

## FOR AN IMMANENT CRITIQUE OF A NEOLIBERAL FORM OF LIFE

### POR UMA CRÍTICA IMANENTE A UMA FORMA DE VIDA NEOLIBERAL

**BÁRBARA BURIL<sup>1</sup>**  
(UFSC/Brasil)

**ALESSANDRO PINZANI<sup>2</sup>**  
(UFSC/CNPq – Brasil)

#### ABSTRACT

This paper departs from the assumption that the critique of neoliberalism should not restrict itself to a criticism of an economic project. Another possible criticism of neoliberalism consists of a critique of how this specific form of life forms subjects. In this paper, we argue that a critique of a form of life is only justified in a reasonable way if it starts from the experiences of suffering produced by this form of life. As we will show, we must criticise neoliberalism not because it is inadequate for solving problems, since for a specific portion of the world population it has been extremely effective, but because it causes suffering. Suffering, unlike mere unsolved problems, represents sufficient grounds for highlighting the existence of a normative problem in a form of life. According to Max Horkheimer, the first step of a critical project committed to the transformation of a form of life are the crises of the present, which are not fully understood through the theoretical tools of “problem solving” or “learning processes”, as Rahel Jaeggi resorts to in her critical theory of society.

**Keywords:** Forms of life; Immanent critique; Neoliberalism; Rahel Jaeggi; Suffering.

#### RESUMO

Este artigo parte do pressuposto de que a crítica ao neoliberalismo não deve se restringir a uma crítica a um projeto econômico. Outra crítica possível ao neoliberalismo consiste em uma crítica a como essa forma específica de vida constitui sujeitos. Neste artigo, defendemos que uma crítica a uma forma de vida só se justifica de forma razoável se partir das experiências de sofrimento produzidas por ela. Como mostraremos, devemos criticar o neoliberalismo não porque ele não é capaz de resolver problemas, pois, para uma parcela específica da população mundial, tem sido extremamente eficaz, mas porque ele causa sofrimentos. A existência de sofrimentos, ao contrário de meros problemas não-resolvidos, já aponta para a existência de um problema normativo em uma forma de vida. Segundo Max Horkheimer, o primeiro passo de um projeto crítico comprometido com a transformação de uma forma de vida são as crises do

presente, que não são totalmente compreendidas por meio das ferramentas teóricas de “resolução de problemas” ou “processos de aprendizagem”, a que Rahel Jaeggi recorre na sua teoria crítica da sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** Formas de vida; Crítica imanente; Neoliberalismo; Rahel Jaeggi; Sofrimento.

## Introduction

The neoliberal ethos, through its economic and social policies, but also from its psychologically oriented discourse, is identified in the media and in diverse cultural creations. It places individual self-realisation as an achievement arising only from the actions of an individual, and not as the consequence of a broader social background, which even challenges inflated notions of self-determination. The neoliberal idea of subjectivity seems to have been constructed as the basic building blocks of an economic, political and social edifice, since it is this which, in fact, fundamentally structures this form of life. What we are defending here is that the critique of neoliberalism should not restrict its focus to an economic project whose main actor is an entrepreneurial state complicit with the market economy. Another possible criticism of neoliberalism, still little explored philosophically<sup>3</sup>, is one that can be interpreted as a critique of a neoliberal ontology of subjectivity. In that sense, it consists of a critique of how this specific form of life forms subjects. Although it is possible – in addition to being useful and necessary – to criticise neoliberal economy or the social impacts of the neoliberal economic project, for example, we must remember that this neoliberal edifice is supported by robust, affective building blocks. The fact that not only the State and the business sector perceive the neoliberal form of life as the only possible one, but that all of us do so when we work and have fun, when we love and sleep, is convincing proof that neoliberalism has discovered how to subject subjects while it produced them<sup>4</sup>.

In this paper, we argue that a critique of a form of life is only justified in a reasonable way if it starts from the experiences of suffering produced by this form of life. As we will show, we must criticise neoliberalism not because it is inadequate for solving problems, since for a specific portion of the world population it has been extremely effective, but because it causes suffering. Suffering, unlike mere unsolved problems, represents sufficient grounds for highlighting the existence of a normative problem in a form of life. A more effective way of criticising the neoliberal form of life is to start from an analysis of whether or not it creates suffering. Suffering is self-

justifying. This form of critique, called as "immanent critique" by critical theorists, departs from the movements, crises, sufferings and symptoms, expressed in social life, in order to criticise the norms which sustain this form of life. Departing from this observation, we can, then, go from suffering to the causes of suffering without having to discuss how the problems are not always undesirable.

In order to criticise neoliberal form of life, it is necessary to take into account certain metatheoretical assumptions. The first is that this theoretical project should not be seen as the "icing on the cake" of another social philosophy, supposedly more robust, concerned with supposedly more "basic" issues, such as material distribution, recognition and social equality. It is commonly believed that we could only question the "good life" when the issues of need have been resolved. However, the critique of a form of life is developed as a socio-critical diagnosis that understands that social institutions and supra-individual meanings shape our lives, then guide our practices, our options for action and even our conceptions of the self. In that sense, this type of critical theory explores precisely the conditions of the possibility of what is commonly understood as individual and collective emancipation processes. This is because this socio-critical project can identify, in an even more striking way, what exactly prevents emancipation processes: the fact that subjects are affectively committed to the forms of life in which they are immersed. The neoliberal form of life can be much more consistently and effectively criticised if we appeal not to its rational capacity to unite the State and economy in a common objective, but to its affective ability to form subjects actively engaged in this form of life. A more effective way to bring about the collapse of the neoliberal edifice would be for us to discover how to undermine its structure, not just to scratch at or scorch its façade.

Our concern here is not to point out whether neoliberalism works as such, because we know that, in a sense, it clearly does, but whether neoliberalism works well, in terms of not producing suffering through its specific contradictory and/or paradoxical norms of freedom, autonomy or self-realization, for example. As Jaeggi (2018, 16) points out, "the 'success' of a form of life and its constitutive practices has the normative connotation of 'going well' or 'turning out well', as opposed to the merely functional sense of 'working out'". What Jaeggi points out is that this "working well" depends on certain social practices in a form of life being performed according to the criteria that justify these practices. This is because the specific nature of certain social practices begins to be misunderstood when we start to treat them according to criteria outside them. The main then

question is: what is the impact on social life, and also on our psychic life, if we treat certain social goods that until recently were not commodities, like education, as if they were, and how does this economic reinterpretation of social life change our understanding of ourselves as individuals and as a society? A critique of forms of life, therefore, is not restricted to their ethical criticism. It is also a theoretical project in philosophy and social theory, because critical theorists are occupied with pressing issues in this area, such as justice and democracy.

Thus, in this paper, we shall present some methodological reflections in order to substantiate possible and future critiques of neoliberal form of life. To begin with, in sections 1 and 2, we shall develop the concept of forms of life from the reflections proposed by Jaeggi and we will propose a reflection on whether we can speak of a "neoliberal form of life" despite the immense differences between the forms of identifiable lives in a multicultural society. Then, in sections 3 and 4, we intend to demonstrate that immanent criticism reveals itself as the most appropriate methodological choice for dealing with a diagnosis that departs from experiences of crisis, suffering and not always articulable malaises. Not that all socio-critical diagnoses should be confined to a certain methodological choice for them to be considered as worthy of some credibility – as if the method were a rule able to evaluate how much a diagnosis is or not suitable. The method is not a mere formal orientation, since it is deeply committed to the content of the criticism that one wishes to level.

### **The notion of forms of life**

The most recent and extensive approach to the concept of forms of life was developed by Rahel Jaeggi in *Critique of Forms of Life*. In this work, Jaeggi presents a meta-theoretical foundation on the possibilities of developing a critique of forms of life based on a reflection on the possible types of critiques, the meaning of social practices and the engine of social transformations. For Jaeggi, we use the expression "forms of life" when referring to a wide spectrum of phenomena, such as the "medieval form of life" and the "modern form of life", to explain a way of living a given historical time, going through notions such as "academic form of life" and "European form of life", to account for a certain professional or cultural ethos, respectively. The expression "forms of life" is also commonly associated with the idea of "way of life" – this being more directly linked to a set of habits and mores adopted by individuals. The notion of life habits

has the connotation of regularity and stability, characteristic of the concept of forms of life. However, while habits would be associated with isolated practices, forms of life, by contrast, are linked to a set of practices. As Jaeggi emphasises, the idea of forms of life needs to be understood not merely in its individual, but also in its collective aspect. In addition, forms of life, unlike life habits, have normative features. "Behaviour with regard to life forms – conforming with or deviating from collective practices – invites positive or negative sanctions" (Jaeggi, 2018, 61).

With regard to this normative aspect, forms of life as well as institutions are instances of social practices that have become habitual and that are normatively imbued. However, while these practices tend to be firmly established and codified in institutions, they appear more lightly and informally in forms of life. As Jaeggi (2018, 62) points out, unlike some institutions, forms of life are not founded or established. They are also not codified or legally constituted. In other words, social practices, in forms of life, are not as formally established and codified as it is possible to identify in some institutions. However, forms of life represent the background and the condition of possibility for certain institutions. "This becomes evident whenever institutions cannot be implemented in a community (...) without a point of reference in the local forms of life" (Jaeggi, 2018, 63). In the same way, institutions become part of a form of life and even facilitate and stabilise it.

Thus, the first broader definition of the concept of forms of life is that they are presented as a set of practices. This set includes "attitudes and habitualized modes of conduct with a normative character that concern the collective conduct of life, although they are neither strictly codified nor institutionally binding" (Jaeggi, 2018, 65). That is, in addition to being a set of practices, forms of life have a non-strict normative character. Thus, based on this more general assumption, Jaeggi defines forms of life in terms of four specific points:

- 1) forms of life should not be understood as a matter of individual or collective practices, but as a set of practices that are interconnected or interrelated in one way or another;

- 2) forms of life are collective formations, even if a subject participates in it and relates to it as an individual. This means that an individual's form of life refers to the fact that s/he participates in a collective practice;

- 3) forms of life have an active but also a passive element. Although an individual already lives in a previously given form of life, s/he also simultaneously creates and transforms a form of life from her/his own practice; and

4) forms of life, as orders for social cooperation that are based on regular practices, are also supported by an implicit normativity.

Superficial and temporary phenomena, as well as sporadic practices are not forms of life, although, as Jaeggi points out, "it may prove to be difficult in many cases to make a clear separation between the phenomena" (Jaeggi, 2018, 66). Thus, practices need to demonstrate a certain stability so that it can be qualified as a form of life. However, something that never changes and cannot be changed is not a form of life. Regarding the possibilities to change a form of life, Jaeggi states that forms of life are transformed for reasons based on reality, such as problematic situations arising and/or a mutation in the perception of problems. For example, the transformation of the rural and feudal family into a bourgeois nuclear family resulted from changes in the socioeconomic conditions and in the normative expectations of feudal societies (Jaeggi, 2018, 70). Thus, forms of life change because something has changed in a specific society. However, dialectically, what causes changes in a form of life also changes when this form of life changes.

Briefly, as Jaeggi points out (2018, 76),

Forms of life are nexuses of practices, orientations, and orders of social behaviour. They include attitudes and habitualized modes of conduct with a normative character that concern the collective conduct of life, although at the same time they are not strictly codified or institutionally binding. (emphasis in original).

Furthermore, to this characterisation, Jaeggi adds the criterion that forms of life adapt to the reality at the same time as well as needing to last in order to be considered forms of life, and not merely transitory phenomena. That is, at the same time as they have to exist over time for them to be considered forms of life, they also need to be malleable and susceptible to changes, since a form of life is necessarily just one form of life form among others.

There are a number of philosophical criticisms levelled at the reflections on forms of life. As Jaeggi develops, the contempt for a critique of forms of life would be linked to the fact that modernity would have produced a differentiation between a "correct way of living", to which all forms of life would (or should) conform, and a "way of living well", restricted to the private domain. Individuals would be responsible for living in a way

that they consider to be good. Society, on the other hand, would have the competence to ensure that different forms of life were subjected to at least certain correct, and therefore universal, ways of living. This is because, in modernity, “politics” and “forms of life” appear as two concepts that contradict each other, as Loick (2019, 82) points out. While, in antiquity, there was a close relationship between the way individuals led their own lives and their political practices, in modernity there was a separation between public and private spheres that would have resulted in the assumption that politics is a public matter, while forms of life would be a private issue<sup>5</sup>. According to the political liberalism of authors like Rawls, Dworkin and Habermas, the State should remain neutral with respect to forms of life. Only by abstaining as much as possible from the particularities of forms of life for each citizen, the State could guarantee an egalitarian coexistence of the incompatible, of particular conceptions and, consequently, of the plurality of forms of life.

On the other hand, as Loick (2019, 85) argues, liberalism is not neutral in relation to forms of life. In fact, it privileges certain forms of life, while excluding or denigrating others. Liberalism in itself is a form of life because it has conventions of affectivity and patterns of cultural interpretation, for example, which are by no means indeterminate, but, in fact, highly determined and also determinant. In addition, the liberal idea that the State should refrain from becoming involved in private matters can also be criticised from the perspective of “subordinate” or “minority” forms of life. Certain forms of life deal privately with deeply political issues, as it is the case with desire and sexuality among gay couples. The politicisation of forms of life is necessary because what is commonly taken as private in liberal societies has a profoundly political and, therefore, public character. As one of us (Pinzani 2019b, 1) points out, “differing from liberalism she [Jaeggi] understands forms of life not as the mere expression of individual beliefs or preferences, but as something shared by social groups or by large numbers of individuals”.

However, as Jaeggi (2018, 259) explains, it is necessary to have more than “good eyes” to point out the problematic character of forms of life. One of the starting points of a critique of forms of life would be to support the hypothesis that forms of life produce normative assumptions that guide the subjects across their lifetime. “Forms of life are answers to normatively predefined challenges that are shaped by history and culture. The fact that forms of life, when they fail, fail normatively comes from this” (Jaeggi, 2018, 209). Thus, for Jaeggi, a form of life could be evaluated (and compared to other forms of life, in certain aspects) based on its problem-

solving strategies. It can be said, therefore, that a form of life succeeds or fails if it is able to solve the problems it promises to solve. This is a complex issue, however. While Jaeggi perceives forms of life as a result of the attempt to solve specific problems, Celikates points to the fact that there is a risk in thinking about social changes in terms of learning process or problem solving. As he reasons,

Arguably, the apartheid system – in some respects surely a form of life – has not been an attempt to solve the problem of social cooperation under the specific circumstances of South Africa, and its overthrow was not the result of a collective learning process in which white oppressors gradually came to realize that there are more rational ways of solving social problems or that "blockages of experience" stand in the way of the further development of their society (Celikates, 2019, 143).

This issue is fundamentally linked to how Jaeggi understands progress, i.e. in terms of learning processes. As Celikates indicates, Jaeggi's understanding of progress is formal, emptied, opened, plural, non-teleological and procedurally oriented, and thus have a strong notion of progress. Although Jaeggi has a notion of progress that is far from the innocence and triumphalism of the notions of progress found in the works of Peter Singer and Steven Pinker, as Celikates argues, this notion of progress risks functioning as an epistemological obstacle, capable of blocking our understanding of the complex ways in which social transformations actually occur. This notion of progress can blind us, so to speak, to the fact that slavery and other practices and institutions continue to form our present, even though they no longer go by the same name or are not practiced in same form as they used to in the past.

With this interpretation, continuities and discontinuities are also disregarded, as well as the heterogeneity of forms of struggle. On the almost consensual assumption that slavery was overcome through moral progress, as Jaeggi, but also Elizabeth Anderson argue (apud Celikates, 2019), how can we address the fact that there are still industries marked by slavery in countries like, for example, India, China, Thailand?<sup>6</sup> "And what about mass incarceration and penal labor in the US, which, while maybe not themselves cases of slavery, bear certain structural resemblances to it?" (Celikates, 2019, 148). History shows that slavery was not overcome in certain parts of the world because there was a moral improvement on the



part of the abolitionists, but because supporters of slavery faced social pressure at the same time that they saw advantageous conditions to change this specific structure of material reproduction. It is clear that epistemic improvements and learning processes can happen, but they happen only too rarely.

In *Systemic Suffering and Pervasive Doctrines*, one of us, namely Alessandro Pinzani, similarly to the concept of forms of life elaborated by Jaeggi, calls into question the systemic dimension of domination. For him, domination is neither performed by a specific person, nor by a group of actors. It is also not the result of the asymmetry of power in our societies, but of a social system that produces and simultaneously supports domination. This systemic form of domination is more profound, because it remains untouched even if there are changes in the power relations of the system. This is not, however, a concept of "structural domination", which refers to a static dimension (a structure) capable of causing domination from a specific place. "The idea of 'systemic domination' refers to (a) to the interplay of relational and structural domination and (b) to the dynamic moment of maintaining or rebuilding of the structure along new internal power relations" (Pinzani, 2019a, 11). From this perspective, domination is specifically a system formed by structures and social relations that feed each other.

What Jaeggi and Pinzani appear to emphasise in their approaches is the fact that domination occurs in a pervasive way, through ideas, symbols, norms and conceptions of the self (Pinzani), but also in social practices, when subjects act and relate practically with the world and with one another (Jaeggi). The main difference between both – apart from the secondary fact that, while Jaeggi emphasises practices, Pinzani focuses on beliefs and values along with practices – is that, while Jaeggi points to the fact that forms of life must be criticised due to their irrationality or failure to solve problems, Pinzani argues that the criticism of forms of life needs to relate to the avoidable suffering they cause, not because they are irrational or fail to solve problems. This aspect is fundamentally related to the criticism developed by Celikates about Jaeggi's choice to interpret social transformations based on the conceptual key of "learning" and "problem solving".

This is the reason why we want to argue that we must criticise the neoliberal form of life not because it is incompetent in solving problems (after all, for a specific portion of the world population, it has been extremely effective), but because it causes suffering. The criticism that starts from the perception that forms of life are formed as attempts to solve

previously existing problems reveals itself as strongly committed to robust notions of progress, not to say "blind" to historical processes that deny this assumption. Criticism that is guided by experiences of suffering, on the other hand, is not committed to such robust notions of progress, but only to the humanist idea that forms of life that produce avoidable suffering must be radically transformed.

### **Is there a neoliberal form of life?**

Before we continue, we need to address the question if it is possible to speak of the existence of a "neoliberal form of life". How can we affirm, in societies as multicultural as ours, that there is a specific form of life capable of structuring other forms of life, existing concurrently? Should not we understand our Western societies according to the idea that their main form of life consists in the coexistence of different forms of life? We believe that, in contemporary Western societies, we can identify different forms of life – the academic, the Islamic, the peripheral, to mention just a few examples. However, we want to argue that neoliberal form of life has become a pervasive doctrine (cf. Pinzani 2019a), in the sense that it is no longer simply a certain set of practices and norms restricted to one domain of society, but a set of ideas, symbols, beliefs and values that can be identified as the background to the most diverse domains of social life: in advertising, literature, churches, at the dinner table, in kindergartens, etc. This means that neoliberal beliefs, practices and values have ended up integrating forms of life which, at first sight, seem completely alien to the neoliberal logics, as it is the case for universities, considered by many to be a space for reflection capable of subverting certain quasi dogmatic social assumptions, but which by now has also succumbed to a neoliberal logic of evaluation and award<sup>7</sup>.

In *Capitalism: a Conversation in Critical Theory*, Jaeggi in her dialogue with Fraser devotes herself to an interpretation of neoliberalism as a form of life. Following Marx, Jaeggi reasons that capitalism should not be criticised simply for its (i)moral dimension or for its (un)fair system. For capitalism to be appropriately criticised, what would be necessary is an ethical criticism capable of pointing out the fact that capitalism, broadly understood, is a distorted form of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) – called by her "form of life" (Jaeggi; Fraser, 2018, 158). Although Marx used the term "exploitation", his criticism of capitalism is not moral. As Jaeggi (Jaeggi; Fraser, 2018, 157) argues, "just think about his astonishing claim that there

is no injustice involved in exploitation. He says that the fact that labor is that commodity, which, when purchased, produces surplus is simply 'good luck' for the capitalist". So, as she argues from Marx's perspective, the problem is not that the mode of production, per se, generates exploitation, because that is just how the system works. This is part and parcel of system's rationality. The problem is that the system works this way, because the mode of production is itself a problem. "And this is the deeper reason why a narrowly moral or justice-theoretic critique is insufficient for the critique of capitalism" (Jaeggi; Fraser, 2018, 158). This means that, for her, capitalism must be criticised more broadly, ethically, as a form of life.

In response to this statement, Fraser (Jaeggi; Fraser, 2018, 163) postulates that an ethical criticism of capitalism should connect the "evils" that capitalism produces with its institutional divisions – the separation between production and social reproduction, between politics and economics, between society and nature. As Fraser (Jaeggi; Fraser, 2018, 163) states,

And it's definitely worth asking whether that sort of divided form of life permits us to live well – and whether we would be better off living in other, less divided ways. But, whatever we say about that, there's also another problem: capitalism's institutional structure predefines some fundamental contours of our form of life, and it does so in a way that deprives us of our collective capacity to design the modes of living we want.

However, Fraser expresses her uncertainty as to whether this type of criticism should really be called an "ethical" critique. If so, she would prefer to call it an "ethical-structural" critique of capitalism.

What becomes clear in this dialogue between both philosophers, is that "neoliberalism" can simply be understood as capitalism in its current phase. When we refer to neoliberalism, it is because we also try to account for the specificities of capitalism in its current stage, because what we understand as a neoliberal subjectivity, marked by a disregard against the formative potential of society, has not manifested itself in previous capitalist societies in a so intense and systematic way.

In addition to being characterised by structural divisions, neoliberal form of life can also be characterised precisely by values such as negative freedom, personal autonomy, individual search for the improvement of one's economic condition, but also by the insecurity of contracts, flexibility and precariousness. Neoliberal ideas of autonomy and freedom can be

identified not only in the works of neoliberal theorists, such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, but also – and especially – in the speeches that are disseminated, for example, in television programs, magazine advertisements, self-help books and by evangelical cults. It is in these spaces that the neoliberal ethos<sup>8</sup> advertises its content and conquers minds, without this process of submitting this content being strongly coercive, on the part of neoliberal ideologists, nor voluntary, on the part of the subjects. What happens in this process is that the neoliberal ethos, as it spreads through various spaces of our social life, begins to affect and shape our emotions, faculties of perception, actions and practices, without, in fact, there being a awareness on the part of the subjects that their social and psychological lives are constituted by a specific ethos.

From this perspective, domination is neither situated exactly in a localised structure, nor does it simply consist in a set of social relations, but it is specifically a system formed by structures and social relations that feed each other. This means that the relation between subjects and subjective self-relations end up strengthening structural domination. Conversely, structural domination sometimes, but not always, as one of us (Pinzani 2019a, 11) has argued, ends up reinforcing relations of domination that characterise society at a specific time. However, systemic domination, formed by relations and structures of domination, would not have arisen unless there was a strongly ideological dimension behind this systemic domination. This seems to be the specific case of neoliberalism: characterised by a strong ideological dimension, it forms systems of domination constituted by social structures and relations.

These relations of domination, however, are not always easily perceived by the subjects. As Stuart Hampshire writes (apud Jaeggi, 2018, 108), “it is a well-known fact that most of our routine actions are performed without our being aware of how we perform them, unless we happen to encounter a difficulty when performing them”. This consists in the fact that we become more aware of the practices we perform or try to perform because we have experienced suffering in the moment we perform it. We therefore turn to what Jaeggi understands as “second order problems”, which are conceptual problems.

Conceptual problems, by contrast, are higher order problems. They do not arise with regard to the world itself but to theories about the world – theories for solving empirical problems –

which are either self-contradictory or can come into conflict with other theories (Jaeggi, 2018, 214).

Thus, conceptual problems are questions of higher order that were created to answer questions of first order. These second-order problems are about our interpretations of the world. In the critiques of forms of life, as Jaeggi (2018) argues, there are no empirical problems, but only conceptual, second-order problems. In that sense, first-order problems, when they are experienced as systemic suffering (Pinzani, 2019a), result from higher order, second order problems. So, then, we can go from the sufferings to their causes. These conceptual problems that cause practical problems are the center of a socio-critical diagnosis of a form of life. This means that, when thinking about neoliberalism as a form of life, we need to problematize the beliefs and ideals that underlie this form of life (second-order problem) and that cause suffering (first-order problem). It is our interpretations of the world, and also of ourselves, that shape the ways we feel and also suffer. Suffering appears, then, as the point of departure from which we can reach their causes, which are, in turn, the concepts which sustain our form of life. The causes of first-order problems are conceptual; they have a second-order nature.

What it is developed here, then, is a “denaturalization” of what we understand as natural: this is the transforming effect of a critique of forms of life. This criticism highlights what is obvious to us: living in residential condominiums<sup>9</sup>, preferring a new car to using the bus as transportation, adopting the habit of scheduling meetings, planning the future, consulting coaching, living in apartments, living in nuclear families, etc. As Jaeggi (2018, 26) rightly stated, a critique of forms of life “strips something that appears to be self-evident of its legitimacy”. We start from the assumption that it is only through a public thematisation of what is taken for granted (or for private), that we can begin to identify and work towards developing emancipatory processes. This because, in addition to clarifying and demonstrating arguments and counter-arguments, philosophy also has the competence to interpret and analyse a situation. Through this interpretative and evaluative path, it becomes possible to recognise and understand the regressive and alienated character of a form of life.

### **The concept of immanent critique**

The theoretical approach of suffering and also of what seems to emerge as its causes can be very consistently and reasonably developed as

an immanent critique of a neoliberal form of life. What is crucial, therefore, is not to duplicate a normative reconstruction of the ideals found in society, in the sense of making unrealised ideals have concrete realisation, for example, but to highlight the internal normativity of a form of life, seen by most people as naturally given. Along this path, by making visible a certain normative constellation, it is possible to recognise the neoliberal form of life as just one form of life among others. The distance from a form of life occurs, then, when a particular form of critique (immanent) points to the irrational, obsolete, dysfunctional or contradictory character of a form of life, and not when this critique (normative) seeks to adjust the effectiveness to the norms at all cost, as if we needed to put reality into a “normative straitjacket”. This is because the mismatch between effectiveness and norms seems to integrate, in most cases, neoliberal’s own normative logic. The point here is not to make individuals free and autonomous in the neoliberal way, trying to correct the errors that prevent them from doing so, but rather to question the neoliberal form of being free and autonomous.

This criticism is linked to the intuition that subjects, when trying to be someone according to the norms offered by neoliberal form of life, have encountered difficulties and sufferings. We consider immanent critique the most appropriate method of approaching crisis experiences, because it starts from what is already shown in society, in its actions and its self-understanding (in the manifestations of sufferings, for example), in order to go beyond the constitutive norms of these societies. Rahel Jaeggi (2018) attributes seven characteristics to this form of critique. In immanent critique,

- 1) the effective, the social practices are seen as having a constitutive normativity;
- 2) the norms are considered as constitutive of the functioning of societies and also of the self-understanding of the participants of it;
- 3) there is an “inverted effectiveness of the norms”, which become contradictory due to the effectiveness;
- 4) there is an orientation from the crisis, instabilities, deficiencies and dysfunctionalities, which put under threat the identity of a social formation;
- 5) norms are not left untouched as a fixed measurement standard;
- 6) there is a search for transformation, while in internal criticism there is a pursuit for reconstruction – which is the most striking difference between them;

7) it emerges a process of experience and learning, since contradiction and failure would not only reveal the false character of a specific normativity, but also a new normative position.

Titus Stahl (2013, 7) defines immanent criticism concisely:

Immanent critique is a form of social critique that evaluates both the empirical behavior constituting social practices and the explicit self-understanding of their members according to standards that are, in some sense, internal to those practices themselves. By doing so, immanent critique aims at a transformation of such practices that encompasses both actions and self-understandings.

In the case of immanent critique, reality is not confronted with a prefabricated ideal, as Marx puts it, nor is this ideal simply extracted from reality, as if it were already there. Immanent criticism develops this ideal from the contradictory movements posed by reality itself. Marx's critique of capitalism, as Rahel Jaeggi (2018, 240) presents it, can be understood as form of immanent critique, since Marx shows that the norms of freedom and equality, anchored in the self-understanding of bourgeois society and implicit in its social structure, are undercut by the social practices that also exist in this society. In other words, the idea of freedom is annulled by capitalism's own practices. Therefore,

[f]reedom and equality are systematically undermined by the institutions of burgeois-capitalist society, so they are not, or are only incompletely, actualized in this society. As a participant in the labor market, the worker is "only formally" free and equal, but in reality he is unfree and unequal (Jaeggi, 2018, 248).

There is a Hegelian and Marxian root in this methodological tradition, so to speak. Even before Marx, Hegelian philosophy rejected both metaphysics and empiricism, because both presupposed the existence of a reality beyond the subject. Platonic forms, for example, and things-in-themselves, which Kant already referred to, would go beyond the dimension of the "Spirit". In this sense, Hegel already argued that the forces of contradiction, denial and change would already be contained in the Spirit. "Driven by 'Desire', the Hegelian subject engages in self-formative and self-transformative labour, causing 'the development of Spirit in Time... [and]

Space'" (Antonio, 1981, 332). In other words, the work of the Spirit is constituted in an immanent way to its own history.

Marx also starts from a Hegelian base, albeit in a relevantly reformulated version. He retains from Hegel the notion that "being" and "should be" are not antagonistic instances, as it was commonly identified in German idealism, since ideas are intertwined in reality itself. He also preserves from Hegel the idea that humanity is created through work, lost in alienated work ("alienation") and that it overcomes alienation through the reappropriation of the work process. Despite these similarities with Hegel, Marx overcomes the idea of Absolute or Abstract Spirit, abandoning the notion that the history of human kind is a history of an Abstract Spirit, and substitutes this idea for another one in which what is at issue is a real and corporal subject. The basis of the immanent critique developed by Marx is, therefore, aimed at contradiction, not correspondence. Therefore, the great Marxian turn lies in the fact that he replaces Hegelian historical phenomenology with a history of domination and class struggle.

For Marx, the movement toward freedom and reason is not an unfolding of labour in consciousness, but is instead, an historical transformation born of social struggle and ultimately realised through the efforts of an historical agent of emancipation – the proletariat. This is the basis for an immanent critique that turns the treasured values of bourgeois ideology against the unfreedom, inequality and misery of developing capitalism (Antonio, 1981, 334).

Thereby, immanent critique shows that the contradictions to which it points are constitutive of corresponding practices. "The moments of dysfunction, instability, and institutional erosion are themselves the effects of normative expectations and the self-understanding of a given social formation" (Jaeggi, 2017, 213). This means that sufferings faced in certain spheres of a form of life should not be interpreted simply as external problems. Sufferings can arise, in a form of life, not accidentally, but systematically. What is interesting to realize is that the identification of a contradiction does not always lead us to a situation in which it can no longer be identified. For example, the diagnosis presented by Nancy Fraser (2016) that there is a conflict in capitalism between the requisition of material production and the concomitant need for social reproduction does not lead us directly to the solution of the problem in question, not even from a theoretical point of view. Likewise, this issue is far from being resolved in



practice. Again, here it is not simply a question of conflict, but of contradiction, since at the same time that the material production of neoliberal societies requires the existence of the work of social reproduction, it undermines its condition of existence through a very demanding labor routine, for example.

In addition, the contradiction is not always experienced by the subjects as such. What often happens is that, despite the contradiction, what the subjects experience is a kind of pacification<sup>10</sup>. As Rahel Jaeggi argues, today we have not only been confronted with a multiplication of social struggles that do not always converge, but also with a variety of situations which, "although marked by social misery, injustice, suffering, do not give rise to corresponding social movements, or do give rise to movements but none that could be regarded as emancipatory" (Jaeggi, 2017, 212). As we have already noted, the dysfunctionalities of contemporary capitalism to which Fraser points (crises in the spheres of reproduction, ecology, politics and financial institutions) reveal a catastrophe, but in no way do they mean the end of capitalism. The emancipatory solution to the contradictions of capitalism is not so easy, but the suggestion of immanent critique is that it is found in society itself.

The negative positioning of the tradition of immanent critique is also evident in the philosophical works of Theodor Adorno. In *Minima Moralia*, for example, it is not stated what would be the "most certain" or "most appropriate" form of life, how humanity should be or act, but what should not happen with forms of life that are already problematic. The negative character of the method used by Adorno is evident in the aphorism of the writer Ferdinand Kurnberger, who introduces the first part of *Minima Moralia*. "Life doesn't live", writes Kurnberger. Instead of making assumptions about what life should be like, Adorno only shows what life should not be<sup>11</sup>. In short, Adorno presents his theory as a form of immanent critique from which he demonstrates how a society fails to live up to its own norms. The pessimistic aspect of Adornian reflections on society is based on what he himself believes to be the only way of doing philosophy. For Adorno, "we can only know the bad (or part thereof), but not the good, and that this knowledge of the bad is sufficient to underpin his critical theory" (Freyenhagen, 2011, 5). His immanent criticism was thus constituted from a negative ethics that points out to us what we have to avoid and how we should not live.

It is not a matter of simply rehabilitating each proposition of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, however, but of carrying out a type of criticism that, as Adorno and Horkheimer have already defended, is in an

uncomfortable position, as it does not start from a normatively safe place. The first step of such a critical theory are the crises, sufferings and miseries of the present, as Max Horkheimer pointed out in the essay *Traditional and Critical Theory*, published in 1937. "The primary emphasis is on the negative experiences of human beings along multiple dimensions (not merely injustice)" (Freyenhagen, 2017, 3). In a sense, what we seek to defend here is a critical theory in its most orthodox sense<sup>12</sup>: not simply as a theoretical reflection on itself, in the metatheoretical sense as it is done here, but as a socio-critical diagnosis of a form of life. This critique is also orthodox in the sense that this work also follows a certain program outlined previously by Horkheimer, whose intention was to insert critical theorists into a struggle against social injustice and the most varied forms of suffering. As Horkheimer already postulated/argued, the critical theorist is not (or at least should not be) a neutral academic interested only in systematising facts, based on normative theories that do not apply to the social conditions that these same normative theories seek to account for. This form of critique is also orthodox in the sense that this work also starts from another assumption previously outlined by Horkheimer: that there are no neutral theories of society and no philosophical reflection that do not in themselves involve any kind of political interest. Since reflective activity is, per se, a concrete historical activity marked by political issues, the reflection that is developed here also reveals itself as fundamentally influenced by a political interest in transforming the form of life that we are living nowadays. This means that neutrality is not only impossible, but also that a certain interest is required for certain experiences and historical possibilities to leave the invisibility zone and start to be seen. In other words, as Horkheimer (2002, 242) already pointed out, we can only access the truth if we are guided by a certain interest, i.e. the interest in limiting social injustice<sup>13</sup>. Without this interest, certain forms of suffering simply go unnoticed.

Therefore, it is not necessary to present different arguments to justify this intention. The very fact that these forms of life produce suffering is, in itself, reason enough for us to question the norms that sustain them. This means that, as Horkheimer also predicted, certain judgments do not require any mental effort on the part of intellectuals. To put it differently, certain issues simply do not require a theory that justifies the attempts of addressing them. As Freyenhagen (2017, 4) convincingly put it, "there are evils with regard to which the guidance by academics is unnecessary and even has no place". However, when it comes to sufferings that are not so

easily identified as such, for instance, alienation, reification, but also mistrust and resentment, it seems necessary to resort to the phenomenological and social aspects of these forms of suffering, not always named and identified as such. In other cases, whose malevolence is evident, such as Auschwitz, dealing with these sufferings discursively would in itself be an outrage to the subjects who survived the Holocaust and those who died because of it – a fact already mentioned by Adorno (1962). Normatively justifying the need for Auschwitz not to be repeated is simply an outrage, because some evils are so stark and obvious that they themselves justify their own criticism. Other cases need a theory that can make them visible; that can reveal them, in a sense. This can be done not only through a phenomenological description of these malaises, but also through the inclusion of the voice of those who cannot speak, for example, by recovering stories shared in clinics, and, returning to literature, in order to find a common basis for discomforts that are not always easily translated into language, despite the attempts to do so.

It is important to emphasise that, although this paper turns to a meta-theoretical reflection on the possibilities of carrying out an immanent critique of neoliberal form of life, we do not start from the assumption that the “model” has directive authority for critical practice, as if it could evaluate the more or less critical level of a diagnosis. What is at stake here is not a division between a “modeled activity” and a “modeling activity” (i.e. critical practice and metacritical practice respectively). This paper assumes that critical diagnoses are inspired by metatheoretical traditions that face their problems, but that also have their reasons of existence. However, we do not seek to restrict social diagnosis to a methodological “straight jacket” in order for this to suggest that it has a degree of credibility. The proposal here is not that the diagnoses are constituted as activities “modeled” by the methodological requirements of immanent criticism. Arvi Särkelä (2017) points to the fact that Dewey and Hegel would have problems with a type of criticism that in a dualistic way separate the “model” of criticism from critical practice itself. The strict division between model and practice would seem to prevent both model and practice from going through real critical processes. Särkelä brings Dewey to argue that, instead of “models”, we should resort to “maps” or “compasses”. The idea that we need models would reveal a mistrust against critical practice, a mistrust of the critical power of experience. For Särkelä, Dewey and Hegel argue that we should give the experience a chance to solve the problems that are manifested in experience’s own process of movement.

This is an interesting question, but it raises new problems that will not be dealt with here extensively. The main problem, however, is that this perspective also ends up separating theory and practice, because it views experience as a field dissociated from interests. Horkheimer's lessons point to the fact that no theory can approach experience neutrally. Therefore, experience, diagnosis, and criticism in themselves depend on a certain previous orientation that cannot simply be ignored. As it is impossible to "let experience speak for itself", since we end up speaking for the experience when referring to it, it is necessary to make clear what the rules of that speech are – how one intends to account for an experience that does not arise by chance, but that becomes the center of our concerns because it concerns us. Since experience thus never speaks for itself, because by approaching the experience in a critical diagnosis we give it a certain sense, it is necessary to make clear why and how it is conceived in a diagnosis that is intended to be critical. As we have already developed, what is sought here is not to approach a normative constellation in order to make it practically realisable, as an internal criticism would do, or with the objective of simply proposing new norms, as an external criticism would do. On the contrary, the objective is to show that the sufferings we experience today result from the contradictory character of a certain normative constellation that constitutes our forms of life. If the theoretical approach of suffering and symbols never arises out of a disinterested movement, since, evidently every movement has a direction, we considered it necessary to make clear which approach a socio-critical diagnosis of a neoliberal form of life should use in order for them to be not only critical, but also transformative.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude from the preceding considerations, we believe that forms of life like the neoliberal form of life are not properly criticised if we simply ask a question about whether or not they have solved the problems they promise to. For some subjects, this certainly applies. For those who have experienced the totalitarianism of Soviet regimes, the neoliberal form of life can solve the problem of individual tutelage by the State. For other people, it does not lead to freedom because it produces new forms of servitude. Therefore, a more effective way to criticise a form of life is to start from an analysis of whether it produces suffering or not; in concrete terms, can this form of life be the cause of specific suffering, for example, such as exploitation, precariousness and exclusion, in addition to depression,

anxiety and other psychological problems. As Horkheimer has pointed out, the first step of a critical project really committed to the transformation of a form of life are the crises, sufferings and miseries of the present. This is not only because starting from a normative constellation could lead us to a type of criticism committed to the preservation of an oppressive form of life, but also because the experiences of suffering seems to exposes the shortcomings of problematic norms. After all, sufferings always have a strong social face.

In addition to identifying whether or not a form of life produces suffering, it is also the task of the critic to point out the causes of that suffering. For example, we can question whether this form of life causes suffering because it produces a contradictory discourse, in the sense that its promises do not translate into practical reality, or whether it leads to a paradoxical discourse, if, in the attempt to fulfil these promises, we find, in practice, the opposite of these promises manifests itself. The self-sufficiency of suffering allows us, then, to go on to an analysis of the causes which sustain them.

From this perspective, it is not enough to criticise forms of life because they are simply irrational, but because they cause suffering. Thus, from a theoretical point of view, a socio-critical diagnosis can only approach these sufferings convincingly if it establishes alliances with knowledge developed in science, such as psychology, sociology and epidemiology, in order to collect evidence for this diagnosis. Immanent critique then needs to be committed to an insightful analysis and description of these suffering experiences, not always clearly revealed and articulated. The risk of not doing so, then, is to fall into normatively oriented, but critically de-potentialized notions such as "moral progress" and "learning processes". Interesting as these ideas may be from a normative point of view, they are eventually unrealistic, if we take into account the domination's creative resistance, revealed by history.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> PhD Candidate at the Graduate Program in Philosophy at the Federal University of Santa Catarina. AOC: Political and Social Philosophy; AOS: Critical Theory. Received an Excellence Scholarship for Foreign Scholars (Eskas) from the Swiss Confederation for a stay at the University of Luzern. We would like to thank Franz Andres Morrissey for reviewing the text. ORCID-ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3545-2352>; e-mail: [baiburil@gmail.com](mailto:baiburil@gmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> Professor for Ethics and Political Philosophy at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianópolis (Brazil). AOC: Political and Social Philosophy; AOS: Theories of Justice, Critical Theory and Philosophy of Poverty. This paper was written within the context of our respective research projects. Alessandro Pinzani would like to thank the CNPq for the grant 302590/2018-8. ORCID-ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8721-2134>; e-mail: [alessandro@cfh.ufsc.br](mailto:alessandro@cfh.ufsc.br)

<sup>3</sup> Some authors have already developed reflections on how neoliberalism produced new forms of subjectivation, as we can identify in Dardot and Laval (2016), Boltanski and Chiapello (2009), Crary (2013), Illouz (2007, 2008) and Hochschild (1983).

<sup>4</sup> In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler shows that the term subjectivation (*assujettissement*) denotes both the subjective formation and a process of subjection.

<sup>5</sup> Loick (2019, 82) argues that, although it is possible to speak of a broader view, anchored in modernity, that forms of life are matters of private domain, he says that it is also possible to identify, in this same modernity, a series of attempts and projects that understand their practices in terms of "politics of forms of life". These attempts to form collectives and initiate private projects, but steeped in political issues, can be seen in Charles Fourier's socialist utopia and in rural anarchist communities, such as Monte Verità, in Switzerland, for example. These initiatives would have sought to establish an old connection between the private and public domains.

<sup>6</sup> According to a Know The Chain research, about 24.9 million people are victims of forced labor today. See: <<https://knowthechain.org/about-us/>>. Slavery takes on different facets today, as can be seen in The Guardian's series of reports on the issue. Work experiences analogous to slavery are so proliferated that they are grouped together under the expression "modern slavery". See: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/series/modern-day-slavery-in-focus>.

<sup>7</sup> This statement can be exemplified through various practices adopted in the academy, such as public selections for professors in which the evaluation criteria are based on the quantity of articles published, not on the quality of the articles or on broader skills than publication. On the commodification of universities, see Bok (2003).

<sup>8</sup> We could use the expression "neoliberal reason" here, as did Wendy Brown (2015). If, in this paper, we use the expression "form of life" or "ethos", it is because we try to emphasise the fact that neoliberalism is not simply "ideas that hang in the air", as the concept of reason seems to consist in. We believe that the concept of "forms of life" emphasise the material aspect of our existences (social practices) – something that the concept of reason does not accomplish.

<sup>9</sup> We are referring here to these types of residential spaces in which people share the same geographical space, separated from the outside by a protective wall, but without enjoying real community life. Residential condominiums are frequently constructed as apartment buildings, but there has been an increase in the number of "detached condominiums", which look like single-family homes but in which the yards, corridors, building exteriors, and streets as well as any recreational facilities (like a pool or pools, bowling alley, tennis courts, golf course, etc), are jointly owned. These experiences, at least in Brazil, are far from real social experiences. For a reflection on the malaises arising inside condominiums, see Dunker (2015).

<sup>10</sup> Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, in *Commodity Activism*, problematize the way in which political activism is deeply marked by the consumption of goods in neoliberal societies. Since Che Guevara's t-shirts, activism has also become a commodity. Thus, pacification is identified not only in the form of a political activism marked by consumption, but also in a criticism that manifests itself contradictorily through insertion in the logic of what is criticised.

<sup>11</sup> The theorists of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, who resorted to the method of immanent critique more or less homogeneously, were criticised by Georg Lukács for revealing a pessimism that would not result in practical schemes of engagement. They would live in a "Grande Hotel Abismo", as Lukács criticises ironically. Like someone who lives in a large, beautiful and melancholy hotel, the Frankfurtians seemed, to Lukács, the last guardians of the remains of literate civilisation. On the other hand, their hotel would face directly into an abyss that did not offer solutions to the dilemmas of humanity at the time.

<sup>12</sup> In the article *What is Orthodox Critical Theory?*, Fabian Freyenhagen answers the question posed in the paper's title. In short, according to him, an Orthodox Critical Theory should be understood as the effort, guided by interest, to contribute to the fight against suffering, injustice and the lack of freedom, based on conceptual work, self-reflection, and a critical appropriation of the humanities and social sciences.

<sup>13</sup> For Horkheimer (2002, 215), Critical Theory is precisely the intellectual side of the historical process of emancipation of the proletariat.

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