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The connections between psychoanalysis and critical theory: the intersubjective theory of Jessica Benjamin in the analysis of contemporary authoritarianism

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Advisor: Prof. Dr. Rúrion Soares Melo

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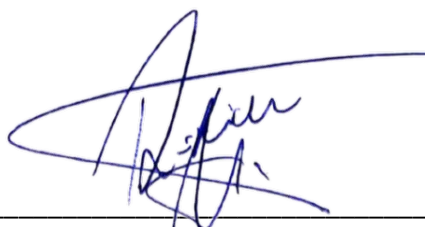
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To my parents, who allowed me to be a
subject with them

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One does not need to be an intersubjective theorist to acknowledge that one's work is never the merit of oneself alone. However, especially considering the deep imbrications between the subjects from an intersubjective perspective, these Acknowledgments may have an even stronger meaning while never being enough. Like a Winnicottian child playing, for me, while thinking through, talking about, and writing the following pages, sometimes the boundaries between creativity and discovery seemed agreeably blurred.

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Finally, thank you, God, for putting so many questions in my heart so as to keep me seeking, questioning You, and always thirsting for greater love.

"To the ego, therefore, living means the same as being loved."

Freud (1923/1961)

"In the moment in which I am depriving myself of something, in order to give it to you, I am loving, but to love means to be. You see, and yet in order to be I must not be, because I must give everything, beginning with myself, but in the moment in which I give myself, I am."

Giuseppe Zanghì (1995)

ABSTRACT

CESAR, J.A.C. **The connections between psychoanalysis and critical theory: the intersubjective theory of Jessica Benjamin in the analysis of contemporary authoritarianism.** 2023. Dissertation (PhD) – Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Human Sciences, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, 2023.

Considering the resurgence of authoritarianism throughout the globe, many contemporary critical scholars have suggested the recuperation of the "negative" thinkers of the first generation of the Frankfurt School because their work would offer the necessary resources for a deep understanding of the irrationality and aggressiveness at the public sphere. In contrast, the following generations would fail to grasp such forces, focusing on vain normative hopes. However, these authors' critique of the first generation's aporias also makes the direct resuming of this approach problematic, leading contemporary critical theorists to seek alternative psychoanalytic references beyond classic psychoanalysis. In this context, Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalysis offers an invaluable tool to make sense of our current social context while also sustaining the possibility of recognition. Largely disregarded by contemporary scholars, Benjamin develops a mutualistic concept of recognition that increasingly incorporates negative elements. To sustain the appropriateness of her work to contemporary critical theory, I first go through the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Donald Winnicott, essential references for critical theory and for Benjamin. Second, I trace the interlocution of critical theory and psychoanalysis from the first to the third generations, focusing on their diagnosis of authoritarianism and their understanding of emancipation. Third, I present Benjamin's first and most famous productions. Fourth, I contrast her early thinking to that of Axel Honneth, arguing that he misread her work, passing on an erroneous interpretation. Finally, I present the more recent developments of Benjamin's work, from the intermediate writing of the 1990s to her most recent productions. Her late interpretation has the advantage of recognizing the place of anti-sociability in human relationships while sustaining the possibility of intersubjectivity – allowed by embracing mutual vulnerability – culminating in a highly dialectic account of recognition. I conclude that Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalysis, especially her latest theory, offers essential theoretical resources for analyzing contemporary authoritarianism.

Keywords: Critical theory. Frankfurt School. Authoritarianism. Vulnerability. Jessica Benjamin.

RESUMO

CESAR, J.A.C. **Conexões da psicanálise com a teoria crítica: a teoria intersubjetiva de Jessica Benjamin na análise do autoritarismo contemporâneo.** 2023. Tese (Doutorado) – Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2023.

Considerando o ressurgimento do autoritarismo ao redor do globo, muitos teóricos críticos contemporâneos têm sugerido a recuperação dos pensadores "negativos" da primeira geração da Escola de Frankfurt porque sua obra ofereceria os recursos necessários para uma compreensão profunda da irracionalidade e agressividade presentes na esfera pública. Em contraste, as gerações seguintes falhariam em compreender tais forças, concentrando-se em vãs esperanças normativas. No entanto, a crítica desses autores às aporias da primeira geração também dificulta a retomada direta dessa abordagem, levando os teóricos contemporâneos a buscar referências psicanalíticas alternativas além da psicanálise clássica. Nesse contexto, a psicanálise de Jessica Benjamin oferece uma ferramenta inestimável para dar sentido ao nosso contexto social atual, ao mesmo tempo em que sustenta a possibilidade do reconhecimento. Amplamente desconsiderada pelos estudiosos contemporâneos, Benjamin desenvolve um conceito mutualístico de reconhecimento que incorpora cada vez mais elementos negativos. Para sustentar a adequação de sua obra à teoria crítica contemporânea, em primeiro lugar, percorremos as teorias psicanalíticas de Sigmund Freud e Donald Winnicott, referências essenciais para a teoria crítica e para Benjamin. Em segundo lugar, traçamos a interlocução da teoria crítica e da psicanálise, da primeira à terceira geração, enfocando seu diagnóstico do autoritarismo e sua compreensão sobre a emancipação. Em terceiro lugar, apresentamos as primeiras e mais famosas produções de Benjamin. Em quarto lugar, comparamos seu pensamento inicial com o de Axel Honneth, argumentando que ele interpretou mal seu trabalho, transmitindo uma interpretação errônea. Por fim, apresentamos os desdobramentos mais recentes da obra de Benjamin, desde os escritos intermediários dos anos 1990 até as produções mais recentes. Sua interpretação tardia tem a vantagem de reconhecer o lugar da anti-sociabilidade nas relações humanas ao mesmo tempo em que sustenta a possibilidade da intersubjetividade – permitida pela aceitação da vulnerabilidade mútua – culminando em uma compreensão altamente dialética do reconhecimento. Concluímos que a psicanálise de Benjamin, especialmente sua teoria mais recente, oferece recursos teóricos inestimáveis para analisar o autoritarismo contemporâneo.

Palavras-chave: Teoria crítica. Escola de Frankfurt. Autoritarismo. Vulnerabilidade. Jessica Benjamin.

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Introduction

The recent global resurgence of authoritarian forms of government, paradigmatically evidenced by Donald Trump's leadership over one of the self-acclaimed cradles of democracy, has been challenging political analysts to offer a critical diagnosis of the current context. In critical theory circles, several authors have suggested resuming the studies of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno on authoritarianism to cope with the task.[1] Intending to understand the failure of the socialist revolution in Germany and the subsequent turning of the working classes towards fascism, the theorizations of the first generation of the Frankfurt School involve a complex reading about the society of late capitalism, the alienation of workers, changes in family structures, and the overwhelming influence of the culture industry. These aspects combined grasped the social contradictions and antagonisms existing between society and individuals, making sense of the emergence of authorities whose support was paradoxically contrary to the interests of the masses. Much of these analyses paid tribute to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, especially some of its darker elements, such as the internalization of authority in the superego, the incompatibility between nature and civilization, and the death drive.

The current general perception is that the negativism of these authors would be necessary to grasp the profound irrational dynamics we are facing worldwide. At the same time, the second and third generations of critical theory would not be in a position to offer adequate diagnostic tools for the current times, mainly due to their focus on providing normative substantiation for critique. Having largely abandoned both the Marxist and Freudian approaches, the subsequent works of the Frankfurt School, particularly those of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, would fail to provide a comprehensive analysis of the economy (Abromeit, 2018) and would be unable to account for our emotional connections to populist figures such as Trump (Gandesha, 2017).

Nonetheless, several of the current critical authors recognize that it is no longer possible to simply return to the first generation, applying their diagnosis directly to our context. Obviously, the economic and social structures have changed considerably after almost a century, gaining new complexities related, for example, to globalization, neoliberalism, and the development of the financial system, to name a few. However, it is also undeniable that critical theory itself changed, so we cannot disregard the criticisms made by the second and third generations, who pointed out

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[1] See: Wolfe, 2005; Wolin, 2016; Gordon, 2017; Gandesha, 2017, 2018, 2020; Leeb, 2018a, 2018b; Bernstein, 2017; Rensmann, 2018; Bottici, 2017; Allen, 2021a.

the limitations and the endless aporias that the first generation could not overcome. Moreover, Freudian psychoanalysis, an essential foundation for Adorno and Horkheimer, has also been widely revised, criticized, and historicized in recent decades. Thus, the task of resuming the first generation is accompanied by the necessary revision of their theses in accordance with the immanent proposal that critical theory assumed from the beginning (Horkheimer, 1972).

Echoing the work of contemporary critical authors, such as Amy Allen (2021), Nöelle McAfee (2019), Joel Whitebook (1995, 2017, 2021), and others, in this work, I argue that psychoanalysis is indispensable for our making sense of current society in a critical perspective, as the first generation believed. However, I suggest that the work of the American psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has not received the attention it deserves in critical theory circles, offering theoretical resources that can bridge a realistic reading of society and a democratic platform for taking action. Navigating between diagnosis and critique, critical theory cannot avoid the delicate challenge of balancing these two sides, which provokes tension within it from the beginning.

Such tensions are related to the complex connection between Marx and Freud. Since the early days of the Frankfurt School, the articulation of psychoanalysis with the Marxist orientation of the Institute for Social Research faced logical and political disagreements, leading to important alterations in the assumptions of either or both of these theoretical currents. Martin Jay points out that the combination of Marx and Freud represented a bold undertaking because, in most Marxist circles at the time, psychoanalysis was disregarded or even rejected as incompatible with their revolutionary hopes.

The Freudo-Marxist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, headed mainly by left-wing psychoanalysts, was the first attempt to articulate both currents, but it soon revealed that Freud's pessimism did not easily tune in with the orthodox Marxists' radical hopes in social change (Rouanet, 2001, p. 17). So much so that Wilhelm Reich, a pioneer in defending the combination of Marx and Freud in this period, got expelled from both the Communist Party and the psychoanalytic movement, which shows that the attempt to unite the two traditions was far from straightforward or uncontroversial.[2]

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[2] The reception of Reich's book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, written between 1930 and 1933, illustrates these difficulties. In short, on the one hand, Reich failed to satisfy the Marxists by focusing his analysis of social oppression largely on the psychosexual sphere, beyond the socioeconomic one, thus apparently giving more value to sexual than to economic politics (Albertini and Bedani, 2009). On the other hand, he also antagonized Freudian psychoanalysts because he understood fundamental psychic contradictions as historical and contingent occurrences, rejecting the Freudian explanation via unchanging libidinal origins (Rouanet, 2001, p. 29).

In fact, from the first reception of psychoanalysis by critical theory, what we observe is the alternation between the employment of Freudian theory, especially drive theory, in a more or less radicalized way. Katia Genel points out that from the Freudo-Marxist movement until the third generation of critical theory, represented by Honneth, the employment of psychoanalysis alternated between approaches "for or against Marx." The difference between these approaches is either the faithful acceptance of Freudian *Civilization and Its Discontents* – which poses a fundamental and insurmountable opposition between society and the individuals' impulses – or a greater orientation toward emancipation (2017, p. 265). This issue permeated the works of the Frankfurt School, leading to a review of positions and the increasing distancing between its members, while a more negative orientation tended to prevail over the years under Horkheimer's leadership.

Actually, it was Adorno who first proposed the idea of a dividing line between these perspectives in a letter to Walter Benjamin, in which he pictured a rope that both of them pulled on one side, while Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich pulled at the other (Genel, 2017). Adorno's and Herbert Marcuse's criticism of Freudian neo-revisionism radicalizes this image. However, according to Genel, this same question informs the "intersubjective turn" of critical theory, developed by its second and third generations, resulting in reduced use of Freudian psychoanalysis. Hence, for her, on the one side, the "negative" authors of the first generation, mainly Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, proposed a radicalizing use of psychoanalysis that drastically opposes individual and society and distrusts reconciliatory possibilities. While on the other side, the theories of Reich and Fromm, and the later developments of Habermas and Honneth, use psychological theories to offer normative support to emancipation, mainly through intersubjectivity.[3] Oscillating between the support of Freudian drive theory, on the one hand, and the possibility of intersubjective reconciliation, on the other, this controversy has thus been present from the first generation of the Frankfurt School to the present one.

From the perspective of psychoanalysis, this dividing line resonates with the controversy between the Freudian perspective and the revisionist or post-Freudian approaches, which would be more social or mutualistic. In this sense, the separation outlined by Whitebook (2008) within psychoanalysis itself is also instructive. For him, on the one hand, classical analysts in general

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[3] In this context, Marcuse apparently occupies an intermediate position between the two poles because while he strongly criticized psychoanalytic revisionism, addressing Fromm directly, he also developed the utopian possibility of a non-repressive civilization. For this reason, according to Genel, "despite his agreement with the critique of neo-revisionism, Marcuse could not share the pessimism of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*." (Genel, 2017, p. 282).

"adhere to Freud's pessimistic anthropology," giving different names to the source of human existential negativity such as "death instinct," "infantile helplessness," or "primary narcissism" (Ibid, p. 382). On the other hand, however, a countertendency within psychoanalysis draws a less conflictual and more sociable image of human nature. This second field is represented mainly by the Relational and Intersubjective psychoanalytic schools, which, mainly relying on empirical research with babies, identify a tendency towards interaction and mutuality from the first months of life. These authors conclude that individuals are naturally sociable, contrary to Freud's expectations.

This controversy, which crosses through psychoanalysis and its reception by critical theory, has far-reaching consequences, with both sides being accused of conformism. First, the more optimistic view would be conformist because its social diagnosis comfortably disregards the human mind's deep, antagonistic, and violent tendencies, mistakenly reducing or masking the depth of social contradictions. Adorno (2014) then praises Freud's "irreconcilable pessimism" because, along with the bourgeois negativist thinkers such as Nietzsche, Sade, and Hobbes, he would bravely reveal the radically antagonistic character of society, distrusting any alleged systematic harmonization. On the other side, however, such radical and insistent maintenance of negativity would offer no support for critique or any direct emancipatory praxis, being considered paralyzingly conformist or "political quietist" (Whitebook, 2004), especially by the second and third generations of critical theory.

This dispute complicates the development of a proper and productive critical diagnosis of the present time. As I mentioned, considering the global resurgence of authoritarian forms of government, several contemporary critical theorists have suggested resuming the "negative" thinkers of the first generation because their work would offer the necessary resources for a deep understanding of the irrationality and aggressiveness that currently occupy the public sphere. In the context of a crisis of democracy, the later generations would fail to explain the highly irrational, hostile, and affective aspect of voters' relationship with populist leaders (Gandesha, 2017). They would also be "less concerned with addressing pathologies and more with identifying normative foundations for a more just society." (McAfee, 2019).

At the same time, however, the "communicative turn" of critical theory, operated by the second and third generations, also advanced important discussions regarding the immanent normative foundation of collective praxis, which may support emancipatory processes with democratic

aspirations (Allen, 2008). Moreover, the endless aporias the first generation encountered seem to offer no clear way out of domination, which may discourage the direct defense of any emancipatory or democratic movement. In this context, the question that remains is "How can one 'both take human irrationality seriously and participate in a democratic ideal.'" (Whitebook, 2001, p. 260). In other words, how to both grasp the negative, irrational, and aggressive potential of the human psyche while also sustaining the possibility of some form of emancipation? How to account for the non-identical element, represented by the indomitable drives, that insist on defying normalization while maintaining a democratic aspiration?

Many critical scholars are currently seeking to tackle this issue by combining elements from both sides of the dividing line proposed by Genel (McAfee, 2019; Allen, 2021a; Whitebok, 1995). From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the challenge involves finding a model of the ego that adequately explains the current context, acknowledging the "sting of the negative" while also identifying alternatives for normativity. Among the contemporary authors, we see mainly the strategy of agreeing on the existence of a source of fundamental human negativity and then seeking a way to contain it democratically, albeit impurely or partially. Whitebook, for instance, explores the Freudian concept of sublimation, further developed by Hans Loewald, as an element that could balance both the poststructuralist critique of reason and democratic rationality (1995, p. 13). Nöelle McAfee (2019) and Amy Allen (2021a), in turn, appropriate Melanie Klein's "depressive position," related to the possibility of making amends and overcoming manic idealizations, as the concept that enables the containment of primary aggressiveness through democratic elaboration.

In parallel to these suggestions, in this project, I propose a solution to this controversy based on the most recent work of the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, which I argue has the advantage of offering a more precise and productive model. Several contemporary authors appropriate and recognize the validity of her feminist critique of Adorno and Horkheimer (Gandesha 2018, 2020, Allen 2021, and Marasco 2018), exposed mainly in her first publications (1977, 1978). However, critical scholars do not consider her complete psychoanalytic model for a systematic analysis of current events. Perhaps this is because such initial productions are excessively optimistic. Moreover, critical scholars usually identify her work with Honneth's position, considering it inappropriate to offer a correct diagnosis of society, especially in the current context. Amy Allen, for example, after a first interlocution with Benjamin (Allen, 2008), changed her primary psychoanalytical reference to Melanie Klein, arguing that the latter would have the advantage of

maintaining the importance of the drives, especially the death drive and the idea of primary aggressiveness (Allen and Ruti, 2019, p. 190).

Nevertheless, contrary to this interpretation of Benjamin's work, I argue that she increasingly accounts for antagonistic elements within human relations and the human psyche, which makes her model more and more appropriate to critical theory. My argument entails that Honneth misread her intentions when he employed her theory, thus passing on the erroneous interpretation that she would defend a strong intersubjectivity in which the subject would be fundamentally sociable. In contrast, since the publication of *The Bonds of Love* (1988), Benjamin offers more dialectic elements than Honneth's work can account for, culminating in a different, more complex understanding of recognition. Even if Benjamin herself never discussed Honneth's reception of her work, a close reading of both authors reveals fundamental disparities that make them incompatible.

It is true that from her initial to her intermediate works, although absorbing more pessimistic elements in dialogue with poststructuralist critics, Benjamin still preserved some remnants of a too-positive view of human nature and emancipatory reconciliation. However, these elements were reduced throughout the development of her theory, reaching closer proximity to Freudian negativism in her latest productions. In it, we can find resources to design a negative or ambivalent model of intersubjectivity, which would be capable of containing, in the same experience, both the possibility of the intersubjective relationship and the disruption of normativity. Contradicting interpretations made so far about Benjamin's work, I will make clear the pessimistic background that sustains her latest democratic vision, also highlighting the bodily foundation behind intersubjective recognition.

In short, in her last book, *Beyond Doer and Done To* (2018), resonating with Freud, Benjamin identifies a source of antinomy between the individuals, which is rooted in the body's vulnerability and the possibility of suffering under excessive stimuli. Admitting that we begin life in a situation of complete asymmetry and helplessness, she adopts Laplanche's notion of excess. She then suggests that we need others to discharge excessive tension outside ourselves. This situation easily turns into domination or submission, which projects excessive affects back and forth between the partners in a relationship. In this sense, a common way to protect ourselves from helplessness is to see ourselves as good and deserving, projecting badness and indignity outside – into otherness.

Nonetheless, despite asymmetry and domination, Benjamin identifies a seed of mutuality, precisely in the subjects' insurmountable and collective condition of vulnerability. For her, even

the most powerful subject is inescapably vulnerable and in need of others' recognition. Thus, the same vulnerability that easily submits us to others, generating inevitable acts of violence toward one another, can also foment mutuality.

In this context, the subjects can surrender to a situation in which they share vulnerability openly beyond self-protection. This experience amounts to "mutual recognition" in her late view. Thus, recognition is far from an idealized or harmonic situation because it entails accepting our unavoidable mutual vulnerability, the fact that we may be bad, undeserving, or even monstrous. In other words, to recognize the other, the self must face and acknowledge his own helplessness and strangeness, fomenting a space beyond the shield of moralist dissociative protections. When such an intersubjective relationship can be sustained, it offers a mutual space of discharge and elaboration of excess, which relaxes the allure of power and the threat of annihilation under excessive affects.

No one is purely good and deserving in the intersubjective relational space. In it, the idealization of oneself and the other is demobilized. What occurs is a double movement of destruction of the objective character of both partner's idealized identities, so both can meet as subjects, sustaining mutual survival. Thus, Benjamin's concept of intersubjectivity is a negative one, depending on the sustenance of mutual vulnerability. As we will see, only through accepting that we are "all sinners" can we attain a democratic situation of mutual survival.

That is, in Benjamin's concept of recognition, there is a moment of lack of recognition of oneself and others, which, despite being extremely dangerous and painful, still sustains the possibility of mutuality. Bridging a negative comprehension of society that resonates with Adorno and Horkheimer, and the hope in the possibility of intersubjectivity, which echoes the works of Habermas and Honneth, Benjamin offers a profound critical theory of society rooted in the notion of mutual vulnerability that can help make sense of today's world. Largely disregarded by contemporary critical theorists, her work offers invaluable tools to analyze current society. Trying to offer a clear and critical interpretation of Benjamin's psychoanalysis, I hope that we will be able to apply it more directly to a sociological analysis.

Drawing on the tradition of the Frankfurt School, this work then focuses on approaching the proper balance between both a critique of the antagonistic tendencies of our current societies and the discovery of possible emancipatory relief through democratic means. I hope to help settle a

persistent controversy in critical theory while also offering pragmatic democratic solutions to current political actors, avoiding conformist tendencies.

I divided this investigation into three main parts. The first one explains in further detail the connections between psychoanalysis and critical theory and what is at stake in this discussion. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the psychoanalytic background, exposing key concepts in the theories of Freud and Winnicott, respectively. This part is essential to understand not only the discussions within critical theory but also the development of Benjamin's thinking since Freud and Winnicott are among her main theoretical influences. Chapter 3 briefly presents the different receptions of psychoanalysis by critical theorists from the first to the third generations, focusing on how they resolve the death drive issue and explain authoritarianism. The second part is the main one. It explains the evolution of Jessica Benjamin's thinking from the first (Chapter 4), to the intermediate (Chapter 6), until the last writings (Chapter 7). I considered it important mainly to present in depth the new concepts and understandings of the latest Benjamin to be able to indicate how critical theorists can employ her psychoanalytic theory. In Chapter 5, I also contrast her theory with Honneth's model, arguing that he misread Benjamin when he employed her theory. A more careful reading of her work would culminate in a different, more appropriate, critical theory. In Part III, I conclude this investigation by delineating the implications of Benjamin's psychoanalysis to a critical theory of society, especially considering the contemporary authoritarian trend, and suggesting further research in this direction.

Part I - The Object and the Subject in Psychoanalysis and critical theory

Psychoanalysis is a central tool for social theorists to understand the irrational and negative forces within the individual that constantly thwart social emancipation and lead to domination. Within critical theory, the psychoanalytic perspectives employed, at least from the first to the third generations, were mainly Freudian psychoanalysis and Winnicott's object relations theory. Only more recently, critical theorists have been employing other psychoanalytic references, which are currently under exciting dispute.

In this context, this investigation begins with an overview of Freudian and Winnicottian psychoanalytic theories. Since both productions are vast, I will focus on their understanding of the intersection between nature and culture, the drives and civilization, the object and the subject, as these splits develop throughout their theories. The issue of human anti-sociability, or the opposition between nature and civilization, determines the possibilities of emancipation, thus informing a more pessimistic or optimistic understanding of society, the merit of democratic praxis, and the possibilities of overcoming authoritarianism.

In Freud, this issue is present mainly in the opposition between the drives and object relations, which unfolded from the first model related to the constancy principle, to the late development of the death drive, in which he reaches the greatest negativism. In Winnicott, this issue is present mainly in the opposition of the False and the True Selves. For him, despite the antinomy between social life and the individual's spontaneous bodily expression, a certain compromise can be reached, culminating in a good-enough individual life. However, he did not intend to antagonize Freud, but to complement his theory. Thus, he offered innovative concepts that preserve the existence of a fundamental antinomy between the individual body and society.

Subsequently, we will see how critical theorists inherited the issue of human nature's antisociality through their reception of psychoanalysis, leading to diverse diagnoses of authoritarianism.

1. Freud: between the drives and the object relations

Freud famously believed that his theory implicated a fundamental decentering of men from himself, comparable to the ones operated by the Copernican revolution and the Darwinian evolution of the species. All these discoveries would implicate a recasting of the human relation to nature, be it the configuration of the celestial bodies, the other animal species, or men's own body

and mind. Not only are men not at the center of the universe, nor are they beings fundamentally detached or transcendentally above all the other living creatures, but they are not even a master of their own minds. Our consciousness might not be at the center of our psychic universe. After such a discovery, the human subject can no longer coincide with his own conscious experience or conscious awareness. There is an internal opposition or an alien force inside the conscious mind that believes itself to be the one and only ruler.

However, as Thomas Ogden pointed out, Freud did not displace the human subject from consciousness to place it on the unconscious. Freud did not conceive of an unconscious subject nor believed that the unconscious harbored the truth or the subject's true nature to the detriment of consciousness. On the contrary, he places the subject of psychoanalysis somewhere *between* consciousness and unconsciousness (Ogden, 1994, p. 18). These two sides, moreover, are understood to be in a permanent dialectical position of co-dependency, affirmation, and negation of each other. Consciousness and unconsciousness "coexist in a mutually defining relationship of difference" (Ibid). Both depend on the other and sustain the other, at the same time that they negate each other permanently. This contradiction has no end, generating a constant and dynamic interplay that constitutes the substance of human experience. That is why Freud's theory is dialectical in nature. In other words, the Freudian concept of the subject is one that "is created, sustained, and at the same time decentered through the dialectical interplay of consciousness and unconsciousness" (Ibid, 14). It is probably this dialectical character of Freudian perception that attracted the critical theorists of the first generation, resonating with their understanding of society.

At the heart of the human subject, such fundamental dialectic derives from an internal conflict or contradiction of a permanent and unresolvable nature. Despite many reformulations, Freud always maintained an element of contradiction or disturbance between something in men's nature and men's psychic constitution, which demanded a reflexive defense. The fundamental psychic conflict, as conceived by Freud, always involves an antagonist element with bodily roots, be it the need to reduce stimulations (which he named the constancy principle), the demands of one's drives, the pleasure principle, or innate aggression. As Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell put it:

> Throughout its history, psychoanalysis has been a conflict theory in which opposite trends within the individual struggle for a dominant role in controlling mental life. The most crucial of these pairs of polar opposites consist of the forces representing the repressed and those representing the repressive. This is true of each phase of Freud's theory making, from the defense model through the drive model. (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983, p. 53).

Greenberg and Mitchell, two of the main contributors to relational psychoanalysis, divide Freud's production into three phases according to the different forms this fundamental conflict took throughout the development of his theory. Their systematization is helpful, even if incomplete and sometimes biased, because it clarifies the displacements that nature-as-conflict suffered in Freud's thinking until the late conception of the death drive.

1.1. Excessive stimulation, the constancy principle, and seduction

The first phase, which lasted from the late 1880s to 1905, started with Freud's collaboration with Breuer on the study of hysteria. The psychic conflict analyzed then revolved around the reduction of stimulation, which arises from external sources in contact with the body and the psychic apparatus. Following hydraulic metaphors, Freud and Breuer developed the "constancy principle," according to which the psychic apparatus aims at reducing stimulations to the lowest possible level, ridding itself of all tension. This principle presupposes that the individual mind functions like a closed system in which energy builds up, demanding discharge or release. Excitations are unpleasant, so the objective of our psyche is to get rid of or discharge stimulations.

Stimulations or tensions disturbing the psyche, in this phase of Freud's thinking, are equated with affects such as sexual excitation, anger, fear, etc. This model explains human behavior and psychopathology basically according to the constancy principle. Specifically, it explains hysteria as an illness derived from the impossibility of abreaction of a certain repressed affect. The symptoms observed in hysteria were generally expressions of a stimulation demanding release but clashing against a psychic conflict that demanded repression.

Focusing his analysis mainly on psychopathology, not on every human behavior, in this phase, Freud did not elaborate deeply on the fundamental source of such conflict or incompatibility. Greenberg and Mitchell conclude that it arose from dynamics that unfolded "outside" one's mental apparatus, involving a particular individual's cultural context, moral standards, and interpersonal exchanges. Indeed, in the *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer mention that certain ideas or affects would demand a defense, or repression, due to their incompatibility with the "dominant mass of ideas constituting the ego" (1985/1955, p. 116). Therefore, they believed the "incompatibility of an idea" would be the source of repression, suggesting that the conflict between ideas would come from external sources, not innate impulses. Being incompatible or inassimilable

to the organized structure of the psyche, these antagonistic ideational elements would demand exclusion from awareness.

Greenberg and Mitchell affirm that: "The incompatible idea is incompatible *within a given context*, a particular social situation." (1983, p. 33). That is, the "dominant mass of ideas" that fits one's sense of self, demanding the repression of incompatible contents, would come from socially sanctioned values and contextual moral standards, even if Freud did not clarify how these elements came to be internalized by the psyche. The authors explain: "In other words, at this point in Freud's thinking there were no fundamental passions, no irreducible forces determining our human nature. What mattered was simply what grew out of particular interpersonal encounters." (Ibid, p. 27). Therefore, even if they were fundamentally related to physical stimulations and culminated in bodily tension, the affects that hunted the psyche would depend on interpersonal exchanges or actual experiences of the individual, not coming from some underlying natural predisposition.

In subsequent essays, Freud proposes the theory of seduction, according to which an actual precocious event of sexual stimulation from an adult would generate trauma in the immature child, being responsible for later neurotic symptoms. The "actual irritation of the genitals" (Freud, 1896 apud. Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983, p. 28) would take place in an experience of early seduction, generating a traumatic memory because the immature sexual and mental apparatus of the infant would be incapable of processing such excessive stimulation. The traumatic event would be registered as a repressed memory, which could nonetheless be revived in adult life when the individual encountered a scene with some association or resonance with the early seduction. The experience of infantile sexual abuse would, then, inform later symptoms of hysteria in the form of persistent pathological reminiscences that the patient could not integrate into his psychic apparatus. The traumatic memory, more precisely, would generate ideas and affects incompatible with the central mass of thoughts that constituted the individual's experience, failing assimilation. Therefore, the pathogenic event responsible for neurosis would result from an actual traumatic experience with another.

Since Freud explained repression, pathology, and psychic conflict via actual encounters and events in this phase, his early theory resonates with later relational accounts, such as Greenberg and Mitchell's. But most notable, perhaps, is the later resuming of the notion of seduction by Jean Laplanche for the development of his "general theory of seduction," which poses a general traumatic experience suffered by the infantile psyche in relation to the adult addressing. What is

most important for this author is the idea that psychic conflict comes from interpersonal dynamics, not from a purely natural predisposition or a merely endogenous cause, even if the body has a fundamental role in the vicissitudes of the affects.

However, instead of pursuing these ideas, Freud abandoned his theory on early seduction, concluding that the memories of sexual abuse were actually imaginary fantasies, not necessarily related to actual events. In a letter to Fliess in 1897, he suggested that it was not probable that all his patients had suffered a similar traumatic event or that all their symptoms arose from actual experiences of abuse. Gradually, the founder of psychoanalysis replaced the idea of an actual seduction by endogenous sources of motivation. External events would have a reduced determinability on psychic life, to the detriment of internal motivational elements.

The model developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) anticipates some elements that would compose Freud's subsequent drive theory. In this oeuvre, he maintained the constancy principle, according to which we obtain pleasure via excitation discharge. However, now he understood that the process of discharge was intermeshed with inner somatic needs. The satisfaction of an internal need via somatic discharge generated an experience that would be registered as a positive memory or perception invoked in subsequent moments. This memory would give birth to a wish, which is basically an impulse to recreate a past situation of gratification.

More than just psychopathology, now Freud studied processes related to all human activities, such as dreams and everyday communication. Dreams, for him, would bring about the fulfillment of wishes, especially those forbidden in awake life. But wishes are the motivational force behind all psychic life. Motivation would still come from an actual experience, but in contrast to the earlier model, these experiences are now grounded in an internal need. The first origin of the wish is a somatic need, not an external stimulation. As Greenberg and Mitchell explain, "Wishes are desires to reestablish situations, but the situations are desirable only because they once satisfied an internally produced need." (1983, p. 29). Unlike the later drive model, however, the bodily needs here are broad and unspecific, which is not the case once Freud defined the nature of the drives.

1.2. The first duality of the drives

This definition happened with the publication of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905/1955), which inaugurated the second phase of Freudian theory in Greenberg and Mitchell's framework. In this text, the founder of psychoanalysis introduced the "drive," a complex concept

understood to be "on the frontier between the mental and the physical." The paradoxical status of the drive, a concept at the boundary between the mind and the body, did not stop Freud, at this moment, from speculating on its content, at least the content of its manifestation in perceptible experience.

Despite Freud's uncertainties regarding the determination of the drive's contents – evidenced both by his own allegations on the provisory status of his hypothesis and by his later reformulations of it – he indeed expanded the degree of determinability of individual motivation. Greenberg and Mitchell go so far as to state that in this model, Freud reduced every human motivation to the "ultimate, irreducible, and qualitatively specifiable instinctual sources" (1983, p. 30). The former indeterminacy of the wishes in *The Interpretation of Dreams* would be replaced by the crude determination of the drive's content, which would be fundamentally sexual in its first formulation.

At this moment, Freud speculated that repression would arise from an organic development, which would naturally organize the infant's perverse and fragmentary sexuality around the genital sexuality of the adult. A mature sexuality, focused mainly on reproductive aims, would follow from the natural development of the drives' predispositions. The repression of perverse behavior through feelings of shame, disgust, or moral outrage would arise from organic sources, not external or social influences. As Greenberg and Mitchell understand, "This is morality without society" (1983, p. 35). That is, this first drive model implies the natural and endogenous development of moral sexual repression.

In this phase of Freud's theorization, he placed psychic conflict entirely on organic terms, stipulating a dual or conflictual drive configuration, opposing a sexual drive (libido) and a self-preservative one. The mental conflict would arise basically from the interplay of sexual aims and the need for self-preservation. So, the relations with the external world, society, and others would be less relevant for his analysis.

Evidence of his lack of attention to actual relationships is the introduction, in the *Three Essays,* of the concept of the "object," understood broadly as "the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds." (Freud, 1905/1955, p. 136). This understanding suggests that the object is an unspecific support to one's drives, not a real, determined, concrete person. The focus here is the expected sexual development of an individual towards mature genital sexuality, not one's determinate relations to others. In a subsequent elaboration of these topics, Freud affirmed that the drives are not originally connected to specific objects, being actually freely displaced between different

objects. Moreover, at this moment, it is already fair to suppose an initial objectless phase of development (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983, p. 39-40), in which autoeroticism would characterize the first disposition of libido.

The external object would enter the scene later, and it would be perceived and cathected as a whole object only once the fragmentary currents of childhood sexuality were already organized under the premises of genital reproductive sexuality. The unification of the sexual drive comes first and is a condition of possibility for recognizing the object. Therefore, endogenous motivations take precedence over relationships with other people, which are reduced to a function of the drives. External reality assumes a secondary role.

Nonetheless, challenged by contrary evidence and by his colleagues' claims, mainly Alfred Adler and Carl Jung, Freud was convinced to progressively accommodate external reality into his drive model. According to Greenberg and Mitchell, the third phase of his work, which began in 1910, tries to accommodate both the drive theory developed in the last phase and a growing relational sensibility, which increasingly challenged Freud's thinking.

1.3. The reality principle, the discovery of narcissism and the structural model

The first step was the introduction of the "reality principle," which designates the individual's acceptance of external reality. For Freud, reality would be mostly recalcitrant, unpleasant, and repressive to the individual. It would introduce frustration to drive satisfaction, requiring that one abandon, modify, or postpone the satisfaction of one's desires. The drives, therefore, still came first in individual development, so the assimilation of reality, albeit central, would be a derived developmental goal. Put differently, reality came to have a strong presence, but it merely opposed the drives on the surface without fundamentally structuring or shaping them. The role of reality, despite the introduction of the reality principle, was still secondary, forcefully bringing an originally autistic child into a relationship with the external world.

Moreover, the impingement of reality into the child's world was unspecific, implying merely a negative influence. It did not depend on a certain kind of experience or specific configurations of object relations. The reality was always frustrating and deceiving, no matter the configuration of the external world or the infant's relational situation.

Nevertheless, more than the reality principle, Freud's investigations on narcissism represented an essential step towards a more significant consideration of object relations. Such

investigations were provoked mainly by Jung's argument that seeing libido as a quantitative energy, not a qualitative one, would be more appropriate. Libido, for Jung, would represent just a neutral or a general kind of psychic energy without a clear differentiation between sexual and self-preservative aims.

Freud's discovery of narcissism, which he mainly developed while observing psychotic patients, led him to acknowledge that libidinal energy could be either directed towards the other, in the form of sexual desire, or towards the self, in the form of narcissistic cathexis, thus blurring the former dual distinction of the drives. The difference between ego-libido and object-libido, self-preservation, and sexual desire, would be less in the nature of the drives themselves than in their endogenous or exogenous directionality. With this realization, Freud rendered the libidinal drive more unspecific while the influence of the object increased. Moreover, the fact that the ego could dispose of the drive energy, endogenously or exogenously, also expanded the possibilities and un-determinability of individual motivation:

> With the idea that the ego can deploy libido for its own purposes, the original libidinal aim recedes in importance. It is still relevant genetically, but not dynamically, because it is subject entirely to the ego's intentions (retaining the penis, being loved, and so on). But where does the ego get its 'intentions'? With the concept of narcissism we have a set of aims that have a life of their own, free of the quality of the drives, which can use the energy of the drives to pursue these independent goals. (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983, p. 61).

Yet, Freud believed that object libido derived from narcissistic libido, so the cathexis of one's ego would be primary and more fundamental than the direction of libidinal energy towards others. This understanding is related to Freud's postulation of "primary narcissism," which means "an early state in which the child cathects its own self with the whole of its libido." (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p. 337). According to this concept, the initial phase of one's life would be characterized by omnipotence because the infant would be incapable of differentiating itself from the external world or its thoughts from reality. Moreover, before being able to encounter other objects, the child would inhabit a blissful state in which it invested all libido in this undifferentiated reality, that is, in itself.

Nonetheless, according to Freud, it is inevitable that the beatific situation of primary narcissism is interrupted by reality. In this process, part of the original libido solely used to infuse the ego comes to be directed to the external objects that satisfy one's primary needs. Once reality

interrupts primary narcissism, a crucial differentiation occurs between ego-libido and object-libido. Maintaining the idea of a closed system, Freud understands that both forms of libido, once differentiated, run counter each other. Object love impoverishes the ego, and narcissistic love diminishes the love of another. As Laplanche and Pontalis put it: "Basing himself on a sort of principle of conservation of libidinal energy, Freud postulates a seesaw balance between ego-libido (i.e. libido which cathects the ego) and object-libido." (Ibid, p. 255). In this conflicting scenario, the mature object relation would be an achievement, not a taken-for-granted reality. Considering primary narcissism and omnipotence, sustaining a relationship with the other would be a problem for the subject, one that required a successful development and the relinquishing of part of one's libido to the other.

However, the interference of the other is not limited to mediating the recalcitrance of reality or demanding the division of one's libido. The seesaw between object- and narcissistic relations has more profound reflexive consequences that foreshadow the development of Freud's structural model, in which object relations assume a more significant role in the individual's psychic development. In the essay *On Narcissism* (1914/1957), Freud already envisions that the external dynamic between self and object bounces back to the self, resulting in an internalized structure of self-censorship, which represents the internalization of an asymmetric relationship.

In 1914, Freud attributed this function to the "ego-ideal," a formation that follows from the loss of primary narcissism. Once one loses the state of omnipotence to reality, one cannot sustain one's complete self-cathexis or idealization. The interruption of the blissful narcissism arises mainly from a threat or reprimand that emanates from others. The totality of the self cannot be loved or infused by libido anymore because the other interrupts: "This state of narcissism, which Freud compares to a veritable delusion of grandeur, is abandoned as a result, in particular, of the criticism which is directed at the child by its parents." (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p. 144). Guilt arises from the fear of losing the parents' love or of being punished by them. Once primary narcissism is interrupted, the most we can retain from the beatific original phase is an internalized ideal, which substitutes the initial ideal state. The primary form of narcissism is displaced to the ego ideal. But, unlike the earlier phase, the psyche is now divided. It is split into different structural units, one of which exerts control over the others, measuring oneself against the ideal.

The ideal internalized pressures the ego to act according to its standards, inaugurating self-control, including the control of one's impulses. According to Freud, the repression of libido is

demanded by the ego's "self-respect," which denotes the judgment of the internalized ego ideal that serves as the ultimate reference point for self-evaluation and control. In addition, the ego-ideal is the incarnation of the moral conscience, derived from the parents' and society's prohibitions and criticisms. Therefore, external objects play an essential role in the individual's development, motivation, and the organization of psychic agencies. Object relations gain a significant centrality in this moment of Freud's theory, clashing with the free play of the drives.

The subsequent essays *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917/1957) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923/1961) reinforce this tendency. Relational theorists consider the essay of 1917 one of Freud's most important contributions because it represents his primary systematic elaboration of what would later be termed "object-relations theory" (Ogden, 2002, p. 768). In this text, observing the behavior of melancholic patients, Freud concluded that they would depict a regression from object love to narcissism with essential reflexive consequences.

In melancholia or depression, the loss of a loved object would have generated the withdrawal of the libidinal investment from the object back into the ego. The ego would then be identified with the lost object, preserving it and its now disturbing and despising characteristics. Instead of generating investment in new objects, such loss would cause a loss of the ego, or one's massive loss of self-esteem, which would explain the melancholia. The ego identified with the lost object would suffer all the negative judgment and outrage directed toward the abandoned object. Therefore, an external relationship would be replaced by a reflexive internal one: "In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification." (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 249). For Ogden, this dynamic creates an "internal object relationship" (2002), implying that, by the identification with the lost other, the ego would suffer a reconfiguration or a split that would generate an internalized relationship between parts of it.

In Freud's terms, "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego." (1917/1957). This means that, from now on, the subject would take oneself as an object of censorship, judging oneself as it former judged others: "We see how […] one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object." (Ibid, p. 247). Greenberg and Mitchell affirm that in the concept of identification, as described in 1917, "we encounter for the first time the ability of the object to influence the nature of psychic structure." (1988, p. 71). However, more than that, we

see that the lost object internalized comes to objectify part of the subject, instituting a relentless internal conflict.

If this process of identification was first limited to the pathological cases of melancholia, in 1917, in 1923, Freud extended the notion of identification, suggesting that this would be the general process of ego constitution. Thus, identification following object loss would be a normal, crucial, and unavoidable process necessary for the constitution of the ego. As Freud famously put it: "The character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and…it contains the history of those object choices." (1923/1961, p. 29). Thus, the constitution of the ego would not be a merely endogenous process, but it would depend fundamentally on affectively-charged relational patterns with others (Dunn, 1995). The internalized shadow of the other would be fundamental to the formation of the personality.

The Ego and the Id (1923) also marks the introduction of Freud's structural model, organized around the agencies of ego, superego, and id, in contrast to the earlier topographical model, organized around the notions of the conscious, unconscious, and preconscious systems. Now the id represents an entirely unconscious agency, the source of untamed drive energy. The ego is the central agency that mediates the id's demands and the contrasting determinations of reality. The superego is a subdivision of the ego that exerts moral censorship and self-criticism over the ego and the id. With this new tripartite division, we see how the identification process introduced in the theory of narcissism is now enlarged to explain the personality formation. Freud explains how the ego is formed out of the id's original energetic impulse:

> This would seem to imply an important amplification of the theory of narcissism. At the very beginning, all the libido is accumulated in the id, while the ego is still in process of formation or is still feeble. The id sends part of this libido out into erotic object-cathexes, whereupon the ego, now grown stronger, tries to get hold of this object-libido and to force itself on the id as a love-object. The narcissism of the ego is thus a secondary one, which has been withdrawn from objects. (Freud, 1923/1961, p. 46).

In other words, from the love of external objects, the ego is formed or transformed so as to impose itself on the id, via identification, as an object of love. Hence, the personality is formed as a reflexive precipitate of such object relations, following their characteristics.

In addition to the process of identification, the introduction of the concept of "superego" represented the recognition that external relations could be transposed into internal psychic

agencies, with significant motivational consequences: "In 1923, Freud extended the notion of identification to include not only a modelling of oneself after the external object, but as in the case of superego formation, a process by which the functions of the external object are instated within the psyche." (Ogden, 1983, p. 229).

In this context, the most important object in the story of personality formation, for Freud, is the oedipal father, the one responsible for the first and most important identification and the internalization of repression into the superego. The Oedipus complex, which Freud had already stipulated at least as early as 1910 (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p. 283), now explains the structural constitution of the personality. According to this theory, the boy, identified with the father, takes the mother as his first object of love. He, nonetheless, increasingly perceives the father as a romantic rival in relation to the beloved mother, thus coming to entertain the desire to eliminate the father and take his place. The bond between father and mother entails a prohibition against the boy's possession of the mother. Thus, the father intervenes as a prohibitor in the marvelous mother-baby dyad. In fantasy, the father's superior power threatens the boy with castration if he proceeds in his love for the mother. The boy's relationship with the father is thus ambivalent: he both loves and identifies with the father while at the same time hating and fearing his greater power and his position over the mother. The father's prohibition entails that the boy must be (a male) like him while also renouncing certain attributes of the most powerful male – which is fundamentally the mother. From this dual command – "be like me, but renounce what I have" – the personality of the boy is forged. The most common outcome of this process is the solidification of the boy's identification with the father (as a male subject) and his renouncement of the mother as an object of love. The boy can only renounce his desire because he internalizes the father's prohibition, giving birth to an internal agency of censorship: the superego, the heir of the Oedipus complex. As we have seen, in this process, the ego suffers a division, and a part of it is endowed with the role of self-control, self-judgment, and self-punishment. In other words, one part of the ego is set against the other (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p. 436). The subject, who first saw oneself as an object of love following its identification with loved objects, now also sees oneself as an object to be permanently put under control.

Moreover, after the oedipal phase, the boy comes to recognize other beings in their specificity; that is, he recognizes differences, especially sexual and age differences. Despite keeping the idea of the drives as the motivating forces behind human behavior, Freud now

understood that the external situation had a determining influence on the personality, including the social morality and specific object relations of a particular individual. Greenberg and Mitchell affirm that "The structural model in *The Ego and the Id* moved Freud's theory to final acceptance of the developmental approach to object relations." (1983, p. 71). Freud affirms, for example:

> The superego retains the character of the father, while the more powerful the Oedipus complex was and the more rapidly it succumbed to repression (under the influence of authority, religious teaching, schooling, and reading), the stricter will be the domination of the superego over the ego later on – in the form of conscience or perhaps of an unconscious sense of guilt. (Freud, 1923/1961, p. 34-35).

However, this trend toward contextualism was limited. Freud insisted that such object-relations dynamics also followed a phylogenetic determination. He even suggested that forms of ego and superego formations might be hereditarily inherited (1923/1961, p. 38).

Moreover, in an influential essay that dates a few years from *The Ego and the Id*, Freud introduced another specification regarding the drives, which presented critical anti-social consequences. In the famous text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1955), Freud speculated that there would be a drive toward death and destruction in addition to Eros, or libido. In this highly speculative text, Freud pointed out evidence of uncanny actions of the mind that did not follow the pleasure principle, repeating, on the contrary, traumatic situations. Some examples were the dreams of traumatic neurosis, which echo a dramatic past, and the phenomena of transference, which repeats a hurtful relational pattern. The compulsion to repeat a traumatic or painful situation of the past, pointing towards something beyond the seeking of pleasure, led Freud to postulate the existence of a self-destructive drive.

More precisely, in his abstract and far-fetched speculations about the origins of life and the nature of the instincts, he suggests that organic substances would have a natural tendency of conservation or regression towards an earlier phase, until the inorganic state. The interplay between external disturbances and an innate conservative force would be at the roots of life itself. Freud says, for example: "It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life." (1920/1955, p. 30). The death drive, in other words, would be an impulse towards the regression from the organic state to the inorganic, tenseless, and undifferentiated state. When directed toward the outside, this self-destructive force

generates aggressive and destructive behaviors against others. As we see, he further specified the nature of the drives and related them to the biological or organic processes within living creatures.

Since, with the discovery of narcissism, both sexual and self-conservative drives were considered libidinal in nature or consisted of the same libidinal substance, with only topographical differences, Freud needed another source of conflict to explain psychic antagonisms. The new dualism of the drives then comes to reflect a conflict between life and death, self-preservation and self-destruction, love and aggression, Eros and Thanatos.

This new dualism has significant anti-social consequences. In Freud's understanding, the conservative character of the death drive directly opposes civilization and men's progress. He only suggested this idea at this moment, but he would further specify it later, as we will see. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud affirms, concerning the death drive: "What appears in a minority of human individuals as an untiring impulsion towards further perfection can easily be understood as a result of the instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization." (Ibid, p. 36). We see, then, that the stipulation of a self-destructive drive, in direct opposition to social progress and individual perfection, generates a source of opposition between nature and society. Directed outwards, the self-destructive impulse would generate the opposition between the individuals, in the form of aggression and hostility, but it could also return as a conflict between different parts of the self once the relationship is internalized.

Now we can understand from where the superego extracts its aggressive energies. Following the stipulation of the death drive, Freud could consider that the superego would not merely oppose the id but would also feed on the id's forces. To control the id's desires, paradoxically, the superego could count on the energies emanating from the id itself, especially on the recently discovered aggressive energies, which the superego would redirect against oneself. While the id, accommodating both the life and death instincts, is "totally non-moral" and the ego "strives to be moral," the superego can be "super-moral" or cruelly judgmental and harsh (Freud, 1923/1961, p. 54), employing the death drive to its purposes.

With the introduction of the death drive and the superego, Freud complements his understanding of melancholia, relating it to the fear of death. For him, one can reflexively translate the fear of castration in the face of the powerful prohibiting father of the Oedipus complex as the fear of death or, we could say, the fear of deserving to die in the hands of the superego.

Freud distinguishes the fear of death as a reaction in the face of an actual external occurrence (a true menace to one's life) from the melancholic fear of death that comes from the superego. In the first case, which first occurs in the early situation of vulnerability faced by the baby, the helpless subject seeks the protection of someone more powerful for its protection. At the beginning of life, this figure is especially the father and the mother (surprisingly recognized here as a source of protection).[4] The first caregivers' protection thus guarantees one's continuing living despite the immense infantile vulnerability.

However, after the Oedipus complex, the protection against death is internalized, being sought in the superego, the agency that incorporates the father's role. If, originally, the baby depended on his father's protection for survival, now his life seems to depend on the approval of his superego. Then, if abandoned by the superego, the subject fears death or fears deserving to die. Therefore, the severe judgment of the superego generates anxiety to the point of menacing the ego with the deserving of death or destruction. In the face of such a cruel internalized judge, "living means the same as being loved" (Ibid). Or, as Freud puts it, at the end of the *Ego and the Id*:

> The fear of death in melancholia only admits of one explanation: that the ego gives itself up because it feels itself hated and persecuted by the superego, instead of loved. To the ego, therefore, *living means the same as being loved — being loved by the superego*, which here again appears as the representative of the id. The superego fulfils the same function of protecting and saving that was fulfilled in earlier days by the father and later by Providence or Destiny. But, when the ego finds itself in an excessive real danger which it believes itself unable to overcome by its own strength, it is bound to draw the same conclusion. It sees itself deserted by all protecting forces and lets itself die. Here, moreover, is once again the same situation as that which underlay the first great anxiety state of birth and the infantile anxiety of longing — the anxiety due to separation from the protecting mother. (Ibid, p. 58, emphasis added).

Therefore, the fear of death derives first from the child's concrete vulnerability after birth, which is avoided by parent care and protection, and later from the harsh judgment of the superego formed in the father's image. Against the second fear, derived from the reflexivity of the death

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[4] Bringing under scrutiny the process of identification, the structural formation of the psyche, and early object relations, the structural model considers preoedipal relations and early psychic events in more depth, granting more significant attention to the role of the mother. Therefore, it is not so much a surprise that the mother's protecting role is acknowledged here. However, the space given to the mother in Freud's theory is still considerably deficient, as several feminist psychoanalysts and post-Freudian theorists pointed out. See, for instance, Whitebook, 2017a.

instinct, the ego counts on Eros. To keep the aggressive drive in check, the ego has to "become filled with libido" so that it "desires to live and to be loved." (Ibid, p. 56).

With this vocabulary of life and death, Freud's theoretical framework suggests that the infant's vulnerability in the face of death would connect it with others, first as protectors and later as internalized authorities in the superego. In this discussion, vulnerability would not fundamentally oppose the reality of object relations, being actually closely related to it, so that being loved would amount to gaining vitality or deserving to live. The connection between deserving to live and being loved suggests the importance of object relations.

However, this model still clearly depends on the anti-social nature of the drives. Housed in the id, they remain the primary and fundamental reality of the mind, out of which the ego differentiates when exposed to reality. The objects here preserve abstract and impersonal characteristics, with little space for indeterminacy and singularity. Even the superego, formed at the father's image, also depends fundamentally on the energy that emanates from the id, employing its aggression for masochistic purposes. Therefore, despite his greater acceptance of the importance of object relations, Freud remains within the framework of drive theory. As Greenberg and Mitchell put it, "Despite their clearly articulated relation to reality figures, the ego and the superego are genetically tied to the id." (1983, p. 73). So, "the balance of forces at work in the mind strongly favors the id. The ego, endowed with no energy source of its own, is dependent entirely on the id in this respect." (Ibid).

Later developments of Freudian theory would confirm his complete adherence to drive theory to the detriment of a more relational view. He implies that the superego would result more from the individual's own aggressive tendencies than from one's external context, upbringing, or specific relation to the father. Freud affirmed, for instance, that: "the original severity of the superego does not — or does not so much — represent the severity which one has experienced from it [the object], or which one attributes to it; it represents rather one's own aggressiveness towards it." (1930/161, p. 129–130).

In this context, Greenberg and Mitchell point out that, after introducing the structural model, Freud gave some critical steps towards integrating object relations more fully in his drive theory, but they conclude their analysis of the Freudian project by claiming that he could never entirely or appropriately integrate object relation and drive theory. This impression intensifies if we reflect on

the important implications of the publication of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) for object relations, which the authors surprisingly do not consider at large.

1.4. The death drive and the discontents of civilization

In this text, Freud reinforces the idea that in the beginning, the child's experience is one of continuity with the world, without a clear separation between inside and outside realities. He declares that "Originally the ego includes everything, later it detaches from itself the external world." (1930/1961, p. 13). In this phase of primary narcissism, there is only the pleasure principle. Thus, "When the infant at the breast receives stimuli, he cannot as yet distinguish whether they come from his ego or from the outer world." (Ibid, p. 11-12). However, "He learns it [to differentiate his ego from the outer world] gradually as the result of various promptings." (Ibid, p. 12). These prompting or exigencies that introduce external reality are mostly the physiological needs of the child, especially hunger. Soon, the child realizes that some excitation sources are "temporarily out of his reach." Privation, mainly of the mother's breast, makes external reality gradually appear to the child. The mother, as an external object, appears only once she has been absent. Therefore, Freud still believes that the perception of externality and object relations arise from experiences of disappointment and unpleasure:

> A further stimulus to the growth and formation of the ego, so that it becomes something more than a bundle of sensations, i.e., recognizes an 'outside,' the external world, is afforded by the frequent, unavoidable and manifold pains and unpleasant sensations which the pleasure-principle, still in unrestricted domination, bids it abolish or avoid. (Ibid, 12).

Following this early frustration, the ego tends to dissociate from everything that brings unpleasure or threat, placing it outside the ego as a not-ego, thus differentiating the self from the other. The unpleasant sensations are discharged outside, reinforcing the not-me instance.

For Freud, the disappointment of the pleasure principle is inevitable because the world contradicts its success completely and persistently. We cannot be happy for extended periods because obstructions to the pleasure principle come from three main unavoidable sources: from our own mortal and suffering bodies; from outside nature, which constantly menaces men's life and well-being; and from the other individuals, who can threaten us mainly with lack or withdrawal of love, not to speak of direct aggression. That is why the founder of psychoanalysis bitterly concludes that, despite the originality and centrality of the pleasure principle, "one might say the intention that man should be happy is not included in the scheme of Creation." (Ibid, p. 27). Since the sources of distress or the impediments to our happiness cannot be eliminated, we must bow to

the reality principle, accepting the many limitations to our happiness, even if we cannot avoid seeking pleasure and avoiding pain again and again.

As we proceed in Freud's argumentation, we realize that the three limitations to the pleasure principle actually come all from the same source: nature. The external pressures of the world and the limitations of our body are clear effects of nature: "We shall never completely subdue nature; our body, too, is an organism, itself a part of nature, and will always contain the seeds of dissolution, with its limited power of adaptation and achievement." (Ibid, p. 43). But even the sufferings that come from our relations to others are not seen as deriving from social structures or historical configurations that could be corrected. They also come from something pervasive, or, as Freud puts it, "a bit of unconquerable nature" in ourselves. What is present between men that prevents a harmonic conviviality is nature itself. He writes:

> To be sure, when we consider how unsuccessful our efforts to safeguard against suffering in this particular [the social source of our distresses] have proved, the suspicion dawns upon us that a bit of unconquerable nature lurks concealed behind this difficulty as well – in the shape of our own mental constitution. (Ibid, 44).

Since unhappiness comes from nature itself, it cuts across diverse societies, historical times, and specific cultural configurations. Indeed, scientific discoveries and technological progress could not increase men's happiness or pleasure. Progress is certainly not worthless, but "power over nature is not the only condition of human happiness." (Ibid, p. 46).

That is the case because civilization, albeit unavoidable for the life of humanity as we know it, undeniably imposes restrictions on man's freedom and happiness. In other words, civilization is built on the renunciation, repression, or non-gratification of individual instinctual needs, thus fueling a permanent antagonism. First, culture works to repress sexuality, directing part of its disruptive energy to other aims, such as useful work and the maintenance of broader social bonds. However, more than sexual restrictions, culture has the most important objective of curtailing men's aggressive tendencies, which represent a direct menace to collective endeavors and social conviviality.

For Freud, due to the death drive, men would naturally oppose one another, entertaining spontaneously aggressive desires against each other. Therefore, such an innate hostile tendency would explain the paradoxical need for the emergence of culture, which curtails the free realization of men's individual happiness. The duality of the drives, suggested in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1955), is resumed here to explain persistent sources of discontent in humanity at

large. More than an opposition that unfolds within an individual psyche, the conflict between the life and death instincts sheds light on culture evolution at large:

> And now, it seems to me, the meaning of the evolution of culture is no longer a riddle to us. It must present to us the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instincts of life and the instincts of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of and so the evolution of civilization may be simply described as the struggle of the human species for existence. (Freud, 1930/1961, p. 103).

Now it is more evident that the containment of the death drive comes from Eros, but it is mediated by the superego, counting with the paradoxical help of internalized aggression. As we saw, the superego is the principal agency responsible for controlling men's drives, introjecting aggression, and sending it back to the ego.

From a phylogenetic perspective, Freud postulates that conscience first arose when the sons of a supposed primal horde killed the tyrannical father who ruled authoritatively over the group. However, the sons' remorse for having killed the man they both hated and loved gave birth to the internalization of his law. The superego is a homage paid to the dead father, which repeats internally the punishment he would have pursued against the sons. Guilt, therefore, first arose from the ambivalent feelings of the sons towards the assassinated father.

From an individual or ontogenetic perspective, the motivation to obey a morality that does not accord with one's natural dispositions comes from "man's helplessness and dependence upon others," which "can best be designated the dread of losing love." (Ibid, p. 107). In the beginning, the father, as an external authority on which the child depends, threatens the restraint of love or even the punishment and the destruction of the child if he or she does not behave. Like the primal father, the oedipal father represents prohibition and restraint. In the process of internalizing a moral commandment, "What is bad is [...] whatever causes one to be threatened with a loss of love; because of the dread of this loss, one must desist from it." (Ibid). However, once the oedipal complex is complete, this authority is internalized in the superego, so the threat of losing love or being punished is introjected, coming reflexively from the self. The internalized conflict is so that the most righteous the men, the most masochistic must be his superego.

In addition, with the internalization of authority and prohibition, the sense of guilt becomes magnified because the actual renunciation of a sinful wish is not enough for the severe superego since the mere existence of the wish causes the need for self-punishment. The threat of unhappiness in the hands of the authoritarian father is turned into a permanent sense of unhappiness under the

limitless sight of one's superego: "Virtuous restraint is no longer rewarded by the assurance of love; a threatened external unhappiness – loss of love and punishment meted out by external authority – has been exchanged for a lasting inner unhappiness, the tension of a sense of guilt." (Ibid, p. 112). If renunciation first gives birth to conscience, this relation is later reversed once internalized so that self-blame is increased above the original level, fed by one's aggressive instincts themselves. The destructiveness that was once renounced then becomes partly employed by the superego against the ego, heightening one's aggressiveness.

Freud sees an important influence of object relations in this process: "The relation between superego and ego is a reproduction, distorted by a wish, of the real relations between the ego, before it was subdivided, and an external object." (Ibid, p. 115-116). But the endogenous drive of the child also plays an important role here. So, Freud concludes that "the formation of the superego and the development of conscience are determined in part by innate constitutional factors [especially the child's own aggression] and in part by the influence of the actual environment" (Ibid, p. 117) such as the father-child relationship. Yet, the death drive will always determine a permanent antagonistic instance in individual development despite different configurations that such a relation might assume.

Despite the positive role played by Eros in the containment of men's aggressive tendencies, Freud's conclusion has a rather negative tone. He implies a permanent, unresolvable, and growing conflict between individual happiness and civilization: "the price of progress in civilization is paid in forfeiting happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt." (Ibid, p. 123).

Eros – in the form of the bond of love between the primal father and the sons who killed him (in a phylogenetic perspective), or as the bond of love between the oedipal father and his son (in an ontogenetic perspective) – guarantees that part of our aggression will be diverted from the destruction of civilization and of others towards the reflexive individual self-control in the form of superego punishment. Freud affirms that "guilt is the expression of the conflict of ambivalence, the eternal struggle between Eros and the destructive or death instinct." (Ibid, p. 121). However, his libidinal economy concludes that Eros, at most, guarantees the reflexivity of individual aggression, not its actual dissipation.

In summary, the incompatibility between nature and civilization in the late Freud bears a persistent anti-social connotation. It opposes the individual and society, opposes one subject to another, and, finally, the subject against itself. Nature within the subject (the drives) runs counter

to any harmonization between the subjects or within the subject. Therefore, convinced by the dual nature of the drives and mainly by the persistent antagonism of the death drive, Freud remained within the framework of his drive theory, neglecting a greater appreciation of object relations or a deeper analysis of different ways of dealing with aggression.

Following his reflexive conception, the subject always has in its center an object or its own objectification. It needs to see oneself as an object, to be controlled or mastered, due to the excessive demands posed by its own body or its own bodily drives. The reflexivity inaugurated in the subject by this conflict makes one objectify oneself, experiencing subjectivity forever from a distance in relation to one's body.

More precisely, following the evolution of Freud's late theory, the objectifying process of the subject runs as follows. First, there is no subjectivity; there is just a "a bundle of sensations" submitted to the pleasure principle. Experiences of unpleasure and temporary privations lead to the separation of oneself from the object placed outside. The world is objectified as not-self, separated from the subject. The outside world thus formed is the object of ambivalent drives, being both loved and hated, desired and despised. In part, the object is loved as the source of care and protection. Through identification, the ego is then formed or filled with the precipitate of such object relations. Following the objectification of the outside world, the ego is then objectified; that is, it is molded, via identification, as an object of love for one's own id. But the process unfolds so that the ambivalent wishes against the object also generate hate and hostility. In the Oedipus conflict, the murderous desires against an object are interdicted by an external authority, being internalized in the superego. Part of the ego, then, assumes the reflexive role of authoritarian censor. From an object of love, the ego is also made an object of judgment and control.

Following Freud's story, we see that such objectification is derived from the ambivalent relation of the drives and reality, making the individual love, identify, hate, and internalize the object. As we saw, the subject faces nature's recalcitrance in the external world, in one's drives and the other's nature. Its response is to objectify oneself, to make oneself an object of narcissistic love and desire and of hate and control. In the superego, when the story is complete, nature's menacing presence, especially in the form of the id's demands, is translated as death or as the threat of deserving to die. Nature's uncontrollable and inscrutable presence in men is finally translated as the fear of death under the internalized commandment of the superego, depending on the meriting of love or hate, which resumes the ambivalence of the drives.

Despite many reconfigurations, disputes, and later developments of psychoanalytic theory, Freud's dialectic conception of the human mind still guides and reverberates in such advancements. Nonetheless, his view about the dualistic character of the drives, and especially his postulation of the death drive, attracted extensive criticism, mainly because of its pessimist implications and the dead end it seemed to imply.

As early as the late 1930s, relational or interpersonal psychoanalysts claimed that Freud's view was too materialist or mechanistic. They tried to see the constitution of the psyche as a derivation of object relationships and social determinations, not constitutional elements of the human body. Such authors often claimed that Freud theorized a monadic or positivist model of the mind, largely disregarding the relational aspects of subject constitution and psychic functioning (see Dunn, 1995). Especially the drive theory was rejected by these psychoanalysts, seen as too deterministic and individualistic. Instead of individual drives, these authors would place more explanatory power on interpersonal and social dynamics.

Another current that both opposed and complemented aspects of Freudian theory, offering a different view about the drives, is object-relations theory, developed mainly by Melanie Klein, Ronald Fairbairn, and Donald Winnicott. The concept of "object," which originated in Freud's drive theory, meaning the "libidinal object" or the "object of love," came to assume different meanings for subsequent authors, some of whom abandoned drive theory altogether. As Greenberg and Mitchell explain it:

> Freud's object is a thing, but it is not any thing; it is the thing which is the target of a drive. […] In its original usage, the concept of object was intertwined with and contingent upon the concept of drive. Despite this connection, some psychoanalytic theorists have retained the terms 'object' and 'object relations' although they eliminated entirely the concept of drive in the classical Freudian sense (see Fairbairn, 1952; Guntrip, 1969). (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983, p. 13)

Following the object-relations theory, a further step was the introduction of subject-subject relations, or the intersubjective psychoanalysis, which tried to differentiate between internalized images of the other and actual relationships with an external person. Authors such as Robert Stolorow, Thomas Ogden, and Jessica Benjamin have worked in this field, borrowing concepts from different philosophical sources (see Frie and Reis, 2001). In this context, a strong intersubjective sensibility has grown within psychoanalytic circles. Werner Bohleber affirms that "The past two or three decades have seen nearly all psychoanalytical schools of thought undergo a

change towards a stronger intersubjective orientation." (2013, p. 799). As a result, psychic structures came to be related less to the satisfaction of individual bodily needs and more to affective exchanges and connections with others, which in the last decades pushed drive theory, concepts like primary narcissism, and Freud's general Hobbesian tendencies to the background. Thus, relational theories came to be seen as opposed to the pessimism of drive theory.

I argue that this contrasting conclusion need not be the case or that the distance between these two positions can be minimized, especially considering Benjamin's late theory. However, to understand how to combine intersubjective theorization and some of Freud's negativist contributions, we need to follow the path opened by Winnicott.

2. Winnicott between the True Self and the compromise with society

In the last chapter, we followed the unfolding of psychic conflict's sources in Freud's thinking, focusing on the frontiers of the inner and the outer worlds, nature, and culture. Now, I will do the same with Winnicott because these frontiers were also at the center of his thinking. Being both a physician and a psychoanalyst, he was deeply concerned with the issue of how an organized human being develops out of the amorphous body of the newborn, sewing together psyche and soma.

After studying biology and medicine and becoming a pediatrician, Winnicott got increasingly interested in psychoanalysis. In 1923, three years after completing his medical studies, he began a ten-year analysis with James Strachey and was hired as a pediatrician at Paddington Green Children's Hospital in London, where he worked until his retirement in 1963. In 1927 he began training as an analytic candidate in the British Psychoanalytic Institute, bringing to such formation his growing familiarity with the world of babies and mothers.

At this moment, Freud was developing his structural model of the mind, while Melanie Klein was gaining prominence for conducting research with infants. In the following years, a split got established between the Freudians and the Kleinians within psychoanalytic circles in Britain, which intensified following Freud's death in 1939. Winnicott, nonetheless, always drank from the water of both streams, claiming a third, independent position regarding them. Working with small children who had not yet reached the differentiated oedipal stage, Winnicott was deeply influenced by Klein's research and her understanding of early phantasies, primitive object relations, and infantile anxieties. However, contrary to many of his Kleinian colleagues, he never claimed a

breaking with Freud. On the contrary, he claimed to be continuing and complementing Freud's work.

Throughout his investigations, Winnicott set to expand the classic psychoanalytic theory to cover earlier stages of human development, in which the "unit self," as he called the Freudian subject, was not yet constituted. For him, in these earlier stages, in which there is yet no ego and no identifiable id, we could envision more clearly the complex process that culminates in the formation of the subject and, with it, the separation of the object. At issue in this process is the contact of the constituting subject with the external world, including the other individuals inhabiting it. As we will see in what follows, the dialectic between the individual internal reality and its contact with the external world was a constant topic in his theoretical construction, cutting across the development of his most influential and innovative psychoanalytic concepts, such as the transitional phenomenon, the True and False Selves, and the use of the object.

2.1. From primary unintegration to the illusion of omnipotence

Winnicott's first published oeuvre, *Disorders of Childhood*, of 1931, examines emotional causes for childhood arthritis, which indicates his early interest in studying the mysterious contact of mind and body, mental and physical health. Accordingly, his following paper, "The Manic Defense," presented in 1935 to the British Psychoanalytic Society, investigates the difference between inside and outside realities, contrasting fantasy and externality, omnipotence, and the relation to external objects. It represented the first articulation of a personal understanding of the human subject, but it received little attention at the time, being published more than 20 years later. However, it was only ten years after the presentation of this paper, after having conducted instructing clinical work with children and adult psychotics, that Winnicott would present his ideas in a more systematic and personal way (Kahn, 1975, p. xiv). In the essay "Primitive Emotional Development" (1945/1975), he proposes the existence of a non-integrated original reality, or a state of "primary unintegration" (1945/1975, p. 149), which would predate Freud's understanding of primary narcissism.

Winnicott's theory follows basically from the realization that classic psychoanalysis takes for granted something rather complex, which is the constitution of someone as a person, or as a unified, stable, and separated personality that can interact with others. From the presupposition of this lack in psychoanalytic theory, he proceeded to investigate the early process that leads to the formation

of personhood. According to Winnicott, "Integration starts right away at the beginning of life, but in our work [as psychoanalysts] we can never take it for granted" (Ibid, p. 150). Later, he would state that "it is necessary to think of integration as an achievement" (1988, p. 116). Out of a formless and fragmentary nature, the human baby needs to strive to become an organized and relatable unit.

Therefore, Winnicott's fundamental presupposition is that life begins in diffuse bits and pieces of experience, or "shifts from one impulse or sensation to another" (Ibid), not unified in a continuous space and time. Without a unified perception of his own self and body, the baby does not separate an external from an internal reality, so he does not yet perceive the environment. Unintegration of experience is accompanied by unawareness of oneself and the world.

The baby's gradual organization of experience, which starts from brief moments of integration, draws upon the mother's provision and care. Through keeping the baby warm, handling, bathing, rocking, and naming him, she gradually gathers "his bits together." (1945/1975, p. 150). From the disorganized or unintegrated phase, it follows the organization of a primitive self, depending on the provision of a "holding environment" by the mother. The infant would "fall to pieces unless held together," and, at this moment, "physical care is psychological care." (1988, p. 117).

Aligned with the mother's care, the second element that helps integration is the somatic urges of the baby, which "tend to gather the personality together from within." (1945/1975, p. 150). Such urges lead the baby to seek relief, such as when he is hungry.

However, the baby's first contact with reality comes as a hallucination. His initially chaotic and helpless existence starts to get organized through a primary experience of illusory omnipotence. When excited by physical urges, the baby is on the verge of conjuring up something capable of satisfying his needs. Ideally, at the same time, the attuned mother anticipates the baby's need and presents him with just such a suitable thing, generally the breast. The infant believes he has created the breast or that he actually controlled or conjured its existence into being. Multiple times, the infant hallucinates, and the mother corresponds to the baby's needs at a precise timing, enriching, even without his awareness, his hallucinatory expectations. As Winnicott puts it:

> In other language, the infant comes to the breast when excited, and ready to hallucinate something fit to be attacked. At that moment the actual nipple appears and he is able to feel it was that nipple that he hallucinated. So his ideas are enriched by actual details of sight, feel, smell, and next time this material is used in the hallucination. In this way he starts to build up a capacity to conjure up what is actually available. The mother has to go on giving the infant this type of experience. (1945/1975, p. 152-153)

The infant, at this moment, takes his hallucinations and the external object to be identical, thus experiencing himself as omnipotent, as the creator of reality. Winnicott would put it later: "The infant perceives the breast only in so far as a breast could be created just there and then. There is no interchange between the mother and the infant." (1951/1975, p. 239). Such omnipotence, sustained by the mother's anticipation, is crucial for the baby's self-integration and healthy development. Without the use of hallucination, the child would not be able to establish contact with the environment. The baby's sense of creative and magical control of the breast, sustained by the mother's precise attunement to his needs, allows the baby to attune to his own bodily functions and impulses, which is crucial for his evolving integration and sense of self. Therefore, it is crucial that the mother feeds the illusion of omnipotence that holds the baby's experience together and provides a first unthreatening contact with reality.

As we can see, Winnicott supports the existence of an early phase of primary narcissism, or omnipotence, that is fundamental to the constitution of the personality. That is why Whitebook affirms:

> *Winnicott was a theorist of omnipotence every bit as much as Freud.* The baby is omnipotent and dependent at the outset, and the task of the first three years of development is what he calls 'reality acceptance.' In fact, he says the mother's job is to reinforce the baby's illusion in the beginning, to increase the sense of omnipotence, because that's the only way illusion and omnipotence can be overcome. (Whitebook and Honneth, 2016, p. 173, emphasis in original).

However, to sustain the baby's omnipotence, "a human being has to be taking the trouble all the time to bring the world to the baby in understandable form, and in a limited way, suitable to the baby's needs." (Winnicott, 1945/1975, p. 154). Even if, from the baby's point of view, there is no relationship between himself and the mother, she is all the time there, anticipating his hallucinations and sustaining his grandiose illusion. This means, for Whitebook, that Winnicott did not refute Freud's theory of primary narcissism but supplemented it, adding to this picture the fact that "an infant in such a self-enclosed state, operating only in accordance with the pleasure principle, couldn't survive on its own without an attuned and devoted 'environmental mother' acting as an auxiliary ego." (Whitebook, 2021, p. 5).

In other words, despite its centrality to human development, primary omnipotence depends on a two-person relationship, so the baby would not become a person without the mother's assistance. Without her caring intervention, the baby would remain unintegrated and would not become to be. In the words of Masud Khan, Winnicott's editor and main disciple, "For Winnicott the human infant 'cannot start to be except under certain conditions', and he believed: 'the inherited potential

of an infant cannot become an infant unless linked to maternal care.'" (1975, p. xxxviii). Thus, Winnicott writes that "a baby cannot exist alone, psychologically or physically, and really needs one person to care for him at first." (Ibid). Only with the mother's profound assistance in maintaining the baby's illusion of control can he relate to an external reality inhabited by independent objects.

Moreover, while becoming more integrated, Winnicott understands that the baby is also ruthless, meaning that he does not care for the mother's sake precisely because he does not yet envision her as a whole object, separated from himself. In this phase, prior to full integration, it is essential that the baby can spontaneously express such ruthlessness without a precocious fear of destroying the environment (the mother) or of her retaliating. Thus, the mother should bear the aggressive urges of the infant, which are not yet directed against her since she has not yet come to be a person for him. In Winnicott's words: "The normal child enjoys a ruthless relation to his mother, mostly showing in play, and he needs his mother because only she can be expected to tolerate his ruthless relation to her even in play, because this really hurts her and wears her out." (1945/1975, p. 154).

The "good-enough mother," as Winnicott would name the mother who facilitates her child's healthy development, must anticipate the baby's physiological and instinctual needs, with almost perfect timing, provide an auxiliary ego or holding environment, and bear his aggressive impulses and ruthless play. Such a good-enough mother is crucial to the formation of a human subject: "There is no possibility whatever for an infant to proceed from the pleasure principle to the reality principle or towards and beyond primary identification (see Freud, 1923, p. 14), unless there is a good enough mother." (Winnicott, 1951/1975, p. 237).

This idea led Winnicott to investigate the mother's side of the story. He concluded shortly after that a mother could only facilitate such a complex process, being largely devoted to the child, because she is taken over by what he calls a "primary maternal preoccupation," a psychological condition of "heightened sensitivity," comparable to a dissociated state or a "normal illness." (Winnicott, 1956/1975, p. 302). This "illness," which is usually temporary, allows mothers to become "preoccupied with their own infant to the exclusion of other interests." (Ibid). This means the mother feels "herself into her infant's place, and so meet the infant's needs." (Ibid, p. 303). While not totally merged with the infant, the mother, for Winnicott, experiences a state of partial undifferentiation or partial loss of boundaries, from which she later recovers.

Winnicott regards the mother's absorption in her baby's care as a biologically rooted feature that lasts from the last weeks of pregnancy to the first weeks of the baby's life. Such a natural maternal preoccupation makes possible a very close, empathic, and accurate sensitivity to her infant's needs, which is what guarantees that she anticipates and presents her breast almost at the same time that he is encroached by hunger so as to create and sustain the much-needed illusion of omnipotence that allows the going on being of the infant and his ego establishment.

A severe failure of the mother's provision represents a traumatic impingement of reality into the baby's precarious going-on-being. When the mother fails to meet the baby's early demands, in this initial helpless phase, she undercuts his hallucinatory omnipotence, constraining his confidence in his own effectiveness and risking even the rupture of the infant's first ego organization. At issue here is not the frustration of instinctual needs but the considerably more serious threat of annihilation caused by excessive reactivity to external impingements. The fear of annihilation, as Winnicott comes to realize, is a primitive anxiety that predates the sense of death or the fear of death, which comes later (Ibid, p. 303) but can be associated with it. Moreover, the infant does not yet perceive maternal failures as such because the mother is not yet perceived as a person: "Her failures are not felt as maternal failures, but they act as threats to personal self-existence." (Ibid, p. 304). Without the basic formation of a self, instinctual satisfaction, the sense of living in a real world, and even the sense of dying cannot be experienced. That is how much the infant needs maternal care.

Maternal provision, however, need not be perfect or completely undisturbed. For the process of ego-formation to occur in a healthy way, the mother needs to provide a good-enough environment in which, despite some interruptions, "the infant's own line of life is disturbed very little by reactions to impingement." (Ibid, p. 303). Since impingements eventually occur, Winnicott affirms that more than out of a perfect environment, the ego arises from a good-enough context, in which recovery amends short interruptions of the infant's going-on-being:

> The first ego organization comes from the experience of threats of annihilation which do not lead to annihilation and from which, repeatedly, there is recovery. Out of such experiences confidence in recovery begins to be something which leads to an ego and to an ego capacity for coping with frustration. (Ibid, p. 304).

Gradually, while the infant's ego is taking form, the mother also "recovers" from the primary maternal preoccupation, turning her attention to other interests. But, by this time, it is expected that the hallucinatory omnipotence is already firmly established in the child, and his ego is already minimally constituted so that he can begin to perceive the world outside his control. While the

mother little by little fails to anticipate the infant's needs, in this later moment, she allows the baby to gradually learn and come to terms with what he cannot control. Nevertheless, reality can only be accepted once the baby has experienced a sufficient degree of omnipotence. The world only comes into existence in tolerable doses once the baby has experienced being "God." That is, first, the mother needs to illusion the baby, confirming his omnipotent control over the world so that, subsequently, she can facilitate his gradual disillusionment and the essential acceptance of reality. In Whitebook's words: "Though the mother's ultimate task is to 'disillusion the infant' in tolerable doses, she can succeed only if she has sufficiently 'illusioned' it, that is, confirmed its experience of omnipotence in the first place." (2001, p. 278).

In addition, for Winnicott, we can identify instincts emanating from an id only once an ego is in place. So, the mother's failures now are not related primarily to the early holding function and do not threaten the ego constitution fundamentally, being increasingly related to instinctual frustration, properly speaking. Before the infant is an entity having experiences, we cannot talk of personal impulses and drive gratification. But with the initial integration, this becomes possible. Whitebook writes:

> Repeated experiences of omnipotence not only engender a sense of agency, that is, a sense that he can affect reality, in the nascent subject; through them, the infant also gains 'a belief that world can contain what is wanted and needed,' which, in turn, provides him with enough confidence to take his initial steps in surrendering his magical control and turning to the world as a source of gratification […]. (Whitebook, 2021, p. 7).

Aligned with the frustration of omnipotence, there can be instinct gratification. The baby's disillusionment resonates with his push towards separateness and his turning towards the world once the ego begins to take form. There is, ideally, a synchrony between the mother's decreasing devotion and the baby's increasing exercise of active ego functions. As time passes, even if the mother is not so much identified with the baby anymore, now she does not need to anticipate his every need because she can count on his active gestures and expressions. Actually, now that an ego is in place, her gradual failures of adaptation are important to foster the child's realization of reality and active differentiation. Without these failures, the baby would remain in an omnipotent situation, lacking actual contact with reality.

It is important to point out that, for both Freud and Winnicott, the acceptance of reality is the central goal of psychic development. But how can it be achieved, considering the need for primary omnipotence? How can an omnipotent baby come to perceive the reality of other independent objects? What happens when the mother recovers from the primary maternal preoccupation? To

answer these questions, Winnicott developed the idea of a gradual transition between those states. His contribution to Freud's theory, initially centered on the mother's sustenance of primary narcissism, now counts on the groundbreaking concept of the "transitional phenomena."

2.2. The transitional phenomena between inner and outer realities

The concept of the "transitional phenomena" denotes an instance between hallucinatory omnipotence and the recognition of reality, which is experienced between the baby and the mother on the first encounter with reality. Presented in the article "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" (1951/1975) and rearticulated or complemented in the book "Playing and Reality" (1971), this is one of the most innovative and influential contributions of Winnicott to psychoanalytic theory.

The transitional phenomenon represents an intermediary between the omnipotent world of the infant and the world of independent objects, a third state or reality in which both worlds coincide, in paradox. It is, in other words, "an intermediate state between a baby's inability and growing ability to recognize and accept reality" (1951/1975, p. 230) or an "intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived." (Ibid, p. 231).

This intermediary experience can materialize in a transitional object, usually an item of the baby's reality, such as a bundle of wool, a piece of cloth, a teddy, or a doll. This object is endowed with the special quality of belonging both to the internal and external worlds, bridging both realities. It is not a pure hallucination, a fantasy, or a mental concept, but it is neither entirely outside the baby's sphere of control, being part of the real. Ogden writes that "The transitional object is an extension of the infant's internal world and at the same time has a palpable, inescapable, immutable existence outside of, and independent of, the infant." (1994, p. 54). This double existence is sustained by a tacit convention that the infant will not be challenged on the status of the transitional object so that it can go on inhabiting such a no man's land between subjective and objective realities. Winnicott describes:

> Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?' The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated. (1951/1975, p. 239-240).

Due to this ambiguous or borderline status, in which it is both created and discovered, the transitional object helps the infant negotiate the gradual shift from a totally subjective world to a world populated by other objects. The first confrontation of reality and alterity occurring at that

moment is only made possible and tolerable because the transitional object is also constantly created, thus reflecting the infant's subjective reality into the independent world. From the transitional experience, the baby's personality is formed and negotiated, so he can come to see himself as a person with other persons.

In the course of a healthy development, the transitional object is gradually decathected, being relegated to limbo, while the investment in the transitional phenomena becomes diffused, in the adult world, "over the whole cultural field" (Ibid, p. 233), including the realms of play, arts, and religion. The partial illusion that we concede to infants concerning the transitional object is allowed in adult life for meaningful social activities, such as artistic creations and religious experiences.

Therefore, coming to terms with reality does not occur in a single moment or phase but is a constant task of human life, which we can handle only because we count on the transitional phenomena spread all over the cultural world. Indeed, Winnicott believes that the transitional quality needs to be at hand for the adult as well because we cannot escape "the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related." (Ibid, p. 230).

This understanding suggests that culture is not merely repressive, as in Freud's picture in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In a commentary on Winnicott's work, Masud Kahn said, "None could deny the harsh veracity of Freud's announcements [in *Civilization and Its Discontents*]. And yet there is more to human living somewhere than a mere acceptance of 'common unhappiness' (Freud, 1895) and discontent." (1975, p. xxxii). In other words, Winnicott did not directly reject the Freudian pessimist conclusions. However, he saw something beyond discontent, which made reality not just a recalcitrant imposition but also a paradoxical contributor and source of creativity in the transitional space. Cultural creations and even collective illusions have a constructive value for human experience, even if discontent is also an undeniable reality.

We may live a significant part of our lives in transitional spaces and experiences, persistently negotiating inner and outer elements. The concept of the transitional phenomenon is so important that Ogden understands that the Winnicottian subject bears a transitional character:

> At the heart of Winnicott's (1951, 1971a) thinking is the notion that the living, experiencing subject exists neither in reality nor in fantasy, but in a potential space between the two. [...] Winnicott's conception of the creation of the subject in the space between the infant and mother involves several types of dialectical tension of unity and separateness, of internality and externality, through which the subject is simultaneously constituted and decentered from itself. (Ogden, 1994, p. 49).

Implied in the idea of transitionality is the necessary sustenance of paradox, in which the question of whether the object was discovered or created is never resolved. The transitional space

between the baby and the mother both connects and separates the two, sustained by profound paradoxes of simultaneous internality and externality. Later, Winnicott would directly defend the importance of keeping the paradox alive, to the detriment of an intellectual urge to resolve it. In the Introduction of *Playing and Reality*, mentioning the transitional object, he would write:

> I am drawing attention to the paradox involved in the use by the infant of what I have called the transitional object. My contribution is to ask for a paradox to be accepted and tolerated and respected, and for it not to be resolved. By flight to split-off intellectual functioning it is possible to resolve the paradox, but the price of this is the loss of the value of the paradox itself. (1971, p. xvi).

Therefore, the paradox, for Winnicott, has a crucial developmental value. He further reaffirmed this idea when he exposed the understanding that from the transitional experience arises the critical development of the baby's capacity to be alone, an idea developed in the essay "The Capacity to Be Alone" (1958/2007). There is a paradox here related to the transitional space: the baby's capacity to be alone develops out of the mother's reassuring presence.

First, the child can only be alone once he is already a unit or when the integration of his psyche is already in place. Following the experience of constituting an ego, the baby gradually gathers enough stability and confidence to be alone or in a relaxed state of solitude. Having introjected the ego-supportive mother, in the constitution of his own ego, he begins to constitute an internal space of his own. But the introjection is not enough. He needs an actual relationship outside to be able to wander alone in his nascent interior world. By counting on the continuing and non-demanding presence of the mother outside, the baby can feel relaxed, unresponsive, and secure to begin to get immersed in individual thoughts and creative plays. From the experience of relaxed togetherness of baby and mother, the inner personal life develops: "It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli." (Winnicott, 1958/2007, p. 34). From the ambiguous experience of perceiving the mother as both an extension of himself and as another independent person, the child starts to relate to other objects, taking himself also as an object or as a limited person capable of relating to other persons. From the sustenance of paradox, the formation of a limit in one's personality is fostered, and an inner personal world grows inside the child.

Winnicott now relates the capacity to be alone with drive satisfaction. From experiencing a relaxed state, the baby can create an interior space in which the id's demands are owned, processed, expressed, and contained. Without such interior space, the id's forces are disruptive to the nascent ego. Therefore, the containment and gratification of the id depend on a reassuring relationship. The

encouraging and non-demanding relationship with the mother allows the baby to accommodate the id as part of himself, not as a threatening, unstabilizing, or unreal force. The demands of nature in the baby need a relationship with an other to be processed as a subjective and significant experience. As Winnicott explains:

> I think it will be generally agreed that id-impulse is significant only if it is contained in ego living. An id-impulse either disrupts a weak ego or else strengthens a strong one. It is possible to say that *id relationships strengthen the ego when they occur in a framework of ego-relatedness*. If this be accepted, then an understanding of the importance of the capacity to be alone follows. (Ibid, p. 33-34, emphasis in original).

When capable of being alone, immersed in his own rhythms, the child can welcome internal impulses as his own. When alone, relaxed, and unresponsive, "The stage is set for an id experience. In the course of time there arrives a sensation or an impulse. In this setting the sensation or impulse will feel real and be truly a personal experience." (Ibid, p. 34).

2.3. True and False Selves: the compromise between the individual and society

This understanding does not reduce the alien and unsettling character that the id will always maintain with the ego, as Freud perceived. However, for Winnicott, such a troubling character can be expressed through spontaneous acts, becoming part of an authentic and vivacious existence. In the essay "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self" (1960/2007), he further explores this issue, differentiating a True and a False Selves, related respectively to a more authentic or less authentic experience of the drives.

First, he reinforces that in the initial phase of life, we cannot yet speak of instincts because they are not yet clearly internal to the infant once there is no division between internal and external realities. There is no differentiation between nature inside and outside, or of whether some stimulus comes from the environment or the individual's body: "The instincts can be as much external as can a clap of thunder or a hit." (Ibid, p. 141). Once the ego is strengthened, however, then it is possible to speak of id demands coming from a part of oneself, not from the environment. That is, only when the ego is more firmly in place is it appropriate to consider the satisfaction of the id. Before that, the body's stimuli function as impingements, such as external stimuli, which can be traumatic to the nascent ego.

From this premise, Winnicott explains that the development of an authentic existence in which the id is integrated into the personality arises from ego integration, which depends on the experience of primary omnipotence. Only through the intense experience of being all-powerful and

effective will the individual's ego be able to include the id's excitements, giving them due expression and reducing the dissociation between mind and body. The feeling of being all-powerful nourishes the confidence to express truth and vitality, generating a true form of life or giving expression of a True Self: "A True Self begins to have life, through the strength given to the infant's weak ego by the mother's implementation of the infant's omnipotent expressions." (Ibid, p. 145).

On the other hand, when impingements are too great or prolonged to the nascent ego, they threaten one's continuing experience, which generates unthinkable anxiety. The result is a premature attunement to the environment's requests to protect oneself from the fragmentation of being. Out of necessity, the infant cannot enjoy the experience of formless quiescence, being compulsively prepared to respond to external demands. However, in such reactive protection, he loses touch with his own needs and spontaneous desires, developing a False Self, a phony compliant crust that shields a spontaneous inner core – however elusive this core is. The False Self has a defensive nature: "Its defensive function is to hide and protect the True Self, whatever that may be." (Ibid, p. 142). It offers an illusion of personal existence while the individual is actually only reacting to external expectations.

The False Self develops very early as the result of not-good-enough care. For example, when the mother fails to anticipate the baby's needs and to keep up with his illusion of omnipotence, he is obliged to comply with her rhythms and expectations, suffocating his own. Therefore, he does not feel secure enough to act spontaneously and express authentic needs. This means that "the infant remains isolated" (Ibid, p. 146), or more precisely, his True Self remains hidden, unborn, furiously protected by the reactive and compliant False Self. Winnicott affirms that, out of maternal lack of attunement, the infant is seduced into a compliant false life that only reacts to environmental demands.

It was the contact with severely sick patients that taught Winnicott about true and false forms of personhood. Such patients complained of a lack of reality, authenticity, vitality, and desire to live. In his interpretation, their True Self was atrophied and could never express itself, being the False Self set up as real and as the whole of their personalities. Because they probably could not count on the mother's anticipation of their needs, such patients developed a False Self devoted to compulsively anticipating the environment's demands. There was, in these cases, a profound dissociation between psychosomatic vitality and cognitive existence. For example, the intellectual activity of these patients reflected a false personality, in which reason and logic became dissociated

from affectivity. Intellectual success did not necessarily lead to satisfaction but to a feeling of phoniness because it came from the activity of the False Self, following the laws of reaction and defensiveness, not the demands of genuine desires and impulses. True existence, it became clear, was the opposite of reactivity and compliance.

Winnicott believed that the False Self was needed to avoid something unthinkable, which is the annihilation of the True Self. It would be preferable to hide the True Self forever, covering its expression than to allow its exposure to exploitation and breakdown, which would precipitate annihilation or total madness. However, the True Self is never truly exposed or discovered, not even in theory. Therefore, Winnicott relates it to something unexpected and unanticipated, which makes it difficult to describe. In fact, we cannot know, describe, or unveil the True Self. We can only detect its consequences, which entail spontaneity, creativity, and vitality, in contrast to the False Self, which conveys unreality, futility, and reactivity.

Winnicott affirms that we do not gain much in trying to define the True Self: "There is but little point in formulating a True Self idea except for the purpose of trying to understand the False Self, because it does no more than collect together the details of the experience of aliveness." (Ibid, p. 148). The closer he gets to describing the "True Self" is when he affirms that it relates to bodily motility and impulses. He writes: "The True Self comes from the aliveness of the body tissues and the working of body-functions, including the heart's action and breathing." (Ibid). He also affirms that the True Self "means little more than the summation of sensori-motor aliveness." (Ibid, p. 149).

However, such motility or its expression is also related to spontaneous actions and an inventive way of living, infusing a "creative originality" (Ibid, p. 152). Winnicott writes that: "The spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action. Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real." (Ibid, p. 148). Thus, the difficulty in defining the True Self derives from its relation to the endless possibilities of being alive, existing, and acting spontaneously. In contrast, the False Self means the impoverished fact that one does not exist as a subject or that one has "not started to exist yet." (Ibid, p. 152).

As happens with many psychoanalytic concepts, the difference between true and false forms of life, although initially identified in Winnicott's patients, became increasingly detectable in normal or healthy personalities. It became clear that no one can exist entirely based on the True Self or without the protection of a False Self, as thin as it can be. No one exists without reacting to

impingements or suffocating spontaneous impulses in one's life with others. Even in health, the False Self exists, being recognized in the "whole organization of the polite and mannered social attitude." (Ibid, p. 143). In this sense, the False Self, on a limited scale, is also an achievement necessary for social life: "Much has gone to the individual's ability to forgo omnipotence and the primary process in general, the gain being the place in society which can never be attained or maintained by the True Self alone." (Ibid).

When successful and healthy, the False Self does not entirely hide the True Self or prevent it from living but enables it to live in good-enough ways. In fact, the healthy individual achieves the capacity to make compromises between the True and the False selves, adapting the individual to society or the individual nature to society's demands. There are different degrees of falsity, so a minimal degree of a False Self is acceptable and even desirable once it does not suffocate the subject's authenticity in crucial ways:

> The equivalent of the False Self in normal development is that which can develop in the child into a social manner, something which is adaptable. In health this social manner represents a compromise. At the same time, in health, the compromise ceases to become allowable when the issues become crucial. (Ibid, p. 150).

Winnicott, therefore, did not reject the Freudian idea of the incompatibility of individual impulses with social life. However, he believed that a certain good enough compromise could be reached. In this context, we can understand the True Self as the unspeakable, elusive, and mysterious element of nature in the self, which can be expressed in spontaneous gestures but can never be fully integrated, comprehended, described, or unveiled.

Indeed, in the early 1960s, Winnicott mentioned that there would be a "permanent isolation of the individual" (1963a/2007, p. 189-190) and that "at the core of the individual there is no communication with the not-me world." (Ibid). The True Self, for him, would be fundamentally isolated from the external world in health, never being fully communicated or influenced by the external reality. Even though we can encounter objectively perceived objects, or communicate with the independent external reality, even obtaining satisfaction in it, it remains the background fact that "each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound." (Ibid, p. 187).

As Greenberg and Mitchell interpret it, this "incommunicado element" in the subject is related to the infant's fundamental vulnerability, which demands the continuing lack of impingements. The early helplessness in the face of exploration and annihilation of the core self

remains forever an element of isolation. The fundamental lack of communication is what protects the sacred self from exploration. In their words:

> The inevitable residue of this [early] vulnerability is a private citadel of subjective reality held forever inaccessible to public, objective light. [...] No matter how firmly anchored in objective reality the person is, no matter how fluidly and resiliently one negotiates the gap between subjective creativity and objective externality, the fear of the exploitation of the true self persists as the deepest dread and therefore there remains a 'noncommunicating self,' or the personal core of the self that is truly isolate. (1983, p. 197)

The incommunicado element in the subject reflects the ambiguous expression of his own body, which evokes total vulnerability (and the possibility of annihilation and death) but also the expression of a True core, capable of spontaneous gestures. That is why the precarious balance of personhood entails the partial integration of this incommunicado element within a sense of self or the expression of true bodily motion and urge without the undoing of subjective integration. As the authors interpret Winnicott's theory, mental health "is constituted by the relative integrity and spontaneity of the self." (Ibid, p. 200).

Such balance demands a transitional quality. Despite a fundamental incommunicability, the partial expression of the True Self can occur in the ambiguous space of transitionality. Winnicott writes in his paper "Communicating and not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites" (1963a/2007) that an intermediate cultural area exists in which a compromise between explicit communication and the silence that protects the True Self can be reached. Accordingly, the compromise between the individual and society occurs in the overlapping of internal and external influences that the individual can experience in the transitional space. Moving from total dependence in the primary phase of illusory omnipotence towards greater independence in adult life, the healthy individual manages to live in a bearable, even satisfactory, and authentic way. In healthy personal and social conditions, both the individual and society are interdependent and interact satisfactorily. Winnicott explained in a talk of 1963 on the progress towards independence:

> Let us say that in health, which is almost synonymous with maturity, the adult is able to identify with society without too great a sacrifice of personal spontaneity; or, the other way round, the adult is able to attend to his or her own personal needs without being antisocial, and indeed, without a failure to take some responsibility for the maintenance or for the modification of society as it is found. [...] Independence is never absolute. The healthy individual does not become isolated, but becomes related to the environment in such a way that the individual and the environment can be said to be interdependent. (1963b/2007, p. 83-84).

In summary, what Winnicott adds to Freud's pessimistic antagonism between the individual and society is the transitional quality of a possible good-enough compromise between these two

instances. The expression of the True Self is the element of individual nature that eventually escapes from the social False Self's guard for the sake of an authentically-enough life.

Accordingly, while for Freud, the mediation of nature and society occurs through the violent and sadistic superego, Winnicott envisions the possibility of a less violent capacity for "concern," which arises, before the Oedipus complex, from the inherent ambivalence of early object relations. Indeed, Winnicott increasingly realizes that the vitality of the True Self, which includes the expression not only of disinterested spontaneous gestures but also of violent acts and aggressive demands, depends on a continuing object relation or, more precisely, on the other's recognition and survival. After reflecting on the Kleinian view of the role of guilt in psychic development, especially in the papers "Psychoanalysis and the Sense of Guilt" (1958/2007) and "A Personal View of the Kleinian Contribution" (1962/2007), he presented his own perspective on this topic in the paper "The Development of the Capacity for Concern" (1963d/2007).

According to it, in the transition from infantile omnipotence to objective perception, the infant develops the capacity for concern, which "refers to the fact that the individual *cares*, or *minds*, and both feels and accepts responsibility." (1963d/2007, p. 73, emphasis in original). That occurs as the result of a synthesis between two different mothers that the immature child perceives. The first is the "environment-mother," or the mother as the caretaker, who provides the holding function in quiescent states and who receives affection. The second is the "object-mother," the receptor of the infant's erotic and aggressive impulses and "ruthless" attacks in excited states. The capacity for concern arises when the infant can integrate the environment-mother and the object-mother. Before that, the infant has no regard for the mother's feelings or survival, being aware only of his own wishes, which contain attack, sadism, and destruction. However, as the mother gradually emerges as a whole object, integrated into the environment and object functions, both love and destruction are combined. For Winnicott, the feeling of ambivalence towards the object is an achievement of this phase. However, such ambivalence also generates high levels of anxiety because the aggressive urges threaten to destroy the mother, who is also loved. Put differently, the mother who is damaged and destroyed is also the one on whom the baby depends.

At this moment, the object-mother ideally survives the instinct-driven attacks, while the environment-mother remains empathic and available to receive the infant's spontaneous gestures. To resolve his anxiety, more precisely, the baby needs to count on the object-mother's survival and the environment-mother's insurance that, beyond destruction, he can also make amendments and

offer reparations. The mother's reliable presence gives the infant the necessary opportunity to contribute. Such confidence in one's goodness and the possibility of offering reparation, in its turn, compensates for the sense of guilt that comes from destructive impulses, allowing the infant to integrate and express his drives more fully. Winnicott explains that "the opportunity for giving and for making reparation that the environment-mother offers by her reliable presence, enables the baby to become more and more bold in the experiencing of id-drives; in other words, frees the baby's instinctual life." (Ibid, p. 77). With a recurrent cycle of instinctual expression and amendments, the anxious guilt gives way to a more positive concern for the other. This process entails developing personal responsibility and fosters constructive motivation for social contributions, work, and play.

Only by the assurance that he can contribute and make amends can the baby tolerate his guilt or anxiety without resorting to crude forms of defense, such as splitting, disintegration, or dissociation (the lack of capacity for concern). On the other hand, "In the initial stages of development, if there is no reliable mother-figure to receive the reparation-gesture, the guilt becomes intolerable, and concern cannot be felt." (Ibid, p. 82).

In the pediatrician's view, it is not enough that the infant makes amends in fantasy, as Klein would have it. The child must be given the opportunity to contribute, repair, or comfort the mother in actuality. In this sense, the mother's contribution in this phase lies in her "survival value" (Winnicott, 1963c/2007, p.102). Following this realization, in his late works, Winnicott set to investigate the continuing link between the other's survival and one's psychic development. It is by surviving the baby's attacks that the mother allows him to integrate his ruthless impulses and sustain a satisfactory life.

2.4. Object-usage anticipating intersubjective theory

The consideration of the importance of the other's survival led Winnicott to elaborate on the conception of the "use of an object," which greatly influenced intersubjective psychoanalysis and Jessica Benjamin's theory, as we will see. In the essay "The Use of an Object and Relating Through Identifications" (1969), Winnicott introduced the important differentiation between "object-relating" and "object-usage." The first refers to the projective relation to an other who is under one's illusory control. In this relationship mode, the other is a subjective-object inhabiting one's area of subjective phenomena. The object is meaningful and is allowed to generate certain alterations in the subject, especially in the form of projections and identifications. But the subject

is still isolated because the object is largely under his fantasized control. In object-usage, on the contrary, the object emerges as an independent entity or a "thing in itself" (1969, p. 118), outside one's omnipotent control and projective activity. The object, in other words, is real "in the sense of being part of shared reality, not a bundle of projections." (Ibid).

As it occurs in accepting external reality with the help of transitional phenomena, using an object is a difficult capacity developed with the help of a facilitating environment. In fact, for Winnicott, placing the object outside one's area of omnipotent control or recognizing the other as an entity in its own right is one of the most challenging steps in human development (Ibid, p. 120). It requires, first, that the subject destroys the object in fantasy and, second, that the object survives destruction.

That is a complicated process because it entails the painful limitation of one's omnipotent control. However, the price of destroying the other in fantasy pays off with the inauguration of real object relations and a "life in the world of objects." (Ibid, p. 121). Only once placed outside can the object have external qualities, gain value, and therefore be used by the subject. The independent object has life and autonomy, being able to contribute with its own properties to the subject's emotional life. The value of the other comes from its survival. Only because it continuously emerges as an independent being can it be loved as a not-me substance. Thus, Winnicott's famous words:

> The subject says to the object: 'I destroyed you', and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: 'Hullo object!' 'I destroyed you.' 'I love you.' 'You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.' 'While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) fantasy.' (Ibid, p. 120-121).

Destruction and aggression, therefore, are crucial to introduce the child's relationship to reality. However, different from classic psychoanalysis, aggression is not just directed against the discovery of a frustrating reality, but it also contributes to creating the quality of externality (Ibid, p. 125), thus having a positive value (Ibid, p. 126). Ogden writes that: "the infant makes room for the possibility of the mother as a subject, a *person* other-to-himself, by destroying an aspect of himself (his own omnipotence as projected onto the omnipotent internal object mother)." (Ogden, 1994, p. 57, emphasis in original). But omnipotence is not dissolved naturally or smoothly, nor is it only endogenously destroyed, as this understanding implies. Whitebook draws attention to the fact that the infant, at this moment, really tries to destroy the recalcitrant external reality once it begins to resist the infant's illusion of omnipotence:

> It must be stressed that, in the mind of the infant — where the distinction between fantasy and reality is just gaining a foothold — the wish to destroy the mother is experienced as concrete and real. It is in dead earnest and there is nothing 'as if' about it. Paradoxically, however the infant's attempts to destroy the object because it is located beyond his sphere of omnipotent control — and the object's surviving those attempts — in fact places it further beyond that sphere, thus making it more independent and real. The attempt to destroy the object, in short, constitutes it as an extra-psychic object. (Whitebook, 2021, p. 9).

Here there is also a paradox in place. The child tries to destroy the object when he begins to perceive it as independent and separate. But he also actively puts the object outside by destroying it, thus being able to use it. As Greenberg and Mitchell put it, "the child 'uses' and 'destroys' the object because it has become real, and the object becomes real because it has been 'used' and 'destroyed.'" (1983, p. 196).

Destruction, however, is not enough to introduce externality. That is not merely a one-person process because it must count on the other's survival, which means the other's non-retaliatory permanence. In this phase, survival means the mother's continuing care, empathy, and emotional presence, despite the violent acts directed against her. Good-enough mothers conduct their babies from relating to usage by surviving the constant attacks that put them outside the babies' sphere of control. The others' survival, or "nonretaliatory durability" (Ibid) is what allows their usage and the perception of externality.

Whitebook explains that the mother's survival "is a medium through which hard reality — what Freud called Ananke (necessity) or Atropos (the ineluctable) — is introduced into his world." (2021, p. 9). But along with hard reality, or the distinction between fantasy and externality, it emerges "a world of shared reality," which can be used and loved, offering "other-than-me substance into the subject." (Winnicott, 1969, p. 127).

One of the most important implications of this process is the conclusion that introjection and projection differ fundamentally from the direct recognition of the other as an independent being. This difference between the other as a subjective projection and the other as a real person outside inspires later intersubjective theorizing. Relational or intersubjective authors suggested that the object that is used, in Winnicott's words, could be seen as another "subject," thus inaugurating the possibility of a subject-subject or intersubjective relation.[5]

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[5] In this terminology, which I employ in this research, the object means the fixed and intrapsychic projection of the other, or the object-subjectively-perceived, meaning that the object is largely a creation of the self's omnipotent construction. The other as an object also resonates with the scientific view of an object of analysis, which is (supposedly) immutable, controlled, fully comprehended, and described – while in the unconscious background, it usually also maintains a mysterious resistance and a deep menace as something not fully cognizable or "dominable."

Ogden is one of the psychoanalysts who interprets Winnicott as an intersubjective theoretician. He affirms that the Winnicottian subject is constantly created and decentered from itself in the dialectic intersubjective relationship, in which there is recognition:

> This conception of the space between I-as-subject and Other-as-subject represents still another way of describing the Winnicottian notion of the locus of subjectivity, a subjectivity that is always decentered from itself and is always to some degree arising in the context of intersubjectivity. In this last instance, the emphasis is on the way in which it is necessary for the omnipotence of the infant (as well as that of the adult) to be continually negated, superseded ('destroyed' in unconsciously fantasied object relations), in the process of creating a more fully generative dialectic of self and Other [...] I as self-conscious subject am created through the process of recognizing and being recognized by the Other-as-subject. (Ogden, 1994, p. 58-59).

However, the centrality of the Other-as-subject in Winnicott's theory did not reject or overcome nature's role in human development, as some strong intersubjective interpreters imply. It is true that the subject whose True Self can find some form of expression needs the recognition of the other and the possibility of using the object. Yet, object relations do not exhaust the influences that shape individual development. Somatic and biological forces also play an essential role in it.

Here it is helpful to reconstruct a discussion between different readers of Winnicott. Relational authors tend to read him as a strong intersubjectivist who rejected or overcame drive theory, replacing it with a strict focus on object relations. Greenberg and Mitchell, for instance, argue that Winnicott replaced a drive framework with a relational one. More precisely, they acknowledge that the pediatrician did not abandon drive theory altogether, but, for them, he "establishes object relations on a footing that is autonomous and separate from instinctual processes." (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983, p. 198). While Freud believed that object relations would follow from a drive structure and the infant would be a satisfaction-seeking being from the beginning, Winnicott posed that we cannot speak of drives until there is an ego in place, which would mean that "although Winnicott preserves the concept of instincts, they are relegated to a secondary and peripheral status in development." (Ibid, p. 200). The main factor for human development would not be drive gratification but relational processes that unfold between the baby and the mother, which are "entirely separate from drive gratification." (Ibid, p. 198).

On the other hand, the subject is the individual encountered outside one's mental projection, not apprehended, dominated, or anticipated. Similar to the Winnicottian True Self, the subject cannot be pre-defined or fully comprehended. In the Winnicottian framework, it can only be met after destruction and survival. This terminology is employed by Benjamin in general, but it differs from the epistemological "subject of knowledge," which she mentions in her intermediate works, mainly in *The Shadow of the Other* (1998), as we will see.

Moreover, for them, even if the initial maternal function involves bodily holding and physical ministrations, these acts would not be "essentially physical" (Ibid), mainly involving complex emotional exchanges. Greenberg and Mitchell argue that Winnicott separates drive gratification from object relations because, in their reading, "maternal provisions are independent of the mother's function in satisfying instinctual needs." (Ibid, p. 199). In their view, the infant would need affective relations more than physical satisfaction. Drive gratification would even risk disturbing "more basic developmental needs" (Ibid, p. 200), which are essentially emotional. More than impersonal management, such as merely feeding the baby, good-enough maternal care must offer primarily love and emotional connection.

Furthermore, they stress that Winnicott would not sustain a dualistic view of the drives. Especially the death drive, for the authors, would frontally contradict Winnicott's theory, even if he wrote extensively about aggression. The differences between Freud's and Winnicott's understandings of aggression, for them, demanded a more evident contrast that the latter author never openly admitted:

> Winnicott achieves the appearance of continuity with respect to the concept of innate aggression by simply adopting the term and redefining it. He emphasizes the importance of aggression throughout his work, employing Freud's term as if it carried the same meaning. Yet, at several points he notes that aggression and destruction do not entail anger or hate. 'Aggression' for him refers not to a specific instinctual drive, but to a general vitality and motility. He equates it with a life force and argues that 'at origin, aggressiveness is almost synonymous with activity' (1950, p. 204). (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983, p. 206).

The authors conclude that Winnicott never assumed a direct departure from Freudian theory merely due to strategic and political reasons. His theory would directly contradict Freud's view, especially the classic drive framework. For them, "destruction" would bear a mild and even positive connotation in Winnicott's work, being merely the force that places the other outside of one's omnipotent sphere of influence and creates the quality of externality. In their words: "The 'destruction' in Winnicott's late work on object-usage is thus an innocent, nonbelligerent desire for engagement." (Ibid).

The pediatrician indeed argued against the idea of the death drive, suggesting that this term would be of little help in understanding human development or the roots of aggression (1963a/2007, p. 191). However, aggression for him is far from an innocent desire for engagement, having more negative and paradoxical roots. Whitebook, following Andre Green, offers a very different interpretation of Winnicott's work, stressing the importance of the biological factor and innate aggression in his theory. Winnicott, for him, would not deny Freudian theory but

complement it, exploring earlier stages of development in which the whole person is not yet formed. The pediatrician would provide what Freud's model presupposed. Following Winnicott's own argumentation, Whitebook affirms that "This meant that Winnicott didn't believe that Freud's drive theory and tripartite model of the mental apparatus are false *per se*; he only believed that they are only applicable after a 'unit self' has been formed and the object, toward which drives can be directed, has been constituted." (2021, p. 4-5).

Whitebook acknowledges the progressive theoretical tendency to deny or minimize the importance of biological factors in human development with the aim of rejecting the constricting notion that "biology is destiny." Still, he insists that Winnicott would not sustain a strong relational position in which individual constitution would depend primarily on extra-bodily influences. On the contrary, in the Winnicottian framework, the inherited bodily potential of each individual would be as determinant and decisive as the environmental factor for self-development.

Moreover, the free manifestation of such bodily forces or "motor and sensory elements" would be crucial for a healthy development in which the True Self can express itself. The spontaneous gestures that arise from the infant's inherited potential, which include a ruthless and aggressive character, need to be allowed full expression and be tolerated by the mother so that a compliant False Self does not pathologically obfuscate the individual's liveliness. Whitebook emphasizes that Winnicott posited an innate form of primary aggression in the form of "muscle erotism" and "primitive impulse (or motility)." (Ibid, p. 6). When undischarged or externally inhibited, these ruthless urges would be hidden by a false and compliant form of life that suffocates vitality and reality, with profound and severe consequences for the individual. That is, the True Self expresses a spontaneous resistant element of nature against social and maternal expectations. Expressly denying Greenberg and Mitchell's conclusions regarding Winnicott's relation with Freud, Whitebook sees the pediatrician's continuity strategy as a sign of maturity, not of "political opportunism and theoretical bad faith" (Whitebook, 2021, p. 14), as the authors defend.

Whitebook goes so far as to argue that "Winnicott's contention that the individual's bodily grounded 'inherited potential' constitutes a major source of individuation invites comparison with the position of the first generation of the Frankfurt School" (Ibid), because such authors, especially Adorno, supported Freud's drive theory and the negative conclusions of *Civilization and Its*

Discontents.[6] In this context, I shall add that the more general theme of the antagonism of nature *v.* civilization, conveyed by Freudian drive theory, is at the center of Winnicott's theoretical preoccupations. He wrote extensively about this issue throughout his career, suggesting indeed an affinity with critical theorists. For example, Winnicott's book *Human Nature* (1988), first written in 1954, continuously revised, and published posthumously, brings evidence of his constant reflections on the mysterious connection of psyche and soma that occurs in the human mind, testifying to Whitebook's reading of his overall work.

In this oeuvre, Winnicott clearly sustains the existence and importance of the drives. However, believing that it is "irrelevant" to determine the content or classification of these forces, he prefers to stay with a more general definition that sees them as "powerful biological drives which come and go in the life of the infant or child, and which demand action." (Ibid, p. 39). In short, for him, the instincts are excitations that demand relief, rewarding discharge with pleasure. In any case, he understands that the baby must be ready to feel the instincts and to bear them as their own because they have, from the beginning, a troubling and unstabilizing effect on the child, which can complicate its emotional development. Instincts have a ruthless and uncivilized character, especially at first. They do not care for the other's sake, demanding a spontaneous discharge. That is why, for Whitebook, such bodily urges would represent a negative source of resistance to social assimilation and conformity.

Nevertheless, there is also another source of negativity derived from the baby's body that Whitebook neglects. He understands that the "sting of negativity" of reality appears only after the blissful situation of primary narcissism sustained by the mother comes to an end: "The critical question concerning 'the sting of negativity' doesn't arise at the initial undifferentiated stage of development, but with the next step in development when external reality begins to 'impinge' on that state of 'fusion,' that is, at the initial step in the process of separation." (2021, p. 12). For him, therefore, there is only resistance and antagonism after primary narcissism dissolves and the baby is disillusioned. However, he forgets that the very initial situation of life is that of unintegration. Winnicott affirms that "only out of non-existence can existence start." (1974, p. 531). There it is, the very first "sting of negativity." Once the process of integration begins, under the almost complete sustenance of the mother's ego, the reality of unintegration does not cease, but it remains a menacing possibility, representing the threat of madness and anxiety. As Winnicott taught us,

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[6] This issue will be addressed in greater depth in the next chapter. See topic 3.2. below.

integration is an achievement one cannot take for granted. Before the constitution of a resilient or stable ego, maybe even during the sustenance of primary narcissism, there is also the shadow of breakdown, non-existence, and annihilation. This reading suggests that, less than a demarcated phase of blissful omnipotence, we can think of omnipotence coexisting with the unavoidable menace of breakdown underneath the child's experience.[7]

In his late essay "The Location of Cultural Experience" (1967), Winnicott suggests that the fact that the baby's illusion of omnipotence depends entirely on the mother's attunement generates an important realm of vulnerability, which inevitably triggers moments of distress when the mother is absent, even in good-enough developments. I will quote Winnicott's words to explain this idea with accuracy:

> The feeling of the mother's existence lasts x minutes. If the mother is away more than x minutes, then the imago fades, and along with this the baby's capacity to use the symbol of the union ceases. The baby is distressed, but this distress is soon mended because the mother returns in x+y minutes. In x+y minutes the baby has not become altered. But in x+y+z minutes the baby has become traumatized. In x+y+z minutes the mother's return does not mend the baby's altered state. Trauma implies that the baby has experienced a break in life's continuity, so that primitive defenses now become organized to defend against a repetition of 'unthinkable anxiety' or a return of the acute confusional state that belongs to disintegration of nascent ego structure. (Winnicott, 1967, p. 131).

This explanation suggests that the illusion of omnipotence that sustains the constitution of the ego is hugely fragile, limited to the amount of x minutes. We know that the maternal provision is not perfect. It is merely "good enough." Therefore, this phase may not be purely blissful. It may be ideal enough or blissful enough, but any baby is expected to experience x+y moments of frustration and disturbance, even the healthiest ones. Besides, beyond the mother's return, there is also the constant possibility of an x+y+z time of absence, which exposes trauma and evokes breakdown, even if the baby is unaware of such risk. This possibility implies that the other side of omnipotence is total vulnerability. The infant's complete helplessness and unintegration demand an experience of omnipotence so that he can start to be and form a sense of self. The child's vulnerability demands the illusion of its contrary for successful development. He is so dependent that the mere awareness of his helplessness would be too disturbing, harming his progress.

Accordingly, he needs some confidence to be able to relinquish the omnipotence. The less helpless the child gets, the more he can be disillusioned: "Illusion must first be given, after which the infant has plenty of means for accepting and even making use of disillusionment." (Winnicott,

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[7] This interpretation approximates Winnicott's theory with Benjamin's understanding of the initial experience as one of instability and oscillations, not perfect omnipotence, as we will see.

1988, p. 101). Confidence in the mother's care and in himself is crucial for the infant to begin tolerating being alone and exploring the transitional space. The baby can only relinquish omnipotent control of the world after he has sustained such an illusion for some time, with the mother's support. He can only let the object go once he is confident that it will return: "In the course of time there comes a state in which the infant feels confident that the object of desire can be found, and this means that the infant gradually tolerates the absence of the object." (Ibid, p. 106). Thus, omnipotence has at its other side helplessness and vulnerability, while the relation to the world and other objects implies minimal maturity and confidence.

This realm of immense vulnerability introduces an unavoidable source of antinomy, despite object relations. A subject can only meet another subject once he feels confident enough to relinquish omnipotence. The fear of breakdown and annihilation, beginning in the first reality of unintegration, remains a source of antisociality and lack of communication beyond the possibility of intersubjective relations.

Nonetheless, antinomy is not all there is. The tension between confidence and helplessness, omnipotence and object relations, creation and discovery of the object populate the transitional space of the child, from which his true subjectivity emerges. Besides, the True Self's creative and vital qualities demand both protection against exposure and an effective expression outside. Through the True Self's spontaneous gestures, which are initially ruthless and aggressive, we have a picture of nature as disruptive and uncivilized. However, we know that it can be integrated into a good-enough experience with the help of the other, reaching a satisfactory compromise between the individual and society. Social life requires false selfhood to a certain extent, but it is possible to develop an authentic and lively existence beyond pure conformism. For Winnicott, in the form of the True Self, nature expresses total vulnerability, ruthlessness, and spontaneous resistance, being a force against social life while also being paradoxically the source of a satisfactory compromise that instigates creativity, vitality, and true object relations.

My point, to conclude, is that, with "frontier concepts" like the transitional space, the True Self, and the use of the object, Winnicott avoids both biologism and sociologism, placing his theory on the mysterious, paradoxical, and unresolvable intersection of body and mind, soma and psyche, nature and civilization. The trick to remaining connected to both sides of these splits is never to resolve the paradox. This theoretical path and the concepts linked to it inspired the Benjaminian solution that we will investigate later. First, however, let us look at the main interlocutions between

critical theory and psychoanalysis and how the foremost critical theorists elaborated on these issues.

3. Critical theory and psychoanalysis

Now that we followed Freud and Winnicott in the development of their psychoanalytic theories, we are in a position to study the reception of psychoanalysis by critical theory. In this chapter, we are going through a brief overview of the relationship between critical theory and psychoanalysis from the first to the third generation. I do not presume to offer a complete or exhaustive account of this topic since it would surpass the scope of this text. My objective is to trace critical theorists' reception of Freudian and Winnicottian psychoanalysis, focusing on the tension between diagnosis and critique, negativity and emancipation, the death drive and intersubjectivity. Thus, in what follows, I will briefly trace the contours of the dividing line pointed out by Katia Genel in critical theory, quickly going through the theories of Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Jurgen Habermas, and Axel Honneth.[8] This analysis will focus mainly on identifying the place attributed to the drives versus the possibilities of reconciliation between subject and object. My aim, in the end, is to compare these developments to the solution offered by Jessica Benjamin in dialogue with both psychoanalysts and critical researchers. It is worth mentioning that since Honneth employed Benjamin's theory, I will discuss his work briefly here and in more depth in the next part of this research.

3.1. Fromm and the sociologizing of Freud

In the first period of the Institute for Social Research in Germany, Erich Fromm was the most engaged of its members in integrating Marxism and Freudism. Being a psychoanalyst himself, Fromm was committed to explaining how the individual internalized economic and social structures (Jay, 1996, p. 88-89). Following the legacy of the Freudo-Marxists, he sought in psychoanalysis a tool to complement the lack of a subjective dimension in Marxian theory. In his words: "Historical materialism calls for a psychology – i.e, a science of man's psychic structure;

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[8] Although acknowledging the importance of Marcuse's work, I chose not to offer an analysis of it here, mainly because the interlocution of Benjamin with this author is considerably less significant than with the other critical authors. Therefore, I considered that discussing Marcuse's solution would open new questions at the intersection of drive theory and social analysis that the present research would not be in a position to discuss with the required depth.

and psychoanalysis is the first discipline to provide a psychology that historical materialism can really use." (1932/2005, p. 490).

To harmonize both theories, in the first moment, Fromm concluded, in short, that the economic structure would give materiality to a specific individual character with its own libidinal structure, which would then work as an element of social cohesion. That is, the economic dimension would give form to a libidinal structure, which in turn would reflect individual behaviors in the political sphere. In this sense, Fromm believed that, even if the drives were original and played an essential role in individual motivation, they would be structured and directed by the demands of the productive system: "In certain fundamental respects, the instinctual apparatus itself is a biological given; but it is highly modifiable. The role of primary formative factors goes to the economic conditions." (Ibid, p. 486).

For Fromm, if socioeconomic conditions were altered, so would the individuals' libidinal structure. Negative aspects of character, although related to the drives, would also have a social genesis, therefore not being purely natural or insurmountable. Fundamental Freudian categories, such as the Oedipus complex, were not fixed but historically framed by the economic developmental stage, as well as the bourgeois family and the patriarchal society. Thus, through the historicization of Freudian categories, he relativized the superego and instinctual repression functions, believing that excessive levels of instinctual sacrifice would be unnecessary in a more developed society with higher levels of global wealth.

Following this relativization, Fromm later concluded that it would be possible to anticipate a society in which unconscious superego repression would be almost unnecessary, giving way to conscious and rational self-control, processed directly by the ego. Contrary to the permanently antagonistic relations between id and ego or between the drives and society, Fromm (1936/2020) pointed to the possibility of overcoming this contradiction at a higher level through a kind of triumph of the productive ego.

Until the first years after the Institute's exile in the United States, Horkheimer agreed with Fromm's general argument, even rejecting the concept of the death drive as a supposed hypostasis of the status quo or as a historical reflection of contemporary society (Jay, 1996, p. 101). Furthermore, in the "Studies on Authority and the Family," published in 1936, authored by Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm, the Institute's director proposed understandings quite like those

of the psychoanalyst. For example, Horkheimer tended to see the individual's character as determined by his social situation – the social relations of class above all. He points out that:

> Amid all the radical differences between human types from different periods of history, all have in common that their essential characteristics are determined by the power-relationships proper to society at any given time. People have for more than a hundred years abandoned the view that character is to be explained in terms of the completely isolated individual, and they now regard man as at every point a socialized being. But this also means that *men's drives and passions, their characteristic dispositions and reaction-patterns are stamped by the power-relationships under which the social life-process unfolds at any time.* The class system within which the individual's outward life runs its course is reflected not only in his mind, his ideas, his basic concepts and judgments, but also in his inmost life, in his preferences and desires. (1936, p. 69, emphasis added).

According to the economic influences, the individual character is formed and conformed to the social authorities. Furthermore, as the title of the study indicates, the family is considered the central institution through which the authoritarian character is formed, being the mediating element between the productive structure and individual psychic development. The obedience to the father is the first step towards social conformism. Especially in the case of petty-bourgeois families, a masochistic character is formed from the authoritarian relations within the patriarchal family. The result is "the masochistic inclination to surrender one's will to any leader whatsoever, provided only he could be described as powerful." (Ibid, p. 110).

Horkheimer also envisions a future emancipatory possibility in the form of a society that would handle the productive process, controlling and directing it according to a reasonable collective plan. The function of authority would still exist in such a context, but it would be rational and mutually beneficial:

> In disciplined work men will take their place under an authority, but the authority will only be carrying out the plans that men have made and have decided to implement. The plans themselves will no longer be the result of divergent class interests, for the latter will have lost their foundation and been converted into communal effort. The command of another will express his personal interests only because it also expresses the interests of the generality. (Ibid, p. 97)

Thus, Horkheimer envisioned, even in a structurally diverse society, the possibility of reconciliation between the individual and society or between individual interests and collective ones. In this suggestion, we can see that he considerably disregarded Freudian negativism.

However, despite these initial similarities, by the end of the 1930s, Horkheimer and most of the other members of the Institute increasingly reduced their hopes in emancipation, thus becoming drastically more skeptical than Fromm, who remained faithful to a contextualizing reading of Freud. In fact, contrary to the direction taken by the others, the psychoanalyst mitigated, even more, the Freudian pessimism, coming to reject his drive theory altogether, ignore the oedipal complex,

and reinforce the normative aspect of human development. This tendency distanced him more and more from the Institute, culminating in his leaving the group at the end of the decade.

In his later work, *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Fromm makes several criticisms regarding the founder of psychoanalysis, continuing the effort to historicize his theory. In Fromm's view, men would be primarily and radically social, constituting their needs, desires, and feelings always in relation to others (Ibid, p. 318). Instead of drives, Fromm now speaks of human inclinations, which are not fixed, but dynamically generated by social and cultural processes. Therefore, passions, desires, and anxieties are not part of a determined nature but are changeable historical products, structuring the character of men in history.

Furthermore, being fundamentally social, individuals need to avoid moral isolation, seeking a sense of union or community with others. We need to cooperate with other individuals, not only to defend ourselves, work, produce, and survive physiologically but also to feel part of a complex of collective meanings that guide our existence. Other psychological qualities that we inherently possess, according to Fromm, are the desire for the development of our potentialities, as well as the desire for freedom and justice: "The striving for justice and truth is an inherent trend of human nature, although it can be repressed and perverted like the striving for freedom." (Ibid, p. 316).

For him, these potentialities may arise from the human baby's complete helplessness. The painful early situation of life foments a later inverse desire for justice and freedom, which unfolds dynamically in the history of humanity. Instead of leading man to an aggressive, irreconcilable, or antisocial tendency, the helpless human condition would encourage the inherent search for positive and harmonious values.

Focusing his analysis on early childhood, or in the preoedipal phase, Fromm also states that the Oedipus complex is not essentially a conflict of a sexual character but one related to the child's complete dependence on his parents and the consequent contrary search for independence and spontaneity. At this moment, as we can see, Fromm disregards the most negative aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis, such as the drives (especially the death drive), the Oedipus complex, and infantile sexuality.

The essentially desexualized and naturally freedom-oriented child, then, sustains the hope in a reconciled, harmonious, and free society in which "the fundamental cause for his [man's] asocial drives will have disappeared." (Ibid, p. 296). The free man, acting spontaneously, would become "transparent to himself." (Ibid, p. 285). Moreover, this spontaneity would entail a new relation to

nature and reason, overcoming the split between both: "One premise for this spontaneity is the acceptance of the total personality and the elimination of the split between 'reason' and 'nature.'" (Ibid).

Finally, for Fromm, "the foremost component of such spontaneity" (Ibid, p. 287) would be love, which both unites the subjects and keeps their individuality. In his words: "The dynamic quality of love lies in this very polarity: that it springs from the need of overcoming separateness, that it leads to oneness – and yet that individuality is not eliminated." (Ibid). It would be possible, thus, to harmonize the individual and society through love, overcoming historically distorted antisocial dispositions and eliminating once and for all the split between nature and civilization. Such an optimistic conclusion contrasted significantly with the reality of Fromm's time and the direction Horkheimer and Adorno's theory took. His belief in love and the direct harmonization of nature and reason seemed too hopeful, superficial, and unreliable.

3.2. Adorno and Horkheimer and the negative implication of Freud's theory

In contrast to Fromm's optimistic conclusions, excessive hopes in a democratic, reconciled, or reasonable society were less and less feasible for the other members of the Institute while they saw the holocaust and the Second World War unfold. Adorno's official incorporation into the Institute finally demonstrated a definitive turn in its direction towards a more negative and insurmountable dialectic.

In the 1930s, Horkheimer agreed with Fromm's approach regarding the role of psychoanalysis, placing it as a complementary discipline within an interdisciplinary project in which political economy remained central (Marin, 2022, p. 144-145). Psychoanalysis was then a complementary resource to understand the individual psyche as an intermediary between economics and culture. However, from the following decades on, while the director of the Institute got closer to the Adornian vision, Freudian psychoanalysis gained the status of a central resource for understanding an irreconcilable anthropology. In the 1940s, therefore, Freud's pessimism and the theory of the drives gained more space in the Institution's critical productions, as the scholars' skepticism concerning the possibility of a reconciled society also increased.

The greatest proof of this theoretical turn is the publication, in 1947, of what is considered the masterpiece of critical theory. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947/2002), as Martin Jay points out, a fundamental change occurs, firstly, because the authors change the focus of critical theory

from the orthodox Marxist conflict between the social classes to the broader dichotomy between man and nature, confirming their mistrust in the revolutionary role of the working class. Adorno and Horkheimer's aim is not just that of pointing out the existing contradictions in capitalism to discern the possibilities of a future emancipated or more rational society. Now, the authors understand that modern reason itself is implicated in the insurmountable conflict between subject and object. Thus, the more direct historicization of Freud, operated by the Freudo-Marxists, would no longer be able to explain and possibly extirpate the conflicts and discontents of modern society. The Enlightened reason, unmasked, revealed a contradiction inherent in man's attempt to dominate nature insofar as, ultimately, one discovers that it is also necessary to dominate or deny oneself.

The individual who uses cognitive subterfuges to survive, like Odysseus before the giant Polyphemus, must deny his individuality, even without perceiving it, attributing to himself an eminently empty concept. When the giant asks his name, Odysseus' sagacity in answering "Nobody" in order to save himself illustrates the symbolic denial of one's individuality, necessary for the domination of outside nature.

Now, the authors propose a new dialectical anthropology related to the late Freudian metapsychology mostly delineated in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Here, the drives, whose repression underlies the possibility of social coexistence and the rational domination of nature, represent a strong and pervasive element of incompatibility between the individual and modern civilization. The Freudian formula, according to which "in a state of nature, the individual cannot survive; and in the social state, he cannot be happy" (Rouanet, 2001, p. 111), enters critical theory as the key to a negative dialectic that refuses any previous or artificial definition of reconciliation. While the Freudo-Marxists were willing to relativize or historicize the antagonism between the individual and society, reducing it to the capitalist system, for Adorno and Horkheimer, civilizational progress itself would demand the inevitable repression of individual instinctual life.

At the same time, however, that the critical authors consider Freudian pessimism in all its radicality, they are also concerned with avoiding a metaphysical understanding of the psychic structure, which would prevent a proper analysis of historical change or reduce social theory solely to the dynamic of the drives. Thus, while sustaining that individual psychological forces were behind social events, they also posited that socio-historical dynamics would also influence the psychological structure conceptualized by Freud. For them, although remaining incommensurable, nature and history would also be mutually influential in a dialectical process. The socio-historical

context's influence would alter even the structures of the human psyche. Thus, for example, under late capitalism and the phenomenon of culture industry, they believed that the ego was vastly weakened or even almost extinct.[9]

On the one hand, therefore, Adorno and Horkheimer would avoid a biologizing or essentialist conception of the drives or of psychic structures in general while understanding, on the other hand, that historically repressed remnants of nature eventually reappear, opposing the normative and cultural structures responsible for their repression. Susan Buck-Morss summarizes the authors' proposal concerning this double approach to psychoanalysis, indicating that the author's objective, particularly Adorno's, "was not to develop a theoretical synthesis [between Freudism and Marxism], but to decipher a contradictory reality." (1977, p. 97). For this very reason, when the authors refer to an "anthropology," they evoke a contradictory reality that dynamically pervades social and psychic instances.

Indeed, in a letter to Marcuse, written in 1943, Horkheimer explains that he understood "anthropology" as a "theory of man as he is formed in the context of an antagonistic society," so that, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, by redefining the "theory of domination around its anthropological assumption, Horkheimer incorporates the notion of the death drive." (Genel, 2017, p. 276). However, this drive is not an immutable biological force because the authors understand nature itself as a dynamic reality, permanently modified by culture and modifying culture in a dialectic relation. In this context, the drives come to represent an antagonistic instance regarding the identical desire for self-preservation that underlies reason, revealing the intrinsic relationship between rationality and domination. In other words, the individual drives that, for Freud, are a determined element of disparity between the individual and society, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, play the role of the non-identical, of the chaotic and multiple nature of existence that resists symbolic submission and takes revenge on the conceptual assimilation.

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[9] In Adorno's "The Idea of Natural History," he describes the close dialectic relation between nature and history: "Wherever I operate with the concepts of nature and history, no ultimate definitions are meant, rather I am pursuing the intention of pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference." (Adorno, 1984, p. 111). In this text, Adorno explores the complex mediations between these two concepts, indicating that nature and history are constantly contrasting, negating, and altering each other's meaning. In relation to psychoanalysis, Virginia Costa explains that the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* see nature itself, including human nature, as a historically modifiable element. Their psychoanalytic explanation, therefore, denotes "a historical phase of anthropology or human nature." (Costa, 2017, p. 19). Costa also explains that "while nature and history remain incommensurable in their dualism (they cannot result in a merged, unified concept), on the other hand, their meanings are continually modified by mutual determination." (2019, p. 34). For further discussion on this issue, see Costa, 2017, 2019.

In relation to the death drive, the authors understand it as "a tendency deeply inherent in living things, the overcoming of which is the mark of all development: the tendency to lose oneself in one's surroundings instead of actively engaging with them, the inclination to let oneself go, to lapse back into nature." (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002, p. 189). The death drive is also a mimicry of nature that refuses civilizational progress, moral order, and work, which refuses even self-preservation. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we read:

> The effort to hold itself together attends the ego at all its stages, and the temptation to be rid of the ego has always gone hand-in-hand with the blind determination to preserve it. Narcotic intoxication, in which the euphoric suspension of the self is expiated by deathlike sleep, is one of the oldest social transactions mediating between self-preservation and self-annihilation, an attempt by the self to survive itself. The fear of losing the self, and suspending with it the boundary between oneself and other life, the aversion to death and destruction, is twinned with a promise of joy which has threatened civilization at every moment. (Ibid, p. 26).

Thus, we can also understand the death drive as a contradictory desire to dissolve the delimited, organized, and progressive ego towards an archaic undifferentiation, equivalent to psychic death. Although the effort towards the rational domination of nature fundaments civilizational progress in human history, the possibility of the return of repressed nature brings the ambivalent perspective of enjoyment and death, continually threatening the pacified control of civilization. Then, it is not possible to attribute this contradiction only to the historical determinations of late capitalism, ignoring the perpetually dissonant realm of non-identical nature, expressed in different ways throughout history in the antagonism between the self and the other, the individual and society, nature and civilization.

In this context, in 1946, shortly before the publication of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno published an article that strongly criticized the revisionist psychoanalysts, such as Fromm. For him, sociologizing Freud or reducing the genesis of the Freudian antagonistic psyche to purely social determinations would lose sight precisely of the contradictory dimension of non-identical nature, the perennial dialectic between society and the individual psyche, history and nature, subject and object. The result would be the development of a highly conformist theory accused of reducing the depth of the Freudian psychic conflict. Especially in the context of the Second World War and the Jewish holocaust, but also in American capitalist society, adopting an excessively optimistic view contradicted the best intentions alleged by the authors because it ignored, and therefore reduced, the depth of the contradictions observed. More than wishful thinking or a superficial hope for emancipation, it would be more helpful to openly expose the social contradictions, as Freud dared to do. Only through such a negative methodology would it be

possible to move forward because a positive or hopeful understanding would merely mask the situation.

Therefore, Adorno praises the "irreconcilable pessimism" of the founder of psychoanalysis for bearing witness to real social conditions. In this context, more appropriate than empathetic hope or any superficial consolation, Freud's coldness, distance, and austerity would be necessary to prevent the theorist from being mistaken or deceived by the harsh reality. Against the wishful hope of a reconciling love, expressed by the revisionists, Adorno asserts: "The society has developed to an extreme where love can still possibly be love only as resistance against the existent." (2014, p.336).

Love as reconciliation would therefore be a conformist value at the service of the status quo, while negativism would be more appropriate to resist the reified conditions of the present. Believing that the negative way would be the only one to live up to the current situation, Adorno declares that "Maybe Freud's misanthropy is nothing else than hopeless love and the only expression of hope which still remains." (Ibid). The great merit of the psychoanalyst, as well as of the negative bourgeois thinkers, such as Nietzsche, Sade, and Hobbes, would be their revelation of the radically antagonistic character of society, distrusting any pretense harmonization: "The greatness of Freud as that of all radical bourgeois thinkers consists in that he leaves such contradictions unresolved, and he scorns the pretended systematic harmony where things in themselves are torn asunder." (Ibid, p. 337).

It is in the context of such a pessimist position that the authors develop a diagnosis of authoritarianism. They attribute the need for submission mainly to a failure in the process of internalizing authority within the individual psyche. Economic and social alterations of late capitalism would have generated a decline in the moral and concrete authority of the father within bourgeois families, which would harm his internalization during the oedipal complex. No longer respected and feared by the sons, as they were during liberal capitalism, these weakened fathers would not be internalized as Freud described. The result would be the development of weakened egos and superegos within the sons, which would be dominated directly by external authorities, media personalities, and authoritarian leaders. The lack of reflexivity and self-control would hand these weak, impoverished, and poorly differentiated personalities to direct external control. In turn, facing an audience of individuals lacking autonomy and spontaneity, fascist propaganda would offer the idealized and defensive elements that these weak and lost sons unconsciously sought, managing to dominate them profoundly.

The way out of this situation would involve the ambiguous task of internalizing authority, which, in turn, would promote the reinforcement of the rational ego against the regressive domination of fascist authorities. Although aware of the limitations and contradictions inherent in the internalization of authority and in reason itself, as is evident in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors seem to see no way out other than returning to these elements as the only shields against the generalized unreason of the masses under fascism.

For example, in the article "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" (1951/ 1982), Adorno attributes a central explanatory power for submission to the father figure, stating that "only the psychological image of the leader is apt to reanimate the idea of the all-powerful and threatening primal father." (Ibid, p. 124). And he adds that "The formation of the imagery of an omnipotent and unbridled father figure [...] is the only way to promulgate the 'passive-masochistic attitude… to whom one's will has to be surrendered.'" (Ibid). Without, however, denouncing the patriarchal and authoritarian dynamics that sustain the archaic appeal of the "primal father," the author defends, in opposition to fascist rule, the rationalist possibility of "making the subjects conscious of their unconscious." (Ibid, p. 136). Furthermore, without seeing a way out of internalization, despite its contradictions, he adds: "For, while psychology always denotes some bondage of the individual, it also presupposes freedom in the sense of a certain self-sufficiency and autonomy of the individual." (Ibid).

By "psychology," Adorno refers to the formation of the ego and, above all, the superego, constituted through the internalization of authority. Therefore, he then laments the impoverishment of the ego and the replacement of the individual superego by the leader's figure, which explains "the postpsychological de-individualized social atoms which form the fascist collectivities." (Ibid). That is, although representing, in a certain way, the imprisonment of the individual, the formation of a strong ego would be the lesser evil compared to the regressive de-individualization of fascism.

Amy Allen calls this issue the "paradox of authoritarianism" (2021a, p. 64-65): although Adorno criticizes the rational ego as an instance of internal domination, he still considers it a necessary condition for individual resistance to fascism. Following an early argumentation by Jessica Benjamin (1977), she implies that this paradox is directly related to Freud's understanding of the drives' essentially antisocial and regressive nature. In contrast to these forces, reason becomes a repressive but necessary force of self-control. Without any possibility of harmonization between subject and object, authority appears necessary for social life.

In reference to Whitebook, Allen also denounces the "paradox of self-defeat" (Ibid, p. 62-64), which refers to the identification of the "autocratic ego with the ego itself." By considering any egoic integration as necessarily authoritarian, the Frankfurt school defeats itself, making the project of emancipation or overcoming the dialectic of Enlightenment impossible. For Whitebook (2004), such an extreme criticism of the ego would have been partially responsible for generating insurmountable theoretical impasses and even the "political quietism" of the authors. The first generation, for him, remained trapped in the split between a rigid and narcissistic ego on the one hand and a regressive dissolution of the self on the other.

However, I must mention that it is not consensual that Adorno would have, in fact, abdicated a less authoritarian concept of the ego. Allen, for example, argues that glimpses of a non-reified ego integration can be found in Adorno, mainly in later productions, such as Negative Dialectics (2007) and the essay "Subject and Object" (1997). For her, Adorno subtly suggests a state of reconciliation between subject and object that would not be a state of undifferentiation nor a hostile antithesis but a state of "communication of what is differentiated." In it, subject and object remain diverse, but they can still peacefully participate in each other (Allen, 2021a, p. 83). In this view, differentiation would be possible without domination. Todd McGowan (2016) also recalls a vision of emancipation briefly offered in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, related to the reconciliation of universality with particularity. In the Frankfurtian words: "An emancipated society, on the other hand, would not be a unitary state, but the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences." (Adorno, 1978, p. 103 apud. McGowan, 2016, p. 7).

However, although Adorno perhaps foresees a more harmonious possibility in these texts, which seems related to a balance between universality and diversity, he never elaborated deeply on them. Moreover, the main references taken up by contemporary authors to explain the resurgence of authoritarianism are *The Authoritarian Personality* (Retrieved, for example by Wolfe, 2005; Wolin, 2016; Gordon, 2017; Gandesha, 2017, 2018; Bernstein, 2017; Abromeit, 2018; and Rensmann, 2018) and "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" (Retrieved by Leeb, 2018a, 2018b; Gandesha, 2020; Bernstein, 2017; Rensmann, 2018; and Bottici, 2017). In both of these texts, it is clearly possible to notice the suggestion that a reinforced ego, along orthodox Freudian lines, would have advantages in containing fascism. Allen herself recognizes this evidence in Adorno's study on fascist propaganda (2021a, p. 66).

Adorno did not fail to criticize Freud, especially concerning the hypostatization of psychic agencies, as supposedly ahistorical ontologies (Adorno, 1968). However, he still bases his diagnosis of late capitalism largely on this model without consistently elaborating on the possibility of less oppressive egoic constitutions, at least in the texts mostly recuperated nowadays. Thus, his model as resumed in current discussions remains trapped in paralyzing contradictions regarding authoritarianism.

3.3. *Habermas and the progressive abandonment of Psychoanalysis*

It is precisely the identification of such contradictions that worries the later generations of the Frankfurt School because, at the very least, "What type of praxis might still be pursued was by no means clear." (Jay, 1996, p. 279). According to these authors, Adorno and Horkheimer would have expanded the critique of reason to such an extent that they would have left very little room for normative aspirations, undermining the very foundation of critique. This impasse, in turn, would have fostered a certain conformism on the part of the authors. Believing that the first generation would not be in a position to overcome the paradoxes of reason they themselves identified, the critical theorists of the second and third generations would then attribute to critical theory the role of immanently justifying the emancipatory aspirations of social struggles in order to avoid paralyzing aporias.

In this process, they eliminated significantly the negative dimension of social theory; that is, they reduced "the difficulties, the failures, the tensions, the necessarily unfinished character of every attempt at clarification, etc., which is characteristic of the 'classic' Freudian path." (Marin, 2022, p. 181-182). The use of psychoanalysis by critical theory shifted from a negative dimension to a positive one: instead of being mobilized to explain irrationalism and to clarify the profound subjective obstacles to emancipation, psychoanalysis comes to support possible normative solutions (Ibid).

The main representative of the so-called "second generation" of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas, argues that the negativist analysis of reason developed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would be fundamentally contradictory. On the one hand, its authors develop a critique of ideology aimed at revealing its false character. However, on the other hand, by radicalizing the critique, extending it to Enlightenment itself, or to modern reason as a whole, they end up turning the critique against themselves so that "ideology critique itself comes under suspicion of not producing (any

more) truths." (1998, p, 116). That is, by totalizing their critique, turning it against reason, in order to "enlighten the Enlightenment about itself" (Ibid, p. 118), in a reflexive movement, the critique loses its foundations, falling into a "performative contradiction." (Ibid, p. 119). The critique applied to itself then becomes paradoxical: "To be sure, this description of the self-destruction of the critical capacity is paradoxical, because in the moment of description it still has to make use of the critique that has been declared dead." (Ibid, p. 170).

Aware of the aporia, in which their critique "attacks the presuppositions of its own validity" (Ibid, p. 127), the philosophers of the first generation would have remained in it because they did not envision any way back or any possible way out of this situation. Habermas then suggests a solution to the paradoxes of reason by defending a move from the subjective paradigm to an intersubjective one. He argues that, in addition to self-preserving instrumental reason, Enlightenment would allow the emergence of a communicative reason, this one oriented towards emancipation. In this way, he justifies critique based on the intersubjective communication between individuals in the public sphere. In his oeuvre, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, the philosopher traces the criteria that, sustaining the very structure of the argumentative discourse, would guarantee an immanent and non-coercive normative orientation.

However, while saving the positive aspects of reason and normativity, Habermas had to progressively abandon psychoanalysis as a reference for his model, which also made him lose sight of important irrational, uncomfortable, and aggressive aspects of human relationships. Initially, he employed psychoanalysis in *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1971). But in it, he already offered a rather domesticated reading of Freud (Whitebook, 1995, p. 7; Allen, 2021a, p. 2), focused on linguistic communication.

In Habermas' reading, repressed unconscious stimuli, such as those expressed in symptoms, would be motivations that simply lack linguistic coverage. That is, symptoms would be linguistic distortions or pathologies of communication, which could be "cured" through unblocked communication. The objective of clinical analysis would then be to dissolve such communicative blockages or narrative inconsistencies, allowing the patients to reflect on their own history. In this view, repressed or unconscious motivations could, in theory, be diluted by self-reflexive communication, making the subject more transparent to itself or more self-aware:

> But in our own self-formative process, we are at once both actor and critic. [...] The subject must be able to relate his own history and have comprehended the inhibitions that blocked the path of self-reflection. For the final state of a self-formative process is attained only if

> the subject remembers its identifications and alienations, the objectivations forced upon it and the reflections it arrived at, as the path upon which it constituted itself. (1971, p. 260).

Following this model of the subject, social dynamics can also be understood via linguistic vicissitudes. Oppressive or irrational institutions would represent inconsistencies or distortions in the communication between the citizens, which could be addressed through a more expanded or unblocked form of communication in the public sphere. Social emancipation demands a narrative exercise, entailing a non-doctrinaire communication process.

For Allen, this view of psychoanalysis radically misreads Freud's intentions: "even prior to his turn to cognitive psychology, Habermas's reading of psychoanalysis tended to flatten out the foreignness and absolute alterity of the unconscious, defusing its explosive content and defanging its exaggerations." (Allen, 2021a, p. 2).

The role of psychoanalysis in this picture is that of a "hermeneutics aimed at unlocking language processes." (Marin, 2022, p. 183). Habermas sees Psychoanalysis as a methodological instrument capable of expanding the subject's self-reflection, therefore producing communicative and normative gains. He believed psychoanalysis "provided an actual instance of a successful critical science and could therefore serve as a model for Critical Theory." (Whitebook, 2004, p. 91). As a method for unblocking self-reflexive communication, it would support a non-metaphysical normative practice based on linguistic processes.[10]

Nonetheless, the task of defining this emancipatory dialogical process, which came to occupy Habermas' efforts and especially his communicative theory, ultimately led him to abandon Freudian psychoanalysis. As Whitebook notes:

> A theory of systematically distorted communication seems to require a concept of undistorted communication simply for those distortions to count as distortions. And the attempt to elucidate the nature of this normative underpinning in his theory, without falling into foundationalism, has plagued Habermas, one way or another, for the rest of his career. (Ibid, p. 91).

Plagued by the need to offer a normative justification to support the critical endeavor, avoiding paralyzing paradoxes, Habermas elaborates on the possibility of a transparent and non-coercive communicative practice between the subjects. However, this move leads him to avert psychoanalysis progressively, definitively abandoning it from the 1970s onwards, in favor of the cognitive psychology of Piaget and Kohlberg and, later, the pragmatist social psychology of George Mead. For Whitebook, "Habermas's [first] interpretation of psychoanalysis as a theory of

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[10] To be sure, Habermas' reading of Freud is more complex than I could address here, for lack of space. For a more extended discussion, including the distinction of thing-presentations and word-presentations, see Whitebook, 1995; Allen, 2021a, Chapter 5; Marin, 2022, Chapter 5.

systematically distorted communication planted the seeds for his ultimate departure from Freud."
(2004, p. 95). His tamed employment of Freud in *Knowledge and Human Interest* prepared the way
for the realization that Freud's radical thinking was ultimately incompatible with his strong
normative aspirations. That is because the Freudian unconscious would undermine the claim of a
direct or non-conflictual emancipatory practice through reason and communication.

From the 1970s, then, while abandoning psychoanalysis, Habermas would defend modernity
more directly, dedicating himself to developing his theory of communicative action, which would
ground normativity in the process of communication itself: "In defending the 'project of
modernity,' Habermas and his circle became involved with the technical details of communication
theory, the philosophy of law, and the foundations of liberalism in a more or less Rawlsian mode."
(Ibid, p. 96). In this process, while Piaget and Kohlberg offer Habermas a model that describes the
progressive learning of communication skills, Mead relates subjective development to a
relationship mediated by another subject.

Such authors support, for Habermas, an "intersubjective" paradigm focused on the
communicative process itself.[11] They point to an impersonal normative system anchored in the
communicative process between the subjects, which allows Habermas to circumvent analyzing the
dynamics that unfold within the subject or within social groups (Marin, 2022, p. 207). The process
of communicative and normative learning means using psychology to explain socialization and
discovering in it the possibility of an emancipatory communicative action. This use directly
opposes the radical antagonistic view of the first generation, which employed a psychological
theory to explain the very opposite.

The process of abandoning psychoanalysis led Habermas to significantly neglect individual
irrationality, lose sight of the coercive character of morality, and reduce the subject's inner
strangeness, presupposing excessive communicative transparency and an almost uncontaminated
intersubjective practice of communication. As a result, Habermas finds himself without resources
to analyze the current context in which democracy and intersubjective debates in the public sphere
seem to bump into deep, irrational, and extra-discursive limits (McAfee, 2019; Gandesha, 2018).
McAfee observes that "Even with (or perhaps despite or even to spite) four decades of normative

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[11] "Intersubjective" here has a different meaning than it has for Jessica Benjamin and other intersubjective
psychoanalysts. It means merely the communication or the exchange of reasons between two partners, but it says
nothing about the psychoanalytic process of destruction of the other in fantasy and its survival.

political philosophies calling for more deliberative democracy and sounder principles of justice, actual political practices seem to be more reactionary than ever." (2019, p. 45).

In this sense, the rationalist intersubjectivist perspective inaugurated by the philosopher prevents us from considering the negative elements within the subject, thus containing anti-dialectical and conformist elements, contradicting Habermas' original intentions (Whitebook, 1995, p. 75-89). Regarding the dividing line defined by Genel, Habermas would be "more on the side of Fromm" because he rejects "any theory of the drives in favor of an anthropology founded on intersubjectivity and communicative language." (Genel, 2017, p. 285).

3.4. Honneth and the employment of Winnicott's psychoanalysis

However, the abandonment of psychoanalysis, operated progressively by Habermas, would be contested by consecutive theorists. Axel Honneth, the main representative of the so-called "third generation" of the Frankfurt School, followed Habermas' steps in the project of elaborating an immanent critique through intersubjectivity. However, he sought to eliminate a certain "sociological deficit" of his predecessor, moving his focus from impersonal proceduralist communicative practices to social process materialized in struggles for recognition. In this move, he resumed the use of psychoanalysis, which would be necessary to explain the motivations of the social struggles and the need for recognition. He does not make use, however, of Freudian psychoanalysis but of Winnicott's theory of object relations, which has significant consequences.[12]

As he understands in *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995), the oeuvre in which Honneth first exposes his own theory systematically, the conditions for recognition derive from primary experiences of non-differentiation with the primary caregiver, which, for him, configure embryonic experiences of intersubjectivity. Using theoretical resources from the first productions of Jessica Benjamin, Honneth states that the fraught dynamic that unfolds between the mother and the baby, following this first stage, configures a primordial "struggle for recognition." The painful loss of harmonious undifferentiation, in the process of individuation, would lead the baby to act aggressively as a way of testing the limits of his world and control. Thus, the source of negativity and aggressiveness in human relationships starts in this moment, being fundamentally relational.

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[12] In this chapter, I present a rather broad overview of critical theory's employment of psychoanalysis without pretending to cover all the relevant topics on this theme. However, in chapter 5, "Misuse of Jessica Benjamin," I offer a more profound analysis of Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition*, comparing it with Jessica Benjamin's theory.

However, as Winnicott proposes, if the mother survives the baby's destruction in a good enough way, the baby increasingly realizes that there are independent beings outside his control. Only then can he love and be loved by his mother as an autonomous being. Following the mother's survival, the partners manage to create a balance between independence and attunement, which configures a relationship of recognition. Thus, this first conflict can result in a harmonious and affective experience between the subjects. If the initial struggle is successful, both subjects can migrate from undifferentiation to "a mutually independent loving relation." (Petherbridge, 2013, p. 156).

For Honneth, this affective dynamic between the baby and the primary caregiver is the precursor experience of all other forms of recognition, notably in the broader spheres of law and social achievement. The accomplishment of a positive self-relation would depend on the development of positive relations of recognition with others. More specifically, recognition would endow the individual with self-confidence in the first sphere of love, self-respect in the sphere of legal rights, and self-esteem in the sphere of social solidarity. Going through these spheres, the individual thus can acquire more significant levels of autonomy.

 From the baby's primary experience with the mother, when it successfully migrates from undifferentiation to recognition, Honneth extracts a "latent interest" or an "ontological source" (Ibid, p. 157) for the perennial struggle for recognition. His anthropological model, based on Winnicott, not only outlines a normative ideal of the subjects' formation – the expectation that recognition will leave infantile undifferentiation behind – but also provides the fundamental structure of social recognition – from which later forms of recognition derive.

While the first sphere of recognition is fundamental and particular, the two subsequent ones are subject to political struggles and social change. In the spheres of law and social achievement, the suffering and injury derived from the lack of recognition or insufficient recognition would generate normative frustration, stimulating and justifying collective struggles and political manifestations in general. For Honneth, social struggles would have a normative motivation, arising immanently from frustrated expectations of recognition, which initiate with the primary relation between mother and child but evolve throughout broader social connections. So, Honneth concludes that the objective of these collective struggles, in short, is to expand the ways of life valued by the social standards of recognition in a process of cumulative "moral learning."

In this context, when resuming the use of psychoanalysis in critical theory, but this time following an intersubjective paradigm, Honneth faces difficulties avoided by Habermas when the

later philosopher abandoned psychoanalysis. As was the case with his predecessor, Honneth faced the challenge of accommodating psychoanalysis' deep understanding of subjective conflicts with the normative expectation of intersubjective relations. At the center of this issue, again, is Freudian pessimism and drive theory. How to account for antisocial forces, such as the drives, in the context of recognition? Is it necessary to abandon drive theory to sustain intersubjectivity?

It is in this context that Honneth, after introducing the basic framework of recognition theory in *The Struggle for Recognition*, subsequently sought to include, in his theory, individual unconscious or "drive" motivations. To this task, he employed the psychoanalysis of Hans Loewald. Honneth's preference for Loewald takes place in the context of a move away from Jessica Benjamin, based on the consideration that after the publication of *The Shadow of the Other* (1998), she would have given too much credit to postmodernism (Marin, 2022, p. 246).

Honneth rejects the dissolution of the subject advocated by postmodernism but seeks to partially accommodate its demand for decentering the unified subject. Drawing on Loewald, he defends that individual independence would not be related to the constitution of a strong, rigid, and totally stable ego but to the development of "an intrapsychic capacity for dialogue." (Honneth, 1999, p. 235). In such a dialogic personality, the different psychic instances, notably the id and the ego, do not conflict or neutralize each other but are capable of cooperating. Thus, Honneth does not reject the drives but tries to put them in a beneficial dialogue with the ego.

This dialogical ability, in turn, would derive from the internalization of social patterns of interaction. Since the drives, for him, would initially have neutral or undirected potential, it would be possible to acquire, from the outside, dialogical resources to accommodate or guide them. When internalized, such dialogical resources would organize one's psyche, offering intrapsychic instances of dialogue. The ego and superego resulting from the internalization of socially beneficial interactions "are not to be understood as forces counteracting the drives, but as forms of their organized bundling, as having the role of giving form to the energy of the drive." (Ibid, p. 238).

Although speaking in terms of drives, at this moment, Honneth does not understand them as disruptive, diffuse, or uncontrollable forces but as neutral motivating forces that can be dialogically directed or organized by the mature individual. For him, the psyche resembles a "network of communication of variously organized drive energies" or "a whole of numerous voices representing more or less solidified forms of drive energy." (Ibid). Therefore, in defending

intersubjectivist psychoanalysis, Honneth includes the drives as interactive elements that can be socially controlled through interiorizing communicative dynamics. As the philosopher explains:

> And to preempt the possible objection that the heritage of the theory of drives might be lost in such a revision, I have included the suggestions that Hans Loewald submitted with regard to an interactionist conception of the theory of drives in my attempt to sketch an intersubjectively inclined psychoanalysis. The result of this integration, as has – hopefully – become evident, is the idea that the individual formation of drives occurs parallel to that process of interiorization in which the maturing subject learns contemporaneously to establish intrapsychic instances and to delimit itself from its social environment by means of the interiorization of continuously enlarging interactive relations. (Ibid, p. 240).

If the individuation process is successful, the individual can process an "inner dialogue" between his psychic instances, relating in a communicative way with himself. The ability to listen to the various interactors or the discordant elements within his own psyche, processing an internal dialogue, allows the mature subject to experience greater inner aliveness or intrapsychic richness (Ibid, p. 239). More than constituting a stable and rigid ego, when processing this internal dialogue, the individual would benefit from moments of regression, symbiosis, and transgression of the limits of the ego, keeping open the possibility of acquiring alternative self-sates and identities. Honneth states, "Psychic health grows with the ability for a rationally controlled regression, by which intrapsychic and hitherto excluded ego alternatives are kept alive and can be made fruitful for actually occurring actions." (Ibid, p. 240). For him, such a communicative psychic dynamic configures a model of personality that approaches the expectations of postmodernism, envisioning a flexible ego that includes multiple identities.

Although he relates his model to the postmodern personality, Honneth draws an excessively communicative and transparent image of the human mind. In fact, he needs to defend an interactive and dialogical model of the psyche to maintain the possibility of recognition, establishing a communicative place for the drives. In this context, the capacity for dialogue experienced between the subjects is transposed to a place within the individual so that "the human psyche has to be understood as a context of interaction that has been shifted inside, a context that enjoys a complementary relation with a communicative life-world in which the individual encounters the other in very different roles of interaction (i.e., relations of recognition)." (Honneth, 1999, p. 238). Thus, in this model, it seems he seeks "to transpose the Habermasian communicative model from the social field to the psychic field." (Pacheco, 2016, p. 81).

Relying on a communicative relation between ego, superego, and id, this understanding is far from the Freudian perspective and from more negative intellectuals, who see in the drives a perennial element of conflict and tension in relation to the social sphere. Joel Whitebook, one of

the main current critics of intersubjectivist psychoanalysis, rejects the possibility of an intrapsychic dialogue. For him, "the assimilation of 'communication' to 'dialogue'— with its overtones of moderation, nonviolence, and symmetry — is downright misleading." (Whitebook, 2001, p. 280). In presupposing an innate sociability, this model would be not only erroneous but also inadequate for critical theory because it would not take human irrationality seriously. Whitebook defends the maintenance of a certain "Hobbesianism" in critical analysis, necessary to avoid losing sight of negative psychological and anthropological trends. More than regrettable social pathologies that could be appropriately corrected, these trends constitute a "piece of unconquerable nature" (Ibid, p. 261), as Freud described the death drive. As we can see, the interlocution between Honneth and Whitebook echoes the former discussion of Adorno with the revisionists.

Furthermore, anti-sociability, for Whitebook, may configure an important instance of resistance and denial of the standards imposed by society. If the drives were utterly compatible with society, then what would prevent the complete social domination of the individual? What would constitute the individual realm of resistance against social assimilation?

In response to Whitebook, Honneth made significant adjustments to his theory, aiming to embrace more antagonist elements. His challenge, however, is still that of identifying a source of negativity or anti-sociability that explains the critical capacity for opposition to social standards – that explains, in short, the struggles for recognition – while not invalidating the emancipatory possibility of recognition. Once he is tied to a strong normative expectation, he cannot make too much room for Hobbesianism; otherwise, the possibility of positive recognition may be lost.

It is in this context that Honneth formulates the concept of the "antisocial affect," a force that acts against conventional social standards of recognition or "against the already established normative orders." (Lysaker and Jakobsen, 2010, p. 168). Such affections originate in the complicated process of separation from the primary caregiver. The frustration of the initial harmonic experience, plunging the individual into the solitude of his individuality, would psychologically explain the birth of negative affections. Negativity would arise from a certain nostalgia for the former merged state, whose painful memory would keep motivating adult life. The desire for fusion remains motivating mature individuals to overcome separation and independence. As Honneth puts it in an interview: "The idea that there is a world of unification without institutionalized separations still has power over us as adults, and that is one possible explanation of the psychological causes of revolts, unhappiness, restlessness, the search for

overcoming given situations, and so on." (Ibid). Unlike the Freudian instinctual motivation, Honneth argues that social discontent would derive from the subject's relational attempt to deny the independence of the other, expressing a longing for the harmonious relationship he once shared with the primary caregiver.

On the one hand, the desire for regression or relaxation of ego boundaries can be partially satisfied by collective experiences of fusion, such as that of being part of a mass at football stadiums or rock concerts. These group experiences of unleashed togetherness are not necessarily pathological but inform the constitution of intersubjective spaces in which secure patterns of recognition operate, offering its members encouragement and affirmation (Honneth, 2012b, p. 211). On the other hand, since social life demands relationships with other individuals who are separate and independent, this nostalgia and its regressive tendency also configure an "infinite source of antisociality" (Honneth, 2012a, p. 229) because it fuels attempts to deny the independence of others. The nostalgia for fusion would then be an ambiguous motivational force: while it leads one to seek recognition, it also makes one deny the other's independence. Therefore, Honneth identifies the "work of the negative" in this ambiguous longing for fusion.

This relational form of negativity, however, differs fundamentally from the orthodox psychoanalytic conception because aggression derives from the socialization process and not from instinctual human nature, as Honneth himself admits: "What distinguishes this view from the orthodox conception is essentially that dynamic negativity is understood not as a part of our drive nature, but as an inevitable result of our socialization." (Honneth, 2012c, p. 199). From this revision of his theory, therefore, Honneth explicitly rejects the Freudian theory of drives, especially the idea of the death drive, placing the origin of human aggressiveness in the social experiences between subjects. For him, the Freudian understanding would have unsustainable metaphysical remnants derived from the organic or biological origin of the drives. In contrast, he sustains that the source of human aggressiveness and anti-sociality should be sought in relational versions of psychoanalysis that overcome the metaphysical idea of "universal drives." (Lysaker and Jakobsen, 2010, p. 169). Therefore, his concept of "antisocial affect" aims to exert a similar function to that of the death drive without the metaphysical weight he attributes to the Freudian concept (Pacheco, 2016, p. 81).

In this sense, Honneth also insists that there would not be much difference between these two conceptions about the work of the negative – the explanation via drives or via nostalgia for fusion

– because both equally explain unconscious desires, omnipotent fantasies, and yearnings for submission. In his view:

> The difference between these two conceptions in terms of both the normative and the explanatory role of psychoanalysis in Critical Theory is rather insignificant; in both cases, subjects are only capable of a fragmented form of intersubjectivity, because they are overwhelmed by the independence of a world of interaction that they cannot control. (2012c, p. 199).

For him, moreover, there would be no fundamental differences between the critical perspectives based on the psychoanalytic theories of Melanie Klein, Lacan, or orthodox Freud since they would all agree that "there are internal forces in the human being that disposes it to revolt against established orders." (Lysaker and Jakobsen, 2010, p. 169). The difference between these authors would be just in the origin of these negative impulses. Thus, he concludes that the Kleinian perspective of Amy Allen, the Freudian perspectives of Marcuse and Whitebook, and his own perspective would all be in the same field, equally seeking to explain the "negative energy" present in human subjects (Ibid).

Honneth's critics, however, such as Joel Whitebook, Amy Allen, Judith Butler, Inara Marin, and Mariana Pacheco, among others, all insist that his model still suffers from a significant lack of negativity and that there would be insurmountable and crucial differences between his perspective and others that place in the body the source of human negativity. First, his reading of object relations theory sustains an anthropology radically different from that of Freudian psychoanalysis because it establishes a mutualistic model of human nature in which individuals are understood as socially driven. Genel points out that Honneth is not far from Fromm and that his debate with Whitebook is not far from Adorno's critique of the revisionists (Genel, 2017, p. 286). Honneth himself recognized this fact, asking in sequence: "Why should a critical theory of society only be considered 'critical' if its socialization theoretical premises assume that there is a structural conflict between the individual and the social order, expressing itself in the 'negativity' of the subject?" (2012a, p. 217).

Furthermore, the content of Honneth's desire for fusion would be very different from the death drive that it intends to reflect. For example, the temporary abandonment of ego boundaries, which he relates to football stadiums and rock concerts, dramatically contrasts with the darker feelings evoked by the Freudian death drive, related to sadism, aggression, estrangement, and anguish. In his reading of Loewald, Honneth mentioned, for example, the possibility of a "rationally controlled regression" (1999, p. 240), which clearly opposes the impulsive, arbitrary, uncanny, and excessive

dimension of the drives. As Pacheco notes, for Freud, the drives would represent something that forcefully imposes itself, generating estrangement and lack of control (Pacheco, 2016, p. 82).

Judith Butler also reveals another dimension of the negative that the Honnethian perspective misses, related to his refusal of the death drive. Butler draws attention to that which is excluded or foreclosed from the symbolic order (1997, 2004). From her perspective, in short, even if the struggles for recognition can expand the recognition standards, there will always be an abject dimension that escapes them. That is, there will always be behaviors, ways of life, and identities that are not intelligible or socially recognizable. Demands for recognition will always produce new exclusions. Thus, for her, there would be significant political relevance in the very refusal and dissolution of identity beyond the demand for more recognition, which Honneth advocates. For Butler, the unrecognizable, monstrous, and abject dimension would be undeniably productive from a critical point of view by confronting the subject with what is not assimilable by the symbolic. Present in the Freudian death drive, this radical and destabilizing dimension could set in motion a work of the negative capable of important critical innovations and individual resistance.

In this sense, Genel points out that Honneth "follows the Frommian and Habermasian use of psychoanalysis more to think about the conditions of socialization than as a source of rationality critique." (2017, p. 285). Despite reintroducing psychoanalysis into the canon of critical theory, in rejecting drive theory altogether or any bodily-rooted motivation, Honneth missed the opportunity of explaining the deep blockages to emancipation (Marin, 2022, p. 254). Moreover, he failed to avoid moralistic idealism (Allen, 2021a) and a monist theory of the subject (Marin, 2022, p. 256). Especially in our current social and political context, losing sight of antinomic forces within the individuals or reducing it to an almost neutral longing for fusion is not enough to explain the aggressive and resistant allure of authoritarian forms of government. Therefore, the question remains open about what would be the place of the "sting of the negative" in a critical theory that does not abdicate social emancipation.

Part II - Jessica Benjamin and Intersubjectivity

So far, we have followed the understandings of Freud, Winnicott, and the leading critical theorists regarding the difficult intersections of nature and culture and their understanding of authoritarianism. For the founder of psychoanalysis, there is an unsurpassable incompatibility between the individual and society or between nature and civilization. The pleasure principle, which dominates the baby's experience of primary narcissism in his first period of life, is frustrated at his inevitable encounter with reality. His natural drives are excessive, antisocial, and disruptive, conflicting directly with other individuals. The death drive is especially uncivilized, demanding repression. The result is its internalization in the furious superego, which keeps one's actions and desires in check. To live in society, one must do violence to oneself, as the *Civilization and its Discontents* makes clear.

Winnicott also sustains the existence of a primary narcissistic phase, but he believes that it is sustained by the mother's extensive devotion, which corresponds to the complementary helplessness of the baby. After constituting an ego and achieving some degree of integration, the baby is ready to encounter reality. However, this process occurs gradually, counting on the exploration and play in the transitional space. Following the transitional quality of this first encounter with externality, a compromise can be reached between the individual and society, allowing both the protection and incommunicability of the True Self and its spontaneous and lively expression. Nature still presents an uncivilized instance of resistance and disruption, but one can reach a compromise through the transitional quality, in which it is partially integrated and expressed in a good-enough way.

Following their reception of psychoanalysis, critical theorists also faced the issue of explaining the relation between nature and civilization while trying to understand human irrationality and the potential for emancipation. Fromm, Habermas, and Honneth increasingly relativized the existence of a disruptive force within the individual, which they believed would undermine their strong normative expectations. Something like the death drive could not fit their more hopeful understandings.

Initially followed by Horkheimer, Fromm sociologizes Freud's categories, understanding that the individual character would be socially and historically determined. Even the individual's drives would be socially framed, which allows Fromm to believe in the possibility of a

reconciliation between the individual and society, in which the very split between reason and nature would be overcome.

On the contrary, Adorno and Horkheimer, especially after the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, do not give up sustaining a radical dissonance or incompatibility between the individual and society. While they do not see nature as a transparent and fixed element, they see in it an instance of permanent resistance against social conformism and identity assimilation. Instrumental reason would be necessary to dominate nature, but it would also represent a violent act against oneself. The death drive, in this view, represents the repressed antagonistic force against cultural determinants.

Believing that this negative conclusion undermined the very fundaments of critique, Habermas would rescue reason's positive connotation. He first read psychoanalysis as a method for increasing self-reflection, in which communicative practices could cure individual symptoms and dissolve unconscious motivations. When applied to social science, this method would indicate the need for unrestrained communication between the citizens as the foremost emancipatory practice in modernity. His "domesticated" reading of Freud led him to later abandon psychoanalysis to the detriment of the developmental psychologies of Piaget and Kohlberg.

Finally, Honneth rescues the use of psychoanalysis in critical theory, but he employs a particular reading of Winnicott's object relations theory to sustain the idea of recognition. The "sting of the negative" for him would not come from the drives, considered too metaphysical, but from the loss of the first fusion experience with the mother, from which later struggles for recognition would follow. For him, therefore, the individual would be socially driven, naturally seeking recognition, which drastically reduces human aggressiveness, failing to explain violent dynamics and deep blockages to emancipation.

With this context in mind, we are ready to ask ourselves: what is Jessica Benjamin's understanding of these issues? How does she perceive the relationship between nature and culture? Does she abandon drive theory to sustain intersubjectivity? In fact, these issues have also occupied her thinking since the beginning, informing her contribution to critical theory. However, her answer to these questions changed considerably throughout her career. Being one of the leading proponents of the intersubjective paradigm in psychoanalysis, she has been considered a "strong intersubjectivist" who would reject biologism and place all explanatory power in object relations.

If this was true in her initial contributions, I want to show that this tendency changed throughout her production, reaching closer proximity to Freudian pessimism in her last oeuvres.

I divide this analysis into four parts. The first part, chapter 4, deals with Benjamin's first productions, from the 1970s to the 1980s, in which, following the oscillation of the issue of negativity with her need to sustain intersubjectivity, I trace the consolidation of Benjamin's psychoanalysis, which occurred mainly with the publication of her main oeuvre, *The Bonds of Love* (1988). The second part, chapter 5, deals with Honneth's reception of Benjamin's contributions, especially her first works, which occurred mainly in his book *The Struggle for Recognition*. Thus, I compare Honneth's (mis)use of Benjamin in this book with her own intentions at that time, arguing that a more attentive reading of Benjamin's theory, especially *The Bonds of Love*, would culminate in a very different critical theory of society. The third part, chapter 6, exposes the following developments of Benjamin's theory during the 1990s. In dialogue with postmodern, feminist, and critical theorist interlocutors, she alters some aspects of her theory, trying to accommodate more aspects of negativity. However, many questions remain open from these works, inadvertently ending up with a naïve (or at least unclear) understanding of the self. Finally, the last part, chapter 7, deals with Benjamin's last productions, developed from the 2000s up to now. It focuses on Benjamin's last book *Beyond Doer and Done To* (2018). The reading I offer of her later productions aims to reveal a "sting of negativity" that follows from her inferences, showing that they are rooted in human vulnerability. I conclude that it is this negativity that connects her psychoanalytic theory with a critical reading of society that does justice to the seriousness of the political and social moment in which we live, in dialogue with the first generation of critical theory.

4. Jessica Benjamin's first productions (from the 1970s to 1980s): The first crusade against internalization

Jessica Benjamin is an American social theorist and psychoanalyst. Coming from a Marxist family, her main theoretical interest at the beginning of her career was centered on social theory – to help heal society's pathologies, so to speak, more than the individual ones. During the 1960s, she pursued social theory studies in college and actively participated in the American civil rights movement. It was during this time that she came across the works of the Frankfurt School, with an emphasis on Marcuse, who was instrumental in the New Left movement in the United States. Reading critical theory, in turn, led her to Freud, which significantly impacted her comprehension

of the social world. However, her parallel involvement in the feminist movement shortly after led her to question some of the Frankfurtian conclusions, subsequently motivating her to criticize Freud. At the center of these developments was the issue of human nature, drive theory, and the inevitability of discontent.

At first, for her, *Civilization and Its Discontents* seemed to explain the roots of social irrationality and the pervasiveness of oppression with great accuracy. However, the feminist revolutionary point of view she adopted soon contradicted the pessimist conclusions defended by Freud, making her question how to harmonize them with feminist politics. As she explained in a recent interview:

> Marcuse famously attacked Erich Fromm for abandoning instinct theory, of which he was a great defender. But for me, reading *Eros and Civilization*, followed by Freud, especially *Civilization's Discontents*, was a turning point. I was absolutely riveted, thrilled, and stunned. It felt as though I could begin to make sense of a world that was previously opaque; people's craziness and irrationality had no sense to it, if you will. But this moment of revelation was quickly followed by another, as only a few months the first women's group met. [...] So at the point where I was encountering a radical theory that incorporated Marxism with the idea of liberating human subjectivity, the demand to include women's subjectivity came up. (Benjamin and Atlas, 2022, p. 414).

It was the connections between Marxism, Frankfurt critical theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism which first inspired Benjamin's academic productions. Her early writings of the 1970s offer a direct critique of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno's and Horkheimer's understandings of the family and the formation of the individual psyche. Her central concern was to reject the need for the internalization of paternal authority in the superego, an issue linked to the feminist rejection of a patriarchal reference to secure normativity and resistance.

Mentioning the Frankfurtian critique of the pos-Freudian revisionists, Martin Jay notes that "Fromm had attacked Freud for his authoritarian lack of warmth, but true revolutionaries are often called hard and cold." (1996, p. 105). It is precisely this patriarchal characterization of the revolutionary subject that Benjamin questions, an image that did not correspond to herself or her colleagues in the civil rights and feminist movements. Her rejection of the internalization of authority is linked to questions about how to overcome the existing hierarchical difference between masculine and feminine subjectivities and how to characterize a revolutionary practice that did not depend on the patriarchal model of authority and morality. However, these questions imply a challenge to the father of psychoanalysis; that is, Benjamin's critique of Adorno and Horkheimer leads to a feminist critique of Freud.

In her first writings, she opposes the need for internalization with an empathic picture of nature. Intersubjective recognition would be natural and fundamentally positive. However, by the end of the 1980s, with the publication of *The Bonds of Love* (1988), her solution to the problem of internalization becomes more complex. In it, the value of recognition arises from the contrasting discontent of the omnipotent master when he succeeds in dominating the other. Intersubjectivity, then, is not an ideal of love and empathy but a concrete experience that balances self-assertion and the affirmation of the other, the desire for domination and the desire for connection.

4.1. First articles (from 1977 to 1988): human nature as empathetic, against internalization

Before the publication of her main oeuvre, *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin published several articles, during the 1970s and early 1980s, investigating the limits of internalization and possible alternatives to it. Assisted by object relations theory, the solution that begins to emerge in her first writings is a model of intersubjectivity that functions as an alternative to internalization. Identifying internalization with an eminently patriarchal action, which promotes the isolation between the self and the other, Benjamin sought to rescue the feminine dimension of care while avoiding idealizing the feminine sphere. Her initial proposal aims at overcoming the split between the masculine and the feminine, but it results in the identification of an overly positive human nature, in which there is no room for the Freudian indomitable drives nor any original antisocial force. Otherwise, the internalization of authority would be necessary to control an aggressive and disruptive nature. Therefore, Benjamin's rejection of internalization leads to the hypothesis of an empathic human substrate or an original capacity for sociability in a similar direction that Fromm took. In fact, in her early works, she suggests that she would side with the psychoanalytic revisionists, rejecting the existence of innate aggressive tendencies (Benjamin, 1977, p. 60-64; 1978, p. 56-57).

Despite replacing Freudian negativity, however, the concept of intersubjectivity is not yet fully developed and does not have an evident meaning, being, in general, related to empathy, love, and care. Moreover, this early description of intersubjectivity reveals her hope in a space of complete reconciliation, in which paradoxes, such as the split between self and other or between masculine and feminine, could be transcended. In this description, the hope for reconciliation of nature and civilization is evident, missing the dimension of estrangement and unreason, which is fundamental for Freud.

One of Benjamin's first and most important articles, "The End of Internalization: Adorno's social psychology" (1977), aims to point out the contradictions in the need for internalization.[13] Benjamin explains that internalization is the process that transposes the relationship with an external authority into the psyche. Rather than simply fearing an authority outside, internalization generates an intrapsychic split that inaugurates a reflexive internal relationship through which one part of the ego exercises authority over the other. Thus, the commandments of authority come to be experienced as emanating from the subject himself, from his own superego, while the fear of external punishment gives way to the feeling of guilt. Therefore, domination is internalized through internalization, so authority is transfigured into the superego.

As we saw, Adorno and Horkheimer supported the need for internalization because they saw in it the ambiguous foundation of rationality and critical exercise. For them, it is precisely in the intrapsychic contradiction between the ego and the drives that resides a critical potential or an instance of mediation between the individual and society. The domination that the ego processes over its own nature through internalization would allow the exercise of reflexivity, giving the subject the possibility of taking himself as an object of reflection and control. Although this reflexivity means an objectification of oneself, it also represents an element of self-awareness and autonomy of the individual ego. Being necessary to dominate internal nature, considered incompatible with social life, the internalization of authority becomes justifiable, even if contradictory.

For Benjamin, however, what this understanding implies is the recurrent need for law and authority. It reveals an excessive attachment to the patriarchal model, which the authors justify by the need to oppose a threatening and aggressive image of nature. The main problem with this understanding is that it interprets (paternal) authority as, to a certain extent, necessary or justifiable. In Benjamin's words: "since Adorno finds no possibility of a reconciliation between reason and nature, the struggle between them results in an impasse from which authority emerges triumphant." (1977, p. 43).

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[13] Benjamin's reading of Adorno merits further investigation, which I could not provide in this text. That is, in this research, I could not deeply explore the relationship between Benjamin's production and Adorno's work enough to assess if her reading of his work is the most accurate. My aim here is to explore in more general terms the contributions of the overall production of Jessica Benjamin to critical theory's current discussions on authoritarianism. The bridge I am proposing between the first generation and the subsequent ones could undoubtedly use, in the future, further support from a deeper engagement with Adorno's oeuvre.

In fact, although the critical theorists add more complexity to the nature-society relationship, as we saw, they perpetuate the Freudian impasse because "society is inevitably founded on the domination of internal nature." (Ibid, p. 60). For Adorno, as for Freud, the perennial need for domination of inner nature or drive renunciation derives from the fact that "the rift between nature and society is absolute," so that "some form of domination, a relationship of instrumentality, is therefore unavoidable." (Ibid).

Moreover, Benjamin acknowledges that the authors of the first generation see the nature-culture conflict as a productive element for critical theory, especially in the face of a contradictory reality in which any form of predetermined reconciliation is out of the question. However, just as the more optimistic theorists of critical theory have argued, since the revisionist psychoanalysts, Benjamin charges this negativist view as conformist or resigned, especially concerning the need for paternal authority.

Denying the need for internalization, her only option now seems to be rejecting the Freudian drive theory, especially the death drive, and even rejecting nature as an instance of social disruption. Indeed, at this moment, she suggests that social antagonisms would not express a destructive nature but would result more directly from social and historical processes. Accordingly, seeking foundations for a more mutualistic social interaction would be possible beyond our specific oppressive historical reality. In this sense, she argues that "the problem [in Adorno's theory] results from blurring the distinction between control, appropriation and transformation of nature." (Ibid, p. 49). Thus, she suggests that such a distinction would indicate modes of relationship with nature that are less conflicting and more harmonious. It would be possible, in other words, to transform nature, including our inner nature, without control and appropriation or without necessarily maintaining internalized repression.

Nevertheless, to deny the need for internalization and, even more, for controlling and repressing nature, Benjamin needs to find another basis for critique, or resistance to authority, an element that she finds in mutuality. Intersubjectivity is the source of emancipatory potential that her critical theory needs. In this sense, she argues, with Habermas, that the lack of a concept of intersubjectivity inexorably leads Horkheimer and Adorno back to the model of the autonomous liberal individual and to self-preserving rationality.[14]

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[14] It is worth pointing out that Benjamin already makes it clear that she disagrees with Habermas' reading of Freud (1977, 49). It is notable, in later texts, the difference between her concept of recognition from that of the philosopher, as will become clear throughout this work.

Rather than an aggressive and antisocial inner nature, she sustains a "basic need for recognition" (Ibid, p. 47). For her, the causes of domination should be sought in social processes derived from the need for recognition, not in the return of repressed nature. Benjamin suggests that "What appears to be internal nature can be grasped as the alienated form of the need for recognition, distorted through an intersubjective process of objectification." (Ibid). In other words, aggression would not express a contradictory instinctual reality but an alienated need for recognition.

It is true that she seeks to maintain the concept of the drives, believing that they are essential as individual motivators "in the sense that the 'libido is the actual reality.'" (Ibid, p. 63). Nevertheless, following her commitment to object relations theory, she understands that drives are object-seeking. Thus, we cannot understand them as an essentialist or deterministic reality since they always manifest themselves directed towards an object, being, therefore, always related to a context of social interaction. Thus, for her, "What Adorno misses about sexuality is that people's deepest needs can be distorted and turned against them, not that the needs or drives themselves are hostile." (Ibid, p. 63). Likewise, for her, in fascism, we would not see the expression of an aggressive drive *per se*, but the distortion of positive or neutral drive energies, deformed by a social process of alienation.

Following this line of argumentation, Benjamin's theory resonates with the revisionist psychoanalysts, harshly criticized by Adorno, because she suggests that pathological effects would essentially have a social or relational genesis, not a natural one. Accordingly, for her, the Adornian pessimistic view, which praises the cold and misanthropic theorist, would have obvious connections with the idealization of the father figure. Like Freud, Adorno would value intellectual coldness as the foundation of the possibility of knowledge, to the detriment of love and affective involvement. Both in Freudian metapsychology and in Frankfurt's critical theory, the ego would be the necessary dividing instance between the individuals, promoting control and rationality, while love would represent, on the contrary, a dangerous lack of differentiation and an irrational lack of control. That is why Freud attributed to instrumental reason the necessary unifying element of society, rejecting love as a social principle. Contrary to these authors, Benjamin insists that love is not necessarily opposed to knowledge and social life.

Furthermore, even if she argues in favor of maintaining the concept of the drives, she discards the idea of the death drive or any essentially negative or antisocial element in the original human constitution. In her view, if we understand human nature as hostile and threatening, then

the individual is always self-interested and aggressive, demanding internalized repression. In her words, that sums up what is in question:

> Critical theory is consistent in maintaining that the individual is not naturally social, and conversely, that real individuality (autonomous ego development) is only social, an artificial product. The rift between nature and society is absolute; some form of domination, a relationship of instrumentality, is therefore unavoidable. The impossibility of escaping instinctual repression and renunciation also follow from these assumptions about human nature; society is inevitably founded on the domination of internal nature. Hence critical theory does not escape Freud's impasse in which socialization leads to its own destruction. (Ibid, p. 60).

She then concludes that the way out from such a pessimistic conclusion requires a more friendly and mutualistic understanding of nature, sustaining an egoic ideal that is also more sociable and empathetic, capable of intersubjectivity.

Benjamin elaborated more deeply on this conclusion in a subsequent article, in which she criticizes the defense of bourgeois rationality in Horkheimer's model. The result of this analysis, anticipating the article's conclusion, is the defense of an overly positive picture of human nature, which ends up opposing individual rationality and love.

The article, entitled "Authority and the Family Revisited: Or, a World without Fathers?" (1978), denounces a certain nostalgia for paternal authority derived from the diagnosis that we would be suffering the consequences of a "society without fathers" a recurring thesis that goes back to Horkheimer's critical theory. According to this notion, the absence of paternal authority as a moral reference would prevent the formation of conscious and self-reflexive individuals. Present in the rhetoric of some Marxist movements, this view would imply that we need to resemble authority in some way to be able to face it; that is, we need first to internalize authority to be then able to challenge it. Resistance, therefore, always implies an image of strength and revolt based on the male figure, which would call into question the feminist struggle because only the paternal model is considered a consistent foundation for critical resistance and revolution. Therefore, still questioning internalization, Benjamin rejects Horkheimer's theory of instrumental rationality.

At first, she argues that blaming nature for our need for authority reveals a gender split that associates femininity with regressive undifferentiation, contrasting it to rational and mature masculinity. Only the father would safeguard us against civilizational regression – *qua* mother-baby undifferentiation. Separation from the mother, in this view, depends on an identification with the father, so individuality implies a repudiation of mother/nature.

Borrowing the Hegelian analysis of the master and the slave, Benjamin poses that the gap between the human subject and nature derives from the lack of recognition between the subjects.

While the slave only executes the master's orders, without freedom, the dominant master does not actually contact nature, remaining reactive or defensive to it. Thus, neither the slave nor the master have autonomy or exercise a conscious intention in their relationship with the external world. Our society, divided between masters and slaves, is also separated from a relationship of recognition with nature or the other so that what remains is only the instrumentalization of the world or a "rationality without authorship." (1978, p. 41). As Benjamin puts it: "In essence, this perspective makes the domination of subject by subject the root of the domination and violence toward nature. The paradigm of the male-female division is, of course, suggested by this simultaneous subjugation and equation of nature and other." (Ibid).

Concerning the patriarchal society, it is evident that the maternal function is seen as only regressive and undifferentiated, whereas the idealized paternal function would represent the bulwark of civilization. However, this view "promotes the undialectical and individualistic proposition that freedom consists of isolation" (Ibid, p. 51), or separation from mother and nature. Thus, it would be necessary for the individual to repudiate the identification with the other, especially the mother, to obtain self-reflexivity and self-control. In Benjamin's reading, as long as instrumental rationality remains, there will always be a cultural substratum that values "masculine" dominance and strength, paralleling a rejection of "feminine" care and dependency so that we cannot speak of a "society without fathers." The question, then, is to understand how this instrumental rationality is sustained and how to deal with it, avoiding the nostalgia for paternal domination and internalization.

Now, the model of intersubjective recognition comes in again to oppose the appearance of a perpetually antagonistic nature. To deny the need for internalization, Benjamin postulates the nature-culture antagonism as secondary, derived from the distortion or alienation of a primary demand for recognition. As she indicates: "it seems that internalization is a response to the deprivation of recognition, agency and authorship." (Ibid, p. 55). In other words, for Benjamin, the desire for recognition must be original so that it is possible to sustain a society without internalization.

In this sense, as an alternative to modern rationality, when approaching the article's conclusion, she seeks other social references that would be less patriarchal. She finds a positive example in networks of female kinship and sisterhood present in nineteenth-century America. Also valuing the contemporary feminist ideal of "revolt based upon identification with other stemming

from awareness of one's own suffering and oppression" (Ibid, p. 56), she admits that this conclusion "implies, ultimately, a different view of human nature and the civilizing process as well." (Ibid). This perspective indeed directly contrasts with the Freudian negativist model adopted by the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

This difference is even more apparent in Benjamin's concluding reference to Rousseau, who believed that the Enlightenment would have created an unnatural self-conservative tendency contrary to natural human empathy. In the face of others' sufferings, the modern civilized man would isolate himself, finding safety in differentiation. However, this move required an internal struggle to oppose a natural feeling of identification and revolt against suffering. In short, by referring to Rousseau, Benjamin advocates an original capacity for identification and mutual recognition, which the internalization of patriarchal authority would have distorted.

Given this noticeably positive understanding of human nature, she can then criticize the internalization of authority as the element that represses a natural sociable tendency. In this model, it would be possible to rescue a never-completely-extinguished potential of emancipation via reciprocal recognition and care for the other, which would run against bourgeois instrumental rationality, understood as secondary. The "revolt of nature," instead of expressing the disruptive and uncivilized drives, would represent, in her view, a constructive feeling of "revulsion against human suffering and the refusal to cause it." (Ibid, p. 56).

This notion is directly contrary to the regressive violence that Horkheimer identifies with the expression of nature under fascism. Thus, she argues: "Contrary to Horkheimer's view of 'the revolt of nature' as the primitive aggression which came to the fore in fascism, empathy and compassion are seen as innate, immediate responses rather than the blessings of civilization." (Ibid, p. 56-57).

Such a positive vision of human nature, which then appears in its most idealized form in all of Benjamin's work, approximates her theory to the post-Freudian revisionists, with the difference that sociability is linked to intersubjective recognition, in contrast to the model of Erich Fromm, for example, which is based on the independence and morality of the individual ego. In summary, the initial objective of rejecting the model of the patriarchal revolution and the bourgeois family impels the psychoanalyst to repudiate internalization, which, at the end of the day, leads her to a highly positive metapsychoanalytic model. In other words, as we saw, the author's first theoretical

engagement with the Frankfurt School results in a rather optimistic or even naïve view of human nature as a counterpoint to internalization.

However, throughout the 1980s, Benjamin began to develop her own original theory, which would prove to be much more ambivalent and complex than in these early writings. Such theoretical developments culminate in her best-known work, the book *The Bonds of Love*, published in 1988, which we will study below. Before going into the next section, however, I will briefly present the article "Shame and sexual politics" (1982), which represents an important theoretical transition between the initial moment of Benjamin's theoretical production and her more mature work. Some other articles from that decade were updated and incorporated in the book, but what this particular article brings to this research is an interesting recovery of the negative dimension of social relations, or a deeper consideration of the non-identical dimension of nature, even if this text does not deal primarily with psychoanalysis.

In this essay, initially conceived for a conference on feminist theory, the psychoanalyst recalls her personal history in the revolutionary movement, marked by contradictory identifications with her revolutionary father, a leader of the Marxist movement in America, and her more passive mother, occupied with motherhood and everyday private activities. From this experience, she asks herself about the means for a feminist revolutionary movement trapped between these two paradigms. Following Simone de Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex* (1974), she affirms that while men sought to transcend their condition through the selfless risk of death in search of glorious historical change and universal justice, women would be stuck in the immanent space of the home, the ahistorical, natural, and passive private sphere, in which the separation of subjects is blurred. The split between transcendence and immanence also represented a split between risking life, on the one hand, and giving and maintaining life, on the other; between the individual and the law, on the one hand, and affective and regressive non-differentiation, on the other.

In this interpretation, she admits that, at least in our society, the relationship with the "law" also represents the institution of an ordered social world that prevents archaic undifferentiation or a dangerous return to immanent nature. The social law that regulates and limits the public world would defend the subjects from the psychic death of undifferentiation. In this context, the revolutionary rupture with what is "normal" or familiar to a society also implies an inverse risk of losing one's limits or destroying any law and any source of legitimacy, representing a dangerous

and disturbing regression to immanence. Revolution, if successful, would evoke the terrible lack of limitations and order.

Against the vertiginous danger of lawlessness, revolutionary struggles would count on two options. On the one hand, revolutions tended to slide into reformist movements, seeking to evade a direct confrontation with authority. However, in this case, they easily fall into mere pragmatism and conformism, ultimately accepting the moral authority of the father.

On the other hand, revolutionary struggles could directly challenge the law. However, in this case, they run the risk not only of physical death but also of psychic death and the terror of undifferentiation, represented by total isolation, chaos, or insanity, all possibilities perhaps equally terrifying (1982, p. 154). In opting for a revolutionary utopian idealism, or a non-reformist form of action, one faces, then, these possibilities, either of physical death at the hands of the father or of psychic death, in case the father is overturned: "the risk in combat, if not death at the Father's hand, is the loss of his protection against primal maternal immanence. The risk that if the Father is truly overthrown, there will be only nothingness, meaninglessness, vertigo." (Ibid, p. 155).

Moreover, against the loss of boundaries that the absence of the law inaugurates, there would be a tendency to quickly restore the law, replacing the overturned father with a new authority. As soon as a father is overthrown, another is immediately put in his place, with the justification that "this time it will be a just and moral father." (Ibid). For this reason, against an oppressive social law, revolutionaries use alternative ideals or moral references as both a shield and an encouragement. But they, in fact, reinstate a new paternal authority. That is why several revolutions descended into a moralistic and violent Jacobinism, establishing a period of terror after the seizure of power: "Much too quickly the wound of open fear has been sealed by the creation of new law, new morality, new authority, and by the 'Terror.'" (Ibid). In other words, revolutionary struggles were usually about substitutions of one moral authority, one father, for another, which always maintained the patriarchal power structure.

Faced with this diagnosis, what would then be the place of the feminist struggle? What would be left for the feminist revolutionaries? On the one hand, if they entered "the fields of power" (Ibid, p. 152), seeking to reach their own transcendence, they ran the risk of re-instituting the individualistic model, wielding a universal and abstract morality, to the detriment of the concrete particularity of immanence. On the other hand, remaining within immanence would not change the exclusion of women from transcendence. For the author, "to bring politics into the field of

immanence, to stamp it with the experience of suffering and powerlessness" (Ibid, p. 153) would also mean dissolving the field of power and political struggle, diluting the capacity and possibility of transcendence.

At that time, feminism tended to pursue the first path, valuing motherhood and the female body as sources of strength and power, to the detriment of their deleterious identification with confinement, weakness, and death. Moreover, the model of the lesbian relationship represented freedom, independence, and self-choice. However, this image of strength seemed to deny or at least neglect dependence, trying to hide the fact that even the lesbian, who appeared to be completely independent of men, is also the daughter of a father. In this way, the feminist movement would also have moved towards a defensive position based on the denial of their shameful dependence on the Other, the Father. At the same time, the excessive idealization of women reinstalled a new moral authority, advancing the evasion of self-exposure and the denial of vulnerability.

As a result, the double movement of assuming an idealized position of power while denying dependency, as in historical revolutionary struggles, drove feminists to the extremes either of severe moralization through a "strategy of terror" (Ibid, p. 157) or of paralysis, evidenced by the evasion of many women, especially heterosexual ones, for a merely private (immanent) struggle. For Benjamin, the feeling underlying these two poles was the hidden shame of women's dependence, weakness, and impotence in relation to men. In this sense, she claims that "Both the ideal of strength and the defensiveness about dependency – the two sides of the women's movement today – remind me of the male left heritage" (Ibid, p. 158) in its claim not to depend on nobody.

That is, not even the feminist movement, in its denial of paternal authority, was managing to advance a revolutionary practice without the moralistic internalization of authority. Feminists would be repeating the rejection of the maternal dimension of care, empathy, vulnerability, and bodily intimacy, which revolutionaries traditionally had to sacrifice. This tendency plunged the feminine ideal of freedom back into the realm of the heroic individual, in which freedom should be deserved or conditioned to moral obedience in a "Paternal world of reward and punishment." (Ibid). In contrast, the rejected maternal world of immanence would be "beyond good and evil" (Ibid) because it would transmit unconditional love independent of historical principles or ideals. Neglecting this world, the feminists would be repeating the well-known pattern in which only at

the expense of denying the other can we achieve the affirmation of the self. The denial of men's transcendence would be a condition of feminine transcendence.

However, would there be another revolutionary model that dispenses with the negation of the other or does not depend on an alternative moralistic law? That is roughly the same question that occupied Benjamin in previous years when she reflected on the need for internalization. Her interrogation remains whether even the feminist struggle would need to internalize a moral authority to assert its demands. Now, however, the author suggests that the other side of internalization is not so much an empathetic and sociable human nature but something more negative and inscrutable, related to the experiences of chaos, nothingness, madness, or, at the very least, shame. She claims, for example, that for modern revolutionary movements, "To attack the father without establishing a new form of his moral authority is to risk the death of the ego: chaos, the boundless, madness." (Ibid, p. 155). Then she asks herself: "Above all, have we an image of freedom that would allow us to welcome that return to oneness, that risk of death, without the protection of new moral authority?" (Ibid, p. 157).

To escape the dichotomy between moralizing idealization and dissolution in immanence, avoiding idealizing either side, Benjamin suggests a balance. Between the impossibilities of transcendence and immanence, we should seek a middle ground. More precisely, the solution outlined for a feminist policy, in the context of the conflict between these two options, would be to "find a form of transcendence which does not repudiate immanence." (Ibid).

To this end, she proposes that we see female sisterhood as "both an ideal and an experience." (Ibid, p. 158). On the one hand, strong bonds of sisterhood experienced in feminist movements fostered the formation of a defensive ideal or a "moral refuge," which also instituted its own moral authority. Although important and empowering, this moralistic idealization also ran the risk of becoming detached from immanent concrete experiences, being a source of dogmatic terror, which merely demanded the reversal of power relations. In this sense, promoting sisterhood as an *experience*, more than an ideal, should counterbalance this moralistic tendency, encouraging concrete tolerance, intimacy, and cooperation in the small actions of everyday life.

This balance, however, would imply assuming the uncomfortable dependency between men and women, as well as understanding that "domination is interspersed with love and reciprocity in intimate relationships" (Ibid, p. 159), a theme extensively addressed in Benjamin's subsequent book. Thus, addressing intimate relationships and understanding how domination is intertwined

with love becomes fundamental to discovering a form of political action that does not deny vulnerability, dependency, and shame, while also avoiding idealizing femininity. No wonder, in the Introduction to *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin states that the deconstruction of the sexual split that permeates Western culture requires criticizing "not only the idealization of the masculine side, but also the reactive valorization of femininity." (1988, p. 11). The radicalism of the feminist movement should develop a mode of transcendence that does not deny dependence but sees in it a way to achieve reciprocity, to the detriment of power reversal (1982, p. 158). Against the defensive need for internalization, it is necessary to assume vulnerability and embrace our dependency on each other, making the collective elaboration of shame a form of political action.

In this article, therefore, anticipating the publication of *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin approaches a conception of intersubjectivity that gives more space to negativity, avoiding the naïve presupposition of an empathetic human nature. The reconciliation between subject and object would no longer be so natural or automatic, but it would need to go through the dangerous and disturbing unveiling of idealizations. Although several questions remain open at that moment, finding a more extensive elaboration in later publications, a return of negativity could be glimpsed, if we like, in the highly disorganizing elements that the absent father reveals: chaos, vertigo, madness, and shame.

4.2. The Bonds of Love (1988): intersubjectivity as communion with nature

After elaborating on her own psychoanalytic theory in several articles during the 1980s, Benjamin published the book *The Bonds of Love*, her first and most famous oeuvre, in which she offers a creative understanding of psychoanalysis and subject constitution. The publication offers an extensive and extremely rich theory, covering the formation of the subject, the oedipal complex, the relationship between the baby and his parents, sadomasochism, and many other topics. Since her theory is broad and complex, I will go through the book's arguments focusing on the nature *v.* culture issue, explaining how internalization and recognition frame her understanding of it.

This question remains an essential motivation for her work. It is not by chance that she opens the book with a quotation extracted from *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in which Freud defines men as naturally aggressive creatures, which then justifies the need for self-domination. Nevertheless, instead of disputing this presupposition directly, Benjamin now disagrees with this way of posing the question, arguing that the duality – aggressive instincts *versus* domination –

reveals only the oppressive function of power while neglecting its constructive function. She affirms: "But this opposition between instincts and civilization obscures the central question of how domination actually works." (1988, p. 4). Adopting a Foucaultian view on power, which sees it as productive and not just oppressive, now she seeks to explain our *desire* for domination more than our need for it.

Indeed, in the Introduction of *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin affirms that the aim of her investigation is to understand domination: "This book is an analysis of the interplay between love and domination. [...] Above all, this book seeks to understand how domination is anchored in the hearts of the dominated." (1988, p. 5). More precisely, Benjamin's central preoccupation is understanding women's domination, or understanding "how the subjugation of women takes hold in the psyche and shapes the pattern of domination." (Ibid, p. 74).

Greatly influenced by the relational turn in psychoanalysis, which had a substantial development in the 1980s, she combines the theories of different psychoanalytic authors, such as Winnicott, Daniel Stern, and Beatrice Beebe, with feminist influences, mainly Simone the Beauvoir, to offer a theory that understands how domination gets inscribed into the bodies and psyches of the dominated. As we will see, if there is something permanent or natural in the human being, this is the desire for recognition, which is not directly sociable or benevolent but fundamentally paradoxical.

It is such a paradoxical nature that easily culminates in pervasive and oppressive cultural splits throughout history, which is the case with modern patriarchy. The figures of the master, the sadist, the oedipal boy, the oedipal father, and the modern scientist, which all appear in the book, represent the effort of dominating nature. Through these figures, Benjamin understands that the paradox of recognition is easily stabilized in a one-sided oppressive scheme. On the other side, the slave, the masochist, the oedipal girl, the archaic mother, and the passive object of scientific investigation all represent naturalized characters dominated by modern patriarchal rationality. In this context, power over nature is not just a negative or repressive instance but also a productive one, having the function of integrating, molding, and giving access to nature, albeit in aggressive ways. These are, respectively, the characters we will meet in the following reconstruction, intending to understand how power oppresses them, animates them, and constitutes their desire.

Since this is her first and perhaps most important book and her arguments are presented in a chained manner, I will introduce them in sufficient detail, following the structure of the oeuvre.

In short, in dialogue with Hegel and Winnicott, she (1) begins by delineating the fundamental paradox of recognition that defines the human condition, from the beginning of life. She then (2) studies the relationships of sadomasochism, in order to explain how this paradox turns into domination without much difficulty. Such patterns of relationship have a gender dimension. Thus, subsequently, she studies how domination structures our cultural gender system, (3) shaping erotic desire, (4) organizing gender identification in the Oedipus complex, and finally (5) informing the very structure of modern society and modern rationality. Through the critique of rationality, Benjamin envisions the possibility of communion with nature, representing the maintenance of the tension between self and other or between reason and nature. In conclusion, aligned with Winnicott, Benjamin sustains the possibility of a compromise between true and false forms of life. In this case, power would not be eliminated, but it would be made flexible, disrupting oppressive cultural references, integrating nature differently, and allowing greater spontaneous expression. This experience of compromise, finally, counterbalances our need for the internalization of authority, thus offering an alternative foundation for critical theory.

4.2.1 *The Master and the Slave: the first bond of love between mother and baby*

In the first chapter, Benjamin analyzes how the dynamic of domination is closely related to the paradox of recognition, which begins between the baby and his mother in the process of individuation.[15] Following the Hegelian analysis of the master and the slave, Benjamin identifies this same dynamic in the individual's first affective bond. In her words: "But what Hegel formulated at the level of philosophical abstraction can also be discussed in terms of what we now know about the psychological development of the infant." (Ibid, p. 12). In this view, when a consciousness wants to affirm its absoluteness, it realizes that it needs another consciousness to confirm it; when the subject wants to affirm his absolute independency, he realizes that he depends on the recognition of an other. Since two subjects in relation need and desire the recognition of the

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[15] Benjamin explains that this analysis is restricted to Western middle-class families, where the mother is the most frequent primary caregiver. Despite the significant variation in the organization of childrearing, I will refer to the primary caregiver as the "mother" and the baby as a male figure ("he") to avoid confusion. Following Benjamin's suggestion (1988, p. 13-14), I acknowledge the ambiguity of this use and choose to keep it in a critical stance. Since gender complementarities are under critical scrutiny in this theory (she/he; mother/baby; object/subject), this demands that we critically call them by name. Nevertheless, it must be clear that following her strategy, the "mother" in my use means "the significant adult, which could equally be a father or any other caregiver well known to the child. But since it is quite relevant to my argument that the principal caregiver in our culture is usually (or is assumed to be) 'the mother,' this ambiguity will have to remain." (Ibid).

other, a fundamental conflict arises between them. Hence, Benjamin understands that the fundamental desire for recognition that characterizes the subject constitution is essentially paradoxical. We are trapped in a conflictual relationship with ourselves and others: "The need for recognition entails this fundamental paradox: at the very moment of realizing our own independence, we are dependent upon another to recognize it." (Ibid, p. 33). This paradoxical dependent-independency is what constitutes the basic structure of the Benjaminian subject since its very first constitution.

From the master and slave analysis, however, Benjamin departs from Hegel to affirm that the domination of one consciousness to the other is avoidable. For her, it is possible to maintain a mutual balance between the subjects, which dynamically accommodates each one's self-affirmation and the appreciation of the other. The relational structure that produces a precarious balance between separation and identification is intersubjective recognition. It can dynamically prevent the relationship from sliding into domination by one of the subjects. This perspective contains an inherent tension or contradiction because it understands that we can recognize the other as both diverse and equal to us, that is, as "an other who is capable of sharing similar mental experience" (Ibid, p. 20), which implies a permanent movement between the search for independence and the need for confirmation.

To sustain the possibility of this dynamic balance, Benjamin relies on Winnicott. What is most relevant for her is his notion of using the object. As we saw, only the subject outside oneself can be "used" in the sense of being emotionally significant to oneself as an independent being. But to meet the other outside, one must try to destroy the other inside (in one's fantasy). For Benjamin, destruction is an attempt at differentiation, a way of coping with the paradox of recognition, and an expression of the Hegelian desire to deny the other and affirm one's independence.

Nevertheless, if we achieve the complete destruction of the other, no one is left to recognize our authenticity. If the other is destroyed, in fact, not just in fantasy, it ceases to be viable as a source of recognition, ceasing to exist as an autonomous subject. Then, the victorious master finds himself alone in a world "empty of all human life." (Ibid, p. 71). Finding no limits or otherness, he experiences a reality so empty, desolate, and senseless that his own omnipotent power oppresses himself. The other, reduced to a dead object, contaminates his own reality, turning himself into a master of a dead world. In other words, the reality of the master, in its most extreme form, is one

of deadness, abandonment, and devastation, in which there is no living limit to the subject's destructibility.

Alternatively, if the other destroys me, then it is I who cease to exist outside of the other's omnipotent projection, losing my independence and spontaneity. The dominated self is reduced to a dull, predictable, and controllable object, a false self with no space for discovering or expressing its subjectivity. The world of the slave is also empty and dead, but it is filled with the other's tyrannical power, to which one can only react. Nothing the subject does is authentic; in fact, he may not even know what it is that he wants.

One can only avoid domination when he or she discovers first the disastrous outcome that results from one or the other succeeding in the struggle for recognition and second the fleeting possibility of mutual recognition. If the other survives destruction, remaining attuned to the subject, s/he can be met as another separate subject. Destruction and survival are the movements that allow the intersubjective balance to be kept in dynamic aliveness. Recognition, therefore, involves a constant process of destruction of the other in fantasy, making him or her appear as a subject "in its own right" (Ibid, p. 37). This process is always gradual, impure, and precarious, so the other is never really met in immediacy. Instead, intersubjective and intrapsychic processes constantly overlap.

Indeed, for Benjamin, her intersubjective theory does not cancel or replace the classic intrapsychic theory. She also does not claim a total rupture from Freud, but a further development of his theory, as Winnicott did. Contrary to what some critics of intersubjective psychoanalysis believe, Benjamin's theory does not claim a substitution or overcoming of Freudism, but a concomitant view, which complicates the picture and adds other, sometimes conflictual or paradoxical, elements to the analysis. The intersubjective point of view complements psychoanalysis, even if it also complicates and constrains the orthodox view. Benjamin affirms:

> But my point here is not to reverse Freud's decision for the inner world by choosing the outside world; it is, rather, to grasp both realities. Without the intrapsychic concept of the unconscious, intersubjective theory becomes one-dimensional, for it is only against the background of the mind's private space that the real other stands out in relief. (Ibid, p. 21).

Benjamin also admits that she cannot synthesize both theories because that falls outside the scope of her book. So, she chooses to emphasize the intersubjective dimension, which is less developed and overshadowed by the classic intrapsychic one. However, she understands that there is a relationship of simultaneity, not sequence or mutual exclusion, between both sides. She affirms:

> Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this discussion to propose a scheme for synthesizing the two approaches. The problem is that each focuses on different aspects of psychic experience which are too interdependent to be simply severed from one another. I am emphasizing intersubjectivity over intrapsychic theory because the latter is better developed and usually overshadows the former, not because I think one ought to preclude the other. (Ibid, p. 21).

She compares this complex and sometimes conflictual relationship with a two-way street in which the fluxes move in opposing directions. Another instructing analogy of the intrapsychic and intersubjective currents is the optical-illusion picture of the Escher birds, which shows superimposed birds that seem to fly in opposing directions. More precisely, this figure depicts birds flying in one direction over a background that, under a closer look, is also composed of birds flying in the opposite direction. One needs to look in both directions simultaneously to grasp the whole picture. The visual difficulty in doing so illustrates the conceptual difficulty in comprehending complex, paradoxical, and superimposed dynamics. What the author intends to do, then, is to highlight the background of the intrapsychic figure in relief, revealing not only the intersubjective psychic tendencies, which furtively "fly to the opposite side," but also the complex and paradoxical whole of psychic life, which encompasses both directions.

Consequently, Benjamin does not choose between the drives or object relations but tries to see both as different perspectives on the same phenomenon. Contrary to strong intersubjectivists, such as Greenberg and Mitchell, she does not want to contrast these perspectives. In fact, in a recent commentary about her past oeuvres, she affirms that she had tried to analyze contradictions, not to resolve them, including the contradiction between the drives and the relational perspective. She explains:

> In this respect I had a different perspective from Mitchell and Greenberg, and especially Mitchell, regarding the contradiction between the object relational view and the drive view. Rather than opposing them, I thought we could preserve the understanding of the intrapsychic, but transform it by adding the intersubjective perspective. (Benjamin and Atlas, 2022, p. 416)

Nevertheless, it is true that, even if Benjamin claims such simultaneity between intersubjective and intrapsychic theories, the relational turn in psychoanalysis unavoidably is among her main influences. Being intensely developed at that time, this perspective claimed a more central focus on relational dynamics rather than on intrapsychic ones. Thus, sometimes, she proposes a somewhat short-sighted interpretation of Freud, criticizing the Freudian baby as too passive, enclosed, and totally guided by instinctual demands.

In this context, influenced by relational authors, although not proposing a synthesis between the intrapsychic and intersubjective perspectives, Benjamin offers a particular contribution

regarding how recognition unfolds throughout human development, giving considerable weight to relational dynamics. Most importantly, Benjamin parts ways from Freud and Winnicott in their understanding of primary narcissism. Introducing the research of Daniel Stern and other intersubjectivist "baby watchers," she denies the narrative of a primary merged state from which the baby must strive to separate. For her, the primary relationship between self and other is closer to a continual tension between sameness and difference, in which moments of identification and struggles for differentiation incessantly alternate. Intersubjective theory, in her words:

> [...] focuses, not on a linear movement from oneness to separateness, but on the paradoxical balance between them. What we see in early infancy is not symbiosis, or complete undifferentiation, but, rather, an interest in externality alternating with absorption in internal rhythms; later, there is alternation between the oneness of harmonious attunement and the 'twoness' of disengagement. (1988, p. 49-50).

The author does not give in to the idea that omnipotence would be primary or original, being later broken by the pressure of the external environment, since this view would imply a precedence or genealogical priority of the intrapsychic dimension, placing the relational one as secondary. While denying primary narcissism, she defends that the newborn, even lacking self-awareness, already configures an instance of otherness because it brings demands, needs, and capabilities of his own, adapting and responding, albeit precariously, to the affective stimuli of the first caregiver. For her, even if, in the beginning, the baby cannot consciously separate between internal and external reality or between self and other, this is far from a blissful situation. Instead, it is a potentially conflictual one, which gets increasingly disturbing as the baby matures.

Benjamin does not deny the complete asymmetry in the primary relationship between mother and baby. However, despite the unequal capacities between the partners and the total dependency of the baby – which is certainly not the case for the mother – there can already be a seed of mutuality between them because the mother can already perceive the baby as a separate being. Asymmetry does not lead directly to the complete objectification of the other. The baby, who is totally dependent, can already be perceived as a potential alterity, even if the caregiver also projects many of her own fantasies and expectations on him. Benjamin explains:

> Although the baby is wholly dependent upon her [the mother] — and not only on her, but perhaps equally on a father or others — never for a moment does she doubt that this baby brings his own self, his unique personality, to bear on their common life. And she is already grateful for the baby's cooperation and activity — his willingness to be soothed, his acceptance of frustration, his devotion to her milk, his focusing on her face. Later, as baby is able to demonstrate ever more clearly that he does know and prefer her to all others, she will accept this glimmer of recognition as a sign of the mutuality that persists in spite of the tremendous inequality of the parent-child relationship. (Ibid, p. 13-14).

Following this passage, Benjamin admits that the mother's recognition of the baby's alterity may not be so much guaranteed, natural, or easily achieved as the former quotation conveys. It may be rather difficult and conflicting for the mother to accept the baby's growing degree of independence. The author affirms: "It may be hard for a mother to accept this paradox, the fact that this baby has come from her and yet is so unknown to her." (Ibid, p. 14). However, there can already be an element of alterity or a "glimmer of recognition" in his spontaneous movements, engagement, and disengagement. Indeed, despite the unavoidable frustration, uncertainty, and anxiety commonly denied by the usual idealization of motherhood, "most first-time mothers are able to sustain a powerful connection to a newborn child." (Ibid). Therefore, in the primary, pre-symbolic, and physically close relationship between mother and child, there exists already a glimpse of intersubjectivity, which does not mean harmony, plenum, or fusion, but an imperfect mixture of separation and attunement, the realization of alterity and the projection of intrapsychic contents on the other. In this sense, I believe we can see intersubjective recognition as a "good enough" relationship of balance between intrapsychic and intersubjective currents.

As for the baby, even if he is not self-conscious in the first weeks after birth, he is already interacting with a complex world full of matches and mismatches. Even if, until the fourth month, the baby is not yet endowed with an inner psychic world of object representations and he is not yet able to symbolize, he is already immersed in a complex relational world, which already has seeds of mutuality and attunement, while it is also full of frustration. By this time, "The distinction between inner and outer is only beginning to be developed; inner and outer regulation still overlap." (Ibid, p. 29). Only at the age of seven to nine months does intersubjectivity become more self-aware for the baby because then he can perceive that there are separate minds out there who, despite externality, can share his same state.

As I read it, Benjamin's theory proposes that the baby's reality alternates moments of fusion and separation. Admittedly, if there were no fusion or element of undifferentiation, then the Winnicottian theory about destruction would not make any sense. But fusion, for Benjamin, in contrast to Winnicott, is not an agreeable experience. Even if it may be an important moment in development, it cancels intersubjective tension, being far from a blissful reality. On the contrary, it can represent deadly domination, abandonment, and unilateral dependence (which, to a certain extent, are all unavoidable elements at the beginning of life). Recognition serves precisely to avoid the crystallization of such fusion on any side, diluting domination. The tension of recognition, in

my view, starts from the child's unaware spontaneous movements and physiological needs, which impose an instance of lack of control and disappointment on the mother. In other words, natural demands in the newborn pose a paradox of recognition, a conflict between the mother's projections and the reality of the baby's persistent needs. The closest we get to resolving this paradox is the fraught overlap of separation and identification, self-assertion and connection.

In her subsequent analysis of women's domination, Benjamin concludes that the idea of an original blissful fusion, or a plenum shared with the mother, would oversimplify a highly conflictual process. Perfect primary oneness as a blissful situation is a fantasy or an ideal that we project on the past and which is reinforced when we deal with the painful task of detaching ourselves from our mothers and establishing our subjectivity while not destroying her entirely in the process. Therefore, the notion of plenum remains a necessary ideal of something that we never really had or was never beatific.

Moreover, this oversimplification is related to the private idealization of motherhood and its simultaneous concrete repudiation in the public sphere. We need the ideal of blissful oneness because, in our current model of individuality, criticized by Benjamin, we are obliged to relinquish interdependency and emotional attachment to enter the public world of separate individuals, as we will see in what follows. The ideal of a lost beatific oneness makes the repudiated mother of modern rationality bear all dependency, natural abnegation, and ideal love, while the adult individual can hold on to his contrasting independence, activity, and desire. The ideal of fusion with the mother resonates with the later need to reject dependency and affection in public adulthood. As Benjamin puts it:

> As I have shown, that relationship [with the mother] was neither oneness nor perfect — it was always marked by alterations between helplessness and comfort, by the contrast between attunement and disjunction, by an emerging awareness of separation and individual differences. The vision of perfect oneness, whether of union or of self-sufficiency, is an *ideal* — a symbolic expression of our longing — that we project onto the past. This ideal becomes enlarged in reaction to the experience of helplessness — in the face of circumstance, powerlessness, death — but also by the distance from mother's help that repudiation of her enforces. (Ibid, p. 173, emphasis in original).

Therefore, Benjamin's denial of primary fusion is related to her feminist critique of the idealization of motherhood. For her, it is crucial to see mothers as subjects in their own right, not just as the baby's objects of desire and dread. However, if the mother is a subject while the baby is becoming a subject himself, then we need a vision that sustains an intersubjective relation between them. We need to understand how to sustain two subjectivities in relation so that the baby can become a subject *with* his mother.

Like the ideal of fusion, Benjamin does not deny the reality of omnipotence. However, she sees it through intersubjective lenses as an illusory defensive reaction to helplessness. First, dependency is not an issue in the very beginning or the first months of life because the baby cannot differentiate between the self and the other. However, this lack of differentiation does not mean a state of omnipotence because it is highly helpless, unstable, and unaware, far from an all-powerful experience. Subsequently, the baby becomes less dependent and more capable of crawling and walking freely, but he still takes himself and his mother for granted. The baby's excitation with his greater mobility and contact with the external world obfuscates the question of separation since his relationship with his mother is not primarily conflictual in this phase. Nevertheless, as the baby matures, his increasing independence generates greater tension, to the point that it triggers a conflict with the primary caregiver. The Benjaminian baby cannot be wholly illusioned into an omnipotent state, as the Winnicottian baby is. But the increasing awareness of his own dependence on the caregiver nourishes defensive desires of omnipotence and destruction. Paradoxically, the baby needs to be minimally independent to realize his immense dependency, which generates conflict.

Experiencing greater cognitive and physical skills, the baby gradually comes to entertain grandiose aspirations that clash with the reality of his still significant dependency and incapacity. Along with his expanded abilities, the baby is also progressively aware of his limitations and vulnerabilities and the adult's greater powers. Since the baby perceives more clearly the complex relational world surrounding him, the mother's independence becomes an unavoidable issue. The baby increasingly realizes, above all, that the mother can leave or that she has other interests beyond himself. Once the baby comes to realize the painful recalcitrance of the mother's reality, on whom he depends the most, his grandiose aspirations of effectiveness and control are frustrated, generating conflictual feelings of resentment and anxiety. This realization fuels the child's desire to be recognized in his acts, requirements, and caprices, which easily turns into a defensive attempt to control the other and impose his tyrannical wishes. The paradox he finds himself in is the reason for his destructive impulses.

However, this does not mean the baby would be satisfied with the mother's total submission. Even if the baby comes to truly desire omnipotence, control over the other, and destruction of the external impinging reality, this cannot appease him, being registered as an abandonment. The completely omnipotent baby, as we saw about the master of Hegel's analysis, would experience a limitless world, extremely empty and devoid of connections. Moreover, the omnipotent child feels

desperately lonely, deregulated, and flooded with anxiety, which he is not able to discard outside of himself. In the author's words: "The painful result of success in the battle for omnipotence is that to win is to win nothing: the result is negation, emptiness, isolation." (Ibid, p. 35).

The baby would rather be an effective separate subject *with* the mother. Hence, the baby's contentment with the mother's response and attunement is not due to his omnipotent control or his success in dominating her completely, as some analysts interpret it, but due to his sense of effectiveness. The baby is more appeased when he feels he is an effective subject inhabiting a true subjective reality with another. *Affecting* another subject is different from *controlling* him or her. In complete, omnipotent domination, the other ceases to exist, so no external reality is left to be affected. The omnipotent wish, if obtained, would fail, leaving the self with no other to control or with no subjective substance to be used. That is why omnipotence only makes sense as a secondary defensive wish in the face of vulnerability. But this wish can never really placate the self's helplessness. The desire for perfection is out of reach. As Benjamin explains:

> But one could argue that the infant's subjective feeling when mother answers his cry is probably not one of omnipotence, but simply of effectiveness. The idea of omnipotence, I believe, can only appear in the context of impotence and helplessness. [...] Omnipotence is a meaningful idea not as the original state, but as a fantasy that children construct in the face of disappointment, a reaction to loss – indeed, it is usually derived from a perception of the parent's power. It is the sense or threat of loss that leads to 'impossible demands,' the attempt to get back what we never had but imagine we did. Omnipotence describes a defensive wish, buried in every psyche, that one will have a perfect world, will prevail over time, death, and the other — and that coercion can succeed. (Ibid, p. 256).

The desire for omnipotence, in other words, reflects an attempt to resolve the increasingly disturbing paradox of recognition. Benjamin states: "For if I completely negate the other, he does not exist; and if he does not survive, he is not there to recognize me. But to find this out, I must try to exert this control, try to negate his independence." (Ibid, p. 38). While in early childhood, destruction is a defensive attempt to differentiate oneself, dominate a recalcitrant reality, and be all powerful and all alone, this negative desire can be placated in adulthood if the other survives: "if all goes well, in adulthood destruction will include 'the intention to discover if the other will survive.'" (Ibid, p. 38). It is in this context that Benjamin affirms that "Winnicott's conception of destruction is innocent" (Ibid) because its most favorable outcome is "pleasure in the other's survival." (Ibid). It is not that the desire for omnipotence is innocent. It really attempts to control and dominate the other. But the conception of destruction is innocent in the sense that it cannot be placated as such, reaching, at best, a balance between self-assertion and appreciation of the other.

This framework in which complete omnipotence means desolation also attributes a more positive color to external reality. The reality principle, which for Freud configures a coercive external pressure on individual drives, is, for Benjamin, "a positive source of pleasure, the pleasure of connecting with the outside, and not just a brake on narcissism or aggression." (Ibid, p. 41). Although reality does exercise a constraint on the individual's desires, once survived, it also provides the pleasure of the other's company, sharing that same reality. While not denying the need for instinctual gratification, this intersubjective perspective understands that the early experience of being in tune with the mother satisfies primarily a need for recognition: "Thus the ultimate gratification of being in attunement with another person can be framed not — or not only — in terms of instinctual satisfaction, but of cooperation and recognition." (Ibid, p. 27).

Following Winnicott, Benjamin understands that the sense of reality and the development of a limit between internal and external realms comes from the experience of the transitional space, which is not merely coercive but gives rise to creativity and the pleasure of discovery. From the ambiguous experience of discovering and creating reality, the feeling of authorship emerges, so the self feels that his acts are genuine, spontaneous, and creative instead of just reflecting automatic responses to external stimuli.

The subsection "Beyond Internalization" in Chapter 1 (Ibid, p. 42) informs us that we are still following the author's crusade against the need for internalization. Once again, she insists we must overcome the internalization theory's solipsism, discovering the importance of connecting with the other. Now, however, the experience that overcomes the need for internalization does not derive from a sociable nature but from the irresolvable paradox of recognition as she constructed it following Hegel and Winnicott. The experience that denies the need for the internalization of authority in the superego is not a superficial conception of love and empathy but a more complex view of intersubjectivity, in which mutuality with the other can coexist and even be intensified by the sense of separation from him/her (Ibid, p. 47), thus keeping both sides in tension.

Moreover, Benjamin insists that her more positive view on external reality should not deny "all that we have learned from Freud" nor reject "the many grounds he saw for pessimism" (Ibid). For her, omnipotence, aggressiveness, and domination are indeed realities of psychic life that we cannot deny. There are times, for example, when the baby or the mother is not available for recognition and may, for example, be tired, depressed, anxious, or apathetic. What we observe, in these cases, is the opposite of attunement. For example, the baby may move its body or head away

from the mother as the mother chases and overstimulates him. This early dynamic illustrates how the search for recognition can degenerate into an aggressive struggle for power, in which separateness demands destruction of the other and connection demands surrender, as we will see in what is next.

4.2.2   *The Sadist and the Masochist: the adult erotic bond of love*

In the second chapter of *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin analyzes sadomasochistic relationships as a key example of the relational structure of domination, in which one subject assumes domination and the other submission. This type of relationship helps to explain the paradoxical nature of desire, in which freedom is sought precisely in submission.

Benjamin explains domination as a distortion of recognition, which begins with the attempt to resolve the paradox, denying our undeniable dependence on others. Already in childhood, as we saw, we are faced with the need to deal with our ambivalent dependent-independency on the primary caregiver, a very unstable aspect of the process of psychic constitution, which can degenerate into a complementary structure of domination. When the tension of recognition is broken, then a "dialectic of control" begins: "If I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist, and if the other completely controls me, then I cease to exist." (Ibid, p. 53).

For Freud and Hegel, this is the destiny of man in the uncivilized "state of nature," in which the unlimited and aggressive desire for power reigns. For them, behind the necessary civilizational coercion, it remains an aggressive human nature, animated by the death instinct and always in search of omnipotence. However, even if this view explains the desire for control, it does not explain the *desire for submission* motivating the masochist, which the intersubjective view can better explain.

Benjamin considers that there are gains or psychic compensations in submission and humiliation that so many people accept, no matter how much morality condemns it. Several feminists refuse to admit that women participate in their own domination, seeing patriarchy as a one-way action victimizing women. This view is too simplistic, overshadowing, through moral condemnation, a more complex comprehension that admits that various relationships of domination are constituted on the consent of the dominated party. For Benjamin, the complementarity in erotic domination, especially of sadomasochist relations, clarifies this desire for domination.

In the first place, based on George Bataille's reflections (1986), Benjamin understands that eroticism, in general, is related to the risk of death or the dissolution of the individual's discontinuous, controlled, and isolated existence. Comparing individuals to isolated islands, Bataille argues that eroticism provides the dangerous and exciting crossing of the "sea of death" that permeates our discontinuous existences, exposing individuals to the deadly interruption of their separate lives. The violation of the body carries the dimension of a transgression of the boundary between life and death and between two separate subjects. For Benjamin, in this experience, the risk is that if both partners lose their individual boundaries, the loss of self might be complete, inaugurating primary anxiety and existential emptiness. Both partners risk drowning in the sea of death between them, facing the threat of being unable to return to the island of discontinuous existence. Thus, the thrill of an erotic encounter is the ambivalent risk of losing oneself in the other, risking emptiness, if one or the other does not survive the destruction, while subsequently discovering the exciting and dynamic possibility of mutual survival.

In this framework, sadomasochist erotic relations also bring about this thrill of discontinuity while seeking some form of limitation through survival. Violation and sadomasochist aggression represent a paradoxical effort to find limits while also trying to destroy alterity: "Thus, the desire to inflict or receive pain, even as it seeks to break through boundaries, is also an effort to find them." (Ibid, p. 64). The trick is that in sadomasochist aggression, boundaries are violated in a controlled and performative manner so that the master's violence ensures some form of limitation. In general, the sadist's control guarantees containment to the masochist identified with him. The erotic pleasure experienced by both partners in a sadomasochistic relationship then comes from the master's power and control, which is also related to the dominance, protection, and restraint he offers. The problem with this complementarity is that it tends towards exhaustion, plunging the masochist into total phoniness and the sadist into unbearable loneliness.

The masochist, in his desperation to serve the other, foreshadows the fulfillment of his greatest fear: abandonment. While the sadist, in the enjoyment of the pain he inflicts on the other, also foresees his greatest terror: the death of the other by his own hands. For this reason, abandonment and death, or at least emptiness, lack of meaning, and numbness, are the remaining elements of a relationship of domination. Frequently, this happens when the relationship is exhausted or becomes monotonous, breaking the connection. The sadomasochistic relationship, then, although it begins with the aim of introducing a source of tension between the subjects,

replacing the insensitivity and emptiness of isolation with pain and violence, tends to always exhaust itself, returning to the same torpor. Domination, originating from a situation of emptiness and lack of connection, always returns to this state, repeating, perhaps compulsively, the destiny of solitary omnipotence, from which, secretly, the partners want to escape.

Nevertheless, why does recognition eventually assume this distorted form instead of simply sustaining mutuality or maintaining the vitality of tension if that is, in reality, the wish of both the sadist and the masochist? As we saw, Freud related the problem of domination to the existence of the death drive, the desire for the absence of tension, which, when projected outside, generates aggression and domination. In the intersubjective interpretation, however, such intrapsychic dynamics are understood as reflections of simultaneous relational ones. So, the death drive is understood in this moment as the search for the *absence of tension between the subjects*.

Accordingly, successful omnipotence, in the form of merging or aggression, is the state of zero intersubjective tension. In this state, there is complete assimilation between the subjects, which means a state of psychic death. Therefore, Benjamin suggests that instinctual tension can be understood as "a metaphor for the experience of the self, for the condition of stasis between self and other represented in the mind as a condition of the self." (Ibid, p. 262-263). In other words, the death drive is a one-way metaphorical representation or comprehension of what occurs in a relational experience. For her, "what began as something between subjects winds up being experienced as the fantasy life of the single subject, appearing as instinctual or primary, as purely internal and self-generated." (Ibid).

Therefore, the contradiction that Freud attributed to the duality of the drives, Benjamin attributes to the paradox of recognition animating desire. Domination, for her, is not simply a desire to assimilate the other or destroy all alterity. Beyond that, it is also a contradictory desire for differentiation and the creation of tension, because if one succeeds in destroying the other, one is captured in an oppressive reality in which he is the only one to blame. The following passage explains the paradoxical character of the omnipotent wish for domination, which desires both the other's death and his/her survival:

> Domination, as Freud sees it, is both an expression of omnipotence (or death) — the complete absence of tension — and an effort to protect the self from it: to create tension, to break up this assimilation of or by the other that allows nothing to exist *outside*. Yet it comes full circle, and leaves the self encapsulated in a closed system — the omnipotent mind — at least until the other fights back. (Ibid, p. 67)

The process of domination, then, in its erotic expression, is a cyclical movement. It starts from the numb and solitary omnipotence of a subject, advances to a distorted and violent attempt to recreate tension through the objectification of the other, and ends again in the collapse of recognition and the repetitive loss of tension. The origin of the cycle is not an antisocial biological drive but an earlier collapse of recognition: "In this view, the circular movement from numbness to exhaustion, which characterizes domination, is a manifestation, not of the death instinct towards zero tension, but of the breakdown of recognition between self and other." (Ibid, p. 67-68).

The initial breakdown of recognition, which inevitably occurs in childhood development, starts this cycle of domination, although later experiences of mutuality can reduce and mitigate the omnipotent desire. If that is not the case, if experiences of recognition were unavailable, a cycle of sadomasochist destruction might be the only way for the individual to fleetingly encounter another person in adult life. Thus, adult erotic domination has its roots in the subjects' childhood, in which there was a permanent or profound breakdown of recognition, plunging the individual into a repetitive and violent search for differentiation and connection.

Unable to partake in a mutual reality in which there is a balance between self-affirmation and identification with the other, the child finds it almost impossible to recognize or be recognized. Either the child needs to dominate the other to exist as an authentic and effective self, or s/he needs to submit to a powerful other to find some way into the social world. In overly simple terms, either the mother submits to the baby's grandiose caprices, dominating attempts, and desires, or the baby submits to the mother's demands, orders, and necessities. In either case, the baby comes to believe that both subjectivities cannot coexist because he has rarely experienced such a balanced dynamic.

On the one side, the sadist inhabits a lonely reality in which there appear to be no limits to his power, no other living subject for him to contact, and no discarding channel to his aggressiveness. The primary other of this person probably submitted and failed to survive his aggressive impulses, leaving him alone to deal with it. In a distorted, unconscious, and paradoxical way, the expression of his aggression toward the other aims to meet an external limit or find an externality he could use. His destructive acts paradoxically express a desire for recognition, more specifically, a hope that someone will survive outside of himself to recognize and be recognized.

As for the masochist, on the other side, he lives in a world of submission and passive reaction to the other, in which his true self could not find his way into existence. The primary caregiver, in this case, probably dominated the scene, suffocating the emergence of a non-reactive,

spontaneous, and authentic self. The desire to be violated and wounded is actually a desire to be found, discovered, and released by an other. Lacking subjective effectiveness, the masochist participates indirectly in the power of the controlling other, emulating a release of his self in the strong hands of the violator.

Both partners in a sadomasochistic relationship seek some tension to shackle their lonely and void realities. Destruction, in both cases, is an attempt at differentiation, which paradoxically desires the tension of survival. Both the sadist and the masochist obtain genuine pleasure in their relationship. However, as we saw, the tension generated between them is doomed to be exhausted because one subject can hardly meet the other through successful destruction. As much as performative exchanges can prolong the tension of otherness, the masochist tends to submit once more, while the sadist tends to destroy the other, repeating the pattern to which they are accustomed.

It is true that Benjamin denies the Winnicottian conception of initial infantile omnipotence, seeing it as secondary. However, for her, the desire for omnipotence is also inevitable, derived from the unavoidable failure and breakdown of recognition. Now it becomes clear that omnipotence, internalization, and the expression of the "death drive" are inevitable realities, coming to animate sexual life to a significant extent. She states: "In much of early life, destruction is properly directed toward the other, and is internalized when the other cannot 'catch' it, and survive. Ordinarily, some failure to survive is inevitable; for that matter, so is the internalization of aggression." (Ibid, p. 70). Thus, she now attributes a central and ineluctable place for internalization.

What is not inevitable is the permanent breakdown in recognition. At best, aggression dissipates within the relationship itself. Therefore, the "normal" erotic union is not purified of sexual fantasies, desires for domination, aggression, and submission. However, the partners usually can play with these fantasies while experimenting mutual survival: "The idea of destruction reminds us that the element of aggression is necessary in erotic life; it is the element of *survival*, the difference the other can make, which distinguishes the erotic union, which plays with the fantasy of domination, from real domination." (Ibid, p. 74). When it results in survival, the erotic union can reinforce the attunement of separate minds, setting up a powerful experience of recognition.

Nonetheless, more than an individual issue, the difficulty in survival reflects a social dynamic of domination that bears gender colors. Benjamin understands that in our culture, sadomasochism is related to gender complementarity, despite the recent flexibilization of sexual roles. Even though the complementary roles of the sadist and the masochist can be interchanged, as they often are, the gender cleavage still organizes a complementary, non-mutualistic relationship pattern. Therefore, her analysis presupposes that the sadist is generally a male role, while the masochist is a female one, which, for her, is related to the difficult process of differentiation from the mother.

The Foucauldian perspective, adopted by the author, is helpful now to understand such psychic processes because it explains the reflexive constitution of discourse into material reality. Benjamin understands that masculine domination, more than a misconception of reality, constitutes our very reality, being a discourse in the Foucaultian sense. The patriarchal discourse shapes subjective desire, so women come to crave their own submission, as the masochist desires her own suffering. This discourse has a concrete existence, even if it is not all there is or, more importantly, all that can be. The explanation for women's oppression, therefore, cannot be found purely in nature or purely in society because the social discourse, as Foucault understood it, frames our bodies and mediates our relation to the natural substratum. Thus, Benjamin affirms, "The alternative to a biological explanation of masochism must be sought not only in culture, but in the interaction of culture and psychological processes." (Ibid, p. 81). The dialectic between natural psychic trends and historical-cultural vicissitudes would be the answer to the problem of domination. Not so much a natural phenomenon, nor a purely cultural one, domination draws its strength precisely from the historically constructed distortion of psychological tendencies.

If there is something persistent in the human condition, for Benjamin, it would be the paradoxical desire for recognition, the dependent-independency of one for another.[16] This

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[16] It is true that the Benjaminian presupposition that any resolution of the paradox leads to domination suggests that human beings would or should naturally seek recognition or that they would be sociable by nature, which sometimes seems the case. For example, referring to the oppression of women, Benjamin claims that: "Women, like men, are by 'nature' social, and it is the repression of their sociability and social agency — the repression of the social, intersubjective side of the self — that is at issue." (Ibid, p. 80). In that case, her theory would preserve a reminiscent positive hope about human nature, considering the desire for recognition as original and authentic. In my interpretation, however, it is more coherent to understand that the social expression of nature would be paradoxical, locked in a conflict over recognition. The substratum of Benjamin's analysis is not the (sociable) desire to maintain the tension, which is secondary, but the previous original paradox between independence and dependence, self-assertion and connection. In addition, the breakdown of recognition, the child's helplessness, and the internalization of aggressiveness are also inevitable experiences of the human condition, so recognition is not considered an ideal to be

paradoxical desire interacts in different ways with culture, so, in Western culture, it is distorted by cultural gender divisions, tending towards a resolution via domination. As we will see, this division, whose background is the paradox of recognition, then shapes erotic desire, the Oedipus complex, and modern scientific rationality.

4.2.3 *The oedipal boy and the oedipal girl: the complementary bond of desire*

Following this interpretation, we can quickly walk through the book's third chapter, which analyzes desire or, more precisely, the absence of (women's) desire. It starts from the premise that, while men actively desire, women are only the passive object of desire.[17] It may come as a surprise that Benjamin accepts this rather radical premise about the non-existence of women's desire, sustaining the Freudian interpretation of feminine passivity. But for her, the Freudian analysis of the issue shows a "partial truth," which, while reflecting a real and existing situation, is not inevitable, nor does it configure an immutable "nature." (Ibid, p. 90). The Foucaultian framework allows us to think of the absence of women's desire as a historical reality – not simply a biased view or a wrong understanding of reality – whose genealogy can be traced and criticized.

Benjamin sees the desire to be a force of nature that is accessed and integrated by culture, being, therefore, subject to change. In her words: "We do not need to deny the contribution of 'nature' or anatomy in shaping the conditions of femininity; we have only to argue that the psychological integration of biological reality is largely the work of culture — of social arrangements that we can change or direct." (Ibid).

In this sense, the key to understanding the lack of feminine desire is the contingent impossibility of the mother's survival. In our cultural scheme, the constitution of identity depends on a radical differentiation from the mother, so we need to repudiate her. Masculinity, above all, is achieved to the detriment of the son's identification with the mother, replacing the connection and dependence of early childhood with a typically violent male separation and painful isolation. This process triggers a broader threat to the possibility of reciprocal recognition because emotional attunement, the sharing of mental states, and the relaxation of boundaries between self and other

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achieved, nor is it the truth of desire, but a fraught experience to be concretely lived. This interpretation is confirmed in later texts, as we will see.

[17] This oedipal story, although critically presented, analyzes only the constitution of heterosexual orientation concerning cisgender identity, neglecting alternative orientations. Criticisms in this regard led the author to reassess her theoretical position, especially in the book *The Shadow of the Other* (1998), acknowledging other ways of resolving the individuation process.

are experienced as a dangerous threat to masculine identity. As for the girl, achieving a feminine identity depends on identifying with the terribly good and selfless mother. The cost of femininity is submission and resignation of power and desire, which can only be redeemed in a masochistic surrender to a powerful other. This process reflects a "false differentiation" in the author's terminology because the unilateral masculine identity always depends on the compulsive objectification of an emptied feminine identity.

Since the despised mother cannot be properly used by the constituting subjects, in Winnicott's terms, her children set up false selves, who do not own desire authentically, but are overwhelmed by it. Men do not experience desire emanating from themselves but as enticing and dominating them from the outside. They are prey in the women's irresistible hands. On the other hand, women want to be desired, but they can never feel or express an active desire for others. Their desire is merely to be an object of desire. Desire, then, appears as an external, unintegrated, mysterious force of "nature," while this appearance is largely the work of patriarchal culture.

As we saw with Winnicott, the constitution of a True Self, which can express and integrate its desires, would demand the existence of a transitional space. Besides, the capacity to be alone in the presence of the other, supported by the transitional experience, is fundamental for creating an internal space in which the subject perceives his desires as authentic, emanating from his own subjectivity and not from the demands of the environment. Only through the transitional experience is the desire not fully captured by externality, as if it were a depersonalized and automated "mere drive" (Ibid, p. 128). The experience of the transitional space allows the integration and identification of desire as emanating from oneself, as concrete, spontaneous, and authentic.

Benjamin indicates that this can be a way of discovering or recovering women's desire, which, more than claiming the phallus for itself, can mean sharing desire in the flexible space between the subjects. That is, intersubjectivity, for the author, can provide the mutual possibility of erotic desire, providing the possibility for men and women to share power and activity. It is not, therefore, a question of devaluing or erasing the phallus. However, we can experience other ways of expressing, representing, and sharing desires. While the phallus represents the complementary relationship between subject and object, the intersubjective dimension of desire can express the maintenance of tension, even erotic tension, between the subjects, as in Winnicott's transitional space. However, more than a possibility readily available in adulthood, the sharing of desire in a

transitional space is closely connected to the oedipal experience of gender identification, which largely resolves the paradox of recognition in our culture, organizing desire in the first place.

4.2.4 *The oedipal father and the archaic Mother: the ideal bonds with the primary figures*

We thus enter the fourth chapter of the book, which analyzes the "Oedipal enigma," the moment of childhood development that crystallizes the identity division of gender and the split of desire. For Freud, the oedipal complex is central, marking the occasion in which the individual settles accounts with differences, assuming a stable identity in relation to his or her parents. However, for Benjamin, the oedipal process produces a false differentiation, which establishes individualization in opposition to the recognition of the other.

After going through the oedipal complex, the boy learns he cannot have his mother for himself. At the same time, he cannot yet be like the prohibiting father. Thus, for Benjamin, he is left with the need to repudiate everything related to the feminine maternal realm, such as dependency and emotional connection, with the hope of leaving helpless childhood behind while becoming an independent and self-sufficient male adult in his father's image.

So, the process intended to establish difference actually prevents the recognition of difference: "At the heart of psychoanalytic theory lies an unacknowledged paradox: the creation of difference *distorts*, rather than fosters, the recognition of the other. Difference turns out to be governed by the code of domination." (Ibid, p. 135, emphasis in original). More than just differentiating himself from his mother, the boy repudiates her and despises femininity at the end of the process. More than acquiring a responsible superego, the boy internalizes the prohibition of identifying with others, as if it posed a danger of relapse into an archaic unlimited narcissism.

However, the oedipal split is a particular historical way of responding to the paradox of recognition. Through it, the oedipal boy pretends to keep subjectivity for himself while denying it to women. He counts on the symbolic construction of the father as a benevolent rational authority, the child's hero and protector, which purifies his image of all negativity, projecting terror, weakness, and anguish onto the mother. Fatherhood becomes synonymous with civilization, rationality, and individuation, while motherhood denotes primitive nature, archaic irrationality, and undifferentiation. The male figure that emerges from the oedipal complex cannot recognize women as equal subjects because, as representatives of the repudiated mother, they evoke complete boundary dissolution or the fantasy of re-engulfment into the mother's womb. The connection to

the mother, now prohibited by the father's intervention, must be permanently rejected and repudiated, remaining a continuing threat at the back of the subject's identity. The sustenance of the successful male identity is one-sided because it depends on a distorted form of recognition that seeks only domination, control, and self-assertion. Male identity, in other words, emulates the master of the Phenomenology or the sadist subject of Benjamin's previous analysis. Therefore, the tension of intersubjectivity is broken down into stable gender structures. The splits boy/mother, male/female, public/private, and subject/object stabilize the paradox of recognition to the cost of creating unbalanced domination.

The idealized dichotomy between the archaic mother and the civilized father hides a much more ambivalent and complex reality, in which we can identify an archaic mother and father as well as an oedipal mother and father. On the one side, the idealization of the oedipal father – as a rational and heroic savior – hides the fear evoked by the archaic father – a powerful and forbidding figure. Although he neglects this ambivalence in the oedipal father, Freud suggests a rather terrible characterization of the archaic father in other texts, especially in his description of the primeval horde ruled by a totally narcissistic, authoritarian, and oppressive patriarch. Let us recall that, in Freud's tale, once the sons of this terrible father assassinated him, they resented this action, discovering the ambivalent feelings they nurtured for him. This ambivalence then led them to institute an ideal that represented the father and his law. In place of the dead father, his law was internalized in the superego, thus resolving the oedipal complex.

This description, for Benjamin, reveals that the ideal of the civilized oedipal father is a later fantasy creation, which serves to deny the essentially ambivalent paternal authority. This ideal, more precisely, defends the sons from the irrationality and hatred that the authority evokes, maintaining a purely loving bond with it. This interpretation is inspired by Ronald Fairbairn's argument, which Benjamin quotes on many occasions, according to which "It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than a saint in a world ruled by the devil" (in Benjamin 1988, p. 143). That is, considering the paradoxical relational reality we inhabit, it is preferable to masochistically take upon oneself the evil and arbitrariness of the world to preserve the rational appearance of authority over whom we do not have much control and on whom we depend. At the same time, the internalization of the paternal law preserves the hidden desire to be like the authority, both conserving and repressing the desire to assume the almighty place he occupies.

On the other side, in addition to the idealization of the oedipal father, what occurs in the oedipal complex is the apparently inevitable repudiation of the mother. The boy is prevented from having any access to her, both in the form of identification and in the form of object-love. The lost mother is rejected but also idealized. She is turned into an Eden of goodness, innocence, and gratification, which must be sought only outside and later in future erotic relationships. Even when the mother-and-child's world is envied or romanticized, it is perennially placed beyond the boy's reach. At the same time, the pre-oedipal identification with the mother is projected as a dangerous regression or even a reabsorption in the mother's body, from which the boy needs to save himself, denying any form of continuity, helplessness, and dependence.

This dynamic not only produces the rejection of femininity but also comes at a high cost to masculinity. Affected in his capacity to inhabit a transitional space, the boy loses part of the access to his own inner space of introspection and self-reflection: "The loss of that in-between space [with the mother] cuts him off from the space within." (Ibid, p. 163). As the only source of goodness, the mother can only be sought outside the self. The boy becomes a victim of the "heroic" need to conquer external space and the female body: "The boy who has lost access to inner space becomes enthralled with conquering outer space." (Ibid).

Through this process, as we saw, the man loses his sexual authorship, mirroring the process that occurs with the woman. His desire becomes alien, turning into an uncontrollable drive. Desire seems to inhabit the object, so the man has no choice but to submit to the woman's irresistible attraction and seduction, a scene repeated in several cultural media productions. This dynamic configures a "reverse violation" (Ibid, p. 164) because the object seems to intensely dominate the subject's desire, preventing him from accessing the internal space where he could experience desire as spontaneously emerging from himself. He has no choice but to conquer and dominate the dangerous and irresistible object which, in its abysmal diversity, arouses such a powerful attraction. This sense of "reverse violation," in turn, intensifies the idealized image of women as dangerous, irresistible, and terrifying. From the loss of bodily continuity with the mother, eroticism, for the boy, also comes to convey dangerous and sadistically exciting images, linking, as Bataille pointed out, erotic violation with discontinuity and death.

In this oedipal scheme, the masculine ideal is institutionalized in a "coherent symbolic system of gender" (Ibid, p. 175), populated by the civilizing father, the passively abnegated mother, but also by the less evident fantasies of the archaic father and the active egoistic mother. In it, the

ideal of a much-needed paternal rescue against a supposedly terrifying journey back to the womb is a fantasy that, in seeking to overcome the threat of maternal power, ends up maintaining the unconscious enchantment of an omnipotent mother. Hence, the contempt for femininity preserves the mother's swallowing power in the unconscious, keeping the male identity trapped in the perpetual defense against this internalized fantasy.

While the oedipal ideal sustains a rigid ego, which fears that identification with the other configures a "journey away from civilization with no return ticket" (Ibid, p. 174), recognition shows the possibility of a flexible ego, who experiences union with an other as an enriching and temporary excursion (Ibid). Therefore, Benjamin concludes that "difference is only truly established when it exists in tension with likeness, when we are able to recognize the other in ourselves." (Ibid, p. 169). Recognition of the other runs parallel to individuation: "Real recognition of the other entails being able to perceive commonality through difference; and true differentiation sustains the balance between separateness and connection in a dynamic tension." (Ibid, p. 171).

In this context, Benjamin claims that the primary source of discontent in Western societies is not so much repression, nor the lack of it; not so much the father's authority, nor its absence, but the idealized split that prevents recognition. For her, the oedipal ideal of unilateral individualization has not been challenged despite the recent restructuring of the family structure, the relaxation of sexual identifications, the weakening of paternal authority, and the Frankfurtian diagnosis of the dissolution of the individual. Actually, the pervasive power of the patriarchal ideal not only survived the decline of parental authority but may also have been strengthened in recent years. Even if this ideal is perhaps not anymore clearly embodied in an authority or in a father figure, its fantasy presence and its deep appeal still denies dependence, identification, and empathy in favor of the independent individual performance. Without the support of a concrete figure of identification, this ideal may be even more difficult to attain, exerting a more intense attraction: "The lack of manifest authority intensifies the pressure to perform independently, to live up to the ideal without leaning on a concrete person who embodies it." (Ibid, p. 172). This context, in turn, nourishes the feelings of impotence and helplessness, having the contradictory effect of stimulating the idealization of independence as a protection or cover for the lonely and helpless individual of late modernity. Analogous to the repression of a forbidden desire, the expectation of self-sufficiency backfires, generating more helplessness. As the author puts it: "When individuals lose access to internal and external forms of maternal identification, independence backfires: it

stimulates a new kind of helplessness, one which has to be countered by a still greater idealization of control and self-sufficiency." (Ibid, p. 174).

Consequently, in Benjamin's interpretation, rather than curtailing the formation of previously independent and rational individuals, the decline of paternal authority merely revealed the fragility of this model. She explains that: "this does not mean that the decline of authority has 'caused' the demise of a once successful form of individuality; rather, it has revealed the contradiction once hidden within that individuality: the inability to confront the independent reality of the other." (Ibid, p. 180-181). In a rather Foucauldian interpretation, Benjamin suggests, in other words, that the changes produced in the labor market and, even more, in family structures revealed the weaknesses, contradictions, and fractures of the patriarchal discourse, even if this realization was still not enough to dissolve the idealized figure of the father. In her words: "Men's loss of absolute control over women and children has exposed the vulnerable core of male individuality, the failure of recognition which previously wore the cloak of power, responsibility, and family honor." (Ibid, p. 181). Without an alternative protection against such a vulnerable core, the individuals keep desperately and vainly holding onto the ideal of self-sufficiency.

Such an idealization reveals how difficult it is to process a true form of individualization. More than the father's absence, it is the absence of paternal recognition that nourishes his abstract idealization. Once he cannot be met as a concrete subject, the father remains an abstract ideal. While dead, the primal father is always present. This is how Benjamin explains authoritarianism. The submission to a fascist leader does not result from the absence of paternal authority but from the absence of recognition, which generates the constitution of a submissive false self. For the author, "Again, it is not absence of a paternal authority — 'fatherlessness' — but absence of paternal nurturance that engenders submission." (Ibid, pg. 146). Submission is not explained by a supposed "society without fathers" or by the failure of internalization but by the absence of recognition, mutual survival, and paternal emotional attunement, all lacks that resolve the paradox of recognition via patriarchal domination. The result of the oedipal unilateral solution to the paradox is a pervasive impediment to recognition at a comprehensive collective level, culminating in an authoritarian society guided by a dominating rationality.

4.2.5   *The scientist and its object of study: the modern dominating bond with nature and the possibility of communion*

Now we can finally enter the fifth chapter of the book, which is of great interest to us, as it outlines a critique of modern rationality and its unilateral and domineering relation to nature. At this point, after delving deeper into the psychoanalytical dynamics of domination, from the first formation of the baby's psyche to the oedipal crisis and the configuration of adult erotic relationships, Benjamin finally begins to analyze the consequences of her previous analysis in relation to Western culture in general. Indeed, Benjamin's feminist commitment leads her to develop a broad critique of Western rationality, which is largely influenced by her engagement with the first generation of the Frankfurt School. In summary, she seeks to demonstrate that the gender split, which prevents recognition between men and women, also fosters parallel splits in society and ultimately affects our relationship with nature.

Benjamin presupposes that, just as Freudian psychoanalysis inadvertently takes the Oedipal boy as its model of analysis, modern rationality takes men as its model of the subject. The modern subject, allegedly transparent, neutral, and universal, hides patriarchal colors. He is actually masculine. Moreover, the very principle of modern rationality as we know it comes from the patriarchal mentality based on the repudiation of the maternal body.

This is already evident in Weber's analysis of rationalization. For the philosopher, this process required the progressive diffusion of a depersonalized, formal, and calculable mentality, which replaced traditional beliefs and personal relationships with authorities, formerly based on the community cultural life of pre-modern societies. Modernity created a split between public and private spheres. Modern rationality occupied the public space, making it the sphere of competitiveness, self-affirmation, universality, and instrumentality. In turn, private life harbored the renegade aspects of vulnerability, care, and personal feelings. Substantive and evaluative questions took refuge in the private sphere, becoming questions of the "good life" and not universal law and justice.

This process, for Benjamin, also configures a discursive practice in the Foucauldian sense. More than an ideology that could be unmasked or denounced for its fallacy, instrumental rationality is a system of power that describes and, at the same time, configures the very practices, institutions, and ways of thinking of modern societies. Therefore, despite the greater access of women to the labor market and previously inaccessible functions, the public sphere continues to be ruled by a masculinist mentality, being an impersonal space indifferent to individual needs. It is precisely the universalist, objective, and impersonal character of the public sphere that reveals the predominance

of patriarchal rationality, regardless of the growing presence of women in it. It remains "a man's world" (Ibid, p. 187).

Parallel to the split between the private and the public spheres, the process of rationalization also divided the subject of reason from the object of analysis, structuring modern society's relationship with nature. Benjamin follows Evelyn Keller's argument, according to which the gender split structures the relationship between scientific knowledge and nature. The very claim of scientific neutrality points to its patriarchal character by establishing a supposedly insipid separation between the subject of knowledge and the object to be unveiled, discovered, and dominated. Keller argues that the individuation process based on the repudiation of the mother and the denial of dependence frames modern scientific rationality, which can only know the other as an object, radically separated from itself. The rejection of identification with the mother leads to an absolute split between the subject who holds knowledge and the passive object to be unraveled and instrumentalized.

As Benjamin complements this idea, the object character of the oedipal mother infuses nature and the external world with formal and lifeless status. The fantasy of the totally powerful and menacing mother (nature) at the backcloth of the subject's identity imprisons him in a fortress of impersonality and control, in which his intellectual activity is forever disconnected from the concrete world. In other words, Benjamin criticizes modern rationality on the basis that it objectifies the external world, penetrating the object with a dominating regard. Thus, women's oppression parallels nature's oppression under scientific reason, which seeks to expose, control, and reduce everything into a dead manageable object.

The Frankfurtian theorists reached a similar conclusion regarding modern rationality in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They realized that instrumental rationality makes the subject differentiate himself entirely from the outside world, so he remains alone in a disenchanted catastrophic world. However, they could think of no suitable antidotes to "release the mind from its narcissistic bubble" (Ibid, p. 191) other than further enhancing the subject's rational self-awareness. Without a theoretical model that understood intersubjectivity and the true encounter with the other outside the self, Adorno and Horkheimer related identification and connection to a dangerous and regressive submission to nature. So, as Benjamin already exposed in her article of 1977, she reaffirms: "The only 'solution' to the impasse of the rational mind, then, was constant reflection on its tendency toward domination." (Ibid). For her, because the authors could not see

the gender background present in the instrumental character of Western thought, they also could not develop an intersubjective way out of such rationality. Even if they were right in their critique, they did not see the complete picture, which could be expanded by introducing feminist and intersubjective points of view.

On the other hand, Benjamin rushes to argue that the Habermasian perspective, despite relying on intersubjectivity as a way out of the rationalist impasse of the first generation, also failed to address the problem of domination because it preserved too many rationalist remnants. Habermas recognized the oppressive aspect of instrumental rationality, especially in science and technology, proposing an additional communicative dimension as a way out. However, this strategy only managed to shift the problem of rationalism to the sphere of symbolic interaction, in which, again, abstract formal procedures are expected to legitimize social interactions. The communicative exchanges thus determined do not allow the concrete subjectivity of the other to be recognized, leaving only space for a universal, empty, and proceduralist form of interaction. Therefore, the Habermasian perspective does not solve the problem, despite the "intersubjective turn" that the philosopher had the merit of inaugurating in critical theory.[18]

Therefore, contrary to the tradition of critical theory developed so far, the psychoanalyst advocates a solution based on her feminist perspective on intersubjectivity, according to which separation and connection with the world can coexist. Benjamin follows Keller in advocating the redefinition or reconstitution of the scientific project around a "dynamic objectivity," or a rationality that "permits attunement and similarity between knower and known." (Ibid, p. 192).

While considering vital a certain separation between subject and object, as well as the recognition that the other is outside the self, Benjamin argues that the pretense of a complete rupture between subject and object actually determines the assimilation of a rigid, lifeless, static external world. Hence, a temporary experience of immersion in the object, far from leading to a loss of self, allows the external world to "emerge as real and whole" (Ibid).

The basis of this experience would be the intersubjective encounter experienced since childhood with the first caregiver. As the author explains, the intersubjective paradigm of scientific knowledge would be based on *communion* with nature and not on its conquest. It is worth pointing

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[18] It is worth reinforcing that intersubjectivity in Benjamin's framework derives mainly from Winnicott's psychoanalytic notion of destruction and survival, which makes the other emerge as external and fundamentally separate from the self. As such, it has a different meaning than Habermas's employment of this term, which does not rely on psychoanalytic concepts, bearing a cognitive and discursive connotation.

out that this does not imply discarding rationality or advocating a complete loss of the self in passive undifferentiation. However, it suggests the greater reincorporation of split-off elements, discarded from the formal scientific experience, such as the scientist's identification with and pleasure in the intimate relationship with the object of study. For the author:

> To assert that rationality is contaminated by control is not a proposal to scrap it in favor of romantic anti-rationality; it is meant to redefine rationality and expand its boundaries. The point is not to undo all of modern science but to acknowledge the value of what has been banished as irrational and infantile. (Ibid, p. 193).

In other words, the intersubjective paradigm would allow an experience of knowledge that entails both discovery and creation of the world, as in Winnicott's transitional experience. The communion with nature here resonates with Winnicott's compromise between the True and the False selves in the cultural experience, which relativizes Freudian negativism.

In conclusion, Benjamin reinforces that this theory is not about identifying an ideal model or a hypothetical beneficial reality but more about understanding the contradictory forces that organize and motivate individuals. Therefore, it does not conclude with a moral admonition against domination or internalization. Benjamin affirms:

> To assert the possibility of mutual recognition is not to suggest that in an ideal world recognition would never falter, and the tension between and within individuals would never break down. Such ideal constructions do not help us to understand the subtle way by which what we most desire may alternatively enthrall or liberate us. (Ibid, p. 222).

Therefore, it is important to make it clear that intersubjectivity is not an ideal based on purified femininity, contrary to corrupted masculinity, since this logic would only reinforce gender opposition. The author indicates that the defense of a purified realm, such as intersubjectivity as opposed to breakdown, "would simply repeat the strategy of the opponents of instinct theory, which reversed the model of original evil controlled by culture in favor of a model of original goodness distorted by culture." (Ibid, p. 223). Here, she makes it perfectly clear that she now rejects a theory that relies on an empathetic nature. Nature, for her, would have diverging, ambiguous, and multiple tendencies; the potential for idealization and omnipotent control, as well as a potential for reinstating tension. That is why the gender split is a reality but not an ineluctable one. For her, "A sufficient ground for optimism is the contention that if breakdown is 'built into' the psychic system, so is the possibility of renewing tension." (Ibid, p. 223).

To be sure, Benjamin is aware that her critical analysis entails a feminist normativity in the background, as some of her admonitions make evident. Instead of shying away from this aspect, however, she proposes to focus on the paradox itself, keeping the tension alive in her theory. Her strategy involves focusing the analysis on the normative split itself rather than on one of the sides.

She insists on avoiding the temptation to invert the polarity, valorizing one side to the detriment of the other. For example, in contrast to some feminist arguments of the time, she does not claim that women would be gentle or virtuous creatures, in contrast to morally evil men. Moreover, even if she claims that we need to make space for emotional dependency in the public world, she also does not deny the need for independence. The issue is keeping the paradox alive, not capitulating to any side of the split. In her words:

> In adopting the feminist critique of gender polarity, I am aware that it has sometimes tended to reinforce the dualism it criticizes. Every binary split creates a temptation to merely reverse its terms, to elevate what has been devalued and denigrate what has been overvalued. To avoid the tendency toward reversal is not easy — especially given the existing division in which the female is culturally defined as that which is not male. In order to challenge the sexual split which permeates our psychic, cultural, and social life, it is necessary to criticize not only the idealization of the masculine side, but also the reactive valorization of femininity. What is necessary is not to take sides but to remain focused on the dualistic structure itself. (Ibid, p. 9)

For her, criticizing male domination is a historic step towards a broader process that hopefully does not end in a moral inversion but in a deeper understanding of tension and paradox. That is why, for Benjamin, theory should not be well resolved or static, aiming at a final solution. On the contrary, it should have John Keats' "negative capability," which, in the poet's words, means "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." (1871/1939). For Benjamin, such a capability entails coping with contradiction or making space for aggressiveness, fantasy, and irrationality. As she puts it:

> No doubt our historical situation readily allows us to question the masculine form of authority — as Freud did not — but this in itself does not immediately resolve the problem of destructiveness or submission. It only starts us on a new approach to grasping the tension between the desire to be free and the desire not to be. To persevere in that approach, it seems to me, requires of theory some of that quality which Keats demanded for poetry — negative capability. (Benjamin, 1988, p. 10).

In the context of these multiple tensions and contradictions within her work, Benjamin considers her conclusion "both modest and utopian" (Ibid). For her, although there is no way out of the reality of the complementary split between the self and the other, there is the temporary possibility of reinstalling tension. And this possibility, even if perennial or precarious, may conduct the cultural reality towards more flexible standards:

> The renewal of mutual recognition in the wake of its breakdown is not a final, redemptive 'end of prehistory'; rather, it is a necessary part of the continuing process of individual and social change. To aspire to this renewal is to accept the inevitable inconstancy and imperfection of our efforts, without relinquishing the project. (Ibid, p. 223-224).

This theoretical position entails sustaining a "logic of paradox" and the dynamic recreation of tension. The objective of revolutionary struggles is not to overcome domination once and for all but to make power structures more malleable. The aim is not to eliminate power and domination,

which is impossible, but to create spaces of flexibility and the dynamic reconfiguration of oppressive structures. In her words:

> After all, breakdown of tension is as much a part of life as recreating it once more. The logic of paradox includes the acknowledgment that breakdown occurs. (…). If the denial of recognition does not become frozen into unmovable relationships, the play of power need not be hardened into domination. (Ibid, p. 223).

This critical solution resembles Amy Allen's idea of emancipation without utopia (2015b). Drawing on Foucault, Allen claimed a form of emancipation related to the transformation "of domination into mobile and reversible fields of power relations" (2015b, p. 525), avoiding the idealistic sustenance of a transcendental utopia since, for her, "there is no outside to power." For Benjamin, similarly, despite the importance of breakdowns in recognition, we can sustain a "logic of paradox" that envisions the fleeting and modest possibility of renewing tension. This experience, while unable to efface oppression or overcome the need for internalization, destabilizes and moves power relations forward.

In summary, even if intersubjectivity is not ideal, it sustains the possibility of relaxing the need for internalization, integrating nature through a more enriching experience. Instead of dominating nature, it would be possible to immerse ourselves in it partially. However, nature here, materialized in the model of the ambivalent maternal body, does not have a radically negative or excessive connotation, so partial communion with it would be possible, desirable, and even pleasurable. Despite Benjamin's efforts to deny a romantic idealization of nature, we can still identify in this proposition a remnant hope in nature's positive or at least neutral character, contrastingly different from the much more radical connotation of nature as death and destruction present in Freud's analysis.

This view was mitigated throughout the development of her theory. However, before going through Benjamin's subsequent work, from the 1990s onwards, which incorporates more negativity, I will analyze how her theory was appropriated by Axel Honneth, who counted mainly on Benjamin's work developed so far. We will see that he largely misread her intentions, sustaining a different conception of recognition with important consequences for critical theory.

5. Misuse of Jessica Benjamin: On Axel Honneth's appropriation of intersubjective psychoanalysis

This research departed from the realization that contemporary critical theory needs to resume the negative elements of the first generation if it wants to understand the current context of a crisis

of democracy. That is because the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School, for their normative commitments, would lack sharp enough tools to identify obstructions to an emancipated society. This deficiency is related to their use or misuse of psychoanalysis. Many critical scholars nowadays agree that Freudian psychoanalysis, a central reference for the first generation, did not fit well in the projects of the second and third generations (Whitebook, 2001; McAfee, 2019; Allen, 2021a). Their normative inquiries would lead them to either increasingly avoid psychoanalysis or employ post-Freudian versions of psychoanalytic theory that, in their reading, could sustain direct normative hopes. As we saw, Habermas would first offer a somewhat tamed or domesticated reading of Freud in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971), only to successively abandon Freudian psychoanalysis for the developmental psychology of Piaget and Kohlberg (Whitebook, 1995, p. 7). Honneth would defend the importance of psychoanalysis for critical theory, but he would employ a specific reading of Winnicott rather than classic Freudian psychoanalysis.

The normative approach of Habermas and Honneth is inadequate, mainly when highly antagonistic and irrational forces make an appearance in many democracies. This situation claims a proper, deep, and productive critical diagnosis of the present time. Indeed, nowadays, with the public mobilization of violent fantasies and the unfolding of irrational dynamics within political processes, it seems evident that we need to make use of psychoanalysis' sharpest tools. These, however, may not sustain a normative compass. McAfee alerts: "The trouble with both Habermas's and Honneth's accounts are that they are looking for a normative but nonmetaphysical foothold for critical theory when psychoanalysis is just not going to oblige." (2019, p. 23).

In this context, several scholars have criticized Honneth's employment of Winnicott's psychoanalysis based on different analytic perspectives (Butler, 2008; Pacheco, 2016; Allen, 2021a; Marin, 2022). However, Joel Whitebook, since the 1990s, and Nöelle McAfee, more recently (2019), have criticized Honneth from within his own references, arguing that a more nuanced and careful reading of Winnicott would result in a different critical theory of society. Joining forces with these scholars, I propose that a different reading of Jessica Benjamin would culminate in a very different theoretical model, which can help make sense of today's political challenges.

I argue that while Honneth tends towards the normative justification of critique, Benjamin is more concerned with explaining the domination of women, thus with the diagnosis of obstructions to emancipation. The result is that both authors appropriate Hegel, Freud, and Winnicott in different

ways, resulting in very different conceptions of the meaning of recognition. While recognition functions as a normative reference for Honneth, it develops as a highly ambivalent concept in Benjamin's psychoanalytic theory. More specifically, since Honneth sees recognition as a normative ideal, he faces challenges in diagnosing pathology, particularly in explaining negative forms of recognition. On the contrary, Benjamin sees recognition as a fraught psychoanalytic process, which not only demands a careful translation to social theory but also includes high degrees of negativity and aggression. Moreover, based on such understanding, she develops a systematic critique of Western rationality, informed by her engagement with the first generation of the Frankfurt School and her feminist commitments. This critique shows how different is her critical theory in relation to Honneth's.

To support this argument, I will reconstruct the exchange between Honneth and Benjamin at the beginning of the 1990s, focusing the comparative analysis on the books *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth, 1995) and *The Bonds of Love* (Benjamin, 1988). First, the choice to elaborate a critique of Honneth focused on *The Struggle for Recognition* is not only due to his employment of Benjamin in this text but also because the structure of his understanding of recognition remained roughly the same, despite frequent later reformulations.[19]

Second, while Benjamin made significant changes to her theory on recognition since the 1980s, *The Bonds of Love* was her only book available when Honneth wrote *The Struggle for Recognition*. With the reconstruction of both works, I maintain that Benjamin's theory already contained dialectical elements unaccounted for by Honneth, so a more careful reading of her book would have led him in another, more realistic, direction.

Thus, in what follows, I reconstruct Honneth's theory to subsequently contrast it with Benjamin's argument in *The Bonds of Love*. My objective is to make clear the differences between the authors in order to claim that Benjamin's contribution is an appropriate tool for contemporary critical theory, while Honneth's theory fails to be so.

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[19] Indeed, Whitebook wrote: "To be sure, Honneth, partly in response to my objections, modified his position several times after its original articulation in *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth, 1995). Nevertheless, I would maintain that the original formulation of that position — which consisted in the attempt to integrate 'the social interactionist psychology' of George Herbert Mead with the 'object relations theory' of Winnicott — provided the fundamental template for his later reformulations (Honneth, 1999, p. 226)." (Whitebook, 2021, p. 1). Throughout my analysis, when necessary, I refer to Honneth's later reformulations of his theory, showing that they were insufficient to correct the main problems I identify in his argument.

5.1. Honneth's use of object-relations theory and intersubjective psychoanalysis

In the very first sentence of the book *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth makes clear his intention to seek normative foundations for social theory: "In the present volume, I attempt to develop, on the basis of Hegel's model of a 'struggle for recognition,' the foundations for a social theory with normative content." (1995, p. 1). Following Habermas, Honneth seeks a nonspeculative, intra-worldly, and post-metaphysical normative foothold for critical theory, which he discovers in the concept of recognition. In other words, the interest in elaborating an immanent normative stance led Honneth to elaborate a social theory structured around struggles for recognition, which he presented in *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995), probably his most important oeuvre.

To formulate such a theory, Honneth first reconstructs Hegel's writings of the Jena period, identifying in it a model of social development based on struggles for recognition. However, the main problem in Hegel's philosophy is that it depends on metaphysical presuppositions. To ground normatively motivated struggles as inner-worldly processes, Honneth turns to Mead's social psychology, which gives Hegel's theory a "materialist reformulation" (Ibid, p. 92). Hegel and Mead offer Honneth a theory of social structure based on struggles for recognition and organized around three progressive spheres of recognition (love, rights, and esteem) responsible for increasing levels of individual autonomy. Through his reconstruction of Hegel's writings in Jena and the materialist complement of Mead's social psychology, he arrives at an intersubjectivist concept of the person which, depending on the progress of the three forms of recognition, sustains the possibility of developing "an undistorted relation to oneself." (Ibid).

According to Honneth, normative demands are "internal to the relationship of mutual recognition." (Ibid). When some form of recognition is absent, this deficiency affects or injures one's relation-to-self. Then, three corresponding experiences of disrespect occur: physical abuse, exclusion from rights, and denigration, related respectively to the spheres of love, rights, and social esteem. Under certain conditions, this lack can ignite collective struggles claiming that a social group or identity be included under positive recognition patterns. Normatively motivated struggles for recognition then expand the patterns or references of recognition available in a particular society, contributing to its moral progress.

In this way, based on a normative concept of recognition that points towards the possibility of an undistorted form of self-relation, Honneth can reveal an intra-mundane normative standard

while also explaining the emergence of social conflicts. The moral logic of social struggles also informs his critical orientation or the metanormative framework he offers his readers. Since recognition sustains the possibility of healthy or positive human development, distortions or impediments can be deemed unjust.

More specifically, the three progressive spheres or forms of recognition are the following: love, which comes from emotional connections between lovers, family, and friends; rights, which corresponds to individual inclusion into the legal system; and social esteem, which designates the collective approval associated with solidarity and the shared orientation to values. Honneth uses various empirical sciences' contributions, such as psychoanalysis, historical reconstruction, and legal studies, to fill up the content of each sphere, providing empirical anchorage to his vision. Using such references, he explains the progressive movement along the spheres of recognition and indicates ways in which the moral motivation of social struggles can be empirically verified. That is why he can conclude that the three spheres form a sequence in which the person's autonomy and positive relation-to-self increase.

Such progress, however, depends conceptually and genetically on the development of the first form of recognition, which begins with the fundamental primary relation between the mother and the baby, being responsible for endowing the person with a "basic individual self-confidence indispensable for autonomous participation in public life." (Ibid, p. 107). I will focus my critical analysis mainly on this sphere since, besides being the most fundamental one, it is the one in which Honneth addresses psychoanalysis and Jessica Benjamin.

To give theoretical support to the first form of recognition, Honneth employs mainly Winnicott's object-relations theory. However, he reads it in a somewhat controversial way, arguing that the baby initiates life in a symbiotic union with his mother.[20] From birth, both mother and baby would partake in an undifferentiated state from which they would have to detach themselves progressively, acquiring greater independence. In Honneth's words: "Here, both partners to interaction are entirely dependent on each other for the satisfaction of their needs and are incapable of individually demarcating themselves from each other." (Ibid, p. 99).[21]

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[20] Honneth's reading of Winnicott has been criticized mainly by Whitebook (2001, 2016, 2021) and McAfee (2019).

[21] Later, Honneth would alter the idea of an initial phase of symbiosis, thanks to his dialogue with Whitebook and the consideration of Daniel Stern's intersubjective psychoanalysis. Honneth would come to avoid the term "symbiosis," adopting Fred Pine's concept of "fusion," which refers to momentary episodes of merging. These moments, however, retain the same function in Honneth's theory as the former symbiosis, which is to represent the "zero-point" of recognition (Allen 2021a, p. 4-7). This narrative, thus, maintains the idea that the baby is expelled from a blissful state

For the mother, her "emancipatory shift" (Ibid, p. 100) begins with the expansion of her attention towards an ampler social field and everyday activities, which demand her to leave the baby alone for more extended periods. This move on her part corresponds to the child's growing capacity to differentiate himself from his external environment and to tolerate the mother's temporary absence. However, gradually leaving the initial state of a plenum or of complete satisfaction of his needs, the baby is also increasingly aware of his dependency on the mother, which generates a painful disillusionment and a permanent interpersonal issue.

According to Winnicott, the baby tries to destroy the mother in the face of her recalcitrant reality and his gradual loss of omnipotence. More than a negative reaction to frustration, though, Honneth reads these aggressive acts as "the constructive means by which the child can come to recognize the 'mother.'" (Ibid, p. 101). Such destructive acts, in other words, represent experiments the baby undertakes to test the limits of his omnipotence. If the mother survives destruction without retaliation, that is, if she resists the baby but does not try to destroy him in reverse, she is placed outside his control as an external being. Only once the baby encounters the mother outside of his sphere of omnipotent influence can he love her as an independent being. Through destruction and survival, then, the baby integrates symbiosis and self-assertion: "In the bond that has now been formed, the child is able to reconcile its (still symbiotically supported) devotion to the 'mother' with the experience of standing on its own." (Ibid).

At this moment of his argument, Honneth introduces Jessica Benjamin. Since she had already proposed the integration of Winnicott and Hegel in *The Bonds of Love* (1988), Honneth follows her steps, seeing in Winnicott's "destruction" the key concept to frame primary relations as struggles for recognition, which prepares the ground for later forms of recognition. The destruction survived is what allows a demarcation to be experienced between the partners, sustaining the affective attunement without symbiotic merging. He affirms: "For it is indeed only in the attempt to destroy his or her' mother' – that is, in the form of a struggle – that the child realizes that he or she is dependent on the loving care of an independently existing person with claims of her own." (1995, p.101).

At issue here is the paradoxical acknowledgment of mutual dependency while both partners grow in independence: "If, in the way just sketched, a first step of mutual demarcation is

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that he will forever try to recover. Therefore, the concept of fusion cannot avoid the same problems identified in its first version. See also Allen 2015a, p. 326.

successfully taken, then mother and child can acknowledge their dependence on each other's love without having to merge symbiotically." (Ibid, p. 102).

This interplay between mother and child fundamentally nurtures the baby's autonomy. According to Winnicott, the child's capacity to be alone depends on his being confident of the other's continuing care. Once he is sure of the mother's enduring and sustaining care, the baby can be alone without drowning in anxiety, developing as well the capacity to think for himself and play creatively. In Honneth's interpretation, this means that the reliable affective relation to the mother allows the baby to develop a fundamental positive relation-to-self. The individual confidence that emerges from good enough mothering is responsible for nourishing individual thinking and creative capacities: "The child's creativity – indeed, the human faculty of imagination in general – presupposes a 'capacity to be alone,' which itself can arise only out of a basic confidence in the care of a loved one." (Ibid, p. 103).

More than being the basis of an individual positive self-relation, this experience also introduces oneself to broader affective relations. For Honneth, the original "undifferentiated intersubjectivity" experienced between mother and baby leaves a permanent trace in the baby, even after he has acquired greater degrees of separation, driving him to later affectionate relationships. From the early symbiosis lost to disappointing separation, it remains a continuing desire to be merged with others: "The inner state of symbiotic oneness so radically shapes the experiential scheme of complete satisfaction that it keeps alive, behind the back of the subject and throughout the subject's life, the desire to be merged with another person." (Ibid, p. 105). As I mentioned before, such a desire is a kind of nostalgia for merging. It informs later friendships and loving relationships, which consist of a balance between merging and separation or between boundary-establishment and boundary-dissolution because separation comes to be an unavoidable reality. Honneth relates these later loving relations to Hegel's "being oneself in another," which is not a fixed state but a "communicative arc suspended between the experience of being able to be alone and the experience of being merged." (Ibid).

After introducing such speculative considerations, Honneth employs Jessica Benjamin's theory again to attribute more concreteness to his reflections. He affirms: "These conclusions lose some of their speculative character when we consider Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalytical research, in which she has studied pathological disorders of the love relationship." (Ibid). In his view, Benjamin's study about the roots of masochism and sadism would offer concrete examples of

systematic pathological distortions in recognition, in flagrant contrast to what would be a "successful bond between adults." (Ibid, p. 106). He states that pathological relations occur when "the reciprocity of the intersubjectively suspended arc is destroyed by the fact that one of the subjects involved is no longer able to detach himself or herself either from the state of egocentric independence or from that of symbiotic dependence." (Ibid). Then, a rigid and dominating scheme of complementary roles or mutual supplementation occurs.

However, Honneth rushes to extract positive normative implications from this negative diagnosis. For him, the analysis of sadomasochism supports a contrasting ideal of mutual recognition, in which the reciprocal balance is sustained between merging and separation. What differs from this model is a pathological one-sidedness that breaks the ideal balance. That is, he concludes that the empirical distortions in recognition identified by Benjamin allow the contrasting definition of a normative model of successful recognition as love. He affirms:

> For if it is, in fact, possible to derive a criterion for what counts as a disorder, with regard to affectional bonds, from the idea of the unsuccessful reciprocity of certain tensely balanced states, then this also demonstrates, in turn, the empirical appropriateness of a concept of love conceived in terms of a theory of recognition. (Honneth, 1995, p. 106).

Honneth, thus, extracts a normative standard from the contrast to the negative forms of one-sided relations that Benjamin analyzes. Indeed, after introducing Benjamin's theory on sadomasochism as distorted forms of loving relations, he states that:

> From a therapeutic angle, the possibility of reinterpreting the clinical material on relational pathologies in terms of a structural one-sidedness in the balance of recognition supports the idea that, *ideally speaking*, the love relationship represents a symbiosis refracted by recognition. Accordingly, every prominent model of an instrumentally one-sided relational constellation – to which the love relationship in general is reduced in Sartre's phenomenological analysis – can be seen as a psychoanalytically explicable *deviation from a defensible ideal of interaction.* (Ibid, emphasis added).

Since this primary form of recognition has a strong and fundamental normative content, it also affects the other forms. In fact, Honneth goes on to argue that this first model of recognition, being the primordial one, contains "the structural core of all ethical life." (Ibid, p. 107). From a "symbiosis refracted by recognition" emerges a positive standard for loving relations in which one can be "oneself in another."

However, as we will see in what follows, Jessica Benjamin did not support the idea of an initial symbiotic phase, as it appears Winnicott did not either (McAfee, 2019, p. 36). Accordingly, recognition is not simply an ideal, refracted from such an initial plenum state, from which one can

contrast distorted relationships. The leap from diagnosing distorted forms of loving relationships to a normative standard for critical theory is not so direct and unproblematic.[22]

In this context, some scholars argue that Honneth misappropriated not only psychoanalysis but also, more precisely, Winnicott's theory, which, if properly read, would give a rather different critical theory. Nöelle McAfee argues that contrary to relational theorists who want to see human beings as relational through and through, there would be "an aspect of Winnicott's theory that stubbornly resists the purely relational account." (2019, p. 39). Winnicott would not be a strong intersubjectivist, as Honneth reads him. His psychoanalysis would sustain a developmental conception closer to Freudian theory because, for him, the infant has an undeniable and fundamental pre-social constitution. Sociability would not be a natural feature of the infant but a fragile development and a progressive achievement that cannot be taken for granted.

Amy Allen also criticizes Honneth's appropriation of Winnicott on the basis that it is not realistic enough for critical theory. Following Whitebook, she contends that infantile omnipotence *à la* Winnicott would be incompatible with the early relationship of recognition that Honneth sustains (2021a, p. 3-9). The result is that to save his hope in a strong intersubjectivism, Honneth purifies this early state of much of its ambivalence. Subsequent relations of recognition suffer the same fate in his theory, being purged from much of their conflictual character so that they can stand as a normative foothold instead of a complex and dialectic process.

Indeed, according to the most engaged critic of Honneth's misappropriation of psychoanalysis, Joel Whitebook, the main problem at stake is that Winnicott's theory of an omnipotent phase contradicts Honneth's "strong intersubjectivism." In Whitebook's words, which I quoted before: "Winnicott was a theorist of omnipotence every bit as much as Freud." (2016, p. 173). The issue is that the original illusion of omnipotence that characterizes the baby's development for Winnicott would not easily accommodate Honneth's normative expectation regarding recognition. Accordingly, Winnicott, if properly considered, would render a much more negative image of the self, which not only tries to test external reality to see the extent of its

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[22] Admittedly, Honneth rendered this issue more complicated in later publications. His later conversation with Whitebook is particularly instructive (Whitebook and Honneth, 2016). On this occasion, he acknowledged that the Freudian project would be necessary to circumvent the naiveté of moral philosophy. Denying the existence of a rational moral self, he affirmed that the individual would be probably "also always driven by some not completely conceivable and therefore probably unconscious drives." (Ibid, p. 174). However, both Allen and Whitebook argue that Honneth's employment of psychoanalysis is still not realistic enough for the project of critical theory, focusing too much on normative capabilities. For them, Honneth fails to give due importance to the "sting of negativity," thus failing to avoid moralistic idealism. See Whitebook, 2021, p. 2; Allen, 2021a, p. 3–9.

omnipotence but directly tries to control and dominate the other to deny its troubling independence. In his most recent address to Honneth, the article "The Misuse of Winnicott: On Axel Honneth's Appropriation of Psychoanalysis" (2021), Whitebook argues that there is a second, more ambivalent, or Kleinian, side of Winnicott that Honneth consistently ignores.

The German philosopher would also fail to acknowledge that Winnicott did not reject the Freudian theory but merely complemented or expanded it, especially towards the less explored pre-oedipal phase of human development. In Whitebook's analysis, Winnicott would agree not only with Freudian primary narcissism but also with a sort of "primary aggressiveness," which the baby should be able to express if he was to avoid relinquishing his inner impulses to a False Self. Honneth would neglect, in other words, the genuinely aggressive character of the infant's struggle toward independence. For Whitebook, while the baby progressively discovers that he does not control the mother, he is not merely making a purposeful and controlled experiment on external reality but concretely trying to destroy her, moved by disillusionment, anguish, and anxiety. In addition, such aggressiveness is not just an infantile matter; it keeps forcing its way into later object relations. Thus, the remaining elements of the original plenum can manifest themselves in multiple and ambivalent ways, not just in a rather positive desire for recognition. For Whitebook, our nostalgia of plenitude may nourish erotic bonds and loving intersubjective relationships, but it may also incite omnipotent strivings and the desire to control others, draining their independence. Since such nostalgia has an ambivalent constitution, so do loving relationships:

> Because Honneth wants to preserve the love relationship as the unsullied wellspring for mutual recognition, he doesn't consider the 'pathologies' of love. A realistic non-idealizing theory of love, however, would have to address the countless ways in which love relationships can go awry [...]. (Ibid, p. 9).

Thus, the problem with Honneth's theory is his considerable disregard for contradiction in recognition, which prevents him from giving a proper critical account of today's social discontents. As both McAfee (2019) and Whitebook (2021) argue, facing ambivalence, identifying omnipotent wishes, and admitting our aggressive capacities are all crucial to understanding and dealing with our current political reality.

Concerning this problem, McBride (2013) and McQueen (2015) characterized Honneth's understanding as a "deficit model" of recognition. When one's primary need for recognition is not satisfied, one is bound to struggle to rectify this deficit, which consists of expanding or improving recognition relations. The main problem of the deficit model is that it neglects subordinating forms

of identity formation and deleterious relations of recognition.[23] In summary, Honneth's model falls short of explaining negative forms of recognition and the desire for submission.[24]

Following the analysis mainly of Whitebook and McAfee, in what follows, I criticize Honneth's misappropriation of Jessica Benjamin. Certainly, Benjamin is a much less important reference to Honneth's argument than Winnicott. However, a deeper engagement with her theory would provide valuable elements for a critical social theory, especially for our understanding of the current global scenario.

I am not the first one to make a similar argument. Alessandra Campo (2009), Julie Connolly (2010), and Federica Gregoratto (2015) have suggested that a closer engagement with Jessica Benjamin could correct Honneth's theoretical blind spots, such as his disregard for negative forms of recognition. Alessandra Campo has argued that "Benjamin's conception of recognition represents a meeting point between the positions of Axel Honneth and Judith Butler." (Campo 2009, p. 156). For her, one could answer Butler's criticisms of Honneth through a closer engagement with Benjamin, who, despite the role of mediation between both authors, would be significantly closer to Honneth (Ibid, p. 193). Julie Connolly argues that Benjamin's theory provides "a platform from which to reconstruct Honneth's category of love-based recognition" (2010, 429), adding an account of negative forms of recognition that would acknowledge especially the work of power in the private sphere. Finally, Federica Gregoratto (2015) believes that, even if Honneth neither theorized properly the oppression of women in the sphere of love nor offered an egalitarian model of conjugal love, one could reform his theory to include such elements, with recourse to Jessica Benjamin's theory of gender domination.

Criticizing Honneth from different points of view, these authors have in common the suggestion that Benjamin's work could correct Honneth's theoretical blind spots, such as his

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[23] For further critiques of the deficit model, see McNay, 2008; McBride, 2013; and McQueen, 2015.

[24] This issue is not addressed directly in *The Struggle for Recognition*, but it is a continuing problem throughout Honneth's work. For instance, in his later essay "Recognition as Ideology" (2007), Honneth discusses the differences between ideological and normative forms of recognition, trying to discern distorted from authentic recognition. For him, the ideological forms would reproduce social domination and exclusion while appearing rationally justified. Honneth offers "material substantiation" as the defining criterion to differentiate between proper recognition and ideological recognition. This understanding is in flagrant contrast to Benjamin's theory, for whom one may truly desire submission, material deprivation, and even physical violation. To be sure, Honneth's argument is more complex than what I can reconstruct here. However, it does not resolve the problems pointed out above. As Petherbridge concludes, his later strategy further obscures the problem of negative forms of subject-constitution, so Honneth cannot explain the desire for submission (Petherbridge, 2013, p. 191-200). Allen also argues that the distinction between true and ideological forms of recognition still presupposes that recognition can be true in some form or purified of aggression and domination, which is unrealistic (2021b, p. 114).

disregard for negative forms of recognition. All of them believe that Honneth is compatible with Benjamin, with minor changes, mainly by acknowledging that private relations of recognition can take negative or oppressive forms. Even Benjamin herself seems to disregard the extent to which the implications of her own theory contradict Honneth's account. To my knowledge, she has never systematically criticized his appropriation of her theory.

In contrast to these positions, I believe that Benjamin's and Honneth's theories are incompatible: their understandings of recognition are so different that their critical theories conflict in crucial ways. Moreover, critical theorists have largely disregarded this fact, preventing them from seeing the profound contributions we can extract from Benjamin's theory. In this context, I reconstruct Benjamin's understanding of recognition in what follows, arguing that it significantly differs from Honneth's view.

5.2. Benjamin's dialectic concept of recognition in The Bonds of Love (1988)

I argue that Benjamin's theory contrasts with Honneth's in four interrelated main points: (1) in her research objective, (2) in her understanding of the constitution of the subject, based on her reading of Hegel, Freud, and Winnicott, (3) in her conception of recognition, and (4) in her critical social diagnosis. In the first place (1), her research question or objective differs from his: she does not want to construct a normative social theory but rather to understand the depths of women's oppression. In the second place (2), this leads her to a different and more realistic understanding of the constitution of the human subject, following a particular appropriation of Hegel, Freud, and Winnicott. Honneth's and Benjamin's disparate understandings of primary narcissism are noteworthy in this respect. While, for Honneth, the baby initiates life in a beatific state of symbiosis with the mother (or at least he experiences powerful moments of blissful fusion, as he puts it later), Benjamin argues that the baby faces a paradox of recognition since the beginning of life. Third (3), following their different appropriations of the same authors and their different understandings about the initial situation of life, the authors come up with conflicting understandings about recognition. While Honneth relates recognition to an ideal situation, Benjamin sees it as a complex and dialectic process that cannot be reduced to a normative demand. This discrepancy explains why Honneth cannot elucidate negative forms of recognition nor cases in which people come to desire their own submission. In contrast, Benjamin explains this fact through her analysis of sadomasochism and a feminist critique of Western rationality. Thus, their different accounts of

recognition lead to (4) different ways of diagnosing pathology and developing a critical theory of society. In the last chapter of *The Bonds of Love*, as we saw, Benjamin offers a systematic critique of the split between object and subject, present throughout our society, including in the modern reason criticized in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Nonetheless, her intersubjective view offers a dynamic and modest way of making power relations more flexible, representing an important realization for critical theory. All these differences amount to a very different critical theory of society, incompatible with Honneth's version and more faithful to Winnicott's intentions.

5.2.1   Research objective

In her critique of Honneth's appropriation of psychoanalysis, McAfee affirms that: "Rather than focusing on securing normative footholds for critique, critical theory should expand its scope to work on identifying how to recognize the ghosts in the forum and then how to proceed." (2019, p. 43). Thus, in its double task of offering a diagnosis and a critical stance of current society, as Horkheimer (1972) famously described it, critical theory should not lean too much towards normative justifications but also preserve and even sharpen its diagnostic tools. While these two elements, diagnosis and normative critique, are deeply interrelated in critical theory, Honneth surely focused more on the normative side. To begin our exploration, I argue that this is not Jessica Benjamin's case.

Indeed, as we saw in the Introduction of *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin affirms that the aim of her psychoanalytic investigation leans towards diagnosing domination, mainly the domination of women: "This book is an analysis of the interplay between love and domination. [...] Above all, this book seeks to understand how domination is anchored in the hearts of the dominated." (1988, p. 5). The chapter that dwells upon sadomasochist domination, "Master and Slave," begins again with the same question: "Once we understand submission to be the desire of the dominated as well as their helpless fate, we may hope to answer the central question, How is domination anchored in the hearts of those who submit to it?" (Ibid, p. 52).

To offer a critical diagnosis of oppression, Benjamin relies on psychoanalytic reflexive tools, which acknowledge the existence of irrational, self-harming, and contradictory tendencies in the individual and within society. Antagonistic and oppressive elements are fully assumed as part of our subjective and collective constitution, while other less harmful possibilities are not denied.

For example, Benjamin denounces the gender biases present in Freudian psychoanalysis. However, she does not deny the concrete existence of the Freudian patriarchal categories, such as the Oedipus complex, the phallus representation of desire, or even penis envy. Instead, her objective is to grasp the genealogy of these elements in Western culture, revealing its questionable foundations in order to understand how they get ingrained into our psychic organizations and social structures, coming to be desired. It is precisely these complex, paradoxical, and reflexive elements that she wants to comprehend further.

Moreover, to better understand her research presuppositions, it may be helpful to point out that Benjamin does not see male domination as an ideology but as a discourse in the Foucaultian sense. Indeed, in analyzing male rationalization as a discourse, she explains that: "A discourse is not ideology, not a result of some deeper structure; it is, itself, a system of power." (Ibid, p. 287, see also p. 186-187). This reflexivity is a premise that guides Benjamin's feminist inquiries and informs her research questions.

Since Benjamin's research question differs from Honneth's, it accordingly generates a very different understanding of the subject and recognition. To be sure, she employs a similar vocabulary of "recognition" and "intersubjectivity" and summons some references that would be fundamental for Honneth, especially Hegel and Winnicott. However, she appropriates both authors' contributions in a different, more ambivalent, way.

5.2.2. *The constitution of the subject – the employment of Hegel, Freud, and Winnicott*

First, the Hegelian reference she relies upon is the one from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, while Honneth appropriates the earlier Hegelian writings of Jena. This difference may indicate a more Hobbesian interpretation on her part because the Hegelian understanding of recognition is more conflictual in his later work.

Whitebook, in his critique of intersubjective psychoanalysis, blames some "relationally oriented theorists" (2008, p. 382) for abiding by German idealism to counteract Freudian pessimism. In a subsequent footnote, he mentions Jessica Benjamin's *The Bonds of Love* and Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition*, as if both could be equally blamed for refuting Freud's pessimism via a similar reading of Hegel. However, in another text, he also affirms the following concerning Honneth's preference for the earlier Hegel:

> Because of the strength of the reality-denying force in self-consciousness — the 'work of the negative' — the struggle for recognition, as it is conceived in 1807, is much more

conflictual — that is to say, much more of an agon, a struggle — than it is in the earlier writings. Honneth's use of the early Hegel as opposed to the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* (and his use of Mead as a source of reference as opposed to Freud) serves to radically reduce the conflictual nature, and therewith the intensity, of the struggle in the quest for recognition. (Whitebook, 2001, p. 266).

Among other things, I believe that Benjamin's account of recognition is more conflictual than Honneth's because of her focus on the antagonistic master-slave struggle for recognition as the *Phenomenology* describes it. To recapitulate, Benjamin understands that the fundamental desire for recognition at the heart of the subject is essentially paradoxical. At the very moment that the subject wants to affirm his independency, he realizes that he depends on the recognition of an other. As I explained, it is this paradoxical dependent-independency that constitutes the basic structure of the Benjaminian subject.

In her critique of Honneth's intersubjectivism, McAfee affirms that contemporary relational theorists would presume that human beings are relational from the start, which would then conveniently support their democratic aspirations. For her, "To a certain extent, relational theorists skip the Hegelian problem of a struggle for self- and other-recognition *tout court* by simply positing relational beings *ab ovo*. If infants are fundamentally social, then misrecognition does indeed become the first social ill." (2019, p. 39). However, this critique does not apply to Benjamin's theory since her analysis begins precisely with the Hegelian problem, seen almost as an ontological premise of the human condition. The idea that human beings are relational from the start supports a harmonic democratic aspiration only if the relationship is itself harmonic. If the relationships in which human beings find themselves are fundamentally paradoxical, then intersubjective reconciliation remains permanently at issue.

Nevertheless, we know that Benjamin departs from Hegel to affirm that the domination of one consciousness to the other is not inevitable. Relying on Winnicott's notion of destruction and survival, she sustains that it is possible to maintain a mutual balance between the subjects within a relationship of intersubjective recognition. The only way out of domination is mutual recognition, in which the intersubjective balance is maintained in tension.

Despite sustaining this hopeful possibility, Benjamin's understanding of destruction is faithful to Winnicott's negativity. For her, the subject tries indeed to destroy the other. Aggressive acts of negation and denial are not merely a purposeful test of external reality but more a confusing defense from the other's recalcitrance and a desperate desire for an unthreatening connection. As she cites Winnicott: "For a few minutes he [the baby] really intends to destroy or at least to spoil

everyone and everything, and he does not even mind if he destroys himself in the process." (Winnicott, 1964, p. 62, in Benjamin, 1988, p. 40). However, it is when the other survives without retaliating that the baby discovers with relief that an independent being can still be emotionally attuned to him and that his aggression is limited. She affirms:

> The wish for absolute assertion of oneself, the demand to have one's way, the negation of the outside — all that Freud understood as aggression and omnipotence — must sometime crash against the reality of an other who reflects back the intransigent assertion that the self displays. (Benjamin, 1988, p. 39).

Destruction, therefore, is a genuine and concrete desire, as Freud understood it. But it can sometimes collide with an external reality, which reveals alterity.

Nevertheless, we saw that contrary to Winnicott's understanding, destruction for Benjamin does not interrupt the reality of primary narcissism. For her, the primary relationship is not one of omnipotence but of continual tension and dynamic alternation between sameness and difference. We may speculate that Benjamin faces the same issue as Honneth, invested in both Winnicott's theory of destruction and Stern's "strong intersubjetivism." While both Benjamin and Honneth want to read Winnicott's theory on destruction and survival as a struggle for recognition, they also want to sustain the possibility of an intersubjective balance from the beginning.

Honneth's solution to this dilemma entails the adoption of Fred Pine's hypothesis about moments of fusion alternating with moments of separation. For the German philosopher, Pine's momentary fusion would play the same role as Winnicott's primary omnipotence, being the zero-point of recognition that leaves a strong trace in the subject. That is how Honneth can sustain that primary oneness does not oppose intersubjectivity. On the contrary, it encourages it because the remaining nostalgia of the mother-infant plenum or the beatific moments of fusion is what instigates the subject to seek later forms of loving relationships. Therefore, instead of opposing the intersubjective relation, or at least creating an element of incompatibility, primary fusion actually comes to be aligned with sociability. As we have seen, regarding this theoretical solution, Amy Allen (2021a, p. 6-7) argues that Honneth misconstrues the highly ambivalent experience of primary fusion as a blissful moment, which is a necessary step for his transforming this experience into the paradigm case of recognition. The result of this move, aligned with his rejection of drive theory, is an unrealistic account of the person that "obscures the fundamental role that power plays in human psychic and social life." (Ibid).

Unlike Honneth's, Benjamin's solution provides a more realistic and complex account of the person. For her, the initial situation of life is far from blissful because the paradoxical need for

recognition generates increasing tension. Moreover, Benjamin does not deny the complete asymmetry in the primary relationship between mother and baby. However, the unequal capacities between the partners do not kill a nascent seed of mutuality between them entirely because the mother can perceive the baby as a separate being, or at least as a potential alterity, which also generates relational tensions between the partners. Considering the mother's narcissistic projections on the baby, it may be considerably difficult for her to accept his independence. As I interpret this understanding, intersubjective recognition can be seen as a "good enough" relationship, which is full of intense connections but also of frustration.

At this point, we can understand Benjamin's theory as proposing something similar to Pine's hypothesis about alternating moments of fusion and separation. However, for Benjamin, fusion stands in fundamental opposition to intersubjective recognition, which entails tension. Therefore, contrary to Pine and Honneth, such moments of fusion are not seen as blissful, beatific, or ideal experiences. On the contrary, they can represent terrific moments of domination, abandonment, and unilateral dependence. Undifferentiating states represent a static and deadly absence of tension, which may nourish a false self or a non-spontaneous form of life.

In this context, we come to desire recognition not because we want to return to a lost beatific fusion with the other but because we want to avoid such fusion on any side, since merging with the other or having the other merged with us means a state of domination and, at its most extreme form, of psychic death. The closest to a blissful moment that one can get, in this view, would be the ones in which separation and identification overlap in tension, which is not a pure or ideal state, but one that can nonetheless involve high degrees of pleasure, connection, and aliveness.

That is why, based on Stern, Benjamin defends that self-other differentiation is a continual process that can be present both in moments of self-assertion and in the intense physical intimacy that Pine identified as fusion. Nursing, for example, is not merely an experience of fusion. It usually encompasses multiple experiences, such as "being transformed by another (as in tension relief), complementarity (as in being held), and mental sharing (as in mutual gaze)." (Ibid, p. 46). Besides, moments that clearly reinforce self-assertion and differentiation, such as during active play, can be as significant, exciting, powerful, and positive for the child's development as the ones of calming attunement, since recognition is an essential element there as well (Ibid, p. 253).

In summary, the baby emerges not from a plenum but from a conflict that defines his subjectivity. Moreover, this conflict cannot be finally resolved since the resolution of the paradox

would result in domination, psychic death, or the exhaustion of intersubjective tension. In this sense, even if one classified Benjamin as a "strong intersubjectivist" because she does not support an initial phase of omnipotence, we still have to agree that her version of intersubjectivity is highly ambivalent, including in itself a moment of anti-sociability that is part of the concept. For her, there is something fundamentally anti-social in the paradox of recognition, which can easily go awry. Intersubjectivity, albeit fundamental to the subject constitution, is a process or a development that depends on the dynamic relationship between the baby and his primary caregivers. In such a complex context, when introduced to the social world of humans, the disorganized baby has the progressive task of both identifying and separating from his significant others. No side of the spectrum between relatedness and boundary definition is resolved, guaranteed, or taken for granted. As Benjamin puts it:

> Thus I stress that mutual recognition, including the child's ability to recognize the mother as a person in her own right, is as significant a *developmental goal* as separation. Hence the need for a theory that understands how *the capacity for mutuality evolves*, a theory based on the premise that from the beginning there are always (at least) two subjects. (Ibid, p. 24, emphasis added).

This scenario fundamentally differs from Honneth's narrative, which, as Jonathan Lear identified, emulates "a secularized version of the fall" (Lear, 2008, p. 131). Benjamin's narrative has a different structure. The baby is, so to speak, falling, from the beginning, into a paradoxical social world that demands contradictory moves. The baby is always immersed in a relational paradox that can easily turn into painful submission or empty domination. Recognition arises from an impure balance between these two possibilities, which perhaps only occurs on rare occasions in our society (Benjamin, 1988, p. 78). It is the very conflictual nature of this situation that gives rise to omnipotent desires, illusions about ideal solutions, and paranoid visions of the world.

As we saw, Whitebook and McAfee affirm that current intersubjectivist authors would sustain a complete relational being or a baby that is social all the way down. Such a being would not struggle with separation, only with attachment, because it is already born separated from the primary caregiver. McAfee affirms that: "Contemporary relational theory, while one of the many current strands of Freudian psychoanalysis, rejects the central Freudian notion of an early undifferentiated stage altogether, seeing the child as from the start having a proto-ego whose first task is attachment rather than separation or individuation." (2019, p. 39). In contrast to such relational theories, Benjamin has a more complicated and nuanced view, in which both separation and attachment are equally serious issues for the emerging subject.

Nevertheless, Honneth seems to read Benjamin as one of these relational authors that McAfee evokes. When analyzing her conclusions about sadomasochism, he affirms that for her: "there is of course no doubt but that these distortions of the balance of recognition are to be traced back to psychological disturbances, the cause of which lies in the abortive development of the child's detachment from the 'mother.'" (Honneth, 1995, p. 106). However, as we saw, subject development is not so much a problem of detachment as one of attachment. In Benjamin's words: "In the balance between self and other, disengagement (open space) is as important as engagement." (Benjamin, 1988, p. 42). This mutuality in her understanding of subject development, in which no side of the recognition paradox can be taken for granted, leads to a very different understanding of what it means to recognize and be recognized by the other.

In one of her most recent comments about Honneth's work, Amy Allen criticized again his overly optimistic account of primary narcissism, claiming that a more ambivalent understanding would fundamentally change his theory (2021b). First, she identifies that Honneth needs the idea of a beatific primary fusion for three different purposes. At a normative level, the original plenum represents the paradigmatic experience of recognition, which is his central normative concept. At a social-theoretical level, it explains the struggles for recognition, which would be a desire to return to this original state, albeit in a new indirect form. And at a metanormative level, it informs Honneth's immanent normative commitment to inclusion and individuation, which would also approximate the original experience of oneness through the experience of mutual recognition.

However, what happens to these three levels if the primary relationship is not that much positive? As Allen puts it: "What if the primary 'mother'-infant relationship is best characterized not as a relationship of blissful fusion that must inevitably be broken up, but rather as one of thoroughgoing ambivalence from the start?" (2021b, p. 112). For her, Honneth would, first, need another way of grounding normativity. Second, he would need another strategy for explaining the telos and the motivation for social struggles. These two points would lead Honneth to a more contextualist and ambivalent account of normativity, understanding that it cannot be purified of power and aggression. Finally, abandoning the concept of primary plenum would also alter his metanormative account of recognition. Instead of a purely positive phenomenon, it would have to include negativity in itself. In summary, for Allen, a less optimistic understanding of love and the primary relation would lead to a richer and more convincing concept of recognition, which would be more appropriate for critical theory. Following Allen, I argue that Benjamin's more ambivalent

account of primary relations culminates in a different conception of recognition that indicates incompatibilities in the normative, social-theoretical, and metanormative levels.

5.2.3 Recognition

The different visions that Benjamin and Honneth entertain about the beginning of life and the constitution of the subject lead them to very different conceptions of recognition. While Honneth related recognition to a normative paradigm, Benjamin sees it as a concrete relationship structured around a fundamental paradox with no pure way out or ideal solution. If one succeeds in the struggle, one is left alone as a destroying master. If one fails, on the other hand, one submits and loses all subjectivity. In this context, the precarious solution of the intersubjective balance is not ideal because it involves accepting difference, externality, and lack of power. Our omnipotent desire for perfection, completion, and plenitude cannot be fulfilled. The ideal can never be reached because it necessarily leads to exhaustion, as in the sadomasochist case. The best we can hope for is an unfulfilled tension that generates pleasure, emotional connection, and love but is also non-ideal and unpredictable, frustrating grandiose wishes and idealistic hopes.

Now we reach a fundamental difference between Honneth's and Benjamin's theories of recognition. As we have seen, McBride (2013) and McQueen (2015) characterize Honneth's understanding as a "deficit model" of recognition. These scholars have criticized this model mainly because it does not explain negative forms of recognition and the desire for submission.

Benjamin does not follow the deficit model because there is a fundamental mutuality and reflexivity in her understanding. For her, women do desire their subordination and participate in it, benefiting from their own objectification. She acknowledges that even sophisticated feminist thinkers "frequently shy away from the analysis of submission, for fear that in admitting woman's participation in the relationship of domination, the onus of responsibility will appear to shift from men to women, and the moral victory from women to men." (1988, p. 9). But in order to actually understand the problem of domination, we have to admit that people do participate in their own submission. Only by acknowledging this fact, can we "substitute moral outrage for analysis." (Ibid, p. 9-10). More than normative condemnation, we may need to engage in an uncomfortable self-reflective analysis to deal with domination.

Sadomasochistic relationships are an interesting case in hand. For Benjamin, we might remember, they reflect a desire for recognition, albeit a hopeless one. This desire emerging in adult

life arises from a previous failure of recognition by significant others. We can see that domination here is much more multifaceted than Honneth suggests. The desire for recognition is complex and can easily turn into a desire for domination. More precisely, the very desire for domination reflects a desire for recognition. Following this understanding, Benjamin also sees the absence of recognition as a mutual issue that affects the overall quality of the relationship, setting both the sadist and the masochist in a deadly state of isolation. Thus, a distortion in the bonds of love affects not only the slave but also the master. Even if the master could have access to social esteem or even material confirmation, for instance, this would not mean that he is recognized because recognition is fundamentally mutual, never one-sided.

Honneth could have explained the desire for submission or oppressive forms of recognition in this scenario if he had read Benjamin's analysis of sadomasochism more carefully. In *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth passes too quickly over her theory, and he does not return to it when he analyzes experiences of disrespect in chapter 6 – entitled "Personal Identity and Disrespect: The Violation of the Body, the Denial of Rights, and the Denigration of Ways of Life." One should expect that he would mention sadomasochism when he delineates forms of disrespect that violate individual normative expectations and may generate social outrage. However, he does not return to this issue or engage Benjamin in this chapter. Maybe this is because her theory about sadomasochism would undermine his conclusion regarding the moral motivation of struggles for recognition. After all, she recognizes that the subjects may desire their submission and have pleasure from it. Thus, such lack of recognition would not violate moral expectations, as Honneth would expect, but it would actually entail a more complex bond of love.

Benjamin's sophisticated theoretical structure cannot be exhausted in plain normativity. The lack of recognition is far from merely an issue of moral condemnation or self-correction. Domination is a relational feature, which needs to be channeled and worked through accordingly. That is why her analysis does not end in a normative admonition or the moral condemnation of sadomasochism, for instance. More than blaming the oppressor, she insists on the importance of the oppressed survival in a concrete relation: "Only through the other's survival can the subject move beyond the realm of submission and retaliation to a realm of mutual respect." (Ibid, p. 39).

It is not a matter of obedience, repression, or internalization of some normative commandment.[25] In her words:

> Mutual recognition cannot be achieved through obedience, through identification with the other's power, or through repression. It requires, finally, contact with the other. The meaning of destruction is that the subject can engage in an all-out collision with the other, can hurtle himself against the barriers of otherness in order to feel the shock of the fresh, cold outside. (Ibid, p. 40).

Therefore, recognition is not merely an issue of a normative deficit but of complex psychic mechanisms. Therefore, Benjamin's dialectic understanding of recognition leads to a different, more complex, and ample diagnosis of social pathologies, which Honneth's normative commitments cannot offer.

5.2.4   *Social diagnosis and critique*

Contrary to Honneth, Benjamin's theory focuses on understanding domination rather than on sustaining a normative stance. The complex understanding of recognition arising from such an objective informs a radical critique of current society. In the last chapter of *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin develops a critique of reason that dialogues and resonates with the works of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, all cited in this chapter.[26]

In short, Benjamin denounces the supposed natural oedipal separation between the "repressive" mother and the "progressive" father in individual development. However, she connects this analysis to a critique of the Enlightened split between the rational subject and the object of reason. For her, this last split, present throughout modern society, is fundamentally related to the repudiation of femininity that results from the experience of the Freudian oedipal complex.

The oedipal need to reject the mother and identify with the father comes to frame our social structures and their predominant rationality. Everything related to the feminine experience, such as care and emotional connection is constantly repudiated and secretly feared, being locked in the

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[25] Indeed, since Benjamin's first writings, as we saw, she opposed the internalization of the father's law of morality as the goal defended by critical theory. For her, internalizing authority in the superego is fundamentally violent and carries strong patriarchal elements. Normative internalization, therefore, is essentially different from intersubjective recognition. See Benjamin 1977 or topic 4.1 above.

[26] As we saw, while Benjamin agrees with the first generation's critique of modern rationality, citing the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, she believes that they lacked a notion of intersubjectivity, focusing too much on intrapsychic capacities (1988, p. 190-191). Unlike Habermas, however, she does not see intersubjective relationships as a form of purified or positive reason. Indeed, Benjamin believes that Habermas' theory is excessively universalistic and rationalistic. For her, his argument "merely displaces the problem of rationalism — the inability to recognize the other — to the area of symbolic interaction and moral discourse." (Ibid, p. 191), failing to analyze unreason, the breakdown of recognition, and the psyche's aggressiveness. In this sense, I argue that her critical theory is closer to the first generation than to Habermas.

private sphere of love. In contrast, the masculinist public world is seen as progressive, civilized, and mature, fomenting independence, separation, and self-sufficiency.

Thus, despite Benjamin's critique of women's oppression, for her, this event implicates both men and women. Accordingly, women's "lack" of recognition affects both of them and impedes their mutual recognition as a whole, which also affects the very structure of society. Therefore, one cannot resolve this problem by merely including women under positive patterns of recognition. The very dualistic structure of modern society and the oedipal constitution of individuality would have to be shackled in their structure to advance mutuality throughout society. Benjamin cautions that:

> In order to challenge the sexual split which permeates our psychic, cultural, and social life, it is necessary to criticize not only the idealization of the masculine side, but also the reactive valorization of femininity. What is necessary is not to take sides but to remain focused on the dualistic structure itself. (Ibid, p. 9).

Her analysis, then, does not take sides in the sense that it does not focus on resolving a deficit on the part of the oppressed but on understanding the unequal structure of the relationship, which affects all implicated subjects.

Distortions in recognition cannot be resolved solely on the level of morally motivated struggles that claim one's inclusion under positive patterns of recognition. Concerning women's oppression in general, the problem is not so much the lack of affirmation or valorization of women but the impersonality of modern rationality, which rejects identification to the detriment of strict separation and independence. Again, what is at issue is not normative justification but a critical inquiry about the conditions of oppression.

In this view, one-sided inclusion under positive norms of recognition could even contribute to one's unwillingness to accept dependence on others. For instance, men with successful public careers acknowledged and esteemed by society may need to deny their dependency on private loving relationships to maintain their social status. This behavior leads them to see dependency as weakness and emotional attunement as a threatening lack of control, which resonates with the repudiation of motherhood. Therefore, the social esteem devoted to successful public figures may run counter to what Benjamin understands by intersubjective recognition because this form of esteem depends on the repudiation of dependency, vulnerability, and affective connection, which follows from the oedipal repudiation of motherhood.

Thus, Honneth's description of different spheres of recognition would also contradict Benjamin's model. For her, the translation from the first sphere of recognition to the second and

third ones would not expand the degrees of individual autonomy but could actually run counter to the primary relations of love. Benjamin's critique of Western rationality and the strict separation of the public and private worlds clashes with Honneth's structured model of recognition. Thus, a closer consideration of her theory would not so much correct Honneth's blind spots but directly contradict it.

In this context, Benjamin's willingness to analyze what goes wrong in loving relationships makes her theory more suitable for a feminist critique of primary relations. While Honneth has been extensively criticized for reproducing the public-private split that marginalizes much of feminists' claims (Connolly, 2010), Benjamin casts a critical eye precisely on this split. According to Connolly, since Benjamin consistently analyzed the dynamics responsible for breakdowns in recognition, unlike Honneth, she "analyses rather than marginalizes intimate relationships." (2010, p. 428).[27]

More than investigating individual cases in which the desire for recognition generates domination, the psychoanalyst considers primary relations to be intimately and directly related to broad cultural structures (and vice-versa), such as in her analysis of the oedipal model of subject-constitution. That is why, according to Benjamin, it would not be enough to simply include women in the public sphere or extend public recognition to them in the form of rights or social esteem because male domination works precisely through the split between these two realms and through the meritocratic, rights-based rationality that governs the public world. Feminism, for her, should demand not inclusion in the public world of men but the dissolution, or at least the relaxation, of the split. This view would necessarily include further public consideration of dependency, affective attunement, and love.

To be sure, in some moments, *The Bonds of Love* seems to endorse mutual recognition as a normative ideal. For example, Benjamin suggests: "So far I have tried to convey the idea that differentiation requires, *ideally*, the reciprocity of self and other, the balance of assertion and recognition." (Ibid, p. 25, emphasis added). Besides, sometimes, her analysis seems to be informed by a feminist utopia. She speaks, for instance, of the desirable possibility of integrating masculine

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[27] To be sure, Connolly believes that it is possible to amend Honneth's theory with Benjamin's considerations about recognition. She says: "Juxtaposing Benjamin's analysis of intimacy with Honneth's account of love-based recognition reveals the shortcomings of the latter and thereby provides a platform from which to reconstruct Honneth's category of love-based recognition." (Connolly, 2010, p. 429). However, I argue that such reconstruction would be so profound as to alter his theory fundamentally, contradicting his support for the other spheres of recognition.

and feminine aspects in one's identity so that this solution would represent "a way out of the sexual power relationship in which one side is devalued and subordinated to the other." (Ibid, p. 114). This phrase seems to suggest the possibility of an ideal way out of power, which her overall analysis of recognition, the ambivalent character of normativity, and the theoretical "negative capabilities" contradict.

Benjamin realized this tension in her work (Benjamin, 1995, p. 165), and I believe she struggled with the ambivalent character of her understanding of recognition throughout her career. It is no wonder that, after the publication of her first book, in the following decade, she launched two subsequent books and several articles that revisit themes introduced in the first oeuvre, further elaborating on the tension of recognition. Rather than seeing such tension as a problem, I argue it opens spaces for more reflexivity than Honneth's account.

Despite some contradictions in *The Bonds of Love*, in its Conclusion, Benjamin comes up with an interesting solution for her critical theory, which echoes Allen's idea of emancipation without utopia (2015b), as we analyzed in the end of the last chapter. Benjamin argues that more than seeking or sustaining ideal solutions, which are illusory, one should modestly aim at untangling power relations or making them more flexible. For her, the tension of intersubjective relations, present when the other survives destruction, would allow an open-ended and non-ideal flexibilization or restructuring of power relations. We cannot eliminate power and domination but modestly create the possibility of dynamically reconfiguring oppressive structures.

5.3. The compatibility of Benjamin's and Honneth's theories

It may be clear now that Benjamin's theory is incompatible with Honneth's. Contrary to Campo (2009), Connolly (2010), and Gregoratto (2015), I argue that a closer engagement with Benjamin would not simply amend Honneth's blind spots but would fundamentally alter his theory.

First, both authors start their inquiries with different research objectives, which indicate different visions about critical theory's role. We have seen that Honneth tries to construct a non-metaphysical normative social theory. Benjamin, on the other hand, is interested in understanding the profound allure of domination. She acknowledges the theoretical tendency to invert power relations while critically analyzing them, which leads theoreticians to idealize some contrasting position or solution. More than elaborating on an ideal solution, however, for her, theory should maintain "negative capabilities," which leads one to consider the unavoidability and even the

necessity of unconscious motivations, disturbing fantasies, and aggressiveness. Rather than adhere to normative ideals, theoreticians should reflexively analyze them.

With this proposition in mind, in later essays, Benjamin would critically analyze the problematic idealization of intersubjectivity. For example, in 1994, she published an article named "What Angel would hear me," in which she reflects on the idealization of the intersubjective space. This dynamic makes the intersubjective relationship oscillate between illusory angelic and demonic representations. A version of this article would be published in the book *Like Subjects, Love Objects* (1995), launched in the same year as *The Struggle for Recognition*. In the sequence, I will go through Benjamin's subsequent productions, which Honneth criticized for being too postmodern. But, for now, it suffices to say that, for her, even the intersubjective recognition, which seems to embody the archetype way out of complementarities, can be problematically sustained as a complementary ideal.

Secondly, Benjamin's employment of Hegel, Winnicott, and Freud in a more realistic way represents a crucial difference. The main issue at stake is their different account of primary oneness, which is a blissful reality for Honneth but assumes a complex structure in Benjamin's theory. This difference fundamentally alters Honneth's view of recognition on normative, social-theoretical, and metanormative levels, making her account more realistic and ambivalent.

In the third place, following her contrasting view about the primary relation, Benjamin's different understanding of recognition allows her to avoid moral idealism. Recognition for her is not a normative paradigm but a complex process that entails the destruction of idealistic fantasies and the unpredictable encounter with alterity. Most importantly, her conception of recognition as an ambivalent process avoids losing sight of negative forms of recognition. Social pathologies are not related to a deficit of recognition or ideological forms of recognition but to a complex distortion of the delicate and impure balance between self and other. Destruction, aggression, and power are elements present within recognition itself. Moreover, intersubjectivity does not eliminate intrapsychic fantasies and dynamics, such as projection and introjection, but overlaps with them. Thus, recognition cannot be untainted by unconscious motivations, conflictual feelings, and the desire for domination.

Finally, such an understanding of recognition leads to a more realistic and convincing theoretical stance that is more well-equipped than Honneth's to grasp the profound dynamics of social pathology and to analyze current society. Benjamin's critique of domination entails a

comprehensive critique of patriarchal rationality and contemporary patterns of subject-constitution, which is not present in Honneth's theory. Her work, therefore, offers the possibility of advancing a feminist critique of the current authoritarian tendencies. Scholars could productively employ this diagnostic tool to analyze the current social and political context, seeing, for example, the reactive need for authoritarian leaders as a distorted desire for recognition.

We could hypothesize, for instance, that voters may support authoritarian leaders due to an omnipotent defensive wish for purity and perfection that, as we saw, cannot be fulfilled. Moreover, following Benjamin's critical analysis, we could think that the need of the oedipal boy to repudiate the mother may inform the need for strong leaders in moments of public helplessness and social vulnerability. The more one repudiates the mother, the more one may need the father's protection. The powerful male leader may evoke the protection of the father and its law of separation against the boundary dissolution paradoxically present in private emotional vulnerability. Therefore, the one-sided model of subject-constitution in contemporary Western societies can contribute to the powerless need for authoritarian leaders. We will return to these issues in the Conclusion. However, it suffices to point out now that further research is needed in this direction, and it can inspire fruitful empirical investigations.

Besides powerful diagnostic tools, Benjamin's theoretical model does not eliminate the possibility of attaining better forms of relationships that maintain intersubjective tension, which is also valuable for critical theory's emancipatory commitments. The intra-mundane possibility of recognition as a fraught, never-ending, and dynamic state points towards the possibility of moving forward or disentangling some of the bonds of love, even the oppressive ones we come to desire. Therefore, in including negative capabilities, her theory proves to be compatible with the fundamental philosophical commitments of critical theory, being suited to fulfill both its meta-normative and explanatory promises. If it was already an interesting contribution to critical theory in this time, Benjamin's theory acquired even more complex tools throughout the following years, becoming an even more appropriate resource to critical theory, as we will see.

6. Benjamin's intermediate writings (1990s): towards more negativity in dialogue with postmodernism and poststructuralism

With the publication of *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin's work reached a vast audience and received significant critical contributions. Many authors from feminist and postmodernist or

poststructuralist orientations commented on her work and criticized aspects of it, which motivated Benjamin to revisit her theory in the following years. The result is that she comes to give credit to postmodern criticisms and tries to add additional dissonant elements to her understanding of intersubjectivity, avoiding a romantic view of recognition. Significantly, her conception of nature also acquires the connotation of something much more excessive and disturbing, so the direct defense of communion with nature loses its viability, which complicates the picture.

As I argued before, I believe that Benjamin's latest publications, due to the incorporation of negative and realist concepts, are more appropriate to nowadays critical theory, resembling, in some respects, the intentions of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. In this context, the publications that follow immediately from *The Bonds of Love* are essential precursors to the development of her latest theory, this one significantly different from the first model of the 1980s. Thus, I consider it important to go through the books *Like Subjects, Love Objects* (1995), and *The Shadow of the Other* (1998), before studying her latest productions, to understand the evolution of her theory and the changes that culminate in her last model.

In short, from the first of these books, through a deeper reflection on idealization (and the internalization of the ideal), emerged the understanding that intersubjectivity entails the mutual mourning of ideals, implying that both the self's and the other's idealizations of themselves needed to be destroyed. It also brought a different view on the first situation of life, describing it as one of intense helplessness under excessive stimulation and primary aggressiveness. This context demands externality as a way of discharging internal tension. Both the idea of mutual destruction and the need for an external space of discharge anticipate the formulation of the concept of the Third, which is central to Benjamin's late works.

In the second of these books, Benjamin elaborated on the space of symbolic communication created between the subjects in a relationship of recognition related to Winnicott's transitional space and Ogden's analytic Third. This idea also had a crucial impact on the later Benjaminian concept of the Third. In addition, in this book, Benjamin delineated a self that is capable of attaining multiplicity and enduring non-identity, which anticipates the later idea that moral ambiguity and a certain lack of recognition of oneself may be a condition for recognizing the other.[28]

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[28] It is worth warning that in the following reconstruction, it will be unfortunately necessary to address rather quickly and superficially some important topics and discussions – such as the claims of postmodernism and poststructuralism, gender studies, and the discussions of feminist political theory – without devoting to these topics the due attention they deserve since it would surpass the scope of this research.

6.1. Like Subjects, Love Objects (1995): nature as excess demands the intersubjective space as a means of discharge

Published a few years after *The Bonds of Love*, this oeuvre introduces essential changes in Benjamin's theory. Influenced mainly by poststructuralist or postmodern references, her intersubjective theory becomes considerably more negative, highlighting the breakdown of recognition, the fantasy denial of reality, and aggressiveness as crucial elements for the constitution of the psyche and the possibility of intersubjectivity. Benjamin makes clear now that the intersubjective experience does not configure something different from the intrapsychic one, as if it were possible to inhabit either the inner world or the relational reality. The intersubjective space is full of intrapsychic content, fantasy materials, projections, and introjections, which are elaborated, tested, destroyed, reconstructed, and shared with other subjects.

Since this book aims to revisit and reformulate some aspects of her previous one, it repeats many aspects of it. Therefore, in the following reconstruction, I will focus on the crucial differences concerning our interests in this research.

The first one (1) regards her elaboration on the role of idealization, inevitably present in the intersubjective space. This topic is related to the former discussion of Honneth's appropriation of Benjamin. I argued that, in contrast to him, Benjamin did not develop a normative theory. That is even more evident now that the author offers a deeper analysis of this issue. Besides being a concomitant process to the intersubjective relation and even an enriching element to the experience, idealization demands the work of mourning so that the subject can partially encounter reality. Thus, Benjamin understands that intersubjectivity entails the collective mourning of ideals. In this sense, what also begins to appear by the end of the book is the comprehension that recognition demands a double act of destruction. Both subjects need to be destroyed to construct an intersubjective relation, otherwise (if the destruction was one-sided) one of the subjects would remain as the bestower of recognition, which does not configure recognition proper, but an unbalanced relation.

The second topic of interest regards (2) her new elaborations on the newborn experience. If she first perceived the baby as a responsive and active being, now she pictures the first experience of life as one of complete helplessness. Incorporating the Freudian understanding of the discharge of excessive energies and the Laplanchian reflections on excess, Benjamin introduces a new picture of intersubjectivity that starts from a fundamental vulnerability, not an active capacity of mutuality.

Returning to her analysis of sadomasochism, but this time combining Laplanche, Freud, and Winnicott, Benjamin concludes on a primary form of aggression as the first contact of the baby with reality.

These two main revisions of her theory reveal a turn towards greater negativity, which she manages to accommodate with the hope of intersubjective exchanges. Many questions remain unanswered, but the questions raised and some elaborations advanced configure important precursors to the later formulations.

6.1.1   *The role of idealization and the intersubjective space*

Benjamin reflects on the issue of idealization – which is related to that of internalization – throughout the entire book. In what follows, I am going through the main topics that deepened this issue. Briefly, in the Introduction and the first chapter of *Like Subjects, Love Objects,* Benjamin explains that intersubjective relations and intrapsychic idealizations are concomitant realities, not mutually canceling ones. That is, the intersubjective relation cannot and should not undo the intrapsychic processes of the mind. Internalization now gains a more central, positive, and important place in psychic life. With this discussion in mind, in the third chapter, Benjamin analyzes the idealization of motherhood, concluding that the intersubjective stance cannot completely undo the ideal constructions of culture but can facilitate the work of mourning failed idealized references. The collective mourning of the ideal of motherhood would be fundamental for feminism, allowing a greater flexibilization and a critical recast of the ideal. Finally, in the fifth chapter, Benjamin analyzes the idealization of the analytic intersubjective space. She admits that her former description of intersubjectivity relied on several feminine references, which ended up suggesting a certain background idealization of the feminine. Now she sees that things are more complicated. The intersubjective space (like the female universe) has ambiguous sides, materializing in heavenly but also hellish experiences. In this context, despite the pervasiveness and inescapability of idealization, Benjamin finds a foothold for critique in the Winnicottian transitional space, where fantasy and reality, idealization and concreteness, are superimposed, discovered, and created at the same time. However, the difference is that such space, in her view, is increasingly mutualistic, requiring a double movement of destruction, survival, and mourning of both partners' idealized references.

Benjamin introduces the book by explaining that it follows from an attempt to explain better and rethink some notions of *The Bonds of Love*, considering the critical contributions received in the context of a growing interest of psychoanalysts in feminism and poststructuralism. The author clarifies that she does not intend to synthesize or reconcile these traditions but to make them dialogue in a productive way. Let us remember that the context of this work is still the relational turn of psychoanalysis. Despite contributing to this tendency, the author does not fully embark on it, having a more complex objective of formulating a theory "in ways that allow competing ideas to be entertained simultaneously." (1995, p. 4). Therefore, she seeks to operate between the drive and relational models, proposing a productive eclecticism, which does not entirely adopt or reject the orthodox Freudian theory but manages to criticize and change it from within. She affirms:

> In contrast to seeing a sharp opposition between the drive model and the relational model, which rejects 'model-mixing' (cf. S. Mitchell 1988; Greenberg and Mitchell 1983), I take eclecticism rather further than some explicit advocates of the relational perspective might (but not all: see Aron 1995). I do not see Freud's theory as something to be adopted or cast off. Rather, I think that to critique and revise his theory, to reread it and thereby change it — even radically — is our prerogative, as well as our way of being determined by it. (Ibid, p. 4).

Such a critical rereading is possible, as Benjamin makes clear, because she considers psychoanalysis to be a Foucauldian "discursive field" (Ibid), in which a theorist cannot overcome the thought of another through contrary empirical evidence since the development of the psychoanalytic theory "is tied to its origins in certain formulations of its creators." (Ibid). Therefore, it is not possible to surpass Freud in the sense of the natural sciences because the development of the psychoanalytic discourse is necessarily implicated in its genealogy, being undeniably determined by certain reference points of its concrete history. Moreover, theoretical creativity implies situating one's production in the history of thought without being wholly determined by it.[29]

This methodological discussion introduces a significant reconfiguration of Benjamin's theory. In *The Bonds of Love*, she considered the gender split as the result of repudiation. In the boy's case, his masculine and heterosexual identity depended on the mother's rejection, so object love for women would be opposed to the identificatory love for the mother and derived from its rejection. However, this scheme only explains heterosexual dynamics, neglecting the possibility of homosexual object love, in which the choice of an object does not necessarily contradict

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[29] That must go for Benjamin too. The empirical evidence that the "baby watchers" gathered is, thus, not enough to change one's psychoanalytic position, being, at most, a competing discourse on the origin of subjectivity.

identification with it or does not derive from a failed or rejected identification. Therefore, at this point, Benjamin recognizes that her former formulation could imply a problematic heteronormativity, as some critics pointed out. Therefore, she needs to rethink her explanation of maternal repudiation, bearing in mind the possibility of different configurations of love. The solution found involves the observation that object love is not the simple inverse of identification but that both relationship patterns are mixed. Thus, her view on gender is more complicated now:

> In suggesting that identification and object love do not break down along the clear lines suggested by the oedipal model, that identificatory love may be — perhaps should be — the basis of object love, I question the superficial distinction made between heterosexual and homosexual choice. What appears consciously to be hetero or homo may not be so in unconscious fantasy: whether one seeks likeness or difference is not determined simply by the nominal gender of one's partner (Harris 1991). Nor do others appear to us simply as like or different; rather, they appear in complex combinations that reflect the multiplicity of our and their gendered positions. (Ibid, p. 18)

Her fundamental reference is still Donald Winnicott. However, in her understanding, object relation and object usage "can be understood as sequentially, if not spatially, compatible" (Ibid, p. 6-7) or even as coexisting at certain times instead of simply canceling each other out, as in the Winnicottian conception. In this sense, the intersubjective experience destroys and opposes the idealized object incorporated in fantasy, be it divine or demonic, but does not wholly exclude or overcome it. The other destroyed in fantasy may remain partially present in it, even when the partner survives. Object relation through identification (positive or negative) can be concomitant with object usage. That is, the intersubjective experience is not pure. It enlarges the intrapsychic realm but does not overcome it.

There is a non-resolved tension here regarding the concept of intersubjectivity. Even if it is not a normative concept, it cannot undo or overcome normative content. Benjamin considers it important to oppose the experience of intersubjectivity with the defense of a normative theoretical ideal, which she was accused of implicitly defending. Johanna Meehan (1994), for example, understood that the Benjaminian concept of mutual recognition, being a fundamental psychic need, would configure a normative ideal along Habermasian lines, which Benjamin explicitly denies.[30] She claims, "My argument does not begin with a normative ideal, but with a material possibility." (1995, p. 20). Although individuals have innate capacities for recognition, they do not necessarily develop such capacities or do not always develop them in the same ways. She claims:

> The idea is not to bolster the ideal by proving that we are 'born with the ability'; it is to recognize that when we postulate a psychological need (not a social need or a normative ideal) for recognition, we mean that failure to satisfy the need will inevitably result in

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[30] As we saw, Honneth also reads Benjamin as supporting a normative theory, which she clearly denies now.

> difficulties or even damage to the psyche. Whether normative ideals should be extrapolated from such postulates is another matter. (Ibid, p. 21).

The clash between intersubjectivity as an experience and as a normative ideal arises at the intersection of psychoanalysis and philosophy, an issue that the author recognizes remains open since the publication of her previous book. At that moment, the realization that we needed recognition for psychic development, combined with the diagnosis that the breakdown in recognition generates domination, in fact, seemed to point to a normative argument in defense of intersubjectivity. But Benjamin affirms that her "goals were more modest" (Ibid) and closer to psychoanalytic rationality, which sometimes does not dwell on the normative implications of its theoretical constructions:

> I wished to remain within the theoretical space long assumed by psychoanalysis, in which such arguments could be made without taking up directly the meaning of recognition as a philosophical ideal. To satisfy such philosophical criteria would constitute a far broader task, which others may better undertake (see Honneth 1993). (Ibid, p. 21-22).

Thus, without denying the normative philosophical implications derived from her psychoanalytic model, the author states that she had no intention of developing her conclusions in this direction and that other theorists, such as Axel Honneth, would be in a better position for such undertakings.[31] At the same time, however, in the following pages of the book, she incorporates more negative aspects into recognition, which contradicts even more clearly the possibility of a simple correlation of this concept with a normative ideal.

First, she subsequently states that "To oppose the idea of recognition to that of autonomy would be misleading or self-contradictory, for it would deny the fact that recognition requires acceptance of the other's independence and unknowability (Cornell 1992)." (Ibid, p. 22). That means, in other words, that recognition entails accepting that the other is somehow unknown, unfamiliar, and, ultimately, incognizable. There is a lack of transparency in the other that is implicit in the recognition of his separability and independence, which defies the reduction of this experience to an ideal formulation. In the end, what we recognize in the other is the impossibility of cognizing it, the fact that the other is irreducibly external, ultimately outside our control, and projective apprehension. Now, it is clear that the experience of recognition is not transparent or reconciled, so it could hardly become an ideal. This understanding contradicts the meaning of recognition employed by critical theory so far. Recognition does not mean the affirmation of the

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[31] The author does not directly acknowledge Honneth's limited reception of her work nor the inconsistencies between both points of view, which I sought to clarify in the former chapter.

other, the attribution of predetermined qualities to the other, or the knowledge of the other's truth. On the contrary, Benjamin's recognition involves unknowability, opacity, and lack of control.

Second, the author believes that the breakdown of recognition is a fundamental part of the whole process, which also contradicts a Habermasian defense of normativity. Benjamin mentions, for example, that the necessary rupture of the relationship of recognition refutes the Habermasian point of view of the philosopher Seyla Benhabib (1995), for whom recognition could become a "balance between autonomy and connection." (Benjamin, 1995, p. 23). What Benhabib fails to understand is that "this balance necessarily breaks down and opens the field to domination – indeed, that these two ideals cannot be simply set up as happy complements." (Ibid). More than defending an ideal, it is necessary to understand the rupture of the relationship and its conversion into domination. The concept of recognition needs to incorporate a negative moment of breakdown and failure as a dialectic process. Thus, in criticizing Benhabib's idealism, Benjamin concludes that "mutual recognition is meaningful as an ideal only when it is understood as the basis for struggle and negotiation of conflict (see Pizer 1992), when its impossibility and the striving to attain it are adequately included in the concept (see Butler 1994)." (Ibid). Intersubjectivity cannot be the mere positive opposite of the intrapsychic because it is also charged with normativity, permeated by self-affirmation, and concomitant with the world of fantasy. That may be another way of saying that "there is no outside to power."

In the first chapter of *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, Benjamin makes it clear that even when the mutuality of recognition is possible, it is not a stable reality because it is always on the verge of collapsing in order to be reinstituted again, perhaps in a new format: "breakdown is a common feature within intersubjective relatedness – what counts is the ability to restore or repair the relationship." (Ibid, p. 47). In fact, the impossibility of surviving destruction is so common that subject-object relations, conceptualized by classical psychoanalytic theory, might be dominant in psychic experience (Ibid, p. 43). Internalization, therefore, is inevitable. In her words: "In real life, even when the other's response dissipates aggression, there is no perfect process of destruction and survival; there is always also internalization." (Ibid, p. 40).

However, beyond its inevitability, internalization now does not only denote a defensive or undesirable process. It also has a crucial role in constituting internal psychic structures, configuring an indispensable substrate or background. Although internalization can, with luck, be balanced momentarily by intersubjective experience, freeing the self from an impoverished omnipotent

prison, it also configures a central process of psychic development. It is worth bringing a quotation that explains how important the intrapsychic experience has become for the author:

> All experience is elaborated intrapsychically, we might venture to say, but when the other does not survive and aggression is not dissipated, experience becomes almost exclusively intrapsychic. *It therefore seems fallacious to regard internalization processes only as breakdown products or as defenses; rather, we could see them as a kind of underlying substratum of mental activity* — a constant symbolic digestion process that constitutes an important part of the cycle of exchange between the individual and the outside. It is the loss of balance between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective, between fantasy and reality, that is the problem. (Ibid, p. 40, emphasis added).

Following this new understanding, on the one hand, the intersubjective relationship is placed in opposition to the intrapsychic one. Thus, she affirms: "Internal fantasy is always eating up or negating external reality." (Ibid). But, at the same time, there is a relationship of continuity and simultaneity between these two sides because the intersubjective dimension does not replace the intrapsychic one, nor does it make mental fantasies disappear. What takes place is a dynamic dialectic relationship between these realities. Thus: "The ongoing interplay of destruction and recognition is a dialectic between fantasy and external reality." (Ibid). It becomes clear, then, that her point is not to exalt the intersubjective experience, in contrast to the intrapsychic one, but to advocate each one has a contribution to psychic development.

This insistence on the importance of intrapsychic life also aims to rescue the importance of aggressiveness for intersubjective theory. Antagonist and antisocial forces, for Benjamin, configure a fundamental reality of mental life, so they cannot have their centrality, importance, or authenticity reduced. Her objective is to deny a certain idealism of relational theories related to their rejection of drive theory. She claims: "The intersubjective analysis of the crisis of recognition may help to counter the idealism that otherwise afflicts relational theories – the tendency to throw out with the drives the fundamental psychic place of aggression." (Ibid, p. 46). As we will see, Benjamin offers a revision of the Freudian life and death drives from an intersubjective perspective in the book's last chapter, aiming at rescuing the fundamental place of aggression.

Theorists who understand aggressiveness merely as a secondary force or as a defensive response against the frustration of an initially harmonic situation are still in the individual register of psychic analysis because they locate the beginning of life in a unit from which frustration is supposedly excluded. For them, deprivation makes its entry into psychic life only when the curtains of reality are violently opened, plunging the self into the perpetual strive to close them. In contrast, Benjamin indicates that frustration is an intrinsic reality for the self, essential to its formation and inseparable from its primary experience. Referring to the empirical research of the "baby

watchers," Beebe and Lachmann, she points out that "one of the main principles of the early dyad is that relatedness is characterized not by continuous harmony but by continuous disruption and repair." (Ibid, p. 47). Therefore, both from a theoretical and clinical perspectives, it is vital to safeguard the fundamental place of aggressiveness, understanding it as authentic, constructive, and creative.

In addition, the disruption of recognition must not be pathologized, not only because it is inherent to the process but also because it has essential functions to fulfill in mental life. Destruction, as Winnicott sees it, is required for the emergence of the other. Thus, concerning intersubjective theory, she affirms:

> It does not require a normative ideal of balance that equates breakdown with failure and the accompanying phenomena — internalization, fantasy, aggression — with pathology. If the clash of two wills is an inherent part of intersubjective relations, then no perfect environment can take the sting from the encounter with otherness. The question becomes how the inevitable elements of negation are processed. It is 'good enough' that the inward movement of negating reality and creating fantasy should eventually be counterbalanced by an outward movement of recognizing the outside. To claim anything more for intersubjectivity would invite a triumph of the external, a terrifying psychic vacuity, an end to creativity altogether. A relational psychoanalysis should leave room for the messy, intrapsychic side of creativity and aggression; it is the contribution of the intersubjective view that may give these elements a more hopeful cast, showing destruction to be the Other of recognition. (Ibid, p. 47-48).

However, this new understanding of recognition has important consequences. Since Benjamin now sees destruction and idealization as inevitable elements of psychic life, now we could well ask: what about the idealization of motherhood, which she largely criticized? Is it also an inevitable reality? It is this issue precisely that the third chapter of the book addresses, analyzing the idealizations of the mother-baby relationship both from a patriarchal oedipal perspective and from a feminist counter-narrative.

Benjamin begins this discussion by affirming that the mother-child dyad is not apart from cultural influences, as if it was a purified realm before or beyond culture. For that reason, the recognition paradox that emerges within the first dyad is always affected by culture, resolving itself according to patterns crystallized in the social sphere. Moreover, culture has material effects that appear as naturalized, such as the narrative of maternal omnipotence and the consequent need for paternal rescue. Hence, Benjamin does not deny the materiality of the Oedipal narrative. Nonetheless, the belief, long sustained by psychoanalysis, that the oedipal complementarity is natural or inevitable also does not reach the bottom of the problem because it neglects the discursive aspect of the subject constitution. That is, it is misleading to think that there is no Oedipus, as well as to think that there is only Oedipus.

However, if the oedipal discourse exists in its concreteness, but it is not all that could or should exist, is it possible to see what would be beyond or behind this discourse? Doesn't it presuppose the existence of a more authentic reality outside the oedipal one? Not necessarily. Benjamin affirms that she does not propose the existence of a more essential "truth" behind the Oedipus: "In fact, to bypass oedipal history, as if one could excavate the utopian prehistory of the mother like that of an earlier civilization, is to create an imaginary 'realm of the senses, outside of all history and form' […]." (Ibid, p. 98). For example, some feminist theorists avoided analyzing the Oedipus complex or saw the pre-oedipal reality as containing a more authentic reality. For Benjamin, this movement would represent an unhelpful counter-idealization, in which the idealization of the oedipal discourse would be replaced by another ideal of the feminine, equally unreal and possibly oppressive.

In this context, I believe that what Benjamin proposes is that the reality to which the intersubjective space gives us access is only negative, not direct or transparent. It is not possible to see behind or beyond Oedipus, so to speak, or access the pre-symbolic truth of the body. What we can see, at most, is the discursive aspect of this body, that is, the translucent fragility of the discourse that constitutes it. She affirms:

> The point is therefore not to counter repudiation with rescue — to imagine a mother free of, prior to, the oedipal structure — but to 'see through' that structure like a translucent layer. We may then demystify the ostensibly undifferentiated perfection — omnipotence as oneness — of the preoedipal maternal dyad as an idealized appearance produced by the Oedipal discourse. (Ibid, p. 98).

The "natural" reality or the reality prior to culture does not appear as an accessible, transparent, or evident substrate behind fantasy traps. However, something of the falsehood of culture is evident in the contrasts and sliding fractures of the discourse, kept in tension in the transitional space. What exists beyond the complementary oedipal idealizations is, at best, an open space for creativity and the re-elaboration of relational patterns. In this sense, Benjamin claims that what lies beyond the loss of the ideal of perfect motherhood, once we understand it as not natural, is "'the unknowable ground of creativeness' that the transitional space provides." (Ibid, p. 112).

However, the process of critique that seeks to see through cultural references necessarily involves mourning idealized references. Concerning the feminist movement, women had, in the first place, to experience the failure of the illusion of the "perfect woman" and especially of the "perfect mother," admitting the complex feelings of insecurity, tiredness, envy, hatred, impotence, and fear that they eventually feel during motherhood. However, disillusionment with the ideal is

not enough to make power structures more flexible because it usually has the first effect of generating guilt and melancholia. What is necessary, then, is the labor of mourning. For Benjamin, contrary to melancholia, mourning "invites the other," and it "gives rise to gestures of reparation that, accepting the imperfection, the inaccuracy, all the misses in our reach for the other, can lead to restoration of the expressive space of resonance with that other." (Ibid, p. 113). The difference between melancholic disillusionment and mourning, in this context, is that the first is exclusively intrapsychic, while the second, relying on the effective presence of the other, allows us to inhabit the transitional space in which mutual elaboration, reparation, and creativity can be achieved. In the author's words at the end of the third chapter:

> And if we cannot expect to eradicate the deep, unconscious sediment of the omnipotence fantasy in our psychic and cultural life, it might be good enough to know how we might mitigate its most dire forms: by taking that fantasy back into the self, owning our capacity to create a realm of the ideal. Within the space between survival and loss, acknowledging our own propensity for adoration and dread, fantasy can become the medium of the self at play. That space of creative interchange offers consolation for the inevitable experience of leaving and losing the other, of not being, or having, everything. (Ibid, p. 113)

In short, the dimension of the ideal and omnipotence are inescapable. More than pointing to a final solution, Benjamin's more modest point is to expose the unreality hidden in the oedipal idealizations and try to alleviate the feelings of abandonment, loss, and rejection it generates. Even if it is not possible to purge or undo complementary structures, we can elaborate on new possibilities and combinations of these patterns, transforming, at best, polarity into tension. This process is more about making power structures more flexible than completely undoing them.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, Benjamin continues the discussion of idealized relations, this time as it appears in the clinical setting, which has implications for intersubjective theory in general. She opens the chapter with an epigraph by the German poet Rainer Rilke, which refers to the powerful figure of the Angel, for whom the poet yearns, but who can just as easily destroy him; a figure who exerts an irresistible fascination, but who, due to his absolutely superior power, is equally terrible and contemptuous. This reference, introduced to the author by a patient in reference to their relationship, leads to Benjamin's reflections on the "erotics of transference," in which the analyst is invested with the same characteristics of the Angel.

The poet's yearning for the Angel reflects a desire for recognition, or the liberation of the self in the hands of a superior, idealized being, like the desire of the masochist in Benjamin's former analysis. The danger of being given over to such a powerful figure, begging for recognition, is that the Angel can easily destroy the poet, abandoning him, smothering him with his superior power,

rejecting or totally absorbing him. The Angel represents, in other words, the incarnation of the Ideal, denoting an unattainable transcendence or a liberating and terrifying redemption. In the words of the psychoanalyst: "The poet's awe for the Angel expresses the compelling longing that springs from idealization and typifies its irreducible double-sidedness: self-alienation and submission versus aspiration to a truer form of being." (Ibid, p. 145-146).

Benjamin argues that since idealization is fueled by the desire to be recognized, it might be an essential aspect in the expression of the Winnicottian True Self. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that the relationship with the Ideal can be both celestial and demonic, potentially destructive and liberating. However, she believes we can use this ambiguity to creatively reappropriate the ideal.

Her argument follows from her clinical experience as an intersubjective analyst and the idealizations that take place throughout her work. First, she recognizes now that the metaphors she had used to describe the intersubjective experience – related to the function of holding, the transitional space, and the pre-symbolic interactions – were, in fact, related to powerful fantasies of the feminine and maternal spheres. That occurs because academic elaboration does not derive from a realm alien or untouched by the culture, so the theoretical discourse also uses available social references and eventually reinforces given categories.

The obscure infiltration of gender categories in her theoretical formulation – that sought precisely to overcome the split – may have the contradictory consequence of reinforcing the polarity through the idealization of the feminine sphere. As Benjamin had denounced concerning several contemporary feminist movements, intersubjectivity, in its connection with the maternal experience, runs the risk of idealizing the feminine. Hence, she argues that "we need to be aware that the same kind of idealization that crept into Freud's original formulations of the neutral, interpretive physician analyst might be embedded in formulations of the analyst's role as tender of the intersubjective." (Ibid, p. 165). In this case, intersubjectivity would represent the possibility of perfect reparation, as if it were a kind of heaven purified from destructive intrapsychic fantasies.

It is essential, in this context, to maintain a critical perspective that denaturalizes and destabilizes the same categories employed in critical analysis, such as "recognition" and "intersubjectivity," so as not to fix them in gender stereotypes or idealized categories. It should be reinforced, for example, that maternal transference also contains oppressive idealized elements.

This understanding of the inevitability of idealization now charges the mother's body (which previously represented a supposedly neutral or even positive nature) with both celestial and demonic elements. Like an Angel, the mother's face represents the "primordial experience of beauty" (Ibid, p. 161) for the baby who admires her while also inaugurating terror, overstimulation, and fear of losing the self in the mother's eyes. Pre-symbolic and bodily experiences shared with the mother are later mixed with symbolic elements that give new meaning to the experience, loading the maternal body with multiple erotic messages and idealized fantasies. For example, the mother – or the analyst of either sex who assumes this metaphorical function – can represent the phallus, being the terrible anal controller, or she can represent the nurturing breast, which is the unattainable and supreme source of life and goodness. In both forms, she attracts, fascinates, seduces, and terrifies. The maternal erotic transference, therefore, evokes both the desire for surrender and re-immersion into the maternal body and the erotic horror of violation and the threat of drowning and dissolution.[32]

In this sense, where would the critical capacity come from, allowing the theorist to denounce such categories if idealization returns so subtly and surreptitiously into one's theoretical formulation? If the author follows a Foucaultian understanding that assumes psychoanalysis as a discourse and if the theoretical elaboration is immersed in the culture, without there being an "Archimedean point" outside of power, how would it be possible to maintain discourse reflexivity? As we saw concerning the idealization of motherhood, Benjamin finds a foothold for critique in the Winnicottian transitional space, where fantasy and reality are confused, and meanings are discovered and created at the same time. In this space, the gender alignments that inevitably enter her theory can assume transitional aspects. That is, they can be destabilized, questioned, and rediscovered. As she explains:

> On the one hand, then, we do not wish to hypostatize a split between the intersubjective and the intrapsychic perspectives along gender lines. On the other hand, we are required to recognize that because the gender split is anchored in collective fantasy, it necessarily returns, often unnoticed, in our theoretical formulations and in transference and countertransference (Dimen 1991). What we might adapt from Winnicott's perspective is *the possibility of seeing these gender alignments as transitional categories,* and we might then find in the intersubjective space of psychoanalysis a freedom to move through or around the categories*, to play with these fantasies*. (Ibid, p. 163, emphasis added).

Benjamin does not relate the transitional space to a pure or transcendental utopia, in which cultural references are absent as if this were a space "out of power." More than a heavenly space

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[32] This interpretation is linked to Benjamin's employment of Laplanches' theory of generalized seduction, which I will analyze next.

without fantasies and oppressive idealizations, the intersubjective space is permeated by these elements, while it opens ambivalent and transitory possibilities of flexibility through play, allowing new combinations.

The danger of seeing the intersubjective space as paradisiacal is to vitiate the experience, limiting freedom of movement and preventing spontaneity. Idealization usually forecloses the expression of the True Self, fomenting the fear of hurting the other, the distant hope of redemption, and the paralyzing fear of rejection. Benjamin presents some clinical cases she witnessed in which the transitional experience oscillated from an open space of powerful transformation into a suffocating bond of idealization and lack of freedom. One patient specifically reported a highly positive and idealized intersubjective experience, in which, as if inhabiting a paradise, she felt like "floating on the couch" (Ibid, p. 172). In the analyst's description, "The core of self feels freed of the burden of self-protection, at once known and yet left alone, supported without gravity in a space I would call 'zero coercion.'" (Ibid). However, experiencing the intersubjective space as a paradise denotes a romantic fantasy, which is therefore "subject to the vicissitudes of the Ideal, to delight and disappointment." (Ibid). That experience would eventually fall from the sky of idealization. After all, "every paradise has its fall, every ideal its confrontation with reality." (Ibid). In this case, the beatitude, joy, and relief that the patient experienced at the slightest gesture slid into the risk of dissolution, the terror of being rejected or abandoned, and the fear of the analyst's power. Transference easily drifted from a liberating space of recognition and self-discovery to a viscous and suffocating relationship permeated with fear and guilt. The Angel eventually took the form of the Demon, and Paradise became Hell, in a vertiginous alternation: "Both analyst and analysand may experience a magnified volatility of transitional space, which now becomes an unbearable lightness, permitting a frightening susceptibility to metaphors that carry the magnetic charge of the Ideal." (Ibid, p. 173).

However, the intense alternation from heaven to hell does not eliminate the transforming power of the intersubjective experience, even though it is charged with fantasy material. As the author shares, from her experience: "In the working through of transference, the Angel must fall – must become demonic or lose her/ his powers, must be recognized as human, imperfect – but the analytic relationship must survive, enriched." (Ibid, p. 172). The alternation between these states can even encourage the possibility of elaborating and mourning the idealized transference, eventually helping to sustain the desire for recognition in the earthly environment of everyday life.

Even though paradise dissolves in the mourning of the ideal, the patient has experienced the flight, which adds a certain confidence in his own freedom and his capacity for spontaneous gestures.

For this reason, the shared loss of the Ideal, the joint mourning of the unattainable experience, does not only process a bitter dissipation of the desire for completeness or a cold mature awareness of disillusionment. On the contrary, "In that experience of pain lies a different kind of aliveness, a different sense of being at one with ourselves." (Ibid, p. 173). The ideal is not only tragically torn apart, but it can also be diluted in other, more extensive collective experiences. In Benjamin's words: "The dissolution of the idealization in these transference erotics may parallel what Winnicott said about the transitional space: it is not internalized as structure but rather becomes distributed in creative and cultural activity." (Ibid). Therefore, the shared experience of mourning ideals can foster spontaneous and creative movements and the sublimation of loss, extending beyond the heaven and hell experienced on the analyst's couch.

The result of this proposition is the understanding of intersubjectivity as a potentially idealizable experience, full of intrapsychic material. That is, the intersubjective experience cannot simply be opposed to the ideal or even the internalization of the ideal because it also paradoxically coexists with idealized materials and is, in a way, shaped by them. Moreover, the processes of idealization and internalization are not only negative but potentially bring confidence to the self's own spontaneous capacity. In intersubjectivity, we could say the tension between the magnetism of heaven and hell is preserved alongside the earthly concreteness of mourning. Idealization and internalization take on a more realistic and less pathological character than in previous texts, coexisting inseparably with the intersubjective space. Moreover, beyond the Ideal, reality may be approached indirectly only through the work of mourning. Thus, intersubjectivity entails a certain process of mutual mourning.

In such reflections on the idealization of the intersubjective space, Benjamin begins to realize that destruction and survival need to be mutual. Both the Angel and the poet, the analyst and the analysand, the mother and the baby, the male and the female, need to be destroyed. It is not enough that the other (for instance, the poet) survives the self's destruction because, in this case, the self (the Angel) could remain in an idealized position as the one who bestows recognition. This is not recognition but an unbalanced relation of idealization and domination. On the contrary,

recognition entails movement. Both the Angel's fall and the poet's flight. In the end, it requires mutual destruction, thus arriving at an earthly place of mutually mourning the Ideal.[33]

6.1.2. *The newborn experience as one of immense helplessness*

In light of this relational understanding of idealization, let us now look at Benjamin's updated theory of the primary experience of life. Benjamin begins to explore this issue in chapter 3, which deals with the idealization of motherhood, suggesting an initial phase of unawareness, similar to Winnicott's primary omnipotence, but without the ideas of power and active control. But it will be in chapter 5 that deep innovations will follow regarding this issue. Returning to her reflections on sadomasochism, Benjamin now combines the Laplanchian notion of excess, the Winnicottian lack of survival, and the Freudian death drive to understand the conditions of this practice. She ends up sustaining primary helplessness and aggression as the fundamental experiences of the newborn. In this context, intersubjectivity is related to "destruction survived," but this does not eliminate the destructing attempt or the fearful fact of uncontrolled externality.

First, when reflecting on the idealization of motherhood, in the third chapter, Benjamin insists that the idea of maternal omnipotence hardly corresponds to the actual experience of children, more easily configuring a projective fantasy: "The original psychoanalytic theory or ideal of a mother who offers a perfect oceanic symbiosis might be seen as an extremely idealized and oversimplified view of the infant's experience." (Ibid, p. 87). As the "baby watchers" demonstrate, the primary relationship between mother and baby is not perfectly undifferentiated, much less constantly harmonious.[34]

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[33] Benjamin would later concretize this notion in the concept of the Third, which understands that the self, the other, and the relationship all go through destruction and survival, culminating in the understanding that recognition entails a place of mutual vulnerability.

[34] Benjamin's insistent use of empirical research may suggest that she understands reality (baby's original reality) as a fully accessible substrate, available for positivist observation and empirical demonstration. However, that is not the case since Benjamin subsequently claims it would be naïve to support the intersubjective perspective only on empirical observation. Indeed, she understands the emergence of the relational psychoanalytic approach as an alternative discourse in a Foucauldian sense. In her words: "In any case, this perspective [the intersubjective one] should not be taken just as a product of adhering to empirical observation; to assume that would be naive. The search for new methodologies, the awareness of the implausibility of old theories of an autistic withdrawn infant, the focus on mutuality, all can be seen as a result of new discursive systems." (1995, p. 88). Following a Foucaultian view, it is possible to understand this discursive change in psychoanalysis as derived from ruptures in the previous hegemonic discourse, especially the ones related to maternal omnipotence. However, the relational perspective cannot be expected to correspond entirely to reality itself. Therefore, it is not a matter of finding the "truest" theory. It is about keeping both discourses in dialectical contact, understanding that this dynamic can give us negative access to discursive fractures.

What is interesting for us, however, is that Benjamin now offers more specifications about the primary experience. At first, she postulates the existence of an original state of radical unawareness, in which "the limits of reality are not known and the other is experienced as 'there' without awareness of an opposite center of intentionality. In it, power is not yet constructed as the opposite of powerlessness." (Ibid, p. 88). Thus, the baby's psyche, under constitution, is not initially confronted with the recalcitrant reality of the other, perhaps because, in a Winnicottian view, it counts on the mother's support. However, this moment should not be described as "omnipotent," in Benjamin's view, because the power and independence of the other are not yet known. The newborn does not deny reality simply because he does not know it as such.

Nevertheless, as the psyche begins to structure itself, and the baby starts to advance his own demands, this process precipitates an unavoidable crisis or clash between his reality and the mother's one. At this moment, which occurs probably during the second year of life, the baby's grandiose demands and expectations find clear limits due to his inability, the perception of his mother's independence, and his own dependence. That is where omnipotence, properly speaking, comes into play, understood as the "defensive denial, not simple ignorance, of the other's independence." (Ibid, p. 89). Omnipotence, thus, comes from the awareness of (the lack of) power, meaning the purposeful or active attempt to control the other. She affirms:

> I have suggested that mental omnipotence is a complex intrapsychic condition, not an immediate, originary state. It probably begins in the first crisis of recognizing the other, the first conscious encounter with the mother's independence, during the separation-individuation phase in the second year of life. The infant's grandiose aspirations now conflict with the perceived reality of her limitations and dependency. When the child becomes aware that reality will not always bend to her will, a 'struggle to the death for recognition' may ensue. (Ibid, p. 88-89).

However, the original state, being one of unawareness, is not one of fusion or beatitude. At this moment, the baby is flooded by overstimulation that he cannot control, as we will see shortly after. Still, the independence of the other is not yet evident or undeniable. The awareness of power comes precisely from the awareness of impotence. Omnipotence, in other words, is not simply the ignorance of the other's independence, as in the original state, but it is a defensive negation contrary to the discovery of the other's power, which, in fact, was always there.

From the maternal perspective, there is always a difference between herself and her baby. But from the baby's perspective, there is just unawareness initially. That is not a state in which the baby is all-powerful and controlling because he is menaced by excessive stimulation. However, he still ignores the difference between his own reality and that of the other. This theoretical proposition

seems similar to Winnicott's understanding of primary narcissism as a state of illusion. However, the mother sustains not complete correspondence and devotion but the less-demanding experience of unawareness of power.[35] Although life begins in a fraught and unstable state of attunement and ruptures with the mother, of abandonment in her arms and subsequent agitation and movement away from her, the true crisis of confronting otherness is only faced in a later phase, in which the baby identifies an external reality and the existence of divergent wills, that is, when the baby realizes that the other may want something different from what he wants and that the mother can leave him. From the moment he begins to perceive the resistance of the external world, then omnipotence appears as a defensive response or an attempt to control the other. *Omnipotence is defensive, so it is not primary*. As she states:

> The contradiction between the felt connection to the other and the 'omnipotence of thoughts,' the child's view that reality is inside her or his control, may mean that omnipotence and outsideness have to be constituted simultaneously. Both would then begin when the child starts to realize meaningfully that reality is in fact outside control. (Ibid, p. 194).

This moment of crisis also occurs from the mother's perspective because it confronts her with the excessive and divergent demands of the child, challenging her own narcissism, the expectation that she would be able to cope with his demands, and the perception that he was a perfect, easy-going, or at least obedient child. Therefore, what happens at that moment is a true struggle between diverging wills that want to be omnipotent and will fight to survive as such.

The fight is necessary and should not be denied because it is a condition of the possibility of the constitution and sustenance of the two subjects. In this first moment, defensive omnipotence is fundamental to empower the baby in the face of the terrifying discovery of maternal independence: "A necessary step, the ability to play with omnipotence fantasies, gives a taste of freedom and tests survival." (Ibid, p. 93). If the struggle for self-assertion does not occur, the relationship between the mother and the baby will remain in a fantasy register, never leaving the

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[35] I believe that Benjamin now agrees with Winnicott, to a certain extent, concerning the primary phase of life as one of disorganization and helplessness, followed by a phase of undifferentiation (or unawareness of boundaries) sustained by the mother. However, her feminist commitments make her alleviate the demand of devotion on the mother, allowing for a conflict to emerge pretty soon between mother and baby. Thus, the mother must sustain solely a phase of unawareness, not a perfect matching. Besides, this phase is not one of omnipotence because the baby is not all-powerful since power is not yet known. At this moment, the baby may experience high degrees of distress and vulnerability, even if unaware of self-other boundaries. Combining Winnicott with Laplanche, Benjamin sees the original experience as one of extreme helplessness under excessive stimuli. In this context, the experience of encountering the other, which configures a disillusionment for Winnicott, meaning a limitation of omnipotence, comes as a relief for the Benjaminian baby, offering an instance of discharge of excessive energies, as we will see.

illusion: "The paradox is that only by asserting omnipotence may we discover the other as an outside center of experience." (Ibid, p. 90).

If all goes well enough, the reality of the other will be recalcitrant, but not to the point of totally canceling out the possibility of the self's reality, keeping the struggle dynamically open, unresolved, and in tension. It is not a question of a unilinear evolution from omnipotence to reality but a permanent oscillation between destruction and survival, self-affirmation and recognition. Once it starts, the crisis of recognition becomes a permanent reality, which cannot be resolved once and for all, but which "remains an organizing issue throughout life, becoming intense with each fresh struggle for independence, each confrontation with difference." (Ibid, p. 94).

Eventually, one side will not survive the fight for omnipotence, which means that someone will retaliate, give in, or withdraw from the relationship, starting a persecutory cycle of hate and blame. In this case, the relationship becomes a "zero-sum game" (Ibid, p. 110) because for one to win, the other must lose. Only one side can be active, desiring, and free, while the other is forced into being passive, apathetic, and submissive. And these roles alternate; power and helplessness mirror each other.

Thus, if the mother gives in to the child and stays by his side whenever he demands it, ultimately canceling out her own needs, what happens is a triumph of the child's omnipotence. However, this is also confused with maternal omnipotence, mirrored in the fantasy of a totally devoted mother. In this case, her permanence is paradoxically registered as abandonment because her company becomes ineffective, distanced, and submissive. The mother, in fact, gives in to her narcissism and the imposition of "being the perfect mother" without realizing that this ideal of goodness imposes suffocating, controlling, guilt-ridden demands on her child. The completely fragile mother provokes a similar experience of abandonment as the completely powerful one: both are so omnipotent that they cannot be "used" by the child.

However, if the mother eventually leaves, takes care of her own needs, and then returns, the child realizes that she survives destruction, that she is not equivalent to his omnipotent demands, and that his fantasies, including persecutory ones, are not entirely real. If the mother can have a subjective reality of her own, the child feels that he, too, can have a separate subjectivity.

So far, except in the clearer presupposition of an initial phase of unawareness, which approximates her theory with that of Winnicott, Benjamin's understanding is not so distant from her previous theory on the subject constitution. However, things are about to become wilder with

the incorporation of Laplanche's theory. However, to understand these alterations, we need to take a detour that involves the updating of the author's reflections on sadomasochism.

We now reach the sixth and last chapter of *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, which is of great interest to us, because it brings into discussion the Freudian drive theory, making it clear that nature now gains an excessive character that was previously absent. This chapter discusses the problem of sadistic pornography, in light of the debate at the time, especially in feminist circles, about the justification or outright condemnation of this practice. As the author explains, what motivated her reflections was a conference on pornography in which the participants, exposed to various pornographic works, were led to conclude that their revulsion towards the material was necessarily intertwined with fascination and attraction. In fact, the awareness that these works were reprehensible, violent, and even traumatic, translating into degrading objectification, did not exclude the fantasy excitement they evoked.

Benjamin affirms that this conflict, evidently present in pornography, would actually permeate the entire sexual field, which is never exempt from certain aggressiveness and sadistic fantasies. However, she cautions that sex cannot be simply equated with violence, just as fantasy (or fantasies of violation and brutality) cannot be equated with reality (or the actual fulfillment of violation). Against this view, some feminists at the time argued that sadistic pornography, being a space of suspension of certain social repressions, would reveal the truth of male sexual desire, constituted of violence and domination. However, it is misleading to attribute prevalence to fantasy material, as if fantasy revealed some truth hidden by external morality. This view makes the mistake of seeking to reveal a supposed truth about desire, incorrectly implying that "reality 'is,' that it has one truth, and that this truth can be known apart from the complex process of psychic representation." (Ibid, p. 176). That is, this interpretation implies that there is a reality of desire that is separate from representations or prior to social interactions.

By equating sex with violence as a supposed perverse truth of desire, this view implies that people really desire what their unconscious expresses despite their conscious will. This simplification essentializes and universalizes male desire, demonizing it, in contrast to female desire, supposedly purified of violence and transgression, which conveniently excuses women from participating and having pleasure in violation. For the author, however, sexual fantasy, expressed, for example, in pornography, is not "what it is." That is, it points to elements beyond itself, having

a much more ambivalent relationship with reality. Fantasy does not match the truth of desire because it can represent, hide, or distort reality.

Therefore, if there is a truth of desire, it must be found neither in fantasy nor in concrete action but somewhere in between. It is, therefore, essential to maintain awareness of the tension between the two. This interpretation aims both to denaturalize the relationship between sex and violence and understand the powerful dynamics that unify these two elements. Sadistic pornography lends itself to this analysis precisely because it possesses a "liminal status" (Ibid, 180). The very ambivalence it evokes in the viewer, the mixture of excitement and revulsion, internal inclinations, and public prohibitions, points to a dichotomy on the verge between fantasy and reality. As a kind of violation, it stimulates desire and unconscious identification against the observer's will. Hence, pornography makes us experience the foreignness of desire in ourselves, confronting the ambivalent relationships between the internal field of desire and the social field of collective representations and prohibitions.

The understanding of pornography as a liminal case, which simultaneously reinforces the violation and the prohibition, resonates with Bataille's view of sexuality as an experience at the boundaries of violence, destruction, and death. After introducing the problem of pornography, Benjamin states: "My point of departure is Bataille's (1962) provocative question: How is eroticism related to death? Why do images of death and violence inspire sexual excitement?" (Ibid, p. 181). As we may remember, the death experienced in sexuality is not the physical death but the dissolution of a separate existence from others, meaning the loss of individual boundaries, the dissolution of the self, and the non-differentiation between internal and external realities. This experience is terrifying, vertiginous, and mesmerizing, but it can be shared with another person, as the author puts it:

> By 'death' Bataille means not literal death but 'the fusion of separate objects' that ends their separate identities, a dissolution of the self. Bataille's picture is paradoxical: individual islands separated by a sea of death — representing the ultimate oneness — which the isolates must cross to meet one another. It is this crossing that creates sexual excitement: 'But I cannot refer to this gulf which separates us without feeling that this is not the whole truth of the matter. It is a deep gulf, and I do not see how it can be done away with. *Nonetheless, we can experience its dizziness together.* It can hypnotize us. This gulf is death in one sense, and death is vertiginous, death is hypnotizing' (pp. 12-13). (Ibid, p. 182, emphasis added).

For Benjamin, this interpretation of sexuality is interesting because it introduces an intersubjective understanding of eroticism that sees *the experience of meeting the other as the possibility of sharing the vertigo of dedifferentiation without succumbing to it*. She states: "This

perspective — implied by the question of whether we experience death together —is the intersubjective dimension." (Ibid, p. 182). We see, therefore, that Benjamin's understanding of intersubjectivity has taken a negative turn. More than a harmonious communion, or a beneficial excursion into the mother's body, intersubjectivity, at least in its erotic expression, translates the strangeness or the alienness of desire, which culminates in the vertiginous perspective of death.

For Benjamin, Bataille, unfortunately, does not consider the possibility of maintaining the tension between self and other, which would be equivalent to the joint contemplation of the vertigo of dedifferentiation because he takes for granted the breakdown of tension, especially along gender lines. What happens when recognition is broken down is the depletion of sexual tension, which results in an objectified world of disconnected opposites. In this case, the vertigo of the erotic experience dissolves: "As the splitting of positions into violator and violated gradually vitiates the shared sensibility, vertigo is replaced by control." (Ibid, p. 186). The excitement, which the experience intended to generate, ends up exhausted, as if the sea of death between the subjects dried up, giving way to an arid and lonely desert: "Thus the split unity of violator and violated eventually reproduces the same deadness and lack of sexual tension that the vertiginous confrontation with death was meant to overcome." (Ibid). Bataille himself would have recognized this dynamic, stating, in reference to Hegel, that the wholly surrendered slave would no longer preserve the qualities by which he could satisfy the master.

With this updated consideration of the intersubjective recognition – meaning experiencing the vertigo of death together – the author goes on to reflect on the Freudian drives, especially the death drive in its relation to sadism. For Freud, as we might remember, the death drive would represent the regressive effort to reduce living matter to an inorganic mass. Nevertheless, the intersubjective view understands that the sadistic destructive act is more complex. While trying to reduce the other or the external world to an undifferentiated mass, the sadist also seeks to differentiate himself and establish his own separate identity. Sadism, for Benjamin, seeks both to "do and undo differentiation." (Ibid, p. 187). For example, the child who expresses sadistic strivings has a complex array of desires, which the sadistic fantasy accumulates: he, at the same time, expresses "the wish to finally reach the mother as well as to punish her, to separate from her as well as to control her, to be recognized by her as well as to obliterate her." (Ibid, p. 188). In the face of such a paradox, the death drive as the direct or plain desire for destruction and undifferentiation cannot coincide with the sadistic desire as intersubjective theory sees it.

However, the loss of tension that the death drive seeks could perhaps correspond to the sadistic achievement of destruction, that is, the state of mental omnipotence, which finally succeeded in reducing the other to a tenseless thing. As Benjamin speculates:

> The metaphor of the death instinct, recast in light of self-other differentiation, helps to link the idea of loss of tension to the trajectories of sexuality and aggression. The advantage of Freud's theory of the death instinct is that these links are clearly established, even though in the final analysis 'instinct' may best be understood not literally, biologically, but rather as a metaphor for somatic and affective states. (Ibid, p. 189).

Indeed, we might remember that Benjamin formerly related the death drive as a metaphor for the state of omnipotence (1998, p. 67). However, now she argues that even the correspondence of the death drive with omnipotence is not appropriate enough because it does not capture the dynamic and relational character of domination. Pursuing her effort to translate the death drive in intersubjective terms, Benjamin is now willing to give more space to another aspect of Freudian theory: the early notion of energy conservation and discharge. The idea of *discharge* is interesting for her because it provides a way out of omnipotent encapsulation, putting the other who receives the discharge in the picture:

> Perhaps, then, rather than to express death as simply a metaphor for loss of self-other tension, we ought to consider the way that tension moves from inside to outside. To translate the notion of a drive toward death (zero tension) into omnipotence (loss of tension between self and other) does not fully confront the question of how the two terms, inside and outside, are actually connected. (Ibid, p. 192).

In her view, now offering a more generous reading of Freud, the discharge of energy from the self to the external world and the reception of that energy by the other "constitutes the intersubjective element in Freud's theory" (Ibid, p. 192). Therefore, more than correlating the death drive to the one-sided omnipotence, she focuses her translation on the energetic fluid dynamics that permeate different mental states and the paths that the drive energy travels between the self and the other.

In turn, this more nuanced translation between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective is related to a deeper understanding of excessive psychic energy and the means of discharging it. We arrive at an important change in the author's understanding of early childhood: she no longer postulates the image of an originally active baby, who naturally engages in mutualistic relationships with the mother, but suggests the understanding of a baby who suffers, from the beginning, a distressing excess of stimuli.

Benjamin mentions the existence of a "stimulus rape" (Ibid, p. 192), defined by Michael Eigen as an "early danger of being flooded by sensations of various kinds, possibly even in the womb." (Eigen, 2004, p. 234). This concept shows a state of passivity and total abandonment of

the baby in relation to the external world, which burdens him with information, sensations, and excitement. The baby's passivity is primary, and his activity is minimally co-original, if not secondary and defensive, against an unbearable stimulus. The baby's defensive way of dealing with this excess is through aggressiveness expressed outside of itself, an effort to eliminate intolerable and intrusive tension. This movement constitutes a form of primary sadism, which does violence to the external while seeking to get rid of overstimulation.

Understanding the baby as "originally helpless" (Benjamin, 1995, p. 193), Benjamin now places the need for intersubjective exchanges on stimulus regulation. Even if the baby cannot represent the other in the first moments of life (let us recall the presupposition of an initial phase of unawareness), the other is necessary to help regulate the stimulation received. If the other is not there, the baby is traumatized, as Winnicott understood it, even if the child cannot initially represent such absence or understand it as such. She explains:

> In intersubjective terms, the self that has to escape an overwhelming tension caused by stimulus outside its control is never an isolated self: if no other is there to help contain that tension, it is still registered (although perhaps not able to be represented) as the absent other, who could have or should have been there (Green 1986). If absence becomes traumatic, the self cannot represent it, yet is still haunted by the one who wasn't there. For the isolated self, too overwhelmed and alone to represent the other, what appears is not the other's absence but rather death, or the wish for death. (Ibid, p. 193-194).

Therefore, Benjamin now understands that the baby initiates life in a state of helpless undifferentiation. It is precisely the need to discharge overstimulation that motivates the aggressive attempt to differentiate. Drowning in overstimulation, the self's lack of externality has the connotation of death. For the author, what matters in this scenario is not so much the primary aggressiveness that stems from child helplessness but the unfolding of this act in relation to the others who receive it. That is, what is decisive is the relationship that the baby develops from its primarily aggressive interaction with the world. Primary sadism must collide with the mother's separate existence so that an externality is available for excess disposal. If the mother survives, stimulations can be digested and metabolized together with her, affecting but not destroying her. Anger, insecurity, and overwhelming fantasies can be digested and discarded in the relational space shared with the surviving other. In this way, intersubjectivity serves as a secondary means for elaborating, regulating, and discharging the excessive tension that the baby receives primarily. If the mother does not survive, however, the baby's aggressiveness finds no means of dissipation, locking him in an omnipotent cage:

> Whereas the (m)other's survival permits the shattering of mental omnipotence, her failure to survive leaves the subject with unprocessed, indigestible rage that cannot be further

> broken down and metabolized. This overwhelming, unmanageable internal tension, which is not contained by the other's holding or communication, remains as aggression. (Ibid, p. 193).

What remains for the baby left alone with his excess is an indigestible rage, an uncontrollable internal tension, and a desire for permanent aggressiveness, expressed sometimes in sadistic or in masochistic violence, which both aim to create spaces for dissipation and disposal. The lack of the other, his non-survival, causes the unprocessed excess to be directed either toward the outside in the form of permanent aggression and control, or toward the inside, in the form of internalization, submission, and annulment of the self.

A clear proof that the author now gives more space for Freudian negativism is a footnote in which she agrees that the aim of the death wish is to escape tension. She states that before the constitution of primary sadism, or the primary act of aggression towards the exterior, there would be "an even more primary experience of 'stimulus rape,' producing the inner tension that leads to the initial aggression." (Ibid, p. 197). However, she then has to admit that this view implies an original situation of helplessness and internal tension:

> However, in this logic aggression is absolutely ineluctable, since there is always more tension than can be somatically and mentally processed, except in death. In keeping with Freud's later argument in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, escaping tension is the logic behind the death wish, turning the tension outward in aggression the preferred means of escape. (Ibid, p. 197-198).

This interpretation brings quite a relevant change in Benjamin's translation attempt. The death drive can finally be translated as *the aggressive attempt to discharge an unbearable internal tension into the external space*. However, it is precisely the tension of the intersubjective relationship, when the other survives, that allows the excessive intrapsychic tension to be placed outside the self:

> The shift back to mutual understanding, or out of the fantasy of destruction into the reality of survival, reestablishes the tension between two individuals even as it dissipates the tension of aggression within the individual. But when this shift back to intersubjective reality fails, internalization remains the only way to deal with aggression; the turning inward of aggression forms the basis of the fantasy of doer and done to, an inner world of persecutors and victims. (Ibid, p. 197).

Thus, the death drive is not simply a desire for omnipotence but also an aggressive effort to find externality, breaking a solitary and excessive state. For this reason, the death drive is not a purely negative energy that, at best, should be exhausted or contained. It may also serve the effort of reaching the other. Its less oppressive result is the possibility of bumping into a surviving other.

In this new understanding that deals with the energetic discharge of tension and excess, Benjamin extends her intersubjective translation to Jean Laplanche's theory of sexuality and

sadomasochism.[36] Reinterpreting Freud's understanding of sadomasochism, Laplanche poses that there would be a primary aggressive movement on the part of the child, similar to Freud's primary sadism, but which has nothing of sexualized. This aggressiveness becomes sexualized only when the baby encounters the adult world. In this asymmetrical encounter, the adult sends messages loaded with unconscious and sexualized materials, which are highly enigmatic, both for the sender and even more for the child receiver. For Laplanche, sexuality is always excessive, being conveyed by an adult who already possesses a sexual unconscious and who is not totally aware of the messages transmitted. The baby who receives such messages does not yet have a constituted unconscious. Hence, this passive and radically helpless receiver does not have the symbolic or physical resources to process or metabolize these enigmas. The result is that part of the message and the excess it contains is internalized in the form of original masochism.

For Laplanche, the reflexive movement of internalization of excess and enigmatic messages creates, in a single movement, the sexual field, fantasy, and the unconscious. Through this process, called "fantasmatization," the material that escapes symbolization and digestion is internalized as unconscious fantasy, which starts to foment the sexual realm. Excess is internalized as "the sexual," a form of negative sexuality, aggressive and destructive, filled with death drive material.

Benjamin's translation of this theory links the Laplanchian movement of internalization of excess to Winnicott's understanding of the inability to destroy the other. In her view, the Laplanchian internalization that creates the field of sexual fantasy stems from a relationship with the "subjectively conceived object" (Ibid, p. 199), that is, the object as recorded intrapsychically, not the subject encountered outside. It is only when the baby does not find a surviving subject to help him metabolize the excessive and unbearably enigmatic sexual material that he internalizes this content, which then comes to populate his intrapsychic fantasy world. In opposition, if the other survives, the enigmas and excesses can be partially digested in the intersubjective space between the subjects.

There would therefore be a difference between "the sexual" and "the erotic," in which the first would configure the intrapsychic aspect of the sexual relationship, while the second would correspond to the addition of the intersubjective aspect to it. The "sexual" derives from the internalization of "unsurvived" aggression, which feeds fantasy, anger, and internal tension. On

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[36] Benjamin suggested an approximation with Laplanche's theory in *The Bonds of Love* (1988, p. 69), but it is only in *Like Subjects, Love Objects* that she integrates his theory more fully.

the contrary, the aggressiveness survived and digested in the intersubjective space returns in the erotic form of the joint experience of vertigo. Benjamin affirms: "Eros, as Laplanche, following Freud, implies, is about something other than the sexual; it is about life as opposed to death, about contacting the other." (Ibid). Eros is not exempt from aggressiveness and fantasy, just like the erotic drive is never apart from the death drive, but it offers an external way out that reaches the other.

Indeed, in concrete experiences, the sexual and the erotic cannot be separated, occurring simultaneously, so the outlined differentiation serves more didactic and analytical purposes than descriptive ones. Obviously, we cannot and should not expect any sexual experience to occur without high doses of fantasy, even aggressive ones. Following the Laplanchian understanding, sexuality needs the sexual, being always imbued with power and submission. The difference that the erotic aspect brings is the survival of the other amid wild fantasies. The mutual relationship with another subject "preserves-by-transforming omnipotence fantasies" (Ibid, p. 202), diluting their absolute status and allowing their symbolic communication between the subjects. In the words of the psychoanalyst:

> We cannot say that sadomasochistic fantasy is inimical to or outside the erotic, for where do we find sexuality that is free of the fantasy of power and surrender? Would sexuality exist without such fantasy? There is no erotic interaction without the sense of self and other exerting power, affecting each other, and such affecting is immediately elaborated in the unconscious in the more violent terms of infantile sexuality. […] But what makes sexuality erotic is the survival of the other throughout the exercise of power, which in turn makes the expression of power part of symbolic play. (Ibid, p. 206).

The release of excess in the intermediate space diminishes its power over the subjects, opening or enlarging the spaces of mutual elaboration, including symbolic elaboration. In fact, Benjamin goes so far as to claim that in keeping internal and external realities, fantasy and action, in tension, the intersubjective space is what allows the distinction between the symbol and the thing symbolized. For her, the mutual elaboration of tension is related to acquiring symbolic capacity. Thus, Benjamin now relates symbolization to recognition.

That also means that, since the fundamental ability to symbolize comes from the relationship of recognition, it arises within the transitional space between mother and baby, that is, within the dyad itself. Therefore, it does not require the appeal to a third term external to the relationship. Following Eigen and Ogden, she concludes that there is a quality of thirdness in the dyad, which inaugurates the self's reflexivity: "As Ogden (1986) has contended, the subject who

can begin to make this distinction [between symbol and symbolized] has access to a triangular field – symbol, symbolized and the interpreting subject." (Ibid, p. 95).[37]

As an alternative to the Lacanian understanding of the traumatic cut of the symbolic, Benjamin relates the entry into the symbolic world to the Winnicottian transitional space, which does not separate us completely from the object. It is the transitional space that gives access to the symbolic dimension because it is placed in between the inner world of representations and the outer world of things represented, the symbol and the symbolized, detaching one from the other. Consequently, contrary to Lacan, it is not an original and totalitarian loss of the object that inaugurates the possibility of the symbolic. A constant and partial dynamic of loss and reunion makes it possible for us to link the symbol with the symbolized thing.[38] For Benjamin:

> By the same logic, this conception of the mother-child dyad is an alternative to the Lacanian notion of a 'primordially split subject,' whose existence requires postulating an 'originally lost object' (J. Mitchell 1982). Rather, the potential space emerges through sequencing of lost and found, through digestion of loss and recovery, through disruption and repair (Tronick 1989; Beebe and Lachmann, 1994). The transitional space with the object who is neither absolutely lost nor present allows symbolic experience to take shape. An absolute loss would actually lead to a traumatic foreclosure of the symbolic, not to its emergence. (Ibid, p. 95).

Arguing that the triangular and symbolic dimensions can be experienced within the dyad itself, Benjamin can propose, in sequence, that we do not need a total break in the maternal relationship and that paternal intervention is not the only way into the social. The dyad, moreover, need not be understood as an asocial or pre-social reality, as we saw. The symbolic, then, is not externally injected into an original organic unit, but it emerges within the dyad amid destruction and survival:

> When the other survives confrontations over assertion and difference, when aggression is 'caught' by the other, then there is a space of symbolic communication between subjects in which disappointment or excitement can be contained. With the emergence of this space between the person and the action, between action and reaction, it becomes possible to symbolize feeling in fantasy and words. (Ibid, p. 202).

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[37] In these crucial formulations, we see the beginning of a particular understanding of the mother-baby dyad. Benjamin begins to understand that the dyad can assume a differentiated or triadic formulation without necessarily relying on the external intervention of a third figure. Here she uses the term "dyadic triangle" (Ibid, p. 104), but in later works, she would call the intersubjective space directly the "intersubjective Third," as we will see.

[38] It is worth mentioning that "symbolization," as Benjamin understands it, does not directly correspond to the Lacanian Symbolic order, corresponding, more precisely, to a dynamic integration between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, as well as the relationship between these fields. That is why she states, in a footnote: "What I mean by 'full symbolization' would not, I think, correspond to Lacan's symbolic order alone, but to an integration of the Imaginary with the Symbolic, which recognizes the origins of the latter in the former and allows the transition from one to the other to be a 'useful' space." (Ibid, p. 207). In this context, I suppose that the Lacanian Real, in turn, can be grasped in the vertiginous encounter with dedifferentiation, which the self experiences, partially or indirectly, in its intersubjective encounter with the other.

Put differently, intersubjectivity makes the excitement bearable so that it can be symbolized, that is, placed behind a symbol that somehow protects the self or "frees us from the concrete." (Ibid, p. 207). This experience then opens a space between the mother and the child, within the dyad itself, which allows the partners to differentiate their realities, precisely in their attunement, loosening the grip of power: "There is now a space between the mother and child that symbolically contains negative feelings such that they need not be projected onto the object ('she is dreadful') or turned back upon the self ('I am destructive')." (Ibid, p. 94). Thus, more than a symbolic cut, symbolization relies on a space of mutual elaboration or metabolization of overwhelming sensations.

In the absence of the external space, the symbol collapses with the thing symbolized, as if fully equivalent: "In the absence of intersubjective space, symbolic capacities collapse: actions become things, and images of actions become things." (Ibid, p. 203). What happens is a symbolic equation. For example, sex equals violence, turning into a traumatic taboo, with no possibility of communication, sharing of feelings, or artistic expression on this topic. The excess it provokes is so overwhelming that it cannot be symbolized, remaining as a threatening internal reality.

If the symbol equals the thing symbolized, with no difference between the two, external reality appears dangerously fused with the subject; the object swallows the subject, reducing the world's mysterious, recalcitrant, and chaotic traits to a numb and dead-like reality. The symbolic equation represents an illusion of omnipotence that seeks to eliminate the unbridgeable distance between the I and the other, the self and the external world. Therefore, the author states: "Speaking more generally, what distinguishes the erotic — in interaction or representation — is the existence of an intersubjective space that both allows identification with the other and recognizes the non-identity between the person, the feeling, and the 'thing' (action) representing it." (Ibid, p. 205).

Beyond this illusion of omnipotence, the reality of the other subject and the external world cannot be directly known or controlled. It can only be approached negatively through the survival of destruction, which actually conveys the uncomfortable perception that there is a perennial gap between the subjects. It is this reality of mismatch and profound separateness that constitutes vertigo that we can experience together. Thus, Benjamin affirms:

> We may now return to the question raised by the shared confrontation with the abyss, the gulf that separates one subject from another. In effect, it is the acceptance of this separation that makes shared contemplation possible, and it is with this acceptance that the erotic, the outward vector, is associated. (Ibid, p. 205).

Omnipotence is the illusory and ineffective attempt to bridge the gulf between the subjects, which would undo alterity and externality altogether, reducing the other to an object. Again, what is needed is not full internality nor full externality but a balance between the two. Likewise, sexuality is understood as an ambiguous experience that directs us inwards toward a strong relationship of absorption in our fantasies, while the erotic component directs us outwards toward the relationship with the other. Therefore, it is not possible to distinguish the sexual as an aspect related to "omnipotence, death, and fantasy" from the erotic, which would be aligned with "recognition, life, and reality" (Ibid, p. 208). This division is not possible because "what we know about Eros is often what presents itself to us alloyed with its opposite – death, the destructive impulse." (Ibid, p. 209). This interpretation values the expression of aggressiveness as a necessary reaction to the disruption of the omnipotent world, placing the sexual and the erotic as two sides of the same coin. Benjamin explains:

> For the idea of an object that can survive destruction also provides that destruction must have its say, that fantasy must endeavor to devour reality in order for the subject to taste the difference between them. And reality must survive the devouring of the unconscious in order to be more than mere repression, and thus to truly include the discovery of an other. Furthermore, the idea of the destruction of the object suggests the indispensable role of aggression or negation in the subject's effort to reach another. (Ibid, p. 209).

Being necessary to allow confrontation with exteriority and the discovery of the other, aggressiveness is also a natural affect, almost an inescapable impulse. It comes as a motoric impulse, as in the expression of the Winnicottian True Self. In Benjamin's words: "Aggression, like sexuality (before it becomes 'the sexual'), is a given (and in that sense a *Trieb*), a blind motoric impulse." (Ibid, p. 209-210). That is, aggressiveness is both primary, motoric, and necessary in the effort to relate to the outside world, getting rid of excessive stimulation. Benjamin concludes: "As an inextricable counterpoint to recognition, destruction is not the negation of Eros, but its complement. Thus Eros cannot, need not, evade aggression, which so often fuels destructiveness." (Ibid, p. 211).

So now we finally have a clear picture of Benjamin's updated theory and her understanding of primary infancy. For her, we begin life in a situation of immense helplessness, surrounded by excessive sources of overstimulation, which are outside our control. However, we first inhabit a reality in which externality is not perceived because there is no awareness of its independent existence. This situation motivates a primary form of aggressiveness, which seeks to find the limits of the self and unload excessive stimulation. This form of aggression is erotic (not yet sexual) because it tries to find an externality, so it is a vector pointing outside. Nevertheless, when it is not

survived, as is often the case, this aggression remains in the self's omnipotent realm. It is then internalized in the form of the sexual, the fantasizing, and the unconscious, transforming the primary form of aggressiveness into the death drive properly or the destructive effort associated with death. From this process, the psyche's fantasy-like, destructive, and persecutory aspects are naturally created in the dynamic and unstable relationship between the baby and the mother, following inevitable experiences of non-survival of one or the other.

In a subsequent moment, the most productive destination of such a destructive force will be the recovery of the erotic function, allying the sexual with Eros. Eros can call back the aggressiveness and destruction under its services in order to "help us to cross the sea of death that separates us." (Ibid, p. 211). Thus, even if it is not that much "innocent" in a second moment because it is sexual, aggressiveness under the erotic influence can still restore recognition, which now means nothing more than *destruction survived*. Benjamin seeks, with this argument, to complement the Freudian understanding of the drive duality and the fate of the death drive through an intersubjective interpretation:

> Rather, we might rethink Freud's remark at the close of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, that 'now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers,' eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary' (p. 145). Because there can be no useful experience of destruction and survival without aggression, the question is really how its immortal adversary, Eros, can inspire aggression to assume its most creative form, destruction survived. (Ibid, p. 211).

Eros, therefore, is not the opposite of destruction but of internalized or *non-survived destruction*, which then becomes the death drive, the intrapsychic striving for destruction and death that does not find an appropriate channel out of one's mind. As we can see, the life and death drives do not have such a different character or an inherently different quality because both rely on aggressiveness and denial, resulting from our paradoxical relation to externality. What differentiates them is the direction that aggressiveness takes. Being internalized and prevented from finding an external discharge, it expresses itself in an excessively violent way, aiming to destroy the fantasy other that threatens the precarious intrapsychic ideal of the self. Whereas, when it can be metabolized externally or contained by another surviving subject, aggressiveness serves the erotic encounter with the other, which makes the persecutory fantasies more flexible.

Confronted by our helplessness in the face of excessive stimuli, which motivates aggressiveness as a natural force of regulation and self-affirmation, the most we can hope for is that it does not actually destroy the other, assuming the form of *survived aggression* – or reciprocal recognition. We should recall that, for Freud, Eros had the prerogative of redirecting the death

drive towards the self, under the superego, generating self-control. To avoid the negative deadlock of this conclusion, Benjamin understands that Eros can redirect aggression towards the third field of intersubjective relatedness, in which it can be elaborated and dissipated through symbolic communication. Thus, she concludes:

> In effect, while symbolization promotes the movement outward — the vector toward exchange with the outside (*whether interpersonal communication or artistic sublimation*) — the symbolic equation maintains the inward movement of fantasmatization, in which only discharge allows release. (Ibid, p. 204-205, emphasis added).

Nature here takes on a more negative character than in previous texts, although Benjamin's primary aggressiveness is still somewhat innocent.[39] Now, the paradox of recognition is not theoretically resolved through a communion with nature because it necessarily involves the defense against excessive stimuli, destructive attempts, and violent self-assertion. The difference comes from the surviving other, who does not essentially change the violent and wild character of the erotic "drive" but contains it in a transitional space of communication.

Therefore, again, it is not an issue of moralization or the internalized containment of aggression, albeit these are now understood as necessary and natural elements. Benjamin's solution to the problem of aggressiveness, both external and internal, involves the symbolic elaboration of aggressiveness in an intersubjective space. She affirms, for instance, that "The inner tension of aggression may be modified through a shift in the outer relationship back to mutual understanding, which includes communication of fantasy contents." (Ibid, p. 196). For her, moreover, "the point cannot be to 'get rid of' dangerous fantasies; rather, it must be to contain and transform them through symbolization in the intersubjective space." (Ibid, p. 204). Symbolization, especially through interpersonal communication and artistic representation, is the solution here to an original

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[39] Benjamin's notion of primary aggressiveness still has a rather mild or soft connotation because aggression does not refer to an act of total destruction or hatred vengeance, being more related to self-assertion, which aims at generating an impact on the other's omnipotence, so as to find an outside space. As she states: "Any act of the subject toward the other that has an impact 'negates' the other, breaks into the other's absolute identity with her- or himself in such a way that the other is no longer exactly what she or he was a moment before." (Ibid, p. 210). Generating an impact, or unbalancing the sovereignty of others, is what motivates primary aggressiveness. Following Winnicott, Benjamin implies that this first form of aggression would derive from the mere fact of being alive, with no cruel connotation, only with the aim of self-assertion and release of excessive stimuli. In a rhetorical question at the end of the chapter, she implies that perhaps we should not even call this form of "aggression" by this name: "Is it the aim [to discharge tension through affecting the other], or the impediment to the aim [the other's lack of survival], that entitles us to call it aggression?" (Ibid). Subsequently, also through an unresolved question, she suggests a "liberal reading of Freud" that differentiates more destructive from less destructive forms of aggression. In her words: "Through Winnicott might we arrive at a more liberal reading of Freud, in which we call this primary tension aggression but differentiate creative and destructive aims, aims that reach their intersubjective target and aims that do not?" (Ibid, p. 210). The difference between a simply destructive and a productive or creative form of aggressiveness would therefore lie in the survival of the other.

and unavoidable aggressive impulse, freeing us from the concrete. Aggression need not be internalized. It can be channeled to an intersubjective space when the other survives.

Transposing this discussion briefly to social theory – which the author does not deeply develop in this text – I believe that since this primary aggression is somewhat innocent, its containment could be resolved in collective forums of dialogue and positive instances of cultural life. For example, communicative practices in democratic forums could be forms of symbolic containment of aggressive collective forces. As we will see, however, this solution changed in later formulations, while the general communicative hopes of the 1990s gave way to a more pessimist spirit in recent years.

6.2. The Shadow of the Other (1998): the self that sustains multiplicity

The transmutation of Benjamin's clinical concepts to social theory, as I attempted to do briefly by the end of the last section, was developed in the following years by the author herself, especially in relation to provocations from feminist scholars. *The Shadow of the Other* (1998) is Benjamin's book that more directly addresses issues of political philosophy, feminist theory, and especially the debate between critical theory and poststructuralism. The third chapter, the main one of this oeuvre, debates the arguments of feminist political theory, contrasting mainly Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler. Benjamin criticizes the works of both authors, bringing contributions to the debate based on her idea of intersubjectivity. For her, it is possible to bring the two sides of the theoretical discussion closer together, safeguarding both a certain capacity for autonomy and a deep understanding of domination.

Still focusing this analysis on the place of the negative, between culture and civilization, we will go through the two main topics of our interest in the book to understand the evolution of Benjamin's thinking. In the first chapter, Benjamin elaborates on (1) the capacity of speech in relation to Freud's theory. Symbolization still counts as her main solution to excessive stimuli. However, it now assumes the clear role of a third term or a symbolic net that mediates the two subjects in relation, allowing the dissolution of polarized ideals. This notion will influence the conception of the Third in Benjamin's latest theory. Thereafter, she analyzes (2) the issue of identity, trying to accommodate both the recognition theory and the poststructuralist critique. First, she analyzes the process of gender identification, proposing that the shadow of the other, the ineluctable incorporation of the other (as in positive or negative identification), may disturb fixed

gender identities in the individual experience, revealing the precarity of gender. In the sequence, she proposes a model of self that, assisted by recognition, sustains multiplicity so as to retain the capacity for resistance and non-identity. I conclude that, in trying to accommodate the poststructuralist critique of identity, she ended up with an overly positive model of the self, which sustains the hope of achieving multiple identities at an excessively low cost. However, she further elaborates on the role of the intermediate space between the subjects as a condition for the difficult relationship with non-identity, which also anticipates the later development of recognition as a space beyond self-conservation.

6.2.1. Speech as a medium between the self and the other

Starting from the first chapter, titled "The Primal Leap of Psychoanalysis, from Body to Speech," Benjamin reflects on the role of symbolic communication in the development of psychoanalysis. Benjamin aims to trace how Freud's interlocution with his patients (predominantly women) was crucial to the development of the talking cure and the understanding of transference, all elements that highly influenced the development of intersubjective psychoanalysis. She wants to understand how the active-passive split, whose foundation is the male-female one, influenced the constitution of Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as the role women's resistance played in challenging this system from its inception. What interests us the most, however, is Benjamin's understanding of the relationship between the body and speech or the attribution of the speaking subject from his mute and amorphous body.

This analysis is related to the ambiguous relationship between Freud's work and the Enlightenment project. On the one hand, Freud saw psychoanalysis as a scientific enterprise, part of the Enlightenment project in its search for individual freedom. Indeed, one of the central objectives of the Enlightenment is individual autonomy, understood as the subject's capacity to dictate his own laws and to speak for himself. This goal, related to the subject's maturity, would directly oppose infantile and feminine passivity, especially hysterical passivity, in which the inability to speak or to control one's body converts what is unsaid into physical symptoms. Therefore, Freud's project, resonating with the Enlightenment, would be to foster subject maturity, making the body speak or translating the body's symptoms into communicable symbols and interpretations. That would be the "primal leap" of psychoanalysis, to which the chapter title refers: translating hysterical symptoms into interpretations. This undertaking would convey an effort to

rationally dominate nature, unveiling the mysterious motivations behind the body's odd behavior and controlling the unconscious by the conscious, with obvious Enlightenment connotations.

Moreover, for Benjamin, the patriarchal implications of Freud's project are no less evident. Starting with the analyst-analysand pair, we see an undeniable gender subtext sustaining the clinical relationship, especially in the early days of psychoanalysis, which relied on a range of clinical cases of hysterical women analyzed by the cold and rational scientist that Freud embodied. The image of the (male) doctor, conqueror of the unconscious and dominator of the hysterical body, contrasts sharply with the out-of-control, vulnerable, and passive (female) patient. Even though psychoanalysis itself offers resources to unmask the gender patterns in these relationships, it continually repeats them. That is, inadvertently, "psychoanalysis reproduces the splits it aims to analyze." (Ibid, p. 8).

On the other hand, however, psychoanalysis also resonates with the critique of Enlightenment, which denounces the internal limitations of the subject of knowledge. Psychoanalytic investigations, especially the discovery of the unconscious, directly challenge the Enlightenment pretension of a rational, self-centered, and autonomous subject. Not by chance, postmodern theorists called Freud to their ranks, claiming that he would "show that the figure of the autonomous, coherent, rational subject is a deceptive appearance, which serves to deny the reality of a fragmented, chaotic, incoherent self [...]." (Ibid, p. 8).

In addition, Freud certainly challenged patterns of oppressive relationships that existed in his time, reducing the distance between doctor and patient, which is evident, in the first place, in his abandonment of hypnosis to the detriment of the talking method. The primal leap of psychoanalysis, from the body to speech, also implies that the female body was finally listened to, that the hysterical patient, previously hypnotized as a mere object of knowledge, conquered, through the talking cure, the status of a speaking subject who had something to contribute to the analytical process. Therefore, despite the patriarchal context of Freud's time, which undeniably enters his theory and his clinic, one also cannot deny the fundamental contribution of the speech and resistance of his patients in the foundation and constitution of psychoanalysis.

For these reasons, as Whitebook (2017a) suggests, Benjamin understands Freudian psychoanalysis to be halfway between the defense and the critique of Enlightenment, eventually being mobilized by both sides of the dispute. This position is related to the analyst-analysand

relationship itself, which is full of complexities and contradictions, as the first leap makes clear: "And so the origin of psychoanalysis, its decisive move, is ambiguous." (Ibid, p. 9).

Investigating the analyst-analysand pair, Benjamin retrieves a couple of feminine figures who appear in famous clinical cases, showing that they certainly played a critical role in the development of psychoanalysis. These patients, portrayed through stereotypes, such as the "hysterical woman," were important above all for questioning Freud's patriarchal authority, causing him to be, in a way, divested of his hierarchical position and increasingly involved as a subject of the analysis. Through these patients, psychoanalysis was challenged and, in a way, altered by women's demands since its inception.

The first figure retrieved is Anna O', the name Freud gave to Bertha Pappenheim, known as the patient responsible for leading Freud to adopt the method of the talking cure. Anna O's resistance to hypnosis led to the development of a new method in which the analysand could have greater subjective involvement, overcoming a situation of complete submission and gaining a certain autonomy through speech.

Even so, at that moment, Freud's expectation was still that of simply putting into words a bizarre representation performed by the patient to make the symptom disappear. Supposedly, once the logic of the symptom had been revealed and symbolized, the symptom's enactment would lose its *raison d'être* and dissipate, just as, in hypnosis, the hypnotist could control the symptom, at least while the patient was under his influence. In Freud's expectation, words would supplant action; the symbol would unveil the symptom, and speech would directly dominate the body.

Furthermore, Freud still remains in the purely intrapsychic register of the analytic phenomenon, believing that it would be possible to observe the patient's communication from a neutral, controlled, and non-implicated point of view:

> Freud has not yet confronted the intersubjective aspect of the phenomenon, the bidirectionality of unconscious communication; he believes that transference can be simply observed from without. He remains reassuringly within the law – according to which words must replace action, symbol replace symptom, each proceeding in order. (Ibid, p. 12).

The patient remains largely a passive object of analysis, while the analyst is the absolute holder of knowledge, who alone interprets what goes on in the analysand's mind, having the power to symbolize what the other can only enact.

It would be with Dora, the second patient Benjamin recovers, that Freud would discover the phenomenon of transference, which means the revival, in the analytic space, of an infantile

experience of the analysand, investing the analyst with someone else's role. The paradigmatic examples of transference are the unconscious substitution of the analyst figure for that of the patient's father or lover. In the classic case of erotic transference, the patient falls in love with the doctor. The discovery of this dynamic had the undeniable implication of revealing how difficult it was to keep the complete objectivity and neutrality that Freud stipulated as necessary for analysis. If the analyst found himself affectively involved in the patient's unconscious plot, he would not be able to completely control the analysis or directly understand the role he himself played in the relationship. Then, the analytical method changed from the direct interpretation of unconscious materials revealed in free association to the much more risky and complex interpretation of transference itself or the relationship pattern installed between analyst and analysand.

This discovery also led to an alteration in Freud's understanding of reason and self-control. The analytical conflict previously understood as the clash between the symptom and the symbolic representation is replaced by a more elementary conflict between desire and self-control, the drive and the intellect. The result is that reason could no longer remain on the analyst's side alone because the patient also had to adopt an active position of progressive self-control to overcome the pleasure principle or the love for the analyst. For Benjamin, this solution reveals that Freud displaced the paradox of domination to the transference situation: the patient would need first to accept the authority of the analyst, submitting to him, to, in a second moment, identify with this position and internalize it, finally being able to overcome the dangerous desire expressed in transference.

Even though the discovery of transference threatened psychoanalysis' scientific objectivity, Freud insists on the need for detachment, abnegation, and neutrality on the part of the analyst, reinforcing the ideal of independence and self-control. It is interesting to observe the parallel he draws between the dangers of analyzing erotic transference and the scientific manipulation of dangerous chemical materials, as if, in both cases, what was at stake was the control of nature through carefully applied human knowledge. For Benjamin, however, the insistence on self-control and neutrality aims to conceal their impossibility: "What Freud's warnings scarcely conceal is the impossibility of the very objectivity that he prescribes." (Ibid, p. 17).

She interprets Dora's case as a symbolic struggle between the doctor and the patient to control the narrative. The young woman, used to defying medical authorities, repeatedly resisted Freud's interventions through direct denials, gaps in her recollections, disdain for analytical conclusions, and, finally, through the treatment interruption, precisely when Freud thought he was

about to cure her. Freud interprets the persistence of the symptoms as an act of revenge against himself. However, in Benjamin's interpretation, Dora threatened to divest Freud's authority through her identification. Thus, perhaps his neutral and distanced behavior caused the analysis to fail because it reinforced his omnipotent and controlling character, predisposing the patient to view him as an ideal, both to love and defy.

Benjamin understands that identification with the other is inevitable because the other's shadow always falls on the self. Thus, resisting the transference through neutrality and objectivity eventually backfires, having the effect of feeding the attraction of the ideal, as a fuel to the transferential dynamic. More than trying to hide it behind repressive ideals or cold technical rules, identification should be symbolically represented and tolerated in the analytical space. Mutual communication about it would open spaces in the relationship and dilute the transference attraction.

Since Freud's discovery, knowing how to navigate the dynamics of transference and countertransference to dilute the struggle for power has been a significant challenge for psychoanalysts. This issue also motivated the development of the intersubjective perspective, to which Benjamin dedicates her theoretical production. Although there is a great diversity of theoretical and clinical positions, what intersubjective authors have in common is the aim of enabling the use of the analyst's subjectivity as an enriching resource of the analytical process or as another element of analysis. This approach has important consequences for the analytical process. The analyst creates representations that seek to describe the patient's position and his own in order to establish a channel of dialogue, which, in turn, invites the patient to collaborate in the interpretation. In this process, it is not so much the objective accuracy of the analytical interpretation that counts but the sewing process between the identifications and projections of both participants. More than the penetrability and veracity of the analyst's interpretation, what matters is the creation of a third space of collaboration, in which the patient is also capable of knowing and interpreting with the analyst. The author states:

> The analyst is always striving to represent both the patient's position and her or his own in order to create the dialogic space of the third position. Even if this representation is at best only an approximation of the other's meaning, and at worst a misrepresentation, it can nevertheless serve to create the two planes necessary for the third, a double-sided perspective. (Ibid, p. 25).

In this third collaborative perspective, the patient can complement or correct the content of the analyst's interpretation. If it does not perhaps guarantee the technical accuracy of the material, it guarantees the more active participation of the analysand in the process. Thus, from the

intersubjective view, a third position of analytical observation can be created, in which it is possible to recognize, dialogue, and get to know the complementary identifications established.

This intersubjective elaboration, nonetheless, still counts on the symbolic function or the primal leap. But it does not emanate solely from the analyst or the analysand alone, but from a back-and-forth play between them. The dialogue constructed by the collaboration of two subjects forms the third term itself. Benjamin explains that: "This third position is founded in the communicative relationship, which creates a dialogue that is an entity in itself, a potential space outside the web of identifications." (Ibid, p. xv).

Thus, the intermediate space between the subject and the world is related to the function of language and communication. Dialogue composes a third intersubjective term, which fulfills the role of mediation between the self and the other: "Because communicative speech establishes a space for dialogue potentially outside the mental control of either or both participants, it is a site of mediation, the 'third term.'" (Ibid, p. 28). This view contrasts with the Lacanian proposition that the Symbolic would cut the subject from the Real. Again, for Benjamin, on the contrary, the symbolic mediates the self's relation to the external world. In her rather positive words: "Language is the heir to the transitional space (Green, 1986) inasmuch as we see it less in its Lacanian sense as subjecting the individual to the symbolic structure, and more relationally as forming the medium of the subject's acting on and interacting with the world." (Ibid). In opposition to the understanding of language as the structure that separates the subject from the world or represses and controls desire, Benjamin sees language as the means by which the subject acts in the world and relates to other subjects.

The third, as a communicative practice, materializes as a net between the subjects. Established in the midst of the mother-baby dyad, it configures the space of dialogue mediated by the symbolic dimension, indicating that, more than paternal intervention, communication is what breaks the dyad. This idea, for now, is inspired by Ogden's formulation of the "analytical third":

> I have argued elsewhere (Benjamin, 1995c) that we can set the dialogue of the maternal dyad in the place of Lacan's third term that breaks the dyad, the symbolic father or phallus. [...] Intersubjective space, I suggested (Benjamin, 1988) more broadly, could be understood in terms of the dialogue as creating a third, something like the dance that is distinct from the dancers yet cocreated by them. Ogden's (1995) idea of the analytic third is the most intense exposition of this idea of a cocreated yet independent relationship of two subjectivities. (Ibid, p. 28).[40]

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[40] Later, however, this concept will gain specific characteristics and will be more clearly differentiated from Ogden's understanding, as we will see in the next chapter.

As she explained in *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, regulating excessive stimuli is essential for the baby to develop symbolic capacity. However, this process now more clearly attributes a "third" dimension to language, which can mediate between inner and outer realms. Language, which develops in the context of the realization of mother-child separation, works as a bridge between the subjects who are, from the beginning, fundamentally separated. The baby's lack of control over the mother and her insurmountable separation, which he gradually apprehends, is elaborated, among other means, through speech. When the baby calls his mother, he uses language as a bridge to establish the recognition he needs from her. The discourse not only submits the subjects in this interpretation but provides them with a tool for communication and recognition. Thus, Benjamin explains:

> The kind of separation that allows this symbolic development is predicated not merely on a boundary set by an outside other (an abstract idea of limiting the omnipotent self) but rather on a maternal subjectivity that is able to represent affect and hence process the pain of separation between the mother and her child. (Ibid, p. 28)

The symbolic dimension has not only a separating function but also a concomitant unifying function. When there is no collapse between the symbol and the thing symbolized – when there is no symbolic equation – the symbol represents the thing, but it is not equivalent to it, preserving a double or transitional character of connection and separation.

In this sense, the mother-baby relationship is not outside symbolic representation, as if it were an opposite dimension to discursive capacity, or as if it represented a regressive and unconquered substratum, which threatens the more mature possibility of symbolic articulation. On the contrary, the primary relationship with the mother's body configures the very substrate of the symbolic, participating in its condition of possibility. As the author explains, with more details:

> The mother acts as an outside other who is able to help the subject to process and tolerate internal states of tension. The first form she assumes is that of concrete physical other, whose holding and breathing contain the child, whose nourishment stimulates and soothes. However, this concrete experience has formal elements – such as timing, kinetics, distance and closeness – that later enter into speech (Beebe & Lachmann, 1994) and so are already a basis for the subsequent metaphorical object of representation. The evolution from a concrete to a metaphorical experience is contingent on some achievement of bodily regulation and its intersubjective quality of recognition, through which the body metaphorically becomes the mental container. Therefore this container-body, for which the mother's body is the cultural/ theoretical template, should not be dismissed into an unrepresentable presymbolic – as in Lacanian theory – but should in fact be seen as something that attains metaphoric dimensions and remains a substrate of affective life that is more or less in awareness. (Ibid, p. 27).

Thus, with its formal elements, maternal care is at the root of metaphorical representation, conveying meanings. Likewise, the bodily performance of a symptom is also a form of representation or communication, which, depending on the recognition it receives, can be a

precursor of the subject's enlarged symbolic capacity. That is because "Speech no longer figures as the activity of a subject empowered to speak, but as a possibility given by the relationship with a recognizing other. Or, we could say, speech is conditioned by the recognition between two subjects, rather than a property of the subject." (Ibid, p. 28). Thus, bodily communications can attain greater symbolic organization not through intellectual penetrability but mainly through recognition.

In addition, the alleged objective capacity of the sharp Freudian analyst is actually mediated by relational capacities, whose origins are in the relationship with the mother. As the author also explains, the intersubjective movement can create a communicative net between the subjects, which weaves the opposite poles together to allow a leap in the analytical space between knowing and not knowing. In her words:

> This is the position that can tolerate the incessant reversals of opposites by weaving from the attraction to both sides a net. A net that allows us to take the primal leap of psychoanalysis, the leap into the space between certain knowledge and unthinking action, the space of negative capability that is thought. (Ibid, p. 34).

Therefore, intersubjectivity is related to the third element in the dyad, understood as the symbolic communication between the partners. Again, what is needed to attain autonomy, as in the case of the hysterical women analyzed by Freud, is symbolic communication embedded in the relationship of mutual recognition. Going further from the argument in *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, however, this practice will also be related to overcoming the rigidity of identity, toward a self that can sustain multiplicity.

6.2.2. *The critique of identity and the self capable of multiple identifications*

Benjamin's discussion of identity occupies the second and third chapters of *The Shadow of The Other*. The problem behind these texts is the poststructuralist critique of the concept of "recognition," considered incapable of deconstructing the omnipotent reasoning subject of modernity. Benjamin takes such criticisms seriously, clarifying her position more profoundly and trying to bring her main influences, namely object relations theory and Frankfurt critical theory, closer to the poststructuralist perspective. The starting point of this negotiation is the realization that both sides are interested in rejecting the model of the unitary and self-centered subject. Believing that it is important to keep the psychoanalytic concept of the self, while accepting the deconstruction of the epistemological subject of modernity, Benjamin arrives at a model of individual that is capable of assuming multiple identities.

In the first place, the second chapter of the book deals with the issue of gender identity, presenting further elaborations on the primary experience of life and the possibility of attaining gender multiplicity. Counting on her recent understanding of excess, Benjamin now sees gender complementarity as a solution to the containment of excessive affection and stimuli.[41]

In short, maternal passivity serves the oedipal boy as a permanent place on which to discharge his excess. However, in this solution, the excess is not elaborated, and the desire is not assumed by the self as his own, being only discharged or displaced, sometimes through violence, in the female body. More than separation from the mother, Benjamin believes that the oedipal defense implies an urgent attraction and an almost uncontrollable desire for the female object, which is the only one capable of containing excess. The author insists that the masculine identity has no choice but to assert itself and dominate the object compulsively. That means that the oedipal boy retains activity but without authorship.

As for the feminine position, in turn, it becomes equivalent to the suppression of desire because the woman is the perfect recipient of the masculine discharge. In contrast to the boy, the oedipal girl renounces her desire, becoming merely "the vessel for the paternal penis/ baby" (Ibid, p. 57). Much more passive than the mother, the girl is also more desirable than her, being the perfect receptacle of excess, the ideal complement of male oedipal activity.

Nevertheless, the masculine activity, assumed by the boy, was not originally masculine. It is created as a defense against *maternal activity*, mirroring it. In turn, feminine passivity also assumes the negative form of the threatening fantasy of maternal omnipotence, which one wants to deny in the struggle for separation. What happens while the baby is striving to separate and constitute oneself is a projective split between phallic motherhood *versus* femininity, constructed as opposites. The latter is totally devoid of active capacities and desire, while the former is

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[41] It is worth mentioning that Benjamin considers "gender" to be a paradoxical category. While some feminist perspectives denounce the devaluation of the feminine as the other of the masculine, such as Simone de Beauvoir, postmodern theorists generally prefer to deconstruct the split itself, denouncing the precariousness of this opposition. For Benjamin, it is essential to question gender and sexuality in terms of their biological, transhistorical, foundational, and artificially coherent status. Still, we cannot avoid presuming that gender division has a function and a material existence. Thus, gender critique is always paradoxical because gender has a concrete reality, organizing our social and individual experiences, while its existence is artificial and "deconstructable." Gender, in other words, represents a "false truth." Or it is a category "whose truth, though false, remains central to thought." (Ibid, p. 38). In this context, the author proposes that we take gender as a "superordinate" logic: one that is transcendental to any concrete relationship because real experiences necessarily exceed the category, revealing its precariousness and challenging its stability, even while employing or mobilizing it. At the theoretical level, this ambiguous constitution suggests that we must understand what constitutes the "truth" of gender to be able to point out its falsity, using this category with the aim of deconstructing it.

unconsciously registered as active, threatening, and engulfing: "As I see it, the maternal object is split: femininity as absorption, accommodation and receptivity, is constituted as the antidote opposing the phallic mother's control." (Ibid). It is the female mother – the female passive portion of the split mother – that the boy refuses. In contrast, the phallic mother unconsciously remains an object of identification, exercising a function that has become masculine in his fantasy.

This split also serves the girl in her task of separating from her mother, giving her a place and a function in relation to her father and the male world. Thus, "At the cultural level, we might say that this sexual form of femininity – object of male desire – meets the girl at the moment she needs to separate and offers her a route into the world of men." (Ibid). The girl adopts as an identifying model the feminine portion of the split mother, precisely that part that the boy rejected. The phallic maternal power, in this case, is projected onto the father as a separating counterpoint. But for having an identity, the girl pays the cost of becoming an object of desire, while her sexuality becomes the receptacle of male desire. Hence the link between femininity and heterosexuality.

Despite serving both boys and girls in their effort to separate from the mother, gender binarity represents a particularly masculine solution. It reflects the defensive projection of the oedipal boy against the excess of stimuli and the dependence on the mother to contain them. The spoils of the mother split in the paranoid effort of individuation, are unequally distributed between the son and the daughter, with the passive portion going to her and the phallic portion to him. Paternal law is not simply neutral or abstract. Its reference is the mother, defensively separated into unequal portions. Benjamin states, "Femininity in this sense is the negative of the masculine but also does have a determinate content: It is defined by the boy's oedipal repudiation of the maternal and relocation of the mother-baby dyad in the daughter." (Ibid, p. 58).

A central implication of this interpretation is that *what underlies the construction of gender as a defensive oedipal projection is the fear of childhood helplessness*. If the baby did not occupy an enormously dependent and passive position in relation to the mother, he would not need the defensive resource that divides her, resulting in passive femininity. Therefore, "The 'content' of femininity is to contain this unwanted, primitively feared experience [of infantile helplessness] and make of it an exciting invitation, something that the phallus can now act upon, control, and structure." (Ibid). *Gender, therefore, is a convenient, though not inevitable, response to the fact of childhood helplessness* at the hands of a dangerously active and powerful mother, on whom the child inevitably depends.

In this context, the intersubjective relationship, which helps the mutual regulation of excess, is an interesting resource to reduce the defensive attraction of subject-object complementarity. As we know, in this relationship, identification and separation overlap in complex formulations. Therefore, from the intersubjective logic, it would not be possible to clearly distinguish between identifying love and object love, love for the mother as an identificatory support, and love for her as an object of desire. This ambiguity would allow a less manic separation from her, thus reducing the need to despise or reject identification with the passive feminine position.

That implies that restoring positive motherhood would be related to gender multiplicity. Mentioning the different logic of intersubjective complementarity, the author states that "While it does not abolish the logic of X equals not-Y, Y equals not-X, it recognizes that these identities, Y and X, can be recombined in more complicated equations $(A = 5x + 2y - x)$, thereby producing gender multiplicity." (Ibid, 59). Thus, identification with the other must be tolerated to a certain extent so that it does not generate a defensive reaction that seeks to resolve the paradox. In the author's understanding, true differentiation occurs when identification does not threaten it completely:

> Identification with otherness necessarily throws us into paradox: I both am and am not the thing with which I identify (see Dimen, 1991). I have to be able to accept the impossibility of incorporating otherness, but retain the ability to imagine it without being threatened or undone by it. Identification must be tolerated in order that the other's qualities not evoke intolerable envy or fear. (Ibid, p. 64).

Based on this understanding, it would be possible to develop a new, more fluid, and diversified type of complementarity in the post-oedipal phase, giving space for identifying elements between the poles so that they would not be simply negative reflections of each other. This new complementarity means that the same "I" can sustain the ambiguity of different representations of oneself without falling into excessive disorganization or disidentification.

However, it is not feasible to think that the gender system will be permanently abolished because splitting is a fundamental attribute of the psyche. Benjamin believes that the possibility of sustaining multiple and conflicting identifications does not entirely overcome the oedipal split, or our cultural gender references, although it destabilizes and recombines them in more multiple, fluid, and less coherent formulations. What matters is the critical possibility of questioning, destabilizing, and recombining the cultural oppositions and split complementarities we inevitably encounter and sustain. In her words:

> Does this mean that the possibility exists (on some distant horizon where parallel lines meet) that sustaining a tension rather than splitting activity and passivity might abolish

gender categories as we know them? I am inclined to think this unlikely because I see the tendency toward splitting as a fundamental piece of psychic reality, one which finds its expression in objective forms of culture and social life. The question is whether such splits in the self and in our theory have to be reified, congealed in massive cultural formations, perceived as the Law. (Ibid, p. 74-75).

Although it is not feasible to completely transcend the social references of gender, they can be seen as a collective background for individualized transgression. Remaining our social reference, they do not represent an inevitable and totally oppressive destiny but an element to be critically elaborated on in the individual experience. What this recombination of opposites determines is neither the fixation on an identity nor the complete undifferentiation, but a third place that combines elements of these two situations. Again, Benjamin relies on the notion of a third element: "Releasing ourselves from the constraints of polarized oppositions means establishing identifications in a less absolute way, not fixed as the One or the Other – allowing entry into the transitional 'third' place beyond identity." (Ibid, p. 74). In addition to the binary logic of having/not-having, male/female, subject/object, sustaining a multilateral logic of more nuanced differences is possible.

This possibility would be informed by the inevitability of identification, the shadow of the other on the self. The process of identification with the other, understood as a natural attribute of desire, would disturb crystallized identities, having the effect of questioning stabilized cultural references. Benjamin claims, "In theory, it is possible to work through that process of reification, to elaborate what it conceals. In practice, we experience the loosening of those reifications in the free play of desire." (Ibid, p. 75). The free play of desire would resist the coherence of Oedipus, breaking the unidirectionality of identity to enable a more fluid and spontaneous subjectivity. Moreover, intersubjective recognition would allow the demobilization of dissociative defenses, allowing the recuperation of one's desires in the direction of multiple identifications. That is the basis of the Benjaminian model of self, which attains multiplicity.

Based on this reflection on gender, in the last and most important chapter of *The Shadow of the Other*, Benjamin reflects directly on identity from the point of view of feminist philosophical theory, proposing the theoretical model of a self that can assume multiple identities. The author opens the chapter with an epigraph taken from the text "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), in which, as we saw, Freud begins to understand that the ego is constituted by the incorporation of objects with which it inevitably identifies. The passage contains the phrase that inspires the title of the book: "The shadow of the object fell on the Self." (1917). According to Benjamin, this

understanding means that the ego cannot be an enclosed structure because it continuously incorporates the other. In other words, the ego is non-identical with itself, being continually constituted by the shadow of others. We cannot avoid identifying with the other, both through positive identification – which we incorporate as an enriching part of ourselves – and negative identification – which we repudiate and identify as "not-me." Benjamin states: "It is not truly in our power not to identify; what we cannot bear to own, we can only repudiate." (Ibid, p. 95).

Identification, however, excludes externality because it assimilates otherness to the self, as ideal or as abject, as equal or opposite, in complementary positions that can be alternated but not integrated. She affirms: "The object may be assimilated as like or opposite, taking the form of the split unity, in which self and other are assigned complementary parts that can be switched, but never held together." (Ibid). Identification, we could say, tends to exclude non-identity.[42]

With these presuppositions, Benjamin enters the confrontation between critical theory and poststructuralism, which, from the feminist perspective, was summarized and concentrated in the well-known book *Feminist Contentions: A philosophical exchange*, published in 1995. It contains the productive discussions between Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler, representing respectively Frankfurtian critical theory and poststructuralism.[43] Benjamin's involvement in the feminist contentions intended to elaborate further on the intersubjective psychoanalytic contribution, neglected or misunderstood by Benhabib and Butler (Benjamin, 1998, p. 84).

On the one hand, critical theory, although opposing the idea of a unified, pre-defined, and transparent self, still preserves some elements of synthesis and conciliation. Here, the primary reference is Seyla Benhabib, who raised important criticisms toward what she calls "strong versions" of poststructuralism. In its "weak" version, which Benhabib defends, the subject still preserves elements of classical philosophy, such as reflexivity, the ability to follow principles, autonomy, and rationality, not being reducible to a "position in language." However, for her, the subject is conditioned by its social, linguistic, and discursive context, so its autonomy means the ability to rearrange the linguistic meanings at its disposal. The remnant of autonomy available to

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[42] Benjamin does not consistently differentiate positive from negative forms of identification with the other. For her, identification is always opposed to meeting the other outside idealized projections and introjections. Her point is that, certainly, the internalization of the other is fundamental to our psychic constitution (as Freud understood it), but moments of recognition are fundamental to liberating the self from identity.

[43] Since the 1990s, much has been discussed about this dualistic representation. Butler herself criticized her own characterization as a "postmodern" author (1995). However, I believe that the fact that Benjamin uncritically follows the terms of the debate at that time, does not fundamentally affect her critique of Benhabib and Butler.

the Benhabibian self would be crucial to differentiate it from the discursive situation that largely constitutes it, safeguarding some reflexivity and critical capacity, albeit modest ones.

On the other hand, Judith Butler, representing poststructuralism in general terms, defends that discourse constitutes the subjects entirely by authorizing some recognizable ways of life and excluding others. Even the subjects' autonomous capacity is conditioned by discourse, so it is not an intact or neutral attribute. This understanding, for Butler, does not eliminate the agency, nor does it discredit the critical position or efface the subject altogether. It only clarifies the conditions of the possibility of all these concepts. In her words: "No subject is its own point of departure." (Benhabib et al., 1995, p. 42). Autonomous reflexivity would then be an illusion based on the denial of the subject's social production.

Faced with the theoretical controversy briefly outlined, in a commentary on the debate, Nancy Fraser states that it is not necessary to choose between one of the positions since each of them sheds light on the weaknesses of the other. Benjamin seems to agree with this idea, but her contribution goes beyond Fraser's hope, trying to sew together the positive points of both sides while making the necessary concessions.

In the first place, for our author, it is essential to safeguard some notion of autonomy, such as that of the Benhabibian self. However, for her, this philosophical model does not sufficiently account for the role of the unconscious and negativity. Benhabib's model does not consider that recognition needs to count on the crucial moment of denial, breakdown, and the attempt to destroy the other in fantasy, which can easily slip into domination. According to Benjamin, the defense of the morality of inclusion and respect for difference can easily mask the capacity of violence and the collapse of recognition, as if these negative possibilities were merely a matter of moral choice. To understand the possibility of recognition, more than a moral defense, we need to assess the profound obstacles existing within and between the subjects: "To articulate the conditions for recognizing the other, we must understand the deepest obstacles within the self, and acknowledge that this ideal of autonomous knowing reason has served to obscure those dynamics, if not, indeed, to foster them." (Ibid, p. 84). Thus, it is necessary to include in the Benhabibian model the violence, horror, and unreason of which we are capable, a task with which psychoanalysis can help.

In psychoanalytical terms, the problem of recognition is linked to the possibility of relativizing the self's omnipotence, which is motivated by the other's shadow over the self. The undeniable identification with the other (as same or opposite) represents a threat to the self's stable

identity. As a reaction to this threat, the self tends to defensively reaffirm coherence and omnipotence, dissolving the other's disturbing alterity. She declares: "In fact, if the other were not a problem for the subject, the subject would again be absolute – either absolutely separate or assimilating the other. Therefore, the negativity that the other sets up for the self has its own possibilities, a productive irritation, heretofore insufficiently explored." (Ibid, p. 85).

In the face of this irritation, or more strongly, this threat, insisting on a moral condemnation against exclusion may reflect escapism into the superego or a denial of our capacity for aggression. Benjamin mentions Bataille's analysis of Auschwitz: the philosopher argues that referring to the concentration camps through rationalism and moral condemnation would risk reducing the horror or eliminating the monsters from the sphere of possibilities. Thus, the insistence on a conception of the good, given the evident horror that inhabits us, is not productive for an accurate understanding of the negative.

On the other hand, the poststructuralist insistence on the dissolution of the subject is also not enough to resolve the problem of omnipotence because it may also hide an alternative ideal of identification with the excluded Other, which would also configure moral escapism. If identity is always denounced as exclusivist, oppressive, or negative, the excluded subject seems to be always on the "right," neutral, or positive side, which reveals an idealization and a denial of guilt. The critique of inclusion without a clear counterpoint places exclusion as an unadmitted counter ideal, or a disguised normativity, in which the excluded are placed in an idealized position, as if they were outside of power, in an unacknowledged position from which they could always unmask oppression and denounce exclusion.

Moreover, without a positive concept of inclusion, the critique becomes innocuous or impossible because it does not have a viable way out. Following this reasoning, from the moment people who were not recognized are included under the rules of social recognition, their identities also become oppressive or exclusivist. In this case, the demand for inclusion or enlarged recognition would be contradictory because it would generate further oppression. Paradoxically, the critique of identity as necessarily oppressive has no possible counterpart other than the absence of the recognition it criticizes. But the total absence of identity and recognition can only generate a situation of complete undifferentiation, which cancels difference and reinstates omnipotence. That is why, even if Benhabib's model is inadequate because it fails to integrate negativity, Butler's

argument is also inadequate because it fails to offer an alternative to negativity, which is furtively elaborated with an air of ideal. Both sides are inadequate to deal with the problem of omnipotence.[44]

Furthermore, since the shadow of the other is unavoidable, Benjamin understands that, from the point of view of psychoanalysis, exclusion cannot actually occur, meaning, in fact, a displacement of what is repudiated. Exclusion, in reality, generates the inclusion of threatening and negative elements within the psyche. She calls this process the "law of inescapability," which states that nothing escapes our psychic universe. Exclusion, then, is an illusion because what we do not recognize outside reappears as a threatening intrapsychic object:

> Something that is pushed out of one psychic place ('inclusion') has to go elsewhere ('exclusion'); likewise, what one refuses to recognize outside reemerges as a dangerously threatening internal object. This internal object may then reappear 'outside' as the dangerous other. It would seem, psychoanalytic theory once accepted, that we can formulate this as the essential 'law of inescapability': nothing leaves our psychic universe. To deconstruct the terms by which exclusion operates, or even the opposition inclusion/exclusion, reveals that we cannot reject exclusion without affirming inclusion, for that is a psychic impossibility. (Ibid, p. 102).

Faced with the impossibility of exclusion, the question is how we deal with this inevitable shadow. In the intersubjective view, as we know, the other can only be effectively placed outside the self after destruction and survival. Thus, only by including the other in a concrete relationship can we exclude it as a persecutory internal image. In Benjamin's words, "Thus, paradoxically, only inclusion, the reavowal of what was disavowed, in short *owning*, could allow that otherness a place outside the self in the realm of externality, could grant it recognition separate from self." (Ibid, p. 103, emphasis in original). In other words, the exclusion is the introjection of what the self repudiates or silences as a dangerous internal abject. Inclusion is the movement of acceptance of the other, which allows it to be positioned outside the self as an external being with whom a certain identification is possible. Therefore, "Inclusion calls for difference, not synthesis." (Ibid, p. 108) because it processes a certain identification without assimilation.

The fundamental problem with Butler's theory is that the philosopher confuses the notions of "subject" and "self," which Benjamin proposes to differentiate: the first term designates the political and epistemological position of identity, while the second refers to the psychological self,

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[44] In reconstructing Benjamin's argument here, I must point out that the feminist discussions of the time influenced both Butler and Benhabib, who considerably altered their theories in the following years. Therefore, I cannot stress enough that Benjamin's critiques are located in a specific moment of the debate, failing to stand till today. Since my aim in this research is merely to trace the evolution of Benjamin's work, focusing on her last productions, I cannot give an appropriate account of these authors' oeuvre or how the feminist debates evolved from that time. For further references on this topic, especially on the evolution of Butler's thinking and her dialogue with Benjamin, see Cyfer 2019, 2020, Costa 2023a, 2023b.

which has more extensive possibilities. In her words: "Butler collapses self and subject, as if political, epistemological positions, such as the 'identity' of women as a unified political subject, fully correspond to the psychological concept of the self." (Ibid, p. 85).[45] By mixing both concepts, the self loses its psychic authorship, which is related to its desires and affections. The self configures, then, "the doer behind the deed," which, for Benjamin, sustains the psychological relations behind, or perhaps beyond, the "epistemological and political positions that constitute the subject of knowledge or history." (Ibid, p. 87). The advantage of the psychoanalytic self, different from what Butler has in mind when she denounces the grammatical fiction of the "I," is that it includes within itself the notion of foreignness and alterity necessary to decenter it. Already in the Freudian perspective, the self is formed by the shadows of others, the foreignness of its desires, and the unconscious.

As indicated in Benjamin's analysis of gender multiplicity, the same self can assume different gender identities or identify with different positions toward the other. Furthermore, for her, the same self can alternately occupy the subject and abject positions. Thus, the critique of identity does not eliminate nor invalidate the possibility of a psychic agency that can identify with different positions. As she explains:

> Butler's main assertion in *Gender Trouble*, that there is no gender identity 'behind' expressions of gender, is clarifying, reminding us that gendered positions are multiple, non-identical. But identity is not self. Self is a category distinct from that of identity. We can say that a self can be non-identical, and yet contain a state, express a feeling, identify with or assume a position. The critique of identity does not prevent us from postulating a psychic subjectivity that takes up various positions through identification, a kind of 'identifier behind the identification.' (Ibid, p. 87).

On the one hand, poststructuralism and the Lacanian theory, which largely influences it, understand that we do not have access to a self before or outside language. The self is an effect of language. It arises through the split that language operates in it. Object relations theory, on the contrary, understands that the self actively splits the world, incorporates, and projects the objects. Benjamin sustains the ability to split as a natural one, related to the need to get rid of excessive stimuli. She states: "The ability to split may be seen as endemic, innate, a pregiven property of the

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[45] The "subject" in this usage means the "I" as a position of discourse in postmodern philosophy, opposing the psychoanalytic "self." It does not correspond to the "subject" of intersubjective psychoanalysis, nor does it oppose the "object" as in the omnipotent projection of the self. The confusion with these terms derives from the intersection of different disciplines and theoretical traditions. While, in general, Benjamin employs the "subject" as intersubjective theory sees it – which is related to the Winnicottian usable object – in this particular context, she follows the postmodern connotation.

mind like the ability to use language." (Ibid, p. 89). Therefore, it is clear that object relations relies on a more extensive capacity for agency and autonomy than the Lacanian conception.

On the other hand, as much as the ability to split is innate, according to the author, such a view does not require us to understand the splitting self as an initially unitary or undivided structure. We could think of a disorganized self that splits the world to defend itself against the chaos and excess that threatens it and to try to organize its own experience. As she puts it:

> Indeed, splitting in that sense is not only defensive but organizing; by setting boundaries and discriminating, it allows the self to keep from being overwhelmed by bounding and discriminating what confronts it (Ogden, 1986; Aron, 1995). Unlike the 'split subject,' a concept that is set up in opposition to 'unity' – relying on the falseness of its binary Other to generate its oppositional truth – the notion of splitting does not require that we posit a preexisting unity, or an ideal of unity to which splitting gives the lie. (Ibid, p. 89).

Benjamin defends a self that, although not unitary, has the ability to split the world in its attempt to defend itself from excessive stimuli, organize one's experience, and protect oneself from the others. The self is not just an effect of language because, as we saw, language can be a mediating element that, while allowing the self to organize the world according to intrapsychic projections, is continually challenged by its nonidentity regarding the world it symbolizes.

With the distinction of "self" and "subject," Benjamin returns to the critique of identity, believing that her intersubjective model expands and enriches it. Poststructuralists criticize identity for its essentialist, alienating and repressive character. For them, assuming an identity means submitting to the reifying cultural system. However, the opposite option, completely escaping identity, would not be viable because this movement would originate a totally passive undifferentiation between the individuals. Hence, Adorno, for example, in his critique of identity, can only offer, as a way out of the problem of identity, its continuous negation, through reflexivity. Despite his opposition to identity thinking, he cannot establish a clear solution to identity because that would culminate in a total undifferentiation or the omnipotent assimilation of the self and the other. The opposite of identity cannot be undifferentiation because that would paradoxically mean the totalization of omnipotence. Recalling her first critique of Adorno (1977), Benjamin argues again, "In the absence of intersubjectivity, the subject of reflection can only reflect upon itself, not account for the possible transformation made by the intervention of an other whose negativity is fully independent of the subject." (Ibid, p. 93).

Habermas, on the other hand, despite introducing the concept of intersubjectivity in critical theory, situated it in the context of discursive interaction, which still does not foresee the inevitable failure of recognition, the negativity of the other, and the possibility of non-survival. Just as

Benjamin denounced Benhabib's lack of attention to negativity, she recognizes the same problem in Habermas, from whom Benhabib borrows her primary references. Thus, while Adorno sees no clear way out of superego aggressiveness, Habermas neglects the internalized violence that this instance promotes so that neither of them is able to offer a way out of internalization:

> In fact, neither Adorno nor Habermas succeeded in elaborating a position of recognition or reflection that takes us 'beyond' the superego. On balance, in considering the well-known line-up of Habermas *v*. Adorno, we might say that whereas Adorno bequeathed us the critique of identity without intersubjectivity, Habermas provided an entry into intersubjectivity, but without sufficient attention to the subject's destructive omnipotence. (Ibid, p. 93).

What Benjamin proposes, in this context, is a solution that partially relaxes superego aggression while not disregarding its violence. She does not sustain the unrealistic intention of transcending internalization nor dispensing entirely with the superego function. Instead, she insists that recognition inevitably breaks down and domination necessarily sets in, so the normative critique of identity is necessary against these unavoidable cases. Indeed, concerning intersubjectivity, she states that "It therefore cannot dispense with the critique of identity, which addresses the self where survival fails, in the intrapsychic enclosure of identification and projection." (Ibid). What her theory intends, more modestly, is to complement the intrapsychic perspective, offering a precarious alternative to the identity dilemma, one that oversees the possibility of survival, despite and amid the destruction.

Benjamin defends a political theory that seeks to apprehend the depth of violence and horror that separates the subjects but also sustains respect for difference. Thus, while grasping the negativity that the self exerts on the other, and vice-versa, the possibility of recognition establishes an ethical position in which differences can coexist and be negotiated. The possibility of relating to others without assimilating them through identification also indicates the possibility of admitting political divergences in a community. In other words, for Benjamin, the psychoanalytic overcoming of omnipotence through intersubjectivity is related to the ethical-political possibility of non-violence: "What psychoanalysis considers the problem of overcoming omnipotence is thus always linked to the ethical problem of respect and the political problem of nonviolence." (Ibid, p. 94).

The author's conclusion is, thus, ambivalent. On the one hand, while living in a social world, individuals are exposed to the tendency to identify with others, regardless of their choice or will. They are constantly confronted with separate beings beyond their control, which evoke feelings of vulnerability, weakness, fascination, desire, loss of identity, and instability. We cannot

escape the shadow of the other. Alienated forms of complementarity, based on the split of idealization or repudiation, are inevitable. However, on the other hand, there cannot be a normative expectation contrary to identification; that is, we cannot attribute a moral condemnation to this process because morality is itself a process of idealization and repudiation based on the internalization of aggression. The split between the self and the other cannot be opposed to a normative ideal. This process would represent an escape into the superego, which would paradoxically recreate the split. One cannot escape superego violence through more superego. In the author's words:

> But the way out of these identificatory processes is not merely escape into the superego, whose moral condemnation may be used to counter idealization or repudiations; nor through simple identification with or revaluing of the despised half of the complementarity, the done to, which creates new moral imperatives, a new normativity. Identification can serve as a means for bridging difference without denying or abrogating it, but the condition of this form of identification is precisely the other's externality. The other's difference must exist outside; not be felt as a coercive command to 'become' the other, and therefore not be defended against by assimilating it to self. It is here that the notion of recognition as mediated not only through identification, but through direct confrontation with the other's externality, makes a difference (Ibid, p. 95-96).

Thus, the split cannot be morally condemned. At most, it can be conceived as the initial form adopted by the self's confrontation with the other. To escape idealized identification, we need to combine the irreducible intrapsychic dimension with the intersubjective one in an attempt to place the other outside the self, beyond its ideational control. More than morality, intersubjectivity is an *experience* between the I and the other, which involves a concrete encounter with otherness. To achieve it, we need the contrary of moral purity. Recognition depends on a conflict between the subjects, the destruction of the idealized images of both, and a moment of non-recognition. Benjamin claims that "recognition practically, psychically depends upon symbolic processing of destruction." (Ibid, p. 96). In this way, recognition does not imply a total reconciliation of identities, but a fraught and unstable state, never completely reconciled or overcome.

A certain moment of negativity is, thus, part of recognition. This moment is only catastrophic when there is no movement or when the other is definitely prevented from surviving – when the possibility of recognition is permanently canceled. In this case, a permanent breakdown occurs, which is different from denial, destruction, or momentary non-recognition, which are all part of the process of recognition. The opposite of breakdown is not a harmonious or reconciled relation, but an unstable and dynamic state of "repair of disruption" (Ibid). That is, the split and the denial of the other are not problematic in themselves; they are indispensable and inevitable attributes of the mind, which cannot be opposed to an undivided or unified ideal of the self. The

problem only arises when the split becomes calcified into immovable complementarities, which repeatedly and perennially impede survival. The problem is not power but the lack of movement in power relations. As the author puts it:

> All negotiation of difference involves negation, often leading to partial breakdowns which we might call disruption. Breakdown, full rupture, is only catastrophic when the possibility of reestablishing the tension between negation and recognition is foreclosed, when the survival of the other for the self, of self for other, is definitely over. (Ibid, p. 96).

It is not possible to reach a static state of harmony between self and other because every search for a supposed undisturbed unity, or every attempt to escape conflict, creates "false reconciliations" or a "coercive reconciliation" (Ibid, p. 97), which actually strengthen the complementarity, fixing the partners in a defensive state of fear and self-restraint, different from the dynamic state of recognition. For example, one of the most subtle forms of breakdown occurs when the subject accused of a moral violation succumbs to the accusation, identifying entirely with the victim in order to get rid of guilt. That means the subject did not survive the attack, submitting to a reactive idealization of the other and projecting all his/her own narcissism onto otherness: "The subject capitulates, rather than surviving with impact." (Ibid, p. 98). In this case, self-denial is fulfilled by the complementary idealization of the other. The subjectivity of the self is resigned in the name of a false reparation, which can later return in a violent attempt to reverse the hierarchical polarity. This solution entails a moral competition in the background, not the sustenance of both subjectivities.

It is the process of breakdown and repair of recognition that creates spaces for creativity and the renegotiation of identities. What is more, repeated experiences of rupture and repair of recognition foster the confidence that the rupture can be overcome, which encourages the subjects to negotiate their differences and put ossified forms of complementarity at risk. Therefore, momentary and frequent ruptures of recognition can be positive in the sense of challenging complementary formations crystallized in cultural systems. In the author's words:

> In fact, we have reason to believe that repeated experiences of breakdown and repair result in the subject's confidence in the possibility of reinstituting tension after breakdown (Beebe & Lachman, 1994). This confidence is what allows her/him to relinquish ossified forms of complementarity, to risk the negotiation of difference (see Pizer, 1992). In this light, splitting and breakdown can be seen as a necessary moment of destructiveness to break up what is calcified (Eigen, 1993). (Ibid, p. 97).

One can only break an ossified pattern of domination through survival, which means the exercise of the "negativity of non-violence" (Ibid, p. 99). Obviously, non-violence is contrary to violent retaliation or reversion in the poles of power. But it does not necessarily entail the complete

capitulation to an accusation or the permanent abstention from defying the other, despite the asymmetry of power. Insisting on intervening, causing an impact, or occupying a significant position of divergence before the other means honoring the other's ability to survive, believing in the possibility that one subjectivity does not need to cancel the other.

Therefore, the Benjaminian ethical position of non-violence means "surviving destruction" of oneself and of the other. Surviving, in this sense, means letting the other affect you, assuming denial and still reinstalling the tension, creating a space of non-threatening externality. That is why the author states: "Therefore, *any subject's primary responsibility to the other subject is to be her intervening or surviving other.*" (Ibid, p. 99, emphasis in original). The subject's responsibility is to be a non-retaliatory other, that is, to maintain its divergent and external position, avoiding assimilation – be it in a positively or negatively idealized position (such as the Angel or the Demon of the former section).

The possibility of surviving depends on the distinction between the subject of discourse and the psychological self, which Benjamin outlined earlier in the context of her dialogue with Butler. The self is the structure capable of receiving and absorbing the impact of aggression against its subjective identity without being totally undone by destruction. The self, therefore, can circumvent the I/not-I plane that the rigid identity dimension or the logic of non-contradiction imply.

However, we know that we cannot get rid entirely of idealizing identifications. Especially the emancipatory struggles may not be able to dispense with ideals or normative references. Thus, Benjamin reinforces that "the point is not to dispense with the ideal, but to accept the failures and losses attendant upon any relationship to ideals, the necessary tension of the difference between the ideal and the real." (Ibid, p. 103-104). Ideals then should be maintained along with the conviction of their limitation and the awareness of the tendency towards exclusivist idealization, which must collide with the concreteness of the outside world. Therefore, we could at most admit inclusion as an "unrealizable ideal that is worthy of our striving." (Ibid, p. 104).

When we distinguish the self from the subject as a position of discourse, we can better understand this ambiguous possibility, conceptualizing an individual who has an identity but is not limited to it, being able to relate to the other in a less oppressive way than just through the channel of identity. Thus, the only possible basis for sustaining recognition is a model of self that can assume contradictory subjective positions, the "good" and the "bad," the "right" and the "wrong," the recognition and denial of the other. We need a self that assumes multiple identities and tolerates

non-identity, one that "allows different voices, asymmetry, and contradiction, that holds ambivalence." (Ibid, p. 101).

Beyond the dichotomy between identity and complete dissolution, the author proposes a self that sustains multiplicity, contradiction, and difference in itself. This capacity would be the opposite of an ideal of coherence and unification of the self. In short, her model of the self is located in the transitional space of intersubjectivity: "In referring the self to its relationship with the concrete other, we locate the self in the fragile, unenclosed space of intersubjectivity, a possible reciprocity of difference and recognition, from which negativity, both creative and disastrous, cannot be excluded." (Ibid, p. 105).

The Benjaminian self does not maniacally deny negativity or project hatred outwards, but it can own or contains these feelings, working them through. Precisely because this self tolerates ambivalence, it can digest aggressiveness:

> Tolerating ambivalence, being able to feel both love and hate toward the same object, does not mean that love and hate are synthesized so that love triumphs over hate. Rather, it means that hate can be borne. Difference, hate, failure of love can be surmounted not because the self is unified, but because it can tolerate being divided. (Ibid, p. 105).

For Benjamin, the unified self is an illusion or idealization that is not so different from the state of dissolution or fragmentation. While the rigidly unified self is incapable of accepting difference, the fragmented self, equally problematic, cannot assume all the multiple states that constitute itself, remaining paralyzed and disorganized. In other words, the fragmented self "has lost contact with its multiplicity" (Ibid, p. 106), being unable to process the transition between diverse states. Both models, rigidity and fragmentation, cannot deal with multiplicity and ambivalence, being unbearably threatened by diversity. Therefore, as Stephen Mitchell noticed, they can alternate in the same patient: "the self characterized by high degrees of dissociation may appear either fragmented or rigid, chaotic or organized." (Ibid).

In contrast, for Benjamin, mental health would be to "replace dissociation with internal conflict" (Ibid). Therefore, the Benjaminian self is not unified in the sense of assuming only one identity, but neither is it fragmented in the sense of not being able to organize or work through contradictory positions. Integration does not require a fictional unity of the self but the ability to maintain, endure, and own the contradiction of multiple mental states or identities that constitute a person, being able to assume all these elements as part of the self. Assuming all the voices that speak within the self implies that none of them becomes absolute. The multiple ideals that we

possess and that constitute us then become more fluid and distinguishable rather than coercive, compulsory, and threatening.

This model, however, cannot be fully explained using the intrapsychic view alone. The ability to assume different mental states, bear different identities, or even endure moments of non-identity depends on a relationship of recognition between the self and the other, in which identities are threatened and destroyed, but in a way that allows survival. In the clinical situation, for example, this means that the patient needs a transferential relationship with the analyst to be able to re-elaborate a traumatic experience. Through the clinical work, with luck, the patient can retell a traumatic experience as part of his personal story, but not as the whole story, doomed to eternal repetition. If the analyst can survive the analysand's transferential projection, he or she is encountered as external and outside the other's mental control, allowing the patient to disidentify with his own threatening internalized objects.

Such clinical experiences provide inspiration for the practical-political re-elaboration of identity. By way of conclusion, Benjamin states that her theory leads, politically, to the principle of the constant maintenance of contradiction, in a space where different individuals can survive and coexist. She states: "Politically, it cannot mean anything but the principle of sustaining continual contest and contradiction among differences, which Butler formulated, albeit from very different premises about the subject." (Ibid, p. 108).

For this reason, Benjamin opposes the understanding that recognition harmonizes or dissolves difference. On the contrary, recognition does not imply transparent knowledge of the other but a lack of control that sustains alterity, separability, and diversity. It depends on a confrontation between different subjects, never fully reconciled. Thus, she affirms: "Politically, the possibility of mutual intersubjectivity is predicated on the very difference that also leads to continual misfiring of recognition, the very plurality that strains subjectivity." (Ibid, p. 101).

For her, this means that political struggles should not be content merely with the moral repudiation of the oppressor. The repudiation of oppression should also count with the recognition of the oppressor that exists in each of us or the recognition of our negative identification with the oppressors so that we can place them outside of ourselves in a less threatening position. Benjamin summarizes her conclusion in the following sentence: "To accept this form of inclusion is a precondition of disrupting the totalizing demand to make any voice absolute, even that of the formerly excluded other, or to silence others, even the silencers." (Ibid, p. 108). It would be

dangerous to silence the "other within," the oppressor whom we demonize or include as a devil – while seeking to exclude – because he will always pursue us internally until, eventually, transforming us into oppressors in his likeness. Including the other, even the oppressor, is what allows us to distinguish their externality, finally working through their shadow.

To conclude, following the title's suggestion, Benjamin clarifies that the self naturally or unavoidably splits the world, assimilating the others as like or opposite. Her main strategy to resolve the problem is to separate the political subject and the psychological self, a distinction at the intersection of the divergent disciplines and theoretical positions mobilized in the text. The center of her argument is the defense that identity, although split, exclusive, and oppressive, can be relativized and made flexible by the working through operated by the psychoanalytic self in conjunction with an other. In this way, she seeks to maintain the critique of identity, reinforced by poststructuralism, but also to outline a possibility, albeit precarious, of emancipation, satisfying the critical theorists. Her solution to the identity critique is the survival of the victim and the aggressor, both subjectivities altered by the shadow of one another. Instead of communion with nature and more than interpersonal or artistic symbolic communication, intersubjectivity now demands non-identity and multiplicity, motivated by the shadow of (positive or negative) identifications with others. This process still demands symbolic communication as an intermediation between the subjects, as the first chapter made clear, but what really counts is the deconstruction and reconstruction of their identities in a concrete encounter full of desires, aggression, and one-sided identification.

However, by trying to incorporate more negativity, in acknowledging that the shadow of the other is inevitable, as well as the aggressive desire that comes with it, Benjamin ended up having to reinforce a too-optimistic hope in multiplicity and identity reformulation. The negativity she assumes on the side of identity (to accommodate the poststructuralist demands) is counterbalanced by a rather hopeful understanding of the self, thus maintaining recognition as a possibility along with the critique of identity. The psychological self appears as the substrate behind identity, but it can apparently assume any form, position, or identity without much difficulty. The lack of identity, or even moral ambiguity, does not apparently generate anguish, loss of self, madness, or death, as Benjamin suggested in former texts – and as she will reinforce even more later. Indeed, her reference to psychic health involves the capacity to sustain multiplicity, as if it

was minimally comfortable or logical to do so, placing both rigid unification and fragmentation on a pathological spectrum.

In other words, the weight or fundamental necessity of identity is unclear in this argument. It seems the self can easily assume multiple identities, or it can even be non-identical, with no explanation of the consequences these states generate. If, however, we understand, following important critical and poststructuralist references, that the non-identity or the abject positions are highly distressing, demanding a "willingness not to be" (Butler, 1997, p. 130), configuring a "de-subjectivation" (Ibid), or representing a kind of "social suicide" (Allen, 2008, p. 83), then it would be necessary to explain in more detail what allows the self to risk non-identity.

Furthermore, as Freud believed, when he mentioned the "shadow of the other" in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), the identification with the abject, or with a lost and despised object, generates a massive loss of self-esteem, ego loss, and depression, which cannot be easily overcome. Moreover, as he implies in *The Ego and The Id* (1923) and in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), the loss of self-esteem under the sight of the superego implies the fear of death or the feeling of deserving to die. Thus, by losing a positive identity, the self might face an unbearable and paralyzing sense of death. Even if Benjamin gives more space to Freud at this moment, including the notion of identification present in the texts mentioned above, she falls short of acknowledging that the shadow of the other can bring deep melancholy.

If, following Freudian comprehension, we understand the position of non-identity as that of losing self-esteem, which might be extremely risky, painful, and disturbing, it remains to be explained how it is still possible to maintain an expectation of emancipation through recognition. In this sense, we might ask, after reading this book: What guarantees multiplicity and non-identity if it might be realistic to see these states as extremely anguishing? In this case, how to ensure that breakdowns in recognition do not become a permanent collapse? If, on the contrary, multiplicity is relatively light and easy, what explains the frequent and insistent defense of one's positive identity, which generates recurrent violence? I believe we can find an answer to these questions in Benjamin's last work, which I will analyze in the sequence.

In my view, when the author proposed a self that assumes multiplicity, although she ended up with a too-positive conclusion, she understood that recognition was related to non-identity and that it demanded a dual movement of destruction and survival. The shadow of the other menaces both partners mutually, and it needs to be survived by both. That is, it is not only the other that

needs to survive the self's destruction, but also the self needs to "die" or have his idealized identity destroyed so that it can recognize the other beyond intrapsychic identifications. Multiplicity and the ability to assume non-identity, although posed in a too-positive framework now, is the precursor idea to the later notion of "deserving to die," which will frame Benjamin's late notion of recognition, as we will see in what follows.

7. Benjamin's late productions: the Third in *Beyond Doer and Done to* (2018)

Let us recall the evolution of Benjamin's thinking so far. In her first writings of the 1970s, intending to deny the need for internalization of the father's authority, Benjamin ended up presupposing a positive human nature, in flagrant contrast to Freud's negative conclusions. Her strategy to counter authoritarianism relied on the hope of a natural tendency towards intersubjectivity and harmony between the subjects, similar to Rousseau's critique of the Enlightenment. Recognition then meant love and empathy.

From the 1980s to the 1990s, Benjamin developed her original theory of recognition, combining the contributions mainly of Hegel, Freud, and Winnicott. In *The Bonds of Love* (1988), she presupposes a fundamental desire for recognition as a substratum of human subjectivity, but she analyses how this desire, which is fundamentally paradoxical, can easily go wrong and slide into domination. We need recognition because the resolution of the paradox – via omnipotent domination – does not appease the master. The objectified world infects the subject, drowning him in tedium and abandonment. The way out of this situation would be the survival of the other, in a Winnicottian sense, which would sustain the logic of paradox beyond the patriarchal domination of nature. Thus, recognition means the survival of the other, which puts him/her outside of the self, keeping the tension between self-assertion and others' affirmation. A partial communion with nature would expand modern rationality, approximating the thinking subject to the objective world.

In *Like Subjects, Love Objects* (1995), the author understands that the beginning of life is one of helplessness and excessive stimulation, which demands the presence of another subject as a way of regulation and discharge. We need recognition now because the psyche is vulnerable, and the stimuli received (from the inside or outside of oneself) are excessive, demanding externality. In the absence of a surviving other, the alternative is to get rid of excess through violence against another. Intersubjective recognition, as the solution to domination, now involves symbolic communication

between the subjects, which creates spaces for the disposal of stimuli and the elaboration of excesses, mainly through interpersonal communication.

Finally, in *The Shadow of the Other* (1998), Benjamin believes that the excessive stimuli and the shadow of the other subject (which is our ineluctable identification with the other, be it positive or negative) menace one's identity. However, beyond the subjective identity, the psychological self can survive non-identity and assume multiplicity. Recognition here is related to the mutual destruction and survival of the partners, which creates a transitional space of elaboration that allows them to navigate different identities and bear multiplicity. Accordingly, the solution to domination is related to the conviviality of multiple voices in the public sphere, in which one does not cancel the other out. The non-violence of mutual survival is what allows the coexistence of multiple voices and contrasting opinions in a democratic society.

To summarize Benjamin's conclusion so far, intersubjectivity is a rather dialectic concept because it involves the destruction of the subjects' identities so that they can welcome difference, bear contradiction, and attain multiplicity. Recognition, in the spirit of Allen's "Emancipation without Utopia" (2015b), does not eliminate power but plays with it, making it more malleable.

However, some questions remained open in relation to this model, which increasingly seemed not dialectic enough. After all, according to this view, it would be directly preferable to establish relationships of mutual recognition than to remain omnipotently enclosed within established identities. However, if such an experience of mutual recognition was so desirable and liberating, even if unstable, what prevented it from being more prevalent? What could explain the recurrence of aggression and breakdown, which frequently prevents us from moving forward? What would prevent the subjects from embracing difference and multiplicity? In other words, the cost we need to pay for emancipation seemed suspiciously low, in this view, since it involved just bearing the impact of the other upon ourselves, accepting multiplicity.

More importantly, this model did not explain deeply enough the problem of authoritarianism, in which precisely the identification with an authoritarian leader prevents multiple and flexible identifications, enclosing the citizens in polarized and defensive identities. The intersubjective experience, although not purified by power or free of destruction, as Benjamin makes clear on some occasions (for instance, Benjamin, 2012, p. 291), seemed to be a too comfortable or easy way

out of their force. Butler's critique of Benjamin's work is one of the most important contributions in this sense (see Butler, 2000).[46]

After some years, however, perhaps following changes in the social context and the contributions of authors such as Butler, Benjamin altered her theory in important aspects. Having gathered considerable clinical experience and worked on clinical projects in conflict zones, especially in Palestine, she published many independent articles during the 2000s and the 2010s, expanding her theory about recognition and psychic development. However, it was only in 2018, 20 years after the publication of her then-last book, *The Shadow of the Other*, that she published a new substantive oeuvre, in which she systematized and organized new concepts and understandings, offering a broad and clear picture of her late theoretical contribution. These alterations incorporate additional elements of negativity, informing an even more ambivalent model of recognition, in which one subject perceives the impact of the other as highly risky and disruptive.

As I hope to make clear in what follows, while Benjamin maintained her understanding of the possibility of intersubjective recognition, the negativity in her writings lies less on the possibility of mutuality than on the excessive character of the original situation of life, the illusory aspect of the "lawful world," and the consequent normative determinations of who deserves to live. In what follows, I will construe some of the innovative concepts of her late theory, as detailed mainly in the book *Beyond Doer and Done-to* (2018), to trace the possibilities they offer for an ambivalent understanding of recognition. My objective is to prove that this theoretical framework is adequate for a contemporary critical theory of society that seeks to comprehend the problem of authoritarianism.

The updates to her thinking are all centered on the development of the concept of the "Third," which comes to frame the experience of recognition in further detail, including the concepts of "thirdness" and the "lawful world." From these updates, we see that another view emerges on excess and vulnerability, which includes the acknowledgment of one's badness and monstrousness in the process of recognizing the other. This view culminates in a negative understanding of social life centered on the fantasy that "Only one can live." Thus, I will proceed as follows. First, (1) I

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[46] I insist that, although the dialogue between Benjamin and Butler is extremely rich and important, I will not analyze it here because it would surpass the scope of this research, involving many other topics that I would not be able to address. On this issue, see Butler, 2000; Benjamin, 1998, 2012. Also, as indicated above, see Costa 2023a, 2023b.

will present the concepts of the Third, thirdness, and the lawful world, which consist of her main new theoretical elaborations. Second, (2) I will investigate how this new conceptual toolkit reflects Benjamin's understanding of sexuality and the possibility of recognition, which is related to her view on excessive stimulation and vulnerability following Laplanche. This new understanding makes recognition much more ambivalent and difficult. Finally, (3) I will reconstruct Benjamin's new contribution to social theory, centered on the fantasy that "only one subject can live." As we will see, Benjamin's updated theory brings many interesting and realistic elements for a contemporary critical theory.

7.1. The Third, thirdness, and the lawful world: intersubjectivity as mutual vulnerability

One of the main novelties in Benjamin's theory is the elaboration of the concept of the intersubjective "Third." The notion of the Third and ideas of triangular configurations have long been present in the psychoanalytic canon, from the Freudian Oedipal triangle, the Lacanian name of the father, and the Winnicottian transitional phenomena, up until more recent elaborations of the concept of the Third, most notably by Ogden and Green (Coelho Junior, 2015). We saw that a similar understanding emerged in Benjaminian texts of the 1990s, referring to a communicational element or a relational space that would initially arise in the mother-baby relationship. This notion aimed to deny the need for paternal intervention as the only barrier against the fantasy of re-engulfment in the mother's womb. At that time, this third element had not yet been consolidated as a concept, configuring something like a space for dialogue mediated by the symbolic dimension (Benjamin, 1995, p. 95; 1998, p. 28). However, in 2018, the concept of the Third is more fully developed so the updates of the Benjaminian thought in general are basically centered on it. We will see that relying on Winnicott, Benjamin's "Third" tensions the notion of the transitional space towards an even more radicalized mutuality, bringing into it a hitherto absent negativity.

In what follows, we will see that Benjamin first (1) defines the concepts of Third and thirdness. Then, (2) she further specifies these concepts by distinguishing a rhythmic and a differentiating aspect of it, which develop from the beginning of life, combining mutuality and asymmetry. She also (3) explains how the rhythmic pattern shared between mother and baby gives birth to a "lawful world," a sense of goodness and fairness which, even if illusory and possibly oppressive, is at the root of the subject's moral experience and sense of deserving to live. Finally, she (4) offers the concept of the Moral Third as a guide to reinstate lawfulness when it is absent.

7.1.1. The intersubjective Third and thirdness: something that both unites and separates the subjects

The Benjaminian intersubjective Third is a structure that, placed between two subjects, sustains and mediates both realities and both subjectivities in tension, preventing a collapse into oneness. It emerges from a relationship of mutual recognition, being cocreated by both partners. It can materialize in a function, principle, or relational pattern that stabilizes the behavior of both actors, partially harmonizing their divergence. As a coconstructed system, the Third is open-ended and emergent within the dyad, giving space for the creative expression of both actors.

Acknowledging that the concept of the Third may be elusive and that this theoretical elaboration is a work in progress, Benjamin also relates it to a relational psychological position, similar to the Kleinian depressive position, but not as an internal one. It is a mental position shared with another. In her words:

> Thinking of the Third as a position draws from and bears resemblance to Klein's formulation of the depressive position, in which we can accept within ourselves a host of binaries, including that of doer and done to. But in my usage it is meant to describe the state of the relationship, the stance towards real others, not to representations of internal objects. (Ibid, p. 77-78).[47]

The intersubjective Third is not a thing, a superego ideal, or a person that interferes within a dyadic relation, such as the Freudian and the Lacanian oedipal interpretations would put it. Nonetheless, it is not a purely reconciled state, nor is it outside of power. Instead, it is infused by external or social material, being also highly fraught, unstable, and dynamic. After all, to be an uncoerced and open-ended structure, it must constantly be open to revision and alteration, following the ever-changing rhythm of the relationship. Therefore, we can say that the Third may include power, but in a situation that contains the Winnicottian transitional space's ambivalent, playful, and creative qualities.[48]

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[47] The influence of Klein in Benjamin's work is a recent realization, even for the author herself. In 2022, Benjamin admitted that "Klein was in my mind even when Klein wasn't on the page. The most recent thing I've written, though, is an attempt to show how Klein's notion of reparation can be intersubjectivized. It needs to be explicitly relational, especially in terms of acknowledgment, and not simply described in terms of the inner world where we must reconcile the good and bad objects." (Benjamin and Atlas, 2022, p. 426). Thus, the concept of Third as a position may also be derived from the Kleinian depressive position but within a relational framework. I believe that this engagement with Klein also contributes to making Benjamin's late theory considerably more pessimistic.

[48] Beyond the reference to Winnicott and Klein, Benjamin also partially follows Ogden's understanding of the Third. She affirms: "I consider it crucial not to reify the Third, but to consider it primarily as a principle, function, or relationship (as in Ogden's (1994) view), rather than as a 'thing' in the way that theory or rules of technique are things." (Benjamin, 2018, p. 23). However, she also differentiates her concept from Ogden's, pointing out that not every

On the one hand, following Winnicott, the Benjaminian Third represents the intermediate or transitional structure that both unites and separates the mother and the infant, the analyst and the analysand, and the self and the other. On the other hand, however, beyond the theory of the English pediatrician, Benjamin now understands that recognition demands a double or mutual movement of destruction and survival. The focus is no longer so much on the survival of the (m)other but on the partners' mutual survival of destruction. That implies a further turn in the relational view involving the destruction of the self, not just the other. The self that recognizes the surviving other must also undergo a form of destruction itself. Therefore, the idea of recognizing the other was no longer enough to translate the author's broader mutualistic understanding, which focused on the survival of the relationship itself. Hence the centrality of the Third in her theory. It evokes all these dimensions: the self, the other, and the very relationship between them; all must suffer destruction and survival. Benjamin explained clearly this idea in a recent article, recalling how she arrived at the concept of the Third:

> Pushing Winnicott's insight, I believed that both partners must survive destruction, indeed the dyad itself must survive moments of retaliation or collapse of difference. This being so, we must find some position 'beyond' the doer and done to relation, one *not fully described by the notion of mutual recognition*. Lacan's idea of the Third — briefly, that speech, or dialogue, was the alternative to kill or be killed — appeared to fit. The intersubjective Third could be formulated as a process, not a thing: going beyond the 'kill or be killed' opposition to a relational position in which different minds, different realities, can both live. (Benjamin, 2022, p. 98, emphasis added).

Stretching the Winnicottian reference, Benjamin admittedly changed her understanding of survival by introducing the Third. For Winnicott, the mother who survives destruction does not necessarily change. Now, for Benjamin, however, to survive means to change one's subjectivity in relation to another, which entails a sort of "death" of oneself (2018, p. 55). Now, a higher level of violence against oneself is required to arrive at intersubjectivity. In a recent interview, she explained this idea concerning the need for the analyst to change to be able to recognize the patient:

> So I originally started out with this notion coming through Hegel to Winnicott of the survival of destruction. Rachel McKay, with whom I worked on my last book, pointed out

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relational pattern, for her, denotes a Third, but only those patterns that are mutually created in the space of relativized self-protection. She writes: "He [Ogden] used the term analytic Third differently than I do, to denote the relationship as that of an other to both selves, an entity created by the two participants in the dyad, a kind of cocreated subject-object. This pattern or relational dynamic, which appears to form outside our conscious will, can be experienced either as a vehicle of recognition or something from which we cannot extricate ourselves. Taking on a life of its own, this negative of the Third may be carefully attuned, like the chase-and-dodge pattern between mother and infant. From my point of view, it is somewhat confusing to call this a Third because, rather than creating space, it sucks it up. With this negative of the Third (perhaps it could be called 'the negative Third'), there is an erasure of the in-between — an inverse mirror relation, a complementary dyad concealing an unconscious symmetry." (Ibid, p. 25). Thus, we can differentiate the "intersubjective Third" – as a cocreated, transitional, and open-ended pattern – from mere "relationality" – which can be materialized in an oppressive, reactive, and non-spontaneous pattern of relationship.

> that in developing the idea of surviving destruction my view is not exactly identical to Winnicott's, as he specified that the analyst doesn't change in quality whereas I, following relational thinking, suggest that survival includes the analyst changing. The way that we indicate survival has been radically reformulated by the relational turn insofar as I now think in terms of the Third: the relationship, and each partner, survive the ruptures, the attack. (Benjamin and Atlas, 2022, p. 421).

Therefore, the (always partial) reconciliation between the subjects involves a double death, which requires a turn of aggressiveness towards the subject itself, destroying, in the first place, one's self-idealization. Thus, destruction, being mutual, cannot merely lead to survival, without some change. If, as Benjamin understood before, the survival of the other as a subject made him emerge as external, autonomous, and out of the self's control, now the self is also faced, in this new mutualistic scheme, with what is "out of control" in itself. It is faced with its own strangeness, perverse desires, and monstrosity, all aspects we generally strive fiercely to deny. Thus, not only does the other emerge as a subject radically external to the self but also the foreignness of the self becomes evident in the intersubjective space.

The strangeness we face in ourselves can be merely uncomfortable or minimally embarrassing, but, depending on the case, it can provoke deep feelings of lack of control, shame, and, in its extreme forms, an intense guilt that evokes the deserving of death. The monster we (also) are clashes with our superego, demanding self-punishment and sacrifice. Therefore, in this new understanding, the radicalization of mutuality, present in the Third, is supported by a shared instance of vulnerability or helplessness in the face of a lack of control, suffering, and death. Indeed, intersubjective recognition now coincides with mutual vulnerability (Ibid, p. 104), as we will see, because both subjects face the limit of their dissociative defenses in relation to suffering.

Nonetheless, when the subjects can sustain some form of the Third, it provides the relationship with the quality of "thirdness," which is related to the opening of spaces for movement within power relations. Since the Third – as a mutual principle – mediates the reality of the other, otherness is not wholly threatening, allowing the subjects to surrender to the relationship and let go of the need to protect themselves.

Benjamin follows Ghent's (1990) notion of "surrender" to explain the intersubjective relationship and the Third. For her, surrender means "a certain letting go of the self." (2018, p. 23), which opens space for the other's reality. Surrender differs from submission because, while we *submit* to someone, we *surrender* to the relationship itself, the rhythm and pattern cocreated by the partners. We surrender to the Third, not to our partner in relation. While submission denotes a relationship of domination, surrender denotes one of mutuality. In Benjamin's words: "From this

point follows a distinction between *giving in* or *over* to someone, an idealized person or thing, and letting go into *being with* them." (Ibid, p. 24, emphasis in original).

In the intermediate space of thirdness, the subjects can relax their self-protection, reactivity, and the defensive desire to control the other and oneself. In Benjamin's explanation: "I think in terms of thirdness as a quality or experience of intersubjective relatedness that has as its correlate a certain kind of internal mental space; it is closely related to Winnicott's idea of potential or transitional space." (Ibid, p. 23). The space of thirdness, then, is the in-between space of ambiguity, which mediates the inner and outer realities and in which playing takes place, opening spaces for movement. The triangular metaphor is instructive:

> As Aron (Aron & Benjamin, 1999) suggested in an early joint formulation of the idea of the Third, we can think of the complementary structure as a straight line, with no room or space to alter the relation of the two positions. Whereas, the Third can be thought of as the point that creates, in a geometrical sense, the opening into space of the triangle or other shape (Aron, 2006). The movement from the locked-in structure of twoness to the spacious opening of thirdness is something we subjectively experience as a freeing of our feelings and minds. (Ibid, p. 50).

In summary, the *Third* is the cocreated principle or pattern that emerges in an intersubjective relationship, with the function of both separating and attuning the subjects, mediating their subjectivities. This emerging structure gives rise to the quality of *thirdness*, representing the transitional spatiality where play can take place, nurturing mutual spontaneity. As the author condenses: "Elaborating this idea, we might say that the Third is that to which we surrender, and thirdness is the intersubjective mental space that facilitates or results from surrender." (Ibid). Placing the focus on the relationship itself, the Third implies a greater level of mutuality, requiring a double process of destruction and survival, which has significant consequences from the beginning of life.

7.1.2. *The rhythmic and the differentiating Third: two aspects of the early relationship that balance asymmetry and mutuality*

Since Benjamin believes that the Third has a double character of unification and separation, she differentiates these sides respectively as the "rhythmic Third" and the "differentiating Third." The first one originates from the accommodating, bodily, and pre-verbal patterns created between mother and baby that unite both actors in a common experience of shared affective states. The mother's rhythmic attunement to the baby is fundamental for his survival and proper development. Like Winnicott's notion of the mother's original devotion, the rhythmic Third involves

accommodating the baby's needs and the affective attunement to his feelings, creating a shared pattern that sustains the baby's integration and development. Benjamin believes that "Rhythm constitutes the basis for coherence in interaction between persons, as well as coordination between the internal parts of the organism." (Ibid, p. 30). Thus, for her, integration arises from rhythmicity, not from omnipotence. She explains:

> I (Benjamin, 2002) have therefore proposed a nascent, energetic form of the Third — as distinct from the one in the mother's mind. It is present in the earliest exchange of gestures between mother and child, in the relationship that has been called oneness. I consider this early exchange to be a form of thirdness, and suggest that we use the term rhythmic Third for the principle of affective attunement and accommodation to share patterning that informs such exchanges. (Ibid).

However, this is not an experience of fusion, especially from the mother's point of view, who should keep a sense of differentiation. The baby may be yet developing a conscience of separation and symbolic organization, so fusion or differentiation is not yet an issue for him initially. However, for rhythmicity to be maintained, the mother must keep in mind the sense of her separateness from the baby, relying on the differentiating aspect of the Third, or the "differentiating Third". In this way, she can take care of herself, avoiding the oppressive feeling that attending to her own needs for short periods means abandoning or murdering the child. Without this notion of separateness in her mind, the mother (and the analyst) feels that "separating and having one's own independent subjectivity and desire are tantamount to killing, while staying means letting oneself be killed." (Ibid, p. 29). Besides, when keeping a notion of separation, she is not excessively dysregulated and helpless when the baby expresses anguish and distress. Thus, the mother can only provide adequate or good-enough care if she can both separate herself from the baby and partially identify rhythmically with him, offering a secure instance of soothing, assurance, and responsibility that does not melt completely when the baby drowns in despair. As Benjamin puts it:

> This differentiating Third is exemplified by the mother's ability to maintain awareness that the distressed child's pain (e.g., over separation) will pass, alongside her empathy with that pain; that is, she is able to hold the tension between her perspective and her child's, her identification with him and the adult's observational function. (Ibid, p. 28).

The mother's narcissism is nourished by her sense of being useful, being a source of nourishment, and being extremely necessary and central for the baby's life. Motherhood can be a powerful experience of omnipotence and supposed independence. However, when it is so, it denotes a lack of differentiation. The omnipotent mother may feel excessively dysregulated when she fails or when the baby is unsoothed and inconsolable. Instead of a source of goodness, she feels the very opposite, bearing all the blame for the baby's distress, drowning in chaos and desperation

herself. In contrast, what the good-enough mother should offer is, from the beginning, a mixed tension of attunement and separation, identification with the baby's needs and recognition of her own needs, mutuality and asymmetry. This tension provided by the caretaker and shared by the baby allows both to sustain a Third, even before the acquiring of symbolic capacities.

We could say, then, that the Third exists so that there is no experience of "a completely unmediated being together with another person," as Amy Allen characterizes Honneth's account of the point zero of recognition, which, for him, represents an experience of fusion (Allen, 2021b, p. 105). For Benjamin, such a fusion is terrible, so a third element should be placed into the dyad from the beginning. Nevertheless, for it not to be an experience of fusion, the baby, in theory, needs to coconstruct the pattern shared with the mother so that he is not entirely submitted to her. Otherwise, this pattern will be merely the mother's law disguised as a mutual relationship.

However, how would it be possible that the child coconstructs a pattern considering that he is in a position of total dependence on his caretakers, lacking in physical and symbolic capacity? According to Benjamin, despite total asymmetry, there can be a seed of mutuality from the beginning because the latter does not need to extinguish the former, possibly existing alongside it. For her, "the binary of mutuality with its opposite, usually taken to be asymmetry, needs to be broken down or 'sublated' (transcended but preserved in new form)." (2018, p. 11). The Third, as the mediating term between the partners, can hold such opposites in tension.

To understand the possibility of sustaining both asymmetry and mutuality in the mother-baby relationship, it is worth taking a look at the author's reflection on this topic concerning other binaries or other relationships. Then it becomes clear that Benjamin relates mutuality to mutual vulnerability. For example, in a discussion about the asymmetrical responsibility of the analyst towards the patient, which should be kept in tension with an element of mutuality in the clinical setting, she affirms that "we grasp mutuality as mutual vulnerability to each other." (Ibid, p. 104). In the context of analysis, Benjamin affirms that the greater responsibility of the analyst does not cancel her exposure to the patient's impact, so "The essential relational move of accepting the analyst's vulnerability creates a sense of mutuality within the frame of asymmetrical responsibility." (Ibid, p. 103). This conclusion also holds for other social relations, even highly asymmetrical ones. She observes: "The idea that we have an impact on, change one another is the ultimate implication of mutuality within asymmetrical, unequal relations." (Ibid). Therefore, asymmetry in power does not avoid our mutual submission to it, nor our mutual vulnerability

towards it. That is why the solution to the situation of asymmetry involves embracing vulnerability in mutual relations so that power loses some of its vital attraction, creating spaces of reflexivity.[49]

Returning to the mother-baby relationship, then, despite total symbolic, physical, and material asymmetry between the partners, they share mutual vulnerability, which opens the way for their impact on one another. The seed of mutuality present in the primary relationship threatens to partially undo the mother or risk her subjectivity and her sense of goodness, making, at the same time, her powerful projections more bearable and accommodated, not just tyrannically imposed upon the baby. Despite the caretakers' asymmetrical social ascriptions and narcissistic projections upon the baby, this act need not come from a wholly subordinating or disproportionate place. The asymmetrical attribution is not all there can be.

In this sense, I believe that since Benjamin understands mutuality to be the mutual vulnerability of the partners, the mother's exposure in the face of the baby's failures, incapacities, and inadequacies to comply with her expecting projection is what may represent the seed of mutuality within the mother-baby highly asymmetrical relation. From such vulnerability, or the possibility of failure, may emerge the sense, however illusory or partial, that one has mutually contributed to creating the relational pattern, making the asymmetrical ascription more tolerable. That is, *the child's possible failure to comply is what generates the seed of his agentic power*.[50]

If the baby were utterly submitted to the mother's determinations, he would be a perfect mirror of her narcissistic wishes. That is almost impossible, considering the baby's excessive needs, helplessness, and incapacities. For example, babies hardly ever sleep, eat, or stop crying whenever the mother wants it. It might be the inscrutable and ruthless nature that cries in the baby – when he is hungry, tired, stressed, angry… – which disappoints the mother's expectations, reclaiming

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[49] In my interpretation, submission here does not refer merely to the dyadic structure, meaning the submission of one subject to the other. It also involves the submission of both subjects to the social patterns of recognition, which generates their mutual vulnerability towards it and one another. That means that even the powerful side of a relationship still submits to the social law, depending on it to retain power and the assurance that he/she deserves to live. That is why Benjamin believes that denying recognition to others also harms the most powerful subjects. This act prevents them from playing reflexively with the law, removing them from the intersubjective universe of thirdness in which power is relaxed. This idea will become clearer throughout this section and in the next one, in which the idea of excess, borrowing Laplanche's theory, links vulnerability to our bodily existence.

[50] Certainly, power relations mean that vulnerability is unequally distributed (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 3). However, even the powerful side of such a relationship maintains a fundamental dependence on the social patterns of recognition, which constitutes his or her potential vulnerability. A seed of equality, in this picture, exists only in the situation in which both subjects embrace their vulnerability, acknowledging that both may not deserve to live. As I hope to make clear by the end of this chapter, this model presupposes that we can only be equal on the negative side, embracing our existential vulnerability.

alterity in the first place. Following Winnicott's theory on spontaneous gestures and bodily motility, we can reach the conclusion that the element that guarantees that asymmetry is not complete between mother and baby is, first and foremost, the baby's embodied vulnerability, which in this phase means his dependence on his physiological needs, or, as we will see in the next section, the excessive stimulation that risks drowning him. Perhaps he can disappoint his mother because he cannot forever disappoint his own bodily urges. The natural dispositions in the baby's body and the excesses that disturb him are what generate a first instance of alterity. The baby's suffering and mortal body defies the mother's expectation of perfect care and control.[51]

Nonetheless, Benjamin does not expect to resolve asymmetry or eliminate hierarchical positions. The mother and the analyst will always occupy a position of power and unequal responsibility respectively to the baby and the analysand. We can only hope to maintain mutuality within asymmetry or in tension with it so that power is not just oppressive but also supporting. More than the trumping of asymmetry by mutuality, Benjamin wishes to keep both in a productive paradox, following the intersubjective logic of thirdness. In her words: "Viewed in this way, the conflict between mutuality and asymmetry is not something to be solved but is instead a recursive paradox within intersubjectivity, one we try to hold in the tension of thirdness." (Ibid, p. 110).

From the mother's perspective, recognizing the baby means surrendering to the baby's reality and accommodating his needs, rhythms, and incapacities. This dynamic means that, for the child to have a less anguishing development, he should receive more than just the ascription of the social pattern, the parental projections, or the symbolic idealized designation inevitably conveyed by the other. He should also receive the support and the love of the caregiver in the form of the acceptance of the negative, meaning the willingness to admit wrongness, divergence, messiness, and disappointment as natural features:

> Here the function of the Third is to help transcend this threatening twoness not by fostering the illusion that mother and baby are one or by self-abnegation; rather, at this point, *the principle of asymmetrical accommodation should arise from the sense of surrender to necessity*. The mother needs to feel that this is *acceptance of the baby's nature*, not a submission to a tyrannical demand or an overwhelming task. (Ibid, p. 35, emphasis added).

It is true that the "baby's nature" may be quite demanding for the mother. Moreover, failure may generate significant levels of disappointment, anger, and suffering for both partners. The same natural needs and dispositions that reclaim alterity in the baby also subject him to the mother, on

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[51] In the next section, I will deal with Benjamin's updated discussion of sexuality, which borrows the Laplanchian notion of excess. Through this understanding, the body comes to occupy a new position within intersubjectivity, thus confirming the reading I am offering here on the rhythmic Third.

whom he depends for survival. Therefore, the baby's physiological needs at the same time defy the mother's narcissistic expectations of perfection and submit the baby to her care. Therefore, the baby's agency may be in the possibility of failure, but once it does not result in the catastrophic and final deserving of his death or the death of his True Self.

That means that, at least in some moments, the caregiver should risk being a bad caregiver, altering her plans, accepting the child's mess and failure, etc. The Third, let us recall, demands a double destruction of the one and the other, generating a greater acceptance of our helpless reality. What recognition demands, in short, is the relativization of ideals, or the caregiver's ability to "tolerate her own imperfection and that of her child." (Ibid, p. 83), surrendering to What Is, or to the embodied reality of imperfection and vulnerability of both partners. Benjamin explains:

> Recognizing both her own need and the baby's need as legitimate, but knowing whose need comes first, allows the mother to relate to the baby's cry in the middle of the night not as a persecutory experience of being 'done to,' submitting to the tyrant baby, but as a necessary condition. This is just how babies are, this is 'How it is,' rather than how she would wish when she is deprived of sleep. How she maintains a sense of her own goodness and her self-regulation is intertwined with tolerating the difference between her ideals and What Is. (Ibid, p. 83).

The security that comes from the mother's accommodation to the disappointments of her own will and lack of control results in the creation of a nascent form of Third. It generates a relationship of "safety in dependency" (Ibid, p. 78).

Nevertheless, if all the child gets is the pure narcissistic projections, social ascription, or the authoritarian demand of the law, without some sense of support and security in the case of failure, then this does not constitute a Third but a suffocating bi-dimensional ideal that cancels his spontaneous agency and threatens his subjectivity. In this case, there is no negotiation with authority (and later with the superego), which means scarce elements of reflexivity and spontaneity. This child may grow closely submitted to the parental law, which he perceives as the only element that gives reason and normative support to his existence. Moreover, if there is no seed of mutuality – no sense that the child can live or deserve to live as a separate and authentic subject *with* the caregiver – this experience tends to be extremely painful, possibly generating highly traumatic consequences and suffocating the expression of the True Self.

Let us remember that, for Winnicott, the baby's integration and the emergence of the True Self depended on the sustenance of an illusion of omnipotence. As we know, Benjamin disagrees with this terminology. However, now she proposes that we need some illusion to sustain both integration and spontaneity. In her new terminology, the sense of security that comes from the mother's

rhythmic care – and that allows the emergence of a True Self in Winnicott's terms – materializes in the sense of a "lawful world." The rhythmic pattern, which first constitutes the Third, produces a stable reality the baby perceives as good and caring despite significant asymmetry. Similar to Winnicott's notion of omnipotent illusion, the mother's rhythmic attunement, for Benjamin, creates the sense of a lawful reality, in which the baby feels that he has an impact: "Winnicott's idea of the creative illusion, the baby's sense that he has called the breast and now it appears just as he wants or expects it, is an evocative metaphor for how recognition of need confirms the belief in one's own agency in a lawful universe." (Ibid, p. 193). More than being a powerful and all-alone God, however, what the baby perceives is that the universe is good and welcoming towards him and that he has an impact on it.

7.1.3. The lawful world as a necessary illusion of goodness

Benjamin understands that cocreating a safe rhythmic pattern with the primary caregiver generates a sense of lawfulness, or the feeling that the world is trustworthy and benevolent. In other words, this primary experience of care, security, and light predictability generates an emerging pattern or order, which the individual perceives as coconstructed, fair, and legitimate. Outer reality is secure and good. If not predictable, the partners' behaviors are at least open to correction and reparation, which contributes to the self's coherence. Unlike an imposed law, the sense of a lawful world conveys a relational pattern that the subjects feel to be mutually agreed upon. The early pattern facilitated by the mother infuses the baby's perception of reality, hopefully generating a coherent and benevolent acceptance of the natural order of things. The authors explains:

> Here, try not to think of law as in decree, prohibition, government. By lawfulness, I am denoting not prohibitions or decrees, or even explicit rules. I mean the quality of reliable patterning and coherent dyadic organization (Tronick, 2005; 2007) at affective and sensory-motor levels of interaction that might be thought of as a baby's idea of the 'natural order of things.' Now it is true that the natural order and system to which an infant may become used could be highly depriving of agency or quite painful, an arrangement involving control and pathological accommodation. It would be without the essential element of contingent responsiveness whereby one's intentions are affirmed. So in this usage, lawfulness would signify sharing of intention, the infant equivalent of the aesthetics of harmonious existence, something like the implicit relation to harmony in music or synchrony of motoric movement in dance. The harmonious, coordinated movement is the opposite of both tight control and fragmentation or disintegration. (Ibid, p. 79).

The "lawful world" opposes the rigidity of fixed expectations or legal laws. It suggests a foundation of coherence or a structure of meanings that channels the intelligibility of recognition, asserting the value of values. The psychoanalyst affirms, for instance, that: "The mental representation of lawful world refers not to juridical law, but to a belief in the value and possibility

of intelligible, responsive and respectful behavior as a condition of mental sanity and interpersonal/social bonds." (Ibid, p. 6).

When such a pattern eventually breaks or fails, the mother can admit that disappointments in expectation or disruptions in the relationship eventually occur. The admission that there has been a rupture or a mistake communicates the possibility that things can be fixed, the world can be rebuilt, and we can rely on the Third. Acknowledging that something went *wrong* reinforces the sense of *rightness.* Alternatively, even if some things cannot be repaired, a new form of legitimacy can be created from the sharing of pain and loss.

Therefore, from this initial relationship, a sense of reassuring normativity emerges. Benjamin believes that the sense of a normative orientation originates from the baby's first exchanges with the mother, when she accommodates the baby's rhythm, creating a good and safe pattern with him, thus establishing a sense of a lawful world. The experience of normativity begins very early, with the bodily connection the baby shares with the mother, not with a direct relation with the norm.

I understand that this concept refers to the form of goodness or to a world perceived as good, which sustains the possibility of a legitimate moral universe, but which says nothing about the content of the "laws" themselves.[52] In the context of a fundamental vulnerability, the expectations of the lawful world represent merely the fictional possibility of justifying the subject's life before others, which, when violated, produces a painful breach of existential expectations.

In this reading, such a concept implies that individuals need justificatory sustenance or normative support for social existence. It is clear, indeed, that the lawful world sustains the constitution of a sense of agency in the world, granting the feeling of deserving survival and the creation of an "existential platform for action in the world." (Ibid, p. 88). Therefore, the sense of lawfulness is a vital experience that sustains social survival, psychic cohesion, and the coherence of subjectivity. The author's description is clear about the vital and fundamental meaning of this concept for psychic cohesion and sanity:

> Furthermore, the acknowledgment of the infant's discomfort or suffering implicitly communicates the mother's respect for her child as a separate body worthy of care. Thus the correlate of the lawful world, wherein you can trust the other's protection, is recognition of the worthiness or, in general, human terms, the dignity of the child's person (Bernstein, 2015). This dignity is linked to the sense of self-cohesion (Kohut, 1971), which

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[52] Indeed, suppose we understand the "lawful world" as a natural or ahistorical expectation with concrete contents. In that case, the entire critical theoretical system collapses because that would be a strongly metaphysical presupposition, which the author would hardly sustain, given her reverence for critical theory.

> depends on such recognition. Having had such experience of the moral Third allows a person to gauge her own and the other's behaviors well enough to have an existential platform for action in the world. The sense of self-cohesion (being), the worthiness of self and other, and the experience of agency are united through the reliability of caring others. (Ibid, p. 89).

This description seems similar to Honneth's understanding of the need for recognition at the roots of individual agency. Nevertheless, I should note here that, in this excerpt, Benjamin is not referring to *recognition* itself but to the creation of a *lawful world*, which is not the same thing. It also seems perhaps contradictory to say that the lawful world, which conveys the sustenance of values, relational patterns, and predictability – first about the primary relationship and later about the social world – is compatible with the playful openness, ambiguity, and lack of coercion characteristic of thirdness. To sustain the coherence of both concepts – the openness of thirdness and the predictability of the lawful world – we need to understand the lawful world to be nothing more than an *illusion*, eventually a perverse one, despite its fundamental and sustaining prerogatives. Despite the lawful world being vital to psychic coherence and subjective authorship, it also has a negative, disciplinary, and defensive character that may prove highly oppressive.[53]

Even if Benjamin does not describe it directly in that way, some passages in her book suggest that we can understand the lawful world as a necessary illusion, sometimes an exclusionary and unjust one. First, Benjamin makes clear that the need for a lawful world is so intense that it can easily foment submission. In fact, this understanding was present in the author's thoughts since her first productions. She frequently quotes a phrase formulated by Fairbairn that explains this dynamic. It says: "better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than a saint in a world ruled by the Devil." (Fairbairn, 1952, p. 66, in Benjamin, 1977, p. 57; 1988, p. 143; 2017, p. 482; 2018, p. 229; 2021, p. 408). For her, this phrase means that the child prefers to assume badness upon itself than to confront the reality of a bad caregiver or a bad external universe, an understanding that she further developed in *The Bonds of Love*, as we saw. It is better to be bad oneself than to inhabit an evil and insecure world: "To accept the reality of living in a world without hope of redemption, without goodness, may be too terrifying. In this sense what we think of as self-preservation relates to protection from the terror of living in a lawless world." (2018, p. 229). Thus, the self-preservative need for a lawful world may lead the child to submit to the more-powerful adult, hiding, under the

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[53] We saw that Benjamin translates Winnicott's "omnipotence" as the need for a "lawful world." In this sense, I believe that Honneth's understanding of recognition as an affirmation of the self and the attribution of a positive relation-to-self can also be translated as the sense of a lawful world in which one feels loved by the primary caregiver and later esteemed by society. In the Benjaminian sense, however, this is an illusion that can be largely oppressive. Recognition, as we will see, demands the partial demobilization of such an illusion.

illusion of a fair universe, the unbearable knowledge that the father may be cruel, individualistic, and violent. Indeed, the need for lawfulness is behind the idealization of the powerful Oedipal father, which is closely related to the pervasiveness of authoritarianism.

Second, we can perceive that the lawful world may be illusory and corrupt in some cases of failure or demobilization of it. This is the case, for instance, in a passage describing the event of a collective failure in dissociative protections, which struck the reporters transmitting live the consequences of Hurricane Katrina. On this occasion, the horrible conditions and the situation of abandonment suffered by the Afro-American victims of the hurricane visibly shocked the reporters broadcasting the case. Locked in a convention center without water or medical supplies, these victims attested to collective institutions' and governmental agencies' terrible lack of responsibility and care. This situation, which the journalists crudely and perhaps unexpectedly encountered, defied their protective expectations and unmasked the illusory character of their lawful world, making them appear shocked and outraged in front of the cameras. The author describes the event:

> These reporters became real witnesses, embodying emotionally the impact of what they saw, indeed more intensely in spite of the fact that the scene they could not turn away from flew in the face of *what they wanted to believe about the lawful nature of our society. Their own lawful world, the goodness they also depend upon, was cracked*. This shattering of self-protective goodness allowed them to step through the breach, out of their disembodied professional roles, the customary forms of pseudo-witnessing and pseudo-Third based on dissociation and protectively cloaking the authorities' failure. (Ibid, p. 231, emphasis added).

Once the reporters got in touch with the reality of Afro-American citizens and the lack of responsibility devoted to them, their sense of a lawful world (probably one based on white privileges) cracked, so the world appeared less good, safe, and fair to them. This experience of personal and emotional identification with unlawfulness is what allowed them to be authentic witnesses to the situation, testifying to its gravity and asserting the need to rectify the world for all the implicated subjects.

The analyst evokes a similar veil of protection when she reflects directly on whiteness, which she personally experienced to be an illusory shield against danger. She realized this fact during a situation in which she identified with a brown-skinned Palestinian friend, momentarily demobilizing her usual white-skin-person protection, during an attack on Gaza that she was following from a beautiful and safe beach in Miami. The contrasting situation between herself and her friend, aligned with their deep friendly identification, made her feel irrationally and unreasonably in danger, as if she was not a white American in the United States. Informed by this experience, she proposes that whiteness corresponds to "an illusion of protection, invulnerability

and self-realization that functions to deny vulnerability and block identification with those being harmed: 'this is not happening to people like me.'" (Ibid, p. 222). According to her description, whiteness could compose the sense of a lawful world in which white people's lives are protected because the world is good, fair, and caring for them. Again, once this identity shield is pierced by the identification with someone outside the walls of this lawful world, this protection is demobilized and defied. Then, the world appears in its harsh and outrageous reality.

Finally, when mentioning the election of Trump in the United States, Benjamin makes clearer her ambivalent understanding of lawfulness. On the one side, she denounces the former President's aggressiveness, irresponsibility, and destructibility, which had the terrible and dangerous effect of tearing apart the former sense of lawfulness in the country. However, on the other side, the event of his taking power provoked "a historically unprecedented surge of popular uprising." (Ibid, p. 246), motivated by the citizens' need to reinstate a lawful world. She implies that Trump's aggressiveness had the positive counter effect of unveiling the violent and unequal reality of many in the country, which pushed former bystanders to become activists fighting for the reinstallation of an alternative lawful world. The lack of lawfulness under Trump revealed the fallacy of the former lawful world upon which US citizens had relied, "tearing of the veil of denial."[54] By the end of the book, she writes:

> Between the time of writing this essay and its editing, the election in America brought to power the frightening and destructive figure of Trump. This event has aroused a historically unprecedented surge of popular uprising, accompanied by powerful emotions regarding the need for a lawful world and recognition of our need for social protection and connection [...]. For this moment of crisis, much of the *business-as-usual dissociation* regarding the fate of the marginal and vulnerable seems to be replaced by widespread concern, anxiety, and urge to defend the lawful world where more than one can live. I can only hope that this will to defend and protect grows and transforms us. In closing this chapter and this book I will note that the *tearing of the veil of denial to expose the painful truths of American history* seems to be engaged in a way I have never previously experienced, even in the Vietnam war. (Ibid, p. 246, emphasis added).

From these examples, we can conclude that the lawful world is a dissociative illusion, a veil of denial that we sustain to live everyday life as if the world was safe and we deserved to live in it. In this sense, the social norms of recognition that permeate such lawfulness, granting us justified social existence, are also precarious contents of imaginary and self-professed justification.

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[54] Benjamin reinforced this understanding in a recent article on the current political crisis. She affirmed: "The catastrophic election of 2016 brought a moment of truth; it exposed the uncritical embrace of neoliberal economies of gilded wealth for the few and austerity for the many, and how this supported the successful dissociation of the realities of race and class." (Benjamin, 2021, p. 409). Thus, before the 2016 election, the former lawful world was based on dissociation regarding the unequal and insecure reality under neoliberalism, which Trump's violent actions revealed. I will return to this topic in this work's Conclusion.

In other words, we need the illusion that we deserve to live in a good and caring world, and we only discover the fictitious character of this illusion once our identification with the other breaks it down. After such a traumatic rupture, at best, we tend to fight for an alternative pattern that we can perceive again, at least temporarily, as legitimate and fair.

Moreover, the lawful world may be illusory and somehow perverse, but its absence, such as in the US under Trump, generates open violence, unfairness, and an undifferentiated lack of limits. Let us recall that, since the beginning of life, the sense of lawfulness is related to self-cohesion and personal safety. Therefore, what is emancipatory is not the tearing apart or the complete destruction of the lawful world but its momentary unveiling that may generate productive moral outrage and struggles for rectification. We need to rely on the possibility of a fair and good world, even if it may retroactively prove, at some point in the future, to be exclusionary and pernicious, demanding a collective restructuring. This idea suggests the open-ended character of social struggles for emancipation.

In this sense, despite the illusory and precarious character of our moral universe, sometimes perceived only retroactively, social struggles need a moral guide to advance their claims for justice and to reinstate the sense of a lawful world. To apprehend both the need for the lawful world and the possibility of its open-ended amendment, under normative struggles, Benjamin developed the concept of the Moral Third, which explains how these two sides are kept in tension.

7.1.4. The Moral Third as the wishful principle sustaining normative survival

The Moral Third designates a moral experience that, contrary to the superego moral principle, is felt to be supportive and not oppressive. It conveys the sense that the subjects who follow a normative principle in a situation of thirdness do so based on a mutual agreement so that they do not submit but rather surrender to such a principle. That means that normativity can be experienced in a way that is not oppressive but felt to be mutual and coconstructed at a very elemental level. More than agreeing discursively on a normative principle, as the Habermasian moral universe would see it, for Benjamin, the experience of a supportive normativity, based on the Moral Third, requires a much more complex, ambivalent, and uncertain experience, closely connected to the body and its affects. As she defines this concept: "Thus the term moral Third is meant not to suggest a 'higher' cognitive function or level of relating, rather, it is a sense of *moral order* that derives

from harmonious or predictable connections at early developmental levels of bodily and emotional interaction." (Ibid, p. 51-52, emphasis added).

Like Winnicott's capacity for concern, the sense of morality, for Benjamin, arises from the early relationship with the caregiver, demanding both identification and differentiation. As we saw, this early rhythmic process is what generates the sense of a lawful world. However, this pattern can easily be undone or ruined, especially when patterns are violated and domination takes control. Benjamin still believes that the breakdown of recognition is a common feature of our relationships. In this context, the Moral Third is the principle that sustains and fixes thirdness, insisting on the reconstitution of the lawful world, even when it is at risk.

However, to better understand this concept, first we need to see closer what happens in the absence of the lawful world and what is needed to reinstate recognition. With the idea of the Third, as we saw, recognition now inevitably requires a double destruction. Clearly, the demobilization of the lawfulness is a highly uncomfortable and even painful situation that generally plunges the self into an unsafe and guilty position, as Benjamin's reflection of whiteness makes clear. Thus, recognition now is closely related to "acknowledgment," an act that entails someone assuming the burden of badness in the first place. The acknowledgment that something went wrong is necessary to reaffirm the sense of rightness, goodness, and stability, even in their absence. This acknowledgment, however, depends on the exposure of what went wrong or who did wrong, which involves one assuming the blame in the first place.

This act occurs first between mother and baby, such as when the mother acknowledges natural mismatches and disappointments that arise in their relationship. For example, she acknowledges that it is okay that the baby misses her and that she understands and shares his distress, feeling something of it herself. She acknowledges that she may hurt the baby and that he is justified in feeling hurt, even if this is not her intention. This action then alleviates the complementary dynamic of blame and shame, in which the baby feels guilty for his demands and resentful for the mother's absence, while the mother feels guilty for leaving the baby and resentful for her heavy maternal duty. With the acknowledgment of blame and the restoration of thirdness, the mother enlarges the space of negotiation between their different needs.

However, this initial situation can assume even more complex and extreme forms. Explaining how recognition may function in the clinical context, the author affirms that in certain situations, especially with deeply traumatized patients, a highly persecutory and complementary relationship

emerges between analyst and analysand, infused by unprocessed transferential material. In such cases, the rage, fear, and shame are so great that any Third seems impossible. The collapsed relation leaves just the options of killing or being killed, oppressing the other or submitting, affirming oneself or losing all agency, being the sane one, or being totally mad. Ignited by highly oppressive relationship patterns of the patient's past, a ping-pong or a buck-passing of badness and guilt is installed between the subjects. As Benjamin explains later, a similar dynamic occurs in situations of collective traumas and social conflicts, such as in war-torn regions.

To halt such a perverse dynamic, someone needs to take on the negativity so that both subjects can do so, dissolving the dangerous burden of guilt. The act that restores the possibility of recognition is acknowledging that one is bad and wrong, perhaps to the point of undeserving life. As we saw, survival now means more than just giving up retaliation, as Winnicott meant it. It requires that both partners change.

Now we can see clearly how Benjamin's dialectic understanding of recognition entails its very opposite: the lack of recognition of the other and of oneself. Recognizing the other may involve the lack of affective containment and the unveiling of dissociation. To assume that oneself may be guilty and bad means stepping into the non-recognition of oneself, finding oneself a stranger, and feeling unintegrated. Reflecting on the work with deeply traumatized patients, Benjamin insists on the inevitability of encountering one's limitations and internal strangeness when contrasted to the patient's transferential projections. In this case, she affirms: "Like the mother dysregulated by her infant's crying, the analyst may become a stranger to herself, may have to recognize parts of herself she does not want to see. Thus, we meet the other within and without — for Dissociation is also Us." (Ibid, p. 104).

Recognition may still entail multiplicity, allowed by playing with different meanings and self-states in the space of thirdness, but this capacity now comes at a high cost.[55] As some clinical vignettes of Benjamin's patients make clear, one self-state, or part-self, may risk destroying the other parts of the patient, taking control of the whole of his mental life, and even unleashing uncontrolled violence or a chaotic fury, especially if the patient hides a particularly hurt and violent part-self within. Multiplicity, in this case, is highly risky and challenging, maybe putting at risk the

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[55] To recapitulate, Benjamin proposed that multiplicity, or the picture of a self that can assume multiple identities and self-states, configured a condition for recognition (1998). However, it was unclear then how difficult and risky this practice can be, making her argument seem suspiciously naïve.

patient's hard-won psychic organization and the protective dissociation of dangerous and disturbing feelings. The therapeutic integration of particularly violent and painful self-states into the patient's story and mental organization cannot overcome or ignore the strong resentment that claims recognition in these selves. To attain multiplicity, welcoming and integrating these feelings or self-states, the patient and the analyst may need to awaken that which was forbidden, excluded, or banished from consciousness. Both partners may need to "tarry with the negative." (Ibid, p. 193).

Indeed, mentioning the Hegelian notion of "tarrying with the negative," Benjamin affirms that "Analogously, we may consider the negative to be the dissociated feelings, perceptions, 'truths' that were denied because of the necessity of conforming to the other's omnipotent control or misrecognition. Precisely the negative, then, must be recognized." (Ibid). In the analytic process, the not-me and the not-spoken appear in the space of thirdness, progressively moving out of the shield of dissociation.

In this analytic comprehension, surrendering to the space of thirdness entails relinquishing false selves. However, once the control of a protective and conformist self is relaxed, what is behind it is usually the chaos, fear, and disruption of the unspeakable true self, probably unleashing fury and aggressiveness. Based on Ghent's notion of surrender, Benjamin understands that the move beyond compliance may unleash a "creative fury," which evokes extreme fear and the menace of chaos. When concluding a reflection on one of her patients, she states:

> While I could formulate the idea of surviving destruction, playing along with power reversals, my afterthoughts suggested to me that the relinquishing of omnipotence also involved a surrender in Ghent's (1990) sense of relinquishing the false, protector self in order to liberate the expansive self; a process Milner (1969) described in which a 'force to do with growth,' unleashes a 'creative fury' that strives despite great fear of chaos to move beyond compliant adaptation (pp. 384–385; Ghent, 1990, p. 113). I surmise that this creative fury of anti-compliance becomes more violent in direct proportion to the submission and subjugation suffered earlier. (Ibid, p. 206).

To welcome such fury, the analyst may have to encounter her own limits, overcome protective dissociations, tarry with her dangerous self-states that the transference awakened, and contain such excessive feelings in the space between them.

The difference between the self and the postmodern subject still stands. Nevertheless, the flexibilization of identity depends on a rather negative move: it demands acknowledging one's participation in hurting the other and assuming the blame. The self behind the subject may be full of dissociated guilt that needs to be revealed for the regaining of subjectivity:

> In any true sense of the word, our sense of *self as subject* is eviscerated when we are with our 'victim,' who is also experienced as a victimizing object. An important relational idea for resolving impasses is that *the recovery of subjectivity requires the recognition of our*

> *own participation.* Crucially, this usually involves surrendering our resistance to responsibility, a resistance arising from reactivity to blame. (Ibid, p. 25, emphasis added).

Now that we can admit that overcoming identity is such a painful and dangerous move involving the "recognition of our own participation" in hurting, we could ask: why would someone do so? Why would someone assume one's blame in the first place? Why would someone risk such "social suicide" beyond comfortable identities? These were all questions that remained without an answer in former theoretical elaborations. Let us recall that intersubjectivity and multiplicity appeared as relatively easy possibilities in Benjamin's former texts. Now, once the experience of intersubjectivity takes a much more negative connotation, involving one assuming one's badness, it needs an explanation on how it ever occurs and why anyone would recognize the other at all, risking one's moral support.

On the part of the oppressed, it seems that the self behind identity resists domination on an embodied level. The fact of bodily vulnerability itself may be the source of resistance, like in the case of the helpless baby in the mother's hand. The denied and hurtful self-states would demand expression on a bodily level:

> Lacking a notion of a psychological self with some inherent tendencies, *it might seem that the social self could submit and sacrifice to maintain belonging without soul and body rebelling.* But precisely this rebellion — in the form of hysterics' bodily resistance to the pain of self-denial in the patriarchal order — gave birth to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis insisted that parts of self that were denied would demand some expression, perhaps equally painful; that the process of splitting off desire for the other, the basic needs for safety and agency, always has violent repercussions. (Ibid, p. 17, emphasis added).

In this view, the desire for the recognition of repressed self-states would return, such as the Freudian repressed instincts, resisting crystalized structures and defying oppressive relationships.

Nevertheless, once the oppression is denounced, what would motivate the oppressor to move out of the complementary structure into thirdness? Why would the oppressor assume blame and acknowledge harming? For Benjamin, the motivation for such a step may be precisely the belief in the Third, the experienced faith that it can restore the relationship. Moreover, such a belief performed is what actually materializes this structure, summoning the Third into being. By having faith in it, one summons it, therefore materializing the Third. As Benjamin explains:

> My point is that this step out of helplessness usually involves more than an internal process; it involves direct or transitionally framed communication about one's own reactivity, misattunement or misunderstanding. *By making a claim on the potential space of thirdness, we call upon it, and so call it into being.* (Ibid, p. 42, emphasis added).

This calling-upon is what Benjamin refers to when she mentions the Moral Third. More than a coercive or idealized principle to which one desperately clings, the Moral Third demands accepting failure, badness, and even monstrousness, without relinquishing the possibility of a sustained

relationship. She affirms that: "The moral Third depends upon acknowledgment of disruptions, disappointments, violations of expectancy, and more broadly upon acknowledgment of injuries and trauma that challenge principles of fairness, and respect for human dignity." (Ibid, p. 51). In other words, we should not confuse it with a superego maxim because it assumes negativity upon the self, not for self-punishment, but based on the belief that the other will let one survive. If such negativity is not fatal, normativity can be sustaining and not just oppressive because both subjects can survive, which is another way of putting the Moral Third's wishful creed.

For instance, Benjamin defends that the analysts should "go first" in the clinical cases of intense complementarities, assuming, before the patient, the possibility that they may eventually fail and hurt the other. Nevertheless, the analyst does not assume her guilt just because she masochistically wants to punish herself, giving victory to her superego, but because she believes in the possibility of negotiating with the law itself (in this case, her professional expectations of being a good analyst, for instance) and on the possibility of mutual survival. Such an analyst ventures the future possibility of suspending the complementarity, relying on the hope of putting an end to the moral ping-pong. However, to actually demonstrate her belief in this possibility and how much she is willing to pay for it, the analyst needs to make the first step, assuming first the negative side of the complementarity. This act means that she needs to assume the possibility that she may be aggressive, wrong, inadequate, incapable, or maybe even crazy so that the patient feels safe to assume the same, dissolving the need to accuse or to "kill" the other. From this "bet" on the restoration of the relationship, the ambiguous space of thirdness begins to emerge between the subjects, fuelled by the initial price paid by one of the sides. In the clinical situation, for instance, this act can replace the manic avoidance of guilt, shame, and indignity with a situation of open mutual vulnerability. In this case, the emerging space of ambiguity can better welcome the destructive selves of the patient, who had long and dangerously awaited in the shadows, desperately demanding recognition. S/he need not hide such shameful parts of him or herself since they lose some of their destructive, disgraceful, and terrible powers amid open and mutual vulnerability.

According to the Moral Third, we need not be purely good, as our superego demands. This principle, when invoked, suggests that, in our impurity or ambiguity, being both good and bad, we may still survive in the human community. Once it is related with the demobilization of the lawful world, more than the knowledge of what is good and bad, the Moral Third involves the identification, even physical one, with the other, demobilizing dissociative defenses. While the

superego maxim is a split-off demand that protects the self behind claims of goodness, dignity, and purity, the normative experience of the Moral Third involves rhythmic identification with the other.

Indeed, Benjamin explains that the Moral Third is more about bodily rhythmicity than strict separation and purification. In her words: "The position of the moral Third, however abstract it sounds, is not a function of mere 'reason' but founded in the embodied connection of two minds." (Ibid, 89). She also says: "This perspective leads to a notion of an emotionally grounded or embodied Moral Third based on a level of primal identification with the split-off aspects of vulnerability and weakness rather than merely knowledge of 'right and wrong.'" (Ibid, p. 226).

Moving the normative experience out of the realm of rights and into the sphere of our embodied vulnerability, this explanation implies that the task of reconstituting an intersubjective Third requires the very challenging acceptance of the body's violability, weakness, and mortality. It requires the demobilization of dissociative defenses that build normative conceptions of ourselves as virtuous, clean, deserving, and inviolable. As Benjamin explains:

> In order to define the moral Third as embodied, we must introduce categories that relate not only to moral goodness and badness, but to psychologically complex constellations, not merely right versus wrongdoing but clean, safe and pure versus abject, contaminating, dangerous. There is more implied in the ability to hold opposites than merely recognizing one's own capacity for destructiveness or wrong action. There must also be an ability to tolerate the possible incursion of the badness that has been identified with the Other into the good that has been identified with the self: the so-called primitive or early feelings of discarding and projecting that which is abject, faecal, disgusting in the human body have to be countered by an acceptance of bodily or psychological weakness within self and other. (Ibid, p. 225).

Identification with the other, in such a moral experience, is related to the ambiguous and highly uncomfortable acceptance of the body's suffering, disgust, and death. We can only approximate such an acceptance when we believe that we are still alive, that we can still live, or that, despite our vulnerability, the other will allow our mutual survival, which is what the Moral Third sustains.

As we saw, recognition begins with a proto-symbolic process of rhythmic attunement, which sustains later normative experiences. This process shows how embodied process are at the center of Benjamin's intersubjectivity. Indeed, the considerably more negative understanding of recognition advanced through her triangular conception dwells on a new understanding of the body and its vulnerability. This interpretation becomes clearer when we analyze her conceptions about sexuality and affect regulation, which I will do next.

7.2. Excess and affect regulation: recognition as an embodied process without the drives

After explaining and elaborating on the concepts of the Third and thirdness in the three first chapters of *Beyond Doer and Done To*, Benjamin then returns, in the fourth chapter, to a central theme for her thinking, which occupied a large part of her initial theoretical production: the theme of gender complementarity and the "enigma of sex." Her starting point is the intersubjective interpretation, initiated in *Like Subjects, Love Objects* (1995), of Laplanche's understanding of the sexual, the enigmatic message, and seduction, concepts now linked to the early regulation of affects. Let us briefly recall that, for Laplanche, excessive stimulation would come from the early enigmatic message conveyed by the adult, permeated by sexual contents, which the immature, infantile psyche cannot metabolize. According to Benjamin, without the intersubjective space of containment of affections, now identified as the space of thirdness, the enigmatic message can only be internalized or violently discharged into otherness, which fuels gendered oedipal solutions, opposing active-passive, violator-violated, sadistic-masochistic.

We know that Benjamin rejects the biologistic and metaphysical view of the drives. However, now she sees the human psyche as overwhelmed by excessive energies that demand some kind of elaboration or discharge. Thus, she says: "Excess could be seen as a link to Freud's view of the psyche as grounded in an energetic economy — but without the drive." (Ibid, p. 111). In her reading, the instinctual excess of Freud's intrapsychic economy is related, from an intersubjective point of view, to a failure in affect containment. Thus, she links the Freudian view on excess and discharge with affect regulation, focusing on how early failures of the primary caregiver generate the too-muchness of excess. Since the text from 1995, her strategy follows Laplanche's theory of generalized seduction, linking the internalization of excess to Winnicott's inability to destroy the other (see topic 6.1.2 above). For her, the other's unavailability impedes the baby from regulating excessive stimulation, making him drown alone in desperation. Therefore, the fact that the master in Hegel's analysis is not appeased or satisfied, even when winning over the other, is due to excess.

Benjamin does not clearly specify the source of the excessive stimuli the child experiences and needs to eliminate. Being a relational theorist, it might seem that she refers only to stimuli received from the outside, from the relationship with others. However, at a certain point, she mentions stimuli that would come from both outside and inside sources: "Without the outside other, the originally helpless self cannot process arousal associated with *internal tension* or *external*

stimulation." (Ibid, 113, emphasis added). She also affirms: "We must still track the intersubjective vicissitudes of bearing excess, which generally *derive from the uncontained and unsymbolized excitement originating in the child or the mother's reaction to the child*." (Ibid, p. 115, emphasis in original).

Furthermore, let us remember that there would be, for her, an initial moment of unawareness regarding the differentiation between the self and the other. In this context, primary aggressiveness, in her interpretation, aims to find an exterior, a non-self space on which to discard excess. Thus, if there is still no separation between I and not-I, it is not even possible to identify where the excess would come from since there is no defined border between inside and outside. Only the survival of the other generates externality from the baby's perspective. Thus, some tension could be seen as arising from within.

If, in the face of this uncertainty (of where the excess would come from), we follow the Laplanchian reference, it becomes clear that the original excitations arise from the relationship between the baby's body and instincts with the maternal care, full of sexual enigmatic messages, therefore having a clear bodily basis, but also an immediate relational interruption.

For Laplanche, the mother's first gestures are impregnated with sexuality. She cannot stop herself from transmitting, along with care, sexuality. That is why there is an implantation of adult sexuality in the child. Seduction is an inevitable and universal human event. However, it is due to the immature character of the human baby's vital functions that the sexual dimension is introduced. It is the baby's vulnerability in his mother's hands that introduces seduction. There is a biological substrate in the Laplanchian baby, but what is most characteristic of it is insufficiency, incapacity, and vulnerability. He affirms:

> The 'break in' of sexuality from the other implies a biological focal point, but of a very special sort. Far from the vital order resulting in sexuality through its efflorescence, it is through its insufficiency that it provokes the intrusion of the adult universe. A deficiency or prematuration of the vital order in the human infant: these are terms with which we are familiar, and which are already in Freud. They allow us to understand that, in the entirety of its extension, that 'order' is infested by the sexual 'order.' (Laplanche, 1976, p. 48).

Thus, the insufficiency in the baby's body predisposes it to receive the adult's messages intromission. Moreover, Laplanche later postulates a "primary somatic receptivity" (Laplanche, 2011, p. 49) necessary to prepare the reception of the adult's enigmatic message. This receptivity would be related to the baby's prematurity, that is, to his inability to provide for himself. Thus, the excess comes from the adult, but on the indispensable support of the baby's instinctual precocity, which predisposes him to the receptivity of the message, even if it is highly unsettling and

enigmatic. There would then be a bodily substratum that is characterized, above all, by immense helplessness. I believe this view is perfectly compatible with Benjamin's late theory on intersubjectivity, which focuses on the reality of bodily vulnerability.

Indeed, Benjamin implies that, even if the excess arises amid the baby's relations, not from a force generated purely inside one's body, in isolation, it has roots in the body, in its primary and inescapable vulnerability. She affirms: "If the excessive and mysterious aspects of sexuality derive from more than one source, still all of them center on the experience of otherness, the dependency on the other to contain, recognize and thus organize the infant's bodily experience." (2018, p. 118). She also implies that excess comes from a complex relational field, between the mother's anxieties and the baby's needs, but the relationship dwells on their bodily contact:

> The maternal message conveyed in this arena consists not only of her unconscious sexuality, but involves such content as anxieties about injury, fragmentation, depletion or over-stimulation by the infant, thus influencing the realm of the sexual. And, conversely, the skin and body eroticism of the mother, her gaze and connection with her infant, 'cradle' the message and calm it down. Hence the production of excess is located within a complex configuration of relational experience. (Ibid, p. 118).

In addition, the excess is never fully metabolized. There is always a remainder, uncontained by any relationship. Following the Laplanchian theory of excess, Benjamin understands that sexuality will always have an unassimilable, excessive, unconscious, and ghostly dimension, which cannot be completely contained either by the conscious dimension of the psyche or by the intersubjective relationship. The generalized seduction and the enigmatic messages are not fully metabolized, not even by the recognition relationship, so the premise is that:

> Thus in multiple senses the sexual, understood as an effect of the Other and of otherness, is *bound to be excessive, to exceed what the relational dimension can help the immature psyche contain and regulate* (Benjamin, 2004b). Consequently, the psychic demands of the excessive are ordinarily met through a form of splitting that separates the fantasmatic process of the sexual from other forms of using the object. *The enigmatic message itself, opaque and not conscious, because not symbolized,* is inevitably dissociated from other psychic processes. (Ibid, p. 115, emphasis in original).

As Laplanche understands it, the enigmatic message conveyed by the adult is internalized, motivating the formation of the child's unconscious and the phantasmatic realm. However, for him, the internalization also establishes the precedence of the Other in the formation of the human psyche, which Benjamin now acknowledges:

> The 'enigmatic message' conceptualized the overwhelming of the child's immature psyche by communications from the Other, the adult's psyche: thus an implantation of something other and too much (Laplanche, 1992; 1997). Once this otherness is now implanted within the self, *the question of the Other as external is always preceded by the Other within*. This idea of otherness ultimately will be seen as implicating the social ordering of sexuality and interpersonal relations (Laplanche, 2011). (Ibid, p. 113-114, emphasis added).

Therefore, through Laplanche's theory of generalized seduction, she admits that there is a precedence of the other in the formation of the individual psychic structure and its unconscious, even if the mutuality of recognition balances this asymmetrical element. We could say that there is always an unassimilated remainder that is left from the rhythmic care, which the space of thirdness cannot contain.

For Laplanche, the enigma of the adult's message takes the form of the following question "What does the other want from me?" an anguishing demand that does not find a conscious answer, being processed in a phantasmatic way. Inserting this theory in the framework of recognition, Benjamin understands that the enigma of seduction, materialized in this question, is universal, originating from our shared condition of vulnerability. When explaining Laplanche's theory, she affirms:

> It is not that a literal seduction becomes fantastical, but that an implicit and not directly sexual enigmatic message, perhaps carrying the 'noise' of the adult's unconscious sexuality (Laplanche, 2011), takes shape within the self as a question — 'what does the Other want of me' — which must be translated and processed through fantasmatic activity. In this sense the *general intersubjective condition of seduction is universal* and is distinguished from specific, actual seduction. (Ibid, p. 114, emphasis added).

In the framework of recognition, I believe that it would not contradict Benjamin's intentions to say that the other's opaque demand, because it is enigmatic, casts a shadow of death over the baby or an implicit threat that he may not be able to correspond to what the other wants from him, or to the mother's mysterious desires. This means that he may not have his existence recognized or justified as separate from her. Indeed, in reference to Bataille (1986), Benjamin relates the excess of sexuality with the menace of death and dedifferentiation: "The mysterious and asocial effect of the sexual — its otherness — was explored by both Bataille (1986) and Bersani (1977) and associated with the loss of individuation, the experience of merger and continuity (Bataille, 1986) and shattering of the ego (Bersani, 1985; see also Saketopoulis, 2014)". (Ibid, p. 114). Against this menace of dedifferentiation present in sexualized messages, efforts at mastery and violent discharge follow: "The ensuing fear of the sexual and sense of too-muchness stimulates efforts at mastery, frightening fantasies, dissociation: the cure becomes its own problem." (Ibid, p. 115).

Even so, despite a permanent unassimilable remainder, the excessive element can have different degrees of metabolization, depending on the intersubjective relationship shared with the first caregiver. The enigma, in other words, can be partially elaborated, contained, or regulated, in diverse ways, depending on the availability of the baby's others. Although the experiences of excess and vulnerability are generalized, there are significant differences in the relationships of

each individual and the relational space each one finds to metabolize affections. Thus, "In my reading, the inevitable excess of the adult's messages, the 'general seduction,' can be intensified by specific relational instances of misrecognition and failure of containment (Benjamin, 2004; Benjamin and Atlas, 2015)." (Ibid, p. 119).

A traumatic failure in the regulation of infantile affects or a severe absence of recognition may prevent the sufficient elaboration of excess, generating trauma or even harming one's psychic organization. This failure can affect the development of the psychic structures necessary for assimilating the enigmatic message so that otherness can no longer be perceived as soothing or exciting, being always registered as terribly threatening: "In this case, the transmission of something unconscious from the mother that is unassimilable and excessive cannot even be allowed to form sexual subjectivity as an exciting otherness — with all the usual attendant conflicts and frustrations psychoanalysis has recognized." (Ibid, p. 117). The stimulation that cannot be contained by the other is such that it appears intolerable to the organization or self-cohesion of the self, being experienced at most from a dissociated, alien, and unreal distance. In this way, a failure in elaborating childhood excess may culminate in the adult's inability to experience intersubjective encounters and even sexuality as unthreatening. Such excitement is not tolerable. The later survival of the other subject represents a threat to the self, not a possibility of connection. For the traumatized adult, "The experience can be that of impingement, engulfment, flooding and invasion; given the overstimulation, excitement and anxiety become indistinguishable." (Ibid, p. 118). Relationships are menacing, not pleasurable. In the author's more detailed explanation:

> The need for the other to contain excitement through recognition in this way leads to a further intersubjective dilemma: intense anxiety about the other's presence as a subject with her own affect, which has been experienced as dangerous rather than a source of resonance and pleasure. Accordingly, the basic issue around dependency — needing an other who is outside one's control or influence (Benjamin, 1988) — becomes intensified. It then translates as a fantasmatic relation to an other who becomes more dangerous outside. This is the consequence of a primary object relation in which affect regulation fails, in which the other cannot be relied upon to be attuned, accommodating, engaged in a way that recognizes and creates mental space for excitement. The other cannot be relied upon to be responsive and recognizing of the child's communications in a way that allows the (smaller, younger) self to have agency and internal control. (Ibid).

On the contrary, when the mother, in tune with the baby, can calm him down, both partners can accommodate and digest part of the enigmatic message, making otherness a bearable and even exciting experience. Then, the baby's emotions are expressed, processed, and integrated within the self. While diminishing hyperarousal, the mother also helps the baby expand the field of what he can bear, own, and communicate, reducing the risk of dysregulation and the need for dissociation.

It is, therefore, possible to differentiate between an inevitable, necessary, and universal phantasmatic aspect, derived from the Laplanchian enigmatic residue, and a more extreme or traumatic aspect of the sexual, which establishes alterity itself as dangerous and unbearable. Benjamin recognizes that excess is ineluctable and generalized, but there would be, for her, an unnecessary level of alienation and phantasmatization, not contained by the other, which would significantly harm the intersubjective experience, to the point of making it unsustainable. That is, it would be possible to identify "a traumatic rather than ordinary excess." (Ibid, p. 119).

The unwarranted excess, as is evident in traumatized patients, has a rebound effect on the intersubjective dimension, generating a vicious cycle of non-survival and excessive demands: the anxiety not contained by the other fosters the phantasmatic dimension, which, in turn, returns as a violent defense against the other, expressed in the form of submission or domination. The lack of early affect regulation makes stimulation appear uncontrollable, extreme, and too painful. For example, when the mother does not survive the baby's destruction, or when she gets too dysregulated by the baby's distress, he experiences fragmentation and the strong need to dissociate from an unbearably dangerous and broken world. Especially in cases of acute trauma, the sense of a lawful world is blown:

> The world appears incoherent, its sense or meaning is precarious. This is to say, it is not simply the 'object,' mother who has been destroyed or made bad, for whose sake the self feels destructive and guilty. The world itself has become unreckonable, its goodness spoiled, its territory treacherous with pitfalls, as with the feeling that 'people are crazy, life is dangerous.' (Ibid, p. 87).

In the absence of intersubjective regulation, nature seems too chaotic and menacing; desires seem irresistible; the drives seem too violent, demanding control. The natural order of things is not fair and lawful but disordered and wrong. This view derives from the menace of excess. However, the background of this negative interpretation is a previous lack of intersubjective containment.

While both the Freudian and the intersubjective perspectives agree on the baby's helplessness in the face of internal and external stimuli, the intersubjective point of view reveals the mutualistic dimension of this dynamic, or how the relational vicissitudes of excess make all the difference. Thus, while agreeing on an initial situation of helplessness, Benjamin's model still must avoid the conclusion that the oedipal internalization and superego self-control are the only means to contain the "drives" or the excessive character of the body. Once again, she argues against the oedipal model, especially the derived understanding of the female body as a receptacle for discharge:

> If we consider this overwhelming of the immature psyche as another take on Freud's (1926) idea of original helplessness, we can see how we are still working to grasp a primary experience and identify a through line in our intellectual history related to excess. This perspective on 'too-muchness' recognizes the original helplessness and anxiety Freud first identified, as well as the implicit role of excess in his thinking but, as we shall eventually see, the translation of this helplessness into the feminine position of passivity in Freud's oedipal model served to obscure many of the primary causes of this state. (Ibid, p. 113).

For Benjamin, there is indeed an excessive element permanently risking overstimulating the psyche, but there is also the relational possibility of metabolizing this excess, which is not considered by Freud, thus culminating in the necessary triumph of the superego. Concerning the oedipal split, Benjamin states:

> Thus, for instance, the position of passivity, which Freud associated with feminine masochism insofar as it involves being subject to the other's drive, is only threatening or excessive because of this relation to the other. If passivity assumes such a frightening appearance this might be seen as an effect of a particular relation to an other — one that involves projection, power, degradation, thus resulting in an alienation from self, not due to something essential in the position of the drive. (Ibid, p. 119).

To deal with excess, we tend to split entirely body and mind, discharging through and on the body the psychic affects that our minds cannot process. Bodies communicate much more than they can apprehend. For example, sexual bodily contact can simulate the much-desired and much-needed experience of recognition, which perhaps does not take place directly at the symbolic level. Sexuality thus has an ambiguous valence: it both generates excess and also offers means of discharge:

> In dealing with bodily excitement and regulation, then, we are always liable to touch upon the paradox of sexual excess: sexuality itself is potentially excessive and creates experiences of stimulation and tension even as it serves as a method of regulating self and other, not only through discharge but also through the containment of otherwise unrepresented, unmentalized experiences with significant others (Benjamin, 2004a; Atlas, 2015). (Ibid, p. 121).

However, in extreme cases, non-metabolized pain and anguish are communicated through the performance of violent fantasies, as in sadomasochism, which desperately seeks a witness capable of finding, experiencing, and attesting to the excess that inhabits the self. Sexuality, in this case, is experienced through a "monadic sexual economy" (Ibid, p. 123), which discharges mental excess through the complementary channel dominator/dominated, doer/done-to. In this economy, one needs the body of the other to resolve one's excess and unilaterally regulate one's affects. More than an encounter, the monadic economy seeks purely the discharge, or "the use of the body to solve the problem of mental excess." (Ibid).

This solution, which seeks the complete objectification of the other, also has familiar gender configurations. The author states that "Excess and the oedipal go hand in hand." (Ibid, p. 126).

Excess is usually channeled into binary gender signifiers or into "culturally intelligible, recognizable identities organized as a binary." (Ibid, p. 128). In this sense, the construction and reification of the feminine would be directly related to the need for a container for the excessive stimuli that threaten the child in his fundamental helplessness. The rejection of (feminine) passivity is an infantile defensive act in the face of overwhelming stimuli and the excess contained in the enigmatic maternal message. Cut out from maternal regulation, the boy is alone. Without her external support to regulate himself, the stimuli become excessively threatening. He is forced to resort to intrapsychic defenses as a substitute for mutual regulation. Maternal seduction is resolved, so to speak, by the phantasmatic rejection of the female body, internalized as both frightening and despicable. The more overwhelming the seduction, the more intense must be the rejection of that body in order to defend the boy from his helplessness. Thus, what the active-passive split engages is a vicious and destructive cycle of invasion, domination, and exclusion, which keeps the flow of excess circulating painfully and without dissipation between the partners.

Furthermore, this position turns out to be precarious: the boy must permanently deny the ownership of affection because that would equate him with the despised female object, undoing all his protection against overstimulation: "The catastrophe of being uncontained and overexcited becomes gendered: it signifies emasculation." (Ibid, p. 127). In this sense, the child of either sex can be "emasculated" by a controlling mother or father, who discharges excess and blame on him or her, forcing the child to contain the adult dysregulation. Later, against this emasculation – which can be extremely humiliating and degrading, especially for the boy – one can, as an adult, vengefully wield parental aggressiveness towards others, which are then forced to contain the excitement and anguish that had fallen on the child's immature shoulders. As several clinical cases illustrate, the positions of the active boy and the passive girl can be assumed by children of both sexes and can be exchanged in different situations, evacuating excess, guilt, and rage from one side to another. However, there is no possibility of harmonizing these attributes: either one has the phallic power, or one is painfully castrated, despised, humiliated, or infantilized.

Benjamin now believes that the reification of (gender) identities derives its strength from the primary unavailability of spaces for discharge, making the phantasmatic solution necessary. She claims that "what appears as an inevitable course of development may be seen as an intrapsychic production rooted in the vicissitudes of intersubjective breakdowns in regulation and recognition." (Ibid, p. 128). Oedipal patterns of domination and submission are constituted from

the previous experience of intense abandonment or helplessness in the face of non-metabolized stimuli. Thus, overcoming the gender split is no longer just a question of the woman's survival and the assertion of her desire, but it involves the task of giving a different destination to the excess that inevitably overwhelms us. Although vulnerability in the face of excess is inevitable, we could assign an intersubjective destination to part of the excess, reducing the need for discharge via reified gender identities. The solution to strict oedipal complementarity would be to re-elaborate the pre-oedipal experience of dysregulation, reinforcing the possibility of mutual containment of affection in the relationship between mother and baby. That is, the mother offers both an excessive message, but also, possibly, the intersubjective space of containment.

Since "Excess contained is not the same excess" (Ibid, p. 137), mutual digestion could open new ways of dealing with excess. A positive cycle can also derive from early experiences of mutual survival: primary experiences of recognition expand the capacity of self-regulation, which widens the field of what can be experienced and communicated in mutuality, strengthening the intersubjective field.

In addition, the possibility of discharging excess into thirdness, in turn, recovers the pleasure of containing affection, of owning one's desire, and of maintaining sexual tension. It expands Freud's conclusion that pleasure would only be in discharge. Sexuality, in an intersubjective economy, is a two-way street: "In the experience of sexual union, both partners are able to receive as well as transmit to each other, alternately or simultaneously." (Ibid, p. 131). Giving and receiving, discharging and containing, are all shared and enjoyed in the intersubjective sexual game.

However, the intersubjective position is not a purely romantic or idealized process because it cannot avoid a certain experience of castration. To inhabit an intersubjective experience, the partners must embrace mutual vulnerability, as we saw. In the context of oedipal complementarities, this means that they need to demobilize or make flexible their phallic defenses, constructed and put in place to deny vulnerability. Therefore, the feminist struggle, based on intersubjective theory, cannot avoid or ignore the castrated reality that lies behind the phallus: "Freeing the feminine position from debasement went hand in hand with alleviating the pressure to contain the shame with a phallic defense." (Ibid, p. 137). Thus, the feminist rescue of women's position now depends on containing shame and helplessness.

Reflecting on the American film "The Best Years of Our Lives," Benjamin offers a very instructive example of the vicissitudes of the phallic defense amid intersubjective experiences. The drama portrays the return of three American soldiers from World War II and their painful readjustment to civilian life. According to the film analysis of the historian Kaja Silverman, when returning traumatized and mutilated, these men felt that the phallic fiction of glory and strength could no longer protect them. They were now castrated men, powerlessly observed by their penalized women. But this situation provokes a sort of reversal of roles in the film, in which the women take care of the wounded men, not without sexual tension. There is a scene, for example, in which a woman undressing one of the mutilated soldiers, who had lost his arms in the war, feels erotically attracted to him. In Benjamin's interpretation, this attraction has an intersubjective character because it entails a surrender to mutual vulnerability, transcending phallic protection. The couple's experience is that of sharing the vertigo of mutual helplessness beyond the phallus and the possibility of death beyond identity protections. As the author explains:

> In the film, the couple faces the abyss of breakdown together — as described by Bataille (1986), the breakdown is like the vertiginous experience of death in a different form, one which allows us to share its dizziness together. With this acknowledgment of the reality of loss and breakdown, the lovers in the film interrupt the circuit of defensive activity and perverse passivity. The sign of the wound functions as the opposite of a fetish, it signifies the possibility of overcoming disavowal, representing vulnerability, witnessing pain and suffering — the intersubjective moment of surrender. (Ibid, p. 141).

What provokes attraction in this erotics of recognition is not power, domination, and phallic strength but, on the contrary, the possibility of mourning together the intact, invincible, immortal body. That is what the partners share: their survival in the face of the near possibility of death, their resilience in the face of grief, and the strength of their shared vulnerability. The erotics of intersubjectivity involve experiencing the dizziness of vulnerability together, the pain and suffering of the body. Benjamin concludes:

> Eros in this version begins with mourning the loss of the intact body and the ideal of manhood, to which so much has been sacrificed. It is mourning in the presence of an other, a depressive solution, accepting passivity, loss and death. Breakdown of the phallic fiction opens fissures in what would otherwise remain the seamless wall of repetition. (Ibid, p. 142).

So, it is the cracks and fissures in the fiction of masculinity that open the possibility for passivity to be enjoyed and for desires to be shared. In this case, the castrated subjects are not undone, despised, or humiliated but survive the deconstruction of the identity fiction – that once sustained them – in a more ambiguous and more profound relationship in which the thirdness of mutual vulnerability welcomes what would be too painful for the self to bear alone. The support of

the castrated subjects is no longer the manic denial of helplessness and death but the recognition of vulnerability and the other's permission for survival.

In short, the intersubjective thirdness allows us to metabolize, contain, and process excess in a mutual relationship, experiencing its dizziness together. The intersubjective relation does not cancel the excess but allows its elaboration, reducing its control over the subjects. Therefore, there is a direct relationship between the intersubjective erotic relationship and the acceptance of the body's limits and mortality. Benjamin states again, "In light of Freud and Bataille we might imagine destruction as helping to cross the sea of death that separates us." (Ibid, p. 142). However, this death can only be experienced because a certain guarantee of survival accompanies it, ensuring that the vulnerability will not be totally destructive or traumatically excessive. She explains:

> The distinction between passivity and surrender becomes possible as fear of passivity gives way to the joint creation of interpersonal safety, each person's gift to the other of a holding presence and an understanding witness. The witness who bears it with us ensures that vulnerability will not plunge us back into traumatic excess. (Ibid).

In this safe space of thirdness, identity does not need to be used defensively, as well as gender, both serving as elements of creation, renegotiation, and elaboration of the inevitable excess of sexuality. Thus "gender conventions no longer need be used defensively. Rather they can become conventions of play, forms of expression, available for use in our fantasy elaboration of the inevitable enigmatic and excessive elements that mark sexual life." (Ibid).

Therefore, the intersubjective experience of mutual vulnerability, by admitting the expression of identity fissures in a safe environment, also allows for the renegotiation, experimentation, and flexibilization of gender stereotypes, which otherwise would be excessively disorganizing, distressing, and unbearable. Identity fissures make us experience, even partially, the emptiness, disorganization, and death that come from non-identity. Such a traumatic and excessive experience can only be tolerated by an embodied guarantee of survival, the secure contact with an external sustaining subject who also sees through the fissure but does not fall entirely into it, resisting death and madness through mutuality.

Placing vulnerability at the core of recognition, Benjamin gives another weight to the problem of omnipotence. Even without sustaining primary narcissism, nor the pure drive framework of classic psychoanalysis, she suggests that omnipotence is a fundamental problem that needs to be overcome for the sake of recognition. In a recent interview with Galit Atlas, Benjamin says: "[...] if I don't conceive of omnipotence as a kind of an original state, as Freud or even

Winnicott did, rather as a reaction to the realization of dependency, the question still remains as to how we get out of omnipotence. And domination." (Benjamin and Atlas, 2022, p. 416).

On the same occasion, she also suggests that the pleasure principle and the drives should not be simply rejected by an intersubjective psychoanalytic theory but reframed or translated through relational lenses. In her intersubjective view, the pleasure principle (as the Freudian imperative of reducing stimulation) would be related to affect regulation, the early need to discard excess. In her view, it is the original situation of excess that generates dependency on others, which very easily leads to omnipotence and domination as means for self-regulation and discharge, especially when early others fail to provide mutual spaces of discharge. Not primary omnipotence as a natural state, but the fact of infantile vulnerability is what fuels domination. Omnipotence, thus, is somewhat "natural" because it derives from our ineluctable vulnerability, which not even the relational space can exhaust. That is why the problem of omnipotence remains even in an intersubjective framework. Indeed, Benjamin suggests, in the Introduction of *Beyond Doer and Done To*, that this view would not be far away from the Freudian pessimism in *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

> If we accept this way of thinking about recognition as a motivating need — a need that 'drives' the psyche (to use an outmoded phrase) since without it we are alone and unsafe — then we may end up not far from Freud's (1930) original powerful insight that the child renounces parts of his psyche to stay connected to the parent (authority figure), to keep mother or father's love. (Benjamin, 2018, p. 9).

Omnipotence, internalization, and dissociation now derive from our fundamental vulnerability. Our dependency on others' recognition to get rid of excessive stimulation may be a fundamental source of discontent because this need motivates structures of domination in the individual and collective spheres. Moreover, the best solution to it is not a romantic or harmonious situation but the acceptance of mutual vulnerability, which we cannot escape.

With this new analysis of excess, sexuality, and identity, we are able now to investigate Benjamin's view on the excess expressed by the fear of death and the possibility of not deserving to live, which culminate in a negative conception of social life focused on the fantasy that "Only one can live." In what follows, we will see that Benjamin's new understanding of recognition, focused on human's ineluctable vulnerability, reaches a larger field. Vulnerability, bearing bodily roots, is seen as pervasive and unavoidable. However, how we deal with it varies considerably in history, which makes a difference regarding the possibility of recognition. These differences are

also crucial to understanding and maybe diagnosing our current society, thus pointing out interesting suggestions for critical theory.

7.3. *"Only one can live": deserving to die on the route to intersubjectivity*

In the introduction of *Beyond Doer and Done To*, Benjamin recalls the evolution of her theory, explaining how she both employed and criticized Hegel and Freud to demonstrate the possibility, not envisioned by them, of intersubjective relationships. However, this time she stresses the negative aspects of the theories of both authors, giving greater credit to them and making evident that recognition depends on and is related to the human body's vulnerability, which has its most drastic expression in death.

In relation to Hegel, she laments again that he did not envision the possibility of mutual survival, concluding on the necessary domination of the master over the slave. However, she sees now that the rupture in the tension between the two subjects is rooted in the menace of death that oppresses both partners:

> While there have been numerous interpretations of why Hegel thinks this must happen [the split between master and slave], we may reduce it to two essential and interconnected conditions. First, the Self finds it intolerable to bear the vulnerability of being dependent on an other subject whom he does not control, indeed who is independent and can demand the same recognition as the Self. Second, *the Self is trying to master and deny the vulnerability of its organic bodily existence*. If one wishes to escape dependency on the other, one must face death, that is, stake one's life and deny fear, overriding the *vulnerability of the flesh.* Alternatively, if one tries to escape death, one accepts the truth of one's vulnerability in exchange for enduring the servitude of dependency. So, the first choice becomes the way of the master, the second the way of bondage (slave/servant). (Ibid, p. 15, emphasis added).

Thus, both the master and the slave try to escape death and vulnerability, one by denying fear and dependency, the other by suffering it beforehand through submission and servitude. In this context, the mutual acceptance of the "vulnerability of the flesh" would be the necessary move to leave this complementary structure. That is, the maintenance of intersubjective tension between the subjects entails the confrontation with their vulnerable and mortal existence.

In relation to Freud, this vulnerability appears in the baby's relationship with the mother. As Benjamin conceived in former texts, the master, in this case, is the oedipal boy who denies the need for the maternal object, thus rejecting infantile dependency and helplessness to become an adult in his father's image. The mother's survival would be necessary to envision the possibility of circumventing the male-female split, but this move would also entail the revelation of the male's

ineluctable vulnerability and his dependence on the mother's body, that is, accepting his natural helpless existence. Benjamin puts it as follows:

> Such a move [the mother's transformation into subject] would be conditional on the original male subject taking back the projection of his own helplessness and vulnerability, accepting his own relation to 'nature.' This means acknowledging his commonality with the maternal body that stands for mortality as well as his dependence for life on that embodied subject (Dinnerstein, 1976). But this is only one moment of the necessary movement. The other, equally important, moment is that the one who was formerly the female object (oppressed, property), resists being consumed and reduced, asserting her separate existence; to risk her own death without taking life, without violence and reversal of the complementarity, reaching for the Third. (Ibid, p. 15-16).

Nevertheless, this Third can only transcend the complementarity because it is rooted in the mutual vulnerability of both master and slave, male and female. The equality reached in thirdness is a negative one: both are immensely, undeniably vulnerable and dependent on one another. Benjamin writes about the overcoming of the master-slave split: "This Third then can transcend reversal: not the slave denying her own vulnerability but confronting the master with his, thereby asserting mutual vulnerability and need for recognition without denying dependency." (Ibid, p. 16). In this understanding, it is not enough that the master recognizes the slave as a subject or grants the other recognition while remaining in an idealized or superior position. The master must also acknowledge his own participation in the oppressive structure, therefore admitting his dependency, wrongdoing, and undeserving quality. Therefore, as we saw, from the initial idea of surrendering to the Third, Benjamin arrives at the crucial understanding that vulnerability is at the center of recognition or that recognizing the other entails the demobilization of self-protection, which brings the shadow of death over the partners.

In this context, advancing a social understanding of the problem of recognition, in the book's last chapter, Benjamin explores the fantasy that "only one subject can live," a way in which omnipotent strivings materialize in history, making evident the pervasive character of this problem. She investigates many historical cases of rupture in the social Third, which generates the unleashing of extreme violence. From this concept, it follows a critical understanding of recognition and the sustenance of a democratic society.

In what follows, we will visit this chapter's argument, which, while resuming Benjamin's clinical conclusions, advances some implications of her theory to think about collective problems and social phenomena. First, (1) we will go through Benjamin's characterization of the "only one can live" fantasy, to, subsequently, (2) understand how it culminates in an ambivalent conjecture about the possibilities of democracy. Going through this chapter will be crucial to reaching the

Conclusion of this research, finally returning our focus to the problem that first occupied us: how a critical theory of society can both properly understand domination and sustain a democratic environment, bearing in mind the current crisis of democracy and the deep appeal of authoritarian leaders?

7.3.1. The fantasy that "only one can live" as a self-protective solution to the vulnerability of the subject

Considering the problem of excess and the all-too-common failure of mutual containment, aggression tends to be expelled from the self via intrapsychic phantasmatic solutions that engage fantasies of purity and goodness. Just like in gender complementarity, the problem of excess disposal uses the culturally available narratives and identity structures as a channel of discard. To avoid the burden of guilt, we tend to see ourselves as good and deserving while discharging negative feelings and unprocessed materials into the other. Indeed, "The Other serves the subject — relieves and props him up — by embodying the discarded, abject elements, as in the scapegoat function." (Ibid, p. 225). In this sense, a direct solution to our fundamental vulnerability is the fantasy that we can and deserve to live. This fantasy represents a clear self-conservative assurance, based on the need for self-regulation, especially in the absence of an other who can help us regulate through a mutual space of waste disposal.

In the Oedipal framework, the father and the son cannot both live and have the mother. Thus, either Laius or Oedipus can live. It is this complementarity that informs the self-conservative fantasy, which infuses both the individual and the collective mentalities, splitting the world into good and evil, deserving and underserving, I and the Other. Through symbolic collective references, we dissociate from vulnerability, guilt, and suffering (including the other's suffering), assuming conscious or unconscious cultural roles that justify our lives and reassure our personal value. Thus, we can go on living without the intolerable burden of badness.

As we saw, the feeling that we deserve to live and that the world is just, good, and welcoming towards us are crucial elements to a sane development, constituting the stabilized sense of a lawful world. One's "deservability" is rooted in the initial rhythmic relation shared with the primary caregiver. However, we also saw that this notion is illusory and can be oppressive and exclusivist. Moreover, when the lawful world collapses, reality looms raw and cruel, while persecutory fantasies rein.

The complementarity resulting from the failure of the Third not only means a relationship of domination but also assumes a vital character: it materializes in the fantasy that only one of the subjects can live. The collapse of a third principle or space between two subjects determines that the relationship collapses in a suffocating and persecutory duality, submerging into an immediate struggle for power, which only allows a defensive reaction toward an arbitrary other. In a strongly complementary situation, when the Third is eroded, the divergent realities of the subjects, unmediated, fatally crash into one another so that only one of them can survive. The subjects experience the fantasy that only one of them can live, meaning that only one subject in the interaction can be right, good, deserving, or sane. In such a collapsed and immediate relationship, for one to survive, the other needs to die.

A persecutory and lawless world results from the dissolution of the sense of a lawful world. The subjects seem to live in a world where only a few are saved while the others drown, so we must do whatever it takes to guarantee our individual survival. Especially when we do not believe in the possibility of reinstating the lawful world, we are left with the imperious need to defend ourselves.

This fantasy also represents an intersubjectivist reading of Melanie Klein's schizoid-paranoid position as something that can take hold of the psyche, especially in situations of stress. As Benjamin puts it: "I suggest that we make use of an intersubjective psychoanalytic position to extend Klein's idea of the paranoid position of splitting between good and bad objects to include splitting the world into those who may live and those who must die." (Ibid, p. 229). Therefore, this fantasy is considered elementary, related to inevitable dependence and human vulnerability. In this sense, the general conviction that "I deserve to live" protects the subject from suffering, fostering dissociation behind normative justifications and self-congratulatory narratives. However, it tends to establish a pattern of persecutory relationships between the subjects. As a scapegoat for our excessive impotence, the other must remain undeserving so that suffering and vulnerability are discarded from the self.

Even if this fantasy tends to appear clearly in individual situations of distress and more intense insecurity, being a typical strategy against suffering, as the reference to Klein makes clear, for Benjamin, it may also crystalize in social structures and collective institutions, appearing to leave no other alternative than suicide or parricide and organizing social relations according to this split:

> While everyone may be subject to this fantasy at times of fear and stress, when the social Third breaks down, or when certain groups organize around this fantasy, it becomes a dominant structure, there appears to be no exit from the stark alternatives of kill or be killed. (Ibid, p. 7).

In this sense, Benjamin suggests that the "only one can live" mentality is undeniably present in extremely violent contexts, such as armed conflicts and severe humanitarian crises. However, it also informs more ordinary structures, at least for much of the Western world. She mentions, for example, the Puritan ideal of the United States' founding fathers, who divided the world between the chosen ones, deserving of good fortune, and the damned others, subjected to bad luck. Furthermore, Benjamin highlights that Weber's correlation between the Protestant ethic and the capitalist economic structure (1905/2002) suggests that the division between the elect and the condemned is at the roots of capitalism.

This mentality ensures to those who survive that they are dignified because they, God, fate, or their ancestors have paid the debt of their existence. It also ensures that the condemned deserved their fate, being guilty "of breaking the law, of disobeying the Father and the morality of family, church and state." (Ibid, p. 232). More broadly, then, we can see that the opposition between the saved and the damned is related to the modern state and even more so to colonial history. Benjamin states, "The psychological premise 'Only one can live' is not accidentally materialized in nationalism and imperialism." (Ibid).

Consequently, the meritocratic paranoid mentality reveals itself in historical structures, clearly identifiable in Western governmental and economic institutions. Maintaining a lawful world within such a dangerous, violent, and unequal background seems indeed a precarious illusion. Therefore, psychological work in deeply violent and conflictual contexts worldwide can teach valuable lessons to critical theory, notably recognition theory, mainly once it focuses on understanding modernity and Western democracy.

In this reasoning, Benjamin resumes her critique of modern reason, first developed in *The Bonds of Love*, suggesting that at least part of our difficulty in assuming mutual vulnerability is due to the strict split between the subject and object of modern reason. The intellectual activity of the modern subject serves, in many instances, to promote dissociation. Again, she cites Rousseau's critique of Enlightenment, which blames modern reason for the dissociation from others' suffering. However, we might remember that, for Rousseau, reason would repress a natural tendency toward connection, empathy, and identification. So, he presupposes a sociable and beneficial human nature, which Benjamin now expressly negates. While agreeing that the Enlightened reason, based

on self-protection and self-interest, would oppose mutuality, she believes it is questionable "to identify empathy with our animal nature rather than human sociability." (Ibid, p. 229). Thus, she proposes:

> Though we might well feel a similar despair at the inhumanity accepted as normal self-interest, a less polarizing psychological position, than Rousseau's (a third position) would argue that both these self-states — compassionate and self-preservative — exist in most people, and that much of our social thought struggles with how to live the conflict between them. It is from the position of the moral Third that we may admit this conflict within ourselves and struggle to transform it — not by denying the self-protective urge to turn away but by examining its sources. A powerful impetus to dissociation of harming and denial of the other's suffering is the fear of living in a world of badness. (Ibid).

Right away, by quoting Fairbairn's notion of the need for a "world ruled by God" (1952, 66), she suggests that the sources of self-protection are related to human helplessness in the face of excessive affects and the reactive need for a lawful world. In the face of such vulnerability, both empathic identification and dissociative self-protection tendencies might exist in most of us. But culture makes a difference in how we deal with excess, offering channels for its stabilization. Based on the split between the pure thinking subject and the dangerous object, modern culture offers the one-way discharge of excess in the other-of-the-subject, which buck-passes overstimulation back and forth without really dissolving it. Mainly, it provides intellectual activity and individual moralism as shields against the shameful aspects of dependency and identification, constantly resisted by the modern subject.

Speaking about how our culture values intellectualization, rather than affect regulation and rhythmic attunement, in a recent interview, Benjamin concluded: "In a way we agree with Freud's view that our bodily nature is repressed by the demands of culture, we just focus on affect rather than sex." (Benjamin and Atlas, 2022, p. 420). Her mention of Freud – not Rousseau – ensures that she is not arguing that our sociable nature is repressed by an arid culture but that excessive bodily nature is repressed or antagonized by cultural demands. More precisely, our excessive affects, unspeakable and undefined, are seemingly stabilized by the cultural domination of the subject over the object, as if anxiety and discomfort could be controlled or purged from the subject and displaced into the object. However, the excessive character eventually returns, especially in the form of symptoms, helplessness, and the fear of death.

Furthermore, in relation to modern culture, it is easy to discern multiple lines of dissociation, protecting and separating Westerners from non-Westerners, safe from not-safe regions of the world, those protected, and those left to perish. For example, we might remember Benjamin's argument that whiteness configures "an illusion of protection, invulnerability, and self-

realization that functions to deny vulnerability and block identification with those being harmed." (2018, p. 222). When such protection collapses – for instance, when white people identify with brown or black-skinned others – it provokes intense insecurity, guilt, fear of death, and the sense of a lawless world. That is because, when identifying with the victim's suffering, the perpetrators and even the bystanders cannot avoid facing their own badness: "In forging a new bond of empathy with the suffering and embodied other, however, those who have harmed are no longer protected by the dissociation from suffering their own monstrousness." (Ibid, p. 242). The almost unbearable fear behind the unmasking of whiteness is that we, white people, may not deserve to live.

Therefore, a central lesson from the "only one can live" fantasy is that the collapse of the social Third affects both the master and the slave, the subject and the object, suffocating both in massive amounts of guilt, dissociation, and fear. Violence has the power to tear down the social fabric that sustains mutual survival, thus making the subjectivities collapse in immediacy, drowning them into an uncontained excess. On the one side, the perpetrator needs to dissociate from the other's suffering to deny his participation in it, precariously avoiding the confrontation with the badness within himself. On the other side, victims tend to form an identifying bond with the perpetrators, being forever oppressed by the shame and burden of "knowing terrible things," as if the aggression they suffered maculated them, isolating them from any possible lawful world or caring sociality. Even if employed as a one-way action, violence has a mutual valence, implicating both master and slave, perpetrator and victim in a lawless world in which only one deserves to live, in which all have shameful blood in their hands.

That is another way of seeing the fact that asymmetry in power does not cancel the mutuality of vulnerability. Despite the difference in power, the perpetrators cannot avoid violating themselves, destroying their own sense of humanity, and making unfeasible the possibility of living in a sane and safe world. Their oppression itself leads them to a dangerous world where only one deserves to live. Nevertheless, in such a complementary bind, no one may feel as or admit to being the oppressor. Considering the "only one can live" fantasy, the aggressor cannot in any way admit being wrong because that would be equivalent to admitting the deserving of his own death or the deserving of what he caused to his victims. Thus, both sides feel they are being done to. Both are menaced by the other. Both fear not deserving to live.

Benjamin developed this analysis in conversations with her Palestinian friend, Ayed el Sarraj, about the ongoing conflict in his region. According to these reflections, the fantasy that

"only one can live" would inform an economy of suffering and guilt that spans the Holocaust until the recent occupation of Palestine, a topic to which I will come back in a while.

In the context of such an economy of suffering or of social competition for moral status, giving reason to one group may mean condemning another group to degradation and vice-versa. Thus, in this complementary framework, by claiming the status of the victim, one may imply (or be seen as implying) that the oppressor must die. What occurs then is a competition between self-acclaimed victims for moral status. Therefore, reclaiming recognition through victimhood and moralist accusations may perpetuate the dissociation from harming and fuel the conflict.

Thus, we are left with some questions. Considering the typical resort to dissociation behind moral and intellectual certainties, what space is left for intersubjectivity? How can we counter dissociative tendencies stimulated by cultural structures to avoid shutting up suffering others? How can intersubjective relations rooted in mutual vulnerability be sustained at a social level if too much vulnerability claims for self-protection?

7.3.2. Intersubjectivity as the liminal space in which no one deserves to live

Dissociation, as a typical response to suffering, configures "a manic defense against vulnerability" or "a reflexive shut down in the face of pain or fear." (Ibid, p. 230). We saw that intellectualized symbolic communication and moralistic narratives aid in containing the excessive materials that cannot yet inhabit the light of public meanings yet are permanently stimulating and pressing the social field from the shadows of dissociation. However, even if this process may provoke the perpetuation of pain and violence, behind the shields of dissociation, moral condemnation is not an answer to this process, because morality serves as a protection against badness and the fear of deserving to die. Therefore, dissociation cannot be countered by moral dogmas:

> *The response of disidentification is a reflexive aspect of self-protection that cannot be erased by moralizing.* It can arise as a manic defense against vulnerability or as a reflexive shut down in the face of pain or fear. What clinical experience with manic and grandiose states allows us to grasp is the way in which individuals rationalize their survival or success precisely in order to uphold the dissociation of their fear — fear of being left to perish by their families or community. […] The disavowal of public social responsibility for helping over harming is part of a complex process of withholding acknowledgment of injuries to victims in an unlawful world. (Ibid, p. 230, emphasis added).

The problem of dissociation and self-protection is not one of morality. It is not about "bad people" who do not want to recognize others. Framing the problem in terms of good and evil may only perpetuate the dissociation, denying one's implication in suffering. Since violence has a

mutual implication that makes both perpetrator and victim suffer under a terrible world of arbitrary violence, the solution is to repair this world itself. Benjamin insists, "The conflict is not merely between altruism and aggression, but between believing that repair of the world is possible or rationalizing the despair we feel when helpless to make the world good and lawful." (Ibid, p. 229). Thus, beyond attributing moral status to some group, we may need to restore hope in a lawful world where all can live. In the framework of thirdness, it is equally important to give recognition as to receive it, thus more than a matter of giving someone moral affirmation – which can be done from a dissociated position, desperate to get rid of guilt – it is a matter of repairing the social fabric and reconstructing the lawful world. In this context, Benjamin timidly contradicts Honneth's comprehension of recognition, pointing to something beyond it:

> While moral injury, the denial of justice, has been understood in terms of our need for recognition to affirm our sense of self (Honneth, 2007; Bernstein, 2015), it is equally important that denying acknowledgment to others damages the social fabric and our own bond to the lawful world of the moral Third, fixing both sides in the complementarity of doer and done to. (Ibid, p. 219).[56]

Recognition restores the world for both victims and perpetrators. And it might be difficult to discern who needs it most. So, it is not only the victim that needs recognition but also the "one who has harmed needs recognition of his humanity." (Ibid, p. 242). Hence, Benjamin believes that the victims, through the reclaiming of vulnerability and the dignifying of suffering, have the power to restore the perpetrator's humanity, informing that they can inhabit the social world, despite what they have done. This action contributes to the recreation of a safer situation in which dissociation and the projection of badness can be disengaged. In other words, recognition is not something bestowed one-directionally from one subject to the other. It is a mutual action that needs the acknowledgment of harm and permission for social survival. Beyond the perpetrator's recognition of the victim, the victim has the power to bestow recognition of the perpetrator's humanity. In an interview in 2022, Benjamin explained this dynamic as follows:

> Those who make the demand for reparation have already recognized their own humanity. But what becomes more complicated is what Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela talks about, which is that in making that demand, they are giving the previously established subject the opportunity to restore their own humanity, which they have lost by being perpetrators. […] The perpetrator imagines that the other is less than human, but in reality, it is the

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[56] It might be clear now that Honneth's concept of recognition – related to love, rights, and social prestige – resonates with the lawful world, the sense that one deserves to live, and the demand for moral status, as we are discussing these concepts. However, Benjamin's understanding of recognition entails the very opposite: the discovery and acknowledgment that one does not deserve to live. She thus differentiates "moral status" and "deserving to live" from "recognition," properly speaking. While she sees that we need the other's affirmation and a moral support based on the lawful world, for her, recognition is a place of moral ambiguity and non-identity. In what follows, I reflect on the prospectives for democracy and emancipation in this framework.

> perpetrator who loses more and more of their humanity, not only because they have dissociated the horror of the deeds – this is complicated because what is horror were it to be done to themselves is perversely transformed into pleasure by visiting it upon the other. But also because they believe, shall we say unconsciously, that if they were to acknowledge what they did, it would be unforgivable. They have rationalized but not forgiven themselves. (Benjamin and Atlas, 2022, p. 427).

Benjamin envisions the possibility of transforming guilt into guiltiness. While the first is self-referential and seeks to purge one's badness through moralist claims, the latter generates concern for the other. While the first reveals a constant reversal between victim and perpetrator, the second implies empathy with suffering. The danger of employing only guilt and moralistic accusations in social struggles is that it may generate cycles of victims becoming perpetrators. For the author, "Although some form of indignation and anger may be absolutely essential, it became clear how this moralism might become a manic defense, employed in the service of repudiating identifications with the aggressor." (2018, p. 224).

On the contrary, the opposite path to dissociation is the uncomfortable negative identification between the subjects, inaugurating a space for sharing impotence, evil, and guilt. What is required to create a moral Third is the rhythmic dimension, which engages an embodied identification with the other. Therefore, more than the knowledge of good and bad, the moral intersubjective experience requires actual affective engagement with the other. Benjamin comments:

> I want to recast our thinking about what might constitute an ethical position in relation to the other using a notion of the moral Third grounded in the rhythmic and not only the symbolic dimension of thirdness — one which includes the conditions for witnessing based on a level of primal identification rather than mere knowledge of what is right (Ullman, 2011; Benjamin, 2011a). (Ibid, p. 224).

In other words, the moral Third needs to be embodied. As we saw, more than the symbolic sphere of classic morality, such as good and bad, just and unjust, the intersubjective moral universe needs to deal with the more directly embodied categories of impure, dirty, contaminated, dangerous, fecal, disgusting, weak, castrated. Benjamin argues that "It is necessary to carry the concept of the Third further into the territory of other binaries shaped by unconscious fantasy and fears of bodily disintegration (see Theweleit, 1987; 1988)." (Ibid, p. 225). After all, what is behind the shield of moralism is the immense vulnerability of the body. These symbols or metaphors of bodily disgust and disintegration speak of our helplessness, helping us integrate and interact with the suffering and dying body, the disgusting and unspeakable object at the heart of the subject. Paradoxically, the body's vulnerability is what may connect us to the other as a subject.

The subject that can see oneself as a vulnerable body, one that sweats, suffers, and eventually dies, can share this condition with another equally vulnerable partner, fostering a connection beyond the comfortable shield of moralism and intellectuality. Through their mutual survival, even once monsters are welcomed in the space between the subjects, both can reclaim and further integrate the body with its vulnerability into the social world. Benjamin affirms:

> The move from dissociated to embodied language and affect creates a Third in which the binary of perpetrator and victim, invulnerable and vulnerable breaks down, *as the suffering body itself is dignified through acceptance of pain*. This dignity changes the psychic position in relation to the abject and the monstrous. (Ibid, p. 243, emphasis added).

In such experiences of recognition, we can say that violence is directed towards the self, making him openly assume his own undeserving quality, his own mortal condition. Yet, the experiences of recognition count on the possibility of mutual survival, so there remains an acting subject, even after the paralyzing turning inward of guilt and aggression. This experience defies the subject's self-centrality and power. However, it does not leave him dispersed, disorganized, or dead after all because, when recognition is successful, it ends in a precarious situation of mutual survival amid the sense of unworthiness.

That is why we can understand the moral Third to be a "bet," a wishful ethical guide, or a risky expectation that, once put into practice, is hopefully summoned and materialized. In the space that emerges from intersubjective recognition – when successful – hurt and aggressive selves may appear, as Benjamin illustrates with numerous clinical cases. These selves are then welcomed in an ambiguous and impure relational space where they can live among distress, guilt, and remorse.

One of the author's clearest examples, one that is particularly useful for critical theory, regards the Acknowledgement Project, which Benjamin developed with other colleagues in Palestine. The project aimed at promoting reconciliation and the psychological healing of war traumas through guided discussions between individuals on the two sides of the conflict. First, she explains that the Israelis' normative justification for the occupation of Palestine is rooted in the suffering they experienced during the Holocaust. In this way, they cultivate a "psychic economy" around the moral capital of suffering and victimhood: "Whoever suffers most deserves to live. If the Holocaust remains the greatest suffering, then the Israelis could feel they are still the harmed ones, not the guilty ones, and thus deserve to live." (Ibid, p. 230).

To this day, this moral economy prevails between the two sides of the brutally asymmetrical conflict, as she observed during the project's group sessions. In particular, she noted that discussions held at a rational, moral, or impersonal level, especially in dynamics with large groups,

generally only served to reinforce predictable narratives structured around the "us versus them" logic. Such discourses revealed the two groups' fear of losing their moral status. In this highly violent case, moral structures and persecutory narratives often justify the murder of individuals on the opposite side of the conflict. So, it becomes evident that the contrary act of recognizing one's responsibility for hurting also means placing oneself in an impossible situation. Recognizing the suffering of the other means placing oneself on the wrong, unjustified, uncontrolled, dirty, or devilish side, thus implying the deserving of one's death. This complementary logic then determines that only one reality can survive, meaning that only one people can live in a territory, as in the Palestinian case.

However, while the larger groups of the project reinforced such persecutory narratives, dynamics with smaller groups or pairs enabled the formation of closer and safer relationships, in which the subjects more often acknowledged their own ambiguity, admitting that they could be both good and bad, victims and perpetrators. In more intimate contexts, the possibility of the subsequent symbolic survival was greater, stimulating a safer surrender to the terrifying space of moral ambiguity and a greater relativization of self-protection. In the warmer and safer smaller groups, both sides could partially demobilize self-affirmation and lower the defensive barriers of dissociation so that the identification with the other could risk or defy one's attachment to social norms of dignity and merit. To bear moral ambiguity, confronting the possibility, even if momentary, of deserving annihilation was the movement that sustained the intersubjective relationship between the two sides of the conflict, relaxing the grip of power over them.

The difference between these two contexts, the larger and the smaller groups, is the trust in survival. While large groups were less trustworthy, the small ones developed a greater security environment to allow surrender. About this experience, Benjamin reports:

> What we found was that the injured, self-protective part is more likely to be aroused by situations in which conflicts were addressed impersonally, intellectually or politically, through narratives of justification and attempts at self-legitimation. All of these contained some level of dissociation from the concrete suffering with which they were associated and thus blocked the reception of emotionally embodied witnessing. (Ibid, p. 238).

Thus, *an embodied guarantee of survival is required to foster recognition*. In a social dimension, this may mean many different things. Concerning intensely violent social situations, Benjamin mentions, for example, practices of restorative justice, public apologies, the hearing of personal story-telling, and other practices that engage some form of embodied identification beyond the commonly dissociated sphere of rights. What these practices promote is the

acknowledgment that something terrible happened, thus reinforcing the need to recreate the lawful world. She argues:

> I do want to conclude here by remarking on the fact that restoration of democratic rights is supported by acknowledgment. Furthermore, as we learned in our Acknowledgment Project, it is possible to create social forms of thirdness that mediate between personal witnessing and attachment to identities and narratives, which otherwise become abstract and dissociated in the language of social rights. My conclusion is that political discourse aiming at social justice would do well understand how the language of justice and rights can be reconnected to the language of suffering and mutual acknowledgment. (Ibid, p. 239).

The example of the Acknowledgement Project shows that, despite the genuinely risky and anguishing character that recognition can assume, especially in violent contexts, a sufficient reason for hope lies in the fact that, in the ambiguous space of thirdness, mutual survival is possible.

In many passages, Benjamin relates the Moral Third to a situation in which "all deserve to live" (Ibid, 229) or "all can live" (Ibid, 248). However, considering her examples and the understanding that recognition entails moral ambiguity, we can conclude that, actually, in the intersubjective space, *no one deserves to live* since we are all both good and bad, victims and perpetrators. That is far from a harmonic or purely comfortable experience of inclusion. But this means, as well, that in this space, no one needs to deserve to live. No one needs to fight for dignity or obsessively defend oneself from destruction. Illusory as it may be, the Third is not a fixed maxim but a highly dynamic relational structure based on the egalitarian, anguishing, and vertiginous threat that no one, after all, deserves to live. That is, *on the background of mutual recognition lies the difficult and shameful acceptance that no one deserves to live*. That is, in my interpretation, the idea that negatively sustains the Benjaminian hope of a democratic society.

Indeed, Benjamin indicates that what is behind the precarious possibility of a lawful world is the negative reality that we, monstrous humans, "are all sinners" (Ibid, p. 244). As I interpret her conclusion, there would be a third position beyond "only one can live" – or beyond doer and done-to – in which, considering our "shared human condition of vulnerability" (Ibid, p. 245), all can live precisely because no one merits so. Only by stepping into this ambiguous and almost unbearable reality can one rebuild thirdness, thus being able to reflexively play with power and demobilize oppressive subjectivities, moving the social structures forward.

In short, the fundamental hostility between the individual and society, held so fundamentally by Freud and the first generation, reappears in the later Benjamin in the form of the fundamental need for moral justification and self-protection in the face of bodily vulnerability – our helpless body configuring a sort of "piece of unconquerable nature". At the same time, Benjamin does not

stop on this divergence, stating that intersubjectivity is possible even if it is highly dangerous, precarious, and ambivalent, providing at least a foothold for critique. A high cost is paid for a partial but significant reconciliation. In this model, the subject can assume the limit of deserving his own death, rediscovering some form of relational emancipation in his subsequent intersubjective survival.

Unlike a positive or rational force that contains or softens aggressiveness, intersubjectivity, therefore, would depend on a turning inward of aggression, overcoming protective dissociations, narcissistic idealizations, and even rational self-preservation. However, this does not imply a conclusive internalized violence, or a triumph of the superego, since this turn is a first step in the process of recognition that, from an intersubjective point of view, can be intercepted by otherness. In this model, internal aggressiveness is externalized in the relational expression of guilt. If the relationship contains or sustains mutual aggressiveness, then it can be survived and renegotiated, albeit partially and precariously. If the other allows the survival of the self, both partners may renegotiate their superego demands, perhaps finding an unstable and open-ended situation of mutual survival.

Bodily vulnerability is an element of anti-sociability or incompatibility that can be turned into its opposite. That is, it can foster a more complex form of intersubjective relation in which vulnerability, suffering, and mortality can be mourned. The body as an unspeakable, menacing, and disturbing thing is not an impediment to the encounter with the other subject. On the contrary, it may be on the way to creating a deeper connection. We could think that what the intersubjective encounter generates is a surplus of survival or life-giving support on the part of the other that sustains limited and temporary adventures beyond the limits of self-protection and identity into the dying object that we are.

Part III – Critical theory between death and survival

In this research, I argued that, throughout the development of her theory, Jessica Benjamin reduced her mild consideration of human aggressiveness and her excessive hope in the possibility of harmonization between subject and object, reaching further proximity to Freudian negativity in her latest theory. On the one hand, she offers a concept of intersubjectivity that takes the self out of its monological self-sufficiency, adding a radically relational dimension to its development. On the other hand, the notions of excess, original helplessness, and the fantasy that "only one can live" add fundamental negative, self-conservative, intrapsychic, and phantasmatic elements to her theory. Such negativity, related to vulnerability, is not supported by immutable physiological structures, such as in some interpretations of drive theory, but is still related to the body's organic condition.

In opposition to the collapsed situation of killing or being killed, the Third would guarantee that both partners can live. However, now Benjamin understands that, in addition to survival, destruction must also be mutual, which implies recognition as the site of a double vulnerability. Previously, in her understanding, the destruction of the other opened the field of recognition if s/he survived. However, with the introduction of the Third, the death of the self, or at least the action of facing the deserving of one's own death, is the no-return condition of recognition. Facing one's helplessness, evil, and even monstrousness is the difficult path leading to mutual recognition.

In this sense, survival does not efface destruction, repair the ideal, or return the self to a comfortable and deserving identity. Recognition is not what happens when destruction has been overcome or the edifice of normative merit has been rebuilt. The Third is made up of the rubble of moral ambiguity, of *survival even though we do not deserve it* because "we are all sinners." (Benjamin, 2018, p. 244). What remains is not the immortal, deserving, invulnerable body, but, on the contrary, the realization, more integrated and digested, of the mortal, guilty, immensely vulnerable body. What happens is a greater acceptance of mutual unworthiness. Both subjects change so that there is recognition; both pass to a level where vulnerability is no longer manically denied but can be better integrated through a joint process of mourning.

Survival amid moral impurity entails a precariousness whose final message is that no one really *deserves* to live. And that is why everyone *can* live. The shadow of death or undifferentiation amid ambivalent identifications and idealizations does not dissipate in the Third but survives in different degrees of transparency. That is, the evident worthiness of life is found on the side of domination

or dissociation, in the glory of an identity that believes itself to be victorious and deserving, on its own merits, which barely hides its illusory, paranoid, and sometimes oppressive character. We see that "the sting of the negative," with the Third, penetrates even further into the recognition process, overcoming normative narcissistic defenses. Therefore, recognition does not stand as a normative reference, as understood by Honneth (1995), and it is not equivalent to acquiring an esteemed identity or a positive relation-to-self. On the contrary, recognition, for Benjamin, implies a certain misrecognition of oneself or a negative self-relation, which makes monstrous, resentful, and highly shameful aspects of oneself emerge within a safe-enough relationship with another.

To conclude our journey, we shall ask: How can this new framework inform a critical theory of society? How is Benjamin's late theory useful for critical theory? How does it help analyze the current authoritarian tendency? Those are the questions that will occupy us in the Conclusion.

8. Conclusion

As Horkheimer (1972) described it, in the early days of the Institute for Social Research, critical theory, as an implicated endeavor, has the double task of grasping the deep social tendencies towards domination while critically pointing out unfulfilled potentials for autonomy. That is, it must offer both a diagnosis of social blockages to emancipation and identify potentialities for future improvement (Allen, 2008, p. 3). However, as we saw in the Introduction of this work, nowadays, critical theory needs to deal with a new authoritarian trend that manifests worldwide, evident, for example, in Donald Trump's election. Thus, this situation challenges critical theorists to engage in both tasks – diagnosis and critique – considering this tendency, with all the irrational and aggressive elements it manifests.

So, firstly, how would Jessica Benjamin diagnose current society? Or, more precisely, how can we employ her theoretical tools to analyze the contemporary authoritarian trend? I begin by cautioning that a serious critical diagnosis should employ resources from different disciplines. Otherwise, we risk reaching a psychologism that does not pay the due tribute to social determinations, in the dangerous belief that psychology is enough to explain social phenomena. On the contrary, following Adorno's suggestion that the psyche and society are deeply implicated (1967, 1968), it would be necessary to combine psychoanalysis with serious social investigations to analyse the problem of authoritarianism critically. Thus, in claiming that Benjamin offers us an

invaluable tool for critical theory, I could, so far, only explore part of the problem, suggesting that this study needs to be complemented and further developed with the help of other disciplines.

In fact, Benjamin's intersubjectivity offers a particularly useful entry door to combine psychoanalysis and social theory because it does not separate both elements, incessantly trying to combine them in dialectic ways. Moreover, the author herself advances and suggests many ways in which a robust critical theory could be developed when she ventures some diagnostic explanations that entail patriarchal culture, modern reason, neoliberalism, changes in the family structure, and authoritarianism, among other topics of social relevance. However, it is not her aim to offer a comprehensive economic, sociological, or historical diagnosis. Considering that the psyche and psychoanalysis are not apart from society, I believe the social analysis she initiates should be furthered to make these links more evident. Thus, this conclusion begins with the modest suggestion that further research is needed in this regard.[57]

However, for now, I can advance some indications on how this research could be done, presenting some conclusions that Benjamin herself reached. In this respect, in recent articles, Benjamin has been analyzing the effects of neoliberal ideology in our social context, trying to investigate the current authoritarian tendencies and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. These articles may indicate interesting ways to employ her psychoanalytic theory in further critical analysis.

In a 2017 article, she highlighted the similarity of our current context with the years studied by the first generation of critical theory, arguing that Trump employs similar fascist techniques. She opens the text with the phrase:

> In writing this article, I am identifying with the tradition of psychoanalytically informed social theory, in particular the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, which originally shaped my thinking as a student nearly 50 years ago. I find this way of thinking still relevant, and — indeed as I did then — I see it as a way to inform the practical political struggle for democracy with deeper psychological understanding. Of course, the resemblance between their time and ours has not escaped notice. (Benjamin, 2017, p. 471).

However, despite the similarity in context, she does not sustain her diagnosis of authoritarianism on the Freudian drives, which would demand the internalization of authority, as the first generation did. Her diagnosis is centered mainly on the notion that "only one can live,"

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[57] In addition, beyond the crisis of democracy, Benjamin's psychoanalysis and intersubjective psychoanalysis, in general, have invaluable resources that could inspire further investigations about current family changes, alternative family configurations, motherhood, the discussions on abortion, feminism, gender studies, economic crisis, neoliberalism, economies of suffering, victimization narratives, transitional justice politics, the conflict in Palestine, human rights, the concept of vulnerability, and many other topics that her theory intersects.

which comes from different cultural and social sources, preserving, nonetheless, a root in the body's vulnerability. Through analyzing the vicissitudes of the "only one can live" fantasy and our self-protective need for a lawful world, Benjamin tries to connect the social structure to psychological ones, making the contradictions between both evident.

We may recall that the "only one can live" fantasy is at the roots of American history, related to the foundational Puritan mentality that splits the world between the saved and the condemned, with clear oppressive implications. It is also present within capitalism, the unequal and competitive economic system that inevitably generates suffering and inequality (Ibid, p. 484). Finally, the self-protective fantasy is related to the patriarchal family, in which the failure to live up to the father's norm is punished with shame and coercion, banishing weakness and vulnerability, especially for boys (Ibid, p. 482). The result is that "The fantasy that only one can live is embedded in the economic and nation system." (Ibid, p. 478).

Despite such a fundamentally harmful context permeated by racism, predatory capitalism, and patriarchal repression, our need for a lawful world leads us to avoid facing such contradictions and our own complicity with this system. It is better to project the blame of suffering on others and other secondary elements. Therefore, the problem with American democracy, for Benjamin, is related to the impossibility of owning vulnerability, leading to dissociation from distress, inequality, and oppressive structures. That is why she affirms that "anti-democratic forces are and have always been part of our legitimated political structure." (Ibid, p. 472), even if American citizens, especially the privileged ones, sidestep admitting it.

Furthermore, for Benjamin, despite being always present in the country, the "only one can live" fantasy gains strength under the contemporary context of social crisis, higher inequality, pervasive racism, and the demobilization of public policies. Mainly due to neoliberalism, which undermines social protection and advances individualism, people tend to feel isolated, unprotected, and at risk. Weakening moral justifications and material hopes for structural changes, this system crystallized into a social reality that provokes even broader dissociation from social suffering. Under the pressing need to thrive alone economically and socially, we tend to focus on our self-interest, justifying our privileges and our deserving a good life through individual work performance.

In a 2021 article concerned with the current political context, Benjamin reports: "We watched as the neoliberal order brought about intensified inequality, political violence, ecological

destruction, attacks on women's autonomy and sexual minorities as well as the upsurge of fascistic, racist movements." (2021, p. 404). The result was precisely the intensification of the exclusivist fantasy because "The breakdown in provision coupled with a culture of manic activity feeds upon and is nourished by the self-state whose roots lie in paranoid anxieties about survival." (Ibid, p. 405).

This fantasy leads to massive dissociation from suffering under self-congratulatory narratives. Benjamin explains that "The pressures of neoliberal society have driven those of us who are privileged to accommodate to increasing demands for performance, self-centered ambition, 'making it,' even as we ignore the unmet needs of the precariat." (Ibid). Since the capitalist system is seen as legitimate and immutable, under the neoliberal narrative, people tend to count only on themselves to succeed while also blaming only themselves for their failure. That is visible even in the clinical setting, where "the lack of social holding manifests as daily concern with personal wealth, pressure to perform, 'fear of falling,' and shame of failing — afflictions for us as well." (Ibid).

Manifested in the struggle for a righteous, dignified, and deserving identity, the fantasy that "only one can live" also has obvious material implications, such as the all-too-common murder of black men and the struggle for scarce resources (2017, p. 480). This situation generates insecurity, helplessness, guilt, and anger. These feelings, in turn, are an open door for opportunistic politicians and oppressive ideologies. For example, "forgotten white men" tend to project blame on others pictured as perverse and corrupt: "The blame is projected into the Other who cheats and takes from them: that is blacks, immigrants, women, and the liberal elite who pretend to champion them." (Ibid, p. 478). The failure of these citizens then supposedly results from the menace of others, such as immigrants, or a corrupt system that harms them, thus making them the "righteous victims" (Ibid, p. 479-481), not the ones to blame.

The intense insecurity, filled with impotence and resentment, also drives citizens to identify with an authoritarian figure who is the "only one who can live" in the neoliberal system: "As long as the powerless feel they have no way to assert their own interests in revolt against the authority and as long as such revolt appears dangerous and morally wrong, such identification is perpetuated, even when this identification goes against their own interest." (Ibid, p. 479). For his supporters, what Trump offers is the guarantee that they are good and deserving people in his image. After all, "A king is the 'only one who can live,' and you may identify with him." (Ibid). Moreover, mirroring

the patriarchal model of the family, "Trump's success is based on his identification with this paternal figure who shames and repels all vulnerability." (Ibid, p. 482).

This dynamic also explains the insistent need to keep the leader's idealization. If he is bad, deserving to die, so do all of his followers:

> The dilemma for those who choose to identify upward with the powerful to avoid shame is now the risk of absorbing the powerful's guilt. Here we might see a crucial contradiction. 'Since they are at fault, I am at fault. And if they/I have allowed the Others to be harmed, I am bad and deserve punishment. Yet, unlike the powerful idealized, ones, there is a chance that my real vulnerability would be exposed and I could fall to the bottom. (Ibid, p. 480).

Following the intensely-explored Fairbairn's notion that it is preferable to assume the burden of guilt than to project it on the terrible father (Fairbairn 1952), Benjamin also relates the pervasiveness of authoritarianism with the need for a lawful world. The more social insecurity we face, the more we seem to need the protection of an ideal father, and the more we need to hide his violent qualities, projecting blame and insecurity on others. In her words, "The moral defense of authority is writ large — the more social chaos is fomented by the frightening, chaotic, and transgressive authoritarian parent, the more his fearful intentions must be cloaked." (2021, p. 408).

Nonetheless, the intersubjective theory understands that idealization and objectification are usually mutual processes, not one-sided ones. Therefore, it cannot be content with blaming the others, such as Trump, the Republicans, or even the (white) men. Accordingly, the dynamic of dissociation under massive contradictions affects everyone, including the progressive forces in the country. Indeed, Benjamin denounces that representatives of the left wing were unable to challenge Trump's appeal because instead of assuming their complicity with the system, working through the history of slavery and economic exploitation in the country, they preferred to dissociate from this complicity, perhaps due to the guilt and fear of perishing in the seemingly immutable system in which only one can live. For many left-wing politicians, perhaps it was too frightening and uncomfortable to identify with the downtrodden discarded citizens. Thus, they struggled to succeed under the rules of the system. However, guilty of their efforts at self-protection and their interest in power, they continued "moving up the ladder of meritocracy while lamenting inequality." (Benjamin, 2017, p. 474).

Under dissociative protections, these politicians failed to point out and name the problems affecting American democracy, insisting on a shallow possibility of reconciliation that did not address these issues deeply enough. They failed to point out that capitalism, inequality, individualistic meritocracy, nationalism, austerity, and the glorification of whiteness all contradict

the democratic system. Since they failed to denounce these problems, they could not defend democracy: "Refusing to believe in an enemy force that is antithetical to democracy and cannot be contained within it (the existence of an irreconcilable opposition) impedes the defense of democracy." (Ibid, p. 475). Therefore, they ended up identified as a distant and irresponsible elite.

Similarly, Claudia Leeb points out that the absence of a structural critique of the current economic system weakened the left wing because those most affected by the system channeled their resentment towards other available solutions other than the radical alteration of the *status quo*. The result is that:

> One of the central reasons for Trump's appeal is the absence of a rigorous critique on capitalism on the left in the United States, which has largely arranged itself with free market capitalism. Trump's 'critique' on capitalism, however skewed, helped him earn the vote of the working-classes. (Leeb, 2018a, p. 311).

Benjamin agrees with this diagnosis. In her article of 2017, she affirmed that the left should point out its own failures in offering workers an alternative. However, in 2021, she complemented this idea by suggesting that not only left-wing politicians but practically everyone occupies ambiguous positions in our complex society, being both good and bad, victims and perpetrators. That might be difficult to admit. She, for example, admits occupying contrasting identities, being a privileged white American but also the daughter of an immigrant, economically insecure, and politically persecuted family. In the midst of current and past contrasting identities, we tend to deny our participation in perpetuating suffering, choosing to blame others instead. She explains:

> Despite one's current position, past vulnerabilities can merge with the insecurity aroused by constant demands for performance and undermining of our social safety net. We may struggle to admit being implicated in the vast inequality that at the same time (consciously or unconsciously) intensifies everyone's insecurity, especially the threatened middle class. And even when we admit it, we are still powerless, have no say in the social distribution of wealth to the few, cannot affect the owning class and their agents that fail to protect our society from social and environmental breakdown. Our contradictory position is typified by the alternation between altruism and self-protective responses for which we feel guilt and shame. Awareness of privilege can engender a counter-move in which we gloss over this helplessness and vulnerability. (Benjamin, 2021, p. 403).

Speaking directly to the American liberals with whom she identifies, Benjamin admits that it is difficult to acknowledge harming others or occupying a privileged position, especially since their idealized political identity depended on the principles of justice and equality for all. Their privileges and self-interest contrast with their political ideals. Still, the strategy of insisting on being the good ones has not served to counter the dissociation:

> Our question is how implicated subjects who nominally support freedom for all contain the conflict between a socially mandated identity organized around self-protection and the one organized by our ideals, on which we base our sense of goodness and worthiness. There can be no containing Third for this conflict without acknowledgment of it; without

bearing knowledge of harm. Holding on to the nostrum 'we are better than that' has not served as a depressive integration of good with bad; more often it served an attempt to refuse knowledge of America's aggression and terror. (Ibid, p. 406-407).

This process culminates in an intensely charged political field loaded with excessive blame and fear. The meritocratic social structure, condensing the vital possibilities, attracts a general fascination, imprisoning both right- and left-wing supporters in a symbolic and concrete struggle. The intersubjective space is made impossible, so there is no room for ambiguity and the revision of positions. What occurs is then the clash of opposing narratives of victimization. The gradual tearing up of the lawful world plunges the citizens into an insecure and arbitrary reality in which they feel abandoned and isolated. All feel they are done to; all fear they may deserve to die within a contradictory, insecure, and violent social structure.

The apparent absence of lawfulness calls for a strong father that promises to reinstate order, putting an end to the war of the sons against each other and eliminating the corrupt ones. In times of an absent lawful world, the oedipal father arises as a protection against extreme vulnerability and fear of perishing. But this saving father barely hides the controlling, all-powerful, and oppressive side of his authority. The idealization of the oedipal father, as Benjamin argues since *The Bonds of Love*, has roots in the impossibility of facing the reality of an unsafe world "where a dangerously selfish, narcissistic primal father is in control." (Benjamin, 2017, p. 482).

Benjamin clearly avoids reducing her analysis to a demand for "more reason," which would mean an evasion of responsibility or a comfortable projection of blame onto the other side. Instead, she admits the responsibility of "American liberals" or progressive forces, who for years dissociated from the concrete sufferings of the people and their own participation in the system. At the same time, she insists on the structural and historical dynamics of the problem, not failing to mention that, as long as the capitalist system, the nationalist ideal, and social inequality remain, there will be an insurmountable paradox between the structural foundation of the social system and the democratic ideal of justice and equality. Thus, for her, a social contradiction in the background motivates a psychological process of dissociation and self-protection under ideological narratives.

In summary, a Benjaminian diagnosis of current society would go as follows. The fear of deserving to die or fail in our deeply unstable and unequal system, especially under the individualist and competitive neoliberal mentality, drives individuals towards a leader that guarantees their merit and goodness, purging them of their shame. The authoritarian leader offers the much-needed sense of lawfulness, which became too weak and untrustful in the last years under rising inequality and

neoliberal demobilization of social security. However, his protection is not enough to contain the excessive affects that the situation of crisis generates. It can only discharge them into otherness, mainly into the immigrants, black people, women, etc. Thus, the blame goes back and forth, generating further violence and resentment. This initial diagnosis arises from combining psychoanalytic concepts with a critique of neoliberalism, capitalism, modern reason, patriarchal culture, and other interdisciplinary topics. Thus, further research on these subjects could make this diagnosis more robust, adding important contextual information to the theoretical diagnostic task.

In addition, Benjamin analyzes the particular context of the United States, but her diagnosis could be adapted to other countries that face similar problems with the proper corrections and the help of other social sciences. In the case of Brazil, we can speculate that social contradictions fueling dissociation are related to the country's colonial history, the growing levels of inequality, the cultural crisis of religious and moral references, the demobilization of collective structures of solidarity, neoliberal politics, and other elements currently studied by social scientists. Moreover, moving the normative discussion from the right v. wrong framework to the bodily vulnerability and the economy of suffering, I believe that Benjamin's model might help analyze current conservative movements or the "new right" in Brazil. The paradox of analyzing these groups is that while progressive forces usually consider their ideology oppressive, they claim a victimizing status. A psychoanalytically informed social theory can help make sense of this paradoxical context, validating the sources of their suffering but also pointing out the oppression.[58]

Now that we have a picture of the direction of a Benjaminian diagnosis of current society, we shall ask, what about Benjamin's understanding of emancipation? Where does she place the foothold for critique? Certainly, as I hope to have shown, her late intersubjective model does not avoid a profound and negative understanding of the individual. Like Adorno and Horkheimmer's view in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Benjamin sees nature or the body's organic existence as a source of an antinomy between the individual and society. Despite rejecting the dualism of drive theory and a strong concept of the death drive, she sees the unavoidable excess of affects and the fear of death as generating permanent tension within and between the individuals, thus necessitating a form of containment. Repression as self-containment is undoubtedly needed to deal with this excess. However, internalization can also be alleviated when part of negativity is disposed of and contained in an intersubjective space. Thus, while agreeing on the need for repression and

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[58] On this issue in Brazil, see Melo, 2021.

self-containment due to natural disruptive dispositions, Benjamin also sees the possibility of mutuality as a way of dealing with them.

The author agrees that the more we deny our organic existence via the omnipotent desire for perfection, self-sufficiency, and immortality, the more we get caught up in the object, as the Hegelian master gets caught up in the object-like world he dominates. Nevertheless, in her latest view, intersubjectivity is no longer opposed to the vulnerable reality of the body. Intersubjectivity, as Benjamin understands it, does not cancel the insurmountable gap between nature and civilization, the body and society, death and justification, the object and the subject. What the intersubjective encounter does is reduce the dissociation regarding this gap, allowing us to look more closely at our own vulnerability, partially freeing ourselves from its unspeakable shadow. The accepted presence of this body and its vulnerability reduces its apparent absence, forever present as a hunting ghost or a terrible threat.

Benjamin offers a dialectic intersubjectivity based on the subject's partial destruction in a concrete encounter with the other. Her theory has the advantage of recognizing both the place of anti-sociability in human relations and glimpsing the possibility of intersubjectivity found in the survived failure of self-justification. This model offers a vision that is not idealized nor overly rational, while it also creates a possible ground for democratic aspirations.

Benjamin's model informs a democratic society rooted in the fact of mutual vulnerability, in which no one is perfectly good or deserving, but all can live in peace. Democracy would depend on dynamic processes of breakdown and restoration of recognition, which perturb the system, defy dissociation, and generate guilt, while insisting on the reconstitution of the lawful world, promoting embodied identification and the mutual mourning of ideal expectations. Emancipation is not a final state of autonomy and harmony but a dynamic and constant process of creating thirdness and moving power relations forward, destroying and reconstructing the lawful world.

To this end, the Habermasian communicative practice is clearly not enough as a democratic practice because it disregards the excess, the aggressive potential, and the limits to symbolic communication. As we saw, in traumatic cases, when the Third is effaced, the symbolic or intellectual resources may generate further dissociation from suffering. The procedural or rhythmic dimension of recognition is needed in these cases, processing recognition via an embodied process of identification with the other.

In addition, Benjamin's model of recognition is different from Honneth's. Recognition for her is a mutual process that entails a certain lack of recognition of oneself – since one faces one's monstrousness and strangeness – and of the others – since they emerge as fundamentally diverse than what I can perceive.

Besides, receiving and giving recognition are correlated actions linked to the possibility of inhabiting the space of thirdness. Thus, struggles for recognition, in Honneth's sense, might also be not enough to counter authoritarian tendencies. The bestowing of recognition to the victims may not be enough to recompose the social fabric. The victims also must actively recognize the oppressor in return, confronting their own badness, the ambiguity of their desires, and their knowledge of terrible things. That is, the victims should inhabit a lawful world not as idealized or valued identities but as ambiguous, complex, and independent individuals who have the power to bestow recognition to their others. That means that more than social rights, which can be dissociated from suffering, we need the mutual recognition of vulnerability. As the author affirms when concluding *Beyond Doer and Done To*:

> Absent the social and political forms of thirdness that mediate between testimony of suffering and demands for justice while offering practical means of making amends, the attachment to identity becomes organized by the imaginary battle of 'Only one can live.' For this reason, even in the political arena, where this battle is inflamed and exploited by demagogues like Trump, the effort to counter dissociation of harming requires more than the abstract language of rights. It needs to include the idea of recognizing the humanity of the other and the fact of harming as respect for suffering, an invitation to redress harming. (Benjamin, 2018, p. 247).

Considering the unequal and predatory world we live in, under capitalism and neoliberalism, we may need to confront contradictions within this system, exposing them beyond protective dissociation. This process may involve acknowledging that we all are inevitably caught up in these contradictions. Despite the pain involved in admitting that our self-interest may be harmful in this system, this is the way that leads to the unmasking of it. Acknowledging harm is crucial to reverse the trend of denial, being "an important part of breaking the knot of mystification." (Benjamin, 2021, p. 404). Benjamin proposes the metaphor that we may need to confront, first and foremost, the predatory wolf within us: "The wolf also lies within, and the inability to confront that one's own self-interest feeds that wolf." (2017, p. 484).

However, there is a paradox here. While we need to acknowledge the wolf within if we want to work through the massive guilt it provokes, we do not have any incentives to do so because this wolf that we are do not deserve to live. The same goes for everyone in the system. Thus, to confront others with their guilt is perceived as a violent attack or accusation. Especially when we

lack a vision of repair, the knowledge of terrible things is excessive, being coded as an attack or an invasion: "To confront people with refused knowledge [...] is experienced more as being mugged than being enlightened (Wilderson, 2020). Refused knowledge is unconsciously coded as 'refuse' — toxic waste; it is attacked as an invasion as is the messenger." (Benjamin, 2021, p. 404-405). For instance, the claim that "all can live," as was articulated by the Black Lives Matter movement, was read as secretly denying that white men deserve to live:

> Perhaps our strategy needs much more explicitly to offer the potential of repair. In the United States, for instance, whites who have been manipulated as part of the Southern strategy have had great difficulty admitting the harm that blacks suffered, and continued to suffer, without imagining they will be blamed and thus deserving retaliatory deprivation or even annihilation (deprivation for the smug deniers, annihilation for the traumatized supremacists). (Benjamin, 2017, p. 483).

What can counter fear and dissociation is a negative vision of repair that does not undo harm and oppression but allows working through them. Lacking a vision of repair, "the critique arouses tremendous annihilation fear that we then do not deserve to live." (Ibid, p. 486). Thus, on the one side, we need to call out and face the social system's contradictions. However, on the other side, we need a vision of repair that guarantees that all can live, despite the collective blame and comprehensive involvement in harming – the fact that none of us may deserve to live.

In this context, what our democracies may be missing is not simply the bestowing of rights or social prestige to some social groups (even if we certainly miss these elements as well). As I interpret Benjamin's framework, what we may be missing the most is the *guarantee of survival*, or *surpluses of survival*, which allow the subjects to venture beyond idealizations, risking their lives to construct new lawful worlds. That may include material guarantees of survival embodied in social institutions so that victims and perpetrators feel safe enough to surrender to thirdness.

Benjamin argued that to halt the defensive cycle of retaliation or the ping pong of blame in which each side makes the other psychologically insecure, we need a vision that ensures that "more than one can live." Despite utterly disagreeing with Trump's voters, his opponents should denounce the points of disagreement while offering a reparative solution, avoiding the conclusion that someone deserves to die. Benjamin insists against the narrative of victimization: "Our aim cannot be simply holding onto the moral edge of being the true victims. That is a trap. If we have a moral edge, it is to end victimization by demonstrating the agency involved in making reparation and in embracing the position of the Third." (Ibid, p. 484). Beyond the narrative of victimization, we may need to rely on the moral Third. That involves a depressive politics or a shared depressive position

that acknowledges harm so that all can take responsibility for making amends and repairing the world.

Similarly, both Allen (2021) and McAfee (2019), inspired by Melanie Klein, have recently advocated "depressive democratic politics," referring to the Kleinian "depressive position," in which the self bears ambivalence, elaborates the loss of idealized references, and seeks to make amends for its own aggressiveness. This depressive politics, then, would reinforce the importance of democratic deliberation and collective mourning of idealized references, which "enables the depressive insight that those with whom we fervently disagree are not evil incarnate, but whole people, with good and bad parts." (Allen, 2021, p. 197). Mentioning the "depressive position," Benjamin approaches the conclusion of these authors, reinforcing that we need to foster a social orientation aimed at reparation instead of simply assigning "all rightness and goodness to ourselves." (Benjamin, 2017, p. 481). For her, "we need to hold a position that realizes that one group feels endangered by the others' protest." (Ibid).

The need for an authoritarian father may diminish when an alternative lawful world is restored or when the citizens feel that they are not entirely helpless, having a say in their own reality. Once we can be responsible for repairing the world, we can also acknowledge harm:

> For that tendency to resist knowing can diminish as helplessness is overcome, as people are empowered by fighting for justice and struggling to make repair. We can step out of doer and done to, acknowledge harm, when we are able to take reparative action together — when we are part of a loving and beloved community. (Benjamin, 2021, p. 410).

In this situation, it is through the belief in the Third that we may repair the lawful world, moving from manic dissociation into mourning. However, beyond "depressive politics," Benjamin's theory implies that we need public policies that foment social care and survival. More than democratic deliberations, even if they work to offer repair and advance the work of mourning, we may need the concrete development of collective forms of Third, materialized in institutions that promote social protection. Deliberations, especially intellectual ones, may not be enough to counter dissociation. We may need more than deliberative forums to sustain democracy because deliberation can go around and get stuck in self-justificatory narratives, especially in situations of intense vulnerability. To create extra supplies of survival in times of crisis, we may need social forms of holding.

At the end of *Beyond Doer and Done To*, Benjamin concludes, "The function of the Third — representing a lawful world in which more than one can live — needs to be socially embodied in genuinely protective institutions. Failing that, we will continue to struggle against persecutory

anxieties attached to the fear that Only one can live." (2018, p. 247). Thus, some elements that could help us deal with the current crisis of democracy are further guarantees of survival via institutions and public policies that offer protection and social care. That would foster the subject's propensity to risk self-protection and overcome dissociation, thus generating mutual recognition and possibly reconstructing a legitimate lawful world. In addition, concrete and embodied social actions are important demonstrations that summon into being a reality in which the social world is perceived as caring and welcoming. In places with high economic inequality, such as Brazil, this may involve redistributive public policies. For this reason, even though it is crucial to dispute the excluding fantasy politically, through the creation of a democratic space of dialogue, in which authoritarian leaders are unmasked but not "sent to the guillotine" (Benjamin, 2017, p. 481), it is also necessary to stimulate concrete structures of social protection, which reduce the feeling of helplessness and tangible danger that encourage self-protection.

To conclude, Benjamin's analysis has the potential to combine a radical critique of capitalism and modern reason with a democratic political practice that contains conflict in the space of thirdness, offering an in-depth diagnosis of social contradictions. Her interpretation has the advantage of recognizing the place of anti-sociability in human relationships – which culminates in the need for vital normative justifications that dissociate from suffering – while it sustains the possibility of intersubjectivity – allowed by the embracing of mutual vulnerability – culminating in a highly ambivalent account of recognition. With this interpretation of Benjamin's work in mind, we can begin to defend a collective world in which, if, in the background, *no one deserves to live*, then all feel safe to live, despite inequalities in individual merit.

The task of restoring the social Third and reinstating the lawful world in our societies may be a long and challenging process, which will need to involve the painful reclaiming of our common vulnerability. It may involve admitting the perpetrator in us or at least assuming the mortality and imperfection of our shared human condition while trying to live together.

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[59] We follow the Associação Brasileira de Normas Técnicas (ABNT NBR 6023).

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