Research Paper Philosophy

Lyotard and Habermas on Modernity, Post Modernism and The Present Cultural Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Renaissance proved to be an important turning point in cultural and civilizational history of humankind. Human endeavour of flight from facts towards contra-factuals, or the apprehension of more just values and voyage of realisation of apprehended values, both received a very strong impetus from the renaissance. But the spread of crime, terrorism, violence, pornography, drug addiction, alienation, dehumanization, environmental and ecological problems etc. have resulted in a wide spread dejection and disenchantment with the claims associated with enlightenment vision. Perspectives of Lyotard and Habermas are responses to this cultural crisis. The paper seeks to analyse them.

KEYWORDS | Project of Modernity, Postmodernity, Reason, Rationality.

It is almost a truism that human beings have various levels and dimensions of existence ranging from facticity to transcendence. But it is equally true that being human consists primarly in the flight from facticity towards transcendence. The flight of human consciousness towards transcendence is ontologically situated in a historical context of what is the case and is undertaken towards what ought to be the case. This flight of freedom is empowered by the liberating wings of culture which owe their genesis to the process of human self-creation. Human history therefore has been a process of human self-creation dialectically related to the creation of culture and building of the civilisation.

The historical phase of renaissance in Europe proved to be a very important turning point in the cultural and civilisational history of humankind. The human endevour of flight from facts towards the contrafactuals, or the apprehension of more just values, and the related voyage of the realization of the apprehended values, both received a very strong impetus from the renaissance. The scientific and technological achievements of that period gave rise to the enlightenment sensibility. It was believed that in the modern era reason will succeed in resolving almost all the problems being faced by the human society, culture and the civilisation. It was hoped that one day advances in science and technology will help create a situation where abundence of resources would replace their scarcity and the needs of all individuals will be fulfilled. It was also hoped that in the rational and modern world all the conflicts and differences would be resolved through reason, resulting in a just and humane society. It was further hoped that this would lead towards an exploitation and coercion free civil society based upon egalitarian justice, respecting the dignity of every individual, irrespective of his or her gender, race, caste, class, creed etc. It was also hoped that in such a society, all human beings would lead a satisfied and peaceful life based upon equal rights and liberties, associated with rational duties towards the community and the society.

Achievements in last few centuries have been phenomenal but equally horrendous has been the record of disasters. The advances have been underlined by de-humansiation, alienation, mechenisation, automation, anguish, dread, despair etc. in the field of culture, resulting in crime, violence, terrorism, drug addiction, addition to pornography etc. The newer achievements in the field of information & technology, communication and Internet are not being so much harnessed for common good as against spreading crime and pornography. The short sighted vulgar utilitarian attitude towards nature and environment is threatening the very existence of human species.

These failures and shortcomings have necessitated a re-look and reconsideration of the project of modernity. There is a wide spread dejection and disenchentment with the claims of enlightenment. Post modernism - which thrives on the writing of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Boudillard etc. - puts a question mark on the enlightenment sensibility and the abilityof reason to solve all the probleruis of humankind. On the contrary the, postmodernism considers the present crises to be a result of 'oppressive' role played by the reason in the present culture and civilization. They contend that the crises has its genesis in the illegitimate attempt of reason to provide an over arching blueprint for the progress of mankind in the form of 'grand-narratives'. Let us consider for example the post moder thought of Jean Francois Lyotard. Lyotard introduced the term postrnodernity into the discussions in the realm of philosophy, politics, sociology and humanities. His book The Postmodern Condition (1984) has become a classic for contemporary debates and reflects the characteristic concerns and tensions of the movement. For him the post modern condition is one in which 'grand narratives' of legitimation are no longer credible. By "grand narratives" he means the overarching philosophies of history like the enlightenment theory of the gradual but steady progress of reason and freedom. Hegel's dealectic of spirit coming to know itself. And Marx's conception of the forward march of human productive capacities through class struggle, ending in the proletarian revolution culminating in the stateless communist society. For Lyotard, these "grand-narratives" are instances of the specific modern approach to the problem of legitimation. Each situated the discursive practices of inquiry and politics within a broader totalizing metadiscourse that legitimizes them. The metadiscourse narrates a story about the human history and purports to guarantee that the pragmatics of modern sciences and modern political processes are legitimate. The story stressed some 'sciences' and 'politics' have the legitimate pragmatics and so are legitimate politics & social piactl6ee. The post modernism contends that in the name of legitimation by reason, illegitimate ends are forced. They call for abandoning the project of modernity and of reason as it has resulted in the present cultural and civilizational crisis.

In contrast, and against the post-modernists, Jurgen Habermas, the leading philosopher of the Frankfurt school, though agreeing with the post modernists in their critique of present states-of-affairs, contends that instead of being result of excess of reason, the present crises has its genesis in the deficit of reason (1987). And instead of abandoning of Reason, as advocated by the post modernistshe stresses and underlines the self-rectifying capacity of the reason and contends that the present crisis can be overcome within the framework of the modernity as the project of modernity has gone

astray and is incomplete.lheréfore it should be completed and brought to its logical conclusion.

Following Max Weber, and before him Kant, Habermas stipulates the cultural modernity as separation of substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres of science, morality and art. Since eighteenth century, problems inherited from the older world views have been sought to be rearranged under specific aspects of validity: truth, normative rightness, and beauty. They have then been handled as questions of knowledge, or of justice and morality, or of taste. Scientific discourse; theories of morality and jurisprudence; and the production and criticism of art have been institutionalised. Each domain of culture has been made to correspond to cultural professions in which problems have been dealt by special experts. There appeared the structure of cognitive-instrumental rationality, moral-practical rationality, and aesthetic-expressive rationality. Each of them has been under the control of specialists and as a result distance grew between the culture of experts and that of the people at large. With this type of cultural rationalism, the threat to the life-world -whose traditional substance has already been devalued- increased and it tended to become more and more impoverished.

Habermas insists that the project of modernity formulated by enlightenment thinkers consisted in their efforts to develop above mentioned three spheres in accordance with their inner logic by the experts, but at the same time, the project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. It was intended to use the accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of life-world and for rational organisation of every day social life. It was hoped that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also increase understanding of the world as well as self that would promote moral progress leading to well being of humans (1996, 45).

Habermas admits that present scenario has shattered this optimism. "The differentiation of science, morality and art has come to mean the autonomy of the segments treated by the specialists, at the same time letting them split off from the hermeneutics of everyday communication" (1981, 9).

Habermas argues that it is the colonization of life-world by the instrumental rationality, divorced from ethical and aesthetical concerns, which is responsible for present crisis. He argues that under the influence of contemporary capitalism, human reason has become more or less instrumental, as the developments of knowledge are valued for their economic and political efficiency, rather than for their potential to improve human life. Scientific and technological innovation has become an end-in-itself as it is sought for increasing the efficiency, without considering its effect on social and individual lives. As a result the life-world has split off from various expert cultures and the common person cannot take part in proceedings that infact effect his or her whole existence.

Herbermas calls for a struggle against this fragmentation and fracturing of social life which can only be done by retaining the notion of emancipation as a means of reconciling various language games that constitute a culture. It is in this sense that he considers the project of modernity to be an incomplete one. For him solution does not lie in abandoning the project of modernity, rather it consists in seeking its completion in the sense that all three spheres of reason -i.e. instrumental, ethical and aesthetical- should enrich the life of every individual as well as the hermeneutics of everyday communication. This can only be achieved if all the spheres infact enrich the life-world rather than splitting it.

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