

essay

Critical Social Theory: An Introduction

by Faizul Latif Chowdhury

CRITICAL theory (CT) does not form a monolithic concept. However, its disparate strands of thinking fall in two groups, one is related to what has been labeled as the Frankfurt school of 1920s and the other is related primarily to the works of Jurgen Habermas who has virtually reconstituted the paradigm of critical theory. The purpose of this essay is to explain different aspects of critical theory and point out their practical implications. It is seen that while apparently a powerful methodology, critical theory poses immense difficulties for practical application towards human emancipation.

Critical theory is basically a Marxist perspective of understanding social reality.

Started with the so called Frankfurt School of 1920s, it is now closely identified with the works of Jurgen Habermas. The idea of a philosophically oriented, and at the same time, empirically founded theory of society, owing to Horkheimer of the Frankfurt school, was behind the emergence of critical theory. The initial urge that lay behind was to develop Marxism into a fruitful methodology by taking an interdisciplinary approach; emphasis was on framing a historically grounded social theory that would explain the process of emergence of society into the current state as well as its structure and nature.

Critical theorists do not accept the Hegelian perspective that societal development is an inevitable progression. While they do not intend to downplay the role of structure, they reject that it the sole determinant of social development. Rather, critical theorists emphasize human role in engineering and endangering social change through interaction with structure. Historical analysis is crucial to critical-theoretic perspective because historical analysis enables to identify the points of progression in the past and also the mechanism through which change took place. In this way a critical perspective promises to offer methodological tools for change in the future.

CT can be seen as a response to the ascendance of 'logical positivism' as a methodology in social research. A positivist approach to social inquiry is based on the assertion that the concepts and methods employed in natural science can be applied to develop a science of society. In practice logical positivism

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However, positivistic consciousness objectifies the social as well as the natural world; society is perceived as a second 'nature'; the structure and dynamics of society is treated analogous to that of nature and social facts are considered like natural facts and historical regularities are regarded as natural laws. Consequently the social world is reified, that is the socially created rules, conventions and regularities are considered as natural. The relationship between social facts revealed through research are regarded inexorable, and a particular stage of development of society is hypostatized. In practice: philosophy is divorced from the search for facts and any consideration of how scientific facts can be used is precluded. The proponents of CT asserted that void of philosophical foundation, empirical knowledge of social reality was being reduced to mere facts. CT wanted to develop a methodology so that scientific enquiry had a philosophical base.

Most important consequence of CT is that observation can no longer be regarded as the true reflection of the real world. CT does not regard the world as a domain of neutral objects and asserts that an observation is always influenced by human beliefs and intentions. So the process of knowing is also a determinant of what is known. It means, for example, that the survey methods undertaken in connection with a social research will influence what is to be found out. That is, the selection of questions and suggestion of answers

will shape the findings of an investigation. Such findings, therefore, cannot be straightaway used for either prediction or control. So CT will not accept subjective opinions obtained through a survey as objective accounts of social reality. It rejects objectivation of subjectivity.

That does no, however, imply that a critical perspective merely asks for careful interpretation of findings of any social inquiry by extending focus on action, meanings and interactions to include actors, their actions and intentions. Rather, it indicates a methodology that would take care of these problems of positivism. It aimed at systematic utilization of all social-scientific research disciplines for developing a materialist theory of society. Operationally, the objective was to develop a methodology of social research that would combine philosophical thinking with empirical research.

Critical theory is distinguished by its methodological objective. It has been defined as a theory having practical intent. It has a normative dimension in seeking to bring about change towards human emancipation. The critical theorists placed history at the centre of their approach to philosophy and society. Yet the issues they addressed went beyond a focus on the past and embraced future possibilities. Following Marx, they were pre-occupied, especially in their early work, with the forces which moved (and might be guided to move) society towards rational institutions — institutions which would ensure a true, free and just life. They were thus concerned both with interpretation and transformation.

In this connection, the three underlying assumptions of a critical perspective may be pointed out. First, society has the potential within itself to be what it is not. In fact CT asserts that there may always be a variation of what appears to be constant and unique. Therefore, there is always a scope of transformation of society, its structure and pattern. Secondly, conscious human action is capable of moulding the social world to be some thing different and better. This indicates role of individuals in shaping the social reality. And thirdly, such change towards betterment can be achieved with the insights available from critical theory. This is a crucial assumption as it emphasizes a link between theory and practice.

Put together, they indicate poten-

tially of CT to be a normative theory. Critical theory is critical of existing social institutions to locate domination but its project does not end there. It also seeks human emancipation from domination. CT envisages human progress in terms of eradication of domination from social relationships. It is for a critical-theoretic approach to indicate how social relationships may be transformed to remove the sources of such domination.

According to Habermas, evolution of society can be understood in terms of 'life world', 'steering media' and 'systems'. Life worlds are the symbolic space within which cultural tradition, social integration, and personal identity are sustained and reproduced. Systems are functional organizations that are tangible expressions of the life worlds. Different systems of diverse nature persist together by dint of social institutions which Habermas terms steering media. He defines culture, society and personality as the elements of life world. Then Habermas describes the normal and preferable logic of societal development. However, he points out that, the evolution of society does not follow this pattern since systems take over through 'internal colonization' of life world. Such colonization occurs as steering media gets out of control. If that happens, the steering media reduces human freedom instead of guaranteeing it.

It appears that CT perspective may be utilized for studying human artefacts in order to see the interrelationship between their social roots and technical aspects. CT essentially seeks to find the latent meaning of phenomenon in order to delve out the hidden forces operative behind it. This means focusing on the non-technical aspects of a phenomenon, in addition to its technical aspects. Despite such intrinsic appeal, CT is as yet to have to its credit any significant political impact. To be true, critical theory has simply failed to make clear its won political implications and how it is to be related to concrete political practice. Any operationalization of the transformational aspect seems to be difficult. This is so, presumably, mainly because of the abstract form in which critical theorists have put forward their arguments. And critical theorists are of no help in this regard. Overtime Habermas himself has shown increasing 'systems-theoretic' overtones, and consequently, the role of individuals in the construction of so-

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cial reality has been underplayed. It seems that CT is losing its humanistic dimension and characteristic political commitment and reducing to an evaluatory form.

This is illustrated by using a critical perspective in understanding the management relationship that were brought in UK's National Health System (NHS) in the wake of the Next Steps Initiatives of Margaret Thatcher. This installation of NHS illustrates how the orderly program of evolution through improved communicative process is distorted as the steering media gets out of control and internal colonization takes place. The objective of the management reform under the directives of Department of Public Health (DPH) was naturally good; but excessive emphasis on rules and regulations for the sake of establishing accountability resulted in juridification, that is, rules and regulations became constitutive instead of regulative.

How this occurred? The DPH employed accounting methods as a steering media, that would guide the *lifeworld* of the clinical domain. However, accounting media got out of control and turned out to have colonising effect whereby the clinical domain (*lifeworld*) was overpowered by the managerial (technical) system. Thus the technical system was no more an expression of the cultural lifeworld. The consequence was the loss of meaning in the *lifeworld*.

Habermas' critical social scientific methodology may be construed as a three step methodology. In the first step the researcher would develop his theory about the system to be studied. At the second stage, the theory is discussed

with its subjects who are being researched in order to enlighten them and achieve a consensus about how to proceed. Based on the consensus, at the final stage, actions are formulated aimed at human emancipation which is the ultimate objective. However, it is not obvious how operationalization of such a methodology will be accomplished. As for example, first, how to accurately recognize the steering media and identify its elements? And then, how to respond to the requirement of discussing with every member of the society? The dialogic implication is obvious. However, such a dialogue would not be possible if there is a language barrier. So discourse of any science must be modified in order that its subjects are capable of interaction and communication. It seems that despite theoretical validity and normative appeal, applying a CT perspective will be difficult. At least some adaptation will be necessary to that end.

Apart from this operationalization problem, a critical perspective appears to suggest a consensual approach which particularly seems to be difficult to materialize.

In the real world, democracy is a method of reaching consensus among various groups in the society. Two problems arise here. First, how far democracy is good for reaching consensus? Secondly, how will the theoreticians be able to influence the politicians who represent the people? Should the social scientist take part in politics? Or should he keep out and engage in continuous criticism of social order until all domination and exploitation are eradicated?

Critical theory (CT) is distinguished from other social theories by its explicit concern for social change. CT's is a value laden perspective. Using CT not only promises an understanding of a phenomenon and its changes over time, but also the direction of changes in terms of its impact on human emancipation. It expands the concept of rationality. So a CT perspective may be used for evaluating any-social (and for that matter, Governmental) action or programme. CT is a theory but it is a project in that it is aimed at eradication of social domination. CT attempts to link theory and practice in the pursuit of human emancipation. However, its operational implication for practical application remains to be developed as yet.

To be continued

poems of Jibananada Das Translated by Fakrul Alam

Grass

Light, soft and verdant, like green lemon tree leaves, floods the morning;
Deer nibble at grass, green as grape fruit and as fragrant.
I too would like to drink the essence of this grass, glass after glass,
Revel in its body, rub it in my eyes, make it my feather-bed,
Sprout out of it as grass, as from some beloved grass-mother's womb,
and issue out of its delectable darkness.

In the Midst of the Grass

In the midst of the grass a sparrow's egg lies cracked —
I love its silent pensive shape — who knows when it broke?
Dust and straw cling to it — I gaze at it for a long time,
I see white specks of dust in the grass; grains of paddy too,
Scattered in silence. Soft sad smells rise from the pond;
Listen and you'll hear *sharputi* and *chital* fish leaping —
Mermaids whose homes shimmer through the emerald water —
Mysterious, silvery, deep, and distant in their watery world.

They dart away — knight marshals, ministers of states, and prince regents —
In quest of a dream! I gaze at them for a long time,
Is it afternoon? Kingfishers fly by, iridescent in the sun, wings afire;
Evening will arrive soon — as twilight descends on this earth
The river's delicate features will show — its face and body full of soft curves
Just like yours; and yet I'll never see you anymore.

The Birds

Sleep won't come and cover my eyes —
I lie on my bed
In the spring night —
It must be late!
Over there you can hear the ocean sound,
Up above is the skylight,
Birds talk to each other in the sky,
And then where in the sky do they disappear?
The whiff of their wings float down in the wind.

My body savors the taste of the spring night,
My eyelids won't shut;
Through the window starlight drifts in,
The moist sea breeze
Revives my heart;
All around me people sleep everywhere —
Whose time is it now to cast anchor on this ocean shore?

On that side of the ocean — on its far shore
Over some polar peak
These birds flew;
Till blizzards drove them away
And forced them to descend in flocks on the ocean —



As man falls into the unknown bourn of death.
Within tawny — golden — white — speckled wings
In small breasts like rubber balls
Beat their hearts —
A truth as fathomless
As death spread over thousands of miles of the ocean!
There is life somewhere — the zest for life remains,
Rivers run — not the bitter salt spray of the ocean
Have their bouncy ball like hearts
Known as the one truth —
Breasting their way towards hope, leaving the chill of winter behind
They arrive.

And then flying to some field
With their mates
What is it they say to each other in the skies above?
The time for their first eggs to hatch has come!

Savoring the fragrance of the earth meant surviving many salt seas
The taste of love and love's child
And the delights of the nest
Run deep — very deep.

This spring night
Sleep won't come and cover my eyes
Over there you can hear the ocean sound
The skylight is up above
And birds talk to each other in the skies.

The Indus Stork

O Indus stork, only for a moment or two will you and I lie on the lap of the
Indus sun.
Leaving the lap of the Malabar Hills far behind, on a distant casement of
a wave
You will dance the tarantula — enigmatically. On this ocean shore, I will
pause and in silence see
You spread your two snow-white wings against the living soul of the sky
And dance like the white spray to show your delight to the world.

The dark tunes vultures left behind on mountain peaks fade away,
Once again night is over, and despair; once again your song conjures
A new ocean, bright sunlight, and a soul as green as the grass
To a jaded world; once again your song summons up
The dark waves lying in the caverns of the ocean.

Do you know that many ages have gone by? Many monarchs have had
their day?

Do you know that many golden harvests have been lost?
Many heavy losses have left us weary — happiness has lost its way?
Hopes, thoughts, dreams, afflictions, the future, this moment too —
This mortal heart keeps singing sullenly — do you know that our legacy is
pain?



I know bird, white — plumed bird, child of the Malabar Sea spray,
You do not look back, have no past, no memories; in your soul you do not
bear
A gray scroll; on wintry nights you do not cry like the birds of this world in
pain and in fog.
In forlorn mornings of the mind you do not strive to wave dreams out of
blood that has been shed.
You do not suffer from depression — in your joy does not always give way to
worry and doubt.

You do not dream — leaving all tracks, all Induses of the world behind.
Only in some dream isle, while looking at an enchantress's mirror,
One finds the beautiful one; in her soul the impress of tales left by the
incoming
Tide of the evening river; her hair faded, her eyes dark as the hijol forest;
One glimpse of her in that dream and all the clear light of the world

Fades; there where the golden honey is spent, flies no longer weave their
way;
There *shalik* birds waft in the overcast afternoon, their thoughts full of the
smell of yellowing leaves.

There unruffled, the golden kite too breasts its way
In the overcast afternoon, past the *Dhanshiri* river; alas,
There in a sky where nothing else survives; in a world without grass.

You do not know such silence; you do not realize that here where blood
flows on to the dust
To this day, the beauty of Kanchi and Bidisha shed like flies;
That Beauty must in the end rest its hands on caverns of darkness and
hunger;
That the skyblue moods and deeds of men — their bid to grasp rainbows
Dissipate in the fog of the wintry and short-lived Hemonto days.

You would not know these as you beat your wings jubilantly with all your
might;
Your white wings gleam in the sunlight — surrounded by the ocean spray.
In the heliotrope-like vast expanse of the afternoon sky.
Your white wings glisten like chunks of ice in the sunlight,
Although of all dreams and thoughts of this world they have lost sight.

When was it that you were born in a nest amidst the rustling weeds?
When did you take flight from this weary world to descend in flocks
On Arab and Chinese seas — to be part of an Indus festival at India's
fringe?
When did you tear yourself away from the infinite struggle and strain
Of this world to descend on your nest in the blue ocean?

The world will hear no more tales of golden harvest — the
cowrie-garlanded women
Of the tender early winter days have all gone — their glum-faced,
forlorn lovers,
With their shrivelled-up, straw-like souls will never know them any
more.
Will never possess them again; warbling away as it exults in its flight,
The Indus stork basks in the delectable, intense, and infinite sunlight.