

# MYTHICAL FATE, FACTUAL MENTALITY, AND POLITICAL DELUSION: REPETITION AS A KEY FEATURE OF THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

*Destino mítico, mentalidad fáctica y desvarío político:  
la repetición como elemento clave de la Dialéctica de la Ilustración*

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the problems addressed in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's references to repetition in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Repetition is presented as a particular notion of "immanence of thought" aiming to elucidate a denial of the possibility of social emancipation, inscribed in the conception of mythical fate and in late enlightenment's factual mentality and political delusion. By analyzing the reception of two pivotal sources for the discussion on repetition, Nietzsche and Freud, our aim is to show, both in the points of alignment to their ideas and in the depiction of their limits, how the critical theorists sought to respond to such tendency, which they identified in individual's cognition and psychic life.

*Keywords:* repetition, mimesis, death drive, critical theory, Psychoanalysis, Friedrich Nietzsche.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo explora los problemas abordados en las referencias de Max Horkheimer y Theodor W. Adorno a la repetición en *Dialéctica de la Ilustración*. La repetición se presenta como una noción particular de «inmanencia

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del pensamiento» con el propósito de aclarar una negación de la posibilidad de emancipación social, inscrita en la concepción del destino mítico, así como en la mentalidad fáctica y en el delirio político de la Ilustración tardía. Mediante un análisis de la recepción de dos fuentes fundamentales para la discusión sobre la repetición, Nietzsche y Freud, nuestro objetivo es mostrar, tanto en los puntos de concordancia con sus ideas como en la descripción de sus límites, cómo los teóricos críticos trataron de responder a esa tendencia, que identificaron en la cognición y la vida psíquica del individuo.

*Palabras clave:* repetición, mimesis, pulsión de muerte, teoría crítica, psicoanálisis, Friedrich Nietzsche.

Aiming to elucidate the roots and development of a mode of thinking characterized by an immanent activity, and its consequent inability to prevent the outburst of barbarism, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno present repetition as a shared feature of myth and enlightenment. That is, they aim to understand how enlightened thinking came to inhibit imagination and morality, thereby withdrawing from the pursuit of emancipation and reducing itself to an immanent activity that condemns belief in a better form of social organization.

Along these lines, the notions of fate, blind destiny, retribution, and analogies with the cycle of nature are employed to demonstrate a specific field of entwinement between myth and enlightenment, which we call *immanence of thought*. It describes enlightenment as being presently trapped in a closed cycle that denies the very conception of a new form of social life, and, therefore, all emancipatory change. Moreover, the authors state that a taboo status is placed on everything that does not fit in, indicating a strong affective refusal to it. The result is a strong call for complete adaptation to the *status quo* and the restriction of thought to a narrow horizon of experience and to a sober and realistic set of possibilities, exemplified by the image of an “arid wisdom which acknowledges nothing new under the sun” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002: 8, hereafter DA). Such strong assertions can be understood as a reference to the predominance of positivism, which, according to them, refuses everything that cannot be systematized. They are also connected to their perception that self-preservation came to the fore as the normative guide for every action, leaving morality and imagination aside. Aiming to understand the genesis of this “pure immanence”, a late product of the enlightenment, they refer to humankind’s early confrontation with the closed cycle of the laws of nature,

mediated by a principle of immanence: “the principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself” (DA: 8), of a logic of retribution and fate that haunts mythical entities, mirroring humankind’s confrontation with the laws of nature.

Given that Nietzsche and Freud, who were two pivotal references for the book, also ascribed a central role to repetition in their theories, this raises the question of how closely the perspectives of the critical theorists align with theirs in this aspect. That is, to which point such theoretical construction of the immanence of thought can be related to a certain logic of retribution and to the “eternal return or recurrence of the same” presented by Nietzsche, as well as to the “compulsion to repeat” conceptualized by Freud. Through this investigation, this article will reveal certain similarities, especially Horkheimer and Adorno’s non-adherence to such previous philosophical and psychoanalytical postulations, due to their problematic status for a critical theory of society. While investigating the paths refused by them and highlighting their original approach to the problem of repetition, our purpose is not only to clarify the threat it poses to social emancipation, but, in the end, to understand how the authors found gaps to theorize resistance against these tendencies, even when domination and thinking seem so entangled as in such an account of enlightenment.

The first section of this article describes the path of enlightenment from a representation of repetition as mythical fate and as a first reaction to human vulnerability until its late obsession for control, typical of a *factual mentality*. Illustrated by the contraposition between Francis Bacon’s doctrine and positivism (DA: 2), it designates a manner of thinking concerned exclusively with classification, systematization, and prediction, aiming to enhance its efficacy in the domination of nature. In other words, a strict and narrow type of scientific procedure would have become the sole valid procedure and criteria, extending itself even into Philosophy and social life, since the fully developed enlightened thinking rejects all precedent forms as metaphysical in its own process of development of rationality, and any form of un-adapted attitude as senseless. This section also presents its consequences: the inability to deal with the difference, to imagine another social arrangement and, arising from that, political delusion, regression, and barbarism. The focus is initially on the role of affects associated with fear, such as terror and anxiety, but, above all, on a cognitive development that implies the prevalence of immanence.

In that theorization, one can identify Nietzsche's contribution, despite the limitations of his perspective pointed out by the authors and understand their subsequent option to integrate the critical and non-affirmative elements of his thought.<sup>1</sup>

The following section aims to demonstrate how that affective reaction is further exacerbated because of a subjective tendency to seek the same disintegration of the ego that was being prevented, that is, due to the existence of a force in the opposite sense of self-preservation. This tendency was recognized by the authors as a manifestation of the death drive, uniquely interpreting it through the lens of the anthropologist Roger Caillois' conception of mimicry.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, Freud's biological speculation could not be fully incorporated into a critical theory of society that refuses to explain contemporary events in light of innate psychic features. Therefore, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the compulsion to repeat is not understood as a primary tendency, as it was for Freud and even for Caillois, but as a defensive reaction to the mimetic attraction of the environment. Thus, the interpretation of the myth of Odysseus and the analysis of anti-Semitism both depict a reaction to the anxiety of losing oneself and to the happiness lost in the compulsive quest for self-preservation.

Consequently, what is at stake in such an analysis is not a transposition of a psychoanalytic drive theory or philosophical concepts, but the operation of an anthropological account of subjectivity, which considers its constitution.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche and Freud's contributions are integrated into a narrative of a socially mediated subjective formation, encompassing affects and cognition. They are, above all, mobilized to deploy the self-reflection of enlightened thinking against its tendency to operate immanently.

## 1 FROM MYTHICAL FATE TO FACTUAL MENTALITY AND POLITICAL DELUSION

Repetition is an essential aspect of the entwinement between myth and enlightenment according to Horkheimer and Adorno. Human beings would be initially

<sup>1</sup> Some of these themes were discussed in my broader study on Nietzsche's reception by Max Horkheimer: Fernandes, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> The authors' main reference is the essay "La mante religieuse", which focuses on the strong impression triggered by the insect praying mantis in many cultures (Caillois, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For some interpretations of this conception of anthropology, which does not refer to the specialized discipline, see Marin, 2009, Costa, 2019, Noppen, 2020.

confronted with repetition in the form of the seasons of the year and the corresponding need, once they acquired agricultural skills, to observe the best periods for cultivation and harvesting. In their words, “Nature as self-repetition is the core of the symbolic: an entity or a process which is conceived as eternal because it is reenacted again and again in the guise of the symbol” (DA: 12). Myth refers, therefore, to the repetition found in nature through representations such as cyclical processes, fate, or logics of retribution in which the mythical entities are trapped. For example, even “The mythical monsters under whose power he [Odysseus] falls represent, as it were, petrified contracts and legal claims dating from primeval times”, being “figures of abstract fate” (DA: 45). More importantly, Odysseus’ inability to manage these mythical dangers by fleeing, making a detour, or defeating them by force is a paradigm of the ego confronting overpowering natural threats and, we could add, the internal demands of the unconscious.

Within the development of enlightenment, these mythical representations and science came to be intertwined, both permeated by fear:

“The world as a gigantic analytical judgment, the only surviving dream of science, is of the same kind as the cosmic myth, which linked the alternation of spring and autumn to the abduction of Persephone. (...) The postulation of the single past event endows the cycle with a quality of inevitability, and the terror radiating from the ancient event spreads over the whole process as its mere repetition” (DA: 20-21).

At a later stage, one witnesses a regression to the repetition of the existent in which “The more completely the machinery of thought subjugates existence, the more blindly it is satisfied with reproducing it.” (DA: 20).

To understand this development, it does not suffice to analyze rationality’s conceptual framework. The mediation of the affects is crucial for it, since subjective formation was marked by terror, which is a reaction characteristic of the confrontation with danger without preparation. In this regard, it is essential to refer to Inara Marin’s presentation of the difference between anxiety [*Angst*], as a state of expectation and preparation for an encounter with danger, fear [*Furcht*], which implies the reference to an object, and terror [*Schreck*], as a confrontation with danger without preparation, according to Freud’s conceptual framework.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In reference to the differentiation proposed by Freud in *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920) and *Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926). James Strachey translated *Schreck* as “fright”, but here “ter-

In *Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud stated that the most primordial danger lies in the infant's inherent vulnerability, arising from the unique biological condition of human beings characterized by an extended period of development outside of the womb. The disturbance within the psychic economy resulting from the inability to satisfy basic needs is experienced as a displeasure in the face of which the infant is powerless and unprepared to master. That becomes the prototype for the anxiety that emerges in the absence of an object libidinally invested and, in general, for the subsequent forms of anxiety.<sup>5</sup>

Analogously, from a phylogenetic standpoint, humankind was confronted with its vulnerability when measuring strength against an overwhelming nature. Horkheimer and Adorno argued that, in response to this vulnerability, enlightenment aimed at "liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters" (DA: 1). At first glance, this could be interpreted as a struggle driven by an impulse for self-preservation. It could also appear that enlightenment would promote the emergence of a new emancipated world, in terms of it becoming more capable to master the repetition of the natural cycle. However, it became trapped in immanence, and it finished by representing social life as a hostile external world.

Their approach involved identifying immanence as a principle permeating both myth and enlightenment. This is how they arrived to theorize what they call the principle of immanence:

"The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself. The arid wisdom, which acknowledges nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played out, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self-preservation through adaptation - this barren wisdom merely reproduces the fantastic doctrine it rejects: the sanction of fate which, through retribution, incessantly reinstates what always was" (DA: 8).

That is, by guiding itself by this principle, enlightenment would have been captured in an obsession for unity, systematicity, and rigid identity, as illustrated by the reference to Oedipus' response to the Sphinx: "That being is man" (DA: 4).

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ror" was preferred to mark the accent of a strong affection. For further elucidation of its application to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see: Marin, 2009: 149-151.

<sup>5</sup> See chapters VIII and IX of Freud, 1959: 132-149.

The very conception of emancipation is impacted hereafter: the relationship to otherness and the ability to imagine a different social order are impacted by a deep-rooted belief in immanence, typical of a rigidified ego that occupies itself with compulsive control and seeks to all incorporate into a system. This is also evident when the authors address projection as a crucial mechanism for anti-Semitism.

However, the key to understanding the development of enlightened thinking linked to immanence is not immediately related to Freud's conception of repetition. Not in its first presentation, that is, in the discussion on the technique of clinical practice outlined in "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (1914). Neither according to the 1919/1920s<sup>6</sup> reformulation that posited the compulsion to repeat as the basis of his late drive theory when developing the concept of death drive. This later formulation where the compulsion to repeat is characterized as a primary force that is beyond the pleasure principle and implicated in the very conception of what constitutes a drive<sup>7</sup> is not echoed by critical theorists. Not because they deny it, but because their concerns lead to a different methodological approach to the problem, avoiding the emphasis on its biological aspect and refraining from speculations about inorganic life. Freud's contribution will be discussed in the next section, as in the current presentation of the link between mythical and enlightened repetition the reference to Nietzsche is more elucidating.

In this discussion, one can trace a resource to a certain logic of retribution and to the fear and the ensuing impulse to control nature which were considered by Nietzsche as fundamental for understanding human beings. After all, in *On the Genealogy of morals*, he attributed the origin of the gods to the fear inspired by the

<sup>6</sup> The conception first appeared in "The Uncanny" (1919), shortly before the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).

<sup>7</sup> As observed by Assoun (1994: 348), Freud now emphasizes "the being of repetition, or the 'compulsional' of the very drive". This idea is developed in *Beyond the pleasure principle*, where he presents evidence of a tendency to return to a more ancient stage, that is, of a regressive operation in psychic life. The Nirvana Principle represents this tendency of keeping tensions in a minimal state and even abolishing them. The postulation of a tendency to repeat an original state and diminish psychic tensions implies that this drive must be directed towards the most basic state of all - the inorganic - ultimately leading to the existence of a death drive. As Freud wrote: "It would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the drives\* if the goal of life were a state of things which had never yet been attained. On the contrary, it must be an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons becomes inorganic once again then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*' and, looking backward, that '*inanimate things existed before living ones*'" (Freud, 1961: 32, \*translation modified).

conscience of the debit to the ancestors<sup>8</sup> and, in *Human All Too Human*, interpreted religion as an incipient attempt to impose laws over nature, by coercion.<sup>9</sup> He also connected fear and the need for knowledge in *Gay Science*, by asking: “And isn't our need for knowledge precisely this need for the familiar, the will to uncover among everything strange, unusual, and doubtful something which no longer unsettles us? Is it not the instinct of fear that bids us to know?” (Nietzsche, 1996: 214, §355).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, fear, an impulse to control and the quest for knowledge, elements found later in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, are already entangled in his account of subjectivity.

Nietzsche also devoted significant attention to a logic according to which “everything has its price; all things can be paid for”, as part of the civilizational process of domestication of humankind, where memory, the ability to measure values and to calculate means and ends emerge (Nietzsche, 1989: 70 - II-8). Similarly, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* presents a conception of retribution as a logic moving from myth to enlightenment. It can be summarized in the formula “everything that happens must atone for the fact of having happened” (DA: 8), as well as in the image of a “blind destiny”:

“The world controlled by mana, and even the worlds of Indian and Greek myth, are issueless and eternally the same. All birth is paid for with death, all fortune with misfortune. While men and gods may attempt in their short span to assess their fates by a measure other than blind destiny, existence triumphs over them in the end” (DA: 11).

In mythical representations, it implies the imprisonment not only of humankind but even of gods and mythical entities, since they are bound to follow their role designed by a contract, that is, to reproduce their acts, and to linger to their

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche writes: “The *fear* of the ancestor and his power, the consciousness of indebtedness to him, increases, according to this kind of logic, in exactly the same measure as the power of the tribe itself increases, as the tribe itself grows ever more victorious, independent., honored, and feared. (...) If one imagines this rude kind of logic carried to its end; then the ancestors of the *most powerful* tribes are bound eventually to grow to monstrous dimensions through the imagination of growing fear and to recede into the darkness of the divinely uncanny and unimaginable: in the end, the ancestor must necessarily be transfigured into a *god*. Perhaps this is even the origin of gods, an origin therefore out of fear! ...” (Nietzsche, 1989: 89 (II-19).

<sup>9</sup> In *Human All Too Human*, we read: “The meaning of the religious cult is to determine and constrain nature for the benefit of mankind, that is to say, to impress upon it a regularity and rule of law which it does not at first possess; while in the present age, one seeks to understand the laws of nature so as to accommodate oneself to them” (Nietzsche, 1996: 65 -§111).

<sup>10</sup> As highlighted by Patrick Wotling (1995), Nietzsche assigned an essential role to fear at the foundation of culture, throughout all its stages, and as an impulse to master reality.



right to receive sacrificial goods. In any human attempt to bypass the sacrificial obligations or the consequences of their neglect through deceit, that is, by defrauding such contract, the principle of equivalence must be taken into account, as it stands as the very logic one tries to subvert (DA: 39). This is how immanence permeates both theoretical backgrounds as a description of early forms of cognition.

Furthermore, the importance of repetition was formulated by Nietzsche in the more notorious notion of “eternal return or recurrence of the same”. The conception that the same phenomena are repeated in individual and collective history is established through a narrative based on natural sciences, and the essence of time and universe. However, what is central in his approach is not such a narrative itself, which can be read as having a hypothetical or fictional character, but the motivation for its formulation. Its core is the creation of new values and an affirmative attitude towards life, regardless of whether it is globally happy or valuable, an attitude presented as *amor fati*. Thus, this concept can be understood as an “ethical imperative”, as proposed by Mattos.<sup>11</sup> After all, what is at stake is the challenge of accepting the reproduction not only of pleasant moments but also of painful ones, and, therefore, of preventing resentment against the past. As summarized by Assoun (2018: 310), one finds there, on one hand, the more tragic and harsh truth, but, from another standpoint, also the biggest hope.

This is certainly not how repetition figures in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where neither Nietzsche’s account of subjective formation nor his cosmological narrative was fully assimilated. In fact, Horkheimer and Adorno’s reception of Nietzsche did not comprise elements connected to a cosmological interpretation: concepts such as eternal return and *amor fati* were set aside, while others such as “overman” [*Übermensch*] and “will to power” [*Wille zur Macht*] were referenced only in a critical light. First, it is important to examine the intellectual context in the 1930s and 1940s to unveil a significant motivation for that. After all, those were the concepts upon which the broadly disseminated national-socialist interpretations of Nietzsche relied. Above all, they would contradict the “dialectical interpretation”<sup>12</sup> of his

<sup>11</sup> According to Mattos, as an ethical imperative, “the eternal return comes to serve as a ‘test’ to verify to what extent the strong ones are willing to say ‘Yes to all the things’: if the individual is capable of saying Yes to everything experienced, exactly as it happened, so he/she effectively affirms life” (Mattos, 2013: 229).

<sup>12</sup> This dialectical interpretation of Nietzsche’s concepts by Max Horkheimer was disclosed by John Abromeit (2011: 281-282).

philosophy set in motion by Horkheimer and endorsed by Adorno.<sup>13</sup> To sum up, the authors did not corroborate the propositional character intrinsic to these conceptions since, according to them, his initial diagnosis was already compromised by the lack of dialectic and insight into the effects of a capitalistic society on individuals.<sup>14</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno sought to retain the critical elements of his thought, also observed by Agnès Gayraud (2010). They leaned towards, above all, the analysis they could employ in their historical anthropological investigation to provide a psychological analysis of culture and a truthful picture of enlightenment. Later, their references to Nietzsche's ideas would be problematized by Jürgen Habermas, who concentrated his attention on their repercussions concerning critique and method. The aporia already announced by the authors in the Preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would be read by Habermas from the perspective of what he called "performative contradiction", arising from a self-referential critique of reason. According to him, it undermined the very foundations of critique. In addition, the approximation to Nietzsche is viewed as a detour in Horkheimer's intellectual development which would have engaged him in contradictions.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the limits of the approximation with Nietzsche drawn by the authors themselves and the controversies emerging from it, it is essential to highlight the cognitive aspects analysed relying on his previous developments: enlightened thought's deep-rooted belief in the reproduction of the past, a conditioning to view sameness instead of the diverse, a blockage of free imagination, all fueled by a compulsion of control. In line with his analyses, Horkheimer and Adorno described that enlightened thinking, while directing itself against magical practices

<sup>13</sup> See Gillian Rose (1978: 15-34) and Karin Bauer (1999: 1-4)'s analysis that comprises his other works, as well as his own take on the concept of *amor fati* in the aphorism 61 of *Minima moralia* (Adorno, 2005: 97-98).

<sup>14</sup> A balance of Nietzsche's thought is drawn in a 1950's radio interview, where they discussed the problematic character of his proposals: Adorno, Gadamer, Horkheimer, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> This can be seen in Chapters IV and V of his conferences, first published in 1985 (Habermas, 1990), as well as in his article on the development of Max Horkheimer's work (Habermas, 1986). More recently, however, such theses were challenged, and some scholars attempted to complexify their account of this approximation to Nietzsche, analyzing specific claims and methodological perspectives. Karin Bauer (1999) questions three of the main critiques to the reference to Nietzsche in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: its impact on the search for emancipatory potentials, the contradictory status of critique, and its implications for Horkheimer and Adorno's work as a whole. Martin Saar (2002, 2008) proposed a rapprochement between critical theory and Nietzschean and Foucauldian contributions, emphasizing the potential of genealogical critique. And, more recently, Amy Allen (2016) centered her interest in a discussion on progress and genealogy.

and myth, remained ritualistic and stuck in immanence precisely because of this tendency to control, systematize and mathematize the world. Following on from this, all possible relations to objects and what is diverse in them must be organized by formula and concept, which means not leaving space for particularity and to what is not manageable. Marked by terror, the process of work permeated by the division of labor is a crucial mediation to the institution of such logic that establishes “chains of inference and dependence, the superordination and coordination of concepts” (DA: 16).

The restriction on free and uncoordinated imagination arises when the factual is taken as the sole reference for thought and actions, and self-preservation is the only directive. By treating everything as a scheme and all freezing in its deadly compulsion, this form of knowledge eliminates the hope of transcendence. In this movement, enlightenment also displays its bond with magic thinking, since in both any deviation leads to punishment, that is, “in both cases violation of the taboo carries a heavy price for the offender” (DA: 19). In sum, this leads to a tendency of reinstating the past and to “the blocking of the theoretical imagination”, which, according to the authors, “paved the way for political delusion” (DA: xvi).

These analyses are crucial, first, because this logic of immanence is closely related to the key subject of the book: that “ambivalent relationship of enlightenment to power” of which Nietzsche had a broader and nearly unparalleled insight, in the critical theorists’ own words (DA: 36). But, above all, because this problematic transcends the field of a description of the process of enlightenment, comprising that of concrete political struggles and the question of resistance. Regarding the first point, one can observe in the national-socialist appropriations of Nietzsche a quest to affirm and reiterate that very image of fate he had described, aiming to create their own narrative, as is the case in the affirmation of the predestination of the Führer.

Intending to promote resistance to this contemporary tendency, the authors are interested in Nietzsche’s negativity, as well as in the ideas of all those they named as the “darker writers of the bourgeoisie”. Along these lines, in the Excursus II, “Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality”, dedicated mainly to Marquis de Sade and Nietzsche’s moral critique, they proposed: “In taking fright at the image in its own mirror, that thought [de Sade’s] opens to view what lies beyond it” (DA: 92), adding that “it is the fact that de Sade did not leave it to its enemies to be horrified by the Enlightenment which makes his work pivotal to its rescue” (DA: 92). This

declaration is extended to Nietzsche, as their procedure is approximated: “they both took science at its word. In pursuing the implications of reason still more resolutely than the positivists their secret purpose was to lay bare the utopia that is contained in every great philosophy, as it is in Kant's concept of reason: the utopia of a humanity which, itself no longer distorted, no longer needs distortion” (DA: 93).

The challenge to emancipation is nonetheless maintained, since all deviation of the existent is the source of anxiety, and the disrespect of this taboo is threatened with punishment. Therefore, as well demonstrated by Pierre-François Noppen, psychic life is a fundamental concern for the authors, who investigated “how dynamics related to drives fundament the development of the cognitive apparatus, setting in motion enlightenment’s process and enabling the understanding of its deviation” (Noppen, 2023: 78). Thus, this demonstration can only be complete with reference to their displacements of Freud’s drive theory.

## 2 DEATH DRIVE AND MIMESIS

Horkheimer and Adorno refer to Freud’s drive theory through a peculiar approach to mimicry and to the development of the mimetic impulse in relation to enlightened thinking. This concept of mimesis permeates different movements of the book: displayed as the mimicry performed by animals, as a trace of an ontogenetical development, but, above all, implicated in a phylogenetic process. After all, it was crucial for the development of humankind’s ability to dominate nature, from a magic stage to scientific thinking. Later, in its perverted form, that is, as the mimesis of mimesis, it is decisive for the emergence of anti-Semitism. The interest in this subject is rooted in theoretical discussions from that time, namely, in the reception of Roger Caillois’ investigations by Walter Benjamin and in the proximity of the critical theorists to the Collège de Sociologie.<sup>16</sup> Beyond this intellectual context, however, it is important to look at the implication of mimesis in their description of the imitation of the Jews by the leader of mass movements and its reception by the public.<sup>17</sup> From this empirical fact, the study of the vicissitudes of the mimet-

<sup>16</sup> However, it is worth noting that Walter Benjamin’s approach of the subject took different directions. See the works of Früchtel, 1986: 17, Gagnebin, 1997: 96-97, and Abadi, 2015: 33-45.

<sup>17</sup> See the V these on “Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment” (DA: 151-152).

ic impulse in civilization becomes a tool to elucidate the fall of enlightenment into domination and its regression to barbarism, linked to the return of the repressed.

Even though the following elaboration of the death drive in analogy to Caillois' conception of mimicry is presented only in one of the notes at the end of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is key to understanding the concept of mimesis that permeates the whole book:

“The strength to stand out as an individual against one's environment and, at the same time, to make contact with it through the approved forms of intercourse and thereby to assert oneself within it—in criminals this strength was eroded. They represented 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. Freud called this the death drive [*Todestrieb*], Caillois le *mimétisme*” (DA: 188-189).

In order to elucidate such displacement, it is essential to look into Horkheimer and Adorno's broader position regarding Psychoanalysis, their appropriation of some of Caillois' ideas, and their analysis of passages of the myth of Odysseus.

By presenting the concept of death drive as one of the possible ways to characterize the phenomenon described above, the authors avoid fully committing to Freud's metapsychology and, therefore, they don't need to follow the biological and speculative hypothesis employed to ground it, neither his final verdict about the primary statute of the compulsion to repeat, as presented in *Beyond the pleasure principle*.

Caillois' (1938: 71) conception of mimicry as a death drive encompassed the Freudian “Nirvana principle” and the compulsion to repeat, but he also claimed that, while in the animal the automatism of the instinct triumphs, humans are able to represent, create images, having a “fabulation function”, as described by Bergson. This solution was not approved by Adorno. In his 1938 review of the essay “La mante religieuse”, he showed significant reservations regarding the biologism followed by Caillois, although recognizing in it a potential contribution to a materialistic analysis taking into account real somatic factors (Adorno, in: Horkheimer, 1980).

From Horkheimer's side, the reasoning behind their position in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* implies a displacement of his early rejection of the death drive. Criticizing it in an essay from 1936, he reaffirmed the commitment of critical theory with

the claim of the historical formation of the individual, rejecting biological determinism (Horkheimer, 1993).<sup>18</sup> This tenet was asserted in the discussions held in 1939 with Adorno to elaborate *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer, 1985, v.12: 439ss). By the 1940s, when this concept was finally appropriated by both of them, there was still a distance between their approach and Freud's formulation. Nevertheless, in the study on anti-Semitism they refer to involuntary movements which the individual does not master: "rigidity of the skin, muscles, and limbs" (DA: 148) and reactions of aversion pointing to an unmanaged terror. In short, since they describe the inability to represent impulses in such a manner, a corporeal reference subsists, even though it is not at the center of their reception of Psychoanalysis.

Furthermore, the following excerpt from Horkheimer's letter to Lowenthal written in October 1942 expresses another aspect of his changed position on death drive and a more developed position on Psychoanalysis:

"The set of concepts connected with the *Todestrieb* [the death drive\*] are anthropological categories (in the German sense of the word). Even where we do not agree with Freud's interpretation and use of them, we find their objective intention is deeply right and that they betray Freud's great flair for the situation" (Horkheimer, in: Jay, 1973: 102, translation modified).

In the direction of an understanding of death drive and compulsion to repeat as "anthropological categories" to be elucidated throughout this article, it must be highlighted for now that this approach is self-declared "orthodox" in the sense that Horkheimer and Adorno opposed the Neo-Freudian revisionist currents. Such theoreticians focused on the importance of the environment for people's behavior, denying drive theory and the conception of libido. As stated by Adorno, since they did so at the expense of the consideration of the dynamics of the unconscious, by highlighting the role of the ego as a tool for adaptation to reality, that would undermine Psychoanalysis' negativity and promote social conformism.<sup>19</sup> For example, Karen Horney, whose paradigmatic position he chose as a target, had criticized Freud for postulating that nothing new could arise after the earlier stages of the child's development. Against that, he emphasized the interest of the investigation

<sup>18</sup> This first reception of Psychoanalysis at the Institute of Social Research is deeply indebted to Erich Fromm's theorizations on its compatibility and complementarity with historical materialism in the early 1930s. However, by the 1940s, Fromm had already left the Institute, and Horkheimer decided to work closely together with Adorno.

<sup>19</sup> See Adorno (1962)'s speech proffered in 1946 and published for the first time in 1952, which targets Karen Horney but that must also be put in the context of Erich Fromm's departure from the Institute in the late 1930s.

of ontogenesis as a reproduction of phylogenesis and claimed that “only if theory calls repetition by its name and insists on the negative always-the-same in the seemingly new can it perhaps force the promise of the new from the always-the-same” (Adorno, 1962: 134).

With these contextual considerations in mind, let's focus on the peculiar way by which Horkheimer and Adorno came to present the effects of repetition on subjectivity. First of all, according to Caillois, mimicry and self-preservation are not identical. Instead, they are only contingently combined and can even be opposed. For example, he mentions how mimicry can increase the risk of death for certain animals, characterizing it as “a dangerous luxury” (Caillois, 1938: 106). From this perspective, mimicry is fueled by a yearning of *assimilation* to the environment, inseparable from the desire for reduction of tensions permeating Freud's formulation of the compulsion to repeat. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, this takes different forms, all subsumed to the broader concept of mimesis. However, this yearning for assimilation can only be fully apprehended if situated in the different phases of the process of enlightenment.<sup>20</sup>

One of these moments deserves closer attention for the investigation of repetition: Odysseus' process of ego formation, which is marked by the constant longing for assimilation, return to an earlier phase of development, fall into mythology, on the one hand, and its resistance fuelled by anxiety, on the other. In each of the episodes the hero surpasses, it appears that a mortal threat must be overcome. However, not all of them pose a real threat of material death. While the encounters with Polyphemus and the sirens imply the imminent risk of death by a form of incorporation (being devoured or drowned in the sea), the Lotus-eaters and Circe actually promise happiness by abandonment of the self, its discipline and goals. That is, they represent, instead of real death, the dispersion and assimilation characteristic of a genuine form of mimesis. What is at stake, therefore, is not the fear

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<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the secondary literature opted to approach the problem departing from the idea of constellation (Früchtel, 1989), by the perspective of a narrative definition (Hullat, 2009), and emphasizing the presentation of its different moments (Noppen, 2017). Noppen's division between different argumentative moments is key for clarifying its vicissitudes of the mimetic impulse: the study of mimesis in its elementary forms, which supports the claim that myth is already enlightenment as a dislocation of magical mimetic practices; followed by the analysis of rational forms of mimesis as the “mimesis of death”; and the ultimate moment of regression of rationality and reversion of enlightenment into mythology, in the mimesis of mimesis. In addition to following the movement presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, this author calls attention to its affective and cognitive dimensions, which are of great interest to the present investigation (see Noppen, 2023: 71-98).

triggered by external threats, but anxiety as a defense to a tendency of ego disintegration. In short, one can detect here a reaction against a primordial mimetic impulse, that is, repression and creation of defence mechanisms against it, and, above all, the persistence of such impulse, analogously as one detects in Psychoanalysis' depicting of a drive.<sup>21</sup>

Because rationality must manage strong external and internal threats to the integrity of the ego, this instance is hardened, and it comes to serve much more as a secondary compulsion for self-preservation than an actual primordial drive of self-preservation. Consequently, death drive as mimetic assimilation as well as the anxiety emerging in response to it are the keys to understand this movement that impels reason to a bond with repetition, with an immanent activity that must reject otherness, all that is new, unknown, and does not fit into a system.

An essential movement in that direction lies in Odysseus' mimicry through language. In brief, when he calls himself "Nobody" when confronting Polyphemus, he "is able to differentiate, to separate name and named object, that is, of overcoming the magical-mimetic identity between name and named", as highlighted by Gagnebin (2006: 31). This illustrates a crucial step towards the formalism that would be fully developed in bourgeois society (DA: 47). From this point onward, as summarized by Wolf (2022: 130), in its relation to objects, rationality "becomes the modern functional equivalent of mimicry", and the "cause behind mimicry is still effective, namely the extreme fear of an incontrollable otherness". One can conclude, then, that rationality is also permeated by affects, namely, fear and hostility to everything that cannot be classified and subject to inclusion in a chain aiming at calculation.

Additionally, the myth of Odysseus also portrays a call for the moderation of the claim of human happiness, since calculation emerges as an imperative in response to that yearning for assimilation:

"The nimble-witted man survives only at the cost of his own dream, which he forfeits by disintegrating his own magic along with that of the powers outside him. He can never have the whole, he must always be able to wait, to be patient, to renounce; he may not eat the lotus or the cattle of Hyperion, and when he steers through the narrows he must include in his calculation the loss of the companions snatched from the ship by Scylla. He wriggles through-that is his

<sup>21</sup> See "Repression" and "Instincts and their Vicissitudes", Freud's (1994, v.14) metapsychological writings presenting the impossibility of eliminating the drive, as well as its vicissitudes.



survival, and all the renown he gains in his own and others' eyes merely confirms that the honor of heroism is won only by the humbling of the urge to attain entire, universal, undivided happiness" (DA: 45).

It is noteworthy that this passage does not simply describe the introduction of the "reality principle", which is essential for the formation of the ego and human survival, but a hardening of the ego that goes beyond it. After all, according to Freud, the reality principle meant to serve the pleasure principle, in the sense that it only delayed satisfaction, still following the purpose of ensuring it whenever possible.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, what is at stake in Odysseus' renunciations and later in the antisemitic rage against the supposed happiness of the Jews is that the very idea of happiness is turned into a taboo, in a process mediated by the interdiction of the free manifestation of the mimetic impulse.

In analogy to Freudian drive theory, these developments indicate the proscription of Eros in its manifestation as libidinal drives, as any loosening of the grip on self-control is considered a threat. Paradigmatically, in the myth of Odysseus, total gratification is condemned, as pictured in the rejection of the Lotus-eaters' life of laziness and of the libidinal desires whose liberation, in the episode of Circe, reverts humans to animality, and, even, to impure animals, the pigs. In relation to anti-Semitism, Rabinbach (2000: 60) observes that the Jews are represented in its imagery as those who refuse to be civilized and submit to the primacy of discipline and work, while their utopia of a "land of milk and honey", where satisfaction without work is possible, became tabooed.

Therefore, all the components of Freud's first and second drive theories are taken into a different light in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Self-preservation, although recognized as a primal drive, a *Naturtrieb*,<sup>23</sup> in a brief passage of the book, is not discussed as a drive, but as a compulsion to control that has become second nature. Its origins lie in the anti-emancipatory and sometimes destructive reaction to anxiety that implies the repetition of the same and the instrumentalization of alterity.<sup>24</sup> Sexual drives fall victim to desexualization, which is not simply an argument

<sup>22</sup> In "Formulation on the two principles of mental functioning", in Freud (1994, v.12).

<sup>23</sup> One reads in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Even self-preservation, as a natural drive like other impulses, has a bad conscience; only bustling efficiency and the institutions created to serve it—mediation, apparatus, organization, systematization as ends in themselves—enjoy the esteem, in practice as in theory, of being deemed reasonable; the emotions are incorporated into this spurious reason" (DA: 72)

<sup>24</sup> In this direction, Genel and Grivaux called attention to the fact that self-preservation is not conceived by the authors as a drive: "Horkheimer and Adorno show how *Aufklärung* displaces self-

concerning social repression or sublimation, but part of a broader stance on the denial of Eros, the opposite and complementary force to death drive according to Freud. In turn, the death drive is presented as a drive related to assimilation, but its origins are not explicitly addressed, as it would mean agreeing to Freud's speculations. And, most importantly for this investigation, compulsion to repeat, the most fundamental element of Freud's second drive theory, emerges at the end of a process and is linked to a deranged compulsion of self-preservation.

As shown, repetition is severed from the domain of metapsychological concepts like the Nirvana Principle, and the genesis of its compulsive character is approximated to the constellation of concepts such as domination, control, and anxiety. Even so, the economic dimension of the psychism present in Freud's theory is still considered, but not in terms of a primary tendency of regression to an earlier state and, hence, beyond the pleasure principle. Instead, this conception of repetition can be related much more to the infant's play that Freud called *fort-da*, through which an infant seeks some mastery of a situation of vulnerability, such as the absence of the mother or primary caretaker (Freud, 1959: 8-11). The *fort-da* is one of the phenomena presented by Freud when he's tentative about the hypothesis of the existence of events beyond the pleasure principle. Therefore, it does not need necessarily to be read as such, as its goal is the control of a situation in favor of homeostasis.

Such mastery over the circumstances, even if imagined, is also a key aspect to Horkheimer and Adorno's approach, as, describing the development of enlightenment, the authors claim that it "seeks to escape the trial of fate and retribution by itself exacting retribution on that trial" (DA: 8), in an attempt to exert control. Thus, it is interesting to observe Benjamin Fong's elaboration of the problem. He calls attention to the consideration of a drive to mastery [*Bemächtigungstrieb*], which is not itself bound with domination, and places the game *fort-da* as a paradigm of the moment when such drive becomes entwined with domination [*Bewältigungstrieb*]. In such a passage, the anti-emancipatory aim of control is instituted, not anymore as self-mastery but as a compulsive attitude (Fong, 2016: 26).

All these remarks, in sum, reveal the particularity of such an approach to repetition and drive theory in general. The perception of the formation of a second nature, which comprises the psychic and cognitive modification of the individuals by

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preservation, understood as mastery, by the weak ego, of the overpowering nature, to the side of domination and repression of the drives" (Genel & Grivaux, 2023: 58-59).

the process of enlightenment and conditions all possible representations of external nature, is crucial for understanding the displacements regarding drive theory. In such a perspective, fascist destructivity is not directly derived from human drives. As Adorno highlights in “Theses on Need” (1942), “Each drive is socially mediated in a manner that what is natural in it appears never immediately, rather always only as produced by society” (Adorno, 2014: 464-467).

This second nature is connected to the denial of the natural aspect of individuals, that is, their drives and longings, and to subjective mutilation. The inability to reflect on these renunciations is a pivotal anti-emancipatory factor. Anti-Semitism is the highest paradigm of the inability to reflect and of the attitude of taking repressed drives as taboo. In the image of the Jews, the antisemites project a happiness that they refuse for themselves and that is perceived as dangerous, along with their own aggression.

In terms of the investigation of emancipatory potentials, Horkheimer and Adorno refuse to reaffirm such logic of repetition, by not recognizing it as the most primordial human tendency. They take as a principle not presenting the drives solely in a natural form and not treating cognition as an ahistorical human trait. This is the source of their particular relation to Nietzsche and Freud’s ideas, who did not envisage an emancipatory exit. For Nietzsche, repetition is external to the individual, and the only possible subjective answer is passivity. In turn, Freud finds its origin within his analysands, pointing therefore to a possible treatment, through transference and working through.<sup>25</sup> However, his conclusions when discussing politics, human aggression, and the possibility of world peace show us how his conception of death drive leads to a pessimistic conclusion.<sup>26</sup>

Differently, Horkheimer and Adorno relied in an anthropology that is not philosophically nor biologically founded, as it does not refer to the human essence or human nature. Instead, it consists of a close scrutiny of a changing human condition. A human condition marked, without doubt, by primal impulses and shared traits, represented in the book by mimesis’ theoretical entwinement with Freudian drive theory and by humans’ initial vulnerability in the face of the external world, a vulnerability that paves the way to affects such as terror, fear and anxiety. But it also involves culture and the effects of the historical transformations over these

<sup>25</sup> See: “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis)” (Freud, 1994, v.12).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, *Civilisation and its discontents* and “Why War?” (Freud, 1994, v.21 and 22).

individuals. Nietzsche and Freud's ideas played, without doubt, an important part on this anthropological investigation. Yet that investigation goes beyond them, as they were accused of taking a certain historically situated structure as what is properly human.<sup>27</sup> In sum, the critical theorists do not fully acquiesce to their conceptions that could lead to a complete pessimism over social emancipation neither to the optimistic position of their contemporary revisionist psychoanalysts, who deny the negativity inherent to drive theory.<sup>28</sup> Instead, they opted to emphasize this negative moment in subjective cognitive and psychic development, paving the way to self-reflection.

### 3 FINAL REMARKS

Throughout this article, it was presented that, from the critical theorists' perspective, repetition is a mechanism of defense and mastery in the face of anxiety. Historically entwined with control and domination, self-preservation is presented as a compulsive attitude that became anti-emancipatory because it was turned into a cognitive and affective tendency to refuse the experience of alterity and the longing for liberation and happiness. In this theoretical elaboration, the incorporation of Nietzsche and Freud's ideas was submitted to the search for emancipatory paths outside a consolidated principle of immanence. This is why Nietzsche's affirmative concepts, as well as his ahistorical analyses were left aside, and the reference to Freud's drive theory required so many displacements. Through such deviations, one apprehends the construction of a particular anthropology aiming to elucidate the formation of a second human nature, not identified with biological traits nor any human essence.

<sup>27</sup> Beyond the aforementioned critiques to Nietzsche, Freud was also heavily targeted. See: the discussions that prepared the writing of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (protocols from January 03<sup>rd</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> 1939, GS 12 : 437-457), as well as Adorno's development in "The Problem of a New Type of Human Being" (1941), against "the assumption of the relative constancy of human nature" postulated by psychology and sustained by Freud (Adorno, 2009 : 461).

<sup>28</sup> The debate over the possible reference to drive theory and its interest for critical theory, as well as its reception of Freudian Psychoanalysis in general, is still heated, as it is evident in proposals which consider its status after an intersubjective turn represented by Jessica Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth's proposals. See, for example, Alford (1988), Whitebook (1995), Fong (2016), Honneth & Whitebook (2016), Jappe (2017), Allen (2021).

As mentioned earlier, Horkheimer and Adorno refrained from a mere adherence to Freud's thesis. However, that did not lead them to what Adorno referred to as the "sociologization of Psychoanalysis" of the neo-Freudians, which reduced the importance of the psychic phenomena in the face of social determinants. This is the sense of Adorno's (1962: 133) statement that it would be a mistake to try to "overcome this negativity by treating the inhuman relationships as if they were already human". On the contrary, Horkheimer and Adorno found in Nietzsche and Freud resources for understanding the negativity and destructivity of their time, situated within subjectivity, and which could not be minimized.

The claim that "If enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate" (DA: xvi) is essential for understanding Nietzsche and Freud's contributions. Regarding the philosopher, the act of mirroring enlightenment's worst tendencies, that is, of not trying to conceal its destructive traits under harmonizing doctrines (DA: 92) is presented as more effective for such a goal of self-reflection. Similarly, Freud's insistence on calling repetition by its name could pave the way beyond it (Adorno, 1962: 134). The image of a mimetic performance presented by Adorno, describing what was depicted as Freud's coldness, is representative of his and Horkheimer's general position: "he wants to free from their captivity the elements of the better that are embedded in the reality. He makes himself so rigid as the petrified conditions to break them" (idem: 135).

At the same time, by preserving the reference to human historical development, Horkheimer and Adorno kept open a space for reflection, which depends on the elaboration of anxiety and the overcoming of pathological forms of projection, even though its effectiveness cannot be easily sketched. It seems, therefore, that the lack of political imagination and the reproduction of the violence could be reversed but the solution is more difficultly envisaged as it must rely, again, on the very rationality which is permeated by mimesis.

## ABBREVIATIONS

DA: HORKHEIMER, Max & ADORNO, Theodor W. (2002): *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. California: Stanford University Press.

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