New Project- CPGD-58

Jurgen Habermas and Critique of Ideology

Anil Kumar Vaddiraju

Concept Note

Introduction:

Contemporarily there is a global resurgence of religion. Religion, which according to modern social and political theory is only a primordial phenomenon, which is supposed to wane away with the onset of rationalisation and modernity, is witnessing a comeback, as if with a vengeance. The current forms of resurgence of religion are not only a soft comeback of the same but are militant and are often combined with violence. Traditionally, social and political theory, both in its modernization and critical theory forms, postulated that with the rise of the modern economy, secular society and spread of democracy, religion would get diluted over time and eventually get replaced with secular values, rational world views and modern, and tolerant ways of living. However, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly with the collapse of Soviet Union, discrediting of Marxian theory that followed, and the attacks of the 9/11 on the United States, have heralded a new era of awakening among social and political theorists towards the growing importance of religion in social and political world. This is a global phenomenon. It is not only that some religions have come to play a prominent role in some parts of the world, globally almost all the religions are playing role increasingly in politics in all the nations. While it may be radical Islam in one continent, it is radical Christianity in another. And simultaneously we are also witnessing the role of emergence of Hindu nationalism in India in the recent past. The nature of these politics is generally conservative, combined with neo-liberal capitalism, ultra-nationalist ideologies and is xenophobic.

The above is the context in which this study is proposed. This research proposal holds that it is interesting to see how critical social and political theory and the leading exponents of the same respond to the challenges posed by this phenomenon. Among the variety of critical socio-political theories available, we choose the Frankfurt School to see how it responded to the rising phenomenon of religion across the world. We are interested in its theoretical
response to the challenges posed by the phenomenon. And among the theorists of the Frankfurt school we are focusing on the theory of one particular social theorist, Jurgen Habermas.

Among all the traditions of critical social theory the Frankfurt School is known to have shown more openness towards the study not only of the economic bases of social and political phenomenon, but also their political, juridical, cultural and ideational superstructures. The Frankfurt School, by now in its long history, has not treated the latter phenomenon merely as a reflection of the former. These so called superstructures have been the central focus of the research at the School by not treating them as mere epiphenomena. Though Frankfurt school too takes its inspiration from Marx, it also pays close attention to other pre-Marxian philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, G.W.F Hegel, and non-Marxians, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, Talcott Parsons( in the case of Habermas) and so on. Firmly rooted in the tradition of Continental philosophy, the School’s theorists draw inspiration from the entire European tradition of social and political theory.

Marxian theory conventionally treated religion as ‘ideology’, a set of ideas and practices that only serve to obfuscate or mystify the oppressive reality; an ‘opium’ to keep ordinary people tranquilized, or at best as an ‘illusory Sun around which human beings move so long as they do not move around themselves’. Thus Marxian theory in general treated religion as false consciousness, as a set if illusory ideas which keep working people from raising genuine scientific questions and struggles for emancipation. As opposed to these false set of ideas, or ‘ideology’, is posited the ‘science’ of orthodox Marxism. The Frankfurt school however, differs from such a binary conception of both ‘ideology’ and ‘science’. First, Frankfurt school treats religion as more than an ‘ideology’. Second, Frankfurt school does not take the claims of orthodox Marxism as ‘science’. Frankfurt School views the entire effort of Marx more as a critique rather than as a positivist science. (Hence the name for the school as ‘Critical Theory’) And in addition to these differences, the School is also eclectic in its intellectual orientation in taking into consideration thinkers that do not come from Marxian pantheon alone. That is the major justification for taking Frankfurt School theorists for the research proposed here.
However, The Frankfurt School of critical theory always focused on ideology and criticism of ideology. The Frankfurt school also is known for focusing on superstructural aspects such as culture, art, theology, communication, language and everyday life. While the Frankfurt School and critical theory developed by it is a product of the work of a galaxy of thinkers, today Jurgen Habermas is one of its most well known proponents.

Jurgen Habermas is one of the foremost critical thinkers of the 20th and 21st centuries. His contribution to the Frankfurt School of critical theory is immense and spans a wide range of issues. His major contributions have been to the theory of public sphere, communicative action and deliberative democracy. Habermas has early-on engaged with critique of tradition and conventional hermeneutics when he criticised Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theory of philosophical hermeneutics as elaborated in Gadamer’s magnum opus ‘Truth and Method’. In between he has focused on different other aspects of social theory. In the recent period, that is, in the wake of 9/11 and wars against terror etc. and in the context of the rise of the right-wing religious-nationalist politics across the world, Habermas has started devoting his attention to religion and its role in public sphere. In this context he has debated on the nature of these politics with prominent philosophers of our time such as Charles Taylor. Though Habermas is more known for his work on communicative action and theorisation of public sphere, we however, in the research proposed here we deal with Habermas’ critique of ideology as reflected in two aspects: 1) Habermas’ critique of Hans-Georg Gadamer and tradition; 2) Habermas’ recent critique of and engagement with religion.

The first question falls in the area of critique of hermeneutical theory developed by Hans-George Gadamer and considers his most important text ‘Truth and Method’. The second question deals with the more recent engagement of Habermas with religion.

**The research proposed here asks three questions:**

1. What are the principal arguments of Hans-Georg Gadamer for the defence of his philosophical hermeneutics in his text ‘Truth and Method’?
2. What are the principal criticisms of Habermas regarding Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics and tradition?
3. What is the recent engagement of Jurgen Habermas with the critique of religion?
What are the recent philosophical debates in which Habermas has engaged and what are the views expressed by him regarding the same.

Limitations of the study:

This study limits itself to the thought of Jurgen Habermas and his critique of tradition, religion and ideology rather than considering all the thinkers of the Frankfurt School. We will be limiting ourselves only to the critical thought of Jurgen Habermas vis-a-vis tradition, religion and ideology.

(The project was approved by the Research Projects Committee (RPC, ISEC) and is presently an on-going research project CPGD-58)