CRITICAL THEORY, HABERMAS, AND THE CRITIQUE OF POSITIVISM

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INTRODUCTION

The scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries marks a break with the Middle Ages and with Aristotelian physics. The thought of the Middle Ages was dominated by Aristotelian physics—a set of dogmatic assumptions eleborated in detail by the doctors of the Church and imposed with absolute authority.

The theorist of the Middle Ages was primarily concerned with the study of mechanics and statics. However, Nicolas de Cusa (1401-1464) studied hydrostatics and invented the first bathometer based on the reduction of a submerged body, as well as the first hygrometer which measured moisture absorbed by sheep's wool. Renaissance physics made a more rigorous beginning with Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) who took a number of mechanical and theorietical ideas from Hero. He borrowed the thermometer from Philo and the worm gear and pinon from Archimedes (Reichen, 1963:26). Leonardo's work with ball bearings and roller bearings helps explain motion on an inclined plane.

Although Copernicus was primarily an astronomer, his ideas were expressed in terms of physics. He shows that the planets move around the sun obeying the laws of ballistics, which greatly upset the Thomists, who did not want to have Aristotle's intelligence or Thomas's angles ejected from their heavenly spheres (Grant 1977).

Galileo, a physicist and an astronomer, bravely faced the Inquisition in order to refute Aristotle, who had maintained that heavier bodies fall faster than light ones. According the the legend, he dropped a leaden ball and a wooden ball of the same size from the top of the leaning tower of Pisa and showed that they reached the ground at exactly the same time. This simple experiment brought Galileo fame and pushed scientific method into the limelight, but incurred the hatred of the Inquisition.

The work of Leonardo, Capernicus, Galileo, and others, help to establish the experimental method as a vital part of the knowledge generating process. At the bottom of this new knowledge generating process, called the scientific method, lies experimental observation. When followed by imaginative inductive reasoning it leads to the formulation of great scientific laws. A code valid for generating knowledge was formulated by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) of England, who wanted to disprove both Aristotle and St. Thomas. Bacon made a direct attack with the publication of his *Novum Organum* and other works, on the whole tradition of the Schoolmen. Bacon's method led to the development of some of the empirical sciences.

The history of science shows that any empirical science in its normal healthy development begins with a more purely inductive emphasis in which the empirical data of its subject matter are systematically gathered, and then comes to maturity with deductively formulated theory through formal logic and mathematics. Geometry, for example, began with the early land measurements of the ancient Egyptians, and came to maturity with the deduction of Euclid's *Elements* . Physics began with the Greeks and did not become a science until Galileo used deduction to discover its key concepts, and Newton, taking Euclid as his model, generalizes Galileo's concepts, thereby developing them systematically in his deductive theory for mechanics in his now famous *Principia* (Northrop, 1947:134). The empirical sciences have continued to break new ground, while the social sciences appear to have languished.

Many theorists have tried to explain this chronic absence of development in the social sciences. Thomas Kuhn, uses the history of the natural sciences as a model for understanding the social sciences. He discovers that all fully developed sciences are governed by a major paradigm unifying all the theorists around one fundamental set of philosophical and methodological assumptions.

The social sciences are in a pre-paradigm period. What's needed in the development of a scientific field is the transition to the paradigm period. Before this occurs, a number of schools compete for the domination of a given field. Afterwards, in the wake of some notable scientific achievement, the number of schools

is greatly reduced, ordinarily to one, and a more efficient mode of scientific practice begins. The latter is generally esoteric and oriented to puzzle-solving, as the work of a group can be only when its members can take the foundations of their field for granted (Kuhn, 1962:178).

Positivists intend to use the natural sciences as models for reorganizing the social sciences. There are problems with this, in the sense that the scientific methods which men fascinated by the natural sciences have so often tried to force upon the social sciences were not necessarily those which the scientists followed in their own fields, but rather those which they *believed* that they employed. This is not necessarily the same thing (Hayek, 1952:22). Positivists feel that by incorporating methods from the natural sciences into the social sciences they will be better able to generate universal laws and valid scientific generalizations. These laws will then be useful in establishing boundaries that govern all scientific thinking in these disciplines. One of Comte's reasons for searching for universal laws of society was to help overcome the anarchy resulting from the aftermath of the French Revolution (Comte, 1975).

Postitivists also glorify the method of logical deduction as applicable to the social sciences. The method of logical deduction is not based on real connections between states of affairs, which we apprehend in thought. On the contrary, it has nothing at all to do with the nature of things but drives from our matter of speaking about things. A person who refuses to recognize logical deduction would not thereby manifest a contrary belief about the behavior of things, but he would refuse to speak about things according to conventional rules.

After it has been pointed out to them that the method of logical deduction appears to be incompatible with what actually takes place in the social sciences, they respond by indicating that failure to correctly use the method and logical deduction in the social sciences is due to their relative undeveloped status. (Hemple, 1965). In the natural sciences a particular event is explained by showing that it's occurence can be inferred by means of laws or theoretical principles or from usually antecedent circumstances. As Max Weber's writings make clear, an 'adequate explanation' of a particular event in sociology or historiography has to be of essentially the same character (Hemple, 1965:163).

This critique has been extended to include their intention of formulating scientific laws of the exact logical form as those in the natural sciences. It doesn't appear possible to establish universal laws of society. The best we can establish are statistical uniformities. Positivists tend to feel it's the failure of the social sciences in achieving some clarity in fundamental and methodological issues and the structure and explanations in the social sciences. (Nagel 1961; Parsons, 1950).

Laws concerning social phenomena made available by current social inquiry are far more restricted in scope of application, are formulated far less precisely, and are acceptable as factually sound only if understood to be hedged in by qualifications and exceptions, than are most of the commonly citied laws of natural sciences, but they do not appear to be radically different from such laws. There exists no fundamental reasons why these laws cannot be discovered in all the social sciences (Nagel, 1961).

Science in its methods rather than its spirit has now dominated the social sciences without contributing anything to our understanding of social phenomena. It continues to confuse and discredit the work of the social disciplines but demands for further attempts in this direction are still presented to us as the latest innovations which if adopted, will secure rapid undreamed progress.

Another positivistic assumption is the concept of a neutral "value-free" social science. The difficulties confronting the social sciences are colored by values. Since social scientists generally differ in their value commitments, the value neutrality that seems to be pervasive in the natural sciences is therefore often held to be impossible in social inquiry. In the judgement of many thinkers, it is accordingly absurd to expect the social sciences to exhibit the unanimity so common among natural scientists concerning what are the established facts and satisfactory explanations for them. It is, moreover, also impossible to eliminate values because what a social scientist selects for study are determined by them, as well as what he sees as significant facts. Concepts of right and wrong enter into the very assessment of

evidence. Conceptions held by a social scientist of what constitutes cogent evidence or sound intellectual workmanship are the products of his education and his place in society, and are affected by the social values transmitted by this training and associated with his social position. (Nagel, 1961:485-497).

CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory arises in the early 20's with the publication of two important books, Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* and Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy.* Each book deals with different themes but shares a central concern, that is, the return to the dialectual, more Hegelian Marx. Both thinkers found themselves in deep trouble with Moscow, and soon were expelled from their respective parties. However, Lukacs was able to remain in the party, following a recantation of the heresies in his book. Addressing the philosophical section of the Communist Academy in 1934, Lukacs said: the mistakes into which I fell in my book, *History and Class Consciousness* are completely in line with these deviations...I began as a student of Simmel and Max Weber...at the same time, the philosophy of syndicalism (Sorel) had a great influence on my development, it strengthened my inclinations towards romantic anti-capitalism...thus I entered the Communist Party of Hungary in 1918 with a world outlook that was distinctly syndicalist and idealist...

Lukacs and Korsch had a tremendous influence on Max Horkeimer and Theodor Adorno. Much of what they argued was confirmed a decade later, with the revelations produced by the circulation of Marx's long-neglected Paris manuscripts. When their efforts faltered, the tasks of reinvigorating Marxist theory was taken up primarily by the young thinkers at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (Jay, 1973:42).

The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research used many of Lukacs's and Korsch's ideas in developing a critique of positivist dogmatism in the social sciences. Therefore, the Frankfurt School, founded in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1923, was both a distinctive mode of thought and an institution, reaching intellectual maturity in 1931, when Max Horkheimer became director. With the rise of European Fascism, the Institute continued its work in exile in the United States, not returning to Germany until the 1950's (Friedman 1981:13).

The Frankfurt School was a systematic project of scholars from diversed disciplines united in a common effort of creating an 'authentic' critical theory, to explicate the sociocultural crisis affecting the contemporary world. The Frankfurt School tries to develop a third way between positivism and idealism (Friedman, 1981; Van der Berg, 1981).

The Frankfurt School views positivism as both a fulfilment and a perversion of the enlightment. Part of this perversion is the decline of philosophical subjectivity and rationality. By removing subjectivity and rationality, positivism collapses the distinction. Essences no longer exist, only facts or appearances. Along with this removal of essences goes the traditional disciplines whose job was to deal with them, such as metaphysics, epistemology, or ontology. (Friedman, 1981).

Finally, positivism presents itself as a totalizing theory, leaving little room for the existence of any alternative theories, such as metaphysics or epistemology. It views itself as providing the 'only' valid interpretation of reality. The Frankfurt School's intention was to attack this dogmatic claim by developing an authentic critical theory.

The Frankfurt Institute's search for a third way, says Van der Berg, was doomed from the outset (1981). They felt that by using Lukacs and Korsch, who placed heavy emphasis on the voluntaristic and dialectical side of Marx, they would discover some third way. Finding a third way was an absolute necessity for the Frankfurt Institute, for failure means that no firm foundation exists for grounding critical theory (Friedman, 1981).

Marx and Engels, the first critical theorists, did not experience this sort of problem for they had lived at a time when a new 'negative' revolutionary force in society-the proletariat-was stirring, a force that could be seen as the agent that would fulfill their philosophy. By the 1930's, however, signs of the proletariat's penetration into society was becoming increasingly apparent. This was especially evident to the members of the Institute after their emigration to America. Thus, it might be said of the first generation of critical theorists that theirs was an immanent critique of society based on the existence of a real historical subject. By the

time of its renaissance in the twentieth century, critical theory was being increasingly forced into a position of transcendence by the withering away of the revolutionary working class (Jay, 1973:43).

The failure of history to conform to the expectations of critical theory forces a completely new perspective.

HABERMAS AND POSITIVISM

Complaints are sometimes made about a lack of communication between different disciplines, such as politics and sociology, and different schools of thought; such as Anglo analytic philosophy and European continental philosophy. Recently with the appearance of Habermas a dialogue between these disciplines and schools of thought has begun. (Habermas, 1968; 1973; 1975; Agger, 1977; Hearn, 1974).

Reading Habermas becomes difficult for Anglo readers, who discover they have to be somewhat proficient in Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, not to mention the Frankfurt School, Structuralism, Marxism, Systems Theory, and in Linguistics. In an era of monodisciplines and specialists, this is an extremely demanding task.

Every thinker, however, must sooner or later confront Habermas, if to develop a critique of positivism; to comprehend the intersubjective dimensions of social life and the hermeneutic mode; to ascertain the intersubjective dimension of constituting the world; to connect the psychoanalytic dialogue to the project of social critique; to establish the lineages between the logic of personal development and the logic of social legitimation; to penetrate the sources of legitimacy problems in advanced capitalist societies; or to establish an epistemological foundation of social political theory (McCarthy, 1973; 1978; Offe and Ronge, 1975; Slater, 1977; Goran, 1970; 1971).

Habermas establishes his positions by abandoning many of the traditional Marxist distinctions: labor and interaction, forces of production and the relations of production. According to Habermas, Marx rediscovered the interdependency between labor and interaction, but failed to develop it adequately (McCarthy, 1978:33).

Marx conceives the moral totality as a society in which men produce in order to reproduce their own life through the appropriation of an external nature. Morality is an institutional framework for the processes of production. Marx takes the dialectic of the moral life, which operates on the basis of social labor, as the law of motion of a defined conflict between definite parties. The conflict is always about the organization of the appropriation of socially created products, while the conflicting parties are determined by their position in the process of production as social classes (Habermas, 1968:57-58).

Habermas criticizes Marx for not explicating the relation of interaction and labor, and for reducing communicative action to instrumental action. Because of this, Marx's brilliant insight into the dialectical relationship between the forces of production and the relations of production could very quickly be misinterpreted is a mechanistic manner (Habermas, 1973:168).

The basis of Habermas's critique of positivistic philosophy is formulated tersely in the preface to *Knowledge and Human Interests:* 'that we disavow reflection is positivism.' Habermas qualifies this by saying that positivism certainly still expresses a philosophical position with regard to science, for the scientistic self-understanding of the sciences that it articulates does not coincide with science itself. But by making a dogma of the sciences positivism assumes the prohibitive function of protecting scientific inquiry from epistemological self-reflection.

Habermas doesn't call for total rejection of positivism. He only wants to restrict its area of inquiry.

The distinctions made by positivists between questions of genesis and questions of validity, problems relating to the subjective conditions of knowledge are consigned to the psychology and sociology of science, understood as empirical sciences (McCarthy, 1978:41).

Positivism, which now marched into view with Comte and Mach, no longer inquired about the conditions and meaning of knowledge. By virtue of the fact of modern science, this question had become superfluous. Scientific theory, which takes the place of the theory of knowledge, has "the prohibitive function of shielding research from the self-reflection of the theory of knowledge. It is philosophical only for the single moment which is necessary

to immunize science against philosophy.

Habermas hopes to revive the theory of knowledge as reflection abandoned by positivism. His theory of cognitive interests is an attempt to radicalize epistemology by unearthing the roots of knowledge in life.

Once a certain level of development is reached, if the process of formation of the species is not to be endangered, knowledge must assume the form of methodical research, of organized science. We have essentially two types of sciences: empirical-analytic (natural) and historico-hermeneutic (social and human).

Habermas takes up this question by showing that the empirical-analytic sciences coincide in a peculiar way with ancient ontology. Just as the latter insisted on the objective reality of self generated ideas and concepts, so the former religiously maintains that in presenting empirical facts, they have succeeded in presenting an entity with the negative additions or subjectivity, even though the facts appear in a socially mediated framework, tested by a social criteria part and parcel of this framework. If we say that the facts of a scientific experiment are constituted by means of a prior preliminary organization, then the important question that must be answered is-what is the viewpoint from which this organization is carried out? Habermas answers: from the viewpoint of the interest in an informative testing and expansion of successfully controlled instrumental behavior, from an interest in the greatest possible technical mastery of objectivized natural processes (Habermas, 1968).

The historico-hermeneutic sciences deal with a different set of relationships. Instead of experiments, they use sensible understanding to arrive at facts. The interpreter must feel his way in, and situate himself in the horizon of the world or in the language network. Just as the facts in the empirical-analytic sciences are always mediated through hermeneutic knowledge, so in the historico-hermeneutic sciences, the interpreter's fore-knowledge plays a vital role in formulating knowledge. The historico-hermeneutic sciences are governed by the interest of testing and expanding intersubjective, practical life understanding, in reaching a consensus within the communicative framework. The empirical-analytic sciences include both the natural sciences, and economics, sociology, and political science, while the historico-hermeneutic sciences deals with with those sciences concerned with linguistic understanding (Keat and Urry, 1975:224). These sciences are related in the sense of being part of the developmental history of the human species. All of the sciences are part of the grand efforts of the human species to survive (Kortian, 1981).

The self-conception of a modern positivist orientated natural and social sciences excludes reflection on the interests guiding knowledge and social inquiry. It means that positivism is virtually unable to understand the constitutive role of the subject in the creation of facts. It knows no critical epistemological questioning of its own actions. It views the sciences as simply facts among other facts in the world. Lacking any teleological grounding, it tends to be strongly supportive of the status quo, or at the very least-a-political.

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