

Dialectics of resistance: Connections between Adorno and Gramsci and their relationship with education.

Dialéticas de resistência: Aproximações entre Adorno e Gramsci e sua relação com a educação.

Dialécticas de resistencia: Aproximaciones entre Adorno y Gramsci y su relación con la educación.

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Abstract

This article analyzes the historical and conceptual connections between Theodor W. Adorno and Antonio Gramsci in the field of education, emphasizing the relationship between dialectics, resistance, and critical formation. Through a comparative bibliographical review, it identifies convergences and divergences in the authors' approaches to contexts of domination. It highlights that both renew the understanding of dialectics, criticize educational technicism, and value a humanizing formation based on culture and art. The article concludes that Adorno and Gramsci offer relevant contributions to rethinking education as a space of resistance to alienation, conformity, and social massification, emphasizing the importance of critical educational practices.

Keywords: Education, Gramsci, Adorno, Dialectics, Connections

Resumo

O artigo analisa as aproximações históricas e conceituais entre Theodor W. Adorno e Antonio Gramsci no campo da educação, enfatizando a relação entre dialética, resistência e formação crítica. Por meio de revisão bibliográfica comparativa, identifica convergências e divergências nas abordagens dos autores diante de contextos de dominação. Destaca-se que ambos renovam a compreensão da dialética, criticam o tecnicismo educacional e valorizam uma formação humanizadora baseada em cultura e arte. Conclui-se que Adorno e Gramsci oferecem contribuições relevantes para repensar a educação como espaço de resistência à alienação, à conformidade e à massificação social, ressaltando a importância de práticas educativas críticas.

Palavras-chave: Educação, Gramsci, Adorno, Dialética, Aproximações.

Resumen

El artículo analiza las aproximaciones históricas y conceptuales entre Theodor W. Adorno y Antonio Gramsci en el campo de la educación, enfatizando la relación entre dialéctica, resistencia y formación crítica. Mediante una revisión bibliográfica comparativa, identifica convergencias y divergencias en los enfoques de los autores frente a contextos de dominación. Se destaca que ambos renuevan la comprensión de la dialéctica, critican el tecnicismo educativo y valoran una formación humanizadora basada en la cultura y el arte. Se concluye que Adorno y Gramsci aportan contribuciones relevantes para repensar la educación como espacio de resistencia a la alienación, la conformidad y la masificación.

Palabras clave: Educación, Gramsci, Adorno, Dialéctica, Aproximaciones.

Introduction

In times of the resurgence of technical rationality and new forms of authoritarianism, the study of authors who resisted authoritarian regimes becomes particularly relevant. Among them are Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) and Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), thinkers who resisted Italian Fascism and German Nazism, respectively. A preliminary reading of their texts and biographies reveals similarities between their theories and lives. However, despite the vast body of critical literature on both authors, few studies comparatively examine the role of dialectics and its articulation with education in their works, especially in the context of resistance to technical rationality and contemporary barbarism. This article seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the historical, conceptual, and contextual connections between Adorno and Gramsci,

with an emphasis on the relationship between education, dialectics, and resistance to totalitarian regimes.

The study adopts a theoretical and comparative approach, grounded in a literature review of Adorno's and Gramsci's works, with a focus on the articulation between dialectics, resistance, and education. The aim is to analyze conceptual convergences and divergences between the two authors, particularly with regard to the role of human formation in contexts of domination.

As primary sources, the study selected Adorno's major philosophical works: *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, *Negative Dialectics*, *Aesthetic Theory*, and *Education and Emancipation*. From Gramsci, the study draws on volumes 1, 2, 4, and 5 of the Prison Notebooks (including the texts on "Italian Risorgimento" and "Americanism and Fordism"). Fundamental works in the field, such as Horkheimer's *Traditional and Critical Theory* and *Eclipse of Reason*, were also included.

In addition to these writings, internationally recognized biographies and critical studies were incorporated, justified by their historical and contextual accounts of the two authors' lives. For reconstructing Gramsci's trajectory, this study relies on Maestri's (2020) biography, written by a collaborating professor of the Graduate Program in History at the University of Passo Fundo (UPF), and Santucci's (2010) work, authored by a former director of the Gramsci Study Center at the Gramsci Institute in Rome. For Adorno, reference is made to Claussen (2006), a German sociologist and writer educated in philosophy, sociology, literature, and politics at Frankfurt, who personally knew Theodor W. Adorno and conducted extensive research on his life, key concepts, and philosophical work.

The selection of these texts reflects their centrality to debates on dialectics, culture, and education, as well as their impact within the field of critical theory. The analytical procedure consisted of comparing the authors' formulations on dialectics, culture, and formation, identifying conceptual convergences and tensions, and linking them to contemporary debates in critical education. Interpretations that highlight the dialogue between the traditions of the Frankfurt School and Italian Marxism were prioritized, without attempting to exhaust the complexity of the authors.

As a limitation, it should be noted that this study is restricted to conceptual analysis and the dialogue between bibliographic sources, without incorporating empirical investigation or the

full scope of Adorno's and Gramsci's production. The proposed analyses should therefore be understood as a partial exploration intended to illuminate possibilities for educational reflection in contexts of crisis and resistance. In the European context after the First World War, fascist regimes emerged as authoritarian responses to capitalist crises linked to imperialism and early 20th-century colonialism. In Italy, the Fascist Party was founded in 1919 and rose to power with the March on Rome in 1922, when King Victor Emmanuel III appointed Benito Mussolini as prime minister. In Germany, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, founded in 1920, came to power in 1933 with Adolf Hitler's appointment as chancellor by President Paul von Hindenburg. The rise of these regimes resulted in the repression of social movements, restrictions on civil liberties, and the suppression of critical debate—elements that profoundly shaped Adorno's and Gramsci's intellectual and political experiences.

Fascism consolidated itself through nationalist, anti-communist rhetoric hostile to liberal democracy, using systematic propaganda, violent repression of opponents, the dissolution of civil society organizations, and the implementation of educational systems subordinated to the authoritarian values of the State. In both Italy and Germany, the fascist rise led to the closure of public spaces for debate and the systematic repression of cultural and educational practices aimed at promoting critical thinking.

In this context, intellectual and critical forms of resistance to totalitarian regimes gained prominence. The conceptual similarities between Adorno and Gramsci, especially with regard to education, are central to this article. For this reason, it examines the contributions of two thinkers who wrote so that some events “not happen again”: Antonio Gramsci, from Italy, and Theodor W. Adorno, from Germany.

Gramsci, imprisoned by the fascist regime, wrote much of his work under adverse conditions, developing reflections on strategies of cultural resistance. Adorno, forced into exile by the rise of Nazism, formulated critiques of instrumental rationality and the cultural conformity characteristic of totalitarian regimes. Although contemporaries and sharing common concerns, there are no records of encounters, correspondence, or reciprocal references in their works. Nevertheless, both converge in their analysis of the rise of totalitarian regimes supported by broad popular participation and in emphasizing the centrality of dialectics and critical education as strategies for preventing new forms of barbarism.

Thus, this article proposes a comparative analysis of Gramsci's and Adorno's approaches, highlighting convergences and limits in their contributions to contemporary educational debates. The guiding research problem is: to what extent can the conceptions of dialectics in Gramsci and Adorno contribute to understanding education as resistance in contexts of domination and alienation?

Thus, the originality of this study lies in proposing a systematic comparative dialogue between Gramsci and Adorno in the educational field. Although both have been widely studied separately, few works examine their conceptions of dialectics in an articulated manner and their implications for critical formation and resistance to barbarism. By addressing this still underexplored area in the literature, the article contributes to expanding the theoretical repertoire of critical education, offering insights for confronting contemporary challenges posed by the rise of technicism, instrumental rationality, and new forms of authoritarianism in educational policies and practices.

It is worth noting that the aim is not to exhaust the complexity of the authors' works but rather to propose a theoretical-methodological dialogue based on central selections from their writings. To this end, the article is structured in three parts: the first presents the biographical context of the authors; the second discusses the concepts of dialectics and their implications for education; and the third outlines convergences, divergences, and developments for the educational field.

Biographies of Resistance

The affinities between Adorno and Gramsci—authors who never had direct contact or proven mutual influence—arouse interest not only for their ideas but also for their life trajectories. Considering the subject as a historical being, shaped by the events of their time and place, it becomes possible to identify historical and relational convergences between them by analyzing their biographies.

According to Maestri (2020) and Santucci (2010), Antonio Gramsci was born in 1891 in the town of Ales, Sardinia, one of the poorest regions of Italy, where he spent his childhood and youth. His early years were marked by serious health problems, poverty, and his father's imprisonment, which forced him to interrupt his studies in order to work, resuming them only

later in Santu Lussurgiu. He later enrolled in the Literature program at the University of Turin, supported by a scholarship, where he came into contact with the labor movement and socialist intellectuals.

Theodor W. Adorno was born in 1903 in Frankfurt am Main, into an upper middle class Jewish family (Claussen, 2006). From an early age, he received encouragement in the study of arts and languages, showing precocious intellectual ability in philosophy, music, and languages. After the First World War, during which he served as a medical orderly, Adorno attended the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gymnasium, where he was a student of the philosopher Hans Cornelius and met Siegfried Kracauer, a cultural critic who introduced him to journalism.

In 1915, after leaving university, Gramsci became an editor for newspapers, including the official page of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) (Santucci, 2010). With the Russian Revolution of 1917, he became actively involved in internal movements supporting the Bolshevik revolution, which culminated in the Bread Strike—marked by repression, workers’ deaths, and the arrest of the PSI leadership—through which he emerged as one of the party’s main leaders. In 1919, he founded the newspaper *L’Ordine Nuovo*, dedicated to workers’ councils, with the aim of informing and educating workers, promoting class politicization, and strengthening the labor movement in the years that followed. These episodes already foreshadowed the centrality of education in his thought. At the same time, Mussolini’s regime was consolidating itself as a dominant force, as Gramsci himself analyzed.

In 1924, Adorno completed his degree in philosophy at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt. His early writings highlight aesthetic development as a crucial dimension of historical evolution, already reflecting the influence of Walter Benjamin’s thought, especially in applying Marxism to cultural criticism (Claussen, 2006). During this period, Adorno moved between the study of German idealist philosophy and an interest in contemporary music, writing on the philosophy of new music and the aesthetics of modern art.

In 1926, in response to Gramsci’s strong parliamentary opposition to the fascist regime, Mussolini revoked the mandates of opposition deputies and ordered his arrest on charges of conspiracy against the Italian state. As Maestri (2020, p. 126; our translation) notes, “Gramsci was one of Mussolini’s main opponents in Parliament, denouncing the crimes and frauds of the government.” In 1928, Gramsci was tried and sentenced by the Special Court for the Defense of the State to twenty years, four months, and five days in prison.

Gramsci remained imprisoned until his death in 1937. In his last two years, as his health deteriorated, he was transferred to a medical regime, without the conditions to continue his intellectual work. Paradoxically, his prison years, from 1926 to 1935, were the most productive of his career, resulting in the 33 notebooks that make up the Prison Notebooks, his masterpiece, divided between thematic notebooks and critical notes. The thematic notebooks address specific subjects such as the philosophy of praxis, Italian history, and intellectuals, while the special notebooks contain notes on books and authors read by Gramsci in prison (Maestri, 2020). Gramsci died at the age of 46, on April 25, 1937, technically free but physically weakened in the two years prior to his death, after enduring a decade of imprisonment under the fascist regime.

After teaching for two years at the University of Frankfurt, Adorno emigrated to England in 1934 to escape Nazi persecution of Jews. There, he taught at the University of Oxford for three years. He then moved to the United States, where he worked at Princeton (1938–1941) and served as co-director of the Research Project on Social Discrimination at the University of California, Berkeley (1941–1948) (Claussen, 2006). During this period, the Institute for Social Research, under Max Horkheimer's direction, deepened its studies on the formation of authoritarian identity.

In 1949, Adorno and Max Horkheimer returned to the University of Frankfurt, where they rebuilt the Institute for Social Research and reestablished the Frankfurt School of critical theory, contributing to Germany's postwar intellectual renewal. During this period, Adorno produced some of his most important works, such as *Aesthetic Theory*, *Negative Dialectics*, and *Hegel: Three Studies*.

Although they lived in different countries, Gramsci and Adorno were profoundly impacted by the political and social upheavals of the twentieth century. The age difference between them was only twelve years; both witnessed the First World War and the advance of fascist regimes, events that crossed their biographies and decisively influenced their works. While Gramsci, imprisoned by Italian fascism, developed his theory under conditions of incarceration, Adorno approached the Frankfurt School and critical theory during the 1920s and 1930s, engaging with Marxism in a context of mounting persecution in Germany.

Unlike Gramsci, who held parliamentary office and was directly involved in political activity, Adorno did not formally participate in political life, focusing instead on criticizing capitalist society through philosophy and academia. This path enabled Adorno to survive exile

and contribute, after the Second World War, to Germany's intellectual renewal, while Gramsci, imprisoned, did not survive the conditions imposed by the Italian fascist regime.

In summary, the life experiences of Gramsci and Adorno reveal trajectories marked by confrontation with contexts of repression and political violence—whether through imprisonment and fascist censorship in the case of the Italian, or forced exile under Nazism in the case of the German thinker. Both, in different positions and via different strategies, confronted the limits imposed by twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, translating these challenges into reflections on culture, politics, and, above all, education. These biographies, though lacking direct contact or mutual recognition, demonstrate that intellectual resistance can take multiple forms and underline, in both authors, a commitment to critical formation in the face of threats to democracy and human dignity.

The question of dialectics and education

Beyond biographical convergences, it is possible to identify significant philosophical similarities between Gramsci, a representative of Italian Marxism, and Adorno, of the Frankfurt School. One such convergence lies in the centrality attributed to the concept of dialectics and in its distinct relations with education. This link makes education a fundamental axis for comparative analysis between the two authors. Based on the reading of their major works and interlocutors, this study sought to outline the conceptual proximities in their use of dialectics.

Bringing together two thinkers of great stature, whose critical reception is diverse, is no trivial task. For both, dialectics implies considering social totality, incorporating praxis, historicity, and the multiplicity of conjunctures. Although it is impossible to cover the totality of their theoretical systems, the focus here is on the conceptual similarities and the ways in which, in different “historical blocs,” Gramsci and Adorno reflected on diverse issues analogously and, at times, addressed similar facts from distinct perspectives.

In Gramsci, dialectics takes shape as an eminently practical and political tool, oriented toward the transformation of social reality. His conception is deeply anchored in the analysis of power relations and in strategies for revolutionary change. It is in this context that Gramsci formulates the “philosophy of praxis”: a renewed and radically dialectical Marxism, in opposition to traditional readings that separate theory and history from concrete human actions.

The philosophy of praxis is a renewed Marxism and has an essentially dialectical character, as Gramsci himself explains:

There is however a fundamental difference between the philosophy of praxis and other philosophies: other ideologies are non-organic creations because they are contradictory, because they aim at reconciling opposing and contradictory interests; their ‘historicity’ will be brief because contradiction appears after each event of which they have been the instrument. The philosophy of praxis, on the other hand, does not aim at the peaceful resolution of existing contradictions in history and society but is rather the very theory of these contradictions. It is not the instrument of government of the dominant groups in order to gain the consent of and exercise hegemony over the subaltern classes; it is the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths, even the unpleasant ones, and in avoiding the (impossible) deceptions of the upper class and—even more—their own. (Gramsci, 1999, p. 388)

In contrast with mechanistic interpretations of historical materialism, which reduce history to an inevitable succession of modes of production, Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis emphasizes the active role of subjects in constructing social reality. From this perspective, social transformations do not automatically result from economic contradictions, but arise from political and cultural struggles involving the production and contestation of hegemony. Thus, Gramsci breaks with the economic determinism of Second International Marxism, which conceived the economic structure as the exclusive factor in social change.

For Gramsci, the superstructure—comprising political, legal, and ideological institutions such as the state, laws, religion, culture, and educational systems—has relative autonomy and plays a fundamental role in political struggle. In the Prison Notebooks, he rejects any reductionist view of the relation between base and superstructure:

[...] the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership.” A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to “liquidate,” or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups (Gramsci, 2002, pp. 62-63)

Thus, dialectics in Gramsci is a principle that articulates structure and superstructure within a strategy of social transformation. It is not an automatic process of history, but an incessant struggle among different social forces, in which culture, ideology, and politics play

fundamental roles. Social transformation depends on the capacity of subaltern groups to build new models of hegemony—a process in which the historical subject assumes control of history by bringing thought and practice together. According to Gramsci (2001), it is in the space between the economic base and the superstructure that the actions of political parties and political and ideological disputes take place. It is in this context that individuals come to understand existing conflicts in the social structure and seek to express them in ideological terms.

Thus, for Gramsci (1999)—specifically in Prison Notebooks 10 and 11—the doctrine of praxis represents a new worldview, though it has its origins in the ideas of Marx and Engels. Praxis, understood as revolutionary and critical action, is not an innovation exclusive to Gramsci, but a deepening of Marx’s proposal expressed in the well-known Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, which argues that philosophy fully realizes itself only when it becomes political practice, ceasing to be mere abstract theory to become an effective transformative force in reality.

This renewal of dialectics, advanced by Gramsci in opposition to traditional Marxism, finds resonance in Max Horkheimer’s elaboration in *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1989), co-founder with Adorno of Critical Theory. Horkheimer starts from the same principle: social history is the result of practical-critical human action, and this praxis returns upon theory itself. Thus, there is no “pure” theory separate from the adversities and contradictions of the social process. As Horkheimer (1989, p. 35) states:

As a matter of fact, the fruitfulness of newly discovered factual connections for the renewal of existent knowledge, and the application of such knowledge to the facts, do not derive from purely logical or methodological sources but can rather be understood only in the context of real social processes.

If, for Gramsci, the superstructure is the site of struggle for hegemony and the formation of new consciousness, for Horkheimer it plays a central role in perpetuating domination, especially through mass culture and ideology. Yet both reject the idea of the superstructure as a mere mechanical reflection of the economic base, recognizing its active role in mediating and reproducing power relations. What diverges is the potential attributed to culture: Gramsci sees in it the possibility of revolutionary transformation, whereas Horkheimer, with Adorno, emphasizes its dimension of reproduction and alienation.

Both Frankfurt School Critical Theory and Gramsci's philosophy of praxis can be understood as movements of overcoming (in the sense of *aufhebung*) "traditional theory." Both break with the separation between theory and practice, integrating social critique, historicity, and transformation. Gramsci (1999, p. 143) synthesizes this point by stating:

The true fundamental function and significance of the dialectic can only be grasped if the philosophy of praxis is conceived as an integral and original philosophy which opens up a new phase of history and a new phase in the development of world thought. It does this to the extent that it goes beyond both traditional idealism and traditional materialism, philosophies which are expressions of past societies, while retaining their vital elements. If the philosophy of praxis is not considered except in subordination to another philosophy, then it is not possible to grasp the new dialectic, through which the transcending of old philosophies is effected and expressed.

Adorno, as a leading figure of the Frankfurt School and Horkheimer's intellectual partner, developed the concept of negative dialectics. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno presents dialectics not merely as a method of overcoming contradictions, but as a permanent exercise in exposing and radicalizing them. Adorno regards social reality as fundamentally contradictory and sees the role of philosophy as revealing, analyzing, and criticizing these tensions. For this reason, he opposes any attempt at abstract reconciliation or harmonization, which he views as an expression of ideological repression.

Adorno rejects the notion that history and thought obey a teleological movement toward a higher synthesis. For him, this vision results in a false reconciliation capable of masking the real contradictions and sufferings of society. His negative dialectics refuses the substitution of contradiction with the principle of identity; instead, it seeks to think the non-identical and to preserve the tension between subject and object, without reducing them to a reconciled totality (Adorno, 2003).

Adorno's critique of instrumental reason is intrinsically linked to his theory of negative dialectics. For him, modern rationality, far from promoting emancipation, became an instrument of domination and oppression. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer show that enlightenment, which should liberate, turns into a new mythology by eliminating difference and negativity (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1985). Thus, reason, in seeking to classify and control the world, destroys singularity and divergence, generating authoritarian forms of thought and action. It is in this context that Adorno identifies in authentic art a privileged space

for negative dialectics: true art does not reconcile but exposes contradictions, challenges expectations, and breaks conventions. In this way, modern art, by rejecting facile harmonies and predictable narratives, fulfills a critical function, confronting instrumental reason and unveiling the malaise of civilization (Adorno, 2006).

Adorno's negative dialectics does not aim to reconcile or overcome contradictions but to deepen them and reveal the falsity of imposed syntheses. His thought resists the logic of the capitalist system and instrumental rationality, denouncing reification and the oppression of differences. In contrast to the dialectical tradition that seeks synthesis and totality, Adorno maintains that critique must remain negative, refusing simplistic solutions and keeping alive the tension with reality (Adorno, 2003).

Gramsci and Adorno converge in their critique of the economic determinism of traditional Marxism, which attributed to the economic infrastructure an exclusive role in determining the superstructure. Both recognize that culture and ideology have relative autonomy, acting as active agents both in the reproduction and in the contestation of social order. Gramsci (2000; 2001), in formulating the concept of cultural hegemony, demonstrates that the ruling class maintains its power not only through state coercion but above all through ideological consensus produced in civil society—that is, through the process of internalizing dominant values and ideas by the subaltern classes.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1985), in developing the theory of the culture industry, expose how capitalism transforms culture into a commodity, blocking the formation of truly critical consciousness. Thus, while Gramsci envisions in culture a space of struggle and social transformation, Adorno identifies in mass culture an instrument of alienation, tending to neutralize any effective possibility of resistance.

A point of convergence between Gramsci and Adorno lies in their emphasis on education as a factor of social transformation. Such a perspective requires the formation of subjects capable of resisting passive adaptation to the dominant whole. For Gramsci (1999, p. 143), education is one of the main mechanisms for maintaining the ideological control of the ruling class:

Every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces that comprise it, but in the entire international and world field, between complexes of national and continental civilisations.

Education, in this sense, must be active, forming subjects capable of becoming agents of transformation. For Gramsci (1999), education constitutes a dialectical process that integrates theory and practice (praxis), not neutral but an instrument of the conscientization of the oppressed and the construction of a new hegemony. He emphasizes that school and culture are fields of struggle in which critical consciousness can be developed to challenge domination, via praxis and the articulation of theory and practice.

Adorno, in turn, interprets education through the lens of negative dialectics, especially in view of the influence of the culture industry, which fosters conformity and inertia, hindering the development of autonomy and reflective thought. For him, education must be a field of critical resistance, in which artistic analysis and opposition to the ideological domination of the entertainment industry are fundamental to the formation of autonomous subjects. In Adorno's words (2000, pp. 132-133):

A world where technology occupies such a key position as it does nowadays produce technological people, who are attuned to technology. This has its good reason: in their own narrow field they will be less likely to be fooled and that can also affect the overall situation. On the other hand, there is something exaggerated, irrational, pathogenic in the present-day relationship to technology. This is connected with the "veil of technology." People are inclined to take technology to be the thing itself, as an end in itself, a force of its own, and they forget that it is an extension of human dexterity. The means—and technology is the epitome of the means of self-preservation of the human species—are fetishized, because the ends—a life of human dignity—are concealed and removed from the consciousness of people.

From this perspective, Adorno and Horkheimer (1985, p. 100) observe in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* that:

What is not mentioned is that the basis on which technology is gaining power over society is the power of those whose technology is gaining power over society is the power of those whose economic position in society is strongest. Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination. It is the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself.

For the authors, the development of Western reason, of enlightenment, opens the way for the emergence of its own opposite, especially when enlightenment turns into mythology and irrationality. As Horkheimer (2015, p. 32) emphasizes in *Eclipse of Reason*:

The more the concept of reason becomes emasculated, the more easily it lends itself to ideological manipulation and to propagation of even the most blatant lies. The advance of enlightenment dissolves the idea of objective reason, dogmatism, and superstition; but often reaction and obscurantism profit most from this development.

Horkheimer (2015, p. 39) also observes:

Today the idea of majority, deprived of its rational foundations, has assumed a completely irrational aspect. Every philosophical, ethical, and political idea—its lifeline connecting it with its historical origins having been severed—has a tendency to become the nucleus of a new mythology, and this is one of the reasons why the advance of enlightenment tends at certain points to revert to superstition and paranoia.

In *The Concept of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer (1985, p. 46) relate the loss of formative capacity and the blockage of experience to the predominance of this technocratic rationality:

Humanity, whose skills and knowledge become differentiated with the division of labor, is thereby forced back to more primitive anthropological stages [...]. The calamity is not that individuals have fallen behind society or its material production. Where the development of the machine has become that of the machinery of control [...], those who have lagged behind represent not only untruth. Adaptation to the power of progress furthers the progress of power, constantly renewing the degenerations which prove successful progress, not failed progress, to be its own antithesis. The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression.

In *Education after Auschwitz*, Adorno (2020, p. 129) argues that an education based on severity and extreme discipline creates the conditions for barbarism, as it prepares subjects to submit to authoritarian collectives and forms of violence justified by customs or rites. His ethical maxim in this context is categorical: “The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again.”

This concern with the reproduction of barbarism in education aligns Adorno with Gramsci, particularly in his critical analysis of “Americanism” in *Italian Risorgimento* (Gramsci,

2002). Gramsci examines the global diffusion of North American technical, productive, and military culture, marked by Taylorism and Fordism, responsible for the standardization and rationalization of existence in function of production. While recognizing national specificities and local resistances, Gramsci (2015, pp. 56-57) observes that this productivist logic permeates industry, agriculture, schools, and private life, imposing an alienating culture and hindering the overcoming of the historical bloc and the advancement of dialectics.

The development of professional technical schools in all the post-elementary grades has reopened the problem. Recall Prof. Peano's assertion that even in the Polytechnic and in the mathematical sciences, the students from the grammar schools turned out to be better prepared than those from the technical schools and institutes. This better preparation came from the comprehensive "humanistic" education (history, literature, philosophy). Why cannot mathematics yield the same results? Mathematics has been drawn close to logic. And yet there is an enormous difference. Formal logic "tends" to do the same thing, but only up to a certain point. Its abstract nature is retained only through the early stage of learning, in its direct, bare and crude formulation, but it is put into practice concretely in the very discourse in which the abstract formulation itself is carried out.

Gramsci's observation underscores the value of a humanist education, capable of overcoming technical and instrumental reductionism, recovering the centrality of history, literature, and philosophy for the development of critical thought. Similarly, Adorno (2020), in *Education and Emancipation*, also argues that emancipatory education must promote intellectual and ethical autonomy, overcoming the logic of technical adaptation and conformity so that subjects can resist domination and cultural impoverishment.

Americanism and Fordism in the educational sphere represent an alignment of the school system with new techniques and methods. These forms of educational organization are based on curriculum standardization, simplification of content, and mechanization of pedagogical processes. Schools thus produce subjects characterized by functionality, productivity, and utility to the detriment of critical and humanist education. This creates a contradiction between technical rationalization and social irrationality, manifested in the dehumanization, uniformity, and alienation of students. This analysis aligns with Adorno's thought, as it is precisely the advance of technology and production, without critical reflection, which deepens alienation and, ultimately, barbarism.

For Gramsci, the subaltern group gradually constructs its worldview via the conflict between social categories and, in the struggle for hegemony, tends to transform this worldview into the prevailing conception. For Adorno, however, the struggle is justified only when it drives, without compromise, the critical capacity of reason in the face of the irrationality of reality. While Gramsci relies on the class as a collective subject capable of producing historical transformation, Adorno sees that, in contemporary fragmentation, individual subjects themselves must confront domination and seek emancipation. Both, therefore, defend the necessity of an education oriented toward contradiction and resistance, capable of fostering authentic formative experiences. Only an unabridged education, open to negativity, can counter barbarism. Thus, even recognizing that rationality becomes counter-rational in the contemporary world, Adorno does not abandon enlightenment and reason as indispensable principles for emancipation.

Therefore, Adorno and Gramsci stand out as thinkers who enriched Marxism in the twentieth century, each through their own approach. Adorno focused on the critique of culture and reason in advanced capitalist society, emphasizing the analysis of forms of domination and alienation promoted by instrumental rationality. Gramsci, in contrast, centered his analysis on politics and culture in peripheral capitalist societies, with particular attention to the issue of hegemony and the construction of strategies of resistance. Despite differences in context and focus, both sought to understand and respond to forms of oppression and alienation, pointing toward paths for resistance and social transformation. Overcoming initial distinctions, we can highlight some of the conceptual and thematic proximities between Adorno and Gramsci, particularly regarding dialectics and education.

Possible approximations

Revisiting the authors' biographies, as well as their approaches to dialectics and education, we can identify significant approximations between Adorno and Gramsci. Both directed their reflections toward the critique of domination and alienation, aiming to form subjects capable of resisting conformity imposed by capitalism, technical rationality, and the culture industry. For both Gramsci and Adorno, culture and education constitute fields of contestation. Gramsci emphasizes that cultural hegemony is constructed and contested in civil society, assigning a central role to schools and organic intellectuals in this process. Adorno, in

turn, notes that while the culture industry serves as an instrument of domination reproduction, art and education remain potential spaces of resistance, capable of promoting autonomy and critical thought.

The relationship between Adorno's negative dialectics, the dialectics present in Gramsci's analysis of Americanism and Fordism, and education requires a critical analysis of the interactions between ideologies, social structures, and formative processes. For Adorno (2020), education is a fundamental space for the development of autonomy and critical thought, resisting the homogenization imposed by instrumental rationality. For Gramsci (2001), the educational process is embedded in the struggle for hegemony and in the formation of organic intellectuals, crucial for historical transformation. Although by different paths, both attribute to humanizing education, inseparable from culture, a central role in social transformation.

This proximity of the authors regarding education, especially as related to culture and subjective content such as art, is evident in their biographical trajectories. Gramsci studied literature at the University of Turin and later became directly involved in producing cultural content aimed at leftist workers. Gramsci's analysis of Fordism and education involves a critical understanding of the interactions between ideologies, social structures, and instructional processes. A key convergence between the two authors' conceptions is precisely their connection to historical materialism. Adorno, in turn, trained in musicology in Frankfurt, and before the advent of the totalitarian regime, music and the arts occupied the center of his academic output. Similar to Gramsci, Adorno consistently demonstrated concern with the phenomena of mass societies and their cultural consequences.

Gramsci analyzes how mass culture, particularly the movements of Americanism and Fordism, contributes to consolidating cultural hegemony and social conformity. He notes that these movements are grounded in productivist rules that traverse all spheres of life, including education. According to Gramsci (2015), the rationalization and simplification of content, combined with the mechanization of educational processes, result in the formation of alienated students who are functionally useful to the labor market, in an education characterized by functionality, productivity, and utility. In response, Gramsci (2021) proposes an active counter-revolution, that is, a transformation oriented toward constructing a new hegemony, grounded in an alliance between industrial and rural workers, the formation of organic intellectuals, and the promotion of education aimed at critical consciousness.

The Gramscian dialectic emphasizes the importance of recognizing and questioning the cultural and ideological influences present in education, encouraging the development of critical thinking about these determinations. Thus, education should stimulate students to question and critically analyze knowledge rather than simply accept it passively. This approach fosters a critical understanding of how dominant values and ideologies are transmitted to students through the curriculum, the media, and educational institutions.

Adorno's negative dialectics focuses on challenging certainties and revealing the contradictions and ambiguities present in society and thought. It constitutes a reflection opposed to idealist dialectics, which seeks identity between subject and object, thinking and thought, thereby subjecting reality to the logic of the dominant system. Negative dialectics, by contrast, seeks to preserve the non-identity between thought and object, respecting the materiality and singularity of the real, while revealing contradictions and possibilities for the transformation of the world.

Adorno (2003) understands negative dialectics not only as a method of thought but also as an ethical stance toward reality and the other. For him, the refusal of abstract reconciliation—typical of idealist philosophy and dogmatic Marxism—is above all a commitment to difference, negativity, and the recognition of real suffering. Thus, for Adorno (2003), in *Negative Dialectics*, thinking always entails thinking against oneself, indicating that all genuinely critical philosophy must confront what resists identification and conceptual closure. Negative dialectics therefore presents itself as a permanent critique of the principle of identity—the basis of instrumental reason—and as an openness to the unfinished and the plurality of the real. For Adorno and Horkheimer (1985, p. 144), “The whole is the false,” arguing that every attempt at totalization obscures the singularity of suffering and the possibility of emancipation. In educational terms, this implies a formation open to negativity, capable of fostering critical autonomy and resistance to barbarism, as opposed to passive adaptation to the existing order.

In this sense, education, for Adorno (2020), plays a central role in shaping critical consciousness and resisting the culture industry, which alienates and manipulates individuals. Educational practice should promote the development of autonomy, reflection, and dialogue, encouraging the exercise of negative reason and formative experience. For the Frankfurt School, such formative experience enables the individual to engage with reality in a sensitive, creative, and critical manner, rejecting submission to socially imposed patterns and aiming toward social

emancipation—the ultimate goal of education according to negative dialectics. In other words, it is a matter of overcoming the barbarism and domination characteristic of contemporary society and building a society based on dignity and respect for differences. Social emancipation, in this framework, depends on individuals' ability to think autonomously, question ideologies and prejudices, and actively engage in the radical transformation of reality.

It is evident that both Adorno's negative dialectics (2003) and Gramsci's dialectics, as developed in *Americanism and Fordism* (2015), share a commitment to critical thought and an in-depth analysis of social, cultural, and ideological structures. Both highlight the importance of an education that enables students to recognize contradictions, explore complexity, and question dominant narratives. From these perspectives, the educational goal is to form conscious and critical citizens capable of understanding the multiple influences shaping society and of actively engaging in transformative practices.

Among the first generation of Frankfurt thinkers, represented here by Adorno and Antonio Gramsci, relevant points of convergence can be identified. In particular, both, each in their own way, promote a renewal of dialectics by opposing its vulgarization within traditional Marxism, which was especially predominant in the first half of the twentieth century. To this end, they revisit the fundamental bases of dialectics, deepen its concept, and develop it in a critical and open manner. They do not renounce critique and resistance, nor the horizon of emancipation.

Both Gramsci and Adorno recognize that the education of sensibilities—realized through art, culture, and aesthetic experience—is indispensable for the formation of critical subjects resistant to alienation. For both, schools and cultural spaces should not merely transmit content but cultivate the ability to feel, imagine, create, and recognize the other. In this perspective, art and culture are not only means of resistance but also foundations for truly emancipatory education.

This perspective results in the production of subjective and class identity, whose principal consequence is the construction of hegemony within the revolutionary transformation of society. For Adorno, emancipatory struggle may manifest itself in multiple fields: in the elaboration of a rigorous and uncompromising critical theory in the face of reality, and in the action of subjects capable of resisting domination. Between the two authors, despite their

differences, there is a remarkable convergence in the reformulation and critical, innovative recovery of dialectics and its application: a dialectics that does not accommodate itself to existing reality but sees in formation—whether through the formal pathways of schooling, as Gramsci (2001) suggests, or through a broader and more integral formation beyond institutional limits, as Adorno (2020) proposes—a real possibility of emancipation.

In view of the convergences and divergences discussed between Adorno and Gramsci, particularly regarding dialectics, formation, and resistance, it is possible to consolidate some central reflections on the emancipatory potential of education and culture in the contemporary context. In the concluding remarks, the main points of the analytical path will be revisited, highlighting the contributions and limits of each author, as well as the current challenges for constructing an education committed to critique and emancipation.

Final Considerations

The analysis of the convergences and divergences between Theodor W. Adorno and Antonio Gramsci, whose ideas have been explored throughout this article, sought to shed light on their contributions to understanding the relationships among dialectics, culture, resistance, and education in contexts of crisis and authoritarianism. The historical-biographical overview showed that experiences of repression, exile, and confrontation with totalitarian regimes profoundly marked the intellectual production of both authors, shaping their reflections on culture, subjectivity, and politics. Despite different trajectories and the absence of direct contact, both critically responded to the challenges of the twentieth century, articulating projects of intellectual resistance in contexts of barbarism.

At the conceptual level, it was observed that Gramsci and Adorno, even while drawing from distinct philosophical traditions and fields of engagement, renewed the understanding of dialectics and rejected mechanistic or dogmatic readings of Marxism. Gramsci, by emphasizing the philosophy of praxis, highlighted the active role of subjects and culture in the struggle for hegemony and in the formation of subaltern classes as agents of historical transformation. Adorno, in turn, by developing negative dialectics, focused his critique on the dangers of instrumental rationality and reification, defending the preservation of non-identity and the constant exercise of critique as forms of resistance to cultural and social domination.

One of the main points of convergence identified was the valorization of education as a strategic space in the struggle against alienation and conformity. For both authors, human formation cannot be reduced to technical adaptation, authoritarian discipline, or the reproduction of the values of the prevailing system. On the contrary, they proposed a humanizing, sensitive, critical, and culturally grounded education, capable of integrating art, philosophy, history, and ethical experience. This perspective reaffirms the importance of schools, culture, and art as spaces of resistance to barbarism and as sites for constructing emancipatory alternatives.

However, the analyses also showed that Gramsci and Adorno propose different paths for overcoming alienation: Gramsci bets on the collective construction of hegemony, the role of organic intellectuals, and the centrality of social praxis; Adorno, more pessimistic in light of the advance of the culture industry, invests in the resistance of art, negative reflection, and the critical autonomy of individuals, even in contexts of fragmentation and massification.

It is important to underscore some limitations of this research. The analytical scope privileged the best-known works and concepts of Adorno and Gramsci, focusing on the relationship among dialectics, culture, and education, which necessarily limits coverage of the full complexity of their thought and historical contexts. The absence of direct dialogue between the authors further restricts the comparison to conceptual and contextual approximations, making it impossible to identify mutual influences or effective exchanges. Moreover, the research was based on bibliographic review and conceptual analysis, without recourse to empirical investigations or to an examination of contemporary receptions of these authors in the Brazilian educational field. These limitations point to the need for future studies that deepen these interfaces, explore receptions in specific contexts, or investigate pedagogical practices inspired by Adorno and Gramsci.

The dialogue between the works of Adorno and Gramsci makes it possible to illuminate contemporary challenges in the educational field, especially in the face of the advance of technicist, productivist, and authoritarian tendencies. An integrated reading of their legacies reaffirms that only a critical, humanizing, and sensitive education—rooted in culture, open to difference, articulated with praxis and negative reflection—can prevent the reproduction of past

errors and strengthen resistance against new forms of domination. Although coming from distinct contexts, both converge in the defense of an education of the sensibilities, in which art and culture are essential dimensions of critical formation and resistance to barbarism.

The convergences outlined here point to the urgency of educational policies and practices committed to emancipation, the defense of human dignity, and the promotion of subjects capable of resisting barbarism, alienation, and the uncritical repetition of history. In this sense, Gramsci and Adorno remain both relevant and indispensable, reminding us that sensitive, humanizing, and artistic education is one of the great possibilities for ensuring that the atrocities of totalitarian regimes “not happen again.”

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