and injects into that dominant reality the vision of new possibilities. By rethinking radically about the various aspects of man's social existence, it contests the existing order. In this sense of utopia's function of social subversion it is exactly counter to ideology's function of social integration.¹⁵

Utopia subverts the legitimation of authority. By projecting another society, utopia shows the fragility of the ideology that seeks to bind together the claim of legitimacy and the belief in that legitimacy. By imagination of another society, utopia exposes the clever game which ideology plays to bolster its credibility. The need of legitimation is kept in check by the projection of another mode of social order. Ricoeur feels, however, that utopia is beset with the same kind of pathology as that of ideology. Utopia can degenerate into a mad dream that seeks to submit reality to itself. It can become fixated into perfectionistic schemes and uncompromizing refusals to undertake the concrete means to realize the aim of utopia.¹⁶ Utopic imagination can lead to unrealizable nostalgia. Utopia cannot function outside of an ideological context. They together refer to the dissonance and incongruity of social and historical reality. In that sense, they work complementary to each other.

Perhaps the most serious criticism which Ricoeur makes against Habermas's critical theory is, whether there is any non-ideological approach to reality and social relations possible as claimed by the critical theory. He contends that an absolutely radical critique of ideology is a mad dream as there is no non-ideological place from where such a critique can be undertaken.

¹⁵ See Ricour, *du texte a' l'action*, pp. 388-89.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 390.

No reflection or knowledge is possible which is totally free from ideological standpoints, for every reflection implies a point of view, a historical position and every view on society is an ideological standpoint. It shows the relative nature of any critique of ideology. How one can claim a non-ideological position, asks Ricoeur, and asserts that critical theory or critique of ideology must stand the test of its own self criticism and that a purely rational approach will not suffice here but it should be fortified by an ethical approach. It is clear that Ricoeur proposes a broader concept of ideology than that of Habermas and hence a radical critique of Habermas' critique of ideology.

Conclusion

We have seen how Habermas has attempted to formulate a rational and radical philosophy as well as a social theory for the liberation of man from the forces that work against man's dignity and freedom. His attempt to provide a sound philosophical and hermeneutical foundation for social science is really admirable. What he has done is to attempt a purely rational solution for the problems that man faces in realizing his freedom. The question, however, is whether such a purely rational approach will be able to solve all the problems in the society. As Ricoeur has rightly pointed out, Habermas' ambitious project of establishing a social order free from all ideological biases proves to be too utopian.

Man is more than just a rational animal; he is also an ethical and religious being. The ethical dimension of human understanding is highlighted by Paul Ricoeur, but it is not given sufficient importance in Habermas' philosophy, especially in his theory of knowledge. One has to admit, at the same time, that a sound rational and critical approach is a must for any philosophy that aims at the real freedom of man. In this regard, there can be no better a choice than what has been attempted by Habermas. The philosophical and hermeneutical approach of Habermas to social science will, no doubt, be a great inspiration for the social sciences in India which remain rather too empirical in their approach to social realities.