

THEMATIC SECTION:  
CAPITALISM, STATE, AND EDUCATION:  
THE LIMITS OF THE CAPITAL



## Theory and Education in the Limits of the Capital

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**ABSTRACT – Theory and Education in the Limits of the Capital<sup>1</sup>.** In this article we deal with theory and education and the different contexts in which the limits of capital, its historicity and relations with human life are located. Another aspect of our reflection is education in the sense of human formation. First, we deal with the historicity of historical materialism; secondly, we present some fundamental concepts for educational research; third, we bring the history of the present and its relationship with authoritarianism in Brazil; finally, we point out the social limits of the capital system its contradictions and the recognition of the dialectical space of the phenomena that establish counter-hegemonic forms of thought and action.

**Keywords: Theory. Education. Capitalism. Historicity. Historical Materialism.**

**RESUMO – Teoria e Educação nos Limites do Capital.** Neste artigo tratamos de teoria e educação e dos diversos contextos em que se situam os limites do capital, sua historicidade e relações com a vida humana. Outro aspecto de nossa reflexão é a educação no sentido de formação humana. Primeiro, tratamos da historicidade do materialismo histórico; a seguir, apresentamos alguns conceitos fundamentais para a pesquisa em educação; terceiro, trazemos a história do presente e sua relação com o autoritarismo em curso no Brasil; por último sinalizamos os limites sociais do sistema capital, suas contradições e o reconhecimento do espaço dialético dos fenômenos que instauram formas contra hegemônicas de pensamento e de ação.

**Palavras-chave: Teoria. Educação. Capitalismo. Historicidade. Materialismo Histórico.**

## Introduction

Where it was originally thought that humans were the advanced and progressive form of life (the angels), and other animals the more primitive, now it may be argued that the animal within us is our noble side, and humanity or civilization the blacker side – a complete reversal of the original Victorian image (Foley, 2003, p. 59).

The understanding of theory and education demands reflection upon the different contexts in which the capital's limits, historicity, and relations with human life are manifested. This justifies bringing the words of a biologist in the beginning of this article, because the capital system is understood not only as a historical matter but also as an existential matter. Just consider the vast universe of scientific and technological discoveries of the 20th century, its continuous advances in the 21st century and the disastrous consequences of many of its experiments<sup>2</sup>.

There is not just one, but many theories of study and explanation of life and its intricacies, which consider the struggle of human beings for survival, for culture, for their beliefs, for socialization and education, with a centuries-old history, like humanity, in its forms to live together, to produce life, to cultivate values and behaviour. But there is a more recent history of the set of epistemologies that dominate the production of scientific knowledge, such as physics, chemistry, social and human sciences, where history, anthropology, sociology are in evidence, including, sustaining an idea of human progress<sup>3</sup>.

Regarding the capital system, which is the other pole of this reflection, we know that it has its own dynamics of production and reproduction of necessary goods for human life. History before the capitalist mode of production shows diversified relations over time in the ways of collecting and transforming existing natural resources and in the relationships evoked between human beings. To talk about antiquity, feudalism, capitalism<sup>4</sup> is to deal with commonplaces that situate us in the present moment and within the possible limits of the capitalist system.

This subject compels us to make a *détour* into the words and their materials and symbols, that is, seeking to understand the movement of history, the time-space of events, the social totality within the mediations and contradictions that constitute this movement and contextualize the objects, social individuals and the phenomena of the rich universe of human existence and its relationship with nature. The concepts briefly mentioned here are part of the theory that we adopted to reflect upon the world, education, and the limits of the capital (Frigotto; Ciavatta, 2001).

What Foley (2003) pointed out in 2003, we may reaffirm eighteen years after the publication of the book, and with further evidences. From Darwin's idea of evolution, as a result of natural selection and adaptation, "[...] the idea of progress [is] only a short step to a ladder

of complexity, a classification of advanced and primitive forms, and an evolutionary framework that relates primarily to value judgements rather than to scientific objectivity” (Foley, 2003, p. 60). The wreckage of wars invented or justified by cultural and religious differences, by territorial disputes between nations and their peoples, produce and reproduce capital on an increasing scale. Climate change, within the limits of a not-too-distant future, threatens the rich diversity of life and the human species. The positivist idea of the advanced development of science as human progress is no longer supported by the field of human and social sciences, which study human beings and their multiple relationships.

Another aspect of our reflection on the capital system and theories of knowledge is the perspective of education meaning human formation. These are terms that refer to a reality beyond instruction or training, they involve formation processes that can be part of education, but education cannot be restricted to them. This inadequate reduction is often advocated by entrepreneurs and their intellectuals to fulfil the requirements of the industrial production, services, mechanized agriculture, and agribusiness.

This is not restricted to businessmen, there is a whole tradition and metaphysical, positivist and apolitical thought of reality that dwells in many educational, business, and confessional institutions. For many generations of Brazilians, university students of Philosophy and Classical Letters<sup>5</sup>, in addition to Latin and Greek writers, used to dawdle in their studies of Portuguese and Brazilian authors. Amongst them, The *Lusiads* by Camões, in which the The Old Man of Restelo<sup>6</sup> stands out as an occasional figure of the great poem, shouting as the Portuguese ships leave the port. But his cry is more than a poetic figure, it has a strong political and existential substance that may be appropriated in the present time, as it shown by Rocha’s (2013) report on the history of the Brazilian Constitution.

Analysing the words uttered by Ulisses Guimarães, when proclaiming the Constitution of 1988, one perceives the conservative spirit of the alert expressed in the figure of the *Velho do Restelo* and the warning signs of the lurking old oligarchy represented by President Sarney. As the first civilian president of Brazil after the Military dictatorship (1964-1985), José Sarney delivers a speech at the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution:

There is a feeling of apprehension that some of its articles may discourage production, drive away capital, that they may have adverse effects on the private sector and may end up inducing idleness and unproductivity. [...] And that the people, instead of getting richer, may impoverish; and may regress rather than progress. In short: Brazilians fear that the Constitution will make the country ungovernable (Costa, 2013 apud Delgado, 2006, p. 315).

In the following day, Ulisses Guimarães rebuts Sarney with an incisive statement aired on national radio and television:

We did not hear the *establishment*, embodied by the Old Man of Restelo, [...] The Brazilian people authorized me to proclaim this Constitution, it will not be just a beautiful unfinished, mutilated, or desecrated statue. The people sent us here to do it, not to be afraid. Let us celebrate the Constitution of 1988. Let us celebrate the life it will protect and promote (Delgado, 2006 apud Rocha, 2013, p. 53-54).

Such as the Old Man of Restelo, under the influence of positivist and metaphysic studies, the political aspects of acts and facts are expunged in the name of a so-called neutral perspective, positive or religious, depending on the text, of its possible meanings and learnings. Authors are studied in depth, but without placing them in the context that would give them the social representation and meaning of the movement of history, where the scientific, artistic and philosophical belong. The studies conducted under these perspectives suppress the country and the people to which they belong.

There is nothing naive about this perspective. In Brazil, it represents theoretical frameworks that overlook the ways of producing life: on the one side, overlooking the exploitation of the land and the enslavement of black peoples brought from Africa, and on the other, by denying the implementation of rights to free workers and European immigrants. The development of the capital system has been camouflaged since the origins of the Colony, throughout the time of the Empire and the Proclamation of the Republic to the present day.

These initial questions intend to highlight the complex universe of ideas and actions involved in the issue of theory and education within the limits of the capital. These questions rise from the courses we have developed and research we carried out on the history of labour-education, the use of photographic images in social research, courses on theoretical-methodological concepts and aspects of the research in Human and Social sciences, education and the capitalist society in which we live. First, we will work on the historicity of historical materialism. In the second section, we will present some fundamental concepts for the educational research; thirdly, we approach the history of the present and its relationship with the current state of authoritarianism in Brazil; in the fourth section, we will seek to point out the social limits of the capital system in the history of the present.

## **The Historicity of Historical Materialism**

Historical materialism is not just a powerful instrument in the analysis of the reality in which we are in motion and which we simultaneously constitute with our ideas and actions. It is also a theory of extreme disturbing power in the world of the production of life from the 15th century onwards, when the capital system began to constitute itself (Marx, 1980; 1985). Its ability to manipulate human labour, to produce limitless wealth and poverty in large scales is a strong component of political tension in individual and collective life.

Like historical materialism, history and its own historicity can be understood in two main interrelated ways. First, through the question of space-time, where and when human beings are in motion and act, phenomena take on form and materiality, and events take on meaning; second, through the understanding of what history is, the science of human memory, one of the ways of explaining what the adventure of being human is.

Marc Bloch (2001), for whom *the historian's job* begins by examining the events of the present, states that the present and the past are not simple things:

The notion of proximity not only lacks precision - how many years are talking about? - but it also places us in the presence of the most ephemeral of attributes. Although the current moment, in the strict sense of the term, is nothing but a perpetual evanescence, the boundary between the present and the past does not therefore move in a less constant movement (Bloch, 2001, p. 61).

There is an ephemerality in the perception of time that, however, guides the rhythm of perception of life. Other historians, such as Prost (2008), address the issue of who writes history: "The historian's question is formulated from the present in relation to the past, focusing on the origins, evolution and itineraries of time, identified through the dates. History is made from time, a complex, constructed and multifaceted time" (Prost, 2008, p. 96). But dates do not convey the social space-time dimension of the phenomena, they are just marks of events that precede and follow the brief time of the dates. They are hallmarks assumed due to the symbolic value of the memory that one wants to preserve; for example, in Brazil the Revolution of 1930, the Military Coup of 64. There is a time before and a time after each symbolic date.

Overcoming a metaphysical vision, regardless of the conditions that spawn any and all facts, requires the understanding of the phenomena's historicity in the time-space. The question of the historicity of time involves a change in the conception of linear time, in the mathematized time such as the dated time of the history of political events, of the Nation State, the succession of events and their homogenization in the quantitative treatment of the phenomena. Time as approached by positivism, by the experimental sciences, by the knowledge-production methods that sustain sciences based on mathematics and which quantify the succession of phenomena.

But, as historians reiterate, social events do not repeat themselves, they are unique. They do not allow time to be fragmented as if social phenomena could be understood when they are broken into crumbs<sup>7</sup>. "Human facts are essentially very delicate phenomena, many aspects of which elude mathematical measurement" (Bloch, 1953, p. 26).

There is an apparent pleonasm when we talk about the historicity of historical materialism. We say apparent because very often the use of the concept comes down to the materialism's philosophical aspects. In

Marx's terms (1979), it is not about Feuerbach's materialism or Hegel's<sup>8</sup> idealism, it is about a critique of the political economy, which transforms the materiality of social relations between the capital and labour into an abstraction, in a nominal relationship.

That the academic analyses critique the perverse relations of human labour exploitation, which favour the private ownership of capital, does not guarantee the historicized treatment given by materialism. The historicized treatment of phenomena entails the explanation of complex social processes that occur in a certain time-space under the action of social characters. It entails the historical reconstruction carried out by Marx in all his work founded on abundant empirical and documental information.

But the history of the revolutionary appropriation of Marx's thinking by the 1917 Russian Revolution, after the power dispute and Stalin's victory, suffered the restrictions of any authoritarian government: the silencing of social movements that can bring to light the contestation of power and its guidelines. We observe, in many analyses of the capitalist system which focus on the critique of political economy, but do not bring to light its historical elements, the empiricity of the phenomena studied in the time-space in which they occur. On the other hand, critics of Marxism reduce Marx's rich social thinking to economics, reduce economics to the economical, exposing the fracture of the absence of the history of economic phenomena.

History is the social production of existence (Marx; Engels, 1979, p. 39): "[...] the premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, is that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history'" But, in order to live, one needs, first of all, to eat, drink, have a home, dress and a few other things. The question is reiterated by various aspects:

This conception of history depends on our ability to expound the real process of production, starting out from the material production of life itself, and to comprehend the form of intercourse connected with this and created by this mode of production (i.e. civil society in its various stages), as the basis of all history; and to show it in its action as State, to explain all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc., and trace their origins and growth from that basis; by which means, of course, the whole thing can be depicted in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another) (Marx; Engels, 1979, p. 55).

In this theoretical work and in others - in an distinguished way in the *Capital*, in the *Critique of political economy* (Marx, 1980) and in the historical events narrated in the *18th of Brumaire* (Marx, 2011) -, Marx opens a window of possibilities for the understanding not only of the great deeds, the great men, of princes and emperors, as required by traditional history, but also an understanding of all the phenomena of

life, of all social classes, of the struggles of the mishaps and tragedies of large historical economic development and of the ideology of scientific progress. His thought does not carry the conceptual and methodological refinement that the *historians by profession* brought up to History, especially, those of the twentieth century, but it has the theoretical clarity of a conception that reveals the social and economic history of the processes and ideologies of the capitalist world in which we live.

We realise how much we owe to the development of science in terms of knowledge of the planet Earth, quality of life, health, comfort and expansion of consciousness, the pleasure of traveling and of the interaction with other peoples and other cultures. But we must see the other side of the coin, the synthesis of the *progress* we are living: the tragedy of wars, the climate changes that threaten the survival of life on the planet, the economic impositions of scientific and technologically developed countries on impoverished countries through the exploitation of their richness by those who oppress them, sell weapons, foment wars and reject their migrants.

## **Fundamental Concepts for Historical Reconstruction**

The initial question is to know how human beings welcome and incorporate reality, how the individual who seeks to know reaches the object that is to be known. And what the paths outlined to reach *truth* are in order to expose the object's interiority and its relationships. Like any theoretical framework of knowledge that analyses reality, historical materialism accommodates some basic concepts<sup>9</sup>. In this essay, we will limit ourselves to the fundamental concepts of totality, mediation, contradiction, particularity and, in addition, an investigation of knowledge and truth, time-space, history as a process and history as a method.

In the production of scientific knowledge, the explanation of the method and the rigour in its application are taken as requirements to grant the knowledge obtained the quality of scientific or true. However, the broadening of the boundaries of science and of the new forms of human interaction with the world has brought to light the complexity of the so-called true knowledge and the multiple types of millennium-old knowledge humanity carries and which is in great part unknown.

A first question concerns the acceptance of certain founding principles of the very conception of knowledge. In his critique of postmodern conceptions, Eagleton (1997) questions Enlightenment norms and classical notions of "[...] truth, reason, identity and objectivity, the idea of universal progress or emancipation [...] or the ultimate grounds of explanation". A new conception of the world sees it "[...] as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities" (Eagleton, 1997, p. 11)<sup>10</sup>.

However, this nucleus of negativities is itself a historical product of material and symbolic changes where great transformations of capitalism take on form, it is marked by the ephemeral and disposable, by the seduction of the image and the paroxysm of its speed, by consumerism, by the industries of culture, finances, services and information, by the presence of technologies in all forms of sociability, including in the everyday life of the poorest, traditional or obsolete – in comparison to the hegemonic standard – sectors.

In the historical reconstruction of the knowledge of the reality within which we are in motion, we refuse all dogmatism and evolutionary conceptions of history, as well as a sceptical, fragmented, relativistic view of the world. We propose the scrutiny of the articulations that explain the connections and meanings of the real and lead to the construction of social totalities, determinants of and determined by every object of study. In this sense, the constructed social totality is not a rationalization or just an explanatory model, but a dynamic set of relations that are necessarily connected with the activity of social individuals.

In this conception, the object is seen in its genesis within broader social processes, which means understanding history as a process; and it is reconstructed based on an always-complex reality that is open to transformations under the action of social individuals, that is, using history as a method. But the understanding of history as a process is not only an academic or scientific matter, but also a political one, as are the questions of knowledge and science themselves. It is Marx who explains the political and ideological elements of history by conceiving it as the real-life process of men and as the science of this process, as knowledge of a matter and as a matter of this knowledge, and yet, history as a process lived, history as object and as method of knowledge.

Time-space is a basic category in the identification of the phenomena and entails a new form of periodization. Zemelman (1987) speaks of the analytical work open to new determinations that emerge from the facts and which allow the re-examination of the theory used, these do not fit in models nor have rigid dates and limits (Zemelman, 1987). Periodizing does not mean simply dating. Periodizing is also to divide history in terms of contents, the restoration of events considered relevant and significant (Odália, 1965). A portion of time is not just an arbitrary ordering, it is a certain portion of history.

Knowing an object in its historicity is to reveal its social structure, its social totality and the mediations and contradictions that constitute it, processes that go beyond the appearance<sup>11</sup>. We talk about mediations, complex social processes (economic, technical, political, environmental, scientific, etc.), the hidden essence of the phenomenon, the multiple relationships that are established, articulated relationships that are reconstructed at the level of knowledge.

Unlike the variable, mediation is neither an analytical instrument for quantitatively measuring the behavior of a phenomenon nor



the search for the cause-and-effect relationship, it is rather the phenomenon's historical specificity. Mediation is located in the field of problematized objects in their multiple relationships in time and in space, under the action of social individuals (Zemelman, 1987).

The theoretical concept of mediations established by social practices, like other similar concepts, was not specifically approached by Marx. Mediation is situated in the methodological context upon which he wrote his work. The entire work of the *Capital* is a methodological exercise, starting from the simplest concept of commodity and reaching the most concrete elements and their mediations, such as wage-labour, capital, exchange, the division of labour etc., until he gets to the totality of the capitalist relations of production. We find explicit elements of the method of investigation of historical materialism in the *Critique of Political Economy* and in the *Capital*.

The classic example in Marx's (1977) critique of political economy is the question of population: "Population is an abstraction if, for instance, one disregards the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn remain empty terms if one does not know the factors on which they depend, e.g., wage-labour, capital, and so on. These presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc." (Marx, 1977, p. 218). Mediation is, thus, the historicized view of the object, whose knowledge must be sought in its most general determinations, in its universals, as well as situated in time and space, that is, in its historical contextualization. It is the historical-social determinations, the field of the particular, that allow the apprehension of an object in the light of more general determinations (Lukács, 1968).

## **The History of the Present and the Authoritarianism**

The question of historical time is fundamental when we think about the moment of today, yesterday, and tomorrow. There is an intermingling of consciousness when we become aware of the most recent events, how we got to them, and the perspective that lies ahead. This feeling becomes more constant in a world ruled by the speed of communications both in the terms of transportation and of Computer-mediated communication. Ideas spread quickly and are almost simultaneously multiplied, contested, or replaced on social medias. We live in a fast-paced world in all directions of the perception of events.

For this analysis, two questions are particularly interesting to us: the question of time and the idea of the present time. In terms of the duration of time, we turn to Braudel (1982) who addresses the idea of the multiple times in which everything happens regardless of our will and knowledge. His great work on Mediterranean geohistory analyses the long duration, the secular time of economic structures, the medium duration of conjunctures and the short duration of events:

All historical work is concerned with breaking down time past, choosing among its chronological realities according to more or less conscious preferences and exclusions. Traditional history, with its concern for the short time span, for the individual and the event, has long accustomed us to the head long, dramatic, breathless rush of its narrative [...] It is clear, then, that there is a short time span which plays a part in all forms of life, economic, social, literary, institutional, religious, even geographical (a gust of wind, a storm), just as much as political (Braudel, 1982, p. 11).

Braudel (1982) moves from *the instant to the long duration*. From the perspective that *economists call the secular tendency*, he proposes a structure, though not in the sense of the

[...] *structure* of an organization, a coherent and fairly fixed series of relationships between realities and social masses. For us historians, a structure is of course a construct, an architecture, but over and above that it is a reality which time uses and abuses over long periods (Braudel, 1982, p. 14, author's highlights).

Dialoguing with economists and other social scientists, Braudel (1982) proposes the medium time span of conjunctures and the multiple times: "It is this which, in our imperfect language, we call by the name of *histoire structurale* ('structural history'), less in opposition to the history of events (*événementielle*) than to the history of conjunctures (*conjoncturale*), to relatively brief waves" (Braudel, 1982, p. 45).

The social totality is the context of the history of the present, of the ongoing events, which crystallize, in a determined social memory, the long duration of the socioeconomic structure, the medium span of conjunctures, the periods of the political history of governments and rulers, and the brief time of events.

The history of the present admits of different approaches and controversies among historians. But such as in any historical report a critique of the sources (origin, authors, comparison with other documents) is required. It should be noted that the history of the present suffers from the contamination of the idea of presentism, in the sense that life is lived as a permanent present<sup>12</sup>. It affects the understanding of time that becomes only present, with no memory of the past and no prospect of the future in face of the acceleration of time and influence of technologies that have given a faster pace to production and to relationships between people.

The genesis of the conception of presentism may lie in the great transformations of the 20th century. This is what we find in Zygmunt Bauman, discussing in his books the various manifestations of *liquid life*. Bauman (2007), "[...] draws attention to the problems that the current condition of the capitalist system raises in human beings today, who live between the need to adapt to the destructive-creative<sup>13</sup> rhythm of the markets and the fear of being left behind, become expendable"

(Bauman, 2007, back cover). In this world of ever-changing transformations, individual achievements come and dissolve.

Hobsbawm (1995)<sup>14</sup> might have been the first historian to draw attention to the way in which the young generation lives in a kind of continuous present: “Most young men and women at the century’s end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in” (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 29). In the Preface to the first editions of *The Age of Extremes*, Hobsbawm (1995) gives rise to the hypothesis of the impossibility of a history of the present. His arguments bear the mark of historical culture, scientific legitimacy, and honesty in identifying the limits of the historian, which characterise his work. Hobsbawm begins by affirming that

Nobody can write the history of the twentieth century like that of any other era, if only because nobody can write about his or her lifetime as one can (and must) write about a period known only from outside, at second or third-hand, from sources of the period or the works of later historians (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 7).

But he claims that his lifetime coincides with most of the facts that he will deal with, the period he called the brief 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically from 1914 and the beginning of the First World War to 1989, marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union<sup>15</sup>. And he goes on to say that he does not know all the scholarly literature published about the period or all the archive sources accumulated by many historians of the period. He considers his knowledge of the topic *casual and patchy* and suggests that he should ignore numerous controverted questions (Hobsbawm, 1995).

Then he exposes other limits of his sources, the fact of having drawn on the “[...] knowledge, memories, and opinions of someone who has lived as a ‘participant observer’, having met people and been to places, interviewed ‘prominent history-makers or statesmen’, people who say things ‘for the public record’”. Other sources are “[...] information drawn from colleagues and students” and other interlocutors involved in the elaboration of the themes, in addition to reading papers and following up on debates.

As the historian of the twentieth century draws closer to the present, he or she becomes increasingly dependent on two types of sources: the daily or periodical press and the periodic reports, economic and other surveys, statistical compilations and other publications by national governments and international institutions (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 9).

In a different theoretical perspective, the idea of a presentist young generation is found in the Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci (Melucci, 1996, apud Santos; Khun Jr., 2013, p. 2). For the author, young people live in a culture and build their history only connected to what they live today, an everyday life without references to a time of fragmented relationships.

The oblivion, the obliteration of memory has been a topic addressed by historians. Pierre Nora (1984), discussing the acceleration of history in today's world, draws attention to the increasing process of discarding the past. The vision of the social totality that constitutes the events is lost, there is a rupture in the balance between the rhythm of life and the demands of the outside world.

Luisa Passerini (2006) considers the controversies of the hallmarks of contemporaneity, *the time in which one lives*, with the analogous meaning of present time, specifying different temporalities for historical research. In the author's words, these are periods demarcated by collective subjectivity. She also points out that it is not just a matter of time, but also of space, *a dimension that belongs to that time*. The understanding of this relationship between a present time and the lived experiences refers to the relationship between a past considered recent, the present and its projection for a time yet-to-come, the future.

Roger Chartier (2006) relates this theme to issues pertaining to the whole history. It is about the "[...] study of the incorporated presence of the past in the present of societies and, therefore, in the social configuration of the classes, groups and communities that constitute them" (Chartier, 2006, p. 217).

We will focus on the Brazilian reality from 2018 onwards. The brief span of time of the events and the conjuncture of Jair Bolsonaro's coming to power as President of the Republic, within capitalism's structural framework in its extreme-right neoliberal version. The president's authoritarian outbursts of derision are perplexing in face of the struggles against the military dictatorship (1964-1985) and for the establishment of the democratic regime as a system of government. The dream of a democracy that was more than parliamentary representation, ruled by the law and popular participation was fuelled by the presence of progressive parties waving various political flags (PDT, PC do B, PSB, PT, PSDB)<sup>16</sup>.

But, with greater or lesser loyalty to their declared principles, the parties that held presidential power, PSDB and PT, did not respond satisfactorily to the demands for dignified living conditions and well-being of most of the population impoverished by a centuries-old history of economic and social exclusion. On the contrary, despite the streaks of nationalism and autonomy, we witnessed neoliberal policies<sup>17</sup>, the acceptance of consented economic dependence, articulated with financial benefits, the privatization of the economy of agribusiness, mining, illegal deforestation, the privatization of education, the impoverishment of the population<sup>18</sup>.

In the present space-time of the current government's authoritarianism, we have identified some aspects reiterated by the Brazilian society: the presence of the military ideology and its basic principles of order, hierarchy, and unconditional obedience from subordinate individuals to superiors<sup>19</sup>. A well-founded analysis (Schwarcz, 2019) also reveals the naturalization of inequality, the myth of the three races

united by racial miscegenation, assuming a country without conflicts, informal and egalitarian; the absence of racial and religious hatred; the construction of narratives that contradict the evidence of facts. “[W]e have practiced an incomplete and flawed form of citizenship, marked by bossism, strong patrimonialism, various forms of racism, sexism, discrimination and violence” (Schwarcz, 2019, p. 19-24).

We have witnessed the authoritarianism of the proto-fascist regime of the Jair Bolsonaro’s government (2018-present). We live in the alleged finitude of a continuous present in which allusions to fascism are frequent. As a political ideology, fascism defends the totalitarian state, the one-party, militarism, violence, war.

The intense use of social media to disqualify PT, with allusions and half-truths, fake-news, they have led to situations of popular wrath in the 2017 elections, in which those who did not agree with Bolsonaro would become the enemy to be fought or shot down<sup>20</sup>.

The use of lies as a persuasion technique and violence as a norm in social relations with opponents were the scenario of the elections. When elected, the president chose to have direct contact with the population through social medias and morning meetings at the *Palácio do Planalto* (the fenced area for journalists and supporters on the other side), and the promotion of agglomerations of supporters without observing the basic protection protocols in the face of a growing pandemic (masks, social distancing). The macabre outcome of the disease’s virulence, the rebellious recklessness of the people and the bad example given by of the country’s highest authority caused more than 470,000 deaths (until June 7, 2021)<sup>21</sup> and double or triple the number of people bereaved by the loss of their relatives and friends.

In addition to this behaviour, the autocratic transgression of limits in derogation from the law, the dismantling of public institutions of health, education, culture, science, environment, etc. This set of behaviours, discourses and actions may be easily connected to the fascism of Benito Mussolini in Italy in the period before and during the Second World War (September 1939 to April 1945).

Schwartzman (1982) helps us situate the historicity of the term *fascist*, which is frequently used today by the media. The author understands that “[...] [t]he importance of concepts, as well as political theory or any other, is measured by the richness of the phenomena they help understand or predict” (Schwartzman, 1982, p. 35). The best concepts would be those “[...] that assist the process of making sense of and providing meaning to a larger set of facts and processes” (Schwartzman, 1982, p. 35).

Almeida and Toniol (2018) state that conservatism, fascism and fundamentalism are terms that refer us “[...] to founding historical cases, whose characterization is directly associated with specific actors involved in particular historical situations. [...] Source of a symbolic repertoire that, although disseminated by history, goes beyond the specificity of its original events” (Almeida and Toniol, 2018, p. 8). Re-

cently, Jair Bolsonaro occupied important avenues of the city of Rio de Janeiro with the explosive noise of powerful motorcycles in a display of the strength of his power, days after a similar demonstration in Brasília (Zanini, 2021)<sup>22</sup>. His initiative resembles a similar rally registered in a photo of Mussolini in Italy during the fascist dictatorship (1925-1943).

**Photograph 01 – Bolsonaro During Motorbike Parade in Rio de Janeiro**



Source: Zanini (2021).

Journalist and professor Fábio Palácio (2021) published an article with a photo of Mussolini on his motorcycle in Rome in 1939<sup>23</sup>.

**Photograph 02 – Benito Mussolini on his Motorcycle in Rome**



Source: Palácio (2021).

In his analysis, Palácio (2021) recalls that “[...] the fascist leader Benito Mussolini promoted similar motorcycle parades”. He also talks about the symbolism of the motorcycle in the fascist ideology and the relationship between politics and aesthetics. The first ideas related to fascism originate from the futurist manifesto of poet Filippo Tomaso Marinetti that had repercussions in other countries (France, Brazil, Russia, Portugal) and the support of nationalist activists, poets and intellectuals. Among these, Gabrielle d’Annunzio who carried forward the idea of a multi-ethnic city, Fiume, which would become a *new Rome*. The idea did not go any further, but fascism got closer to futurism and its conception of modernity.

Palácio (2021) thus analyses fascism:

It is a kind of mechanistic ideology, which tends to see the future of human beings in the light of a ‘machine metaphor’, in two senses. First, because it reinforces the fascist conception of ‘organic society’. [...] ‘The human being is conceived, in this perspective, as an automaton at the service of the improvement of the race’ (Palácio, 2021, p. C6).

Secondly, what also brings it closer to the ‘machine metaphor’ is an image of strength, of power: “In this perspective, technology is conceived as an extension of the human body, capable of making it more vigorous. This is the meaning hidden behind the fascist ideology of weapons and means of transport such as the car, the plane... and the motorcycle” (Palácio, 2021, p. C6).

Palácio (2021) relates Marinetti’s thought to motorcycles that appear in dystopian films:

In these films, motorcycles emerge not as a means of transport, but as weapons, artifacts that expand the bellicose potential of human beings. ‘War is beautiful because it fulfils, for the first time, the dream of a man with a metallic body’, says Marinetti in his apologetic manifesto. The adherence to futuristic ideas took on different forms depending on the country<sup>24</sup>. But, while in Italy, ‘it leaned towards fascism, in Russia, another approach was built, in alliance with the socialist movement’ (Palácio, 2021, p. C6).

Mussolini has its political origins in socialism. But he had a memorable career as a man of action and thought that always oscillated between left and right. Juan Carlos Mariátegui’s analysis (1925) distances Bolsonaro from Mussolini’s socialist roots and from Italy’s economic and political conditions at that time; it brings him closer to fascist rhetoric and mobilization techniques:

Let us observe a psychological and physiognomic fact: Mussolini was not brainy, but he was sentimental. In politics, in the press, he was not a theorist or a philosopher, but a rhetorician and a leader. [...] The Fascist program is confusing, contradictory, heterogeneous: it is a mix, a *pelemêle*, of liberal concepts and syndicalist concepts. In other

words, Mussolini did not dictate a real program for fascism; he dictated a plan of action<sup>25</sup> (Mariátegui, 1925, p. 5).

The comparison between the two politicians is not simple, there are convergences in violence, in militarism, in populism in the way they directly address the masses and refuse to follow the protocols of a democratic regime. Bolsonaro, yielding to the exchange of favours, like the 'Centrão', negotiates his personal and family interests with the group of politicians who traditionally seek political and monetary advantages.

Historically, ideas are not transplanted from one place to another, but they can gain universality by tuning in to the culture or interests of other countries or personalities. In an article on *Brazilian Fascism*, André Singer et al. (2020) argue that there would be a certain *structure of passions*, which relates to the characteristics of fascism indicated by Robert Paxton: "[...] the cult of violence and militarism; the persistence that the salvation of the nation requires the elimination of internal enemies through permanent mobilization [...]" (Paxton, apud Singer et al., 2020, p. B 16).

## Theory and Education and the Limits of the Capital

Theories, practices, experiences, and relationships with others help us understand the world in which we live. And this, hegemonically in the planet in the 21st century is the capitalist mode of production, the capital system. The norms, values, behaviours, and knowledge are part of educational processes and are part of the world in which we produce our lives.

We are here talking about education as human formation. Neidson Rodrigues (1999) connects education to human beings' formative action, and this link is materialised in its historicity. Therefore, he dispels any generic definition of the purposes of education and a reduction of it to (liberal) citizenship to include the living conditions in which education takes place. In the educational process, with scientific-technological and cultural knowledge of humanity the limits of nature are transposed.

Saviani and Duarte (2010), when discussing human formation, refer to Marx, for whom in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*:

[...] human formation is analysed in the relationship between the historical process of objectification of the human being and the individual's life as a social being. What makes the individual a generic being, that is, a representative of the human race, is the vital activity, which Marx defines as that which ensures the life of the species (Saviani; Duarte, 2010, p. 5).

But we live processes of social, political, cultural, and educational regression. They began after the coup that culminated in the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, Michel Temer's government (2016-



2017) and continued mainly with the contingency and state budget cuts for public institutions during Bolsonaro's government. The effects of EC-n 95/2016 are pernicious. Investments in social areas have been frozen for twenty years. Educational and Labour Law reforms followed, revoking rights conquered throughout the 20th and 21st centuries<sup>26</sup>.

Revisionist, moralistic and racist policies were introduced; the institutions that support democracy have been dismantled; funds for health, culture, and education were dispersed and frozen; threats to public educational institutions, specially universities, are frequent; despite regulations and laws and norms of the environmental public administration, the deforestation and attacks on indigenous peoples were allowed, with the consent and incentive of the authorities whose function is to protect them. We are witnesses of the presidential scorn of Covid's victims; of the offensive treatment given to the press; of the foul vocabulary used live and on social medias, of the refusal to purchase the vaccines and assist hospitals with funds, since the announcement of the pandemic in the first months of 2020.

The reforms advance grimly, taking us back to the past. They are clearly in favour of the accumulation of capital, the deterioration of work conditions, the privatization – all losses of the working-class population. These are steps taken forward by the capital, in its incessant toil of accumulation and reproduction in the game of financial economics.

The limits of the capital lie primarily in the system's impossibility to deny its own way of being, a way of producing commodities, generating a surplus of value through the exploitation of human labour. Or, in other words, the worker receives only a part of the value generated by the work, and the capitalist benefits from this surplus for the purposes of production (raw material, equipment, etc.) and reproduction of privately appropriated capital.

In Marx's terms (1980, p. 584): "Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is essentially the production of surplus-value. The labourer produces, not for himself, but for capital. It no longer suffices, therefore, that he should simply produce. It no longer suffices, therefore, that he should simply produce [...]", he has to produce more and faster, and work for the self-expansion of the capital. There are two ways to increase productivity or extract surplus value, absolute and relative:

The prolongation of the working-day beyond the point at which the labourer would have produced just an equivalent for the value of his labour-power, and the appropriation of that surplus-labour by capital, this is production of absolute surplus-value.

The relative surplus value is also the extraction of absolute surplus value, but it consists in the reduction of working time through the introduction of machinery and equipment, organization of work (Taylorism, Fordism, Toyotism), computers and others, *working from home* (saving costs with buildings, cleaning services, electricity, telephone,

and also the time and expenses with the transport of employees). Greater productivity is achieved in the same length of working time or in less time by intensifying work.

The so-called crises of the capital are nothing more than crises of the accumulation process, due to the capital's law of the falling rate of profit, as a consequence of economic cycles or the decline of activities. It is a delicate balance. Bottomore (1988) foresees that

Any disturbance or disruption of economic life can potentially ramify throughout the system. A bankruptcy of a large firm or bank for example, has implications for numerous apparently sound enterprises, whole communities, and hence for political stability (Bottomore, 1988, p. 84).

These are the main features of what we live today. What seems to be a succession of economic crises is more of a social crisis in all its extension because it is about the ways of producing life in the real world, in the population's living conditions. We are referring to the crisis of labour, employment, and precarious working contracts; to the imperialistic power of developed countries over peripheral countries; to the organic nucleus of the capital; the hegemony of the market to the detriment of the lives of human beings and the planet; the ideology of consumerism and its effects of compensation and obliteration of social tensions with the support of the media; to the uncertain future prospects for the young<sup>27</sup>; to the blunt manifestations of the *new right*<sup>28</sup>. Are these the limits of the capital? The evidence goes in the opposite direction, they indicate advantage for big businesses and growing profits for private banks.

However, social transformations involving the destruction and reconstruction of peoples' lives are also real. Contradiction is not an abstract concept, it is the permanent movement of transformation of everything that exists in nature, including human beings. Even great catastrophes, if they are not movements of natural phenomena, they are wars and destruction promoted by humans. From the theoretical point of view of historical materialism, if the contradictions of the capital are not evident, they are plausible and so are its limits in the medium and long term if the planet survives the attacks.

David Harvey (2016) wrote about the *17 contradictions and the end of capitalism*. He mentions the Aristotelian concept of contradiction, but he understands that the contradiction "[...] arises when two seemingly opposed forces are simultaneously present within a particular situation, an entity, a process or an event" (Harvey, 2016, p. 15). For the author (2016, p. 17) "Crises are moments of transformation in which capital typically reinvents itself and morphs into something else".

Marx (1980) submits the concept to the Hegelian dialectic and uses it at various moments in the *Capital*, always in relation to concrete problems of his theory, the commodity, wage, labour, production, the lives of workers, for example:

By ruining small industry and homeworking, [capital] destroys the last refuges of the superfluous workers and therefore the safety valve that has so far preserved the entire social mechanism. By favoring the natural conditions and social combinations of the production process, it sharpens the contradictions and antagonisms of the capitalist form of production, maturing, at the same time, the formative elements of a new society and the destroyers of the old society (Marx, 1980, p. 575).

We live today on the verge of a dystopian world, but a real one. Nevertheless, some controversial State policies and social programs for the low-income classes still remain; public policies offering resistance in favour of education, science and technology are promoted; there have been advances in the training of technical and scientific staff in terms of resisting the governmental madness; research has been carried out and services have been offered to address the problems faced by the Brazilian population; and it is important to recognize the dialectical space of the phenomena that establish counter-hegemonic forms of thought and action.

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## Notes

- 1 Translated by Vinícius Neves de Cabral.
- 2 Data on chemical wars, pesticides in food and their great impact on the contemporary world, the atomic bombs used by the USA in World War II in 1945.
- 3 The idea of progress, which we will not discuss in this paper, has to do with the expectation generated by the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries), contesting medieval religious ideas, arguing that human knowledge and advances in science would lead humanity to modernization, freedom, better living conditions. Among philosophers, the positivist doctrine of Augustus Comte was its most expressive elaboration.
- 4 For a more detailed analysis, see Marx (1980); Heilbroner (1984); Sociedades (2012).
- 5 N.T. In Brazil, university courses dedicated to the study of Latin, Greek, and Portuguese.
- 6 “This episode begins at the outset of the voyage of Vasco da Gama across unknown oceans. An old man (the Old Man of Restelo) goes down to confront the occupants of the ships, and argues that the reckless navigators, driven by greed for fame, glory and riches, are courting disaster for themselves and the Portuguese people”. Available at: <[https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Velho\\_do\\_Restelo](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Velho_do_Restelo)>. – Accessed in: August 2021.
- 7 According to François Dosse (1992, p. 190), despite investments in other areas of research, the *École des Annales* has introduced the fragmentation of objects, whose aspects are studied separately. In [quantitative] serial history, “[...] the serialization of the historical field has the effect of giving each object independence from other elements of the real. Detached from the contingencies of the

concrete, the object takes flight, it exists in itself, covering the other dimensions of reality”.

- 8 “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such” (Marx, 1979, p. 11).
- 9 This section is based on Ciavatta (2001).
- 10 For a discussion of history and truth see Fontes (2001).
- 11 For a discussion of essence and appearance in object construction see Kosik (1976).
- 12 The discussion of this topic is based on Ciavatta (2013).
- 13 Mészáros (1996) calls this phenomenon in the current capitalist world *destructive production*.
- 14 As far as we are concerned, Hobsbawm published it in Brazil in 1995 and 1994 in Europe.
- 15 Many authors have written about the collapse of the USSR. Among them: Blackburn (1992) and Kurz (1992).
- 16 The abbreviations are respectively: Democratic Labour Party, Communist Party of Brazil, Brazilian Socialist Party, Workers Party, Brazilian Social-democratic Party.
- 17 In the 1990s and 2000s, many were the publications elucidating and criticizing the new neoliberal guises of capitalism. The tempestuous issues of today were already present: the *new* right, the decay of democracy, anti-national interests, privatization, modernization, conservative discourse and *adjustments*, corporate education, among others, see Sodré (1995), Gentili (1995), Fiori (2001).
- 18 It is not for this text to go into the details of these issues, but some journalistic articles discuss these problems: Setti (2021); Cucolo (2021); Zarur (2021).
- 19 Some examples demonstrate how this has taken shape in the current government: by filling hundreds of positions in the civil government structure with military personnel; dismissal of ministers who disagreed with the presidential guidelines in scientific-based health matters.
- 20 We have written a detailed exposition of some facts of intolerance and violence in the period (Ciavatta, 2021).
- 21 In a bulletin released this Monday (06/07/2021), the Ministry of Health reported that Brazil recorded 1,010 new deaths caused by covid-19 between yesterday and today. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been 474,414 deaths from the disease across the country. Available at: <<https://www.uol.com.br/vivabem/noticias/redacao/2021/06/07/covid-19-coronavirus-casos-mortes-07-de-junho.htm?cmpid=copiaecola>>. – Accessed in: June 2021.
- 22 “Jair Bolsonaro acena durante a ‘motociata’ com apoiadores no Rio de Janeiro, no último dia 23. André Borges – 23.mai.21/AFP” (Zanini, 2021, p. A6).
- 23 “Benito Mussolini em sua motocicleta, em Roma. 8 mar. 39 – Keystone Pictures USA/Alamy/Fotoarena” (Palácio, 2021, p. C6).

- 24 In Brazil, this reverberated in the poet Augusto de Campos; in Portugal, in Fernando Pessoa; in Russia, in Mayakovsky.
- 25 In the original (Mariátegui, 1925, p. 5): Observemos un dato psicológico y fisonómico: Mussolini no há sido nunca un cerebral, sino más bien un sentimental. En la política, en la prensa, no ha sido un teórico ni un filósofo sino un retórico y un conductor. El programa del fascismo es confuso, contradictorio, heterogéneo: contiene, mezclados *péle-méle*, conceptos liberales y conceptos sindicalistas. Mejor dicho, Mussolini no le ha dictado al fascismo un verdadero programa; le ha dictado un plan de acción.
- 26 For a discussion of the context of the reforms and their details, among others, see Ciavatta (2019).
- 27 See Ciavatta (2013).
- 28 See Saints; Tanschei (2019).

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