

## Some notes on the relationship between Adorno and the Southern Epistemology

Algumas notas sobre a relação entre Adorno e a Epistemologia do Sul

Gustavo Ruiz da Silva  
Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Brasil

Daniel Lopes Prado Matheus  
Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Brasil

### Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo desenvolver uma compreensão de como a indústria cultural ainda opera na era pós-colonial. Para tanto, a primeira parte deste artigo se debruçará sobre a leitura de Adorno e Horkheimer sobre a modernidade, abordando como a racionalidade instrumental pode se prestar à barbárie, juntamente com uma exposição da análise de Adorno sobre a indústria cultural. A segunda parte apresentará a teoria decolonial, sua crítica à modernidade europeia e, particularmente, seu foco no neoimperialismo. Esta teoria será então colocada lado a lado com a teoria crítica, analisando suas diferenças em relação às questões raciais e como a crítica ao capitalismo pode representar um ponto de encontro entre as duas teorias. Finalmente, a conclusão terá em conta todos os elementos anteriores para explicar a ligação entre a indústria cultural e a sua estratégia atual em áreas ex-coloniais

**Palavras-chave:** Epistemologia do Sul; Adorno; Colonialismo; Indústria Cultural; Modernidade.

### Abstract

This paper aims to develop an understanding of how the culture industry still operates in the postcolonial era. To this end, the first part of this paper will look at Adorno and Horkheimer's reading of modernity, touching on how instrumental reasoning can lend itself to barbarism, along with an exposition of Adorno's analysis of the culture industry. The second part will present decolonial theory, its critique of European modernity and, particularly, its focus on neo-imperialism. This theory will then be put alongside critical theory, analyzing their differences concerning racial issues and how their critique of capitalism may represent a meeting point between the two theories. Finally, the conclusion will consider all previous elements to explain the connection between the Culture industry and its current strategy in former colonial areas.

**Keyword:** Southern Epistemology; Adorno; Colonialism; Culture Industry; Modernity.

### Informações do artigo

Submetido em 29/07/2023  
Aprovado em 04/01/2024  
Publicado em 15/05/2024.

 <https://doi.org/10.25247/P1982-999X.2024.v24n2.p225-248>



Esta obra está licenciada sob uma licença  
Creative Commons CC BY 4.0

### Como ser citado (modelo ABNT)

SILVA, Gustavo Ruiz da; MATHEUS, Daniel Lopes Prado. Some notes on the relationship between Adorno and the Southern Epistemology. *Ágora Filosófica*, Recife, v. 24, n. 2, p. 225-248, maio/ago. 2024.

## 1 INTRODUÇÃO

This essay follows this important Habermas consideration:

The thinking that has retrospectively been ascribed to the Frankfurt School was a reaction to the historical experiences of fascism and Stalinism, particularly a reaction to the unfathomable holocaust. A particular tradition of thought only remains alive if its essential purposes stand the test of time in the light of new experiences; this cannot be done without giving up outdated theoretical content. [...] Therefore, exploration and ruthless revisionism is the appropriate approach (1983, p. 209).

In this sense, it is important to notice the rise of new epistemological perspectives in Human Sciences, especially those fighting against racial marginalization. In the second half of the 20th century, the so-called Southern Perspectives (viz. decoloniality, subalternity, etc.) started to pressure European mainstream theories, circumscribing their geographical and racial backgrounds; one of these affected schools of thought, then, was the Critical Theory. However, mobilizing Habermas' indication (the Frankfurt School need for revision) and decolonial critiques, "there is no doubt that Adorno demands actuality; he considers hatred of actuality to be reactionary; for him, theory must be up to date and fit the times. However, this means that theory must change with time" (Demirović, 2013, p. 368).

Therefore, a correlation between Critical Theory (especially Frankfurt School's first generation) and Southern Perspectives is proposed here, particularly noticing the neocolonial cultural strategy of oppression. To do so, firstly, this essay presents Adorno's critique of modernity, aiming to show some proximities with decoloniality. Subsequently, Adorno's considerations on the Culture Industry will be circumscribed to express its usefulness in contemporary imperialism processes. Afterward, the second part of this paper presents two considerations: (1) decolonial theoretical bases and (2) its contributions to the Frankfurt School. Finally, they will be all reunited to defend that Adorno's notion of Culture Industry, when updated by anti-colonial perspectives, can provide a key analytical approach to specific Southern issues, especially those concerning non-military or physical strategies.

## 2 ADORNO AND HIS CRITICAL THOUGHT

### 2.1 On Modernity

The problem of modernity is a central theme in Adorno's thought. A critique of modernity can be seen in the author's earliest texts, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). This project has at its core the idea that while humanity reached the means of dominating nature, the project of Enlightenment, which until then was seen as the greatest advance of civilization, ends up bringing within itself barbarism. One of the main problems posed by Adorno and Horkheimer is that even the most ancient mythologies of civilization, associated with the mystic and cultic, are meant to organize the world, and in this aspect, we can find their 'enlightening' element. The Enlightenment, similarly, does not put an end to this mythical aspect but ends up elaborating a new mythology of its own. On the barbarism that instrumental reason and non-critical thought can bring about – both of which the Enlightenment was able to provide – Adorno reinstates the importance of philosophy for the role of critical thinking about modernity:

The undiminished persistence of suffering, fear, and menace necessitates that the thought that cannot be realized should not be discarded. After having missed its opportunity, philosophy must come to know, without any mitigation, why the world—which could be paradise here and now—can become hell itself tomorrow. Such knowledge would indeed truly be philosophy (Adorno, 2005b, p. 14).

With this use, Adorno addresses the Enlightenment self-destruction problem – regarded as modernity-generating element. For him, societal institutions with which the Enlightenment is intertwined already contain germs of regression, which is ubiquitous nowadays. Adorno and Horkheimer (2022), who were witnesses of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomena of ultranationalism and fascism, state that technologically educated masses tend to subject themselves to the mentality of despotism and have an affinity for nationalist paranoia. Such thinking established a point that would apparently have its actuality restricted only to the processes of ultranationalism seen at the time of its publication. However, it is visible how Adorno's thinking still prevails when observing the contemporary world and its dynamics.

In the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism, in its self-destructive affinity to nationalist paranoia, in all this uncomprehended senselessness the weakness of contemporary theoretical understanding is evident (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. xvi).

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment had the project of disenchanting the world, dissolving myths, and ending faith through knowledge, which has its origin in man's ancestral fear of the forces of nature; therefore, it was embodied in the concept of "technique", which does not aim the subjects' happiness, but the complete dominion over nature. They also point out that this is a particularly repressive point of Enlightenment, because only a self-violent thought is hard enough to shatter myths, and the way to consolidate dominion over nature is characterized, for the subjects, by renouncing the search for the meaning of life itself. Therefore, the world becomes a field of systematic exploration that is increasingly restricted, always seeking to reduce multiplicity in favor of the unity of thought:

Ruthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness (...). Faced by the present triumph of the factual mentality, Bacon's nominalist credo would have smacked of metaphysics and would have been convicted of the same vanity for which he criticized scholasticism. [...] For the Enlightenment, only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent or an event; its ideal is the system from which everything and anything follows. Its rationalist and empiricist versions do not differ on that point. Although the various schools may have interpreted its axioms differently, the structure of unitary science has always been the same. Despite the pluralism of the different fields of research, Bacon's postulate of *una scientia universalis* is as hostile to anything which cannot be connected as Leibniz's *mathesis universalis* is to discontinuity (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 2).

## 2.2 On Culture Industry

Adorno and Horkheimer see the Culture Industry as "the Enlightenment as mass deception", but the decline of religion did not bring civilization great cultural chaos since the new means of communication and media are the very continuation of mysticism. They saw the Culture Industry phenomenon as the apex of the "false identity of universal and particular", in which subjects and the

totality are apparently reconciled, when, in fact, the entire system with which the Culture Industry operates is a massive and powerful instrument of social control.

The sociological view that the loss of support from objective religion and the disintegration of the last precapitalist residues, in conjunction with technical and social differentiation and specialization, have given rise to cultural chaos is refuted by daily experience. Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together. [...] The conspicuous unity of macrocosm and microcosm confronts human beings with a model of their culture: the false identity of universal and particular. All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 94).

For the first time in history, as Adorno and Horkheimer observe, culture is defined as an industry. One of the problems noted by the philosophers is that there is an immense hierarchization in the products that the Culture Industry produces, such as, for example, the distinction that exists between the production of A or B films, between magazine stories of different prices — a system that operates immediately through the classification, organization, and statistical computation of consumers. That is, the culture industry operates and defines its prices through the recognition of its consumers.

It is important to note that, according to them, entertainment and free time have always existed before the culture industry - what it does is just appropriate these elements, occupy the free time of subjects, and provide these subjects with entertainment. Adorno sees that since the beginning of modern Western civilization, there has always been a more popular art, which supplied this entertainment function, the same one that the culture industry now supplies. This “light art” developed alongside autonomous art, which is difficult to distinguish. With the Culture Industry emergence, the phenomenon that occurs is this light art absorption – carefully managed and bureaucratically organized – into serious art, so that it has the semblance of autonomous art, when, in fact, everything the consumer is touching is nothing more than industrialized products shaped by the culture industry. This consideration about “light art” is shown in the following excerpt from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

“Light” art as such, entertainment, is not a form of decadence. Those who deplore it as a betrayal of the ideal of pure expression harbor illusions about society. The purity of bourgeois art, hypostatized as a realm of freedom contrasting to material praxis, was bought from the outset with the exclusion of the lower class; and art keeps faith with the cause of that class, the true universal, precisely by freeing itself from the purposes of the false. Serious art has denied itself to those for whom the hardship and oppression of life make a mockery of seriousness and who must be glad to use the time not spent at the production line in being simply carried along. Light art has accompanied autonomous art as its shadow. It is the social bad conscience of serious art (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 107).

For Adorno, the problematic situation in which art finds itself can be demonstrated in Canto XII of Homer's *Odyssey*. In this passage of the *Odyssey*, the proto-bourgeois subject, the figure of Ulysses, approaches the sirens, and his curiosity drives him to look for a way to listen to the beauty of their song without being annihilated. This correlates with the situation of art and beauty during the development of European civilization history. Historically, Western civilization has not considered art and beauty to be strictly necessary since they do not lead to self-preservation. From another point of view, beauty is also, at the same time, highly dangerous, subversive, and an emancipatory characteristic for subjects; from the civilization perspective, it happens because beauty subverts the material survival predominance in exchange for pleasure, enjoyment, and subjects' emancipation. In Canto XII of the *Odyssey*, we see Ulysses engaging in a plan to hear the sirens' song – he allows himself to be tied to the ship mast, while the rest of the crew continues rowing with their ears plugged.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, this is an allegory of the art and culture situation within what they define as an “administered world”, *viz.*, art and culture become a consumption luxury item by a tiny minority, who find themselves, like Ulysses, tied by hand and foot. In a society where art and culture are inaccessible to the vast majority, the immense majority is only responsible for keeping this administered world running, without any concept of beauty or perspective.

The way of civilization has been that of obedience and work, over which fulfillment shines everlastingly as mere illusion, as beauty deprived of power. Odysseus's idea, equally inimical to his death and to his happiness, shows awareness of this. He knows only two possibilities of escape. One he prescribes to his comrades. He plugs their ears with wax and orders them to row with all their might. Anyone who wishes to survive must not listen to the

temptation of the irrecoverable, and is unable to listen only if he is unable to hear. Society has always made sure that this was the case. Workers must look ahead with alert concentration and ignore anything which lies to one side. The urge toward distraction must be grimly sublimated in redoubled exertions. Thus, the workers are made practical. The other possibility Odysseus chooses for himself, the landowner, who has others to work for him. He listens, but does so while bound helplessly to the mast, and the stronger the allurements grow the more tightly he has himself bound, just as later the bourgeois denied themselves happiness the closer it drew to them with the increase in their own power (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 26).

### **3 DECOLONIALISM AND ANTI-COLONIAL CRITIQUE**

#### **3.1 First Considerations**

The decolonial turn, thinking from a Southern perspective, expresses a set of epistemological struggles against the modern Eurocentric rational and analytical model. The Global South (Africa, Latin America, Southwest Asia etc.) reveals a wide range of cross-pollination knowledge. Regarding the elimination of epistemological reflection in cultural and political contexts of the Global South by the dominant epistemology, with the legacy of colonial ideology (widely associated with capitalist and patriarchal domination), those subordinated subjects have their speech right questioned (Spivak, 1985, p. 3-32). This method of oppression marginalizes and puts into effect a series of impediments in the expression of knowledge produced by these subjects, forcing them to remain as local referents, seen only as endowed with particular and non-universal value – therefore, not accepted in the Global North-Center.

Thus, concerning subaltern social groups (especially victims of abysmal exclusions), modern science has always been produced by someone from the outside about someone from the inside – the latter being conceived as an object of investigation and likely provider of information, but never of knowledge (Santos, 2019, p. 220). In this context, since the beginning of modernity, Europeans wanted to understand populations of other regions, their languages, and their cultures, but to represent them and highlight their “primitive” character and the consequent need to civilize and dominate them. The conquest of the cultures and minds of the targeted populations is essential for the colonial mission (Kane, 1971). One of the consequences is the “sanctioned ignorance” that

constitutes a hierarchy of worldviews that rejects any other knowledge than modern scientific rationality. Only a few can benefit from the privilege of the hegemonic worldview, safeguarding knowledge-power structures that order, reject, sanction, or disqualify discourses (Bidaseca & Meneses, 2018, p. 12).

Following Wiredu's suggestion that:

[...] philosophy takes, or should take, nothing, or nearly nothing, for granted; and the rational approach to that heritage must be that of critical reconstruction. Regarding the elements of foreign philosophic thought with which our colonial history and contemporary experience have brought us into contact the need for a critical spirit should be doubly obvious (2002, p. 54).

It is necessary to anchor a methodological line of challenge and resistance against the North, the decolonial studies are working on the triad modernity/coloniality/decoloniality. To this end, it is essential to remember the writings of Quijano (1999) and Wallerstein (2004) on the coloniality of power and the world system theory. Thus, decoloniality is a term that emerged from the need to go beyond the idea that colonization was a finished event, as it was a process that had/has continuity, even though it acquired other forms<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, even though Latin America was responsible for decolonial thinking, this framework operates much more as an architecture of Reason than a thought properly anchored on geographic bases (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 17).

In this sense, it aims to denounce and fight with theories, concepts, and categories fixed in the historical-social development of marginalized and peripheral realities against colonialism and its various forms and facets (Bernardino-Costa & Grosfoguel, 2016, p. 15-24). Consequentially, the great asset of these theoretical perspectives is to defend that one should analyze how colonialism/imperialism of an area has been acting from categories and concepts specific to that zone of influence and domination. The “decolonial turn” refers to the act of opening up thought and letting go of modern European rationality by accepting ‘other forms of life outside the naturalization of the illusion that is modernity and its darker side, coloniality’ (Oliveira & Lucini, 2021, p. 100). This decolonial attitude is an experience of the subject's consciousness concerning

---

<sup>1</sup> Take for instance Narayan's (2014) work, in which she diagnoses that, in “our ordinary, unremarkable daily practical activity”, we are divided between “‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ bodies [...] ‘populations’ from less or more ‘developed cultures’ that are more remote from or closer to the ideal of ‘the human’”.



the Eurocentric modernity project; an awareness of their knowledge-power relations engendered with colonization and its practices of domination and subjugation (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 116). In this sense, as Watt (1994) noted, western thought has not developed in a vacuum, even if the Enlightenment and its famous writers make it seem so. In this sense, the general characterization of modernity as the rationalization of the world, the

Product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value (Weber, 1930, p. 13).

Furthermore, despite the formal independence of the countries that suffered European invasion, we still identify that the ongoing globalization is, in the first place, the culmination of a process that began with the concomitant constitution of colonies and the modern Eurocentric capitalism as a new standard of power worldwide (Quijano, 2005, p. 122). Thus, according to the decolonial theory, coloniality appears as constitutive of modernity, and if such a relationship is built in this way, to break with this colonial logic that persists in an obscure way, one must break with modernity in its European conformations as well (Mignolo, 2015, p. 15).

The diagnosis of coloniality as the hidden face of modernity, the continued logic of colonialism through the coloniality of being, knowledge and power, and proposals for epistemic decolonization through a decolonial turn are some important contributions to the global and current debate on post-colonialism (Bellestrin, 2014, p. 6).

Also, the European experience of Modernity created the notion and relationship between the North (independent, developed, modern) and the South (dependent, underdeveloped, archaic) that is presented in every process and conflict. The economically and culturally established dominating process of globalization produced the relationship of knowledge in which there is a fragmentation of the world, in which some countries consume it and others produce it. With this in mind, it is essential to emphasize the consequences of modernity in underdeveloped or late-developing countries. The decolonial

perspective about modernity and its dark side seeks to propose new articulations for knowledge production and theoretical-political criticism in Southern realities. The relationship between modernity and coloniality is simultaneous and constitutive; even though the Eurocentric perspective states that modernity was born with the Enlightenment movement of the 18th century, its foundation remains in 1492 with the American colonization (Grosfoguel, 2008): the problem is the “failure to understand that the colonization of the so-called third world is also at the heart of western capitalism – and, that colonialization was based on issues of race” (Mcarthur, 2021, p. 7).

One of the most impactful results of it is that “the Western-global scientific assessment excludes, omits, silences, and ignores other worldviews” (Portella, 2020, p. 169). That is, based on pseudo-biological reasons, Modernity (with its colonial shadow) has suppressed other social and cultural experiences; therefore, it is necessary to rethink these bases.

Since its earliest appearance in academic reflection, postcolonial theory has rejected the colonizers’ naturalistic arguments in favor of demonstrating that alleged “natural inferiority” is but a crassly duplicitous rationalization of historically contingent violence and domination. What is said of European superiority and of its inevitable ascendancy is revealed as a thinly veiled, but no less pervasive, justification of pillage and brutality (Portella, 2020, p. 171).

Such criticism went up to the point that even the concept of Latin America was diagnosed as a generated one by colonial geography (Mignolo, 2005). The idea of nature in geography, history, or philosophy has been playing an important role in European colonization – therefore, decolonial thinkers “have long rejected nature (and the concept of natural history) in its ideological form” (Portella, 2020, p. 174). The main reason for that is its impact on the hierarchical descriptions of “race” as part of the classical conception of reason, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The naturalistic justification takes form of imputing to the colonized a certain “proximity to nature”, either on the basis of essentialism (i.e., natives are naturally “closer to nature”) or cultural/historical specificity (i.e., modernization has yet to take place but could, with colonizers’ “help”). The colonized, in this second case, are seen as more “natural” or “closer to nature” than their colonizers, either because of a cultural particularity or

in their “failure” to reach modernity’s benchmark of development (Portella, 2020, p. 174).

Thus, decolonial thought advances in an epistemological turn to vanish the dominant, one-dimensional thought, which justifies the established historical reality. As Segato (2015, p. 3) points out, the decolonial turn points to the awareness that the world continues to be dominated, that coloniality continues after the end of the legal colonial order, and that at the center of decolonial thinking is race as a divider of the world. This point implies understanding race as an invention of the colonial process that converges an inequality created by the conquest justified by biology, excluding all those who do not accept the capitalist accumulation model.

In this sense, race exists as a social representation of the Modern European conquest. As Jarmin (2017) defends, one of the main ways of conquering, then, was the technical production of a mass society accompanied by the manipulation of human beings to adapt to this abstraction, a supposed social cohesion as introduced identification. Their main goal then, the thing we are supposed to fight for, is to avoid creating other conditions of power, knowledge, being, and living, which point to the possibility of living together in a new logical order that departs from complementarity and social particularities, a global model not based on racial oppression in which some exploit from others by using natural categories created by an instrumental reason developed in a circumscribed geographical and historical reality that aims to be superior to any other. This is, therefore, one of the most important contributions from the Decolonial Thought, the opposition to hegemonic models, a dialectical movement of affirmation of what denies the existence of a great European thought.

### **3.2 Tensions between Critical Theory and Decoloniality**

As noted by McArthur (2021), even though there are some questions regarding Adorno’s comments on jazz music – accused of racism and Eurocentrism (OBERLE, 2016):

Critical theory need not be seen as a canonical set of ideas from times past, but rather an ongoing project and commitment. At its core, critical theory rejects the instrumental rationalism of late

capitalism and highlights hidden and subtle distortions and pathologies that impair our ability to lead fulfilling, social lives (Mcarthur, 2021, p. 4).

In this sense, it is important to notice that Western thought has not developed in a vacuum. Defending that critical theory does not need to have a universalist perspective, Baum (2015) and Allen (2015) implement the decolonial perspective into the critical theory without displacing it from the Western paradigm: they rethink critical theory from within, understanding that both capitalism and modernity, have foundations on colonialism and racism. In the same key, as McArthur (2021) points out, Nancy Fraser (2016) and Susan Buck-Morss (2006, p. 105), within the Frankfurt School and the Critical Theory, also engage with decolonial issues by stating that the “*Dialectic of Enlightenment* has morphed out of recognition from its original post-World War Two articulation”, and that the book:

Does not address the problem that even in the 1940s the world was not the universal-western entity assumed by critical theory and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Again it is the link between colonialism and capitalism and between colonialism and race that is missing (Mcarthur, 2021, p. 5).

Furthermore, Adorno demonstrated the Nazi pursuit of racial “purity” by believing in “racial superiority” and defended that it was “the triumph of instrumental rationality inherent in capitalist history” (Mcarthu, 2021, p. 7). Concerning the first Frankfurt generation, trying to explain the Western experience, they were not wrong about instrumental rationality, but their interpretation of European modernity was partially not aware of the profound links to race and colonialism. To Sair (1993, p. 278) they were “stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire”. More recently:

While Honneth clearly has more interest in the non-western world than Habermas appeared to be, his perspective is still largely European and could again benefit from the magnifying power of acknowledging race and colonialism as the splinter in the eye of critical theory (Mcarthu, 2021, p. 8).

Nevertheless, even with these critiques, it is crucial to understand how Critical Theory is still relevant in a decolonial era. For example, both registers of analyses, in their own ways, have a commitment to social transformation, based

on the past. As Horkheimer (1995, p. 227) states: “critical theory maintains: it need not be so [...] and the necessary conditions for such change already exist”. Therefore, both perspectives propose to change the dominance of the Western Enlightenment:

Adorno and Horkheimer reject the basis of the Enlightenment as a progressive liberation from myth in favour of science. In contrast, they see the Enlightenment as heralding a new form of domination, namely over nature, in the cause of the developing capitalist system: this domination of nature diminishes the human sphere (Mcarthur, 2021, p. 8).

By rejecting the false clarity of positivist approaches, both theories revisit the modern European dynamic but from different backgrounds. Thus, it might be fruitful to liaise with them positively, acknowledging some of the original limitations of Critical Theory while also engaging in a more powerful and broad critique and resistance of Capitalism, Colonialism, Instrumental Reason, Racism, and Modernity. To do so, it is necessary to validate some critical thinking positions but also stress the racial tension once forgotten by the Frankfurt School: as Weheliye (2014) points out, critical theory must address its own past, particularly how race and racism were neglected. However, Portella (2020, p. 165), states that Adorno’s work is a crucial continuity between his critique of modern reason and the anti-colonial movement.

Although the critique of colonialism is certainly not the focus of Adorno’s thought, I argue [...] Adorno’s conception of natural history as a critical concept especially productive for thinking about the complex nexus of purportedly “natural” justifications of domination, exploitation, and expropriation, the impetus to dominate nature, and the reified conception of nature that portends these violent rationalizations.

Mignolo (2010:1) also concludes that: “While decoloniality names critical thoughts emerging in the colonies and ex-colonies, Jewish critical traditions in Europe [...] materialized as the internal responses to European formations of imperial nation-states”. Stressing this, Portella (2020, p. 166) will say that his characterization of the Frankfurt School comments on Europe and the decolonial approach to racism and colonial domination puts both as distinct areas and perspectives of the same critical investigation:

The Frankfurt School's deeper commitments to historical materialism make its critique more compatible with the critique of decolonization and with the anti-colonial tradition. With a shared heritage in the Marxist tradition [...] the Frankfurt School's method is, in fact, more compatible with anti-colonial critique, the thematic focus of its major thinkers' analyses notwithstanding (Portella, 2020, p. 167).

Thus, Mignolo's reading creates an artificial filiation, a continuity, between Adorno and Horkheimer's modernity analyses and the decolonial framework. Therefore, one of the fronts of continuity is the concept of *natural history*, with which the instrumental reason reduces everything (including human thoughts and perceptions) into objects, creating a coincidence between subject and object based on domination. On the other side of this approximation, Adorno and Horkheimer, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002), have diagnosed the reification of nature, i.e., how the natural world was subordinated to purely instrumental reason. This logic led to a domination imperative that has only increased due to the so-called "inexhaustibility" of nature. According to Pensky (2004, p. 227), this controversy regarding the concept of nature is "surely a candidate for the most troubling and resistant theoretical element of Theodor Adorno's intellectual legacy" – as Whyman (2016, p. 452) defends, Adorno's considerations on the "nature" and its philosophical dispositions in the 19th-century tension his status as a critical thinker of modern capitalism society.

Knowing that for decolonial thinkers, "natural" statements express the presence of a colonialist argument, both critiques differ in their form but have similar content. However, reiterating the decolonial comments on "natural" justifications for colonial oppression, it is necessary to understand the colonial/imperial project as well as its material foundation (including natural relations). To Adorno (2006, p. 122), the tension between nature and history exposes a series of issues, especially because it is important to grasp and track the historical trajectory of how human beings have been dominating what is considered natural to "overcome" their necessities. By opposing nature and history, colonialism has used arbitrary natural facts to justify the "social necessity of the reproduction of colonial and imperial power" (Portalla, 2020, p. 184)<sup>2</sup>. Thus,

---

<sup>2</sup> One of the most important approaches is Fanon's (2005, p. 182), to whom colonialism has shaped the colonizer's practice of manipulating the category of human nature to dehumanize those colonized: "Colonization has succeeded once this untamed Nature has been brought under control". Correlating colonial practice and domination of nature is thinking about exposing the

Rodney interprets these non-mutually exclusive false naturalizations and acknowledges the role of natural essentialism in colonial domination. This, however, partially coincides with Adorno (2006, p. 122) when he says that “the traditional antithesis of nature and history is both true and false [...]. It is true when it expresses what happens to nature; it is false when it simply reinforces conceptually the historical own concealment of its own natural growth”. Nevertheless, as Portella (2020, p. 193) defends, it needs to be complemented:

The antithesis of nature and history is true when it expresses what happens to nature and what happens to those associated with the “natural” (reified into “second nature”) as well as what happens when colonized peoples are dispossessed of natural resources, extending to the expropriation of their labor (i.e., enslavement, bondage).

However, according to Rodney (1981, p. 236), colonialism has been creating periodic famine, chronic undernourishment, malnutrition, and deterioration among colonized people; regarding his African studies, he says: “if such a statement sounds wildly extravagant, it is only because bourgeois propaganda has conditioned even Africans to believe that malnutrition and starvation were the natural lot of Africans from time immemorial”. In this sense, it resonates with Adorno’s (2006, p. 120) thought, in which domination of nature and the resentment of its necessity increasingly intensify an inclusion of a reified world of “half-subjects” and “non-persons” into an instrumentalized nature and reason. With this: “critical theory’s inattention does not preclude its coming to the aid of anti-colonial critique. Indeed, [...] Adorno’s [...] categories of history and nature are already at work in pivotal critiques of colonialism in the 20th century” (Portella, 2020, p. 193). Finally, Critical Theory and Decoloniality, on a methodological level, have some similarities. As Adorno (2006:9) points out, truth has a “temporal core”, and the critical theorist's goal is to investigate the historical and complex relations of power, in which they are situated. Both perspectives:

---

Modern European invocations of nature to justify slavery and colonial violence, which can be traced back to the lack of natural resources or labor, both extracted from the colonies to supply market demand in Europe. “Those who justify the colonial division of labor suggest that it was ‘natural’ and respected the relative capacities for the specialization of the metropolises and colonies. Europe, North America, and Japan specialized in industry, and Africa in agriculture; therefore, it was to the ‘comparative advantage’ of one part of the world to manufacture machines while another part engaged in the simple hoe-culture of the soil (Rodney, 1981, p. 234).

Reject traditional humanist and socio-scientific pretensions to produce timeless and non-situated knowledge [...] Both reject traditional disciplinary boundaries, moving broadly between the human and social sciences, in an effort to achieve as inclusive a view as possible about the past and the present, even if both deny the possibility of a holistic view “from a place none.” [...] both see themselves as practical, seeking knowledge not for its own sake, but in the name of emancipation, in order to help reverse the blindness, domination, violence, and irrationality that have marked our history (Ingram, 2020, p. 400-401).

Moreover, while the decolonial theory negates the notion of “universal history”, Adorno (2001, p. 46) also says that “the whole is the untrue”. In this sense, he also states that theories of imperialism are not simply doomed to obsolescence with the great powers forcibly giving up their colonies and that capitalism continues to ensure that human beings are doomed to starve across much of the earth (Adorno, 1986). Along with Horkheimer and Benjamin, he subjected modernity to scrutiny, identifying its entanglement with domination, irrationality, and regression<sup>3</sup>. With all these positive approaches, the “deficits in Western thought, including Critical Theory, can be remedied through a focus on non-Western experience mediated by Western authors” (Ingram, 2020, p. 405). Since the Frankfurt School attacked modern instrumental reason, one of the ways of doing so might also be through non-occidental perspectives. In this sense, presuming that critical theory in the Marxist genealogy of thought, as articulated by Max Horkheimer, is also a particular kind of critical theory and not the main norm or paradigm against which all other projects must be compared, and judged, Mignolo (2007, p. 115) claims that decolonial thinking is “a particular kind of critical theory”. Concerning the variety of post-colonial investigations, they

are close to the negative model of modernity that the first generation of the Frankfurt School inherited from Marx. In other words, postcolonialism tends to remain at the level of criticism, mapping with increasing specificity the imperialist legacies and logics that shape relations, subjectivities, and forms of knowledge (Ingram, 2020, p. 417).

Postcolonialism's sympathy for the different and the marginal, as well as its supposed propensity to exaggerate and generalize the homogeneity of Western modernity, is, of course, what brings it closer to the portrayal of

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, Gramsci's reading to Marxism, which aims to write history from the bottom. Something similar to Benjamin's idea of a “history of the oppressed.”



modernity as universal evil outlined by the first generation of Critical Theory. However, a possible objection must be noticed: postcolonialism is concerned, primarily, with the particular. While Critical Theory may share with postcolonialism an orientation to the particular in the form of a commitment to reflexivity, it has always focused on the whole picture.

Postcolonialism's preference for the particular may help explain its affinities with the first generation of the Frankfurt School, insofar as most of Adorno's and Benjamin's oeuvre consists of works devoted to concrete moments and objects, rather than more general philosophical treatises (Ingram, 2020, p. 419).

Knowing that Critical Theory can confront Eurocentrism and white supremacy, it is worth reconsidering the Critical Theory in light of questions and problems taken from post-colonialism because both converge on what is very sensitive to different generations of the Frankfurt School, and post-colonialism authors: the universal history issue; as Adorno (1992, p. 225) says, progress is given at the point where it ends. Furthermore, Adorno (2009), in *Negative Dialectics*, shares fundamental elements with Decolonial Thought, especially the delineation of models of thought, and the criticism of the predominant epistemology. Additionally, Negative Dialectics and Decolonial Thought have similar demands: reconstruction of the being, power, knowledge, and human relationship with nature. The key to understanding decolonization is to recognize how this thought is epistemologically colonized. Concerning race as a historical category of naturalization of social relations, decoloniality is a model of thought that proposes its own deconstruction; as an affirmative negation, it recognizes new categories that transcend the epistemological introjection that, when recognized, can be overcome. Decolonial Thought shares with Negative Dialectics the opposition to classical ontology. Thus, it is vital to understand at this point the meaning of the epistemological approximation between Adorno and postcolonial reflections, not only complementary as a critique of unidimensional colonizing thought but as an antidote to the establishment of a supposed European thought.

## 4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Considering the above-mentioned, it is worth noticing our aim to examine resistance movements against the cultural industry associated with neoliberalism. The *resistance* mentioned refers to cultural movements that express and talk about the regional culture of a place, particularly in the global south. Resistance movements naturally emerge – *sprout, rise* – from culture specific to the global south, as a response to the cultural industry from the global north.

One of these examples of a movement that existed before the reconfiguration of capital known as neoliberalism is the *anthropophagic movement* that emerged in Brazil during the 1920s. This movement was theorized by the poet Oswald de Andrade and the painter Tarsila do Amaral and proposed resistance to the culture of the global north. This movement was proposed by Brazilian artists in the 1920s to respond to the overwhelming influence of American and European culture, approaching these cultures from a global perspective. To do so, they aimed to incorporate, *to swallow* (hence the name *anthropophagic movement*) the various external cultural influences and create an art and culture that represent their own region.

This culture would be inclusive of Amerindians, Afro-descendants, and the unique regional culture of Brazil's northeast – it would also encompass the culture of cities known as “caipiras”, which are characterized by their rural and regional roots. The movement was extended to music and blended Brazilian folk with European classical structure and style (such as from Johann Sebastian Bach), influencing several music compositions – the best known being the *Bachianas Brasileiras*, a series of nine suites composed, for voice and instruments, by the Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos.

Another example is Kuduro, a music and dance style that originated in Angola, specifically in its capital city, Luanda, during the 1980s. It was created by local producers who developed a unique musical style based on a genre called *Batida* ("Beat"), which had originated from American and European music. Angolan musicians created a unique style of music and dance (*Kuduro*) using available materials from the global north – a style of their own. This cultural movement emerged during an unarresting time in Angola, and the youth used it

to express their protest and spread a positive message in their communities. Kuduro has become a symbol of creativity and resilience in Angola.

Thus, to conclude this essay, it is necessary to see decolonization as a second independence. The subsumption of a society under different processes of oppression, in which nations suffered more than three hundred years of slavery, requires a theory and a form of organization that breaks with all the oppressions created and promoted in this process: “reflecting on this form of organization is fundamentally reflecting on the particularities of the economic and social formation [...] the process of social formation can only be concluded with a deep structural change, hence revolutionary” (Aguiar, 2018, p. 75). In this sense, knowing how the Capital can exercise its domination over labor without direct coercive power (since workers depend on the market and are obliged to sell their labor power), this is also seen on a global level, in which different parts of the world are subjected to market imperatives that make them dependent on the North. Thus, capitalistic imperialism requires extra-economic support: the extra-economic force is essential for maintaining economic coercion (Wood, 2014, p. 16-21). With the confirmation of neoliberalism as a new reconfiguration of capital – and its complex and updated forms of surplus value extraction in the 1970s –, the modern understanding of imperialism constructed by the United States as “imperialism without colonialism” (that is, without formal colonies) emerged. With that, imperialism began to move and present itself in a more nebulous and “informal” way: *imperiality* (Ballestrin, 2014, p. 12).

In the new world order promoted by neoliberal financial capital and Western European civilization, there is an underlying process of coloniality of power and knowledge. A new *modus operandi* that articulates the entire planet; a cultural domination from abroad that has not only Western Europe as a fundamental actor but also the association of interests of the dominant groups belonging to the global north (imperialism, Euro-Americans). Therefore, it is necessary to create new mechanisms for “the reproduction of colonial societies, as colonial societies required the systematic extraction, enslavement, and domination of the colonized” (Portella, 2020, p. 176). For this, one of the main strategies is to transform different cultures, worldviews, and alternative cosmogonies of modernity into consumption targets. For that, Quijano (1992) affirms that an epistemological decolonization is necessary to allow new

intercultural communication. It would also include a new form of art and entertainment with strategic projects that advocate pluriversal perspectives based not on inequalities, but rather on differences.

Intercultural relations liberation from the prison of coloniality also entails the freedom of all peoples to choose individually or collectively in such relations; a freedom of choice between the various cultural orientations. And, above all, the freedom to produce, criticize and change and exchange culture and society. It is part, in short, the process of social liberation from all power organized as inequality, as discrimination, as exploitation, as domination (Asprella & Schulz, 2020, p. 194).

Hence, for the first time, culture is defined as an *industry*. The immense hierarchization of products that Adorno sees, for example, the production of films A and B, is a system that operates immediately through the classification, organization, and statistical computation of consumers. Likewise, the cultural industry today is related to the association of interests of the dominant groups, which stratify and hierarchize their consumers according to the intrinsic system of the culture industry. Therefore, in contemporaneity, what can be observed is nothing less than a colonial apparatus, when we think of the global south and the countries with a colonial past. Today's Culture industry defines the value of goods through subject recognition. However, it also affects the recognition of these subjects. Due to the culture of postcolonial countries tending to be intensely receptive, flexible, and porous, we now have subjects who do not look and recognize their own culture but look at the hierarchical position above them, that is, the global north and its groups interested in selling their culture industry products to these colonized subjects. Therefore, we have a more serious situation than the metaphor of Ulysses and his ship crew – these now continue with their ears blocked, but have, in addition to that, their own subjectivity and recognition captured by the imperialistic culture industry.

## REFERENCES

ADORNO, T. **Progresso**. Tradução: G. Cohn. **Lua Nova: Revista de Cultura e Política**, v. 27, p. 217–236, 1992.

ADORNO, T. **Minima moralia**. New York: Verso, 2005.

- ADORNO, T. **Why still philosophy? Critical models:** interventions and Catchwords. Columbia: University Press, Sep 14, 2005b.
- ADORNO, T. **History and freedom:** lectures 1964-1965. Trans. R. Tiedemann. New York: Polity Press, 2006.
- ADORNO, T. **Dialética negativa.** Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2009.
- ADORNO, T.; Horkheimer, M. **Dialectic of enlightenment:** philosophical fragments. 1. ed. Trans. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- AGUIAR, J. Por um marxismo decolonial: contribuições para a reflexão sociológica contemporânea. **Revista Observatório Latinoamericano y Caribeño**, n. 2, 2018.
- ALLEN, A. **The end of progress:** decolonizing the normative foundations of critical theory. Columbia University Press, 2015.
- ASPRELLA, E.; SCHULZ, J. Colonialidad del saber, epistemologías del sur y pensamiento decolonial: crisis y oportunidades en la configuración de un nuevo orden mundial. **Cuadernos de la Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales.** Universidad Nacional de Jujuy, n. 57, p. 177-196, 2020.
- BAUM, B. Decolonizing critical theory. **Constellations**, v. 22, n. 3, p. 420–434, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12169>
- BELLESTRIN, L. Imperialismo como Imperialidade: o elo perdido do giro decolonial. *In: 38º Encontro Anual da ANPOCS*, Caxambu, 2014. Disponível em: [www.anpocs.com/index.php/papers-38-encontro/gt-1/gt26-1/9346-imperialismo-como-imperialidade-o-elo-perdido-do-giro-decolonial/Mle](http://www.anpocs.com/index.php/papers-38-encontro/gt-1/gt26-1/9346-imperialismo-como-imperialidade-o-elo-perdido-do-giro-decolonial/Mle).
- BERNARDINO-COSTA, J.; GROSFOGUEL, R. Decolonialidade e perspectiva negra. **Sociedade e Estado**, São Paulo, v. 31, n. 1, p. 15-24, 2016.
- BIDASECA, K.; MENESES, M. P. Introdução: as Epistemologias Do Sul Como Expressão De Lutas Epistemológicas E Ontológicas. *In: BIDASECA, K.; MENESES, M. P. (org.). Epistemologías del Sur.* Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2018.
- BUCK-MORSS, S. Thinking past terror: Islamism and critical theory on the left. **Verso**, 2016.
- DEMIROVIĆ, Alex. What Does It Mean to Speak of the Actuality of Critical Theory?. **ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies**, v. 12, n. 2, p. 366-379, 2013.
- FANON, F. **The wretched of the earth.** Trans. R. Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2005.

FRASER, N. Expropriation and exploitation in racialized capitalism: a reply to michael dawson. **Critical Historical Studies**, v. 3, n. 1, p. 163–178, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1086/685814>

GROSFOGUEL, R. Para descolonizar os estudos de economia política e os estudos pós-coloniais: transmodernidade, pensamento de fronteira e colonialidade global. **Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais**, n. 80, p. 115–147, 2008.

HABERMAS, Jürgen. “Bemerkungen zu Beginn einer Vorlesung”. *In*: HABERMAS, Jürgen. **Die Neue Unübersichtlichkeit**. Frankfurt am Main, 1983.

HORKHEIMER, M. **Critical theory**: selected essays. Continuum, 1995.

INGRAM, James. Teoria crítica e pós-colonialismo. Tradução: Mariana Fidelis e Simone Fernandes. **Dissonância: Revista de Teoria Crítica**, Campinas, v. 4, p. 399–435, 2020.

JARMIN, G. Dialética negativa e o pensamento decolonial. **Revista Sures**, n. 10, p. 1-14, 2017.

KANE, Cheikh Hamidou. **L’aventure ambiguë**. Paris: Julliard, 1971.

MCARTHUR, Jan. Critical theory in a decolonial age. **Educational philosophy and theory**, 2021.

MIGNOLO, Walter D. Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking. **Cultural Studies**, v. 21, n. 2–3, p. 155–167, 2007a.

MIGNOLO, Walter D. **Habitar la frontera**: sentir y pensar la descolonialidad (Antología 1999–2014). Barcelona: CIDOB, 2015.

MIGNOLO, Walter D.; WALSH, Catherine E. **Ondecoloniality**: concepts, analytics, praxis. Duke University Press, 2018.

NARAYAN, Y. On Biocoloniality and ‘Respectability’ in Contemporary London. **Cultural Studies**, v. 29, n. 2, p. 185–204, 2015.

PORTELLA, Elizabeth. Adorno’s “Natural History” and Anti-Colonial Critique: Critical Theory and Afro-Caribbean Marxism. **Dissonância: Revista de Teoria Crítica**, v. 4, Campinas, 2020, p. 162–202.

QUIJANO, Aníbal. Colonialidad y modernidad-racionalidad. *In*: BONILLA, H. (org.). **Los conquistados**: 1492 y la población indígena de las Américas. Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1992. p. 437–449.

QUIJANO, Aníbal. Colonialidad del poder, cultura y conocimiento en América Latina. **Dispositio**, Quito, v. 24, n. 51, p. 137-148, 1999.

QUIJANO, Aníbal. Colonialidade do poder, eurocentrismo e América Latina. *In*: LANDER, E. (org.). **A colonialidade do saber: eurocentrismo e ciências sociais, perspectivas latino-americanas**. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2005.

RODNEY, W. How. **Europe underdeveloped Africa**. New York: Verso, 1981.

SAID, Edward W. **Orientalismo: o Oriente como invenção do Ocidente**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1990.

SANTOS, B. de Sousa. **Epistemologies of the South. Justice against Epistemicide**. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.

SANTOS, B. de Sousa. **O fim do império cognitivo: a Afirmação das Epistemologias do sul**. São Paulo: Autêntica, 2019.

SEGATO, Rita Laura. **Raça é signo**. Brasília: Série Antropologia 372, 2005.

SPIVAK, G. C. Subaltern studies: deconstructing historiography. *In*: GUHA, R.; SPIVAK, G. C. (Ed.). **Selected Studies**. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 3-32.

WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel. **World-systems analysis**. London: Durham, 2004.

WEBER, Max. **The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism**. Trans. Talcott Parsons. London, 1930.

WEHELIYE, A. G. **Habeas viscus: racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human**. Duke University Press, 2014.

WHYMAN, T. Understanding Adorno on 'Natural-History'. **International Journal of Philosophical Studies**, v. 24, n. 4, p. 452–472, 2016.

WIREDU, K. Conceptual decolonization as an imperative in contemporary African philosophy: some personal reflections. **Rue Descartes**, n. 36, p. 53-64, 2002.

WOOD, E. **O império do capital**. Tradução: P. Castanheira. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2014.

## DADOS DOS AUTORES

### Gustavo Ruiz da Silva

Doutorando em Filosofia pela Monash-Warwick Alliance Joint PhD (Reino Unido - Austrália) e Graduate Visiting Scholar no Department of Classics da Johns Hopkins University (EUA). Mestre (Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo) e bacharel em Filosofia (Universidade de São Paulo). Graduado em Ciências Sociais (PUC-SP). Em 2023, na Charles University in Prague (República Tcheca), fez um estágio de pesquisa no projeto "Black Holes in Art Literature"; fez parte também da Escuela de Verano do Centro Interdisciplinario de Estudios Latinoamericanos da Universität Bonn (Alemanha). Em 2022, fui Visiting Research Student na University of Warwick (UK). Em 2021, durante minha segunda Iniciação Científica, fui membro do projeto

Representações de árabes e africanos em fontes europeias, árabes e africanas (USP). Email: [gustavo.da-silva@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:gustavo.da-silva@warwick.ac.uk)

**Daniel Lopes Prado Matheus**

Mestrando (Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo - PUC/SP, sob orientação da professora Sônia Campaner Miguel Ferrari) e graduado em Direito (Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo - PUC/SP, sob orientação do Professor Antonio Carlos da Ponte). Tenho experiência na área de Direito, com ênfase nos seguintes temas: Filosofia e Teoria Geral do Direito; Filosofia Constitucional; Constitucionalismo e História Constitucional; Antropologia Jurídica; Hermenêutica Jurídica; Sistema de Justiça e Estado de Exceção; Direito Comparado; Direitos Humanos; Direito Ambiental; Direito Constitucional. Email: [dlpmatheus@gmail.com](mailto:dlpmatheus@gmail.com)