



Educação e Pesquisa

ISSN: 1517-9702

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Brasil

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Razão, sentido e formação a partir de um diálogo entre Benjamin e Habermas

Educação e Pesquisa, vol. 39, núm. 3, julio-septiembre, 2013, pp. 645-658

Universidade de São Paulo

São Paulo, Brasil

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# Reason, meaning and formation building on a dialogue between Benjamin and Habermas<sup>I</sup>

Claudia Fenerich<sup>II</sup>

## Abstract

This paper addresses formation in the perspective of philosophy, in an attempt to face the problem of how to make sure, under the current social and thinking conditions, an ethical, moral and political guidance is provided with such formation. Focusing on that, building on a dialogue between the thoughts of Habermas and Benjamin established as a result of bibliographical research, the paper proposes and addresses the following issues: is it possible to form (educate) without transmitting ethical contents, without sharing experiences of life?; is it possible to emancipate oneself without assigning meaning to existence?; what is the relationship between reason and meaning? A double assumption orientates the investigation presented herein: ethics, moral and politics are fundamental dimensions of human life, without which there is no parameter for formation; formation for emancipation depends on a experience of the freedom to think, create, express and assign meanings which has necessarily to do with the vitalization of the possibilities of communication between those who share practices of life. Building on the research undertaken, the paper concludes that, in order to favor openness to the other and provide parameters for the autonomous moral judgment – fundamental attitudes for the democratic cohabitation in the present complex societies –, formation cannot do without the transmission of ethical experiences of life, even if this is greatly challenges the secularized reason we have today.

## Keywords

Reason – Meaning – Formation – Ethics.

**I-** This paper summarizes the results of a post-doctorate research *The encounter of the self and the other in the school: from finding weird to understanding*, conducted at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul from August 2011 through July 2012, funded by CNPq.

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# **Razão, sentido e formação a partir de um diálogo entre Benjamin e Habermas<sup>I</sup>**

Claudia Fenerich<sup>II</sup>

## **Resumo**

*O artigo aborda o tema da formação sob a perspectiva da filosofia, buscando enfrentar o problema de como conferir-lhe, nas atuais condições sociais e de pensamento, um direcionamento ético, moral e político. Com esse foco, a partir de um diálogo entre os pensamentos de Habermas e de Benjamin estabelecido com base em pesquisa bibliográfica, propõe e encaminha as seguintes questões: é possível formar sem transmitir conteúdos éticos, sem compartilhar experiências de vida?; é possível emancipar-se sem atribuir sentido à existência?; qual é a relação entre a razão e o sentido? Uma dupla hipótese orienta a investigação apresentada: a ética, a moral e a política constituem dimensões fundamentais da vida humana, sem as quais não há parâmetro para a formação; a formação para a emancipação depende de uma experiência da liberdade de pensar, criar, expressar e atribuir sentidos que passa, necessariamente, pela vitalização das possibilidades de comunicação entre aqueles que compartilham práticas de vida. A partir da pesquisa realizada, o artigo conclui que, para favorecer a abertura ao outro e fornecer parâmetros para o julgamento moral, autônomo – atitudes fundamentais para a convivência democrática nas sociedades complexas atuais –, a formação não pode prescindir do processo de transmissão de experiências éticas de vida, ainda que isso seja um grande desafio perante a razão secularizada de que dispomos hoje.*

## **Palavras-chave**

*Razão – Sentido – Formação – Ética.*

**I-** Este texto sintetiza os resultados da pesquisa de pós-doutoramento O encontro entre eu e outro na escola: do estranhamento ao entendimento, desenvolvida junto à Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul entre agosto de 2011 e julho de 2012, com apoio do CNPq.

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### **Who would dare, if much, to deal with youth by invoking their experience?**

Would it be possible, today, to have ethics, moral and politics as constitutive aspects of human life and, at the same time, articulating elements of the formation process? Would not this a task doubly doomed in these times when we do not count on the possibility of an *a priori* foundation of the human action and when we face multiple world views, in a globalized movement of production aimed at consumption and discard, which generates more and more wealth to few and poverty to many? Such wealth and poverty, it should be remembered, although referring primarily to the conditions of survival, are never restricted to the material dimension, as it also encompasses what we may call the spiritual, cultural or symbolic dimension.

If, on one hand, the intention is rather unmeasured, on the other hand, it seems sufficiently necessary. In addition to ethics, moral and politics, what else can guide human action in a non-mercantile sense and raise existence to a non-natural landing? What, beside these dimensions, may help us to tackle the issue of what to do, socially and individually, with the technical and scientific knowledge acquired along history and enhanced by the processes of cognitive development achieved by Western modernity? And what is the meaning of the cognitive, moral and aesthetical achievements of today if they cannot be reverted into an asset owned by all and if it is not even granted, at least, the possibility of orientating human formation?

Unless we resign to the assumption that history has led us back to the starting point, that is, to the absolute surrender of our lives to natural law, indifferent to human action, it is possible to conceive and insist on the idea of imprinting an ethical, moral and political direction to formation, even if such talks has to do, today, with the challenge of articulating

social inclusion of all with the existential projects of particular individuals and groups without recurring to transcending justifications.

Would it be possible that we find ourselves, at this time of history, entirely deprived of generalizable knowledge that allow us to assign some non-mercantile value to human actions in the course of events? Or do we fear to incur in ideological indoctrination and authoritarianism when transmitting knowledge that allow assign a non-natural and non-instrumental meaning to existence? And is this fear reasonable? Is the cultural knowledge really based on ethical valuations, so particular and irreducible to a shared orientation? Would it not be omission simply not to pass them on?

The difficulties we currently find to give formation an ethical, moral and political nature lead me to question asked by Benjamin in the text *Experience and poverty*: “who will even try to deal with youth invoking his/her experience?” (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 114). *Nobody*, he answers in the same text, dated 1933, since there reigns a poverty of experience and everyone is mute. As it is impossible for a generation to transmit its experience to the next, Benjamin sees an indication of misery in which he located an entire age. When one is deprived of their capacity to share experiences, it is like nothing else links one to the past, to the cultural assets of humankind, and as if these assets had no value any longer. After all, he asks again: “what is the value of the cultural assets, if the experience no longer links them to us?” When the experience, which *binds us*, is withdrawn from us, it is “a proof of integrity to confess our poverty” (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 115).

In response to the legacy of poverty of experience, there emerges a new form of barbarism: the positive barbarism, which consists of going ahead, alone, counting on our own resources only, creating from within, without looking either to the sides or back. The positive barbarism is an individual reaction, expressed in the aesthetical creation, to the misery shared by the entire humanity.

But is that enough? Paraphrasing Brecht, who said a country that needs hero is an unhappy land: poor humanity when, in order to seize the possibility of expressing itself in its own way, it depends on the creative heroism of a few men capable of confronting generalized barbarism, supplied with its own solitude only.

Benjamin's philosophy depicts two parallel paths towards the crossroads of the loss of meaning, of the dissolution of ethical values traditionally transmitted by means of experiences shared between the generations. One of them points backwards, being a decisive denunciation of the existing misery; the other points forward, analyzing the potential of artistic expressions and the new forms of aesthetic sensitiveness opened by the technique. On one hand, Benjamin invokes the transmission of practical knowledge required for life, assigning an ethical foundation to the shared experience and the community life; on the other hand, he lauds the individual aesthetical potentiality and investigates the formative outreach of the products of the cultural industry.

These two paths have, however, a common starting point: the realization of deep changes in the human relations, resulting from the development of technique in the context of the capitalist economy and the predominance of bourgeois mercantile values. The ambivalence of the criticism does not conceal the objective in sight: resist, in all possible ways, to the conditions of disentanglement with the common world, of absolute poverty, which turns present life into renunciation, into oblivion of the human experience's meaning. Such experience, for Benjamin, concerns the capacity of sharing and translation the sacred nature, in addition to the natural dimension, of life as a whole. Human life, its experience in the world, cannot be explained by natural law, nor can it be reduced to the laws of a linear history which, aiming at the technical and scientific advancement, expropriates humankind of its heritage, its cultural assets, leading to brute survival and an existence tangled in myth. Language is,

according to Benjamin, the place of human experience, humanity's authentic heritage, which is threatened and needs conservation. Apart from the ordinary life, prevented from sharing and communicating experiences, we find ourselves amidst a history that has naturalized itself and became inhuman.

If the individual artistic, aesthetical expression reaches a highlight in Benjamin's thinking on modernity, it is never a route of subjective nature to an ethical problem, but rather a way to access a new form of sensitiveness that affords a full experience; as the point of contact with the meaning of humankind, of a life capable of expression and creation. If the artist becomes the hero, the barbarian who reacts positively against the negative barbarism which victimized humanity, it is because he or she is capable of shaping the contents of ordinary life. And if the development of technique may be taken as something that affords the emergence of a new aesthetical sensitiveness, capable of leading from the *shock to profane illumination* – despite the fact that, on the other hand, it is taken as something that reduces experience to the act of living, to what has been lived, to the immediate, condemning life to a mythical movement, to the eternal return of the same –, it is because this process is deemed in terms of the need to go beyond the verification of the current conditions of life and provide an answer to the problem of the poverty of experience, which is equally given to all.

Ethics, moral and politics are dimensions capable of raising us beyond organic, natural life of mere reproduction and brute survival; its aggregating strength, however, depends on redeeming the possibility of sharing experiences, the possibility of communicating with each other in a language that is not exhausted in the lived events, in what is momentary, in the mere instrumentation. Ethics, moral and politics depend on the possibility of assigning a full meaning to human experience, free from the historically established relations of power, domination and surrender. Such meaning seems

lost among the debris of a history that follows in frenzy, always returning to the same point of mythification and naturalization of human life, by setting men away from their shared world and by suppressing their conditions of life – conditions that are, at the same time, material, expressive, and creative.

But how can one redeem the plenitude of human experience in a historical moment of poverty of experience, of muteness? How can one take advantage of philosophy to do so, when philosophy commits itself only with the institution of the possibilities of evident knowledge, letting exactly *truth* go away, truth that can never be seized but only experienced and expressed through language?

Considering the limits imposed, in its time, for the philosophical thinking and with the conviction that the direction of history depends always on the possibility of liberating the full strength of human experience, Benjamin invokes theology. The profane order must be built on the idea of happiness, and not on the idea of the divine kingdom, he says in *Theological-political fragment*, of 1940, and in this *theses on philosophy of history*; he adds, however, that the relationship between happiness and the messianic element is one of the essential teachings brought by the philosophy of history. When the political action betrays the cause it is supposed to serve, it is necessary to pull it from the meshes of the profane where it was tangled (BENJAMIN, 1996). Theology is the (high) price to be paid by who does not accept to associate themselves with a conception of history uncommitted with the conditions of human happiness.

In this paper, by focusing on the ethical, moral and political formation of children and youths today, I really intend to defend the idea that the issue raised by Benjamin about the impossibility of transmitting experience from one generation to the next continues to echo and still requires a satisfactory answer. However, I do not intend obviously to do so by proposing that we should also pay the price he

paid for tackling the issue at his time. Under the current circumstances of post-metaphysical thinking, the research in philosophy of education, as elsewhere, may only advance by taking seriously the dis-authorization of the use of arguments that are not accessible by a secularized reason. Thus, without striking the principle that everything we propose should remain in the order of the secular, of the profane (HABERMAS, 1993), I will try and point here the need to pursue the possibility of settling contemporary formation on the ground of ethics, moral and politics, by affirming the importance of transmitting ethical contents and by comprehending why Benjamin invoked theology in the sense of challenging reason to go beyond what one already knows to encompass the integrity of human experience.

It is necessary to consider that, today, even though definitely situated in post-metaphysical thinking conditions that prevent us from recurring to *a priori* founding, as well as an alliance with theology, we certainly count in philosophy on openings that were not available to Benjamin at his time. I refer here specifically to the project of revamping the bases of modern reason undertaken by Habermas, who, since his teenage due to the revelation of the barbarism done by Nazi government, tracks in history the

[...] remainders of a reason that leads back, without erasing the distances, that unites, without reducing what is distinct to the same denominator, that, among strangers, makes recognizable what is common, but leaves the other with its otherness. (HABERMAS, 1993, p. 112)

Habermas' thinking leads us through a path to reconstruct the possibilities of rational understanding that places us away from Benjamin's intention of redeeming the conditions of a full human experience. While Benjamin call us to *brush history against the grain*, tracking inside out of the linearity of time the motivations discarded by the march of

an alleged advancement, Habermas call us to perceive the historical achievements made in the order of domination, which resulted in legal and moral ideas based on a post-conventional justice, beyond the tangible contents of traditions.

For Habermas, in parallel with the development of technique, of science, in the context of capitalist societies, there was also the development of a reason that was independent from the interest in power and money; a reason whose purpose is understanding and which, rooted in the cultural forms of life, flows through the social structures, embodying it as a law-abiding State.

As a result of the consequent possibilities, for example, to think formation in terms of its intersubjective nature, by means of language, Habermas' proposal has deserved highlighted attention in the field of education for the past two decades. Concerning ethics, moral and politics, the philosopher allows to establish a ground for formation: democracy, understood as a discursively established legal structure, that is, as something that is constantly built by means of public debates regulated by the norms of modern law. In Habermas' democracy, the citizen is simultaneously the destination of law and the lawmaker who creates and enforces the laws, by utilizing the *medium* of lawfulness.

Building on such thinking it is then possible to establish, as a goal for formation, the communicative-discursive skill in order to act in the public democratic arena of today's open societies. His systematic philosophy, deeply associated with *Aufklärung*, proposes and streamlines a distinction that is very important and helpful to the ethical, moral and political dimensions, even if apprehending them in a whole in the field of practical reason.

Ethical issues, says Habermas (1993, p. 99), provide "clarity about who we are and about who we would like to be", while moral issues leads to comprehend "what is equally good for all". Political issues, on the other hand, enable us to understand the actions that must be undertaken by the State in order to promote the

benefit of all, ensuring all with the possibility of exerting their rights. Emancipation is thus related to the capacity of understanding and self-understanding about these three types of different issues which equally depend on the possibility of communicating with each other and to be guided by a shared reason.

The theoretical input brought about by Habermas is, no doubt, a resource of great value to think formation in a ethical, moral and political sense under the present conditions of post-metaphysical thinking. However, when one focus the process of formation and asks about the access to the ethical contents that should be communicated in intersubjective relations and which are necessary to feed the argumentative processes in a democratic State, one has to face the limits of communication in the current societies; there is, in addition, a theoretical difficulty to grant, even with Habermas, a guiding nature to these ethical contents.

Does understanding who we are and who we would like to be, what is equally good for all and what should be done the promote the benefit of all depend on transmitting contents that point to theses senses or the possibility of establishing common reasons for them? How cultural, ethical and tradition contents relate to the rational autonomy of individuals who should understand each other in regard of issues that concern them all?

To see such relationship between tradition and reason in terms of feedback, as Habermas proposes, is certainly a crucial point. Not less important, however, is to think what can impel the communication among people in a direction that make them capable of recognizing each other as equally human, equally skilled to talk, to listen, to provide their individual and collective life materially and symbolically.

After all, as a last resource, is it not the focus of the discussion of present-day democracy? Is not the cognitive gain of open, rational societies in precisely opening the opportunity of questioning how traditions have fulfilled or not, to this day, the role of providing



their members with the access to their humanity? If one judges traditions by utilizing reason and if the principle of such reason is to establish a human community of universal recognition, would it be possible to rescue, based on it, the symbolic role played by tradition that allow us to grant a non-fragmented meaning to life, to existence? If we can no longer count on either theology or any metaphysics to keep the integral meaning of humanity, what is today enough to give us ethical, moral and political guidance?

Considering these questions, I think that, in spite of contemporary philosophical inputs that provide us with an approach to ethics, moral and politics without recurring to metaphysical means – either theological or not –, we do not yet have sufficient ballast to assign human formation with the ethical, moral and political nature what it always has had since the Western Ancient times<sup>1</sup> and which, even today, against the dispute undertaken by the aesthetical and cultural dimensions, continues to be essential when we have in sight the possibility of granting cognition a non-instrumental nature and granting aesthetics a nature that, despite being expressive, is not merely individual.

In the context of his investigation of the moral sources of modernity, Taylor (1997) comments that the understanding we share linguistically does not tackle the experiential problem, also found in our contemporary times, as it does not provide any guarantee against the loss of meaning and substantiality of human relations. Concealing the problem of experience under the problem of the public, “as if both could be resolved for the price of one” (TAYLOR, 1997, p. 650-651), does not mean to tackle it but just touch it.

The possibility of guiding human formation nowadays has to do, I think, with tackling the problem of experience. The assumption I take to articulate the issue of ethical, moral, and political guidance of formation with the transmission of the experience of life from

one generation to the next, as puts Benjamin, lies in the fact that guiding the formative process in a sense that we generically call emancipatory depends on the possibility of experimenting it and sharing it substantially. That is, it depends on the possibility of having something to communicate, to transmit to the younger about the meaning of human emancipation.

How can we do that under the current social conditions of life and thinking we find today? I do not ignore that the aforementioned assumption also leads to other problems that need to be properly tackled. I will attempt here to deal with some of them and start a dialogue between the thinking of Benjamin and Habermas with the purpose of articulating the objective of a public and democratic rationality, with the sources and resources indispensable for its vitalization.

### **Is it possible to have emancipation deprived of meaning?**

For Habermas, Benjamin’s *semantic materialism* imposes the doubt of the possibility of an emancipation deprived of meaning. Is it possible that emancipated men, making full use of reason, are capable of understanding each other in the public democratic arena, remaining however “deprived of the light that would allow them to interpret their own life based on ideal standards?” (HABERMAS, 1980, p. 205).

As Habermas points out, the question could not be asked by Benjamin, to whom such hypothesis would never occur. For Benjamin, it is impossible to conceive emancipation that is not semantic; what, in the context of his singular way of thinking, implies the possibility of accessing the nominating word, by means of which the original meaning of humanity is revealed, as inscribed in the sacred meaning of life. This is because, according to Benjamin’s thinking, the meaning – universal and *a-historical* – refers to a full relationship between man and nature in which the former plays the role of translating in his language the

**1** - An analysis of the founding elements of formation along the history of the Western thinking was undertaken by Antônio Joaquim Severino (2006).



mute language of things. It is a revolutionary hermeneutics that is intended to save humanity from the webs of the myth, pulling it out of its guilt minority by rescuing an original sacred meaning, whose oblivion leads to condemn human life to mere life, to naturalized life, to reproduction and brute survival.

Meaning, according to Benjamin, is not associated with what is granted for by tradition, but with being open to the infinity that this traditional item provides. Tradition is not identified with meaning; tradition has a paradoxical nature and cannot be considered as an ethical foundation. Meaning escapes the interpretation given by tradition, but tradition is always the way to access meaning. For Benjamin, it is in the kernel of this complex relationship that the role of criticism is inscribed: to save the meaning of the mechanisms of domination that seize tradition from the very contents expressed by it.

Because he thus sees tradition, Benjamin blames the emergence of the problem of meaning for the disintegration of tradition, something unthinkable in traditional social contexts where it was given explicitly and immediately (GAGNEBIN, 1996). However, as Benjamin sees it, despite of being a way to access the sacred meaning of life, tradition may be tangled in the myth by captivating the meaning in its structures of power, linked to destiny and prevented from accessing its revealing openness, Benjamin says it is necessary to also save tradition from the conformism that wants to get hold of it (BENJAMIN, 1996). And saving tradition means saving the symbolic goods that tradition has produced and which are the asset of mankind, since they are connected to the original meaning and cannot be explained only by its ties with the social institutions. Every form of life must be built on the idea of happiness, which is profane, but it keeps ties with the original meaning, which is sacred. It is the tie with the sacred that feeds the profane meaning of happiness that supports the forms of

life. Losing such ties means to fall into oblivion, into renunciation, and get tangled in the myth.

This perspective fits Benjamin's denunciation about the decadence of experience and helps understand his attempts to resume the conditions of its integrity in modern society. In the experience lies the possibility of transmitting and communicating the traditional contents that allow us to remember the meaning.

When, in traditional contexts, the experiences of life were communicable, transmitting practical knowledge and giving advice were common procedures whose role was not to answer questions about what each person should do, but instead "to make a suggestion about the continuation of a history that is being told" (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 200). Because it allows us to remember the original meaning of humanity, enabling an infinite unfolding of the significant human events, experience is the time and the space in which emancipation is originated; it is the access, the *medium* to the meaning that feeds it. Emancipation, for Benjamin, does not mean to go beyond the meaning, but rather return to it, as the meaning does not imprison; instead, it sets one free.

Thus, Benjamin's concept of emancipation points in the opposite direction of Habermas' conception, in which emancipation results from the achievement of a reason that is independent in relation to meaning. When Habermas formulates, motivated by Benjamin's thinking, the issue on the possibility of a meaningless emancipation, Habermas touches the raw skin of the conception of an independent reason from which his thoughts originate, making the throbbing wound to bleed: after all, what really can do a reason that is not capable of integration?

Considering the condition that characterizes modernity – loss of the possibility to access meaning due to the disintegration of traditions and the exhaust of metaphysics –, Habermas takes the path of betting on the reach of procedural reason, thus seeking to settle the

grounds of reason on language with the purpose of unblocking the flow of understanding imprisoned in the subjective consciousness. By achieving this goal through a communicative-discursive rationality, he links emancipation to the rational processes of understanding, driven by the informal linguistic logic. Then, supplied with a naturalized logic of linguistic processes which tend to understanding, Habermas touches the problem of meaning, properly accessible by means of the traditions and metaphysical explanations, resources that are not available to us, contemporary individuals.

The issue Habermas is indeed interested in – which Benjamin's thinking brings to surface – is how reason can set itself free from the structural violence of the forms of life without however voiding their very ethical and moral contents which are the source of energy that feeds life. If Habermas says that reason may be guided by the informal logic of communication, he cannot help acknowledging that this logic depends, for its development, on the contents that integrate the bottom upon which the linguistic interactions are highlighted.

Habermas' reason does not intend to apprehend the meaning, which inevitably "escapes through the holes of the grid" (TAYLOR, 1997, p. 651) of modern reason, by means of which it is possible, however, to get to know the objective reality, to establish what is right, to apprehend subjectivity; but he certainly intends to make a rational morality possible, independent from meaning, by providing everyday communication – under the terms of formal pragmatism – with a moral potential.

The issue, however, as I have mentioned in the previous section, lies in the fact that rational morality, resulting from communicative-discursive procedures concerning issues cut out from the semantic bottom inaccessible as a whole, implies a loss of signification and substantiality that cannot be underestimated, as it falls upon the integrating strength of moral, dis-vitalizing it. Considering such loss, no matter

how significant it is in approaching today's social complexity, the palliative of reason objectified in the forms of modern law does not provide sufficient ballast to think the process of human formation and its ethical, moral, and political orientation. Habermas does not ignore how difficult this is: it is precisely about this issue that a question comes up concerning the possibility of a meaningless emancipation.

Even though they cannot be consigned to the meaning as a whole, the contemporary communicative practices feed precisely from the "influx of those sematic energies which Benjamin's salvation criticisms are aimed at" (HABERMAS, 1980, p. 205). Without those energies, the structures of practical discourse would lose their substance. That is, although it is impossible for the secular and profane reason to access the meaning, it feeds such reason, and without meaning it is not possible to conceive a vitalized public arena, a radical democracy, as Habermas proposes. After all, what can be the object of debate, questioning, argumentation in the public democratic arena other than the intentions of people and groups based in convictions, values, concepts of good and happiness which, in turn, are interpretations of the meaning of life, of existence? And how rational independent will formed if not by means of public debates, driven by the valuating and ethical contents of individuals and groups?

For Habermas – who, in the aforementioned text on Benjamin, defines the issue in terms of a confrontation between the freedom provided by modern reason and happiness, arising from the fulfillment of the forms of cultural life, associated with the perspective of freedom and linking Benjamin to that of happiness –, the difficulty can only be overcome by enriching the dialectic theory of advancement.

The present relevance of Benjamin's thinking, which "deciphers the history of culture in the perspective of salvation for the revolutionary act" (HABERMAS, 1980, p. 205), is therefore revealed when one puts his theory of experience at the service of historical

materialism.<sup>2</sup> According to Benjamin, one should not impose to reason an debt that cannot be settled, by taking clarification as a void utopia; instead one should make the concept of advancement that supports *clarification* more substantial, by challenging it to embody the contradictions interposed between the rational emancipation of secularized and open societies and the ideal of self-achievement and happiness that turns individuals, classes and social groups, into cultural traditions.

Benjamin's hermeneutics, which preserves the original meaning of humanity by proposing the revolution as an instantaneous appropriation of this meaning in history, may indicate the path towards the change in the concept of revolution as a process of self-formation of a new subjectivity.

Independent reason can only promote emancipation when it is vitalized by the ideals of happiness that arise from the forms of cultural life. Declaring the possibility of a clarification by means of a reason emancipated from its solid ties and, consequently, an emancipating reason that develops historically, pointing to a social advancement that includes all, leads on the other hand to declare the capacity of individuals to grant meaning to their lives, to acknowledge in the other the same capacity and to understand each other publically about what must be done so that all can equally live in a free and emancipated way in compliance with the ideals they project.

How can we provide, today, the conditions to form a subjectivity capable of achieving rational independence to negotiate and understand the others about ethical, moral, and political problems that may be considered and tackled in a different ways, and, at the same time, to build ties to a sense of humanity that allows for the perception of what is common? How can one form a subjectivity that recognizes its broad and deep intersubjective status?

**2-** According to Habermas (1980), this is the opposite of Benjamin's intention, which consisted of putting materialism at the service of his messianic theory of experience.

### **Cannot we found the courage and the pride except in what we cannot experience?**

The question that introduces this section was extracted from a text by the young Benjamin, dated 1913, when he was only 21 years old. In this text, the author, as he himself will acknowledge later, mobilizes his forces against the word *experience*, which would then become a prop for many of his theories. The confrontation found in the text comes from seeing that the experience that the previous generation has to transmit is resignation and conformism, the abandon of ideals and dreams of the youth, the surrender of the spirit to the vulgarity of a life without horizons. Later on, recurring to the materialist theory, Benjamin will include the category of experience to his criticism to capitalist society and the bourgeois values. Then, the denunciation will fall against the poverty of experience that characterizes the modern age as a whole.

Although within a yet preliminary theoretical context, I think that the juvenile and rebellious approach by Benjamin to the problem of the experience as appropriate for the purpose of this paper, once it has to do incidentally with the tension between spirit and experience, ideal and reality, always resounding when formation is focused.

Based on the issue expressed in the title of this section, I intend to think the possibility of accessing the meaning of human emancipation by means of experiences shared during the process of formation. For such, I quote as follows, in a longer fragment, Benjamin's question that will guide my goal:

It is necessary that the object of our experience be always sad? Cannot we found the courage and the meaning except in what we cannot experience? In this case, the spirit would free, but life would discredit it constantly, because as a sum of the experiences life would be itself insoluble. (BENJAMIN, 1984b, p. 23)

Benjamin opposes conformism and resignation that characterizes the experience transmitted by the generation prior to his own, with the strength of the spirit of this generation, but he acknowledges however that the challenge is to convert such strength into meaning, into contents of a new experience in which the spirit is integrated instead of excluded. Even in this text, Benjamin does not refrain from criticizing experience; upon realizing the deprivation of spirit that characterizes it, he is impelled to go further, pointing the direction that should be pursued.

What is in fact of interest here in the issue presented by Benjamin is that there no use of having infinite freedom of spirit if the tangible experience of life is not an opening to the meaning of what is true, good and beautify. This is what essentially characterizes human life, what makes it distinct from the other forms of life and can provide it with consolation: the possibility of experiencing the freedom of spirit. And the possibility of this experience of freedom is precisely what should be transmitted from one generation to the next, since this is what can really impel history in an emancipatory direction.

Benjamin detects the tracks of this emancipatory possibility in the production of cultural goods, granting them with a proportion of truth, the expression of a naming language, of an original meaning that transcends and escapes everything that may be apprehended by the scientific procedures whose purpose is evidence. Since "truth is not an unveiling act that annihilates the secret, but rather a revelation that makes justice to it" (BENJAMIN, 1984a, p. 53).

Just as he endowed the works of art with an aura that made them appear, at the same time, as both a singular and a e transcendent event and assigned to narrated stories in traditional contexts the possibility of changing an event into something that would *remind it without limits*, Benjamin intended to grant artistic manifestations with the nature of an exoteric

experience<sup>3</sup> capable of providing a profane illumination, of bringing the experience of a sparkle of the truth.

Today, definitely, what is true, good and beautiful is not conceived as absolute parameters, and the diversity of interpretations about them prevents us from using them as guiders of our knowledge and our practice. But our inability to refer to these parameters in an absolute way prevents us from taking them as a reference? Ought such impossibility imply necessarily in adult generation renouncing to transmit contents that are life-guiding to the younger generations? Will it be the case that, under the current social and thinking conditions we find ourselves in, the guidance of the formation process may utilize only those forms and procedures we have developed in modern times? Such restriction which, on one hand is allegedly in favor of rational independence, would it not be, on the other hand, an impoverishment and a way of garbling the very idea of formation?

In which extent the impossibility of sharing and transmitting teachings that guide the practices of life makes us stand today in the kernel of the tension, or better, of the rupture pointed out by Benjamin between freedom of spirit and the tangible experience of life? If a generation has nothing to say, nothing to transmit to the next about the meaning of life, can this fact be deemed as a lack of meaning for life itself, restricting it to a circumstantial existence that is exhausted in itself, either in a collective or in an individualized way?

No doubt it is possible to conceive human existence as a result of circumstances, and here I do not intend to disqualify this hypothesis; but this does not mean, necessarily, to abandon the idea of formation or to frame it in terms of an existence aimed at developing the singular power of each individual. Decidedly, this is the focus of my research nor is it the

**3-** This refers to the idea of a shared experience, accessible to all, in distinction to an esoteric experience, limited to a circle of initiates in a giver theory or practice.

objective of the projects that reconfigure the modern reason – among which I include those by Habermas and by Taylor – which attempt to empower, through language, the integrating strength of morality, understood as a protective device in the processes of human socialization (HABERMAS, 2007). Likewise, the issues I raise here are addressed to those who acknowledge the guidance of the formation process a problem of today. I ask them, also, if in fact they think it is possible to conceive formation, today, without making any reference to the ideals of the true, beautiful and good, even if these elements are not immediately accessible and escape, in whole, from common sense.

As Taylor synthesizes (1997, p. 653), the fact is that “we are in an age in which a cosmic order of meanings publicly accessible is an impossibility”. This does not mean, however, that the meaning is not present among us nor that we have to confront the current impossibility of accessing such meaning.

It would be comforting if we could, under the current circumstances, utilize only the logic of the communicative-discursive processes proposed by Habermas; if it were sufficient to convey, also it shaped the forms of intersubjective understanding, the semantic energies that vitalize the interactions and are addressed in the public arena. However, as this is not the case – and not just because of the colonization of communicative logic by the strategic logic, but mainly because of the fragmentation that characterizes the linguistic logic –, I understand it is necessary to accept the challenge of seeking means to assign a sense that is right both for human life as a non naturalized experience and for the formation for this experience of life.

By undertaking the search for the sources of entrepreneur morality and locate them outside the self, Taylor (1997) says that the only way we dispose of to explore the order we are a part of, with such purpose, is through personal resonance, that is, we are left to apprehend the order by means of the languages that make

to resound, within the individual, the moral sources that are outside him.

Taylor’s investigation about modern morality runs, through other paths, into a place that is similar to the one that leads me to the dialogue between Benjamin and Habermas concerning formation today: the need to vitalize the language in order to provide a human experience that is more significant, capable of redeeming the commitments and “resuscitate crucial assets for us” (TAYLOR, 1997, p. 654). The basic moral standards of modern times, regarding the law, justice and benevolence, depend on assets we cannot access by means of personal sensitivity. Consequently, the search for new languages of personal resonance is today not only relevant in the realm of experience but also to address public issues of great importance, but also the relationship we establish with the natural environment.

The transmission of experience, in Benjamin, the idea of a shared experience that allow the human event not to be exhausted in what has been lived, and it can be infinitely remembered, is something that is entirely circumscribed within the language, a common language. The theology in which the category is anchored has nothing to do with the compliance with a law to be enforced, but with an illumination that accessible through sensitivity.

What gives Benjamin’s idea of experience a transcending nature is the fact that it transmits a sort of wisdom without a specific object, which concerns life as a whole and allows the appreciation of the events that have been lived.

The worth of what is said, the authority of the one who narrates the events, tells stories, transmits teachings, shares experiences of life is not explained, according to Benjamin, by the standpoint taken in the social hierarchy, but as a result of its usefulness in the practical life of people who listen to and receive the teachings, the pertinence of that advice to their lives. This usefulness and that pertinence, in turn, are not



explained just by the adequacy between the contents and the lived situations, but mainly by the fact that the contents transmitted open the access to meanings that remain open always, they are inexhaustible and be always remembered and re-elaborated.

Transmitting experience – when the experience transmitted is endowed with the strength of the spirit, that is, when it touches something magnificent and full of meaning (BENJAMIN, 2004) – is never related to a mechanic and uncritical assimilation of other people's teachings; on the contrary, it has always to do with an personal intellectual work over a common materiality, building on a intersubjective relation.

The one who transmits a significant experience to guide somebody's life has something that is not exhausted in their subjectivity, something that is legitimate for the other, who is in charge of acknowledging when and where such value should be assigned. The transmitted and received experience is never subjective only, as it transcends both the one who transmits it and the one who receives it. Transmitting experience grants to the one who does so the status of place where moral sources are located (TAYLOR, 1997), sources that are outside him, in the order which is also a part of, and which he or she enounces, as they resound within them and through them these sources find their flow.

Transmitting experience requires from the one who transmits, mainly, the possibility of providing his or her own experience with non-subjective nature. Taylor denotes a epiphanic feature to the very language of this transmission of experience which, in the context of his work, is called *personal resonance* of the order. To make the order resound, what is said and enounced must "put us really in contact with the sources it is connected to" (TAYLOR, 1997, p. 653).

With Benjamin, we catch a glimpse of the form extremely simple and straightforward of this profoundly revealing language, inherent to the art of narration; this art that is not supported by the hand, with "intervenes decisively through its gestures, learned from the experience in the work, which sustain with a hundred ways the flow of what is said" (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 221). The narrator, who knows how to advise not only a few but many, enunciates not only his or her own experience but also other people's; "his gift is the ability to tell his own life; his dignity is to tell it in its entirety" (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 221).

The one who transmits a experience is not looking for the meaning, as the meaning is in him or her; he or she transmits a moral without fearing the error, as he or she know that "the error is just a new breath for the search of the truth" (BENJAMIN, 2004, p. 23). Those who receive teachings that guide their practical life will certainly be capable by themselves of assigning meanings and correcting what they judge is wrong. If they do not, however, how will such capacity be formed and how will they know to judge what is correct and what is not? Where will they take the food of their linguistic enunciations from and by which paths will they manage to make themselves and recognize themselves as the places of moral sources as well?

As a consequence of the issues I have raised and how I have addressed them along this article, I wish to finish by proposing to those who define themselves as agents of formation, today and always, guidance examples, since, as Benjamin teaches us (1996, p. 36), "not everything in this life is a model, but everything is exemplary". I also propose that, by doing so, they feel worthily comforted, passing to those that are the target of formation the difficult and important – but not impossible nor desolating – task of achieving, by themselves, this crucial distinction for their lives.

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*Received on: 25.06.2012*

*Accepted on: 14.11.2012*

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