

Academic productivity as a moral imperative: from suffering to boredom*

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The one who proposes to make the criticism often faces the charge of having to propose something in the place of what is being criticized, leaving aside that the criticism, in itself, is already part of the transformative action, and that what should be modified is not only the specific target of the criticism, but rather the social totality that conforms it.

Such accusation to the criticism paralyzes the thought, obstructed by the threat of being useless and powerless, but whose perception of uselessness – not chained to any immediate objective – and powerlessness – whose recognition is crucial to overcome this limit –, is fundamental. One becomes resigned. The question: “what to do?” can interrupt the criticism that would allow a glimpse of the adequate action.

Certainly, the “criticism for no reason”, the “criticism without substance”, the “rebelliousness without a cause” must be questioned, but when one refutes the criticism concerning the boundaries of what is reflected, indicating what is being and what could eventually be sacrificed through denial, this sacrifice falls upon the criticism itself.

As everything else that exists in the late capitalist society, characterized by the antagonism between social classes and by the predominance of the processes based on the principle of domination that reduces workers to appendices of machinery, by which they are “forzados en sus más íntimas emociones a adherirse al mecanismo social como portadores de un rol y a modelarse sin reservas según este mecanismo” (Adorno, 1968/2004, p. 336), the Brazilian universities and the research centers also seem to not be free from the *modus operandi* of the industrial production. They are full of contradictions that are difficult to analyze, thus the organization of the intellectual work that has thrived in its core ends up imposing to researchers, professors and students a specific form of relationship with knowledge and with its respective disclosure. This aspect considerably resembles the logic of industrial production, which reproduces, in the sphere of the supposedly autonomous thought, the

same technological rationality that was first developed with the aim of increasing material production and capital accumulation (Marcuse, 1964/2015).

The notorious Brazilian effort, represented by the new Legal Framework of Science, Technology and Innovation – Law no. 13,243/2016 –, to approximate the university and its select production of the society that produces it is full of commonly neglected demands and lacks reflection on their goals, because it seems to forget that society, as a complex totality, which is formed in every particular that composes it, is not summarized to productive social institutions. At the center of this contradiction, we highlight the existing abyss between public institutions, historically consolidated and recognized as knowledge producers, and the growing set of private institutions, on which lingers, in a not entirely unjustified manner, certain suspicion regarding the marketing intentions that would be underlying its commitment to be established as references in the field of education and, more recently, of production of *stricto sensu* research. Apart from the excellent qualities of public and private institutions that prioritize the education and knowledge production of great social relevance, the criticism to the subordination of both types of teaching and research institutions to the rationality proper to the industrial production must also focus on the fact that the abyss that separates them radically tends to be only ideology. The hasty idealization and disqualification of the two models of university, in fact, contrasting for many objective reasons, exhaustively demonstrated by studies focused on the analysis of their managements, of education offered and of working conditions in them assured to professors and researchers, minimize the fatal identity between both as regards the mediation exerted by a national policy of science and technology, now markedly associated with innovation.

Not infrequently, we often come across with the intense complaints from colleagues devoted to teaching in private institutions of higher education unrelated to the development of research, but massacred by overwork and remuneration incompatible with the requirements of basic training and maintenance necessary for the practice of their functions as intellectual workers. Even before being systemized as primary data of research, different from the criticism to the teaching working

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conditions declared by trade unions provided with data and historical analysis of events that resulted in the current level of degradation of the education, these complaints represent a manifestation of how each intellectual worker experiences his/her relationship with the knowledge and with the institutions that impose themselves as mediators of the worker's production. The institutions may even be provided with excellent basis on empirical data already systematized or raised to the theoretical reflection, but, still, they are also emotional expressions of the impact that the conditions of work and reception of their efforts cause in the workers' prosaic lives, in the core of their private existences.

The demands until recently perceived as specific of the working conditions particular to each type of institution have shown to be much more fluid and generalizable than the predicted by the well-meaning rigid systematization of differences and specificities of the contradictions that contaminate the Brazilian education and research. The demand for professors to assume responsibility for a large volume of classes, teaching even subjects which are beyond their areas of specialization and for which they have fewer and fewer possibilities to devote themselves to the necessary appropriation of the contents that they must minister; or the demand for the production of significant volume of papers, reports, opinions, conferences, etc., aiming to ensure their academic survival as researchers related to graduate programs, are situations less discontinuous than suggested by the speech that commonly justifies the maintenance of these conditions little favorable to the intellectual work. The contemporary academic life, privileged or deprived of the aura of nobility that often secured to several academics their intellectual distinction, has been absorbed by tasks and more tasks that make impossible the things that should qualify it: research and reflection. Whether the hourly paid professors from private universities of marketing character, who are swallowed up by the serial reproduction of standardized content allegedly related to a technically efficient education for the work, or the research professors of public institutions, subjected to the evaluation systems of intellectual productivity and its supposed impact on society (Oliveira, 2015) – whose maintenance requires them to become effective entrepreneurs capable of capturing financial resources from public agencies of national and international promotion, as well as, increasingly, from public and private foundations and companies with well-delimited interests –, they are equally susceptible to the continuous wear of the conditions that would ensure the intellectual production by which they are rigidly evaluated and, depending on their performance, severely punished (Schmidt, 2011): the quantity of classes, the excess of administrative works and the lack of resources that allow the dedication to research are forms of punishment for those who do not fit the required model of intellectual production, which has become the main mediation for

the enrollment and the rise in the academic career. Both conditions are faces of the same process that subordinates the education and the academic work to the interests of reproduction of capital.

It is within this context of intense pressure, whose effects still unforeseen already include job loss – common reality for professors hired through precarious contracts in public and private institutions, and inaugural for professors with careers subjected to the new forms of performance evaluation adopted by public universities, which already predicts penalties and exoneration by low productivity –, that the complaints of our colleagues are produced. The professors' potential of criticism is not only due to the truthfulness of the facts that mirror the situations that produce them, but also to the suffering that they evidence. And it is about this potential that our very brief reflection exposes, considering the transformation of the academic productivity in moral imperative.

Despite both products of academic work here highlighted being essentially intellectual productions, the devaluation of these activities has a specific direction, resulting in the grotesque division of the academic work, under the justification that it would achieve the aptitude differences: the teaching became a little valued activity due to the ongoing evaluations and, regardless of its urgent need, a "punishment" for the researchers considered unproductive.

Based on this initial critical consideration, we took as reflection object, in this text, the fact that the intellectual production became more than a badge of excellence, it grew into a moral imperative that, for not being feasible, is an expression of a kind of little recognized labor suffering.

Despite the numerous controversies about the ethical implications of this academic administration policy that considers some indicators – number of publications in well-evaluated journals and pair citations – as decisive for the definition of the desired excellence, it is the ability of producing and publishing scientific articles that has been consolidated as a determinant of the researchers' conduct; even though in several cases it happens at the expense of the adoption of spurious means, as the different forms of fraud, propagated in an epidemic manner throughout the world and commonly faced as an moralizing manner:

The ineffectiveness is the most decisive defect of the moralizing treatment. Taking into consideration that it has been applied for decades, particularly in the United States, the latest studies that prove the epidemic also provide evidence of the failure of the moralizing treatment. The intensification of moralizing measures itself, as well as the increasing frequency of congresses and similar events, point to the same direction. (Oliveira, 2015, p. 886)

The numerous failures of the evaluation process are little considered in the discussion: several forms of

plagiarism and self-plagiarism; the improper appropriation of foreign production, including through automation of joint publication with advisees of graduate courses and collaborators; the fragmentation and serial repetition of results of research in productions that do not differ substantially, but, instead, repeat themselves without adding new content; the financial mediation of the submission process and publication of manuscripts by commercial publishers who have been encouraging the increasing professionalization of academic publication, etc. Consequently, both researchers considered very productive and the ones considered unproductive are subjected to the same imperative: publish to ensure your academic existence! The individual accountability for the low productivity observed in a significant portion of researchers is perceived in isolation from factors that limit the productivity as a value and produce it as a distortion phenomenon of the relationship with the knowledge; the result is the degradation of the concept of intellectual production and infusion of guilt to all those who do not fit the operationalization of this effect of intellectual work in function of the serial production of measurable technologies in accordance with the rationality of the industrial production.

It has become frequent the requirement that graduate, master's and doctoral students, depending on their own productions to ensure the recognition of the excellence of the education they promote, mandatorily publish articles during the training process as researchers so that they may effectively complete their courses. If there is not even the submission of manuscripts related to their research, the candidates to the titles of masters and doctors may not even be allowed to defend that which has been traditionally recognized as the main product of this training stage: their thesis or dissertation. This type of requirement, in addition to many others that define this training stage, has promoted and intensified the suffering of enrolling researchers, who see their aspirations of producing works of scientific relevance being thwarted by the pragmatic necessity of adjustment to the serial production. Not infrequently, the despair resulting from this condition is propagated and resonates in the commitment of students and advisors to ensure, even at the expense of physical and mental illness, that their production can be evaluated and, perhaps, approved by the well-evaluated scientific journals.

With the professional researchers, especially professors of public universities and research institutes, the situation is no different, because their maintenance in graduate programs and the possibility of obtaining resources for research – acquisition of research inputs, scholarships for their advisees, tickets for international cooperation, funding for publications, etc. – depend diametrically on their publishing ability, in particular of articles in well-evaluated journals, preferably in English.

Beyond that which can be classified through medical and psychiatric diagnoses – burnout syndrome,

anxiety, depression, stress, etc. –, the suffering produced by these working conditions has a moral connotation, characterized by the self-image degradation and the subsequent disabling of essential arrangements to the work of educators. Whether the blind adjustment to the productivity demands, or the impossibility of achieving them, they imply the obstruction of the most important intellectual activity for those who are dedicated to the training of professionals and researchers: the ability of reflecting on their own work without sacrificing the love for knowledge and the possibility to teach it.

In this regard, in a lecture given at the Student's House of Frankfurt, in 1962, Adorno (1963/2000) considered that, with respect to his experience as evaluator of the general philosophy test in the civil-service examination for the teaching of science in the superior schools of the state of Hessen, Germany, the self-consciousness of spirit interested him the most, because it allows to surpass the private undertaking of certain areas of partial sciences, compared to the badges of value established according to how the person graduated. For him, who made harsh criticisms to pseudo-education, what mattered the most was the arrangement for self-reflection, which presupposes the education, but does not determine definitively the route of its acquisition. The lack of education in the alleged educators was noticed by him as a central point for his evaluation, which seems to maintain a close relationship with the problem delimited in this analysis of the relationship between the imperative of the intellectual production and the production of the suffering among graduate students and advisors, both supposedly devoted to the condition of educators. According to Adorno:

The patchwork formed by ideological declamation and facts that were appropriated, that is, most times memorized, reveals that the link between object and reflection was broken. This acknowledgement in the exams is recurring, leading immediately to conclude by the absence of education (*Bildung*) necessary to the one who intends to be an educator. (Adorno, 1963/2000, p. 63)

In the eagerness of promoting cultural education through qualification of academic institutions, Adorno indicated the need of encouraging the selection of people of spirit and not of people of high production, as so yearned. Adorno was bothered with the predominance of the objectified consciousness, which seeks to rely on paths already consolidated, that ensure them the protection for the challenge of knowledge. The author was interested on whether the people who would be responsible for educating the new generations and would have a “substantial responsibility for the real and intellectual development of Germany, as professors of higher institutions” (p. 54) were, in fact, intellectuals or mere professionals.

As noticed, Adorno's concern is worthy of a evaluator compromised with the purposes of education and knowledge that we produce and does not neglect, by no means, the need to carefully evaluate such spheres. For the purposes of our discussion, it is worth highlighting the topicality of his considerations and reflect on how they are also applied to the current moment of the Brazilian academy.

The risk of institutionalization of the intellectual dishonesty through an evaluation system that overvalues the production volume and its artificial impact through citations seem to be incompatible with the requirement for the highlighted cultural education. Nevertheless, the fallacious character of the undertaking that mobilizes everyone in function of criteria arbitrarily constituted, the pressure resulting from the need to feed the machine becomes urgent. We can say that, with rare exceptions, it mediates the everyday life of academic workers and students in a little healthy manner. In general, the academic tasks require full dedication; invade the everyday life of those who are dedicated to this inglorious condition, suffocating them. With that, the boundaries between personal life and professional activity are relativized and the need for more time for work seems to confirm Schopenhauer's (1851/1999) pessimistic assertion regarding the urgency of time: "No little part of the torment of existence lies in this, that Time is continually pressing upon us, never letting us take breath, but always coming after us, like a taskmaster with a whip. If at any moment Time stays his hand, it is only when we are delivered over to the misery of boredom" (1851/1999, p. 278). Schopenhauer, certainly, did not have in mind something similar to the current productivist pressure, which is typical of the work of contemporary researchers, including the Brazilian ones, but rather the tension inherent to the existence that did not succumb to boredom, granting it a status of metaphysical pessimism, so that, according to his conception, "people suffer due to the unsatisfied appetite of their blind will, or would understand one another as long as the former is satisfied" (Adorno, 1969/1995, p. 75). However, his assertion unveils the oppressive potential of the operationalization of time in function of tasks that, to be accomplished in the proportion required by the evaluation systems little used to the concept of education (*Bildung*), precisely require the boredom, which regardless of the ambiguity that might exist in the Schopenhauerian suffering theory, presents itself to us as a contradictory condition: on the one hand, necessary to achieve the requirements that the perception of the force of time would hinder; on the other hand, increases the displeasure level in the dissolution of the working time and free time, to stimulate the need for sharper demarcation between professional life and prosaic life.

In his analysis of the appropriation of free time by productive rationality, Adorno (1969/1995) focused on the lethargy state to which most people succumbed.

With that, he could formulate critical considerations on boredom and its relationship with the psychological tendencies that damage the resistive forces of those that are captured in their orbit:

Boredom is the reflection of the objective gray. With it occurs something similar to what happens with the political apathy. The most important reason for the latter is the feeling, by no means unjustified of the masses, that with the margin of participation in politics that is reserved to them by society, they little can change in their existence, as well as, perhaps in all systems of the Earth currently. The connection between politics and its own interests is opaque to them, thus they retreat in the face of political activity. In close relationship with boredom there is the feeling, justified or neurotic, of impotence: boredom is objective despair. However, at the same time, it also the expression of deformations that the global constitution of society produces in people. (p. 76)

According to Adorno's understanding (1969/1995), boredom exists in function of the life under everyday coercion resulting from the rigorous division of labor.

It would not have to exist. Whenever the conduct in the free time is truly autonomous, determined by the people themselves as free beings, it is difficult to establish the boredom... Provided that people could decide about themselves and about their lives, provided that they were not contained in the always-the-same, then they would not get bored. (p. 76)

This intrusion of the administrative functioning in the several areas of life, including in the scientific activity, to impress its specific rites and rhythms, creates a paradox that requires reflection: the activities that would be able to produce an intervention on the social reality through which people could recognize themselves as subjects have, themselves, as activities that produce immediate impact on the organization and meaning of life, been growing greatly apart from the quality of promoters of reflection, resembling to what, under the badge of hobby, Adorno named pseudo-activity. If the time unoccupied by the work, which could be free, is not precisely free because it is organized according to the rationality that organizes the production, and is present in the administration of idleness and, in the form, reproduced by the numerous products of the cultural industry that fill most of the activities conducted in these circumstances, the qualities of thought that are sustained in the freedom of spirit, as creativity and fantasy, key elements to the artistic expression and esthetic experience, are prevented from being developed as well. For a long time these characteristics have been banished from the alienated work, organized according to the principle of division of tasks and spoliation, with

the increasing industrial organization of scientific production, the intellectual work quintessential, the research, increasingly becomes an alienated work as well, sacrificing, equally, the creativity and the fantasy. Their effects on the academic activities have spread immeasurably at the expense of the extermination of the creativity and the desired innovation.

Also in the scope of conceptual knowledge, these qualities of thought are essential. Without creativity and without fantasy, science becomes mere statement of facts, a form of feeble worship of the pale reality. Similar to the helplessness imposed to everyone in their free time, deprived of fantasy, the intellectual work is pushed to the staunch positivism that denies the subject on behalf of an objectivity artificially obtained through the primacy of the method. The form of the intellectual production also is converted into a matter of method, it performs a ritual of disenchantment that sacrifices the thought itself, eliminating the will. Paradoxically, the suffering of researchers who resist to adapt to the serial production, their anguish before the need heteronomously imposed to convert their yearning for the knowledge into volumes of publication, is a sign that there is still life, that there is still will under pressure. The full adjustment, on the contrary, reveals the effective and uncontrollable installation of boredom.

For a long time, the need for the rigid demarcation of spheres of work and leisure has been denoting the denunciation of the degradation of the creative capacities of human beings under alienated working conditions. When this same need is stated so vehemently in relation to the academic work as well, it becomes necessary to consider the regression level to which it has succumbed, equally affecting the alienated working conditions. It becomes imperative to note that the large-scale writing and publication of scientific studies attend to interests unrelated to the need for knowledge production and that, thus differently from its purpose, the intellectual work also becomes an object of fetish. In spite of its reduction into exchange value, which converts knowledge into a commodity and production indicators into currency, into capital, the fetishized production of studies provides the scientific activity the *modus operandi* of industrial production. With this, also the rationality proper to this productive form is incorporated by the academic research. The notorious tendency to organization of research work and disclosure to obtain greater productive efficiency has favored the gathering of researchers into teams coordinated by senior researchers and collaborators at different levels of education and career in research universities and centers. With this, the teamwork, which might as well result in collaborations of extremely high quality, has also been showing itself as the contradictory expression of the research administered. The division of research labor accelerates the productive process, ensures the desired effectiveness and, notwithstanding, intensifies the levels of alienation regarding the work developed

and, consequently, the need for demarcation requires professional activity and intellectual activity formally unrelated to the professional tasks. In a brief consideration about teamwork for social research, Adorno (1957/2001) highlighted that the organization of research work through division of tasks can result in the impoverishment of the reflection moments, which could, precisely, ensure the overcoming of the arbitrariness of each one of the researchers involved. As he could indicate:

De este modo no solo es posible llevar a cabo un número de tareas mucho mayor del que podría resolver individualmente cada uno de los colaboradores si se enfrentara al conjunto del material sin la ayuda de los demás, sino que todos los trabajos que pasan por la maquinaria acaban por volverse tan compatibles, por asemejarse tanto entre sí, que la falta de integración teórica de los resultados del conjunto de la *social research* se hace doblemente paradójica: el precio que ha de pagarse por ese *streamlining* de las ciencias sociales es muy elevado. (Adorno, 1957-2001, pp. 60-61)

For the purposes of this reflection, the criticism formulated by Adorno with respect to the research administered assists us to understand with greater clarity the factors that also drive scientists to seek subterfuge at leisure to offset the bitterness of the alienated work. This observation is important, because only with a lot of effort we can demarcate precisely the effective difference between reading literary works that promote us esthetic experience only by the quality of experience that they promote regardless of their importance for scientific research, and approaching these works because they constitute a body of knowledge not less important than the conceptual knowledge validated by scientific method. When the spontaneous difficulty of differentiating experiences due to their respective applications in work or as leisure expressions is shown as a problem to be overcome, one can consider that the division between work and free time is already entirely imposed to the academic work and that the technological rationality (Marcuse, 1964/2015) already mediates the intellectual activity as well.

The awareness on this division is crucial to understand why the academic work has been converted into an intense source of suffering. It is not about the suffering caused by the confrontation with the object of knowledge, which, due to its primacy, requires from the subject the reflection and self-criticism, but rather about the suffering artificially inflated in researchers for a type of organization of academic work that blindly achieves the imperative of production.

Between the torment unleashed by the drive administered of the time and the boredom that permeates the alleged free time, in addition to mediating the relationship with hetero-determined knowledge, in both

spheres there outstands the primacy of technological rationality. The intellectual activity is reduced to the pseudo-activity, unlinked from its effective relationship with the objects, deprived of the charm that has been historically present in the cultural education in the form of love to the object (Adorno, 1963/2000). Without this charm, there occurs the spell of the commodity that becomes independent from its production process, succumbing to fetishism.

Under the imperative of academic production, the researchers – graduate students or professors – suffer the pressure from the evaluation agencies that demand increasing volumes of “products” that certify their production capacity, but also suffer with the boredom unleashed by the mechanical appropriation of creativity. Beyond the suffering unleashed by the will of knowledge in circumstances in which one is compelled to produce in a time incompatible with the act of research itself, the boredom is revealed as the most harmful effect of

productivism, because it is supported on the sacrifice of the desire of knowledge.

If the neutrality is prevented from existing in the relation between knowledge and politics, the apathy established in the political sphere, in the attitude that before it regresses to a powerless posture, it is precisely in the academic politics that the relationship between these two elements intensifies the most: as expression of the objective desperation (Adorno, 1969/1995), the boredom is a continuity of suffering before the requirement of adaptation, sacrifice of creativity and freedom of spirit, but it is also an effect of the deformity imposed by this system which dictates its determination to all who dare to think.

If the suffering resulting from the consciousness of oppression does not shut us up, its strength will be able to become liberating, allowing to reaffirm the value of that one thing we do with love: education, research and criticism.

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