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Critical Pessimism, Progress, and Social Regression: The Schopenhauerian Deficit of Critical Theory

Pessimismo crítico, progresso e regressão social: o déficit schopenhaueriano da teoria crítica

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ABSTRACT

Unlike the founders of the Frankfurt School – especially Horkheimer and Adorno – most contemporary representatives of critical theory tend to overlook Schopenhauer and the critical and emancipatory potentials of his nonconformist and antifinalist pessimism. Does this neglect not implicitly contain an overlooked element for understanding what is today referred to as the “exhaustion of critical theory”, particularly when diagnoses of the present time concerning political and social regression are at stake? The aim of this article is to develop some preliminary considerations on possible dialogues between premises of Schopenhauerian philosophy and those of contemporary critical theory, especially certain premises taken up by Rahel Jaeggi in her most recent book, *Fortschritt und Regression* (2023). In conclusion, the article argues that, in a manner similar to Amy Allen’s and Rahel Jaeggi’s respective proposals for a return to Foucault and Adorno, and to Benjamin and Adorno, an as-yet unexplored return to Horkheimer and Schopenhauer could revitalize critical theory in the face of its current exhaustion.

Keywords: Critical Pessimism; Critical theory; Progress; Social regression; Schopenhauer; Horkheimer

RESUMO

Ao contrário dos fundadores da Escola de Frankfurt – especialmente Horkheimer e Adorno –, a maioria dos representantes contemporâneos da teoria crítica tende a negligenciar Schopenhauer e o potencial crítico e emancipatório de seu pessimismo inconformista e antifinalista. Essa negligência não conteria implicitamente um elemento importante para a compreensão do que hoje se chama de “esgotamento da teoria crítica”, particularmente quando se trata de diagnósticos da atualidade referentes a regressão política e social? O objetivo deste artigo é desenvolver algumas considerações preliminares sobre possíveis diálogos entre premissas da filosofia schopenhaueriana e da teoria crítica contemporânea, especialmente algumas de Rahel Jaeggi em seu livro mais recente, *Fortschritt und Regression* (2023). Em

conclusão, o artigo argumenta que, de maneira semelhante às propostas de Amy Allen e Rahel Jaeggi que propõem, respectivamente, um retorno a Foucault e Adorno, e a Benjamin e Adorno, um retorno ainda inexplorado a Horkheimer e Schopenhauer poderia contribuir com a teoria crítica frente a seus desafios atuais.

Palavras-chave: Pessimismo crítico; Teoria crítica; Progresso; Regressão social; Schopenhauer; Horkheimer

1 INTRODUCTION

As one of the many recent examples of social horror, Brazil recorded more than 700,000 deaths during the Covid-19 pandemic. Statistics later showed that at least half of these deaths could have been avoided, as they resulted from the Bolsonaro government's denialist stance – its repeated refusal to purchase vaccines, all while mocking the victims by mimicking their gasping for air. Amid such pain and grief, one sentiment in particular emerged, indeed not only in Brazil: there was a global wager, a hope that humanity would emerge morally better from that pandemonium. It almost seemed possible to believe in a version of Schopenhauer's thesis that suffering – the *deuteros plous*, or "second way" – leads to the denial of the will¹; and that, in this case, it *might bring moral improvement*.

A few years later, beyond the realization that hunger and global poverty have increased and that the cumulative drive of the wealthy classes remains unshaken in their dominance over the working class, we now face a new era of wars – both military and commercial. Authoritarianism has grown like never before across the planet, a clear example of political regression; and, in 2025, the world is witnessing its largest arms race since the end of the Cold War, which, together with fading hopes for peace, freezes the investments needed to combat hunger and poverty and to confront the climate crisis². As an emblematic instance of humanitarian outrage, there seems to be no doubt that the ongoing slaughter of the Palestinian people – an imperialist atrocity backed by the wealthiest states and carried out by a political regime born of former victims of massacre – constitutes a clear example of political and social regression.

¹ W II, 49, p. 652.

² Chade, J. *Armados até os dentes*, Carta Capital, 23 July 2025.

More than 60,000 civilians in Gaza have perished beneath rubble, among their mutilated, starving, and missing kin, is not unusual. What is unusual is that this has become the most thoroughly documented and live-broadcast genocide in history: a perfect alliance between technological progress and political, social, and civilizational barbarism. In this sense, not only the case of Gaza, but also the other tragic examples mentioned lay bare how the most technologically, digitally, and virtually advanced world – the very world of the greatest struggles and victories for the recognition of oppressed groups, ethnic diversities, and gender equality – is also the one that has most regressed in terms of democracy and rights.

The inevitable question is what all this has to do with Schopenhauer. I would suggest it is profoundly connected, for we are dealing with the philosopher who affirmed without hesitation that humanity does not progress morally – neither individually nor as a species – despite all scientific, technological, political, economic, and social advances. At least three major questions arise from this theme: 1) Are these truly examples of *regressions*? 2) Does it still make sense to speak of *progress* without it sounding like mockery in the face of so much recurring barbarism in contemporary times? 3) To what extent are these Schopenhauerian questions?

Before anything else, the theme of progress and regression has regained prominence in recent years within contemporary Critical Theory, particularly through the works of two thinkers belonging to what is often referred to as the fourth generation of the Frankfurt School: the American philosopher Amy Allen, in *The End of Progress* (2016)³, and the Swiss-German thinker Rahel Jaeggi, in her recent *Fortschritt und Regression* (2023)⁴. They argue that continuing a critique of progress requires abandoning the conception of the category which, fundamentally grounded in Hegel, was widely rejected by the first generation – Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and others – but later reintroduced and endorsed by the second and third generations, represented respectively by Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth.

³ Allen, A. *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁴ Jaeggi, R. *Fortschritt und Regression* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023).

Against this nuanced conceptual background, we may ask whether Schopenhauer's philosophy, without undue distortion, might contribute to the debate within Critical Theory itself. An evident sign of this lies in the very fact that both Allen and Jaeggi strongly question today what the first generation of their school – and Schopenhauer himself – had already rejected: history as a unitary theory of the good, and progress as a predetermined end. To this we might add Horkheimer's unusual and heretical interpretation of Schopenhauer – largely forgotten today – by one of the leading figures of that very first generation.

In what follows, I would like to elaborate and defend the hypothesis that there exists a Schopenhauerian deficit in the current Critical Theory debate on progress and regression, and to offer some reflections on why it might be both possible and advantageous to address this deficiency. For this purpose, Schopenhauer should not appear here as the philosopher of the denial of the will, but rather as a critic of the will's endless errancy and of the suffering it entails. More than that, as someone who – while categorical in denying any moral progress of humankind – did not ensure that his pessimism be monosemic, reducible either to the mere recognition of an *ad eternum* (anti-)ethical sameness or to a sociological invariance. Schopenhauer emerges here as the philosopher who bequeathed to us elements of a critical philosophy in the form of a *critical pessimism*.

2 AMY ALLEN, RAHEL JAEGGI AND THE DEBATE ON PROGRESS-REGRESSION IN CRITICAL THEORY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The theme of progress has always been as inescapable as it is controversial within Critical Theory, whose lineage traces back to Marx and Engels. The founding fathers of socialism never reached a definitive conclusion regarding their views on the matter, and the nuances of the concept are many. Yet it is safe to affirm that the materialist wager on the liberation of humanity from capitalist exploitation implied the moral progress of humankind. The first generation of the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory – especially in certain phases, and when compared to what later developed with their successors Habermas and Honneth – was clearly less enthusiastic about a

Hegelian ideal of history. In that view, as we know, history aimed toward a preconceived ideal of freedom: reason and history jointly guaranteed humanity's march, at every moment, toward the triumph of freedom. This progressive march was thought to be as unquestionable as the literal march of the animal upon which the triumphant Napoleon entered Berlin – a scene in which Hegel saw “the world spirit on horseback (or *die Weltseele zu Pferde*)”⁵. The well-known Frankfurtian critique of this conception of progress and its ideologies is aptly encapsulated in one of Theodor Adorno's most biting remarks in *Minima Moralia*: “I saw the world spirit, but not on horseback; I saw it on the wings of a missile”⁶. Alongside Horkheimer, in the Preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he asserted that “enlightenment is totalitarian as any other system”, its falsity residing in the fact that “the process [of enlightenment] is decided in advance”⁷. And in his Lecture on *Progress*, we again find the core of the Frankfurt School's negative spirit toward the topic: progress, he argued, should aim at “countering the triumph of radical evil, not triumphing by itself”⁸.

A turning point in this kind of critique takes place within Jürgen Habermas's “project of modernity”, later reconsidered by Axel Honneth. In rejecting as “excessively negativistic”⁹ the conception of history and freedom that animated the diagnoses and prognoses of Horkheimer and Adorno – in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but also in many of Horkheimer's individual texts, such as *Eclipse of Reason* and various articles and notes from the 1950s and 1960s – they combined this accusation with that of sociological and normative deficit. For the most prominent figures of the so-called second and third generations of the School, a normatively deficient Critical Theory meant one incapable of stirring the “objective spirit” of institutions or of provoking and setting social movements into motion. Conversely, even if in different and subtler ways, they reinstated a positive view of freedom, never ceasing to understand it as a (great)

⁵ Hegel, G. W. F. *Letter of 13 October 1806 to F. I. Niethammer*, p. 119. See also Löwy, M.; Varikas, E. “The world spirit on the fins of a rocket”: Adorno's critique of Progress, p. 9.

⁶ Adorno, T. *Minima Moralia*, p. 150.

⁷ Horkheimer, M.; Adorno, T. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 32.

⁸ Adorno, T. *Progress*, p. 63.

⁹ See Habermas, J. *Bemerkungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Horkheimerschen Werkes*, pp. 163-179.

positive good to be achieved. This mode of theorizing emancipatory aims, insofar as it remained eager to cast off the pessimism it identified in the first generation, ended up reprojecting into Critical Theory vast loads of optimistic presuppositions drawn from specific types of philosophies of history. The emancipatory social movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, to a large extent, echo this optimistic positivization; yet their progressive freedom has never freed itself from questions already known in other eras: who are its subjects? For whom? And does this positive freedom, by its very nature, not carry the intrinsic risk of turning the (supposedly) formerly oppressed into new oppressors? At least for the last of these questions, it would not be difficult to hear the murmurs of Gaza's massacred attesting that yes, indeed, it does.

It is precisely this type of concern that Rahel Jaeggi takes up – and before her, Amy Allen. The authors do not regard the Habermasian-Honnethian conception of progress and freedom as merely failing for insisting on an end or positive ends, but, precisely for that reason, as colonialist and Eurocentric. They seek to oppose to it a conception of what, above all, Allen calls “progress without end”. The task would require nothing less than decolonizing the normativity of Critical Theory, which would imply abandoning a specific conception of progress – or demanding *the end of progress*, as the title of her book (2016) puts it, a set of critiques that underpins much of Jaeggi's most recent work (2023). The question resurfaces: what does it mean, after all, to progress socially and humanly without being accused of the infamy of progress, in the sense in which – albeit with important differences – Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer denounced it, or in the sense proposed by James Tully, according to whom the language of progress and development is the language of oppression and domination for two-thirds of the world's people¹⁰? Allen and Jaeggi's answer, if not entirely in unison, is clear in its essentials: the idea to be abandoned is the one captive to a worldview that conceives of *progress necessarily* as humanity's forward movement toward a *pre-defined good* to be achieved. The thesis to be embraced is that of a kind of progress understood

¹⁰ Tully, J. *apud* Allen, A. *The End of Progress*, p. 3.

as possible distances from – or negations of – a previously acknowledged *evil*. A *negative progress*. More than a mere recurrence of barbarism here and there, there would exist elements intrinsic to the very concept of regression that generally elude those who begin from a linear conception of historical time.

Allen is concerned with showing how typically modern the notion of historical progress as a necessary and inevitable destiny is. Previously, decline was not the opposite of progress but referred to experiences that could contribute to it. From this observation, she proposes one of her main theses: to distinguish progress as fact from progress as ideal, suggesting discarding the former while continuing to orient ourselves by the later:

Insofar as the conception of progress as a “fact” is doing important philosophical work for critical theory by grounding its normative claims, substituting a problematizing genealogy for a progressive, developmental reading of history will also require us to adopt a different approach to the question of normative grounding. [...] In other words, the normative principles and ideals on which we rely in our judgments about what could or would count as progress in the future may rest on a contingent foundation, but they are no less powerful for that¹¹.

An understanding of progress as a fact is precisely the mark of modernity: “This means that the normative ideals and social and political institutions that emerged in European modernity are seen as the result of a historical process of learning or of cumulative and progressive development”¹². Self-declared as a model, European development as the norm to be followed inevitably categorizes everything that is not its own as pre-modern or non-modern, unevolved, or backward. From this theory of progressive history, the step toward justifying racism¹³, neo-racism, and neo-imperialism is an easy one. The accusation of colonialism is based on an undeniable historical fact: the subjugated cultures of the colonies, from which natural resources were extracted for such an emancipated and free modernity, represent what has not yet progressed; the colonized and exploited subjects do not count as autonomous

¹¹ Allen, A. *The End of Progress*, p. 33-34.

¹² Buril, B. *Reseña de The End of Progress, by A. Allen*, p. 561.

¹³ For a recent and significant study on racism from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, see Ciraci, F., *Sul razzismo: Strutture logiche e paradigmi storico-filosofici* (Mimesis, 2024).

precisely because, by being declared backward, they immediately become domesticated means serving the destiny of those who have “evolved”. Not even the strongest miscegenation has, so far – as can be seen in Brazil – managed to heal the deep wounds of the *casa grande* versus *senzala*¹⁴.

From this comes a more specific conclusion: for Amy Allen, Frankfurtian Critical Theory, as articulated in the works of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst still expresses vestiges or remnants of these philosophies of progressive history through notions such as sociocultural development, historical learning, political progress, and moral progress. These theories have assumed the idea of progress as a fact, something in need of review – in other words, of decolonization. Reconsidering premises that do not view progress as a necessary and inevitable destiny would entail no longer conceiving it as something dependent on the regression of others. Would this conceptual apparatus not also be available in left-Hegelian sources, which likewise understand historical progress as a fact, but rather in the work of Adorno (and also of Foucault), insofar as they do not conceive the past and the non-European as sources of confirmation for the certainties of modernity, but instead as factors that challenge it.

In dialogue with Allen, Jaeggi develops a less radical critique, defending progress as a processual concept, genuinely normative, which designates not only processes of development but above all their quality. Yet it does not draw upon pre-defined norms; it establishes them. Continuities and discontinuities of progress are understood as processes of “problem-solving”: “Social change [...] emerges as a reaction to crises, or rather, as a reaction to the expression of a problem that requires change. This *does not lead to a teleological model of development in view of a predetermined end*, but rather to the possibility of understanding a fragmentary logic of development”¹⁵. In this way, and understanding progress as the possibility – whether blocked or not – of enriching

¹⁴ “Paradoxically, the idea of freedom developed by Enlightenment thinkers and taken up by contemporary critical theorists such as Habermas and Honneth as a fundamental normative horizon began to take root in Europe at the very moment when slavery in the colonies was expanding both quantitatively and qualitatively; it was precisely this slavery that fueled an economy which, in turn, facilitated the dissemination of Enlightenment ideals of freedom” (Buriel, B. *Reseña de The End of Progress*, by A. Allen, p. 561-562).

¹⁵ Jaeggi, R. *Fortschritt und Regression*, p. 43, my emphasis.

experience, the comprehension of whether progress in each case represents change for the better or regression is given by what Jaeggi calls “negative diagnosis”, namely, the diagnosis of blocked experiences. Societies, Jaeggi concludes, “do not have ends, but solve problems” (“*Gesellschaften haben kein Ziel, sie lösen Probleme*”) ¹⁶. The negative method, typical of the first generation of the School, which Jaeggi also seeks to recover by proposing a return to Adorno ¹⁷, is clearly adopted: “That societies behave in a progressive or regressive manner is not measured by proximity to or distance from a (normative) end, but by the quality of the solution to the problem, which is always the quality of the process of problem resolution” ¹⁸. Here one almost glimpses Schopenhauer’s nominalism, praised by Horkheimer. Nothing Schopenhauerian, however, is directly admitted, for what is at stake, according to Jaeggi herself, is no more than “the idea, inspired by Hegel, of a dialectical process of enrichment of experience, which then emerges as the core of the entire project” ¹⁹.

3 SCHOPENHAUER, THE PROBLEM OF THE VALUE OF HISTORY, AND THE (IM)POSSIBLE PROGRESS

Why, then, insist on Schopenhauer? Two complementary ideas have always been clear in him: the impossibility of moral progress for humanity and the consequent irrelevance of speaking of regression in that horizon. At first glance, it may seem inappropriate to claim that such Schopenhauerian philosophical elements are lacking in Critical Theory, specifically regarding the theme of progress and regression. Yet a summary defense of its pertinence could be outlined as follows: the core of a heretical interpretation of the philosopher of the will – initiated by Max Horkheimer and developed by Alfred Schmidt (1974, 1977), Ludger Lütkehaus (1985, 2005, 2007), and what Domenico Fazio (2023) recently called the “Brazilian Schopenhauerian Left”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Now, an unavoidable question in light of this interesting proposal by Allen and Jaeggi is precisely why Horkheimer is excluded from the return movement to the first generation. Certainly, this is something for which Habermas is largely responsible, at least insofar as he declared Horkheimer obsolete and unproductive after he ceased writing with his friend Teddy (and even when he was still writing with him).

¹⁸ Jaeggi, R. *Fortschritt und Regression*, p. 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

(Cacciola, 1994, 2022, 2023; Debona, 2013, 2020, 2022, 2025; Durante, 2017, 2018, 2022)

– is that of a nonconformist, anti-quietist, anti-immobilist, and anti-teleological critical pessimism. The basic premises of this interpretation include the following:

1. By opposing the positivity of evil to Leibnizian positivity of the good, accusing the latter of being a perverse mechanism to justify evil in the name of seeking the good, Schopenhauer does not exclude the social versions of this positivity of evil, which corresponds to not justifying any form of the *status quo*;
2. In this key, and within our thematic scope, it matters little whether the good is named God or progress;
3. Even if the (reductionist) reading that Schopenhauer was reactionary – by opposing revolution in 1848 and thus offering an “indirect apology” for the capitalist *status quo*, as Lukács accused, with broad adherence among Marxists²⁰ – holds some weight, it is not sufficient to contradict or exclude the premise that Schopenhauer contributes to critical theory of society through a permanent critique of the *status quo* and of capitalism in its different stages.

In the end, it comes down to acknowledging the idea that the two instances of will, metaphysical and physical, cannot exclude one another. As A. Schmidt elaborated, the recognition of the contradiction of existence “does not exclude that the will, amid all *malum metaphysicum*, energetically struggles against all suffering, the *malum physicum*, which can be abolished”²¹. If not abolished, at least modified, alleviated, and certainly fought incessantly²².

To these underlying premises we may add Schopenhauer’s conception of history – and of “historical time”. On the same page of Chapter 38 of Volume II of *The World as Will and Representation*, where he defines the well-known dictum that “only

²⁰ In Brazil, Leandro Konder was one of the thinkers who adopted Lukács’s interpretation, for example in his *Introdução ao fascismo*, p. 29.

²¹ Schmidt, A. *Schopenhauer und der Materialismus*, p. 73. “Where materialism renounces the demand for ‘positive worldviews’, it approaches Schopenhauer’s philosophy and, like him, comes to understand in many ways the absurdity of our conditioned and fragile existence” (*ibid.*).

²² “Struggle” is an intrinsic characteristic of the will to life, even if we consider it only in its generic and cosmic dimension: from the inorganic realm, through plants and all forms of animality, “there is no victory without struggle”.

the individuals that are real in nature while genera are mere abstractions”²³, the philosopher of the will develops his assessment of progress and regression. He singles out as target what he calls “constructive histories (*Konstruktionsgeschichten*) guided by a shallow optimism”²⁴, which “ultimately lead to a fat, comfortable and substantial state with a well-regulated constitution, good police and a good system of justice, technology, industry and at its peak, intellectual perfection (*intellektuelle Vervollkommung*); because this is in fact the only possible one, since morality remains unchanged in essentials. But morality is what everything depends on”²⁵. To the promises of systems that aimed to improve humanity morally, betting on progress in virtue, reality and experience reply: if it were possible “to improve character through morality and, consequently, ‘a *constant progress toward the good*’, then, if the many religious institutions and moralizing efforts had not missed their target, the older half of humanity would have to be significantly better than the younger, at least on average”²⁶.

But in what, after all, would consist the “truly essential content”, that which is not contingent and temporal, not subject to the whirls of history, and which remains permanent beneath all change? It would consist in the “fundamental qualities of the human heart and mind – many bad, few good”. This is what constitutes what Schopenhauer calls “universal history”: “the activities, deeds, sufferings and fate of the human race as it develops from the qualities mentioned as well as from the physical, earthly lot”²⁷. To fail to start from such positivity and independence of this fundamental content of existence is precisely what leads erroneously to conceive and construct history “according to a preset plan of the world which holds that everything is for the best, and this best is supposed ultimately to appear and be a supreme excellence”²⁸. Such a senseless wager invests everything in a falsehood, given that “in paltry earthly happiness” (*Erdenglück*), however cultivated and favored by fortune, will not cease to be

²³ W II, 38, p. 459.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Id.*, p. 460.

²⁶ E, p. 194.

²⁷ W II, 38, p. 462.

²⁸ *Id.*, p. 460.

a “hollow, deceptive, frail and sorry thing that neither constitutions and legislation nor steam-engines and telegraphs can ever improve in Essentials”²⁹. Those who bet otherwise could be called naïve realists, optimists, eudemonists, or habitual simpletons and philistines. Thus, the kind of philosophy of history that would be inadmissible because founded upon a false premise goes hand in hand with the kind of progress that does not exist: the moral progress of humanity in general.

Nevertheless, for one who holds that history will always be mendacious, because it always wants “to tell different things” from narratives about individuals and particular events, yet in the end manages only to repeat the same under different appearances, names, and guises – as affirmed by the thesis of a *nunc stans*³⁰ – this does not mean that history is devoid of any value. Not even pessimism could be critical without a kind of philosophical consciousness grounded in historical consciousness. The problem – fundamentally Hegelian – lies in constructing it as a whole, with beginning, middle, and end endowed with coherence, which would be a contradiction based on the equally mistaken assumption that the human species, not its individuals, has a “unity to the consciousness”. Yet this does not prevent acknowledging that there may even be a “true philosophy of history”. This, contrary to what all the others do, must consider

what always is and never becomes or passes away [...], it does not consist in elevating the temporal goal of humanity into an eternal and absolute one, and giving an artificial and imaginary construction of its progress (*Fortschritt*) towards this goal through all setbacks; rather, it consists in the insight that history is deceptive, not only in practice but also in its essence, since, while speaking of mere individuals and particular events, it always pretends to be recounting something else; while, from beginning to end, it only ever repeats the same thing under different names and in different clothes. The true philosophy of history consists in the insight that throughout all these endless alterations with their chaotic noise, we are only ever faced with the same, identical, unchangeable essence that behaves the same today as yesterday and always: the true philosophy should therefore recognize what is identical in all events, in ancient as well as in modern times, in the Orient as well as the Occident;

²⁹ *Id.*, p. 461.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

and in spite of all differences in particular circumstances, in costumes and customs, it should always look out upon the same humanity³¹.

For Critical Theory, which today shows signs of exhaustion in relation to the conception of history it adopted, almost entirely Hegelian and criticized by Schopenhauer, there would thus be water from another wellspring. It would be highly beneficial for it to engage in an unbiased reading of Schopenhauer's concept of history, which excludes the possibility of any significant historical improvement in moral terms, while still recognizing and considering social, technical, and economic progress. The Schopenhauer worth considering, and who would be in close harmony with the conception of progress delimited by Jaeggi, is the one who even admitted a kind of utopia as a complement to the aforementioned anti-deification of the State: humanity, at its highest level, would require no State. In his *Posthumous Manuscripts*, we read that this scenario is envisioned through consideration of the reality of labor: alongside the abolitionist pages of his major work regarding Black slavery, the replacement of manual labor – and therefore of the arduous life of manual workers – could be envisioned alongside a gradual replacement of animals in transportation and agricultural settings. In Schopenhauer, therefore, there is a negative dialectic of a certain kind of progress.

A crucial difference lies between possible ethical progress and the impossibility of moral progress: what much of current Critical Theory and the analytical tradition call moral progress, measured by emancipatory social achievements such as the abolition of slavery and the ongoing fight against its new forms, the abolition of corporal punishment in schools, and the pursuit of gender and racial equality in rights, would be ethical progress for Schopenhauer, but would not affect the fundamental moral content of humankind. It was in this sense that Lütkehaus asserted that “the philosophy of praxis that operates in Schopenhauer's name responds to three minimal conditions

³¹ *Ibid.* Within this understanding, which assumes that history stands to the human species as reason stands to the individual, it is maintained that without history a people would be neither conscious of itself nor of its present: “history is to be regarded as the reason or the enlightened self-consciousness of the human race, and occupies the place of an immediate collective self-consciousness of the entire race, so that it is only through history that the human race is really made into a whole, into one humanity. This is the true value of history” (*idem*, p. 462-463).

required by the expression ‘Schopenhauerian Left’: critical impulse, desire for change, and, in place of pessimism, ‘Peiorism’ or ‘Meliorism,’ understood respectively as the theory of the lesser evil and of the relatively better”³². It was also in this sense that I defended the thesis of a small ethics and of pragmatic pessimism, and that Felipe Durante problematized the place of human rights from this perspective.

Schopenhauer, followed in this by Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno, did not confuse “the progress of skills and knowledge with that of humanity”. This would be one of the strongest attestations to why, as much or more than Hegel and Marx, the philosopher of the will would be an unavoidable source for the beginnings of Critical Theory – as indeed he was, especially for Horkheimer.

4 HORKHEIMER AND THE SCHOPENHAUERIAN DIALECTIC OF PROGRESS-REGRESSION

Horkheimer was the first, within the register of Critical Theory, to focus on Schopenhauerian concepts implicated in the question of progress–regression without concluding that their contribution would be null merely because they were pessimistic. The materialist and anti-metaphysical thinker did not direct his attention to Volume I of *The World as Will and Representation*, but rather to Volume II and to the late *Parerga and Paralipomena*. From these and other works “complementary” to the metaphysics of the will, he was able to perceive what was essential: “In Schopenhauer’s doctrine, what is at stake is laid bare. Material interest, struggle for existence, for well-being and for power constitute the driving force; history, the outcome”³³. But also that:

In his work, nothing is promised. Neither in heaven nor on earth, neither for developed peoples nor underdeveloped ones, is there to be found waiting that popular greatness toward which leaders of any people, of whatever political persuasion, would like to guide their followers. [...] Schopenhauer’s vision was too clear for him to exclude from history the possibility of improvement. He certainly foresaw, and more precisely than most economists of his time, the replacement of what was by far the largest share of manual labor, especially heavy bodily labor. But he also foresaw what would result from such changes. Reflecting on technical, economic, and social improvements, he recognized their

³² Lütkehaus, L. *Esiste una sinistra schopenhaueriana? Ovvero: il pessimismo è un quietismo?*, p. 17.

³³ Horkheimer, M. *Die Aktualität Schopenhauers*, p. 124.

consequences from the outset: blind devotion to progress, the unexpected effects upon the peaceful course of things, or, as I would prefer to call it, the dialectic of such progress. Not unlike a portion of the Young Hegelians who, in this respect, contradicted their master, he resolutely rejected the idea of the divinity of the State. [...] The State is not a moral institution; it is founded on violence. 'Humanity, at its highest level', says Schopenhauer, who here agrees with the founders of socialism, 'would need no State at all' (HN II, p. 264). But whether one might ever reach this point, he made no promises. He divinized nothing – not the State, not technology. The development of the intellect rests upon that of necessity. The greatest promoters of science were hunger, desire for power, and war. The idealist fable of the cunning of reason, through which the horrors of the past are softened by way of a happy ending, reveals the truth that blood and misery are tied to the triumphs of society. The rest is ideology³⁴.

Almost two decades before this explicit claim to view Schopenhauer as another master of Critical Theory, Horkheimer had already recorded, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with Adorno, an agreement with Schopenhauer's thesis that history is mendacious. In the Frankfurt version, history is mendacious insofar as, as a unitary theory à la Hegel, "it is not the good but precisely horror"³⁵: "Spirit is a monstrosity, and everything good in its origin and in its existence is inextricably entangled with this horror"³⁶. Thus the cunning of reason is something else: lacking any capacity to guarantee the identity between subject and object, it performs no more than the role of adaptation, for which purpose it turns humans into beasts endowed with ever-extending power. In this sense, it would be "extravagant to construct universal history, as Hegel did, around categories such as freedom and justice. For these categories derive from anomalous individuals, who, from the standpoint of the whole, mean nothing, except that they helped to produce transient social conditions in which many machines and chemical products are manufactured, useful for strengthening the species and subjugating others"³⁷.

As for the hope of improvements in conditions, this could be recognized only if, instead of guaranteed, stable, and definitive conditions, one placed the wager on

³⁴ *Id.*, p. 124-125.

³⁵ Horkheimer, M.; Adorno, T. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 185.

³⁶ *Id.*, p. 184.

³⁷ *Id.*, p. 183-184.

“disrespect for everything so solidly founded in general suffering”³⁸. For such disrespect, unlike the “rational philosophies of history” (Schopenhauer had spoken of “optimistic philosophies of history”), it is impossible to prescribe any “praxis determined as the salvific praxis”, but it would likewise be impossible to recommend non-resistance. This resistance and this pessimistic hope, in face of an insurmountable contradiction that reason cannot alter, are genuinely Schopenhauerian. Horkheimer would explain why *sober* is another apt adjective for Schopenhauer’s critical pessimism in its social version: because he had been clear in saying that no philosophy of history could be replaced by a “historicization of being in which the victims are absent and the executioners concealed”³⁹. Thus, “if in the literature on the emancipation of a given social stratum, that is, in its optimism, one can also proclaim the general interest in advancing toward the better, then in the philosophy of its twilight (of that emancipation), that is, in its pessimism, one can assert the interest in what, in so-called progress, needs to be preserved”⁴⁰. It is in these terms that Horkheimer indicates the extent to which Schopenhauer’s dialectic of progress acknowledges that the black-and-white scheme of progress and regressions would never suffice to critically evaluate cultural phenomena.

If Schopenhauer follows his thesis of the immutability of suffering and the futility of protest to the end, his philosophy itself would, for that very reason, be an unparalleled protest. Particularly for the diagnosis of the present time as Horkheimer saw it – in the 1940s and 1950s – of a technical civilization that housed the culture industry, instrumental reason, and the end of individuality, humans had become so cured of their basenesses that they had unlearned resistance, which, nevertheless, “is the soul of Schopenhauerian philosophy”⁴¹. At least two major reasons were identified by the founder of Critical Theory for the ongoing necessity of this “Schopenhauerian resistance”: 1) Not only the extreme systems of political oppression culminating in

³⁸ *Id.*, p. 185.

³⁹ Horkheimer, M. *Schopenhauer und die Gesellschaft*, p. 49.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Id.*, p. 53.

persecution and extermination of entire groups, described by Philalethes in the dialogue on religion and, in his century, finding continuity in Hitler and Stalin. No. Even advanced democratic life, those societies that achieved greater success in combating inequalities and strengthening their “institutions of freedom”, could never justify their bloody past. 2) An infinity of achievements – or progress – had indeed been made, but “despite the unimaginable increase in productive forces, life has not become easier [...]”. Not only the relapse into misery, which continues to exist within civilization itself in its most brutal form [...], but also new ideal and real inconveniences arise, provoked by improvements”⁴². The progressive elimination of women’s subjection, the (supposed) equalization of workers’ and entrepreneurs’ ways of life, the democratization of existence, these are examples of social progress listed by the former director of the Institute for Social Research to indicate how they nevertheless update Schopenhauer’s thesis of compensation by new burdens of suffering. For his diagnosis of his own time, economic energies were displaced toward the instrumental, evidenced in the observation that a library had become a luxury item while the purchase of vehicles and various devices had become much more accessible, and that the reduction of working hours had not translated into more creative leisure time: “Before the various instruments of mass entertainment can combat the boredom of free time [...], we are faced with the upkeep of our home and all its devices”⁴³.

Thus Horkheimer – later followed by two much more neglected figures of Critical Theory (of the second generation), A. Schmidt and H. Maus, his doctoral students at the Goethe-Universität – liberated Schopenhauer’s critical philosophy from the charge leveled since the 19th-century *Pessimismusstreit*: namely, that pessimism was one-sided because it universalized – or projected onto the cosmos – what was merely a historical moment of crisis. Pessimism here becomes a critical lens that enables diagnosing the present by way of (historical memory of) the past. It is no longer a device for issuing hopeless, catastrophic predictions about the future.

⁴² *Id.*, p. 52.

⁴³ *Id.*, p. 52-53.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Critical Theory needs this critical pessimism, including in order to free progress from its positivizations and its colonialisms, because what is at stake is a productive pessimism⁴⁴. But would not such pessimism, for that very reason, also help emancipatory social movements and Critical Theory itself to rid themselves of positive and progressive goals? To employ the term (pessimism) merely to qualify the idea of negative prognosis, indicating inevitable and ineliminable future evils; to accuse Schopenhauer, with the idea of a *nunc stans*, of obstinately clinging to a present to the point of confusing it with both past and future; to affirm that pessimism cannot provide anything functioning as a mediator between utopia and catastrophe, all this, as proposed by interpreters such as Kuno Fischer, Rudolf Haym, Georg Lukács, Bernhard Heidtmann, and others, implies restricting oneself to an uncritical, cultural use of pessimism; it amounts to reducing it to psychologism or to a mere reflection of moments of social decline. When we highlight Lukács's accusation, in his questionable thesis of indirect apologetics for capitalism and Nazism, that pessimism had been a mission accomplished by the pre-imperialist bourgeoisie, we see how the readings of Horkheimer, Schmidt, and the Schopenhauerian Left point in the opposite direction: pessimism can be a crucial weapon to be wielded by the other side of society – the side of the victims⁴⁵.

It was precisely when Horkheimer and Adorno shifted their tone in the 1930s and 1940s, becoming progressively less Hegelian and Marxian, including in their refusal to wager on generalized human improvement, that their most renowned successors in Critical Theory agreed to discard and “overcome” them. Among the elements they threw out along with (almost) everything else on the table, under the charge of sociological deficit, was their adoption (albeit critical) of Schopenhauerian metaphysical pessimism. And yet this Schopenhauerian element was particularly unpalatable: it had been

⁴⁴ Cf. Horkheimer, M. *Pessimismus heute*, p. 232.

⁴⁵ A very similar reading was developed by Benjamin, albeit without these direct references to Schopenhauerian vocabulary.

identified as one of the major reasons why Horkheimer, in his later phase, supposedly produced nothing but shocking absurdities – an affront to thinkers like Habermas, who never ceased to wager on humanity's progressive improvement.

Now – and only now – that Critical Theory, through the major contemporary minds of Amy Allen and Rahel Jaeggi, has realized what was lacking when they distanced themselves critically from the second and third generations, it still finds it difficult to (re)see what the first generation had perceived at the School's beginnings. Jaeggi, despite her fruitful proposal of a conception of progress "without end", and despite continuing Allen's critiques, still falters in the same Habermasian-Honnethian mire in which the current generation finds itself, conceptually self-limited in its movements: although insisting that primacy belongs to progress as process rather than to the good as given or preconceived, she remains incapable of being less Hegelian, continuing to posit the good and emancipatory goals. Inspired by these two critical philosophers, who, to a great extent, oppose their Frankfurt peers Honneth and Forst by advocating a return to Foucault and Adorno (Allen), or to Benjamin and Adorno (Jaeggi), rather than to Hegel and Kant, it would be timely to demand another beneficial and still undeveloped return: to Horkheimer and Schopenhauer. *Zurück zu Horkheimer mit Schopenhauer*⁴⁶. This may be precisely what Critical Theory needs today to overcome its self-declared exhaustion, yet another expression of a progressive logic that does not serve it well, since, indeed, something is exhausted only if its matter is assumed to be exhaustible. Evil, if admitted as positive rather than good, is inexhaustible, despite the exhaustibility of the forms of combating it. Self-preservation, the multifaceted and ever-updated interest in matter, satisfaction, and power, oppression, and subordination of the weaker, all these would be better resisted if assumed as perennial.

The productive Schopenhauerian pessimism, which prevents the positivization of emancipatory goals because there is no pre-established *telos*, no planned totality, and because what is independently positive is precisely what must be combated, this

⁴⁶ For a nuanced and comprehensive debate on the proposals and requirements of a "return to Frankfurt," in light of the reappraisals of various classics of the Frankfurt School, see Fazio, G. *Ritorno a Francoforte: le avventure della nuova teoria critica*.

critical pessimism may well recognize its orientation in what the aged Schopenhauer reportedly told the French journalist Frédéric Morin, a socialist revolutionary who visited him in Frankfurt a.M. for an interview with the *Revue de Paris*, two years before his death: “[...] do not forget my last word: the great problem is not that of the good, but of evil. Beware of all sugary metaphysics! A philosophy in which one does not hear, between its pages, tears, lamentation, gnashing of teeth, and the terrible roar of universal mutual murder, is no philosophy at all”⁴⁷. Such is the magnitude of the Schopenhauerian deficit of the Critical Theory.

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⁴⁷ “[...] vergessen Sie nur nicht mein letztes Wort: das große Problem ist nicht das des Guten, sondern das des Übten. Mißtrauen Sie jeder süßlichen Metaphysik! Eine Philosophie, in der man zwischen den Seiten nicht die Tränen, das Heulen und Zähneklappern und das furchtbare Getöse des gegenseitigen allgemeinen Mordes hört, ist keine Philosophie” (*Gespr.*, 412, p. 331).

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