



Habermas : Defender or Offender to Marxian Philosophy

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Abstract:

This paper critically analyses Jurgen Habermas's thought on capitalism compared to Karl Marx's views on capitalism. Marx's solution to the capitalism was in the form of revolution and believed that seminal change in the structure of society through human agency was necessary to end this exploitation which he believed to be an inherent part of the capitalist system. However, history has shown that his idea of communism has remained a far distant dream and the viability of the same could not be tested. In this paper it has been discussed that how Habermas makes a distinction between Liberal Capitalism and Advanced Capitalism as a possible solution to tackle this Marxian challenge. Also, the concept of crisis discussed by both the thinker forms part of this paper.

Key Words: *Capitalism; Crisis, Mode of Production; Legitimizing*

In the critical analysis of Marxian philosophy with Habermas as the reference point, it is first of all very important to understand and accept the contextual difference of both thinkers vis-à-vis their time frame. In this paper, I would like to give this analysis a further approach by trying to look at Habermas's argument and evaluating it on mixed grounds, whether it stands as a defender or offender to Marxian philosophy.

I would begin by comparing the context in which both thinkers, i.e. Marx and Habermas have propounded their arguments and brought out logical conclusions. This would clearly mean a comparative study of liberal capitalism and advanced capitalism. I would then proceed to value Marxian prediction on the parameters of Habermasian arguments. The overall analysis would look dry in absence of a proper study of 'crisis' as explained by Marx and then reflected by Habermas.

As Thomas Mc Carthy believes,

“Habermas’s intention is clearly to overcome the reductivism of Marx’s categorical framework without ‘falling behind’ Marx into the kind of left –Hegelianism, unscientific utopianism, pessimistic kulturkritik, and the like of which the earlier Frankfurt school has been accused. Neither analyses of the economic ‘basis’ nor analyses of the socio-cultural ‘superstructure’ are adequate in themselves to comprehend the dynamics of advanced capitalist society. The long proclaimed ‘dialectical’ interdependence of the different spheres of society must be reflected at the categorical and methodological levels if critical theory is to avoid the extremes of economism and neo-idealism.”ⁱ

This analysis in fact needs a proper evaluation and my paper is aimed at this very aspect.

The very difference in the ideas of Marx and Habermas developed from the very fact that they both were writing in different contexts. We hereby need to understand the difference between liberal capitalism and advanced capitalism that represent their respective contexts. Liberal capitalism was basically based on the non-interventionist concept of state whereby state would have no role in economic areas. This is represented as the Laissez-faire state. However, after proper challenge from the socialist thinkers and the rising demand for social justice forced the state to take decision in relation to economic faculties also though in the benefit Bourgeoisie and this state of capitalism was marked by advanced capitalism, where state also plays certain welfare activities to legitimize the domination of the capitalist class. Habermas properly accepts this fact by differentiating between liberal capitalism and advanced capitalism, which is reflected in the interventionist state.

Marx was writing in the 19th century at a time when liberal capitalism was at its boom. It is, therefore, that Marx could see properly the loopholes of the system and predict that ‘Capitalism will die its own death’ⁱⁱ. We can even see the difference in the philosophy of Marx in his early writings and late writings, which Althusser calls “the writings of ‘young Marx’ and ‘Scientific or mature Marx’”ⁱⁱⁱ. But it is an explicit truth that nothing such happened and capitalism went on strengthening itself. Lenin sensed it in the development of Imperialism but even he marked Imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. But in the later times, around mid 20th century, liberal capitalism turned itself into advanced capitalism. The mode of capitalism had thereby taken a modification with significant structural deviations.

“The structures of advanced capitalism can be understood as reaction formations to endemic crisis.”^{iv}

As Habermas explains,

“In the decades since World War II, the most advanced capitalist countries have succeeded in keeping class conflict latent in its decisive areas; in extending the business cycle and transforming periodic phases of capital devaluation into a permanent

inflationary crisis with milder business fluctuations; and in broadly filtering the dysfunctional secondary effects of the averted economic crisis and scattering them over quasi-groups or over natural groups with little organization. In this way, the social identity of classes breaks down and class-consciousness is fragmented. The class compromise that has become part of the structure of advanced capitalism makes everyone at the same time both a participant and a victim.”^v

So we can see that the contextual difference of Marx and Habermas had a significant impact on their worldview and their study of systems and structures. So, while Marx believes in reductionism based on economic determinism, Habermas looks at the different aspects of structural regulation within the system.

Marx could see the role of state only as an agent of capitalist and as a machine of the oppression of the workers, Habermas views the extended role of the state as not only functioning with legitimacy, but also performing welfare activities; which has led to the development of a compromise within the system which keeps away class conflict.

“A dogmatic conceptual strategy, which admits Bourgeois democracy only as a superstructure of capitalist class domination, misses the specific problem. To the extent that the state no longer represents merely the superstructure of an un-political class relationship, the formally democratic means for procuring legitimation proved to be peculiarly restrictive. That is, in these circumstances, the administrative system is forced to meet use value-oriented demands with available means of control. As long as the capitalist economic system begot of itself a viable ideology, a comparable legitimation problem could not arise.”^{vi}

Habermas believes that,

“Three developments are characteristic of the change in the relations of production in advanced capitalism: (a) an altered form of the production of surplus value, which affects the principle of societal organization; (b) a quasi-political wage structure, which expresses a class compromise; and (c) the growing need for legitimation of the political system, which brings into play demands oriented to use values.”^{vii}

Marx saw ‘class antagonism and class struggle as a necessary and inherent process of all societies (in Communist Manifesto)’, but in the era of advanced capitalism, this analysis looks far from perfection.

Habermas explained this as,

“Problems of domination and distribution that are posed from the point of view of the class structure of society have become obsolete.”^{viii}

In fact, to be very sure, on the one hand where Marx had extreme faith in economic crisis as a major determinant of the overall system (E.P.M., 1844), Habermas believes,

“Because the economic system has forfeited its functional autonomy vis-à-vis the state, crisis manifestations in advanced capitalism have also lost their nature-like character. In the sense in which I introduced the term, a system crisis is not to be expected in advanced capitalism. Of course, crisis tendencies that appear in its place can be traced back to structures that have resulted from the suppression-successful at first-of the system crisis.”^{ix}

This shows his concern in different modes of crisis production both on structural and system level.

If we properly analyze Marxian concept of crisis, we need to understand the overall base-superstructure relation that he propounded. For Marx, what was more important was the base on which the whole superstructure depended. So, crisis for Marx was limited in the sense that he saw crisis only in the economic part, which would necessarily lead to change in the superstructure and thereby change in the whole society. On further analysis, we see that this economic base has been showed as changing when the dominant mode of production in a particular society changes. This mode of production comprises the relations of production and the forces of production. These forces of production keep on progressing continuously and do progress at such a level that the relations of production find themselves not been inconformity with forces of production. It is here that a class occurs between the relations of production and forces of production, which would lead to such a change in relations of production that it is in conformity with the forces of production at a particular time in history. It is this situation that behaves like crisis in Marxian sense because it is this very crisis that would further a change in the modes of production leading to a change in the overall superstructure and it is in this way how history progresses and society is changed.

On crisis, Habermas says,

“We therefore associate with crisis the idea of an objective force that deprives a subject of some part of his normal sovereignty. To conceive of a process as a crisis is tacitly to give it a normative meaning-the resolution of the crisis effects a liberation of the subject caught up in it.”^x

In contrast to Marxian analogy, Habermas views four kinds of distinct crisis which he designates as rational crisis, motivational crisis, economic crisis and legitimation crisis. Yet even in his overall analysis, economic crisis has a overwhelming importance. If we concentrate on the issue of legitimation crisis; for Marx, legitimacy is a part of superstructure and the economic crisis development at the base would be the determining factor of the legitimation formula within

a system. Any change vis-à-vis the economic crisis would lead a change in the process of legitimacy formation within a society. But Habermas does not look very satisfied by this 'over determination'. He views that legitimacy created within the capitalist system, in a big way brings modification within class interest and prevents any confrontation as Marx had predicted.

“In complex societies pseudo-compromises are an important form of legitimation. But historically, they are not the rule. In traditional and liberal capitalist societies, it is rather the ideological form of justification, which either asserts or counterfactually supposes a generalizability of interests, that is dominant.”^{xi}

Habermas has altogether given a great importance to communicative actions free from dominations. This communicative action, in an advanced capitalist system is performed by state. However, this does not mean that crisis does not occur at all.

“As soon as a difference of opinion arises, the 'injustice' of the repression of the interpretive system obtaining at the time, this consciousness of conflicts of interests is, as a rule, sufficient motive for replacing value-oriented action with interest-guided action. The pattern of communicative action gives way then, in politically relevant domains of behaviour, to that type of behaviour for which the competition for scarce goods supplies the model, i.e., strategic action.”^{xii}

So in fact what we see here is that legitimacy helps in creating a pseudo compromise of class interests which can even take the responsibility to handle the economic crisis and not allow it take a bigger shape resulting in a systems crisis a whole. So here we see that it would not be correct to say that it is economy that only determines the superstructure, but in fact other structures within the society can play decisive role in keeping intact the economic imbalance and thereby preventing crisis in a system.

If we try to locate properly Habermasian argument, we cannot take it far away from Marxian philosophy because it forms the basis of his frame of reference. For a layman, it would appear as if Habermasian conclusions were nothing but an extension to Marxian arguments in an advanced time frame, but in fact, it is this very fact that differentiates him from Marx. Marxian arguments, which altogether have taken a new shape in Habermasian conclusion, do actually highlight its weakness. Marxism which in the modern world stands more as an ideology has failed to provide universalist arguments. This truth is explicit in the failures of Marxian conclusions, which always needs the support of thinkers like Habermas to herald their presence. Habermas accepts the basic Marxian analogy that economic crisis is an important formula for system change. But he does not stop there, properly reflecting the idea of his time; he does not fail to understand other kinds of crisis that would bring a similar change in the larger perspective. He also does not fail to see the changed role of state in the advanced capitalism phase. In fact, these successes of Habermas differentiate him from Marx and he leaves no stone unturned to

prove that capitalism is still oppressive, though the modes of oppression have changed radically and making it more acceptable. To see whether Habermas is an offender or a defender of Marxian philosophy with this point in mind is a difficult task. However, a serious study of this paper would reflect that Habermas actually modifies and challenges basic Marxian philosophy to in fact reach to conclusions, which would defend Marxism as a whole.

ⁱ T. Mc. Carthy 'Translator's introduction' in J. Habermas, *Legitimation crisis*, (1973) page xxiii

ⁱⁱ Marx, K. and Engels, F., *Manifesto of Communist Party* [London, three anonymous editions were published in 1848 (two with J.E. Burghard as printer, one with R.Hirshfeld as printer). The names of Marx and Engels as authors first appeared in the Leipzig Edition of 1872, when the title was also changed to *Communist Manifesto*.]

ⁱⁱⁱ Althusser, L., *For Marx* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965)

^{iv} Habermas, J., *Legitimation Crisis*, trans., T. Mc Carthy (Beacon Press, Boston 1973), p. 37

^v *Ibid*, p. 38-39

^{vi} *Ibid*, p. 58

^{vii} *Ibid*, p. 55

^{viii} *Ibid*, p. 130

^{ix} *Ibid*, p. 92-93

^x *Ibid*, p. p. 1

^{xi} *Ibid*, p. 112

^{xii} *Ibid*, p. 113