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# ON ADORNO (AN INTERVIEW)<sup>1</sup>

Roberto Schwarz\*

*Translated by Simone Fernandes and Mariana Fidelis*

## ***Is there actuality in Adorno's thought?***

I will answer your question indirectly. In line with Avant-gardist and Marxists, Adorno seeks actuality as a decisive attribute. In another perspective, discussions on the loss of actuality have a central role in his social and aesthetic criticism. These discussions are the counterproof of his actuality. As was the case for Marx, the index of actuality lies in the productive

<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted in 2003 and first published in Portuguese in 2012 (complete reference at the end). [N.T.]

\* Roberto Schwarz is a literary critic and a retired Professor of Brazilian Literature at the University of Campinas (UNICAMP), having previously taught at the University of São Paulo (USP). Schwarz is well known for his analysis of Machado de Assis' novels. Among others, he published *Ao vencedor as batatas* (1977), which comprises the influential essay "As ideias fora do lugar", and *Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo* (1990). Trained in Social Sciences, the author proposed (as he remarks below) a critical continuation of Antonio Candido's studies of the nexus between Brazilian novels and the historical process. His works currently available in English are: *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*. Trans. John Gledson. London: Verso, 1992; *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*. Trans. John Gledson. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002; *To the Victor, the Potatoes! Literary Form and Social Process in the Beginnings of the Brazilian Novel* (Historical Materialism). Trans. Ronald W. Sousa. Leiden; Boston: Brill Academic Pub, 2019. [N.T.]

forces, whose development demarcates the future and renders whole parts of the social organization and its associate categories obsolete. This process is relentless, and it does not spare the very ideas of the one who formulated it: as everybody knows, the incorporation of science into the productive process is making the notion of working class (upon which Marxist politics has depended so far) outdated. Walter Benjamin was the one who reinvented this schema in the scope of the aesthetic theory by observing that the technical reproducibility of works of art struck the statute of the original work of art at the root, rendering it superfluous, as well as its proprietary and, by extension, the proprietary class itself. This is a clear example of the contradiction between the development of productive forces and key categories of bourgeois civilization. In this respect, Adorno is a continuator of Benjamin.

Adorno's theoretical position was fueled by the critique of Fascism, Stalinist communism, and the American way of life, of which he had direct experience and a negative evaluation as the apex of fetishism. Instead of looking at them separately, as disconnected forms, he and Horkheimer saw them as variants of one and the same process. This perspective, completely unconventional then and afterwards, is at the origin of the radicality of their reflections, which developed a type of "somber Marxism", that, in my opinion, withstood the test of time.

The actuality of the topics of reflection that Adorno has taken to a new level speaks for itself. It suffices to remember the dialectic between progress and regression in our civilization (an idea which is difficult to assimilate), the cultural industry as mass

deception, the blunting of senses related to capital fetishism, the contradictions of artistic engagement and the idea of art for art's sake, the jargon of authenticity, the subtle complementarity between sociology and psychoanalysis, that is, between Marx and Freud, and others. Among Adorno's theoretical achievements is the social deciphering of the New Music, in an essay that I consider unparalleled. And, close to the end of his life, the conception of a remarkably original Aesthetic Theory, devising from the effective positions of modern art instead of from a general philosophical systematization. Art is what art came to be, for good or evil: its late-capitalistic figure presides the critical examination of the object, creating a model for historicized philosophical discussion stemming from the crisis of the present.

But maybe what is more actual about Adorno is his general attitude as a critic, completely open, very alert, and, most of all, driven by the highest possible ambition. In a personal note, he declares the presumption of understanding musical language as the hero of a fairy tale understands the language of the birds.<sup>2</sup> This is a beautiful image because it shows an awareness of his exceptionality and the sense of a mission associated with it. This is also a good image because it underlines the differentiation of the artistic language, as well as the urge to interpret it in common language, in a simultaneously spontaneous, deciphering, and reflexive operation. If we write form where music is written,

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<sup>2</sup> This metaphor is used by Adorno also in the *Aesthetic Theory* and in the essay "Zur Musikpädagogik" ("On Music Education"). See: ADORNO, T. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. R. Hullot-Kentor. London, New York: Continuum, 2002, p. 144; ADORNO, T. *Dissonanzen. Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie. Gesammelte Schriften*, v. 14. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003, p. 116. [N.T.]

we will learn something about Adorno's stance as a critic, who actually aims to know what the forms speak about, responding to them as expressions of contemporary society, in what is more problematic and crucial about it. It is evident that this highly developed receptive faculty – which makes reading Adorno a humbling experience, because of how much he sees where the reader saw nothing or almost nothing – is only half of his strength. The other half of it rests in the diligence and analytical accuracy with which he scrutinizes the formal consistence and inconsistency of the works of art, which he interprets, according to another of his expressions, as an unconscious historiography of our time. It is interesting to compare rival productions, which antagonize with the social-aesthetic reflection, with the meticulousness, seriousness, and relevance of his analysis. When we read them, we detect where reductionism, lack of intellectual ambition and disregard for art lie. Well, I will stop here.

***Can you tell us about your first contacts with Adorno's work and his influence on your own works of criticism?***

I first saw the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* [*Dialectic of Enlightenment*] on a bookstore shelf in 1960, back when I was a sociology student. At that time, São Paulo had two great German bookstores. As far as I know, Adorno was unknown as a critic and philosopher, because his works had not been translated and his influence in Germany was just emerging. But in the Social Sciences' degree at the University of São Paulo, he was a reference for methods and techniques in sociological research, as he was

one of the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality*, a huge collective compendium on the types of personality susceptible to fascism. In college at that time, a progressist group of sociology scholars was striving to combine empirical research – questionnaires, statistics, US manuals, and so on – with rigorous theoretical reflection and a leftist critique, not an easy task, for which there was no model. This is why the combination of methodological debate, disguised Marxism, psychoanalysis, social research paraphernalia, and issues about funding present in *The Authoritarian Personality* – directed by Horkheimer, sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, and also employing a group of (somewhat) Freudo-Marxist Jews that were refugees from Nazism – could not be better received. It was an example of sophistication and of the possibility of escaping the triviality of the current US sociology. In other words, contingent factors as the current available bibliography and the strength of these elective affinities led a product of the best dialectical reflection from 1920s Germany, which was filtered by the intellectual conditions imposed by US anticommunism, to be wed, sort of in the dark, to theoretical and political aspirations arising from Brazilian developmentalism<sup>3</sup> in

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<sup>3</sup> Schwarz refers to the prevailing economic, political, and intellectual orientation in 1950s Brazil (and Latin America) that emphasized the requirement of an increase in productivity and industrialization, generally through import substitution, as a condition for the (so-called, at that time) “Third World” to overcome its underdeveloped condition. In Brazil, this tendency was illustrated, in terms of politics, by J. Kubitschek’s government between 1956 and 1961. It was theorized and examined by scholars related to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Comissão Econômica para a América Latina e o Caribe – CEPAL – founded in 1948), especially by the economist Celso Furtado (1920-2004). Subsequently, in the context of the 1960-1970 wave of military coups in Latin America, the criticism of this standpoint fostered the debate around dependency. For more information, see: CARDOSO, F. H., FALETTO, E. *Dependency and Development in Latin America*. Trans-

the late 1950s. The Brechtian revival among us, that took place shortly afterwards, followed similar paths.

But, returning to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I had no idea what it could be, and I just opened the book because I sympathized with everything that had dialectic in its title. I soon realized that the book was going to be of great interest to me, although it was way too difficult, because of the density and intensity of its presentation. For a while, I was more involved in the argumentative atmosphere and in its topics than in its substance itself. Soon afterwards, I acquired Adorno's *Notes to Literature*, which were just being released and were more attainable for me, and the essays on music, which came to be the ones that made a stronger impression on me, although I do not know anything about music. This is because the discussion on how form operates, its social-historical substance, its modern revolution, its constructed and exploratory character and, above all, its objective logic, is clearer and more abstract there. One year earlier, I had started to read Lukács' literary criticism, and its comparison with Adorno naturally evidenced the intellectual sacrifice demanded by Stalinism.

As always, there is a preparation for revelations. In those same years, Antonio Candido<sup>4</sup> – of whom I was a student – was

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lated by Marjory M. Urquidi. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. [N.T.]

<sup>4</sup> Antônio Candido (1918-2017) was a sociologist, essayist, and outstanding literary critic. He was professor *emeritus* at the University of São Paulo and at the São Paulo State University (USP and UNESP) and doctor *honoris causa* at the University of Campinas and the University of the Republic (Uruguay). In the 1960s, Candido taught Brazilian Literature at the University of Paris and was a visiting scholar at Yale University (during the military dictatorship in Brazil). He was awarded many prizes throughout his career, such as the *Prêmio Jabuti* for essays in 1965, the *Prêmio*

elaborating a materialist notion of literary form, oriented towards the same direction. Instead of opposing formal invention to historical apprehension, segregating these faculties and its respective domains, he aimed at their articulation. Form – which is not self-evident and is supposed to be identified and studied by the critique – is considered a sole ordering principle that regulates both an imaginary universe and an aspect of external reality. In variable proportions, it combines artistic manufacturing and the intuition of preexisting social rhythms. From a different angle, it was about explaining how external configurations, which belong to the extra-artistic life, could get inside fantasy products, where they became structuring forces and showed something about themselves that was not evident before. It was also about explaining how the critique itself could retrace this trajectory and reach one ambit through the other, achieving insight into both. This movement that comes and goes demands a structured description of both fields, the one of the work of art as well as that of social reality, whose connections are a matter for reflection. It was difficult to achieve the due irradiation from the originality of the results obtained, and indeed it has not been achieved yet, because the novels to which they refer – *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant: a novel* [*Memórias de um*

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*Machado de Assis* in 1993, the *Camões Prize* in 1998 and the *Alfonso Reyes International Prize* in 2005. He was also politically active since his youth, especially during the military dictatorship in Brazil, and was one of the founders of the *Workers Party* in 1980. One of his most influential works is *Formação da Literatura Brasileira (Formation of Brazilian Literature)*, published in 1959. His only work currently available in English is: CANDIDO, A. *On Literature and Society*. Trans. H. S. Becker. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. [N.T.]



*sargento de milícias*] and *The Slum* [*O cortiço*] – do not have international repercussion.<sup>5</sup>

We can say that Antonio Candido's essayistic method and his research on the forms aspired to clarify the peculiarity of the Brazilian experience, both literary and social, while Adorno probed the meaning and destiny of the bourgeois civilization as a whole. In the first case what is at stake is Brazil, and only mediately the course of the world; while for the latter what is in question is the direction followed by humankind, almost directly. The difference in their horizons entails a difference in genre and tone – one narrower, the other wider, both having pros and cons. Indeed, it is very unlikely that someone will seek an orientation about the contemporary world in a study on *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant* and the implied dialectic of malandroism<sup>6</sup> (although it would be fully possible), while no one would seek less than that in an essay on Hölderlin or Becket.

However, by resolutely embracing the value of a cultural experience from the perspective of the periphery, by lingering

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<sup>5</sup> In reference to Manuel Antônio de Almeida's *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant: A Novel* (Translated by Ronald Souza. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), first published in 1852, and Aluísio de Azevedo's *The Slum* (Translated by David Rosenthal. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), published in 1890. [N.T.]

<sup>6</sup> Malandroism refers to "malandragem", a Brazilian colloquial term that could be translated as rascality or roguery. This is a popular figure in the Brazilian imaginary that refers to a socially marginalized person that employs his cunning to survive, profiting of lies, tricks, and deception. This trickster tends to be an irreverent figure, that refuses the discipline of work. "Dialectic of Malandroism [Dialética da malandragem]" is the title of Candido's essay on *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*, published in 1970 (*Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros* 8, p. 67-89, 1970 <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-901X.v0i8p67-89>). English translation: CANDIDO, A. "Dialectic of Malandroism". In: *On Literature and Society*. Trans. Howard S. Becker. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995. [N.T.]

on it, Antonio Candido achieved a significant result, that is not peripheric at all: the universality of the categories from the countries that are a model for us is not convincing and it is a mistake to apply them directly here. I have no doubt that the high quality peripheric essayistic tradition suggests that there is a somewhat improper linearity within Adorno's and even Marx's dialectical constructions – a homogenization that leads to the supposition that the periphery will or is able to follow the center's steps.

I was also fortunate to be around a generation of younger professors. In response to that epoch, they dived into a study of Marx in order to understand Brazil – here I think specifically of the group gathered to read *Capital* – and arrived at similar conclusions: that there is a relationship of discrepancy and complementarity between the social forms from periphery and the ones from the center, a relationship that can evolve but that is not contingent nor tends to dissolve itself in equality.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Here Schwarz refers to the “Marx seminar [Seminário Marx]” highlighting its multidisciplinary character: “the assiduous figures were Giannotti, Fernando Novais, Paul Singer, Octavio Ianni, Ruth and Fernando H. Cardoso. As apprentices, there were also some keen students: Bento Prado, Weffort, Michael Lowy, Gabriel Bolaffi, and me. The composition was multidisciplinary, in accordance with the nature of our subject: Philosophy, History, Economy, Sociology and Anthropology were represented there” (SCHWARZ, Roberto, “Um seminário Marx”. *Novos Estudos CEBRAP* 50, p. 100, March 1998 [<http://novosestudos.uol.com.br/produto/edicao-50>] (accessed: May 5th, 2020), our translation]. In different ways, these intellectuals contributed to the 1960 and 1970's political-economic debate in Latin-American around the “dependency theory”, illustrated in Brazil by the work of the sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso (who came to be President of Brazil from 1995 to 2002). In general terms, this political-economic strand sought to explain the under-developed condition of Latin-American countries as a necessary consequence of their relationship with the developed countries and of their complementary positions, rather than considering it as a provisory gap or delay that could be overcome by modernization. It contrasts, thus, with the developmentalist

So, when I impregnated myself with the free and heuristic sense of the form cultivated by Adorno, this was based on an endeavor for knowledge underway in Brazil, deliberately collective, and considerably distanced of his premises; an effort that I sought to maintain.

***A usual critique to Adorno's thought is that, by giving up on a revolutionary or political solution, it would lead to a sort of political immobilism, to the figure of the isolated thinker in his ivory tower. What is your view on that?***

As far as I see it, this critique does not apply at all. Adorno is a writer of unusual mobility and great polemical appetite. If there is an essayist that did not confine himself in the canonized culture, it was him, since he wrote about newspaper astrology columns, jazz, semiculture,<sup>8</sup> the degradation of everyday life by the capital, etc., also notoriously polemicizing with Heidegger,

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approach mentioned above (footnote 3). For more information, see: CARDOSO, F. H., FALETTO, E. *Dependency and Development in Latin America*. Translated by Marjory M. Urquidí. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. [N.T.]

<sup>8</sup> Schwarz uses the Portuguese expression “meia cultura”, which is one of the possible translations for *Halbbildung*. The German term is used by Adorno in many of his works, from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) to the collection of musical writings “Improptus” (1966) and receives more extensive treatment in the “Theorie der Halbbildung” (1959). It has been translated as “pseudo-culture” (in Deborah Cook’s translation of “Theorie der Halbbildung”), “half-education” (in Edmund Jephcott’s translation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), “half-learning” (in Edmund Jephcott’s translation of *Minima moralia*), and “half-formation” (by O’Connor in his book on Adorno). See: ADORNO, T.; HORKHEIMER, M. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. California: Stanford University Press, 2002; ADORNO, T. *Minima moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. London; New York: Verso, 2005; ADORNO, T. “Theory of Pseudo-Culture”. Trans. Deborah Cook. *Telos* 95, p. 15–38, Spring 1993; O’CONNOR, B. *Adorno*. New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 131. [N.T.]

Lukács, Sartre, Huxley, Mannheim, Bloch, student activism, among others. The obstruction of the revolutionary solution and the sterility of electoral politics are diagnoses, not preferences. One can disagree, but there are considerable reasons to agree with him. Intellectual independence and confidence in the objective value of the arguments and critical interventions allow Adorno to criticize, without hesitation, his venerable Schönberg, the greatly admired friend Walter Benjamin, the ingenious and (in his eyes) dubious Brecht, not to mention Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. This is a freedom and a differentiation of spirit that we are not used to and that, perhaps due to annoyance, leads many to the extravagant objection about him allegedly standing in an ivory tower. Indeed, the civil existence of the critical spirit is an important political fact, very scarce, and possibly even more radical than party affiliation. Not to mention that Adorno never made peace with capital. In a recent review of Walter Benjamin's work, the English critic Timothy Clark<sup>9</sup> observed – as a restriction – that Adorno's Marxism could be summarized as a lifelong operation to circumvent the Third Communist International and not to give in. This characterization can be taken as a huge compliment.

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<sup>9</sup> See: CLARK, T. J. "Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?". *boundary* 2 30 (1), p. 31-49, 2003. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-30-1-31>. [N.T.]

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