

SUBJECTIVITY AND AUTHORITARIANISM IN THEODOR W. ADORNO'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Subjetividad y autoritarismo en la filosofía de la educación de Theodor W. Adorno

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the relevance and current significance of Theodor W. Adorno's reflections on education. In this context, the paper demonstrates that the central point of Adorno's philosophy of education is his concern for ways of authoritarian subjectivation and its antidemocratic potential in light of the recent German past. The paper points out that the so-called "turn to the subject," Adorno's *leitmotiv* for a critical pedagogy, must be understood in relation to his empirical works on authoritarianism carried out from the 50's onward, and to certain issues of his philosophy, such as the idea of crisis of experience, his critique of the autonomous subject and his anti-conformist criticism. The article is based on the critical and interpretative reading of Adorno texts on education, especially his lectures and writings published in the volume *Education for Emancipation*, as well as other important texts of his work. The general objective of the article is to think about the role of education in the formation of appropriate ways of subjectivation for a democratic life, capable of resisting manifestations of social authoritarianism. The conclusions show that the core of the problem is the rigidity and the non-critical identity of forms of individualities, which a political education for democracy should call into question.

Keywords

Critique, education, identity, democracy, authoritarianism.

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Resumen

El presente trabajo se propone discutir la relevancia y la actualidad de las reflexiones filosóficas de Theodor W. Adorno sobre educación. En ese contexto se mostrará que el centro de lo que podría considerarse la filosofía de la educación adorniana es la preocupación por formas de subjetivación autoritarias y su potencial antidemocrático a la luz del pasado reciente alemán. Para esto se argumentará que este “giro al sujeto”, que Adorno propone como lema de una pedagogía crítica, debe ser comprendido en relación con los trabajos empíricos sobre el autoritarismo que el mismo autor llevó a cabo a partir de los años cincuenta y con ciertos motivos propios de su filosofía, tales y como la idea de crisis de la experiencia, su crítica a la idea de sujeto autónomo y su concepto anticonformista de crítica. El artículo estará basado en una lectura crítica e interpretativa de los textos adornianos sobre educación, especialmente de sus conferencias y escritos publicados en el tomo Educación para la Emancipación, así como de otros textos centrales de su obra. El objetivo general del artículo es pensar el papel de la educación en la formación de modos de subjetivación apropiados para una vida democrática y para combatir expresiones de autoritarismo social. En las conclusiones se mostrará que el centro del problema son las formas rígidas e identitarias de individualidad que una educación política para la democracia debe problematizar

Palabras claves

Crítica, educación, identidad, democracia, autoritarismo.

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Introduction

Within the multiplicity of meanings and references posed by what nowadays we might refer to as “critical thinking,” it is certain that Adorno’s work occupies a central place. His diagnosis of modernity, his renewal of dialectics, his concern for the autonomy of art, his critique of the modern concept of subjectivity, and his reflections on the culture of capitalism—among many facets of his work—are all elements that go through the modes that we have today to think about our societies. But there is a reason that is often overlooked, which is the importance of Adorno’s public intervention in post-war Germany, especially from his efforts to combat the remnants of Nazism that still persisted in the universities and in German culture. This intervention implied, at the same time, a rescue of the best of that culture that had engendered barbarism, but that had also provided the intellectual tools to combat it. That is to say, Adorno’s intervention in post-war Germany consisted of passing the whole German cultural tradition through a critical filter after the occurrence of Auschwitz as a form of present elaboration of the past. No one expresses it better than one of his most well-known disciples, Albrecht Wellmer (1996), when he says that “with Adorno, it became possible once again to be present intellectually, morally and aesthetically in Germany without having to hate Kant, Hegel, Bach, Beethoven, Goethe or Hölderlin” (p. 242).

This activity not only had to do with what we could call German high culture, but also with the very practice of that culture, and this is

something that we can see clearly in his interventions on the pedagogical practice analyzed in this work. Adorno's commitment to education was not only limited to his work as a professor at the University of Frankfurt, but also as a proponent of the anti-authoritarian pedagogical reforms that were carried out especially during the 1960s. This facet of his work, somewhat forgotten or reduced to solemn expressions—education for emancipation or «education after Auschwitz» etc.—, will be the object of the present article. In these lines I intend to resume the conferences of Adorno on education compiled by Geld Kadelbach in 1970 under the name *Education for emancipation* (*Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*),¹ and which brings together a good part of his pedagogical reflections from 1959 to the year of his death in 1969.

Although they are texts that, unlike much of Adorno's work, can be read with relative fluidity, they contain a philosophical density that often escapes the reader if they are not considered within the framework of other central concerns in his work. This is exactly what I propose to restore in this work. I believe, and this will be my reading hypothesis, that these Adorno texts all revolve around a critique of the authoritarian forms of subjectivation—the so-called “turn to the subject”—and its antidemocratic potential as a central task of educational practice. Taking charge of the subjective conditions of latent authoritarianism within the democratic culture must be the object of what Adorno calls an “education for emancipation” and whose critical and anti-conformist component I will try to highlight here (Cf. Mina Paz, 2012).

The article is divided into three sections. In the first one, “Auschwitz and the turn to the subject”, I will discuss the importance of the recent National Socialist past as a motif of the Adornian philosophy and its repercussion in their reflections on education from the motive of a “turn to the subject.” In the second section called “On authoritarian subjectivity,” I will present the main ideas of research on the authoritarian personality and on forms of social authoritarianism in light of its consequences for educational practice. In the final section, “Education, *Mündigkeit* and Democracy,” I will address these reflections by focusing on the problem of the formation of rigid and aggressive subjectivities as a central problem of democracy, and on the role of education as a tool to achieve a model of pluralistic and non-identitary autonomy. Finally, in “Final Considerations,” I will offer a summary and an evaluation of the conclusions arrived at in the present work.



Auschwitz and the “turn to the subject”

In 1966 the conference “Education after Auschwitz” took place in the framework of a series of lectures called “Committed questions of the present” (*Bindungsfrage der Gegenwart*) on the state-owned Hessen Radio, a cycle to which Adorno was frequently invited. This conference was quickly disseminated throughout the Federal Republic of Germany, although it was only published a few weeks after his unexpected death in 1969 as a chapter of the book *Catchwords*, and since then it is undoubtedly a classic text in the history of the contemporary German philosophy of education and culture. The singularity of that text is not only its theme, but the many categories and central impulses of Adorno's philosophy that are set in motion around two concerns that go through the set of reflections in different ways: the question about the National Socialist past, and the need for an anti-authoritarian political education. But before dwelling on its content, it is worth mentioning the context in which Adorno formulated this famous conference.

In Federal Germany, the beginning of a climate of political and cultural radicalization would lead to the student revolt towards the end of the 60s. This revolt had Frankfurt as one of its epicenters in Germany, and the figure of Adorno, already at that time a great representative of the Critical Theory of the prestigious Frankfurt School, as an inescapable inspiration. But, at the same time and like its counterpart, certain debates about the German past had emerged in the public opinion from the trial against the criminals responsible for Auschwitz in the same city of Frankfurt in the summer of 1965. Alongside, there had been the surprise admission to the parliament of Hessen and Bavaria in 1966 of representatives of the far-right party, NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany), in the midst of an incipient economic recession. The NPD raised for the first time since the end of the Second World War an institutional legitimation of opinions that were not only authoritarian, but openly vindicated the *völkisch* ideology of the Nazi regime along with a Holocaust denial. But the NPD also implied some ideological renewal of the right, which would later be known as the *New Right*, based on motives no longer openly biological, but rather focused on a critique of multicultural societies and immigration, a strong nationalist claim and a clear recognition of the need for ideological intervention from the instances that made democracy possible—publications, electoral campaigns, entry into regional parliaments (Cf. Pffal-Thraugber, 1999). The NPD it was a clear example of antidemocratic tendencies within a fragile democracy.

While the issue of the recent past and its resilience was at the center of the debates in the Federal Republic at that time, this issue was not recent in Adorno's work, but had strongly impregnated his writings from at least the middle of the 40 years when almost no European intellectual had yet to reflect on Auschwitz as a theme (Cf. Traverso, 1997). What was a little more surprising is that he articulated these concerns in the context of a debate in the pedagogical field. This concern for education becomes more and more concrete in Adorno's work, more in direct controversy with the conjuncture and internalized in the educational debates contemporary to him. This process can be seen in the interest of his early reflections on education, more focused on a philosophical analysis of culture in the terms of a *Kulturkritik* and on a dialectical analysis of the humanistic concept of *Bildung*. In these texts, his concern was focused on breaking the nexus of meaning between subjective experience and objects of cultural consumption from the introduction of commercial fetishism in the sphere of culture. Adorno (2004c) used the term "pseudoculture" (*Halbbildung*) to refer to a certain reified relationship with the culture and with the educational contents that prevented an appropriation of its content of truth and a transformation of subjectivity. This diagnosis was closely related to his famous analysis on the "cultural industry" as a way of constructing subjectivities during late capitalism and will appear again in his reflections on education.

As Paffrath (1994) points out, it was only from his participation in the Commission of Sociology of Culture and Education (*Bildung und Erziehung*) of the German Society of Sociology after 1958, of which he would later be president, that Adorno's interest in education becomes more empirical. His reflection turns to the social and cultural conditions of education, to the place of the school and the extracurricular educational institutions in the formation of individuals. This did not imply an abandonment of its criticism of culture, but its articulation in a more concrete dialogue. The aforementioned conference, "Education after Auschwitz," represents a singular piece in this sense, since in it his recent pedagogical concerns are successfully interwoven with the body of his philosophy, the philosophical materializes as a reflection on the present and as an inspirer of concrete pedagogical tasks, for which this text constitutes an unbeatable introduction to discuss what we could call the "philosophy of Adornian education."

The conference in question begins by addressing the problem without preamble. In the first sentence, Adorno (1998) states that "the requirement that Auschwitz not be repeated comes first of all in educa-





tion.” This presence of the idea of Auschwitz as a theoretical concept is something that must be clarified if one wants to understand exactly the relevance that Adorno assigned to education. In his 1966 *Negative dialectic*, the same year of the conference in question, Adorno (1992) had stated that “Hitler imposed on men in their state of non-freedom a new categorical imperative: to orient their thinking and action in such a way so that Auschwitz is not repeated” (p. 365). This moral imperative after Auschwitz would not be expressed either in a fact of reason as is the case with Kant, nor would it be the consequence of a logical deduction, but would be based on an “impulse” of rejection expressed in sentences like “you will not do this,” “you will not torture,” “you will not suffer,” phrases that “are true as an impulse if they come with the realization that there has been torture somewhere” (p. 282). The task then was to think of Auschwitz not within the framework of a cosmogony in which this event was singled out as a sort of metaphysical event, but fundamentally to clarify the cultural conditions of possibility of what had happened. It was about bringing to light the cultural *ethos* that had made Auschwitz possible.

Of course, the set of such conditions of possibility was multiple: political, economic, sociological, emergency cultural conditions that overlapped and made the texture of the understanding of Auschwitz immeasurable. In this infinity of variables, Adorno understood that it was up to education to think about the modes of subjectivation, the constructions of identity, the individual dispositions that made normal people naturalize barbarism. This is the heart of Adorno's proposal (1998, 2013) to think about the role of education that is discussed in the present work: political education after Auschwitz must consist of a “turn to the subject” (*Wendung aufs Subjekt*) in order to “recognize the mechanisms that make men capable of such atrocities” (p. 80, p. 78). Such conditions had to do with what Adorno called a “widespread symptom of universal coldness” (Ibid., p. 91) through which it was possible to kill without feeling hatred, and which lead to millions of lives being exterminated without any moral consideration. “Coldness” which, as stated in *Negative Dialectics* (1992), constitutes the “fundamental principle of bourgeois subjectivity without which Auschwitz would not have been possible” (p. 363). In this context, education would be fundamentally a mode of critical self-reflection on those generalized forms of insensitivity that Adorno saw were still present in post-war Germany.

These manifestations of anger and violence against the weakest, of submission and obedience to the strongest, of enchantment with power, of inability to distance oneself from one's own positions, of the dissolu-

tion of individuality in the mass, the virility forged in hardness in the face of humiliation, masochism that turns into sadism, manipulative character, lack of emotion, exaggerated realism, the cult of efficiency and blind activity, gang spirit, all these are symptoms of that “coldness” that Adorno tries to unveil as the cultural *ethos* of Auschwitz. Those forms of conservative, adaptive and destructive sensibility were what he considered important to deactivate, first through research work and then through emotional education. But the people whom Adorno (1998) thought of as protagonists of education were not the executioners, for whom justice was only to be found in the courts, but those men and women who were indifferent, silent, tolerant of violence, without whom no Nazi barbarism would have been possible. This extended coldness “was, as far as indifference to the fate of others, the determining factor explaining why so few moved” (p. 89), and it is there to which pedagogical efforts should point (Cf. Reyes Solís, 2010).

The idea of “Auschwitz” throughout Adorno’s thought (2008) acts as an obligation of self-consciousness for any cultural practice, and especially for educational practice, self-awareness that means reflection on its assumptions and on its social commitments. This is the idea contained in these often-misunderstood phrases, according to which “poetry cannot be written after Auschwitz” (p. 30). An education after Auschwitz would mean an education that could carry out a self-criticism of the ideals that guided it and especially, as I will show, the ideal of an autonomous and self-sufficient subject. But beyond these pretensions, Adorno (1998; 2013) ends the essay in question quite modestly: “I am afraid that no matter how many measures are taken in the field of education, it will hardly be possible to prevent the emergence of office assassins (*Schreibtischmörder*)” (p. 92; p. 103).

The limits of education against barbarism are obvious, but its strength lies not in the impossible task of suppressing violence, but in the most humble but fundamental task of preventing that violence from being naturalized, in preventing these executioners from having accomplices or their crimes from being committed in a climate of indifference, since as long as “there are human beings who in inferior positions, reduced to slaves, execute what perpetuates them in their slavery and deprives them of their own dignity... this is something against which something could be done through education and enlightenment” (Auschwitz, 2008).

In the conference “What does it mean to overcome the past?,” which is also the conference marking the beginning, in 1959, of his participations as a guest on Hessen Radio, Adorno (1998; 2013) had already



pronounced the idea of a “turn to the subject” in saying that “the overcoming of the past as enlightenment is essentially this turn to the subject (*Wendung aufs Subjekt*), the reinforcement of his self-consciousness and, consequently, of his self” (p. 28; p. 26). In that same text, against the culture of forgetfulness, insincerity and overacting of the so-called “guilt complex,” he affirms that “National Socialism survives, and to this day we do not know if only as a mere ghost of what was so monstrous, or because it did not die, or if the disposition to the indescribable continues beating both in men and in the circumstances that surround them” (Adorno, 1998, p. 18). As a phantasm, as reality or as latency, the past is still present and imposes the task on education and the whole culture to think about the ways and conditions of that survival. However, the “turn to the subject” that Adorno requests from “education after Auschwitz” and the attempt to “overcome the past” must be done with awareness of the limits of the pedagogic practice and the possibilities of enlightenment, but also with an awareness of its urgency and the importance of this limited task. To better understand this “turn to the subject” that Adorno proposes, it is necessary to refer now to his studies on authoritarian subjectivity based on different empirical studies carried out within the framework of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt.

On authoritarian subjectivity

In 1950 the classic collective study “The Authoritarian Personality” directed by Adorno (2009) at the University of Berkeley appeared, which proposed to investigate the conditions and dispositions that made certain individuals particularly vulnerable to anti-democratic propaganda (p. 153). It was not an attempt to X-ray confessed Nazis, but of finding trends, ways of thinking, opinions that could converge with a fascist movement. The authors used the concept of “personality,” in vogue in the psychology of the time, to allude to a tensioned psychic structure between two levels: that of needs and that of ideologies, that of trends and that of opinions. That is, both the level of “opinions, attitudes and values” that are expressed “more or less openly by words,” as the level of “deeper trends” not necessarily articulated as ideas or points of view (Adorno, 2009, p 156). In the general “Introduction” to the aforementioned study Horkheimer (2006) defines the “authoritarian personality” as a new figure of individuality that “seems to combine ideas and skills typical of a highly industrial society with irrational or anti-rational beliefs.” The ideal

type of an authoritarian personality was, then, “at the same time enlightened and superstitious [...] proud of his individualism and constantly afraid of resembling others, jealous of his independence and inclined to submit blindly to power and authority” (p. 165). It was not a specific individual, but a set of characteristics, attitudes, dispositions, and behaviors that made people more or less receptive to authoritarian propaganda.

It is worth commenting on some details of the study since it gives an account of what was at stake in the idea of authoritarian personality. The study was based on interviews and questionnaires made to almost 3000 people who scored according to four scales: antisemitism, fascism, conservatism and ethnocentrism—uncritical identification with the endogroup. These scales (of which the scale F—fascism—became famous and was replicated in innumerable studies to this day), when applied to the material, grouped nine items around which the general characteristics of the authoritarian personality were defined: 1) conventionalism and rigid adherence to socially accepted values, 2) submission to authority, 3) opposition to forms of introspection, reflection and subjective considerations, 4) authoritarian aggression as a tendency to condemn and punish those who violate conventional values, 5) superstition and stereotyping, for example, the belief in the fate of human nature and the tendency to think in fixed categories, 6) the valuation of personal relationships according to categories such as weak-strong, power-submission and identification with the strong, 7) the approval of violence against those who violate the rules without moral or empathic considerations, 8) the tendency to outwardly project unconscious impulses that lead to perceive the world as a place of excess and dangers, and 9) an exaggerated concern about sexual matters. Both the scale and the theoretical bases of the study were criticized, reformulated, defended, recovered and re-criticized in the long history of empirical studies on authoritarianism that this investigation inaugurated, but they will not be further discussed here (Cf. Catanzaro, 2016).

A peculiarity of these studies was the almost complete absence of reference to a specific minority, something that could be considered a defect but that in reality constituted a theoretical assumption of the work: when investigating prejudices against certain minorities without focusing on the determinations proper to those minorities, it was assumed that prejudices were automated structures without precise references. For Adorno, it was about forms and dispositions of subjectivity whose main characteristic consisted in being unable to see the particularities of the object of hatred. The problem of the authoritarian personality was not

the inability to see the equality of the individuals to whom the aggression was directed, but the inability to see the difference between the stereotype and the specificity of that group. This denoted the strong influence that, in Adorno, still possessed a motif inherited from Walter Benjamin and that ran through all of his work: that of the loss of capacity to entertain experiences in contemporary societies (Cf. Jay, 2009). With the authoritarian personality, these were ultimately individuals incapable of engaging in vital experiences with their inner world and of establishing inter-subjective and differentiated intersubjective relationships.

To see the philosophical significance and the implications in terms of social diagnosis of this idea, we must refer to its "Elements of anti-Semitism" in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* of 1944 (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2006). In this text, the terms in which Adorno thought about intersubjective experience referred to the model of the theory of modern knowledge, which considered two moments in all experiences, a passive moment and an active moment: the passive moment was based on the opening of subjective structures to an alien determination, which prevented the danger of solipsism and, at the same time, allowed an enrichment of subjectivity through its contact with an externality rich in its own determinations; at the same time, the experience implied the possibility of structuring that already mediated material in a narrative, of filling that empty space that remains between the pure perception of the phenomenon and our representation of it. To experience, then, meant to enter into a negotiation between the mediations themselves and the mediations of the object. As stated before, this also seems to be the framework in which Adorno conceives the intersubjective experience, whose double condition—passivity and activity—the anti-Semitic subject is not capable of fulfilling. Thus, in the authoritarian personality, the active aspects of experience are identified in a reified quietude, which is resolved in an externalization of destructive impulses, so that the active aspect becomes a "pathological projection" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2006, p. 235) while the passive becomes a reproduction of stereotypes (p. 130). Anti-Semitism, and with it all authoritarian subjectivity, would then be the product of a hermetic, self-centered and fixed form of subjectivity, incapable of questioning its structures in an intersubjective encounter.

However, in "Elements of anti-Semitism" Adorno was not thinking about pathological cases, and the individuals interviewed in *The Authoritarian Personality* were not fanatics or asocials of some kind, but rather they were socially well integrated individuals, whose behavioral patterns corresponded to the commonly accepted norm and for that reason were

so much more dangerous. This was also the case in his social psychology texts where Adorno (2004a) analyzed this “irrational adaptation” by means of the concept of wounded narcissism complementary to the concept of authoritarian character: if the authoritarian character consisted of a regressive formation that combined the tendencies to obedience and submission with a kind of “conformist rebellion,” wounded narcissism was the product of the impotence and social insignificance experienced by a self that only finds satisfaction in an identification with a collective (pp. 45-52; Cf. Reich, 2004). Both concepts tried to account for social forms of internalization of norms that, at the same time, impeded an adequate reflection on objective social conditions. Both concepts were attempts to describe forms of subjectivation that were adaptive, conformist and prone to violence.

This was what two texts that served as a theoretical basis for the empirical analysis carried out in *The Authoritarian Personality* showed, specifically “Antisemitism and fascist propaganda,” a paper presented in 1944, and “Freudian theory and fascist propaganda schemes” published in 1951. Both texts contain some differences on which I will not stop, since I only want to briefly reconstruct the argument to make clearer the relationship between authoritarian character and wounded narcissism. It was through trying to explain the psychological structure of these well-integrated individuals that Adorno recognized a correspondence between aggression and submission, between authoritarian character and wounded narcissism. Based on the psychology of the masses of Freud, Adorno (2004b) states that the social bond is based on a relationship of libidinal character and not on a community of ideas, since what is at stake is the individual’s narcissistic gratification and not its conviction. Narcissistic impulses are not channeled because the weak ego is unable to contain or sublimate them. In this sense, the wounded narcissistic individual satisfies these libido pre I impulses by establishing an erotic bond with the primitive father personified in the figure of the leader. In the love of the leader and in that identification with his power, there would also be an idealization of the I, a projection of an improved I on that primitive father. Through that love, the individual can overcome the tension he experiences between the narcissistic pretensions of his ego and his social impotence.

In short, both with his studies on the authoritarian personality and in his studies on narcissism, the goal is to show that the authoritarian forms of subjectivity are also forms of social impotence, of diminishing the effective capacities to experiment and transform the social world. It is this correspondence between authoritarianism and impotence that must

be deactivated in the “turn to the subject” that should be at the center of education. In both cases, Adorno tried to show that the rigid affirmation of subjectivity carries a load of material violence, an antidemocratic potential that must be studied and combated. As I said, these studies are not based on convinced Nazis or executioners in concentration camps, but rather on well-integrated and socially functional individuals, so that what we were trying to think here was not exceptionality, but authoritarian forms of subjectivation latent in democratic societies. The goal was not to locate an enemy outside, but to locate authoritarian and violent remnants that operated within the subjectivities responsible for building and giving body to the forms of democratic coexistence.

The task of education after Auschwitz is to deactivate the violence contained in the authoritarian character and in the wounded narcissism to make possible new forms of subjectification. However, Adorno was skeptical about the role of education as the basis of a democratizing process, to the extent that he noted in *The Authoritarian Personality* that the excessive emphasis on the role of education was a constant that was repeated among the respondents who scored high on the diagrammed scales. In the section “Education instead of change” (2009) Adorno denounced “the exaggerated emphasis that is given to education in some interviews,” emphasis that acted “as rationalization of social privileges” disguised as progressivism (p. 405). In “Theory of pseudo-culture” Adorno (2004c) stated that one should not assume that “education alone guarantees a rational society. She clings from the beginning to the deceitful hope that she can provide by herself what men are denied by reality” (p. 87). Any criticism of education and all critical education should also be critical of society if it does not want to fall into the ideology of inequality. For Adorno, fetishizing education not only would hide the importance of social inequality, the need to democratize spaces such as justice or the media, but would also be a new form of ideology, such as that discussed by Marx and Engels (2005) when they criticized the neo-Hegelians who took the spirit for reality and pretended that from the transformation of consciousness the transformation of history would take place directly (pp. 26-28). As a good materialist, for Adorno education does not transform history, but it does influence the *ethos* that makes it possible.

Of course, the historical conditions and the intellectual context in which these analyses were written are no longer the same. These studies are marked by the surprise before an emerging mass society and the very recent experience of fascism. Surely this is what caused a strong suspicion of the collective, the fact that institutions or people from which virtual

senses could emerge rose as manipulating leaders or as forms of social deception, and that the antidote to antidemocratic tendencies emphasizes the sphere of a reflective individuality. In our days, with the neoliberal revolution, this emphasis on the individual seems suspicious, since the ideologies of flexibilization and of taking responsibility for oneself exploit that figure to unload on it the weight of the public and the collective (Cf. Sennett, 2005). However, beyond these limitations, I believe that the relevance of these studies is that they focus on the subjective conditions of antidemocratic ideologies, thus showing that between democracy and authoritarianism there is a latent *continuum* present in the plane of subjectivations. In this relationship between subjectivity, authoritarianism and present democracy, not only in the field of opinions and ideologies available in the public space, but in latencies and often unconscious tendencies, is where I think the most interesting aspect of these studies lies, as well as their importance to understand the pedagogical writings of Adorno as I will try to demonstrate below.



Education, Mündigkeit and democracy

Studies on authoritarian subjectivity not only demonstrated the empirical vocation of critical theory, but also made the relationship between democracy and subjectivity more complex. Adorno tried to explain the phenomena of subjectivation as a symptom that could not be reduced to its economic location, nor could it be explained by an analysis of the relations of political forces, but had to be investigated both in its manifest reactions and in its latencies. In this way, and as proposed by Ezequiel Ipar (2011), these reflections on authoritarian ideologies can pose an interesting critical counterpoint to certain theories of liberal democracy that, both in post-war Germany and in an Argentina of post-democratic dictatorial transition, tried to found an order of peaceful coexistence to overcome the burden of authoritarianism on the basis of a model of deliberative democracy. These theories, based fundamentally on Jürgen Habermas, started from a recognition of the performative power of discourse in a public sphere, so that democracy appeared as the institutional framework in which different individual interests could be expressed in non-violent terms (Cf. Habermas, 1998; Nino, 1989). The problem is that they did not consider the dangers that could come from within that deliberative order and this is exactly what Adorno (1998) wishes to reflect on: “The survival of National Socialism” *in* democracy is potentially much

more threatening than the survival of fascist tendencies *against* democracy.” (p. 15, italics in the original). It is a matter of thinking not about the institutional frameworks but about the sensitivity of the actors that give content to those frameworks.

This “aporia of democracy,” as defined by Ipar (2011), is based on the fact that the nexus between democracy and totalitarianism is not external, and that it is not enough to simply secure a public sphere in which sovereign individuals can express their authentic opinions and interests, since the problem is precisely what lies behind that sovereign and self-regulating individual who expresses his true interests. The problem is precisely his subjectivation as a sovereign individual. The authoritarian subject was characterized by Adorno as an identity not questioned, hermetic but respectful of sanctioned, violent and submissive rule, which, in obeying the law, could turn to the law against his spirit. This authentic and imperturbable subject is that dark point that the theory of deliberative democracy had to assume at the time of the decision to think about the consensus but, at the same time, which put in danger all that deliberative order, insofar as it accepted the procedural rules of democratic institutions to convey antidemocratic attitudes with them. The authoritarian personality was for Adorno, in short, an uncritical form of affirmation of the self that could perfectly camouflage itself in the deliberative spaces, which is why it is so much more dangerous. This is why the criticism should be directed not only to the improvement of the institutional mechanisms of consensus generation, but also to the dismantling of that self-regulated subject, of that self-affirming individuality that the institutional procedures presuppose.

Adorno was quite skeptical about the valuation of democracy in Federal Germany at that time, a democratic culture that spread through Germany only through defeat, and that was introduced as something external by the victors. This precariousness and this novelty, not of democracy but of democratic culture, is what worries Adorno (1998, 2013), who sees in it a conjunctural and pragmatic acceptance of democracy linked almost exclusively to economic prosperity: “[Democracy] has not taken root to the point that people experience it as their own thing, knowing themselves as subjects of political processes” (p. 19; p. 14); on the contrary, “it is perceived as a system among others [...] but not as identical with the people themselves, as an expression of their emancipation (*Mündigkeit*)” (p. 19; p. 14). How to achieve a democracy that is felt as a value, that is to say that subjects can experience a pluralist culture as their own, as identical with their own interests and as linked to their political

sensitivity is a question that education should help to answer. Now, the concept with which Adorno thinks about the new democratic tasks of a political education, that is to say the anti-authoritarian movement contained in the “turn to the subject,” is the concept of *Mündigkeit*, a term that means “coming of age,” but that it can also be translated as “emancipation” or even as “autonomy” and on which I am now going to stop.

In one of the famous radio conversations with the pedagogue Helmut Becker titled “Education for Emancipation” (*Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*) Adorno (1998; 2013) makes explicit reference to Kant’s famous 1784 article “What is the Enlightenment?” when he affirms that “the enlightenment is the exit of man from his underage self-guilt (*selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit*)” (p. 115; p. 133). For Kant, as well as for Adorno, the Enlightenment is the “*Sapere aude!*” as an argument to “have the courage to use your own understanding,” the possibility of criticism of and distancing from all foreign tutelage. This Kantian incitement is politically fundamental as a necessary condition of any democratic program since “democracy rests on the formation of the will of each individual,” even synthesized in the form of a representative election, and for such a thing “the value and the capacity of each to use their understanding must be a given” (Adorno, 1998, p. 118). A democracy is only possible if citizens are able to deal with public affairs by following their own will, and this means that they can engage in critical judgments about their political reality and shared social meanings. But there is in this concept of Enlightenment as emancipation and autonomy between Adorno and Kant a profound and decisive difference that must be considered.

In his readings of Kantian moral philosophy, Adorno denounces a certain correspondence between freedom and obedience, between reason and submission. This can even be clearly seen in the recently commented text “What is the Enlightenment?,” where Kant (2004) differentiates a “public use” of reason that should be promoted from a “private use” that should be limited. Only in the area of “public use of reason” could an individual “speak in his own name,” but as a member of a certain community or institution to which he belonged he could only “speak on behalf of another,” that is, he should obey the norms and the mandates that prevail in the society in which he lives and in the institutions of which he is part (p. 36). Against revolution and anarchy, Kant seems to recommend the necessity of a cautious use of the Enlightenment to avoid it jeopardizing the authority of the kings or the effective powers (Cf. Beade, 2014). This is why the concept of *Mündigkeit* that Adorno proposes ceases to be Kantian at the moment when it is fundamentally understood as an antiauthoritarian

political slogan that should serve as an assumption of every democratic community. I am going to stop a little more at this point since I consider it fundamental to understand the idea of an “education for emancipation.”

This correspondence between authoritarianism and freedom that Adorno read in Kantian philosophy was not only characteristic of the concept of the Enlightenment but was also present in the central concepts of autonomy and freedom. In Kant's practical philosophy the ideas of moral freedom and autonomy were equivalent insofar as they could refer to the possibility of obeying only the law of one's own reason, of being one's own subject and legislator of one's own law. This concept of freedom as self-legislation (*Selbstgesetzgebung*) had a progressive meaning in history as freedom of conscience and, as Honneth (2014) states, also as a possibility of “emancipatory efforts of resistance to those unjustified social relations” (p. 133). However, what Adorno tried to show is that the rationalist approach to the concept of freedom and autonomy already contained these repressive elements. This became clear to Adorno if he took the ideal of the ethical subject that Kant assumed as a model. According to Adorno (1996), in Kant there is a subject capable of following the law of his own reason—to ensure that the maxim of his action is valid as a general law—only from the repression of all inclination, of all feeling, of all affectation of affectivity, thus producing “a fetish of renunciation. This means that this doctrine is born from the independent renunciation of its gratification and makes it something that exists *per se* and that is good by itself” (p. 139).

On the basis of Kantian ethics, Adorno sees the renunciation and hardening of the subject, something that can be seen in the words of Kant (2007) for whom the morally capable subject was “a man who, being, moreover, honored, be cold tempered and indifferent to the pains of others” (p. 12). If the *Mündigkeit* as autonomy or emancipation of the subject supposed a self-affirmation of the self in front of external forces, Adorno tried to show that behind this self-assertion was not only the ability to criticize, but also the repression of impulses and emotions, that said autonomy in the rationalist terms in which Kant had proposed it demanded as a model an individual with a cold and rigorous character.

However, this complexity of the concept of *Mündigkeit* raises two questions: on the one hand, the concept of emancipation that should be the end of all pedagogical practice is full of aporias and, secondly, that emancipation should not be resolved as self-affirmation, but as critical rejection even of the assertion itself. In more clear terms: for Adorno, to live as a free individual, to be a moral subject that follows the law of

his own reason, is not something that is free of objective contradictions. Being an autonomous person generates a series of aporias to the extent that the subjective affirmation is made on the basis of self-repression, insofar as the identity of the self merges into a violent rationalization of our non-rational dimensions. While it is true that all identity is the result of a repressive synthesis (of our longings, our perversions, our instincts, even our affections), it is also true that without that identity—according to Adorno (1992) “both non-identical and of diffuse nature” (p. 296)—it would be impossible for us to submit those relations that cause us discomfort to criticism. It would also be impossible for us to have transformative judgement and action according to an idea of the common good. In other words, without that identity that must be subjected to criticism, it would be impossible to criticize that identity.

The concept of autonomy, of *Mündigkeit*, that Adorno (1998; 2013) has in mind then is not exactly Kantian. It is not autonomy as self-affirmation but, as he states in his lecture “Education for emancipation,” “the only true force against the principle of Auschwitz would be autonomy, if I may use the Kantian expression: the power to reflect, to self-determine, not to enter into the game (*Nicht-Mitmachen*)” (p. 83; p. 92). The Humboldtian harmony between the person who functions socially and the fully formed person has disintegrated. That is why, for Adorno, “the individual only survives today as a center of strength of resistance” (Adorno, 1998, p. 104). In education, we must work on the need for an identity as a resistance to blind obedience and that is capable, at the same time, of engaging in its own questioning. Emancipation is a civic virtue, but after Auschwitz it no longer means the self-affirmation of an autonomous self or the consummation of a collective conscience, but the strengthening of the capacity for resistance, non-participation, suspicion in the face of collective, non-reflective identifications.

It is true that the process by which one becomes an emancipated person presupposes authority (Adorno, 1998, p. 104), not only family and school authority, but the authority of social norms in whose confrontation the Ego is forged. Our Self is only possible after a process of identification and conflict with the authority—parent, superego, social, even pedagogical—, therefore, education should not consist of a rejection of all authority, but of fostering a reflective relationship with it. Only through the mediation of authority, not through its complete denial, can we become autonomous. Education should help build a mature relationship with that authority, to dissolve the identifying mechanisms so that subjects are able to see the norms as contingent social relations suscep-



tible of legitimation and not as pure facts to obey. It is necessary to show the relational and contingent character of the “authority, the connection (*Bindung*), or whatever these atrocities are called” (Adorno, 1998, p. 117; Adorno, 2013, p. 135).

These theses can seem surprising and anachronistic in a context in which many pedagogues speak of a lack of discipline and structure as the main problem of youth (Cf. Rorth, 2012). However, what Adorno (1992) has in mind is not only the Nazi past and its emphasis on an irrational community, but also the ideological power of mass media and its appeal often times to an unreflective identification, its emphasis on blind integration through distraction, in our reified relationship with technology or in the collective frenzy that often emerges in contexts such as sports events. For such a thing, it is necessary to strengthen the Self, but to strengthen it by means of a work of dismantling its rigidity, freeing it “from the coercive nature of identity” (p. 296). Self-employed and emancipated individuals would be those who, capable of acting critically, do not consider their own identity as absolute, nor their community belonging as definitive and expulsive.

In this sense, work with emotions and all those dimensions that are not purely rational, even those potentially violent such as shame, disgust, repulsion or hatred, acquire special relevance for educational practice. These impulses should not be repressed or hidden, but rather sublimated and directed as intolerance towards violence against the weakest. The object of education should not be a carefree *new age* subjectivity that inserts itself into the rhythm of life from a conformist interiority, but one capable of sublimating its destructive impulses in community terms and in solidarity with the suffering of others. This implies a return to that idea of restoring the ability to have experiences that permeates Adorno's philosophy as an intention, a certain demand for openness to the “non-identical,” that is only possible with the participation of the emotional dimensions. A democracy's model is not that of the rational and well adapted subject, nor the spirit of the moderate who can face barbarism. Without a quota of indignation in the face of oppression and in the face of the suffering of another, without an emphatic rejection of violence over the weak, such an “emancipated” subjectivity would be impossible, since, as stated by the Strindber phrase cited by Adorno (1998): “How could I love the good if I did not hate the bad” (p. 107). Those who do not feel a moment of repulsion or shame in the face of unjustified violence, in the face of the suffering of the weak, have not overcome this context of coldness. We are more predisposed to respect the other and to face situa-

tions of injustice or cruelty with empathy, love or outrage than with some kind of ethical conviction. Work on this sentimental education, on that affective disposition against cruelty and discrimination, is the essential task of education for democracy.

But if, as we saw, in the same idea of *Mündikeit* there was some ambiguity—as an affirmation of subjectivity and as a critique of the violent consequences of that affirmation—there is also a certain ambiguity in the concept of education concerning its relationship with democracy. On the one hand, education is training for the fulfillment of functions that the world requires: integration into the labor market, the formation of a responsible citizen, capable of rising up to what is expected of them (Cf. Sibaña, Jaramillo & Vinueza, 2017). On the other hand, and as Adorno emphasizes, it is also education that must provide the tools so that we can question that very social world and what is expected of us (Sibaña, Jaramillo & Vinueza, 2017, p.96). Education gives knowledge of the world and prepares us for the execution of roles, but it can also grant the ability to criticize the way in which those roles are assigned, the possibility of choosing our relationship with that world. In Adorno, the task of education becomes a defense against the integrating tendencies of the world, against what in several places of his work he calls the “managed world,” a homogenous and homogenizing world, where the individual is a cog in a machine and whose creativity is only valid insofar as it can be translated in terms of economic return.

In short, the idea of “education for emancipation” after Auschwitz must be, for Adorno (1998), a form of “education for contradiction and resistance” (p. 125). Not a blind resistance to all norms, but to fetishized identifications, to hardened subjectivities, to forms of social order not passed through the filter of criticism. Kant’s *Sapere Aude!* should also be understood as a dare to think against oneself, against one’s own subjective affirmation, to question the common sense on which one’s beliefs and representations are based. It is in this sense that the “turn to the subject” does not imply the acclimatization of tame subjectivities, but the questioning of fixed and authoritarian subjectivities, of the violence contained in the narcissistic wound, of the latent aggression in the authoritarian character, of the identification and idealization of the power relations that constitute us. This criticism of subjective affirmation is also a question of the ideal of adaptation, such as in the case of those who can adapt to any task in a flexible and efficient way and, at the same time, be aggressive and violent in other contexts (Adorno, 1998, p. 84). Emancipation, autonomy, *Mündikeit*, or whatever it is called, does not consist

in the fixity of the authoritarian character, nor in the flexibility of the adaptive character that is required today as a condition of entry into a highly flexible labor market, but in the constant exercise of criticism of any imposed identity. Emancipation is not a state, but a project, a task with provisional syntheses, a process of construction of one's own subjectivity that supposes an incessant critical self-reflection without which democracy becomes a mere formality. In the incentive of that project lies the task of education after Auschwitz.

Final considerations

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In the previous lines I tried to demonstrate that what we could consider as Adorno's *philosophy of education* has an anti-authoritarian character that is articulated as an attempt to mitigate violent and repressive forms of subjectivation. To show the relationship between the concepts of subjectivity and authoritarianism in Adorno's reflections on education, I began by analyzing the philosophical importance of Auschwitz as a new categorical imperative of all cultural production. What that imperative revealed was the need to inquire into the conditions of possibility of what happened in the concentration camps, fundamentally in that cultural *ethos* that allowed naturalization and disinterest in what happened in the camps. Among the elements of such an *ethos* Adorno emphasizes a certain "universal coldness" that made men and women indifferent to the suffering of others. In this way, the task of education in the context of overcoming the past and consolidating democracy is to deal with the subjective conditions of barbarism, the "turn to the subject" has as its purpose the dismantling of that coldness.

For the analysis of these conditions, I stopped in a reading of his empirical works on the authoritarian personality and his most psycho-analytic texts about the concept of wounded narcissism with the aim of highlighting the importance of education in the constitution of a democratic society. The need to think authoritarian nuclei within our democracies, a care for the affective dimensions, the need for a process of self-criticism with our identity claims, the strengthening of our capacity for criticism rather than integration, are the vital elements of the Adornian proposal in education. But, as Zamora (2009) says, Adorno's reflections "are read in the wrong way when direct indications for educational praxis are expected of them" (p. 25), in any case they should be considered as reflection proposals for a pedagogy that is committed to overcoming the

past and democratic and self-critical subjectivities, but at the same time aware of its limitations in that task.

Notes

- 1 I will use the Spanish edition of this book in the very good translation of Jacobo Muñoz (Adorno 1998). In case of clarifications or expressions of relevance I am going to refer to the German edition (Adorno, 2013). In these cases, I will indicate the page numbers in the Spanish edition first and then in the German edition.

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