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# The Emancipatory Intent of Critical Theory: Jürgen Habermas and the Concept of Knowledge

25 July 2025 (Friday)  
3:30 PM to 5:30 PM IST

An online talk by  
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Meet Link: <https://meet.google.com/dum-wbqy-mbm>

## Abstract

Contemporary Western Critical Theory can be seen as associated with a radical critique of modernity, rationality, political association, power, cross-interculturality, and the need for macro or planetary ethics as a stage qualitatively beyond the micro and meso ethics. As

Michael J Thompson says, “Critique is a distinctive form of knowledge derived from the insights of German idealism and developed in Marx’s writings that is opposed to the merely empirical and positivist models of knowledge. The concept of critique is an essential feature of this tradition as a whole and of its distinctiveness. For one thing, it means not simply an act of judgment or resistance, but also a specific way of relating to the world, a way that any subject relates to an object. This is because critique is a means to relate what is perceived in everyday life with a deeper, more rational knowledge of the world.”

When it comes to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, Douglas Kellner puts it, “This project requires a collective, supra-disciplinary synthesis of philosophy, the sciences, and politics, in which critical social theory is produced by groups of theorists and scientists from various disciplines working together to produce a critical theory of the present age aimed at radical socio-political..., whereby a) free markets were to be succeeded by democratic planning, b) scientifically, a loss of faith in the reason (and science) that would rationally guide this process, and c) morally, pervasive challenges to the universalistic values embodied in the theories of natural rights associated with modernity.”

Jürgen Habermas is a well-known representative of the Frankfurt School and critical theory. He is a second-generation critical theorist. The major addition that Habermas makes to the Critical Theory is his concept of knowledge and knowledge constitutive interests. It becomes all the more unique with the idea of the emancipatory-critical interest as the core of all epistemic engagements. As

Habermas says, knowledge cannot be understood without emancipation or emancipatory interest, as it is the most fundamental survival interest.

Therefore, the Empirical Knowledge-Scientific method, the Historical Hermeneutic method of human sciences and history, needs to be informed and juxtaposed with critical reflective knowledge as generated from the need for emancipation from domination/power/ systematically distorted communication. Similarly, Habermas's depth hermeneutics that seeks and grounds the emancipatory dimension operative between the technical-instrumental and the practical-interpretive, also makes the reflective necessity of intersubjective communication inevitable. The discussion tries to explore the various dimensions of the above claims of Habermas's Critical Theory.

### Bio

Dr. Pius V Thomas is Associate Professor & Head, the Department of Philosophy, Assam University, Silchar. He teaches Contemporary Western Philosophy, Critical Hermeneutics, Ethics-Applied Ethics, Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi, Human Rights and the possibility of contextualizing Human Rights, Theories of Democracy and Religion, Ethics and Reason, Environmental Ethics, Philosophy of Education, and Critical Religiosity-Christianity and Buddhism. He has published more than forty papers. The volumes include Knowledge, Theorization and Rights: Renegotiating the Connectives (Edited Volume, Salesian College Publication, Siliguri, 2015); Cosmopolitan Thought and the Displaced (Edited Volume, Authors Press, New Delhi, 2023); Reflections: Collected Papers (Authors Press, New Delhi, 2023); Journeys on the Margin (Authors Press, New Delhi, 2024); and Human Rights: Perspectives (Edited Volume, Dev Publications, New Delhi, 2025). Forthcoming volumes include Political Gandhi: The Contemporariness of Gandhi (Edited Volume, Akar Books) and The Patterns of Intersubjectivity.