

## FOR A CRITICAL THEORY IN THE FACE OF ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM: EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE FOR HUMAN FORMATION<sup>1</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to problematize the ways of apprehending reality in contemporary times and to discuss founding elements for a critical method of knowledge production and education that does not provide the concealment of the mediations that determine an event and is exercised in the praxis between theory and reality. In the face of the age of ephemeral and superficial information, marked by the immediate and apparent apprehension of reality and the need to provide urgent answers to the contradictions of society, the prevalence of theoretical approaches that seek in the subjective scope of the subject and culture, the resolution of real problems is frequently perceived. This movement tends to disregard the structures of capitalist society, thus contributing to the perpetuation of the current order and favoring a *modus operandi* that operates as a myth, that is, without being questioned. In addition, the presence of intellectual fetishisms that abandon critical and reflective theoretical references, justified by a mistaken conception of actuality, is observed. This view equates novelty with effectiveness in knowledge, linking the relevance of a work or author to the historical moment of its production, which eliminates the appreciation of contributions that unveil and deepen issues and determinations of today's society. Another aspect of the impoverishment of knowledge about the world finds expression in post-truth and *fake news*, which configure an explicit form of pseudo-formation. It is in this wake that this article discusses the essential elements for the production of knowledge articulated with human formation in times of anti-intellectualism, from the perspective of the Critical Theory of Society, based on the contributions of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

**Keywords:** Scientific Knowledge. Human Formation. Anti-intellectualism. Critical Theory.

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## INTRODUCTION

In dark times, marked by the advance of anti-intellectualist tendencies, it is urgent to reflect on the relationship between the production of knowledge and human formation. The challenges imposed on education in a scenario in which human values and scientific research are often rejected, intensifies the need for educational processes aimed at human emancipation. In this context, it is essential to question the bases that sustain the elaboration of scientific knowledge and how it can foster critical reflection on reality and form subjects capable of intervening in a transformative way in the world. This reflection requires a careful look at the social structure and the principles that guide the educational and research act, in the sense of revealing knowledge that not only informs, but reveals the determinations that are hidden in reality.

In the current neoliberal context, flexible production increasingly imposes a demand for polyvalent workers, endowed with competencies and skills that, far from favoring critical thinking, consolidate the constitution of subjects/producers subjected to the functional logic of the current mode of production. From this perspective, applicable and innovative knowledge is prioritized, restricted to logical-formal thinking aimed at the analysis of hypotheses and probabilities that meet previously outlined objectives.

This dynamic not only hinders the exercise of critical reason, but also reinforces an instrumental conception of knowledge, reducing it to a tool to meet the demands of the market. As a consequence, the human being is molded to meet productive demands, to the detriment of a critical-reflective education that could underpin a social transformation. Such logic not only compromises the formation of emancipated subjects, but also makes society and individuals more vulnerable to the forces that promote irrationality (Dardot; Laval, 2016).

Anti-intellectualist tendencies gain strength with the appropriation of technical-scientific advances by the information and communication industry, which promotes a diversified and immediate production of content based on ready-made schemes, often devoid of commitment to the truth. This context favors the uncritical dissemination and distortion of information, creating an environment in which speed overlaps with the time needed for reflection and critical analysis.

Although advances in science and technology have the potential to democratize access to knowledge, their logic, often based on superficiality, the appearance of events and the instrumentalization of globalized media, has favored the proliferation of

disinformation, feeding the false idea that the visibility and expansion of information is similar to the democratization of knowledge. Simplistic and sensationalist narratives often replace scientific knowledge, manipulating public opinion and weakening the formation of critical and emancipatory thinking.

At the same time, formal education is also under attack. Currently, recent educational reforms, budget cuts in education and the devaluation of teachers and universities in Brazil are based on anti-intellectualism and denialism, which disqualify or deny scientific knowledge, especially that which proposes to reveal the contradictions of this society. Currently, recent educational reforms, budget cuts in education, and the devaluation of teachers and universities in Brazil are based on an anti-intellectualist and denialist discourse. These movements disqualify or reject scientific knowledge, especially that which seeks to highlight the contradictions present in society. Policies such as the New High School, which reduces the importance of the humanities in school education, and the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC), with an emphasis on competencies, aimed at the market. At the same time, cuts in funding for public universities and in the areas of scientific research seriously compromise the spaces for the production and dissemination of critical knowledge, which are fundamental for the construction of an enlightened and democratic society. Added to this is the disrespect and devaluation of teachers, manifested in episodes of aggression in the classroom, lack of recognition, precarious working conditions and inadequate remuneration, which discourages teaching as a reflective practice.

This panorama weakens the capacity of education to promote a civic and critical education, which is indispensable to face contemporary challenges and advance towards a more just and enlightened society. Faced with this scenario of adversities to critical thinking and acceptance only of certain knowledge that does not shake the structure of the mode of production, it becomes essential to question the conditions and possibilities of the act of knowing: does all knowledge, in fact, contribute to human formation oriented to emancipation?

It is in this context in which critical knowledge emerges as an indispensable tool to resist the processes of alienation and instrumentalization that permeate modern societies, that this article proposes to investigate the foundations of critical knowledge, of a theoretical research based on the foundations of the Critical Theory of Society, developed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In this process, we identified some fundamental categories

for this critical-reflective knowledge. They are: "Contradiction", "Reflexive Critical Reason", "Primacy of the Object", "Articulation between Whole and Part, Universal and Particular" and "Theory and Praxis". These categories do not operate in isolation, but interact in a relational dynamic that gives them meaning and transformative potential, enabling the individual to have a critical understanding of the world and unveiling paths to emancipation.

## **CONTRADICTION AS THE FOUNDATION OF CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE: OVERCOMING INVARIABLE, IMMEDIATE, CLASSIFICATORY AND DOMINATING KNOWLEDGE**

Knowing reality implies unveiling the contradiction and critically questioning knowledge that presents itself as exact, based on precise and immutable definitions. Identifying contradictions allows us to overcome the superficial appearance of the observable and the empirical, leading to the complexity of reality. This approach avoids linear analyses that simplify the passage from myth to knowledge, from regression to progress, or from the past to the future.

A contradiction that stands out in the studies of Adorno and Horkheimer (2006), especially in the texts "The concept of enlightenment" and "Excursion I: Ulysses or myth and Enlightenment", when reflecting on the contradictions implicit in reason and progress, evidencing how mythical thought is reproduced in the civilizing process. Through a dialectical movement, the authors demonstrate that the contradiction between myth and enlightenment exposes how positivist science ends up repeating the same principles that it initially rejected in myth.

For Adorno and Horkheimer (2006), myth represents a primitive form of knowledge that already seeks to understand and deal with the unknown. It is configured as an attempt to name and explain the feared and mysterious nature, using practices such as spells, repetitive rituals or sacrifices to organize and discipline the world. In this sense, both myth and positivist science share domination as a central element: while the sorcerer seeks to control the "demons" of nature, the scientist classifies and dominates the phenomena of reality in order to submit them to human control.

Enlightenment, on the other hand, proposes to replace superstition with rational and enlightened knowledge, allowing the individual to think autonomously, freeing him from fear and relations of submission. However, this promise does not materialize, and the tension between myth and enlightenment reveals the regression of modern science in relation to the construction of a truly free society. Thus, the perpetuation of the submission of thought

to the established order is observed, reiterating relations of domination (Adorno; Horkheimer, 2006).

The contradiction is also manifested in the dialectic between myth and enlightenment, a fundamental reflection to understand the form assumed by reason in response to the objective conditions of society. This society, marked by contradictions, faces limits imposed by reality, from the confrontation between man and nature to the relations of domination and exploitation present in all dimensions of human life (Jay, 2008).

Reason, however, also contains its own contradiction: when it configures itself as an instrument of control, it becomes unreason. In this process, reason becomes a functional and necessary tool for capital, losing its emancipatory character. This rationality, explanatory and dominant, begins to operate against humanity itself, legitimizing barbarism in a movement that prioritizes means to the detriment of ends. Thus, reason is concretized as a fetish, detached from its critical and reflective purpose (Adorno; Horkheimer, 2006).

By submitting to the interests of a bourgeois social order, instrumental reason leads to the regression of humanity, transforming progress into regression and decadence. Rationality, oriented exclusively to achieve capitalist goals, regardless of their consequences, characterizes what the authors call totalitarian enlightenment: a model of thought that rejects any alternative or contestation (Adorno; Horkheimer, 2006).

The advance of scientific rationality and the replacement of myth by enlightenment, instead of promoting emancipation, intensify domination and regression. This process is not limited to demythologization, but reveals the consolidation of an instrumental rationality that, when developed in science, reinforces both the control over nature and the naturalization of power relations in the so-called civilized human being.

The model of rationality centered on positivist science dogmatically imposes logical-formal thinking that converts enlightenment into myth, transforming nature into mere objectivity. Positivist science is a totalitarian system, as it despises any form of knowledge that is not subject to the criterion of calculability and utility, without the possibility of opposition (Adorno; Horkheimer, 2006).

The formalization of the method of thinking, characteristic of positivist science, reveals a link with myth, since its objectivity is based on repetition and predictability, as in experiments whose result can be anticipated. This logic, linear, invariable and calculable, sustains a unilateral reason that eliminates the possibility of considering that, among contradictory propositions, both can be simultaneously true or false (Adorno; Horkheimer,

2006). This elimination of contradiction favors the consolidation of a false social consciousness.

The pseudo-formed individual is incapable of recognizing the contradictions inherent in progress and freedom. In this context, social problems and injustices are treated in a personalistic and punctual way, while acts such as spreading insults, hatred, lies, slander, defamation and prejudice are interpreted as expressions of freedom. This individual, who sees himself as separated from the collective and believes himself to be free, does not realize that his acts deny the very humanity that constituted him as a human being.

Freedom, however, can only be realized in a truly free society, because individual isolation is possible only because the human being has been previously socialized. To deny this link is, ultimately, to reject the foundations of the human condition itself.

Contradiction makes it possible to affirm and deny the same proposition at the same time. Adorno and Horkheimer (2006, p. 26) cite the emblem of the tree in the context of pre-animism, as a symbolic representation of "a dialectical thought, in which each thing is only what it is, becoming what it is not", since, when a tree is seen not merely as a tree, but "as a testimony of something else, as the seat of mana, language expresses the contradiction that something else would be at the same time itself and something different from it, identical and not identical."

Adorno (2015) returned to classical philosophy to think of the one by its opposite. The one can only be understood from its opposite, the multiple. In the same way, Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) turn to myth to understand enlightenment. Myth and enlightenment, even though they are apparently contrary, are also similar in terms of the attempt to predict and control events. Clarification falls back on myth by converting reason into a planned procedure so that there is no reflection on the method itself, so that doubts do not arise that can disturb it.

Reality can be true and false at the same time, which makes it indispensable to criticize the limits of a reason that is not exercised in its fullness. It is crucial to resist projects of humanity that appear to reconcile social contradictions, but in fact only mask these tensions. A scientific knowledge that understands and incorporates contradictions is opposed to mere adaptation, exposing the falsity present in concrete reality, denouncing the deception of the promise of freedom and promoting a critical reflection on the past and the present, while opening paths to question the future of humanity.



When the method is restricted to absolute doubt that only leads to the confirmation of the hypothesis, assuming as objective truth what is in the average, the contradiction is eliminated from the beginning. This imposition of the permanent as true transforms truth into illusion (Adorno, 2015). Such a method standardizes rationality, forcing thought to obey the same rules of logical-formal reasoning. Those who disagree with this pattern are compelled to repress their own ideas and deny themselves, sacrificing their individuality for the sake of self-preservation.

In this logic, the different is treated as an enemy, and the non-identical, because it represents a threat to the functionality of the current social order, is seen as something to be eliminated. Thus, the standardization of rationality not only perpetuates structures of domination, but also suppresses any possibility of genuine transformation, reinforcing a worldview that excludes diversity and denies the critical potential of thought.

### **CRITICAL AND REFLEXIVE REASON IN THE CONFRONTATION OF INSTRUMENTAL, FUNCTIONAL AND SUBJECTIVIST REASON**

The replacement of illusion and faith by rational knowledge is a requirement imposed by bourgeois society, which sees in reason a means for the progress of the capitalist mode of production. However, this transition transforms reason into a mere instrument, aimed at producing objective and subjective results that sustain the exploitation and domination, both of nature and of the human being, who is also part of this nature (Horkheimer, 2015). Thus, instead of promoting human emancipation, reason is instrumentalized, serving the interests of capital and perpetuating inequalities.

For Adorno and Horkheimer (2006), the *Odyssey*, an epic poem from Antiquity attributed to Homer, plays a crucial role in understanding the contradictions of modern rationality and the limitations of scientific knowledge. In this context, cunning – a form of non-linear and strategic reasoning – is inserted as a mechanism to deal with the unknown and with what is perceived as threatening. In the logic of this rationality, strategies emerge that not only seek to solve immediate problems, but also perpetuate relations of domination, perpetuating a system in which reason becomes a tool at the service of maintaining power and exploitation.

In the thought marked by cunning, Ulysses hatches a plan to listen to the song of the sirens without succumbing to death, exercising not only dominion over himself, but also over others. In this process, the promise of happiness is not fulfilled: while the workers are

led to the mere reproduction of their existence, Ulysses, the most powerful, imposes on them a strenuous work that deprives them even of the possibility of experiencing pleasure. Tied to the pole, he enjoys alone the pleasure of the music of the mermaids, evidencing the inequality and alienation that permeate the logic of domination. This scene reflects the dynamics of a social system in which, while the elite sees itself as the sole holder of pleasure and knowledge, the dominated are kept in ignorance and subordination, unable to envision other possibilities of existence than the incessant reproduction of their oppressive conditions.

Ulysses, as the prototype of the bourgeois individual, reveals that the promise of liberation from relations of fear and submission never materializes, because neither he nor his sailors were truly liberated (Braga, 2017). In the critique of enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) confront the formalization of reason in modernity, which becomes a means to achieve goals without questioning the rationality of ends. They defend the resumption of a full reason, which is not limited to being an instrument, but which is constantly subjected to criticism, as discussed by Kant. In this sense, reason should not be guided by the isolated individual, but by the collective exercise that guides both the subject and society, always with the objective of the common good. This conception of reason is opposed to the instrumental logic that characterizes domination, seeking a rationality that promotes emancipation and social transformation.

The reason defended by Adorno and Horkheimer establishes a dialogue with the conception of reason in Ancient Greece, understood as the faculty of thinking and understanding reality, but with a more transformative character. For these authors, reason is not limited to understanding the world, but is intrinsically linked to praxis, that is, to the ability to transform reality (Horkheimer, 1941). In this sense, it has a critical potential that allows objective reflection on material reality, the contradictions of society and historical determinations, breaking with the false consciousness that maintains relations of domination.

The search for reason is, therefore, a search for the human being's ability to critically analyze the world, becoming an active and questioning agent, which opposes heteronomy. However, Adorno and Horkheimer warn of the decline of this reason, as it takes forms that turn against itself, immersed in skepticism and dogmatism, to the point of emptying itself of its true potential. The path of the decadence of reason, as the authors argue, is linked to its appropriation by capitalist logic, which transforms it into an effective and indispensable



instrument of control for the system. In this process, reason loses its emancipatory character and manifests itself in an irrational way, obscuring reality and scientifically justifying the barbarism that threatens humanity. Reason, then, becomes functional to civilization, but in a way that is alienated from full life (Horkheimer, 1941).

When reflecting on the emancipation of reason itself, Adorno (2012, p. 16) highlights that human formation is not restricted to being "aware of", because then we would have several objects to be thought about and we could forget to place consciousness itself as the object of thought, consciousness in movement to think articulating subjectivity and objectivity.

This implies a dynamic reason, which articulates subjectivity and objectivity in a critical way. A knowledge that is limited to instrumental reason, without questioning its own bases, fails to promote true human formation. It becomes a means for the maintenance of the oppressive system, hiding the determinations of exploitation and tending to harmonize the contradictions of an unequal society, prioritizing the utility of knowledge to sustain the current order (Horkheimer, 1941).

A knowledge that is limited to instrumental reason does not contemplate human formation. A knowledge that does not accept criticism of reason itself ends up being a means to maintain the oppressive system and hides the determinations of exploitation in the tendency to harmonize contradictions in the systematization of reality, striving to be useful to the current society, which is unequal (Horkheimer, 1941).

By problematizing the rationality of enlightenment in the modern administered world and its contradictions underlying the process of decay of civilization, Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) denounce the objective conditions that reduce reason to an operation based on formal logical rules, a procedure that limits, imprisons rather than liberates.

Thought no longer understands objects as they really are, but is content to order and classify them as a calculating machine. The less human beings think about reality, the more they become passive and susceptible to manipulation. When they do not understand their objects, they also do not respect them, becoming naïve and collaborators of an ideological and oppressive system (Horkheimer, 1941).

Considering that the conditions of capitalism expanded and deepened the reification of social reality, the standardization of positivist science tended to contribute to the decadence of the potentialities of reason and to deepen the continuity of the dissociation

between subjectivity and objectivity. Horkheimer, in "Eclipse of Reason" (2015), extended the debate on two dimensions of reason: the subjective and the objective.

Subjective reason removes from the subject the mediations of objectivity. In the dissociation between individual and society, the subjective dimension dissolves what is objective. Thus, it is considered that concreteness does not resonate in reason, and there is an abstract subject without analyzing the determinations that constitute it. It is as if the truth was inside the subject. This reason loses from analysis the objective capacity, which is linked to actions in accordance with human life, with the social totality, "the existence of reason as a force not only in the individual mind, but also in the objective world" (Horkheimer, 2015, p. 12).

From the conversion of reason into a form, into a mathematical-geometric scheme that guides the calculations of the means to obtain a certain end, the predominance of subjective reason emerges unilaterally, related to the "subjective faculty of the mind" (Horkheimer, 2015, p. 13), to the centrality of the exercise of reason in the subject to coordinate actions with a view to achieving purposes recognized by bourgeois society. By organizing and applying the logical capacity to calculate probabilities and to adapt the appropriate means for certain ends, according to the interests of self-preservation, the human being detaches himself from ethical and moral values for the common good.

According to Horkheimer (1966), through the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity, reason does not only dominate the consciousness of individuals; On the contrary, reason emptied of its objective content becomes a mechanism of control of the social mediations that reproduce and preserve reality as it is. This reason is not exercised in its full sense, because substantive reason makes a subjective appropriation of objective reality in its totality:

The concept of reason goes beyond the simple coordination of the relationship between means and ends. The objective dimension presents itself as an element for thinking, for analyzing actions in order to determine the ends. From this perspective, Horkheimer (2015) corroborates the conception of Marx and Engels (2007) that it is the real conditions of life that determine consciousness, and not the other way around. Reason is realized in the incorporation of experiences, actions, beliefs, norms and laws that constitute the social.

What determines what is useful is the social, and the reason that internalizes the social aspects without reflecting falls into the mere conformism of what is posed. Many

simply think about inserting themselves, about being accepted in society, especially when society is seen as something external, which rises over the subject, hence the subordination to the mere exercise of a reason that is functional (Horkheimer, 1941).

The crisis of reason is manifested in the relationship between instrumental reason and efficiency, that is, it is capitalist society that determines the criteria for the efficiency of reason as a mechanism to successfully reach the demanded place. Efficiency is the criterion for determining actions, responding to the expectation of the need for individuals to be submissive to capitalist society, although highlighted as autonomous (Petry, 2013). Therefore, behind the appearance of being free and autonomous, the individual continues to be tutored by another.

In this panorama, reason turns against itself and is easily subordinated to authoritarian systems. If it does not question itself by universal humanitarian principles, it is difficult to affirm its irrationality. It doesn't matter how cruel it is, as long as it works, even if in the service of inhumane purposes. In this way, the reason that seeks self-preservation ends up being a rationality directed to self-destruction (Horkheimer, 1966).

The price that the subject pays for the conversion of reason into an instrument of capitalist progress is its objectification. While it replaces superstition and faith with reason, it itself becomes a mere apparatus for the production of mechanisms of domination (Adorno; Horkheimer, 2006). It's as if there was only this way of thinking. This type of rationalization lives and elevates itself before the subject who is submissive, demoted to a mere bearer of its manifestation (Horkheimer, 2015).

In this sense, reason that is exercised in reflection, that mediates between subject and object, is a foundation for knowledge to be realized as formative, for the knowledge of human nature with a view to a life worth living. Thus, a reason arises that, in the full sense, allows criticism of itself. This is because criticism of it is a way of denouncing the rationality that places obstacles for individuals to claim the opportunity to orient their activities to transform society.

## **PRIMACY OF THE OBJECT: FOR A RELATIONSHIP OF COMMUNICATION IN KNOWLEDGE**

In the quest to ensure absolute knowledge, free from subjective interference, science transforms reason into a technique of knowing. Under the primacy of a method that obeys rigid and exact standards, reason tries to subjugate the object, imposing pre-notions and

prejudices on it, without reflecting on itself as an object. The result is a uniformity in thinking, a characteristic already present in myth, because, as Adorno states, "from the known nothing unknown, nothing diverse should be able to arise" (Adorno, 2015, p. 85).

This logic of object domination leads individuals to reproduce the alienation of their own thinking. It is not only a question of an alienation of subjects in relation to dominated objects, but also of a profound alienation in human relations (Adorno; Horkheimer, 2006). Thus, enlightenment, which initially sought to free individuals from fear, becomes a mechanism that sees only that which confirms what already fits its own procedure.

For Adorno (1995), the condition of the subject of knowledge is not abstract, but social, concrete and real, with the possibility of knowing through criticism exercised over and by reason. In the subject, singularity only finds meaning in relation to the universality of the object, a mediation that reflects "the reflexive form of the objectification of men, objectively consummated in social relations" (Adorno, 1995, p. 186). In this mediation, social relations reproduce the dominant structure of society, based on the logic of exchange.

The relationship between subject and object is essentially dialectical, since "the separation between subject and object is real and apparent" (Adorno, 1995, p. 182), since both affirm and deny each other simultaneously. This separation is real because it reflects the human condition, in which one does not exist without the other, but it is also apparent, because this distinction is revealed to be false by identifying and differentiating subject and object in a contradictory way. Thus, both the subject and the object carry within themselves the mark of contradiction.

The social object is thought of by the subject, who is also constituted as an object, since his existence is based on the social. The relationship between subject and object is one of interdependence, but not of identity. It is a constant tension and contradiction: one depends on the other to exist and, at the same time, resists being reduced to the other. The subject is therefore a determination of the object, just as the object is a determination of the subject.

In this relational process, the subject finds the opportunity to recognize and differentiate himself from the object, while also understanding the conditions that constitute them. In this way, the subject is formed and transformed from his interaction with the object, both being products of this relationship. In this context, there is no absolute ideal of subject

or object: the object is the result of human production and, consequently, the subject is socially mediated (Adorno, 1995).

It is not in the certainty unaffected by thought, nor in the pre-conceptual unity of perception and object, but in their reflected position, that the possibility of reconciliation is shown. The distinction occurs in the subject who has the external world in his own consciousness and, however, is effected as a conscious projection (Adorno; Horkheimer, 2006, p. 156).

The relationship between subject and object is marked by a mutual determination, in which both are constituted when confronting each other as fundamental elements in the formation of each other. In this dynamic, the subject should not be considered in isolation. Adorno (1995) proposes what he calls the "second Copernican turn", a dialectical turn that returns to the subject to recompose his subjectivity and his potentiality as a subject of knowledge. This return to the subject seeks, through the analysis of its contradictions, to understand the objective reality that determines it, so that "subjectivity is understood as the configuration of the object" (Adorno, 1995, p. 191).

For Adorno and Horkheimer (2006), the primacy of the object is fundamental as a counterpoint to the subjectivist ideology that, by dominating the object, fragments the experience, perpetuates pseudo-formation and sustains totalitarian enlightenment, which restricts freedom of thought. Adorno (1995) confronts this totalitarian view of enlightenment and rescues the Marxian perspective, emphasizing that the subject is socially determined. He defends the primacy of the object as a means of apprehending reality, allowing the subject to recognize, in the mediations of the object, its deepest determinations.

This approach promotes an inversion in the issue of the constitution of the subject, placing the object at the center of the process. The centrality of the object requires the subject to critically self-reflect, developing an objective consciousness that orients itself outwards, towards the exteriority. This perspective challenges the traditional relationship between subject and object, inviting a more dialectical and reflective posture.

The primacy of the object means that the subject is, in turn, an object in a qualitatively distinct and more radical sense than the object, because it cannot be known except by consciousness, but is also a subject. What is known through consciousness must be something, because mediation refers to what is mediated. But the subject, the quintessence of mediation, is the how and, as opposed to the object, never what, postulated by any conceivable representation of the concept of subject (Adorno, 1995, p. 187-188).

The subject has his place in this dialectic, since it is in the primacy of the object that he is realized and, although the primacy is of the object, it is his possibility of experience and understanding of the material conditions of the objects. As much as the determination is of the object, the subject is not passive: he is safeguarded a subjective moment through which he analyzes and interprets the object and configures it in its particularities, being able to transpose and modify them (Viana, 2015).

In this way, the primacy of the object does not disqualify or silence the subject. On the contrary, the subject is an object that can only be known by consciousness, which makes it an object of knowledge of a thinking consciousness for its own sake, of a self-consciousness. It is only the awareness of the social that guarantees "knowledge the objectivity that it loses by carelessness while obeying the social forces that govern it, without reflecting on them. Criticism of society is criticism of knowledge, and vice versa" (Adorno, 1995, p. 189).

The primacy of the object is manifested in the relationship with the subject by qualitatively altering the opinions of the objectified consciousness. In our society, marked by the influence of market fundamentals, opinions, behaviors and relationships are constantly determined by these structures (Adorno, 1995). However, the primacy of the object does not mean a simplifying objectivism or a reduction of reason; on the contrary, it requires critical thinking that analyzes the material and objective conditions of social and economic reality, especially in relation to conformism and fetishism that position a certain science as the only reference of truth.

In this context, data that do not corroborate socially established hypotheses are often excluded. The primacy of the method, disconnected from the object, prevents knowledge from revealing the determining mediations of objective reality. As a result, knowledge ceases to be at the service of the object, reducing it to a subordinate function and limiting thought to the logic of calculation, all in the name of a supposed objectivity (Viana, 2015).

This dynamic reflects a move away from critical thinking, which should question not only the results, but also the methods and assumptions that underpin knowledge. Only by recognizing the mediations between subject and object is it possible to break with this instrumentalization and move towards a broader and dialectical understanding of reality.

The knowledge that accesses the object without the reflective mediation of the subject becomes functional to the maintenance of the system. "The rest, with which science is satisfied as its truth, is the product of its manipulative procedure, subjectively organized"



(Adorno, 1995, p. 193). In the obsession with removing any interference in the objectivity of knowledge, the logic of modernity silences the subject by replacing his claim to autonomy with a scientific procedure that repeats what has already been thought, thus replicating the same movement in the relationship between subject and object contained in the myths of creating an illusion that apprehends the situation.

Once separated from the object, the subject does not carry out the experience, has his consciousness mutilated in relation to the objective world. The separation between them is a regression of consciousness in which the subject is unable to understand his position in relation to the object. And he loses the possibility of reflecting on the social forces that determine him, which impels him more and more to unreflective action and to a false consciousness that leads him, as a pseudo-formed subject, to blind identification with authoritarian forms of collectivities (Adorno, 1995). Consequently, an impulse to join groups and collective action through the spell of undifferentiation is superimposed, a blind illusion that leads to the possibility of relapse into barbarism.

The denial of the subject creates an obstacle to the production of knowledge that reveals the mediations between subject and object, hindering genuine experience. In the absence of a dialectical interaction between the two, the subject's relationship with the object becomes violent, because, by trying to dominate it, it prevents the object from manifesting its objective determinations. Authentic experience, however, is grounded in a relationship of differentiation, not domination. This condition allows the subject to respect the object in its singularity and recognize what is different in it, promoting a state of differentiation without imposition. Adorno (1995) describes this dynamic as a relationship of communication, and not of domination.

Knowing, in this sense, requires overcoming the individualization and separation between subject and object, placing the subject in a state of attention to the nuances of the object. This posture allows you to interpret and understand the object in a deeper and truer way. The dialectical relationship between subject and object, marked by tensions and contradictions, is essential for the production of critical knowledge. This knowledge, in turn, is formative and emancipatory, as it breaks with the limitations imposed by domination and enables a fuller understanding of reality. Dialectics, therefore, is not only a method, but a movement that enhances experience and reflection as a path to human emancipation.

## **ARTICULATION BETWEEN WHOLE AND PART, UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULAR: FOUNDATIONS FOR CRITICAL AND FORMATIVE KNOWLEDGE**

The totality in which we live, which we feel at every step and in each of our social actions, is not determined by an immediate communion that embraces everyone equally (Adorno, 2008). External reality does not constitute an organic unity; it is more than the sum of its parts. The totality that surrounds us is composed of various mediations that structure society and constitute us, reflecting on political and social relations, work, leisure and daily action.

It is in particularity that totality is differentiated. In recognition and differentiation, the subject is singularized (Adorno, 2008). Particularity is the place where we can understand the specific manifestation of reason. In this way, the form of the individual is a particularity of bourgeois society in relation to the universality of the human being. "The particular is the universal itself, but it is its difference or its relation to an other, its appearance turned outwards; but there is no other from which the particular would be different, but only the universal itself" (Adorno, 2009, p. 271).

The split between the universal and the particular results in an alienated way of thinking about the object, since it distances the subject from its human nature, which is historical, hides the objective determinations that constitute the objects, directing knowledge towards a generalization of the particular and to the ignorance of mediations necessary for the understanding of universal mechanisms in historical particularity.

By moving away from human nature, the subject is veiled, which challenges the possibilities of knowledge that fulfills human formation, given that the way of knowing objects moves away from universality and becomes a search for truth in the individual sphere only.

The form of the bourgeois individual is the affirmation of individualization, which brings about the separation between individual and society, between part and whole, between subject and knowledge. This separation denies the epistemological subject the possibility of criticism, of the "criticism of knowledge and of knowledge as criticism" (Viana, 2015, p. 47), it denies the possibility of experience and reflection.

The reason instrumentalized to manage society is limited to a subjective rationality that prevents the articulation between part and whole. Trapped in a standardized thought, the subject has his subjectivity reified.

The culture industry has maliciously realized man as a generic being. Each one is only that through which he can replace all the others: he is fungible, a mere exemplar. He himself, as an individual, is the absolutely replaceable, the pure nothingness, and this is exactly what he comes to realize when he loses his resemblance over time (Adorno; Horkheimer, 2006, p. 120).

This generic and replaceable being becomes more and more indifferent to the other. At the same time, it is essential to think in relation to human universality, which includes individuality and not individualism. The connection of the particular with the whole indicates that there is no possibility of emancipation of the subject without emancipation from society, since the pseudo-conciliation between the particular and the universal, the relations subject and object, individual and society, are not realized in reality. For Adorno and Horkheimer (2006, p. 156), "the internal depth of the subject consists in nothing more than the delicacy and richness of the world of external perception".

The prevailing socialization system today constitutes a false consciousness of social reality that eliminates the tension between classes and excels in integration that covers inequalities. The reconciliation between universal interests and particular interests is not rational. Although individual instincts have been renounced, civilization does not fulfill the equality it promises. Society is unequal and with conflicting interests (Horkheimer, 1941).

Science is a productive and historical force and, therefore, is connected with the social process of production and with the individual and universal purposes of society (Horkheimer, 1983). It is because it is a human production that science demands a critical reflection on the part and the whole.

Reason, which intended to free human beings from mythology and superstitions, turns against universal concepts, such as freedom, peace, and human equality, dissolved by subjective reason and isolated from social reason and reduced to an individualized search. In this process, concepts are reduced to definitions, mechanisms to facilitate the organization of scientific material, and thought is automated and instrumentalized like a machine, so that more is produced and with greater economy of thought (Horkheimer, 1966).

Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) show that the identity of everything with everything reduces everything to a common denominator. The separation between critical intellect and sensible experience, between knowledge and reality, breaks the bond between subject and object and abandons the tension between universal and particular. The separation between subject and reality hinders his ability to think about his determinations.

The exercise of transformation demands resisting the unreal reconciliation between universal and particular, it consists of a reverse process and tension to enlightenment. It requires a remembrance of human nature in the subject with the presence of the possibility of the particular, so that it is capable of identifying and differentiating itself in relation to the whole. It calls for an awareness of the true objective conditions and the determinations that produce this form of social organization that imposes obstacles to the exercise of critical thinking. This is the scenario of an education for enlightenment and emancipation, which rescues in its way of being the reflexivity of thought, without losing sight of the contents that the reality mediated by formative scientific knowledge could reveal, shedding light on the falsity covered by the apparent truth in a mere technical system and allowing the subjects to reflect on it.

Revealing the tension between whole and part, universal and particular is necessary to achieve the contradictions, because the rationality of bourgeois society represents the particular, which is generalized as the only way of thinking, which is irrational. Understanding the determinations of the universal in the particular is fundamental to becoming aware of the contradictions that determine the relations that constitute objective reality. It is essential for the exercise of scientific knowledge that is formative, since clarification is permeated by contradictory elements, both in its content and in the way it is carried out. However, what prevails is the logic of production of capitalist society, which instrumentalizes integration, so that there is no contradiction within thought, in a strategy of reproduction that preserves and naturalizes the current model of life and domination.

## **THEORY AND PRAXIS: PATHS TO THE CONSTITUTION OF KNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN FORMATION**

The close relationship between theory and historical transformations in the search for truth and the critique of how the research process is conducted, the way it relates to empiricism. In this sense, Horkheimer (1983), in the essay *Traditional Theory and Critical Theory*, approaches Critical Theory in its original conception, questioning how theory is often "sketched 'from top to bottom' by others, elaborated without direct contact with the problems of a particular empirical science" (Horkheimer, 1983, p. 119).

By adopting a critical look at Cartesian thought, Horkheimer goes beyond the methodological perspective centered on value judgments and the supposed neutrality of the social sciences, directing his criticism not to the concept of theory itself, but to the way in

which the research process is conducted and the relationship that is established with empiricism.

The conservative character of the traditional theory, present positivist method, demands neutrality from the researcher in relation to the object, establishes a mechanical and decontextualized relationship with the empiric, while ignoring the material and historical reality that constitutes the object of study. In the positivist method, scientific knowledge follows an invariable, linear and calculable movement, a process in which, as Adorno and Horkheimer (2006, p. 74) point out, "enlightenment expels difference from theory". This model makes it impossible to be open to the contradictions and historical determinations of reality. For Critical Theory, however, criticism consists of distrusting any and all processes of knowledge, instigating doubt about one's own thought (Adorno, 2009). This negative stance is not only an analytical tool, but an essential element of the critical method, whose objective is to reveal contradictions and question the formal scheme of previous hypotheses created to achieve specific political and social objectives (Freitag, 2004).

When inquiry is structured *a priori*, it excludes thought experience, reaffirms reified and automated thinking, and reduces theory to a kind of "calculating machine." In this context, Adorno and Horkheimer (2006, p. 37) state that "what remains for theory is the ideal of unified science, so praxis has to succumb to the irrepressible process of universal history." Thus, Critical Theory presents itself as a counterpoint, proposing a dynamic articulation between theory and practice, sensitive to the historical and material contradictions that shape reality.

A loose theory, disconnected from social reality, does not achieve the sense of mediating experience in the subject-object relationship. The logical structure of critical theory establishes a dialectical relationship with reality, which is in motion, captures the historical contradictions of phenomena, individuals and society. In this logic, in order to exercise a critical theory, it is necessary to consolidate a connection between what is given in the past and in the present and to let oneself be guided by the future. In other words, the logic of critical theory makes it possible to integrate a new datum into a theoretical body that is already given – elaborated at a given historical moment – and to refer to the practice of a better future.

In this context, critical theory allows the subject to question and overcome immediate data, dissolving its appearance of naturalness. It offers an ethical interpretation that guides action, aimed at producing a dignified and just life. From this perspective, scientific

knowledge committed to human formation for emancipation requires a critical approach to society, which not only analyzes social conditions and structures, but also seeks to transform reality towards freedom and social justice.

A behavior that is oriented towards this emancipation, that has as its goal the transformation of the whole, can undoubtedly make use of theoretical work, as it occurs within the order of this existing reality. However, it dispenses with the pragmatic character that comes from traditional thinking as socially useful professional work (Horkheimer, 1983, p. 131).

Scientific knowledge aimed at emancipation is opposed to the pragmatic character of the capitalist urgency, which proposes practical and immediate intervention measures aimed at stabilizing the social order (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2006). Instrumental reason, by justifying the ideology that states that reality is as it is and will not change, reveals the absence of promises of transformation. The social structure, based on domination, is presented as a second nature, immutable, and thus it becomes difficult for the individual to perceive history and social relations as part of his constitution, as well as his ability to modify this reality.

However, scientific knowledge with an emancipatory objective requires the articulation between theory and praxis, so that reason establishes a connection between objectivity and subjectivity, linking thought to experience. It is not only a matter of understanding the theoretical forms, but also of understanding how to act, which requires the human being to recognize himself as an active subject of history. This involves continuous reflection, the ability to see, feel, question and understand the multiple determinations present in the historical conditions of social life, with the purpose of confronting the structures of an unequal society and working to transform social relations, creating a society free of domination.

Adorno's great contribution to the interpretation of the relationship between theory and praxis is, according to Maar (2011), the ability to apprehend social reality as self-production in all its dimensions. For Adorno, "being", the one who, according to the theory, determines "consciousness", is a historical-social being, self-produced, in his praxis. This understanding reflects Adorno's fidelity to Marx's postulations, when he understands that praxis, as the action of the subject who knows the object to transform it, emerges from work, from human activity that develops historically and sustains human formation.

Praxis, therefore, is born from the work that transforms nature and generates the conditions of life, constituting itself from a set of facts of reality foreseen through the system.



In this process, it is characterized by the subject's continuous contact with nature, as a social object: the human experience, as stated by Adorno and Horkheimer (2006), is always a real action and suffering, reflecting the material and historical conditions in which the subject is inserted and which, in turn, he himself helps to shape.

The judgment that is linked to the analysis of facts without theory has practical consequences: thought cannot harmonize the relationship between the subject and the social and conflicts with the practice of real daily life, in which ethical forces in the face of scientific reason tend to confirm the system and reconcile with power (Adorno; Horkheimer, 2006).

In the essay "Marginal Notes on Theory and Praxis", from 1969, one of his last essays, which was published posthumously, Adorno (1995) develops a critical and historical reflection on praxis and its challenges within the discussion on the dichotomy between subject and object: the "subject returned to himself, separated from his other by an abyss, would be incapable of action" (Adorno, 1995, p. 203).

In the light of Adorno (1995), praxis comprises a planned action, aware of the determinations and contradictions that arise from work and that constitute material and historical reality. It refers to a rational and sensitive action that enables the elaboration of a critical analysis and transformation of history, in order to interpret such conditionings and contradictions and overcome them.

From this perspective, praxis only makes sense if it guides reflection on reality as it is, that is, if it provides an opening for the exercise of thinking outside oneself, with a view to understanding and transforming reality. This praxis is not idealized, directed by subjective reason, because this would be the naturalization of reality as it is.

In objective reality, in which social relations are governed by the logic of exchange, enlightenment is restricted to a practice whose thinking is limited to the tendency of transformation directed to economic expansion and the reproduction of the current way of life. It is limited to a practice that links praxis to a certain character of appearance increasingly emptied of concept, since objective reason is dissolved by instrumentalized rationality. Therefore, the subject is reduced to the opportunity for formative experiences, effective experiences of "thinking in relation to reality, to content – the relationship between the forms and structures of the subject's thought and what he is not" (Adorno, 2012, p. 151). A rationality arises that hinders the exercise of thought, because thinking requires a true social consciousness, capable of confronting theory and practice.

In other words, the centrality of a practice that disqualifies theory in social production is a threat to human formation, since theory is a historical construction necessary to unveil objective social conditions and subsidize the critique of practice objectively conditioned by the current one. From this perspective, Adorno (1995, p.204) states that "thinking is an action, theory is a form of praxis". And thought can produce a practical impulse capable of breaking with the accommodation and reproduction of the prevailing mode. Praxis refers, therefore, to action mediated by theory.

The separation between theory and praxis is irreconcilable with the capacity of the human being himself to rationally organize questions of ethical order and human dignity in the same way that he organizes material production and consumption. On the other hand, according to Adorno (1995), there is no unity between them: theory and praxis are not the same thing and are not reconciled. From this perspective, the indissociation between theory and practice is misleading, conciliation is ideological, because both theory and practice can assume a function that objectively conceals the determinations of the social, constituting a false consciousness.

Praxis arises from the understanding of the mediated subject about what the object asks for, permeated by the social system as a whole. The theory should bring light to this communication, so that the knowing subject would be able to interpret the object and plan his actions.

Adorno (1995) criticizes the idealization of an immediate practice, centered only on the subjective moment of determining action, on subjective reason – a behavior devoid of dialectics that leads to a practiceism averse to theory, to an unreflective activism. Such idealization is linked to an automatic impulse that discards theory, abandons the concept and intends to transform the world without interpreting it, which constitutes the fragility of praxis, since it covers up reality and makes praxis an ideology, instead of helping to resolve the conflicts that are repeated.

Praxis without theory deforms subjectivity as a reaction to the administered world. In this panorama, men's practices are subordinated to the objective tendencies of dehumanization and, consequently, the subjective moment of the social is constituted as a copy, as objectified objectification, which unfolds in a coldness, an increasing reduction in the capacity to empathize with the suffering of others. And so, progressively, the naturalization of the conditions that generate barbarism is expanded and the past does not pass, since "the past will only be fully elaborated at the moment when the causes of what

has passed are eliminated" (Adorno, 2012, p. 49). True praxis is an effort to transform the objective conditions to avoid relapse into barbarism (Adorno, 1995), to overcome the obstacles to emancipation, the obstacles in the material world and in the way of thinking about reality.

## CONCLUSION

Science, in its development trajectory, needs to be rethought, especially in relation to its ability to really know reality and contribute to overcoming the conditions that generate barbarism. As we reflect on the thoughts of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, we realize that their critique of science and instrumental rationality challenges us to rethink the role of knowledge in human formation. What stands out in the works of these authors is the denunciation of a process of dehumanization, in which reason is formalized as an instrument that perpetuates domination and prevents the emergence of the constitution of subjects and a just and emancipated society.

The critique of scientific knowledge in its most traditional forms, especially positivist science, is central to understanding how reason, in its pragmatic and technical use, has been instrumentalized for purposes that serve the interests of capitalism. What we see is a movement of pseudo-formation, where knowledge does not question its own bases and does not act as an emancipatory force, but rather as an agent that collaborates to maintain the status quo.

The dialectic between reason and barbarism that Adorno and Horkheimer debate, is an invitation to reflect on the contradictions of knowledge and enlightenment. What used to be presented as a path to truth, enlightening reason, today is often revealed as an instrument for concealing the contradictions of society. The criticism of enlightenment, proposed by the authors, is a way of questioning this dominant logic that transforms reason into something that distorts reality, making it functional to the capitalist system. The task, therefore, is to rescue a critical and reflexive reason, which is opposed to instrumental reason, always seeking human emancipation and the transformation of social relations, rather than their simple reproduction. In this process, it is essential that human education is not limited to the mere reproduction of knowledge, but that it involves constant criticism of the process of knowledge itself.

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