

# CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND EDGAR MORIN TO PROMOTE DIALECTICAL AND COMPLEX THINKING IN EDUCATION

## Aportes de la escuela de Frankfurt y Edgar Morin para fomentar el pensar dialéctico y complejo en la educación

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present an educational proposal that challenges the way adolescents in school think, and, consequently, how they relate to uncertainty, change, and otherness. To this end, the text starts from the formulation of a “method” –a key term in this work– based on the philosophies of the Frankfurt School and Edgar Morin, which can address the multidimensionality and multireferentiality of reality: dialectical and complex thinking. It is believed that only such a way of thinking, one that turns the individual into a strategist, will produce citizens capable of taking responsibility for their democracies. The connection between education and politics is clarified, with the first positioned as the foundation and engine of the latter. The educational proposal for forming complex citizens is then described, which is based on the recovery of a profound culture capable of deepening adolescents’ thinking and distancing them from simplistic and totalizing discourses. Finally, it is concluded that the only way to avoid new barbarities, such as Auschwitz –both as an extermination camp and, more importantly, as a metaphor for the place knowledge can lead without an educated thought to guide it– is to promote an education for complexity, understanding, and freedom.

### Keywords

Dialectic, Complexity, Democracy, Barbarism, Education, Method.

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### Resumen

El presente texto tiene por objetivo plantear una propuesta educativa que complejice la manera de pensar de los adolescentes escolarizados y, por lo tanto, su manera de convivir con la incertidumbre, el devenir y la otredad. Con miras a ello, se parte de la formulación de un “método” –palabra clave en este trabajo– basado en las filosofías de la Escuela de Frankfurt y Edgar Morin, que sea capaz de hacerse cargo de la multidimensionalidad y multirreferencialidad de la realidad: el pensar dialéctico y complejo. Se considera que solo un pensar de estas características, un pensar que convierte al sujeto en estrategia, construirá ciudadanos capaces de hacerse cargo de sus democracias. Se procura esclarecer la conexión entre educación y política para poner la primera como base y motor de la segunda. A continuación, se describe la propuesta educativa para formar ciudadanos complejos, la cual se basa en la recuperación de una cultura profunda capaz de complejizar el pensar de los adolescentes y alejarlos de discursos simplistas y totalizadores. Finalmente, se concluye que la única manera de evitar nuevas barbaries como la de Auschwitz –como campo de exterminio, pero, sobre todo, como metáfora del lugar al que se puede llevar el conocimiento sin un pensamiento educado que lo guíe– es promover una educación para la complejidad, la comprensión y la libertad.

### Palabras clave

Dialéctica, complejidad, democracia, barbarie, educación, método.

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## Introduction

*My deep conviction is that the future is not written anywhere; it will be what we make of it. ¿And fate? For the human being, fate is like wind for the sailboat. The one at the helm cannot decide where the wind is blowing from, or with what force, but it can orient the sail. And that sometimes makes a huge difference. The same wind that will wreck an inexperienced, reckless, or ill-inspired sailor will bring another to good port (Amin Maalouf).*

This text will address the connection between the education received and our way of acting as citizens. To this end, it will be based on the premise that educational curricula should aim to train complex citizens capable of taking charge of complex societies. The defense of human dignity and resistance to all kinds of oppression must be postulated as the main objectives of any educational exercise so that Auschwitz—both the historical fact and the metaphorical fact—cannot be repeated. To this end, the work of the Frankfurt school and Edgar Morin will be used to base the following idea: only the transmission of a dialectical and complex “method” in education—a method that grants the ability to invent strategies to face a changing context, a method that replaces education as a “program” (solid and deductible guidelines that must be followed in any context)—is suitable for creating complex individuals, capable of actively

participating in their democracies. The transmission of this method, then, will be defended in this work as the mission of all education that is worth.

Collecting the teachings of Morin (2003), this method will be presented as a path that is invented at every moment and that invents us in every context in which we put it into practice. The method, understood as a tool to create strategies, both in the field of knowledge and action, will be exposed as the way to organize and contextualize the knowledge and decisions of individuals in their day to day. Only through a dialectical, modifiable and complex method can civilization survive successfully, “a humanity that develops through a contradictory and complementary tension of two globalizing helices: the quadrimotor (science, technique, industry and economic interest) and humanist and emancipatory ideas of man” (Morin, 2003, p. 11).

Dialectical and complex thinking will be presented as the natural basis of the method described. According to the Frankfurt school, dialectical thinking is a way of approaching, both knowledge (*episteme*) and action (*praxis*), a type of thinking that starts from and takes into account the internal contradictions of one and the other. Nothing is as rational, coherent or closed as the totalizing theories about reality defend, say those of Frankfurt (Horkheimer, 2015, p. 218). Every human and social phenomenon is crossed by different logics that fight each other and contest each other. This, as we will see throughout the present study, can lead us to two positions: petrification by being before an uncertain and mutant world or the advance towards more complex forms of understanding and action.

This paper will navigate between the main texts of the Frankfurt school and Edgar Morin, according to their relevance for each issue to be addressed. The first block presents the dialectical and complex thinking from both philosophies. The second block, devoted to complexity, presents more from Morin's teachings. The third block, dedicated to the educational proposal, will be based on the studies of the Frankfurt school a century ago in the face of the rise of radicalism in Germany. The fourth and fifth blocks, dedicated to the Auschwitz metaphor and conclusions, will present the teachings of both philosophies and demonstrate their connection with the mission of education today.



## Dialectics and complexity as two sides of the same coin

Dialectical and complex thinking, rather than a methodology, is an attitude, a way of looking, a strategy to look for tools that allow us to assimilate

an uncertain, unpredictable and constantly building world. If reality is open and transforming, there must be a method to approach it. A conception of this method as a closed program is insufficient, because in the face of changing and uncertain situations, programs are not enough, however, the presence of a thinking subject and strategist is necessary (López Pérez, 2023a, p. 203). For this reason, the method cannot be arranged before one's own experience, as aprioristic rules that can be used in any situation: the method emerges *during* the experience and, perhaps, can be theorized in the end.

To be able to use a relevant method in each specific situation, the subject needs theory, different knowledge learned through education. Here it is important to understand what theory is for the Frankfurt school and for Edgar Morin and how theory relates to education and to the very creation of the method. Theory is what allows us to think, what forms our categories of thought, what determines the *episteme* with which we observe the world. Theory is not knowledge: it allows knowledge. The theory is not an arrival: it is the possibility of a departure. Theory is not a solution: it is the possibility of treating a problem. The theory only fulfills its cognitive role, it only acquires life with the full use of the subject's activity: the theory turns the solidified individual into a strategist, as explained by Morin (2003, p. 25).

The Frankfurt school's defense of theory does not support theorization—remaining in mere speculation about reality—but seeks to show that theory must precede concrete action in order to give it a course. There is no definitive theory or definitive action, but action must be constantly reviewed by a theory capable of testing its legitimacy and its relevance. The theory itself must be assiduously reviewed and contrasted by reality, so as to show that it is still capable of interpreting what is in front of it (López Pérez, 2023b, p. 169). Any theory endowed with some complexity can only retain its complexity at the price of permanent intellectual recreation. The theory that is not revised risks being degraded, i.e., simplified. As Morin (2011, p. 51) indicates, what does not regenerate degenerates. Any theory abandoned to its theoretical content tends to be flattened, unidimensionalized and reified: theory must always retain the lightness of the transformation. Jorge Wagensberg (1994) said:

A plan for the acquisition of ideas is only good if it continually tempts us to abandon it, if it invites us to deviate from it, to sniff out right and left, to turn away, to wander around, to let ourselves be led not to obtain ideas but to treat them (p. 17).



Theory is the fundamental principle of dialectical and complex thinking, as it allows different perspectives and levels to be visualized. What it is about is to enable the subject to think, in the same space-time, logics that complement each other and that at the same time can be excluded. It is about thinking in recursive and dialogic movement to position ourselves against the thinking of fragmentation, disarticulation and censorship, which causes us to lose the ability to understand phenomena not reducible to a single logic or dimension.

Dialectical and complex thinking educates individuals in strategy, initiative, and the invention of new patterns of action to move in reality. This method then creates a recursive relationship between individual and society. We outline, therefore, a first approach to the method-program opposition that we have gradually introduced. The program is a default organization of the action; the method finds resources and detours, makes investments and diversions. The program repeats what is always the same (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1998, p. 80), i.e., it needs stable conditions for its execution; the method is open, evolutionary, it faces the unforeseen, the new. The program does not improvise or innovate, the method improvises and *innovates*. The program can only experience a weak and superficial dose of *alea* and obstacles in its development; the method is deployed in the most random situations, uses the *alea*, the obstacle, to achieve its ends.

The method is the work of an intelligent being who tries strategies to respond to the situations with which he is encountering. In this sense, to reduce the method to program is to believe that there is an *a priori* way to eliminate uncertainty from the context. Gaston Bachelard (2000, pp. 121–122) said that all discourse of method is always discourse of circumstances. This means that you cannot create a program that works in all contexts, but you can educate individuals to *learn*, through a reviewable method, *how to manage* uncertainty and unpredictability.

Dialectical and complex thinking is also an activity of organized spiritual resistance that, as Adorno said (2019, p. 79), implies a permanent exercise against blindness and annihilation generated by the conventions and clichés established in society. Because of this, dialectical and complex thinking is not just a strategy: it is above all a generative tool of their own strategies. The idea of strategy is linked to that of the *alea* (in Latin it means dice, gambling, risk, luck and uncertainty) and the *aleator* is the player of profession, i.e., one who can take advantage of the *alea* to achieve their ends.

Dialectical and complex thinking is the only one capable of overcoming seemingly insurmountable alternatives not by avoiding them, but



by placing them on a richer horizon that gives rise to new possibilities. These possibilities arise when the anti-which seems anti-gaze from a simplifying perspective--is articulated in the meta-in a broader context that may contain within it different ideas in friction. "Only an educated mind can understand a thought different from its own without the need to accept it," said Aristotle (2001, p. 139). Dialectical and complex thinking is able to coexist with contradiction and antagonism without suppressing them, integrating them into a horizon in which they can continue to ferment through their constructive and destructive potentialities.

Unlike simplifying thinking, which identifies a single logic with the act of thinking itself, dialectical and complex thinking avoids the fragmentation and disarticulation of acquired knowledge (Morin, 2003, p. 71). In this sense, this thinking does not stand as a "new logic", it uses logic, but transgresses it. Or the same: it shows other ways of articulating logic(s).

In this way, dialectical and complex thinking and logical thinking are placed at the antipodes. Following Adorno (1973), logical thinking would be based on Aristotelian logic dictating that  $A = A$  under any context and circumstance. This means that every element of reality is "essentially" the same thing at all times in its history. Neither context, nor time, nor self-determination can modify the essence of the elements: they can only modify their accidents. Therefore, and although at first glance something seems to change over time, in reality it only changes its appearance, while its essence is unchangeable and it is headed for a predetermined end in advance. Because of this, their processes are deductible and, if we find the right method, we can foresee them. Inventiveness, creation, and intervention have no place in such thinking. Garaudy (1970) describes the difference between dialectical and logical thinking: "Dialectical reason is first reason becoming, as opposed to a rationality already constituted, with its immutable laws such as those of formal logic" (p. 59).

Dialectical and complex thinking breaks with the dictatorship of predetermination and the immutability of logical thinking. Dialectical and complex thinking is relevant where we find the need to articulate, relate and contextualize elements that are transformed. Dialectical and complex thinking is relevant where you have to think. Where you cannot reduce the real to either a logic or an idea. Where you seek to find something more than you knew in advance. Where we seek not only to understand what is in front of us, but also new guidelines to act on it. The vault keys of dialectical and complex thought arise from the encounter between formidable antagonistic pushes. Therefore, it is necessary that all

education start from the *awareness of the multidimensionality of reality*, therefore, of the unfinishing of thinking; in this way, individuals will not try to hide this unfinishing, but will point it out and take care of it. Thus, it should be noted that:

Knowledge, like life, is an endless quest. A search in which we are also finding some ports of arrival and rest and that serve us to, looking back, recapitulate and see what is serving us and what we can eliminate in that search. See what strategies proposed are serving us in our business with reality and what strategies are disposable (Roger & Regalado, 2016, p. 17).

If, as Pascal (1981, p. 81) said, the good to think reality is the basis of ethics, it is necessary that we make good, adequate, pertinent readings, as little reductionist as possible, of the context to act in the most civilized way possible. “Reducing a whole to one of its components is an intellectual fault, and this is worse in ethics than in science” (Varona, 2020, p. 103). It is necessary, therefore, not only to look, but above all to know how to look. Or as Montaigne said (2005, p. 155): what we need is “to educate the gaze”. For knowledge is not the sum of data, but the conscious organization of it. In this sense, we cannot speak of recipes, but of general mental skills that serve us in the mobilization of thought towards the construction of knowledge as least simplistic as possible in the contexts in which the subject is located, where the constancy of the medium can never be assured (Roger & Regalado, 2016, p. 32).

Diagnosis, understanding and context management go hand in hand. Although uncertainty is always there and it is impossible to make a total and absolute reading, it is possible to read the context as pertinently as possible, and this is an exclusively epistemological question. The only way to reduce uncertainty, or rather manage it, is to increase mental complexity. It is the subject who must be complex: who knows, who makes mistakes, who can provide not recipes, but means-strategies as relevant as possible to establish relationships with reality.

From an etymological point of view, the word “complexity”, of Latin origin, comes from *complectere*, whose root *plectere* means “braiding” or “linking” (Joaqui & Ortiz, 2020, p. 163). The addition of the *com-* prefix adds the sense of duality of two opposing elements that bind intimately, but without overriding their duality. Complexity, therefore, “is a tissue of heterogeneous inseparably associated constituents, which present the paradoxical relationship of the one and the multiple” (Morin, 2003, p. 54). The word “dialectic”, meanwhile, comes from the Greek *dialektik' tékhne*, which means “conversation technique”. Dialectics is the art of contrasting





a certain idea, conception or tradition, understood as a thesis, with others other than it, understood as antithesis. From this confrontation arises, in a third moment, the synthesis, a new understanding of the problem that, more than a solution, amounts to a new level of complexity of the problem itself. Complexity and dialectics arise, as well, as two parts of the same process and are summarized as the activity of articulating dissimilar elements whose final result takes us to another higher level of understanding. However, from complex thinking, to articulate is not to put one thing next to the other, as postmodern praxis do (Ernesto Laclau, Donna Haraway, etc.). The activity of articulating consists in the superficial, tangential or simple proximity relations deepening and serve to create a true unity in diversity, which, being an open unit, enables a whole process of morphogenesis, i.e., of new emergencies of meaning.

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If an element is never exhausted in the *ensidic*, as reported by Cornelius Castoriadis (2013); if an element is not an element in itself and for itself, as indicated by the Frankfurt school; if an element is not a static monad, as Morin pointed out... then, it is not prescribed in its “essence” what it can become. Every element has a *poetic*, creative dimension, which allows it to manifest novelty, invention and possibility. And it is this dimension that should promote education.

Therefore, dialectical and complex thinking must take up the phrase of Adorno (2002), “the whole is not truth” (p. 73), to reject any reading of reality that seems unification, coherence and integration in its elements. It must also recognize the transitory, quasi-schematic state of any idea. Although thought always longs to be made with a total and unparceled knowledge, this longing may be compatible with the recognition of the unfinished and incomplete of any knowledge. It could be said that the path of knowledge is for dialectical and complex thinking what for Paul Valéry was the elaboration of a poem: that which is not finished, but only abandoned.

## Towards an Education to Protect Democracies

One of the fundamental concerns of any self-respecting education is to provide the best way of coexistence to its students. In this sense, any strategy that avoids educating in simplifying, reductive, and castrating schemes must be welcomed. Undoubtedly, the main challenge is to educate in and for the understanding of human complexity.



Throughout this section a question will be raised that, although it seems simple, is more problematic than the ways that are usually offered to address it: ¿what is an “educated individual”? These are those kinds of questions that become more confusing as we move forward with their resolution.

To think about education involves thinking about many elements, articulating many levels, questioning many entrenched ideas that seem obvious. And to think about a dialectical and complex education, an education that converges different logics and paradigms, becomes even more complicated. If we seek to strengthen democracies, we must strengthen the capacity to think and live with plurality, and this is only possible by educating for difference.

At the expense of this, one can start from a clear premise: by nature, human beings are not democratic. We are not born “genetically programmed” to live in a democracy. Nor do we do it to live in tyranny. Human beings are born as a possibility of being many things and it depends on the “cultural genes” that are injected with us through education, we will be enabled to materialize some possibilities or others.

To talk about education—a purely human activity—we need to start from what constitutes us as humans: the word. It is the possibility of dialog, the capacity for reflexive communication—but not the uncritical transmission of information—that separates us from the rest of living beings. Only in nature and in cybernetic devices does communication come down to the transmission of data. The human being is the only living being that builds its world linguistically and semiotically, therefore, the way in which we approach these areas – the use of the word and communication – will outline the possibilities of the society in which we live, as well as the breadth of its diversity.

Our proposal is that an education that enables individual and emancipated life in a space always shared, is one of the many projects that can be built. Likewise, it is proposed that it is necessary to deactivate the exclusionary character of education to achieve this, since education serves both to respect and to undervalue, to create possibilities of freedom and to homogenize, to create projects that take us beyond determinism and immobility and to treat reality by objectifying and quantifying it.

Below, some strategies will be rescued so that education leads to a better coexistence, greater freedom and a real democracy. The basic framework for developing these possibilities is a political framework: it is a question of how to coexist in plurality *while keeping ourselves distinct and homogeneous*, a project that, without knowledge of that otherness that is



both me and you, cannot materialize. It is, therefore, about changing our way of knowing, our epistemology, in order to change our practice, our way of acting. All this based on a dialectical and complex thinking that allows individuals to converge multiple perspectives and levels within themselves. Let us recall the words of Adorno (2002): “Thought is, by its very nature, the denial of all concrete content, resistance to what is imposed on it” (p. 27).

This project requires a specific epistemology. Namely: the way we treat the other reflects a determined conception of reality and its identities, and it is not the same to treat these as something open, procedural and constantly changing as something closed, static and exclusive. It is not the same to think of reality with a logical framework as with a dialectical and complex framework. “Any policy must be based on a conception of man, society and history” (Morin, 2020, p. 11). Therefore, to think of the elements of reality in such a way that they can articulate their particularity at the antipodes of thinking them in an isolated and borderline way. We believe, therefore, that the main characteristic of an “educated citizen” is to possess a dialectical and complex thought that allows him to coexist with people different from him. Civility when it comes to seeking communication with the other and building something together will be the sign of their education.

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### *Political management and its relationship with education*

One of the characteristics of the political management of our current rulers is the absence of a sense of the multidimensional, as well as its possible mixtures and connections. Their thinking is one-dimensional, therefore ineffective: they decontextualize and distort what is in front of them because they do not understand it, and they do not understand it because a simplifying and reductionist *episteme* cannot understand what is complex and constantly evolving. The same is true of educational institutions: they are an example of one-dimensional, simplifying, and above all identitarian thinking, the latter being the most visible defect in contemporary politics and social discourse.

Between a person's mode of action and his or her thought structure is a bridge that is chiseled by the education he or she receives. It can be educated for freedom, autonomy, and coexistence in diversity, and it can be educated for rejecting patterns that are not ours. If we opt for the former, we will enable a society of citizens who will know how to manage shared values in a space of inclusion and belonging; in this case we would

be good heirs of the philosophers of Antiquity. If we opt for the second alternative, we will immerse ourselves in a society hostile to the unknown and the different, unable to communicate with what does not belong to its identity group, we will encourage barbarism and incivility, and we will perpetuate problems that should now be eradicated.

If building freedom in company is one of the many possibilities available to human beings, on the contrary, building “the fear of freedom”—to paraphrase Erich Fromm—is the most dehumanizing possibility of all. The “desirable” for a society that clearly continues to evolve and whose contexts are always uncertain should be an individual without fear of being free and autonomous, a strategist ready to take charge of his place in a world to become. This, on the other hand, is the least “productive” for a society that seeks the automation of its citizens to give free rein to market development. The most useful thing for the *polis*—as a public space under construction—is the most useless thing for the market, since the latter does not need citizens, but objectified consumers and objectifiers.

An educated citizen must have the resources not to be a mere consumer who neglects public space. The educated citizen, in a community among equals, must fulfill the idea that Aristotle (2001) formulated as the basis of his philosophical anthropology:

Only man, among animals, possesses the word [...]. The word exists to manifest the convenient and the harmful, as well as the just and the unjust. And this is what humans have in comparison with other animals: to possess, in an exclusive way, the sense of the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, and the other appreciations (p. 48).

It should not be forgotten that the Greek *logos* does not refer only to “word”, but also to “reason”, “language” and “dialog”, i.e., the human being is the animal that not only speaks, but reasons in company, that *dia-loga*. What develops us as human beings is the exercise of language through dialog in community and with oneself, a community in which we should not prioritize who *is right*, but how we can better coexist *with reason*. We do not dialog to impose our own schemes: we dialog to abandon part of our ignorance through the exchange of ideas and arguments with others.

Politics is, above all, the way in which ethics can be embodied and materialized in the community, a community that is historical and therefore in continuous evolution, in constant creation. Education, in this sense, is always political, since we are unfinished beings that need to continue building not to finish, but to live and coexist. Education is the means by which ideas are inserted in the individual and therefore in society,



test each established context and materialize one way of (with) living or another. Dewey (2004) said that education “is that reconstruction or re-organization of experience which gives meaning to experience and which increases the ability to steer the course of subsequent experience” (p. 74). Education, therefore, is the laboratory of thought and, consequently, the preamble of action and also of democracy.

### *Educating in plurality: approaches from different thinkers*

Education in plurality is necessary, on the one hand, because we live in the company of beings different from us, even when they are of our same culture, nationality or religion, and on the other, because we all need to live in a welcoming and non-hostile environment. The state cannot force anyone to study a career or develop certain personality traits, however, as far as public space is concerned, it can and should build an educational model that helps to know and exercise our obligations as citizens.

Bauman (2003, p. 27) said that it is necessary to learn to think in a liquid way in order to be vaccinated against the tendency to the solid, because as Norbert Elias (1990) indicated: “What individuals form one with another is not cement” (p. 27) and Octavio Paz (RTVE, 2014): “Double threat: turn us into air, turn us into stones”. The great reform of education, then, lies not in imparting other content, but in teaching to think differently, as Freire (2023) pointed out: “Teaching is not transferring knowledge, but creating the possibilities for its own production or construction” (p. 79) and Morin (2016): “The vision of things depends less on the information received than on the way in which our way of thinking is structured” (p. 89).

Noam Chomsky (2013, p. 160) wrote in *The (de)education* that the ultimate goal of productivity achieved in contemporary times should not be the production of goods, but the production of human beings capable of associating with each other to create possibilities of development and evolution. This production would be the only one capable of establishing a free community, a community that is always being made and that is aware of it. In other words, it is a question of betting – again, always – on humanism and its transmission of values, of ideas that go beyond what they have in front of them, of multidimensional, flexible and tolerant perspectives. It is about betting on dialog and not on monolog. It is about betting on dialectical and complex thinking and not on logical and one-dimensional thinking.

Erasmus of Rotterdam (2007, p. 87) taught, even living in a century very different from ours, something very important: without dialog



there can be no freedom, but only imposition. In the beginning, Erasmus says, it is the *serm* (dialog) not the *verb* (imposition of the word/truth). In the beginning it must be dialog and not the word true, absolute, evident. Erasmus knew that only through the spoken word could the fire of fanaticism be put out. However, today we see that our epistemic unconscious remains “biblical”: in the beginning it is the verb and the truth, and not the dialog.

A society of citizens educated to understand coexistence as a *sermo*—as a construction through dialog—is not the same as a society of servants obedient to the word, people who take as natural the slogans dictated by power. Citizens should be educated to think and decide for themselves, and not citizens to reduce themselves to the identities and truths transmitted; citizens who refuse to receive a life made, since, otherwise, they are reduced to being mass, as Ortega and Gasset foreshadowed (2013, p. 32). And the human being is not of the order of the mass, but is able to confront with power and propose new senses, which sometimes involves saying “no”. A word that needs courage and philosophical strength.

For an individual to be able to say “no” he has had to receive an education that allows him to locate the moment when a logic, despite containing *internal logic*, is insufficient to approach reality, and therefore becomes pernicious for protecting the dignity of all. Since the time of Socrates, education—which for him was based on the method of mathematics—is postulated as the only one capable of making emerge a developed, cultured and able to think for himself.

The term “maieutics” comes from the Greek *maieutikós* and means “giving birth”, referring to the process by which the mind of a student is guided to “give birth” ideas by itself and not assume them imposed from outside. In mathematical education, the teacher acts as a facilitator of the learning process, asking questions and leading the student to discover the answers on his or her own. The student is considered an active agent of his own learning and not a passive recipient of information. If mathematical education is based on dialog, the search for truth and the constant questioning of preconceived ideas, at the opposite extreme is an education based on the passive transmission of information, the absence of critical reflection and the lack of dialog between the teacher and the student. This form of teaching is referred to by Freire (2023) as “banking education” (p. 91).

Banking education refers to a teaching model in which knowledge is considered as a deposit in the student’s mind, reducing the role of the teacher to that of mere transactor and the student to that of resource or



instrument. In this model, students are not encouraged to question or challenge established ideas and reach conclusions for themselves, nor are they treated as active and autonomous subjects. We could define the difference between these two types of education with the following phrase, attributed to Socrates: “Education is the lighting of a flame, not the filling of a vessel” (Roger & Regalado, 2016, p. 84).

Hence, it is worth asking, once again, ¿what is education? Education is the ability to understand, in the least reductionist way possible, a world composed of innumerable levels. Levels ranging from the most rudimentary and material—wheels, pacifiers, bottles—to the most symbolic and immaterial—language, religions, thoughts. In this sense, simplifying, banking or one-dimensional thinking, in addition to distorting reality, is ineffective: it decontextualizes and distorts what is complex and constantly evolving, therefore, it prevents acting in a pertinent way. This type of thinking, as Herbert Marcuse (2016) pointed out, is limited to confirming a single perspective or dimension of reality without considering other levels, interpretations or relevant aspects. In this way, it creates a dissonance between what is being interpreted and the interpreter, since the bridges between them are not efficient: the interpreter only captures 1% of what is in front of him and is frustrated with the 99% that he does not understand. And this is precisely what happened in the COVID-19 pandemic, as we will see below.

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### *The pandemic's lessons on one-dimensional thinking*

The pandemic has shown that presenting society as a pile of uncertainties, mismatches, and insecurities is the greatest tool of radicalism, totalitarianism, and identity discourses. It can be easily seen how COVID-19 became an *ideological virus*: what was ideological is not the virus, but *what was done with the virus* at the sociopolitical level. During the pandemic, representatives of all fronts and ideologies decided to take the opportunity to blame the inability to contain the virus on some movement, present or past, undertaken by “the adversary.” In this way, a global pandemic moved away from being a health battle and became a battle between identities and ideologies, a war in which, in the face of the virus, a disintegration began with the political, which is always the space for communication and involvement. A crusade where biased, one-dimensional and dogmatic discourses have been presented as the only possible alternative to a reality that is “too” plural and chaotic.

Far from treating the world as it demands to be treated, in a complex, multicausal and multidimensional way, citizens, exasperated by so many post-2008 crises, look at the world with an increasingly simplified and reductionist discourse that spreads through socialization channels and the media. This discourse ensures that the crises that plague the planet are the direct cause of concrete adversaries, and not a trait inherent in the neoliberal system itself. A system that, on the other hand, has nothing to do with the liberal concept of citizen: neoliberalism excludes the citizen from politics and reduces him to mere consumer/instrument.

At this point, the public space, the *polis*, has been torn apart in a struggle between private spaces, in a battle between radicalized and monolithic discourses that pretend to explain the whole reality through *a single logos*. Because of this, it is necessary an education in dialectical and complex thinking capable of subverting the gradual simplification—which translates spontaneously into radicalization— of the ability to think and act. The fanaticism to which one-dimensional thinking leads is no longer a challenge at the local level, but an obstacle to global coexistence. Therefore:

- Education should offer students a way to look away from the uncertainty, plurality, and otherness that they –and will always– pass through the world. The encouragement of dialectical and complex thinking should be the bridge to this goal.
- Politics must *do politics* again. This means that the public space, the *polis*, must insist on its essence of shared space, a place in which plurality is a fact from which it starts and not a possibility for debate.



## Educational proposal

The proposal presented here aims to analyze the thinking of schooled adolescents living in democratic societies with the aim of understanding their relationship with public space, identity discourses and their fellow citizens. Taking up the studies of the Frankfurt school when they tried to clarify, in the pre- and post-Hitler context, the relationship between citizens and the submissive acceptance of radicalism (Adorno, 2006), we will propose two ways to prevent and intervene the radicalization of thought in young people: the elaboration of surveys aimed at analyzing the rise of anti-democratic populist currents, on the one hand, and the curricular



recovery of *deep culture*, on the other. A culture composed of complex works that the students, far from being able to assimilate instantly —as happens with the works of *mass culture*— must face with a different, active and emancipated look of the prevailing logic.

The polls, on the one hand, aim to unravel the bridge that unites the still current and massive support for democracy with the acceptance of thoughts that go against it, such as the appeal to democracy itself to demonstrate against political enemies, the search for the necessary “Jewish third party” in any closed narrative about itself: “Our society does not work because X is in it,” or the attempt to cancel any action and thought considered contrary to the thoughts of the group itself. In this way, the surveys will try to trace the accepted and naturalized anti-democratic tendencies in democratic societies, revealing, through various questions, the anti-democratic potential of the ideas embedded in the thinking of young people. These surveys are composed of questions such as the ones below, although they can be expanded or specified differently depending on the context:

Indicate from 0 to 10 how much you agree with the following statements:

1. Obedience and respect for what the authority dictates are the basis for the proper functioning of any society.
2. What any country needs, more than laws and political programs, is a few brave, strong, and committed leaders that people can trust.
3. The national way of life is disappearing so rapidly that a strong educational program is needed that imposes with discipline and dignity.
4. The current democratic crisis is caused by the permissiveness of overly diverse views and tendencies.
5. Rather than democratic participation by all citizens, what is needed are a few technocrats who do not need public support to act on what they see as necessary within their fields.
6. The local self-employed shops cease their activity due to the arrival of foreign people who open their own shops.
7. The only way for Western culture to survive is to return to strong values that can compete with the strong values of other cultures.

These questions would go hand in hand with two additional, more informative, questions to learn the context of young people:

8. ¿What social class does it belong to (parents' educational level and job position)?
9. ¿What are your main sources of information (family, social media, books, newspapers, friends, etc.)?

Thus, the answers would be read through typological results ranging from the “radical inclination”—tough, moody, manipulative young people, who claim not to change for anything or for anyone—to the “non-radical inclination”—submissive, conformist, naive young people, open to change and permeability.

The aim of these surveys is to show that democracy is the only possible way in a world composed of different senses and ways of thinking. It is about showing the diversity that already exists, that has always existed and that will always exist. A diversity that is often omitted by entire families, but also by educational discourses that show one of the many faces that make up the subjects, especially the humanistic ones: colonialism, environmental development, racism, revolutions, oppressions, crusades, etc. Each of these meanings can be interpreted in antagonistic ways and lead to models of action which are also antagonistic.

The final stage of this pedagogical proposal focuses on rejecting any educational model that makes students closed citizens in their own paradigm, armored and uncritical citizens, and does so by putting young people before complex works, dilemmas and problems to which they must look with new eyes. Eyes that dispense with the one-dimensional logic that they have naturalized due to the populist messages that govern the sociocultural paradigm.

These complex works must move away from the works that govern the youth paradigm and come from the cultural industry, because although many contain positive values and show the diversity existing in society, they remain simplistic and encourage the gaze of young people to become partial and one-dimensional. Thus, cinema and literature would be the main ways to break with the paradigm of simplification, through examples such as the following:

In cinema:

- *Dreamers* (Bertolucci)
- *East of Eden* (Kazan)
- *Living Your Life* (Godard)
- *One sings, the other doesn't* (Varda)
- *Investigation into a citizen free from all suspicion* (Petri)
- *Hannah and her sisters* (Allen)



- *The Exterminating Angel* (Buñuel)
- *The Shout* (Skolimowski)

In literature:

- *A Happy World* (Huxley)
- *1984* (Orwell)
- *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury)
- *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck)
- *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood)
- *The Clockwork Orange* (Burgess)
- *Fictions* (Borges)
- *Frankenstein or the modern Prometheus* (Shelley)

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The target? Complexify their understanding of the world, make them understand that not everything has a happy ending, put them before logics in friction and allow them to develop a strategic thinking that is suitable for uncertainty and change. It is about developing their capacity to detect what should not be perpetuated and to look for strategies to channel it. And all this to avoid that a new radicalism, born of a new radical way of thinking, has no place in our present and future societies.

## An education for the protection of humanity

Adorno, in the middle of the 20th century, analyzed the barbarism committed by the Nazis in his essay “Culture and barbarism”, written in 1949 and now present in the book *Critique of culture and society II* (2009). There he argued that European culture, which had produced great intellectual, technical, and artistic achievements, was the germ of the supremacist delusion that culminated in the gas chambers. This meant that the Enlightenment and the “progress of reason,” while succeeding in perfecting human dominance over nature and developing technological and scientific tools that allowed us greater material well-being, had not led us to the moral and ethical progress that we might expect.

The reason for this derailment was clear: “instrumental reason,” that focused on perfecting material goods through technical improvements, became destructive by not containing an ethical basis that delineated the direction of their inventions. Concentration camps and gas chambers, two of the greatest technical and logistical inventions of the 20th century, were its clearest examples.

Adorno pointed out the importance of education showing the multitude of assumptions, prejudices and naturalizations that could lead to an environment of hatred and intolerance such as that which led to the Holocaust. Assumptions such as those outlined in the aforementioned survey (“Obedience and respect for what authority dictates form the basis for the proper functioning of any society; What any country needs, rather than laws and political programs, is a few brave, strong, and committed leaders on whom the people can place their trust”) led—and could lead—to what Morin calls “barbarism.”

From all this came a conclusion. The Holocaust imposed on education a new moral imperative: the duty that Auschwitz – as a concentration camp and as a symbolic dehumanization – never be repeated. Adorno argued that the Nazi delusion represented a fundamental break with the moral and ethical values pursued by Western civilization up to that time. It was a before and after in history, since all the advances of knowledge had been put at the service of extermination. Previously, atrocities committed by other eras and peoples had been, in a sense, more “naive,” as the means available were more rudimentary. Auschwitz represented a gap in using the intellectual and scientific knowledge accumulated since the dawn of civilization to exterminate a part of humanity. This, according to Adorno, belied the memorable belief carried over from the time of classical Greek philosophy: that immorality was a consequence of lack of knowledge and that, with greater culture and education, greater tolerance and better ethical behavior. The *crux* of the matter was not, in the eyes of the German, to achieve *more education*, but to pursue *another education*, an education for humanistic purposes, an education that injected the democratic genes of which we spoke at the beginning of this dissertation.

Auschwitz became a landmark that challenged conceptions about the mission of education and its relationship to politics. For Adorno (2009), the scale and systematic nature of the genocide showed that an “educated” humanity—the Nazi commissars were mostly educated people—could also commit unimaginable acts of cruelty and dehumanization. In this context, the German concluded that a civilized education was one that directed scientific achievements to humanly desirable ends and, above all, to the protection of a maxim: that human dignity is above all ideas and discourses.

This new moral imperative, according to Adorno, required a critical review of existing social and educational structures, starting with their means and continuing with their objectives. The Auschwitz massacre, from their perspective, forced a rethinking of civilization’s funda-

mental values and a deeper understanding of ethical responsibility in a world marked by the possibility of impersonal brutality in the age of new technologies. For all this, Auschwitz now teaches us two things: that material progress does not necessarily entail moral progress, and that achievements in knowledge require educated thought to guide them.

## Conclusions

Education, if it is true to its mission, should avoid being reduced to a one-dimensional, banking or simplifying education. Education must provide a multireferential and multilevel understanding of what surrounds us. Knowledge, like the reality it seeks to grasp, has no borders. The borders are put by our *episteme* and it depends on this that something complex looks like this or, on the contrary, it looks extremely simplified.

It should be remembered that the objective of education is to build citizens, people capable of managing both personally and in the community. If education wants to develop dialectical and complex thinking in young people, it must undertake a holistic teaching that inevitably starts from the interrelationship between knowledge. In this way, education will not limit students to a single dimension of reality, but will promote a broad and deep understanding of the issues and problems that constantly emerge before them. As De la Barra (2019) indicates:

The main objective of an educational approach is the integration between disciplines. This aims to achieve transdisciplinarity as the highest level of integration. This means that, through real problems, students apply knowledge and skills from two or more disciplines, which helps shape the learning experience.

And shaping the learning experience has been, since the time of Socrates and mathematics, the ultimate goal of education:

There is a close relationship between transdisciplinarity and complexity, as both approaches advocate an integrative and contextualized view of knowledge. Transdisciplinarity provides an epistemological basis for dealing with complex problems from a broader and holistic perspective, while complexity offers a theoretical and philosophical framework for the transdisciplinary approach, highlighting the importance of recognizing and addressing interconnection, uncertainty, emergence and self-organization in reality (Moreno Guaicha *et al.*, 2024, p. 89).

The mission of education is to strengthen the conditions of possibility of a world-society composed of active citizens and strategists, citi-



zens who are consciously and critically committed to the construction of a *civilized civilization*. Therefore, education has to stop being just a profession and become the political task in a mission of transmitting strategies for community life. This transmission needs as a basis what is not indicated in any manual, but Plato already pointed out as an indispensable condition of all teaching: *eros*, which is at the same time desire, pleasure and love for giving and receiving. In this way, we would like to conclude this work with a quote from Morin and another from Adorno that can shed light on the problem that has occupied us here:

We must abandon the idea of a violent revolution that makes *tabula rasa* of the past and overthrows a bad society to find a good society. We propose a progressive path charted by a new policy rooted in the humanist culture of the past, and we vindicate the republican principles of Freedom, Equality and Fraternity. This complementarity entails antagonisms that a political thought must manage, giving alternating priority to each of these terms (Morin, 2020, pp. 72-73).



I would say that the figure in which emancipation takes shape today is that people who believe it is necessary to walk in that direction influence in the most energetic way so that education is an education for contradiction and resistance. I think, for example, of the possibility of going to see commercial films with the last courses of the institutes and, perhaps also of the schools, then showing the students the kind of hoax with which they have had to face, the fallacy of all that. Or in the attempt to immunize them, in a similar sense, against certain morning programs, so common on the radio, where on Sundays first thing in the morning they are invited to listen to radiant music, as if we lived, as it is said so beautifully, in a “healthy world”. Or a music teacher might analyze, showing them why such a song, or even a piece of the musical movement, is incomprehensibly worse, speaking in the most objective way, than a quartet of Mozart or Beethoven (Adorno, 1998, p. 125).

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