

Struggle for Recognition.

Person, Life, Existence

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Introduction

Unlike what is commonly believed, life does not have a universal value. Although it is a shared ideal perspective that life has a universal value (which partly justifies the contract of social life), this assumption is continually contradicted by reality when – particularly in Western societies – we distinguish between a life that does have rights and one that does not. This distinction is based on different criteria: legal, political, economic, social, cultural and educational. It is not of course a matter of mere Manicheism, even if the tendency to trivialize the representations with which the social organization is built can act as a dangerous alibi to justify some political and cultural aims that have nothing to do with the concept of democracy or justice.¹

Indeed, the “banality” of the “common sense” – as Hannah Arendt had called it,² pointing out that, at any time, under certain historical conditions, it can convert into pure evil – imposes its rules of inclusion and exclusion.³ In other words, the concept of life is historically built

¹ Cf. M. Horkheimer, Th. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Amsterdam, Querido Verlag, 1947.

² Cf. H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, Viking, 1961.

³ Cf. E. Goffman, *Stigma. Notes on The Management of Spoiled Identity*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1963.

by our speeches or, better, the chain of discursive constellations. The question about what a life worthy of living is has an immediate impact – at every level – on educational practices and on the actual function of human education intended as a social as well as a cultural act. A life worthy of living is, in fact, in our social contexts, a life that has rights and which is legitimated,⁴ and whose degree of satisfaction of the basic needs (inviolability of one's own body, direct accessibility to education, pursuit of wealth by means of the equal redistribution of social wealth) depends on the formalization of collective interests, which does not always preserve the dimension of the single individuality.

To continue the discussion on this matter – taking into account the contradictions an intentionally pedagogical criticism must necessarily confront with – the ambiguity of the processes through which the social contexts build (and have built) the paradigm of inclusion and of exclusion firmly emerges when we focus on the so-called “wasted lives” that, in different historical periods and spheres, are the most obvious indicators of the crisis of the idealized universal concept of life as an absolute value.⁵

The lives of migrants, their stories, the dramatic shipwreck of their hopes of salvation in a world – the West – which has reduced the prospect of projects for the future, are the most obvious sign of an emergency that requires a pedagogical, ethical and moral reflection.

The meaning of History

Our perception is that we stand at the crossroads of history. As we are told by Rémy, the protagonist of “The Barbarian Invasion” (a Denis Arcand film from 2003), history has always been a theatre of massacres and we should not be surprised of it: from the conquest of the Americas,

⁴ Cfr. A. Honneth, *Kampf und Anerkennung. Grammatik sozialer Konflikte*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1992.

⁵ Cfr. N. Fraser (Ed.), *Adding insult to injury. Nancy Fraser debates her critics*, London-New York, Verso, 2008.

by way of the Inquisition, to the World War of the 20th century (to name just a few pivotal junctions), mankind has done nothing but demonstrate the calculating rationality of a destructive irrationality. If destructiveness can be considered irrational. Nevertheless, without getting into theoretical discussions, the key to explaining this historical processuality can be found – as Max Horkheimer believed, and Foucault⁶ after him – in the fact that, contrary to Hegel’s belief, history has no goals, no revelatory telos, and above all, does not serve to attain any kind of earthly paradise.

According to Hegel, history is a revelation of the “Absolute spirit”, the revelation of a self-consciousness that realizes itself through certain figures who manifest the spirit of their times. History, in short, is the attainment of freedom. “For freedom in itself”, Hegel writes, “carries with the infinite necessity of attaining consciousness – for freedom, by definition, is self-knowledge – and hence of realizing itself: it is itself the end of its own operations and the sole end of the Spirit”.⁷

What freedom are we talking about? Without getting carried away by Hegel’s construction, we can quote Marx’s words in *The German Ideology*: “The first historical act is thus the production of means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life”.⁸

What we are talking about, then, is this: the freedom to which Hegel refers, which manifests the power of the “Absolute spirit”, is the culmination of a materiality that has produced servants, slaves and masters, but which, on the other hand, has also produced the aporias of a history which we tend to consider always peaceably linear. The “lives of

⁶ Cfr. M. Horkheimer, Th. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, cit.; M. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants. Cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, Paris, Seuil/Gallimard, 2012.

⁷ Cfr. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Transl. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge (U.K.), Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 55.

⁸ Cfr. K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, Amherst (N.Y.), Prometheus Books, 1998, p. 47.

infamous man” constantly remind us of this, but through a curious form of amnesia the purity of the West has always erased them, fearing the end of a history that achieves its perverse expectations precisely through its lack of purpose.

“The concept of the progress of the human race in history”, writes Benjamin, “is not to be separated from the concept of its progression through an homogenous and empty time. The critique of the concept of this progress must ground the basis of its critique on the concept of progress itself”.⁹

This is the only way to clear the field of the useless, moralistic preaching of those who think that history justifies the means used to achieve one’s ends. If it is true that the contemporary world reveals the fissures in the continuum that we tend to believe as inexorable, then the only explanation of this idea is that history is always written by the victors. And, as in every era, they hide behind the veil of justice, of danger, of morality, of democracy, always pointing to a different enemy – always, because this is a necessary complement to their function.

The Construction of the Individual

As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has repeatedly affirmed, modern Western history is built around three key ideas: order, cleanliness, and purity.¹⁰ While it is true that ever since Hobbes coexistence has necessarily been linked to a social contract that can keep the community’s potential ungovernability under control, the very nature of contemporary capitalist societies requires a constant focus on individuals, and on controlling them, in attempt to construct pervasive methods of discipline for the masses.

This entire process results in a massive contradiction between the endogenous need to make commodities, capital, and people circulate

⁹ Cfr. W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, New York, Classic Books of America, 2009, p. 16.

¹⁰ Cfr. Z. Bauman, *The Individualized Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001.