

## CRITIQUE AND EMANCIPATION AS NORMATIVE AXES OF SOCIAL THEORY AND EDUCATION

## CRÍTICA E EMANCIPAÇÃO COMO EIXOS NORMATIVOS DA TEORIA SOCIAL E DA EDUCAÇÃO

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**Abstract:** In this article, we argue that critique and emancipation are two unavoidable horizons for popular education and social movements. As epistemological foundations of social theory, critique and emancipation shed light on the theoretical and practical tasks of progressive social struggles in contemporary society. We reconstruct the historical and political roots of critical philosophical frameworks embedding the denunciation of the current distress, as well as the prospects to overcome it, in order to establish a normative conceptual scheme for social movements with an emphasis on popular education.

**Keywords:** Critique; Emancipation; Education; Popular mobilization.

**Resumo:** Neste artigo, argumentamos que crítica e emancipação são dois horizontes indispensáveis para a educação popular e os movimentos sociais. Como fundamentos epistemológicos da teoria social, crítica e emancipação iluminam as tarefas teóricas e práticas das lutas sociais progressistas. Reconstruímos as raízes históricas e políticas das propostas de filosofia crítica, vinculando-as à denúncia do mal-estar do presente, bem como aos prospectos para superação dessa situação, a fim de estabelecer um esquema conceitual normativo para os movimentos sociais, com ênfase na educação popular.

**Palavras-chave:** Crítica; Emancipação; Educação; Mobilização popular.

In his 1794 lecture, Fichte (1965) says it is not enough to point to the mistakes and misconceptions of society; *instead, science should unveil how to overcome them*. The enlightened Fichtean notion, grounded in the project of

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reforming reason as a project of emancipation, suggests that it is not science *per se* that sufficiently liberates society, but an epistemology clarified by the struggles in the social terrain. Here we do not confine our sense of critique to being a power to judge and evaluate (HEIDEGGER, 2006, p. 29). *We promote critique as a power to expose contradictions and overcome the present distress.* The task of a liberating critique that aims at overcoming, is not purely an academic attempt at grasping concepts and analyzing established points of view. Academic analysis is perhaps valuable in its own intrinsic way, but it is not critique, in the sense that we are using the term here. For us, *critique is both an epistemological and a political principle* committed to progressive social struggles in service to more or less those same ideals professed in the French Revolution as liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Critique and emancipation are the foundations of social movements. Amílcar Cabral's (1980) speech claiming that theory consummates itself only in political practice, in light of the affinities between Marxist critical theory and popular struggle for national liberation and decolonization, offers a bold interpretation of the *motto* of critique as emancipation. Manuel Moreno Fraginals' (1999) essays on the critical compromise of the intellectual with the denunciation of the outcomes of domination and colonialism in peripheral areas reveals how critique can serve to unveil social contradictions beneath the reconciliation with the surface of normality of the present. In popular education, especially in Latin America, where grassroots movements have strong historical adherence to the definition of a field for popular movements, more than a commitment with schooling or broadening opportunities for popular class within the traditional school systems, popular education collectives have been committed to social change (NARITA; KATO, 2020). In this sense, popular education recognizes social asymmetries and states that only schooling is not enough to construct autonomy for popular classes (MUÑOZ GAVIRIA, 2013). Education is not only a matter of internalizing knowledge, but rather a social problem concerning how knowledge itself can be a by-product of ideological structures that subject social groups to symbolic and material reproduction of the inequalities of class societies.

Jean-François Lyotard (2000, p. 13) was basically right about the new status of knowledge (*savoir*) with the rise of informatics and the power of information society to reshape social relations. A more pragmatic communication structure has reinforced the commodification of information as a productive force, driving society and schooling towards the performance of individual competences (that is, administrative forms that optimize capitalist relations) rather than critical ideals of emancipation (LYOTARD, 2000, p. 78-80). However, he wrongly analyzed the potency of circulation of knowledge through networks and how this diffuse process can embed new prospects for emancipation (MORELOCK; NARITA, 2021c). Especially in the wake of the successive crises of capitalism since the late 2000s, the political legitimation of society is still problematic. The force of critique/emancipation, far from being emptied, has gained new contours and dislocations amidst the pragmatic of *saviors*, circulating and engaging perception of injustice and social domination through social media and the public sphere in general. Instead of the collapse of grand narratives, thus, we are dealing with the diffusion of organization and collectives that have decentralized the discourse of emancipation grounded in reason, spirit, classless society, etc.

Besides being part of the action in social movements, critique and emancipation have deep roots in the constitution of the epistemology of the social sciences. This article discusses how critique and emancipation are embedded in the philosophical framework of social theory, providing a theoretical and political agenda for social movements and popular education. Action need not be narrowed by pure voluntarism; it can be enlightened by a critical theory of society. Marx's theory of praxis remains particularly relevant for this task: action without theory is naïve and theory without action is impotently limited to pure contemplation (*Anschauung*) (MARX; ENGELS, 1978). Reality takes shape as action and theory intersect towards change and emancipation from the current distress.

## MATRIXES OF CRITIQUE

The modern notion of critique emerges, between the late 18th century and the early 19th century, as a counterpart of the promises of bourgeois revolution, sociotechnical transformations (railways, industry, etc.), the making of the world market and the discourse of emancipation grounded in public opinion, citizenship and labor (BERGERON *et al.*, 1986, p. 284-290). The term ‘critique’ has been used in a variety of ways, e.g., the difference between Kant’s three ‘critiques’ and the ‘critical theory’ of the early Frankfurt School. Yet, even if Kant’s use of the term is not explicitly focused on the liberation of society, his larger philosophical project participated in the Enlightenment’s reverence for reason and freedom. In the sense that we are concerned with what we refer to as ‘critique’ in this modern sense, the importance for us is the larger purpose, not the particular inflections of the multiple applications of the word. Critique, in our sense here, elevated the present to an object of philosophical enquiry (LÖWITZ, 1964) and the present became problematic, since everything became subjected to the domain of critique of established traditions (NARITA, 2021a; NARITA, 2021b). In other words, the present was subjected to scrutiny in order to reveal its immanent containment of the full human potentiality blocked by the development of modern society (COLE, 2014). Critique and emancipation were associated as a double epistemological condition.

The nexus between critique and education is not strange to Kant’s early attempts at critical philosophy. In his lectures on education, addressed in the late 1770s and early 1780s, he states that a principle for education (*Erziehung*) is that individuals should not be educated according to the current conditions of learning, but rather towards the betterment of our future conditions (KANT, 1968, p. 447). The task of enlightened (*aufgeklärtesten*) teachers and school managers is for students to not only learn the moral grammar of sociality (respect, civility, etc.), but also to learn *how to think* (KANT, 1968, p. 450). Autonomy, which is connected to the self-developed soundness of judgement, entails an enlightened moral pedagogy that, to some extent, was resumed in Kant’s mature philosophy from the 1780s onwards. Enlightenment implies a critical attitude towards the

present, and so this kind of critique should also address the correct way to think and self-develop against heteronomy (dogmas, political authority, etc.). It is an attitude that cannot kowtow to the present, since it can be free to counter the circumstances directly transmitted from the past. For Kant, education is also a discourse of emancipation, since it develops our cognitive powers and teaches us how to master reason, implying the overcoming of primitive conditions and the prejudices of the present.

The diffusion of industrial technique and the rise of bourgeois society, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, started building the basis for modernity. Critique can also be understood as an epistemological stance regarding the sense of transition and how socioeconomic shifts and political turmoil, from the echoes of the French Revolution to the 1848 revolutions (MÜNKLER, 2021), reshaped theoretical imagination. The inner problems of modern society were denounced as contradictions of the new emerging sociality grounded in alienation and deprivation of the masses from the benefits of progress. Hegel mastered a kind of critique that recognized the market as a driving force of modernity and civil society, without being a wide-eyed optimist of laissez-faire capitalism: freedom and emancipation could only be achieved according to social circumstances that could facilitate the full mutual recognition of all citizens, in a true integrated harmony of the individual with the collectivity. The “dead objectivity” of new social institutions under the need for capital accumulation paved the way for a mode of critique that denounced the new social contradictions, turning individuals into “objective things” (LUKÁCS, 1948, p. 145) and reifying social relations in a *problematic present*. The critical discourse of philosophy is addressed to the present, that is, critique unveils present social contradictions as a sign of its commitment to the present.

Two determinations can be unfolded from this problem. On the one hand, in a political stance, in a famous treatise of 1841, which originally came out anonymously, Moses Hess (1841) informed the Hegelian philosophy of history with a horizon for reconciliation of mankind. Beyond the three processes of emancipation that gave rise to modernity (religious reformation, political revolution and industrialization), history only accomplishes reason when self-

assertive egoism clashes with its opposite principles of social justice/commitment and forms a new social assemblage based on equality and cooperation fed by industrial civilization. On the other hand, in an epistemological stance, as Feuerbach (1959, p. 194-195) stated in his 1839 account on the rise of philosophical criticism, critique can be complemented with a genetic epistemology that is not satisfied with the immediate representation (*Vorstellung*) of reality, but rather seeks to denaturalize the conditions and inquire into the origin (*Ursprung*) of phenomena.

The connection between *political emancipation*, grounding critique in the real movement of society, and *epistemological operation*, based on the genetic dimension of critique, can be noted in Marx and Engels. In a letter of 1875, which was incorporated into the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx states that “every step of real movement [*wirklicher Bewegung*] is more important than a dozen programmes” (MARX, 1987, p. 13). This is a bold - possibly too bold - statement, pointing to the importance of a dialectical conception of theory and practice, e.g., the importance of social struggles for informing theoretical perspectives. This interpretation of the entanglement of thought and action frames social relations as the only effective, real horizon that produces history. Not reason, spirit nor the science of the experience of consciousness, but human action ultimately produces the real movement of society, confronting subjective conditions shaped by objective structures. Since the 1840s, Marx (1981, p. 381-382) argued that “once modern politico-social reality itself is subjected to criticism, [...] criticism rises [*erhebt*] to truly human problems”. Critique, in this sense, is not an end in-itself (*Selbstzweck*): it is a means, because “its essential pathos is indignation, its essential work is denunciation”. Critique shows how irreconcilable reality and emancipation are, and its theoretical consciousness does not intend to merely explain how reality works, but rather also unveils the contradictions of society and the current distress in order to open up prospects for social struggles towards liberation, justice, connection and redistribution. In this sense, emancipation is at the core of the historical task of critique:

Critique has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy



or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower (MARX, 1981, p. 379).

As an epistemological operation, with Marx, critique is the analysis of the historical production of society. Social relations are historically established according to the need for the *production of life*; that is, material production (division of labor, classes, technique, the circulation of capital, etc.) is entangled with practical and intellectual representations (MARX, 2005, p. 162). Ideas cannot truly stand above the materiality of life as if they were abstractions emptied from concrete contents; instead, the production of life comprises a constellation of practices, extending from economic processes to cultural reproduction, which ground the critique on the social relations that make viable the human production of history. The genetic determination of reality deranges what looks static and already given into a contradictory movement that leads not only conscience, by abstracting reality into a *logos* (as in the idealist assumption), but also considers how socialization is the outcome of the changing material conditions of the production of life (MARX, 2005, p. 55). This materialist stance feeds the denunciation of the contemporary distress grounding a critique of inequalities in the problem of social asymmetries, which comprises not only the redistribution of material goods, but also the many forms of social power that excludes popular classes from assets and the access to the cultural reproduction of life (like schooling).

This synthetic account on the main matrixes of critique offers a normative principle for critical discourse in the social sciences. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Max Horkheimer pioneered an explicit, programmatic effort at building a critical theory, a broad sociocultural landscape was targeted by critique: the broken promises of the Enlightenment and the irrevocable crisis of bourgeois society. Critique denaturalizes social phenomena and domination and promotes an horizon for emancipation, but it cannot stumble when up against a naïve promise of reconciliation. Instead, it should ceaselessly move, illuminate, and see through. The spirit of the early Frankfurt School, especially in the writings of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, was not far from this theme. Beyond a descriptive effort, their epistemological positions for the social sciences integrally

included addressing the conditions to denounce and overcome social contradictions, not promising a happy end to crises and the current distress (MORELOCK; NARITA, 2021b), but rather exposing how the reproduction of capitalist sociality obstructs – if not blocks entirely – any attempt at emancipation by intercepting, redirecting, and coopting genres of dissent, or by imposing the surface reality as the only legitimate normative horizon of socialization:

Sociology becomes a critique of society as soon as it does not merely describe and weigh institutions and processes of society, but confronts them with what underlies these, with the life of those upon whom these institutions have been imposed, and those of whom the institutions themselves are to such a great extent composed [*zusammenfügen*] (ADORNO; DIRKS, 1956, p. 28).

As Horkheimer (1985, p. 338) noted in a 1969 account on the actuality of critical theory, to remain critical, critical theory must “be critical in confrontation [*gegenüber*] with society and science”. In this sense, emancipation may be read as a search for autonomy (HORKHEIMER, 1985, p. 341), which comprises not only the bourgeois utopia of the free initiative of the individual, but also the social conditions that empower groups to counter the established systems that reproduces capitalist inequalities. In the article, it is not casual that Horkheimer mentions educational institutions as core forums for social conflicts in late capitalism. As dynamic epistemological development, critique cannot be imposed *ex cathedra*, but rather needs to embody a dialectic of theory and practice: critical theory learns on the ground with social struggles. In other words, it is not enough to criticize society as a simple object of science, but we should rather unveil and overcome the very categories that structure knowledge and – in the case of education - reinforce the ideology that views the school system as a field apart from the immanent contradictions of the social world. In this case, popular education can offer platforms for new epistemologies of critique.



## CRITIQUE AND POPULAR EDUCATION

Critique is one of the main normative principles of popular education, which encompasses diffuse forms of pedagogy (in formal or non-formal spaces) led by popular classes committed to social change and political participation (JARA HOLLIDAY, 2020). In these terms, education is a crucial institution from which to cultivate subjectivities that look beyond the immediate state of affairs, and from which to feed political agency that defies the status quo. From Latin American molecular groups of popular education, exposing the strong asymmetries in peripheral countries (NARITA; KATO, 2020), to the precarization of higher education under neoliberalism and managerialism, education – vital to the reproduction of society – has become a disputed field.

Since the 1950s and 1960s, critical theories on education highlighted how school systems reinforced social inequalities, but also pointed to prospects for changing society through education. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1970) proposed a generative theory that emphasizes how social power is based on asymmetries that encompass symbolic (academic degrees, etc.) and material inequalities, reproducing the ideological assemblages of the school system and *le grand mensonge* that states that schooling per se is responsible for producing equality in a class society. Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet (1972) pointed to the duality of the school system with its mirroring of the structure of class society. Although their empirical research was based on the strong French school system built in the Jules Ferry era of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the theoretical outcomes have been valuable to analyze asymmetries in peripheral countries (WHITAKER; KATO, 2013; AMAR, 2016). Much more than mere reproductivist theories, their critical content helped highlight how social power (class divisions and cultural capital) was embedded in the structural authority of schooling, from curricula (with mandatory *savoirs* and evaluations) to the pedagogical methods, for transferring culture. One of the most distinctive theoretical achievements of the late 1960s was Paulo Freire's (1987; 2019) connection between education and the politicization of popular consciousness via the recognition of concrete determinations (socioeconomic and cultural asymmetries) that block the full

status of oppressed subjects. Critical pedagogy turns into a humanist perspective that conceives emancipation as a by-product of the political practice enlightened by the way the individuals becomes a popular subject aware of their situation.

The role of the curriculum in critical pedagogy (APPLE, 1979) and popular mobilization (MCLAREN, 1995), connecting critical approaches on education to popular struggle (PUIGGRÓS, 2020), played a major role in the definition of the critical content of popular education. In the 1990s and the early 2000s, a new generation of theorists pointed to the effects of market reforms on education (LAVAL et al., 2011), connecting them not only to school administration, but also to the precarization of the public, the inequalities of access to the school system (with private groups gaining momentum), and the instrumental purposes of education. If capitalism depends on the reproduction of the labor market to generate value, the transformation of learning environments with technological disruption produced major impacts on inequalities and the broadening of managerial techniques in schooling (NARITA et al. 2020), turning individuals into instruments for the reproduction of the market and accumulation, focusing on cost-benefit analysis rather than education (FASENFEST, 2021; BURAWOY, 2016). In the 21st century, in light of the myriad of crises and sociotechnical transformations of capitalism, new critical efforts are important to revisit and refresh our understanding of the sociocultural contradictions surrounding education, and to consider the place of pedagogy in affecting social change. Privatization processes, which took place simultaneously in many countries of Latin America and Eastern Europe (in this last case, with the collapse of the planned economies of socialist countries) in the 1980s and 1990s, changed not only ownership structures, but also *shared values* (PEHE; SOMMER, 2022) embedded in school systems. One of the most salient critical approaches that challenges the effects of market reforms is the idea of emancipation via education grounded in the common (SZADKOWSKI, 2019), that is, an ontological condition that constructs the political institution of society beyond the private appropriation of the market and the state monopoly of common goods.

Although the West remains an important economic and sociocultural reference, Western narratives of progress and civilization have lost their

legitimation as hegemonic forms of modernity embedded in the belief in moral and material development of industrial society (LEVI-STRAUSS, 2011). Those values, instead of being presupposed as normative principles, have been historicized and subjected to a genetic critique that unveils how domination has accompanied the alleged progress of the West. Beyond postcolonial critique, which was fed by the decolonization movements of large parts of Africa and Asia between the 1950s and the 1970s (one of the major political shifts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), the force of popular movements in Latin America, in the wake of the redemocratization in the 1980s and 1990s, produced new political imaginations for popular education grounded in the critique of the effects of coloniality, according to ethnic/class cleavages and territorial hierarchies reproduced by the ideological structures of schooling and curricula. In this case, more than a critique of the reproduction of class societies, critical pedagogy was connected to social movements in order to challenge the very project of modernity that produced traumas and domination in peripheral societies. The project of rationality, counting on the enlightenment of individuals through education, is not conceived as a universal principle for emancipation (ORTIZ OCAÑA et al, 2018; STRECK et al., 2020). The epistemological principles of Western science have been discussed in decolonial and intercultural perspectives (WALSH, 2007) based on critical epistemologies for popular education built from peripheral societies (MEJÍA et al., 2017), opening up new projects for the valorization of local knowledge from grassroots movements and excluded communities (indigenous peoples, afro-descendant cultures, etc.).

The main historical task of critical education is to connect social struggles and epistemological critique. In this sense, we propose the following theses:

1. *The centrality of critique.* An epistemological stance guides our volume: a reflection on critique as a normative principle for social sciences, enlightening social struggles through the prism of the non-reconciliation with the problems of capitalist society. Major effects of the distortions of market economies are particularly relevant in the educational field, with the precarization of the public and the damaging of shared values of sociality and the common good in light of the rampant discourse on the primacy of the individual and the view of education

as the basis for “human capital” (comprising a logic of competition and the naturalization of market structures as the sole horizon for society). Popular education deals with the groups “from below” and, especially within Latin American social movements, has always been committed to social change denouncing the ideology of individual merit, and denouncing how redistributive problems of society have multidimensional impacts on the access to the cultural and professional assets provided by school systems.

2. *A critique of asymmetries.* The debate on recognition, redistribution, injustice and social justice, which had its momentum in the late 1990s and early 2000s, point to how objective inequalities affect subjective conditions. Social inequalities, often reduced to distortions in wealth distribution, turn into power inequalities. This matrix, which combines socioeconomic and power relations, generates *asymmetries*. In other words, asymmetries reveal how the problems of inequality are combined into a matrix that deals with how cleavages of class, gender, ethnicity and nationality also embed hierarchical positions. They reveal not only how market economies have reinforced differences of class, but they also show how the wealthiest individuals and largest corporations have actively sought to influence policy making, occupying apparatuses of social power (be it in the private or in the public sector) (MACEKURA, 2020; SAEZ; ZUCMAN, 2019). This discussion is important for vulnerable groups, above all, in the wake of the recent concern for inequality connected to the effects of the recent global crises (2008, 2020, etc.) and the uneven recovery, expanding the sense and experience of precarization (MORELOCK, NARITA, 2021b).

3. *To think critically about colonial difference.* Especially in peripheral countries of Latin America, decolonial critique became an important platform for the defense of popular movements towards democracy and the denunciation of the effects of coloniality (racial bias, state violence, etc.). It also carried out an important critique of modernity, from a peripheral perspective, that has been highlighting how domination is embedded in the project of reason and progress. However, we cannot conceive former colonial areas as *abstract negation*, that is, a social formation that is entirely separate and other from the discourse of modernity. Former colonial areas, as by-products of the asymmetrical integration

of the modern world-system, are mediations of the project of modernity. Instead of stumble upon a reified dichotomy – on the one hand, Western modernity; on the other hand, colonial difference –, it is important to consider the dialectical relations that have legitimated and imposed the force of coloniality, via epistemological legitimation of culture over the knowledge of popular groups, considering how former colonial areas are not apart, a pure difference, but reveal the very contradictory nature of modernization moves.

4. *Social change and the empowerment of the popular via state policy.* The suspicion of the state is a cornerstone of critical thought. Hegel, for instance, is not a mere apologist for the modern state, but rather one of the first theorists who scrutinized the role of the state apparatus in modern world. He rightly says that the state constructs external coercion (via right and law) through the colonization of internal principles via morality. Beyond a strict duality, the modern state, with its coercive potency, not only subjects the body but also implies an inner devotion of the citizen and a new morality embedded in collective values. We internalize a conscience of conformity, since institutions are not the mere product of a subjective will or combination of wills, but rather a moment of universality since they extend to general principles that rule a collective (HEGEL, 1986, p. 180-181). The domination and many forms of violence embedded in state authority do not eliminate an important aspect of state policy: the defense of the public. Democracy is also about the redistribution of material assets to vulnerable groups and public policy plays a major role in this sense. State-inductive policy are central to challenge asymmetries and recognize popular movements towards democracy

5. *Cooperation and the common as a political institution of society.* Social movements tend to share specific values as means for mobilization. The social logic that institutes a collective is as important as the resources mobilized for action. Mutual aid and the principle of cooperation are anthropological bonds that can provide expression to collective mobilizations and institute society towards the defense of the general welfare (KROPOTKIN, 2006, p. 185). In this sense, cooperation – instead of market competition – may be the basis for the construction of a new political emancipation grounded in the defense of the

common against private appropriation. The defense of education as a primary political good, thus, must extend the critique beyond the school system: it must consider how the pressures from popular, molecular movements can also denounce the current distress and lead to new forms of political participation.

## OUTLINE

According to this intellectual project devoted to refresh the force of critique in education, this volume has one interview and five articles. The conversation among Panayota Gounari, Jeremiah Morelock and Felipe Ziotti Narita elaborates a notion of critical pedagogy based on the connection between education and social movements. The content reinforces the importance of public pedagogy in an era when education is a struggle over meaning. School, in this sense, is far from being apart from social contradictions; instead, as part of the administered society, its obsession with utility and practical outcomes not only serves to reproduce market inequalities, but also reinforces a highly stratified society.

Charles Reitz and Stephen Spartan argue for a radical pedagogy that considers the role played by political economy for the critical scrutiny of the reproduction of inequalities via school systems. Dallel Sarnou discusses online education through Freirean lenses and shows how capitalism reengineers learning environments grounded in unequal access to digital infrastructure, posing new challenges to student autonomy and teacher practice. Maria Cristina Dancham Simões discusses educational reforms and the narrowing of emancipatory horizons through an Adornoian discussion of *Bildung* and its precarization in contemporary capitalism. The article of Uyen Hoang Minh Ly considers how class consciousness and the identity of collectives can be damaged and experienced in the development of globalization. Francisca Marli Andrade, Letícia Mendes Nogueira, Lucas do Couto Neves, Marcela Mendes Rodrigues and Pablo Santos present how decolonial movements can be embedded in rural education practices and create new spaces for critical intervention and education, as well as new relations between subjects,



territoriality and progressive social struggles for autonomy of popular groups in peripheral contexts.

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