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SECTION: VARIES

Productive Pessimism: Towards a (Re)definition of Critical Pessimism¹

Pessimismo produtivo: por uma (re)definição de pessimismo crítico

Pesimismo productivo: por una (re)definición de pesimismo crítico

Vilmar Debona²

orcid.org/0000-0002-0411-3358

debonavilmar@gmail.com

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Abstract: This article proposes elements for a possible redefinition of so-called critical pessimism as "productive pessimism" (term used by Max Horkheimer), assuming him as an important ally of Critical Theory. After a historical description of Schopenhauer's *metaphysical* pessimism and some of its potential implications for praxis, I go on to portray some aspects of *critical* pessimism in Horkheimer's Critical Theory and demonstrate the extent to which his proposed unfolding as practical optimism would be problematic and inconsequential. The principle article's contributions are defense of pessimism as: (i) a *continuum* rather than a moment of materialist critique; (ii) a device focusing primarily on the past and the *status quo* rather than the future; and (iii) a bearer of praxis as *practical critical pessimism* instead of *practical optimism*. One of the most important "products" of this pessimism would be its ability to guarantee the negative character of critique, which avoids justifying past and present social evils and prevents emancipatory promises, if realized, from turning into new forms of domination.

Keywords: Metaphysical Pessimism; Critical Pessimism; Critical Theory; Schopenhauer; Horkheimer.

Resumo: O objetivo do artigo é propor elementos filosóficos para uma possível redefinição do chamado pessimismo crítico como um pessimismo que, nos termos de uma adjetivação de Max Horkheimer, seja "produtivo" e aliado da Teoria Crítica. Para tanto, contextualizo historicamente o pessimismo *metafísico* schopenhaueriano e alguns de seus desdobramentos possíveis para a práxis, especifico algumas configurações de um pessimismo *crítico* da Teoria Crítica de Horkheimer, e mostro em que medida seria problemática e inconsequente a sua proposta de desdobrar daquele um otimismo prático. As principais novidades do artigo consistem em defender o pessimismo como: (i) um *continuum* e não apenas como momento da crítica materialista; (ii) dispositivo mais voltado ao passado e ao *status quo* do que ao futuro; (iii) portador de uma práxis enquanto *pessimismo crítico prático* e não como *otimismo prático*. Uma das mais importantes "produções" de tal pessimismo seria a garantia do caráter negativo da crítica, que se impede justificações dos males sociais pregressos e atuais, também não deixa que promessas emancipatórias, quando realizadas, se tornem novas dominações.

Palavras-chave: pessimismo metafísico; pessimismo crítico; Teoria Crítica; Schopenhauer; Horkheimer.

Resumen: El objetivo del artículo es proponer elementos filosóficos para una posible redefinición del llamado pesimismo crítico como un pesimismo que, en términos del adjetivo de Max Horkheimer, es "productivo" y aliado de la Teoría Crítica. Para este fin, contextualizo históricamente el pesimismo *metafísico* schopenhaueriano y algunos de sus posibles desarrollos en la praxis, especifico algunas configuraciones de un pesimismo *crítico* de la Teoría Crítica de Horkheimer y muestro hasta qué punto su propuesta de desarrollar un optimismo práctico a partir de ello sería problemática e intrascendente. Las principales novedades del



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² Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil.

artículo consisten en defender el pesimismo como: (i) un *continuum* y no sólo como un momento de la crítica materialista; (ii) dispositivo más centrado en el pasado y el *status quo* que en el futuro; (iii) portador de la praxis como *pesimismo crítico práctico* y no como *optimismo práctico*. Una de las "producciones" más importantes de tal pesimismo sería la garantía del carácter negativo de la crítica, que impide justificaciones de males sociales pasados y presentes, y también impide que las promesas emancipadoras, una vez realizadas, se conviertan en nuevas dominaciones.

Palabras clave: pesimismo metafísico; pesimismo crítico; Teoría Crítica; Schopenhauer; Horkheimer.

Os únicos interessados em mudar o mundo são os pessimistas, pois os otimistas estão encantados com o que está aí
(Saramago, 1997).

Introduction

A natural strangeness exists about possible collaborations of philosophical pessimism with emancipatory projects. One motive this strangeness that which pertains to common sense definitions of pessimism as bad future expectations whereas optimism is defined to good ones. The strangeness also emerges from the philosophical understanding that pessimism is necessarily either i) a symptom its authors' bad mood or their *Zeitgeist*, or ii) resignation regarding emancipatory praxis, i.e. a sort of paralysis or hopelessness regarding hopes for potential social transformation. In another words, not only does common sense see pessimism as being incompatible with emancipations, but much of the philosophical canon shares this hasty conclusion. However, this extremely reductionist and false understanding of pessimism has long been refuted. The founder and systematizer of modern philosophical pessimism (Plümacher, 1883), Arthur Schopenhauer, ironically repudiated neo-Kantian Kuno Fischer's understanding³. Likewise, Eduard von Hartmann, Agnes Taubert, and other authors of the 19th-century *Pessimismusstreit* dedicated considerable effort to rebut-

ting accusations that they were merely painting an unusually "dark cloud" over Germany, due to their hypersensitivity to the predominantly painful mood of the time - the so-called *Weltschmerz*. This article does not counterargue the first (i) above-mentioned simplification, which would be a sterile philosophical issue.

Instead, my goal is to begin by confronting the second type (ii) of accusation, which has also received significant refutations - such as by Max Horkheimer, Alfred Schmidt, Ludger Lütkehaus, and more recently, by so-called "Brazilian Schopenhauerian left"⁴ - but which still presents major open questions. This initial step will allow me to target the most important and most specific objective of the article, i.e., to present elements for the defense of a critical pessimism as an avowed ally of emancipatory projects, especially as having citizenship in Critical Theory - or at least being familiar with some premises of what is generally understood as Critical Theory. The text is divided into four sections. The first addresses issues regarding pessimism and the impossibility of defining it without considering evil as a positive concept. The second part discusses the potential praxis of pessimism of Schopenhauerian nature through proximity relations between critical pessimism and Critical Theory. Next, I showcase specifics aspects of critical pessimism in parts of Horkheimer's Critical Theory. Finally, I go on to argue that a "practical optimism" is problematic and inconsequential.

1. The Term "Pessimism" and the Question of Positive Evil

"Pessimism", as a noun, comes from *pessimus* (Latin for "the worst"), in opposition to "optimism", from *optimum* (meaning "the best"). Pessimistic philosophies or foundational of pessimisms would be those that, due to the perception of

³ In a rare instance where he classified his thought as a pessimism, in a letter to his testamentary executor Julius Frauenstädt, Schopenhauer sarcastically rebuffed Kuno Fischer's statement, from his History of Modern Philosophy, about the origins of such pessimism being identifiable in the "social despair" of his time, in contrast to the great successes of Leibniz and his optimism: "Ergo, then, if I had lived in 1700, I would have been a flattered and optimistic Leibniz, and he would have been me, if he lived now! [...] Moreover, my pessimism grew from 1814 to 1818 (in which it appears complete), which was the most promising period after the liberation of Germany" (Schopenhauer, 1911-1941, p. 393, my translation).

⁴ According to Fazio (2023a), Maria Lúcia Cacciola represents the first generation of "Brazilian Schopenhauerian left", while the author of this text and Felipe Durante are representatives of the second generation.

the existence of evil and the predominance of pain and suffering over pleasure and happiness, believe that "non-being is preferable to being". Thus, they conclude that ours is "the *worst* of all possible worlds". The foundational philosophies of optimism based from opposite assumptions. A summary tentative can assert that the basic premises for the valuation of *pessimus* or *optimum* as (philosophical) worldviews would basically be two, which complement: 1) the world is assumed to have been created by a God or a benevolent principle and, therefore, justified in itself (optimism), or as without foundation or basis and unjustified (pessimism); 2) the positivity, predominance, and pursuit of good and happiness, and the negativity of evil and suffering (optimism); or alternatively, the negativity of good and happiness and the positivity and predominance of evil and suffering (pessimism). These are supposedly the basic premises from which the widest range of consequences in different spheres can be derived.

However, these definitions have never been unanimously accepted. The concept of pessimism has long been subject to linguistic and semantic confusion, misunderstanding, and banalization. Freitas (2024) briefly reviewed the notion, indicating its firsts uses to the late 17th and the early 18th centuries, when it was coined as a neologism in opposition to optimism found in Pope, Shaftesbury, Leibniz, and Wolff. It began to appear in 1815 in British Magazines as a "spirit of dissatisfaction". Only in the 1820s did it appear in dictionaries, never limited to a technical usage, but almost always considered synonymous with melancholy and a tendency for individuals to focus on the dark, or black (with the implications of racism), side of existence. These difficulties with the term also extended to the semantic field. A significant group of neo-Kantians, including Kuno Fischer and Bona Meyer, attributed the origins of

the prolific and highly productive German *Pessimismusstreit*, consisting of renowned members such as Eduard von Hartmann, Julius Bahnsen, Agnes Taubert, Olga Plümacher, and Philipp Mainländer⁵, to a mere question of *Zeitgeist*. The neo-Kantians have attribute the appearance of the term to a historical event almost three decades earlier - the failure of the 1848 revolution and subsequent widespread disillusionment. But could episodes of social disillusionment and economic depression explain pessimism as a philosophical worldview?

For these and other reasons, it is tempting to replace "pessimism" with a term such as "malism" (*Malismus*) or "miserabilism" (*Miserabilismus*) to avoid significant linguistic and semantic confusion. The first benefit would be to free the notion from the comparative problem between the best and worst of worlds. Malism would serve as a better opposite to optimism, as it refers to the stark existence of evil in the world, without committing to specific qualifications. In a sense that would no longer be that one of Schopenhauer to "possible"⁶, this hypothesis it would also allow for the recognition of evil as constitutive of the world, but without compromising the assertion that this would still be "the best of all possible worlds". This was suggested by Knauer (1873) and Haym (1873) when reacting to von Hartmann's *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, that for Plümacher (1883) to have been the second systematizer (following Schopenhauer's) of modern philosophical pessimism. However, with Agnes Taubert (1873), I believe it is extremely difficult an expression as naturalized and internalized as "pessimism" to be replaced by these other terms. Moreover, despite the confusion caused by the term *Pessimismus*, it can open up avenues for thinking about crucial functions and derivations to our hypotheses, as discussed below.

⁵ This "school" from the second half of the 19th century, which was formed from interpretations (and modifications) of Schopenhauer's thought and was established around the so-called *Pessimismus Frage*, historically opposed to the neo-Kantian movement of that same period, is currently experiencing an extraordinary revaluation. Its most significant reinvigoration, in addition to that of Lecce (Italy), already consolidated around the School of Schopenhauer, is taking place in Latin America, especially in Mexico. The initiatives are vast and include translations, the creation of the *Cuadernos de Pesimismo* and the *Sociedad Iberoamericana de Estudios sobre Pesimismo*.

⁶ Schopenhauer understands that "possible" "does not mean what someone can dream up, but what really can exist and persist. Now this world is constituted as it has to be in order to persist with great difficulty: if it were slightly worse, it could no longer persist. Consequently, a worse world would be completely impossible, since it could not persist, and this world is therefore itself the worst one possible" (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 598).

In the Western philosophical tradition, what marked an incontestable metaphysical boundary for our question was Schopenhauer's well-known frontal opposition to the premises of Leibniz's monadology, assumed by the former as "the founder of the system of optimism" of "the best of all possible worlds" (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 597-598), explained by a theodicy. In direct contrast, the "world full of miseries", "this battleground of tormented and anxious beings who survive only by devouring one another" (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 596), explained by Schopenhauer in his main work, could only be the opposite of Leibniz's vision: the worst of all possible worlds, explained by a kind of patodicy. Because the "lame excuse for the evils of the world" (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 598), that evil sometimes produces good, besides justifying the bloody history, would prove false by presupposing the positivity of good and happiness: as Voltaire did with his Pangloss, it would suffice to be sincere to recognize the opposite of optimism. With his premises on: (a) the positivity of evil and pain, and good and happiness as negations of evil and suffering; (b) the immutability of individual character, (c) the history as merely a record of the varied appearances of something invariable, that is, the eternal struggle for matter and satisfaction driven by an irrational and blind will as the essence of the world, this philosophical pessimism founded by Schopenhauer is, then, a metaphysical pessimism.

It is safe to assert, therefore, that, since at least Schopenhauer and the subsequent *Pessimismusstreit*, pessimism has come to designate very well-defined critical worldviews. If the so-called cultural pessimism (*Kulturpessimismus*) arose from the spirit of the times and socio-political factors, the same is not true for modern philosophical pessimism. Beiser (2016) argues that the aforementioned controversy of pessimism, as developed from Schopenhauerian pessimism, was due to a rediscovery of the problem of evil and the recovery of perplexity regarding an existence without God, which had been lost since the ancient polytheistic and, mainly, atheistic Greeks (Beiser, 2016, p. 5). More precisely, Schopenhauer

rediscovered the positivity of evil and the negativity of good. Just as all suffering can be seen as a sign that evil exists on its own rather than merely being an exception to good, the "joys certainly deceive desires by putting themselves forward as positive goods when in truth their nature is solely negative, only the termination of an evil. The only thing that goodness, love and nobility can do for other people is alleviate their suffering" (Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 402). Thus, a new stance was taken, detached from theological and religious notions of evil from the Middle and Modern Ages, but also from philosophical positive notions of good and negative ones of evil, guaranteed even in Kant.

The evil understands as an independent reality, rather than a mere defect of good, is a touchstone marking modern philosophical pessimism. Therefore, the first and only indispensable requisite for considering a philosophy to be pessimistic is the recognition of evil as ontologically positive. Additional variables or peculiarities, subsequently developed in the philosophical tradition of pessimism, depend upon this precedent.

2. Considerations on Critical Pessimism and Critical Theory

Even if these assumptions are relatively well-agreed upon in the metaphysical realm of debate (and they almost never are), they exhibit even less consensus regarding possible implications in the realm of praxis, that is, on the concrete action stemming from the above-listed premises. Or, if there is any significant consensus, it is dominated - at least it was before the foundation of the so-called "Schopenhauerian Left" (Cacciola, 1994, 2022, 2023; Ciraci, 2022; Debona, 2013, 2020, 2022; Durante, 2018, 2022; Fazio, 2023a; Lütkehaus, 1985, 2007) - by that partiality which historically assumes pessimism as necessarily synonymous with quietism, resignation, and political and social immobility, opposed to engagement. To make the difficulty even worse, the use of "pessimism", not linked to conformism or resignation, is generally done using the adjective "critical" without due justification. This is often seen in texts or state-

ments by scholars of Critical Theory who, when trying to differentiate "critical pessimism" from pessimism in general, make "critical pessimism" itself generic and vague, as they assume an obvious equivalence between it and "critical theory." A "critical pessimism" is not obvious. Its definition needs to be accompanied by due justification for the adjective that specifies it and connects it with praxis.

If Schopenhauer would apparently be immune to the problems of this issue by establishing in the pages of *The World as Will and Representation* that "philosophy must always remain theoretical" and that the rare events of redemption in this world, via denial of will in asceticism, can in no way be prescribed, his later essays allow us to see what we might consider as a praxis of compassion (especially in the second part of the *On the Basis of Morality*), a management of individual selfishness in social interaction (especially in *Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life*), and a repeated social critique of the various ills of societies of his time (both in Volume II of *The World as Will and Representation* and in Volume II of *Parerga and Paralipomena*). The latter case can be noted, for instance, when we read the elaborations of Chapter 46 of *The World II*, which confronts Leibnizian optimism, classifying it as false and pernicious for justifying the evils of the world, while denouncing slavery and forced work:

How human beings treat other human beings can be seen, for example, in the case of *Negro slavery*, whose final purpose is sugar and coffee. But we do not need to go so far: to enter the spinning factory or some other industry at age five and from then on to spend first 10 and then 12 and finally 14 hours a day sitting there doing the same *mechanical work*, is a high price to pay for the pleasure of drawing breath. But this is the fate of millions and many other millions have a similar fate (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 593, my emphasis).

Due to the dynamics of will itself, world suffering can never be completely eliminated, but this would not imply refraining from denouncing it to avoid eliminating motives that would lead to the negation of the will via quietism. We have a personal testimony from Schopenhauer himself,

when, in a conversation with his executor Frauens-tädt, he contested the latter's reasoning on the hypothesis that it might not be good to combat sufferings due to his theory of the *deuteros plous*: "Notwithstanding all attenuations and placations of suffering, there will ever be enough misery in the world to lead to resignation" (Schopenhauer, 1971, p. 114, my translation). We may then distinguish between at least two basic alliances of pessimism. One of a reactionary type of praxis that sees pessimism as an acceptance of the *status quo*. Another of an emancipatory praxis that sees pessimism as an opportunity of awareness for struggle. Anyway, it has been a long time since the false idea of reducing pessimism to resignation and immobilism was overcome, and one of the most didactic ways to show what this means it's precisely by delimiting what is still missing, i.e., what a *critical pessimism* would precisely consist of.

Metaphysical and critical pessimism may be differentiated as follows. Metaphysical pessimism is the doctrine that conclude that the non-existence of the world is preferable its existence, due fundamentally to the predominance of positive evil over the negative good. It will always be closer to an idealism unfolded in negative ontology and euphemistic eudemonology, and can always be identified as the philosophy of the "worst of all possible worlds" or as a general axiology of the predominance of pain over pleasure. Critical pessimism does not deny such metaphysical premises, yet, it never restricts itself to their theoretical scope. Whereas metaphysical pessimism identifies generically "the pains of the world", the critical pessimism sees the material exploitations and perversities of specific socio-economic systems that fabricate misery and social evil in a world that exists, regardless of metaphysical disputes about being or not being. Metaphysical pessimism concerns itself with evils in general; critical pessimism needs to concern itself with specific evils, notably social ones.

In one of his most important statements on metaphysical pessimism, Schopenhauer argues that the "astonishment" (or surprise) regarding

existence only arises because the world does not justify itself.

If the world were not something that, expressed *practically*, should not be, then it would not be a problem *theoretically* either: instead its existence would either need no explanation at all, since it would be so completely self-evident that it would never occur to anyone to be surprised by it or to question it, or its purpose would be unmistakable. [...] Thus, if someone dares to raise the question why there should not be nothing at all, rather than this world, then the world cannot be justified by itself (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 594).

Schopenhauer finds that the true explanation of such a foundation or final cause consists, as we know, of the metaphysical thesis that the principle of existence is unfounded, i.e., a blind will to life without purpose, reason, or finality. An implicit consonance must then exist between the very idea of "critique", in a broad sense, and the nonconformity from which pessimism is constructed, in the sense of not "conforming" to an inherent justification of being and the world. "Philosophical astonishment" in Schopenhauerian sense, pessimism and social criticism would complement each other: they are all forms of non-conformism regarding to different forms of being, from the metaphysical to the social. Thus, it can be stated without qualms that, if pessimism allows not *only* axiological and metaphysical contributions on the meaning or value of existence, then one of its privileged places can be Critical Theory – which can adopt it as one of its tools, transforming it into critical pessimism and seeing in it different potentials⁷.

But in what more specific sense do I understand "critical" here? I assume it in harmony with relatively well-consensual meanings of the adjective which names the School (of *Critical Theory*), notably in its beginnings as the Frankfurt

School and, in particular, as used in one of its founding texts, *Traditional and Critical Theory*. In fact, current representatives and scholars of Critical Theory seem to assume as certain or obvious that Critical Theory is "pessimistic" due to the obstacles and difficulties that it necessarily considers in view of emancipatory processes – or due to impossibilities of emancipation. But this would be to use "pessimism" uncritically, under the aforementioned meaning of common sense or the so-called "cultural pessimism", that is, to reduce it to a synonym for low expectations or bad expectations. It would be to directly collaborate with the continuation of the historical trivialization of use of the term "pessimism" in Philosophy.

There are, however, exceptions. Olgária Matos is a rare current representative of Critical Theory to use, for more than twenty years, the expression "critical pessimism" to analyze the Frankfurt School, justifying and linking such use directly to the decisive Schopenhauerian presence at the beginning of the School. Matos does this, for example, as the title of a brief topic in her book *A Escola de Frankfurt: luzes e sombras do Iluminismo* (1993), in which she starts from the assumption that "Horkheimer's pessimism and Adorno's melancholic science have a critical function" (1993, p. 74, my translation). The author assumes that pessimism is critical as an emancipatory critique, based not only on Horkheimer but also on Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*: the idea that it is not possible to attribute to a telos immanent to history the possibility of a happy outcome; "it is not about the struggle for historical victory, because that means remaining in the enemy's register" (Matos, 1993, p. 75, my translation). Already in *Os arcanos do inteiramente outro*, from 1989 (p. 259, my translation), the author had summarized: "Against the Enlightenment self-confident in the

⁷ Others elaborations of critical pessimism exists within the literature (not necessarily within the scope of Critical Theory) such as Malter's view of critical pessimism as a critical concept of pessimism. Metaphysical pessimism is assumed by Malter to refer to a consideration or appreciation of the experience of pain and as a correct and non-falsified understanding of such experience, which may be false precisely if measured by parameters of eudaimonism – since happiness would not be the purpose of existence – or of optimism and of some theodicy – since the world would not be the work of a good and provident God. Malter presents such pessimism principally as both a theoretical and practical attitude. He also sees it as a critical philosophical corrective orientation regards eudaimonism and optimism. It could also be seen as a, "disillusioning" perspective for the individual before the naked and raw world, which would enable the elimination of false hopes and expectations. Malter, thus, sees Schopenhauer's philosophy as a sort of "philosophy of liberation" (Malter, 2009, p. 630, my translation) by which the enlightening force of pessimism allows for an awareness of pessimus, would pave the way for liberation from pain itself.

unfolding of reason in history, Schopenhauer, due to his anti-finalism and anti-Enlightenment, is a critical force". I believe, however, that this is more of a result, a possible consequence of critical pessimism, and less of a definition of it. For a more precise delimitation, we would have to consider what I seek to highlight below.

We know how Horkheimer distinguished the two theoretical models. "Traditional theory" originated with early modern philosophy, especially with the Cartesian method, with which "the order of the world opens up to a connection of intellectual deductions" (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 118), like long chains made for rational reasons (as Descartes would say) or as a closed system of propositions (as per Husserl). "Critical theory", on the other hand, would have had to be able to think of theory and praxis as a dialectical unity, which would require moving "to a conception that eliminates the partiality that necessarily results from taking partial processes out of the totality of social praxis" (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 124). The last sentence of the work can express the essence of the new conception of theory: "But conformism in thought and the insistence that thinking is a fixed vocation, a self-enclosed realm within society as a whole, betrays the very essence of thought" (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 243).

Were "thought" replaced with "pessimism" the above statement could reasonably still be said to make sense. And here one of the semantic roots of a critical pessimism in the sense of Critical Theory can be noted. Overcoming conformism would basically mean, for our theme, moving from a conformist pessimism to a theoretically critical one, which could then unfold into practical critical pessimism. In other words, just as Horkheimer differentiated critical theory from traditional theory by rejecting the idea of classical metaphysics, similarly, we could then distinguish critical pessimism from "traditional pessimism" (fundamentally metaphysical) due to the latter's lack of disposition or the inability to contribute to social transformation, at least as proposed by Critical Theory.

Beyond or below all the nuanced uses of cri-

tique in its different and variable diagnoses for emancipation, in the various branches, generations, and current states of Critical Theory - and even if Horkheimer himself later changed the originally attributed meaning of his concept (Wiggershaus, 2002, p. 34) - the most valuable aspects of that critique for this inquiry are two: the ability to diagnose social pathologies and the transformation of reality in terms of social emancipation, considering the obstacles to it (Melo, 2011, p. 249; Nobre, 2004, p. 31-33). That is, precisely, the original definition of Marx's 1840's Critical Theory regarding industrial exploratory capitalism and class struggle, which the Frankfurt School resuscitated in the 1930s, under the aegis of interdisciplinary materialism in the context of a new stage of capitalism. We know that this recovery includes the notion of praxis, that cannot to be confounded with mere action.

Thus, it would be reasonable to suggest that the uses of "critical pessimism" be at least minimally consonant with the tradition of *Critical Theory*. Otherwise, using "critical" to qualify "pessimism" might sound like an allusion to "philosophical pessimism" in general, to indirectly highlight its difference from the common usage of the term "pessimism".

To this end, it is worth considering a clear - and only apparently strange - Marxist root of this critical pessimism. It is evident precisely in the referred two tasks (conducting diagnoses and engaging in emancipatory praxis) and is mediated by Horkheimer himself and Alfred Schmidt, Horkheimer's student and successor at Goethe University. Indeed, "the Frankfurt School was separated from Kant and Hegel by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Bergson, Weber, Husserl, and many others, not to mention the systematization of Marxism itself" (Jay, 1996, p. 45). Horkheimer (1991, p. 270, my translation) stated that "Marxist materialism, free from idealist self-deception, is closer to Schopenhauer than to Democritus"; and, in *Critical Theory Yesterday and Today*, we read that "the two philosophers who decisively influenced the beginnings of Critical Theory were Schopenhauer and Marx" (Horkheimer, 2022, p. 336, my

translation). Thus, in the author who would dedicate no less than five articles to Schopenhauer⁸, we have more than the defense that the *malum physicum* of Marx's historical materialism would be complemented with the Schopenhauerian *malum metaphysicum*⁹.

We know, for example, that the blend between Marx and Schopenhauer in the 1930s occurred mainly because Horkheimer found in both, albeit in different forms, the idea of the impossibility of justifying the sufferings of capitalist society. Furthermore, as Alfred Schmidt summarizes when analyzing this dual influence, "Marx and Schopenhauer both profess [each in their own way] the blind and unconscious character that characterizes the course of the world" (1977, p. 89, my translation). From the 1940s, in the context of diagnosing the unfulfilled promises of Enlightenment, the combination significantly changed, with less Marx and more Schopenhauer. Schmidt holds that "pessimism in Schopenhauer is the hidden link between materialism and metaphysics" (1977, p. 69, my translation). The author has grounded even grounded, in Marxian and Engelsian terms, a "pessimistic materialism" from a "materialistic pessimism" (Corbanezi, 2017) and has been clear:

Where materialism renounces the demand for 'positive worldviews', it approaches Schopenhauer's philosophy and will understand, as he did, in many ways, the nonsense of our conditioned and fragile existence. This does not prevent the will, amidst all *malum metaphysicum*, from fighting energetically against all suffering, the *malum physicum*, which can be abolished¹⁰. In short, certainly, every materialistic philosophy worth its salt harbors a pessimistic moment within it (Schmidt, 1977, p. 73, my translation).

This Schmidt's strong statement is a version of what Horkheimer wrote in 1968, in his Introduction

to the reissue of a set of texts from the 1930s, entitled *Critical Theory*:

Metaphysical pessimism, always an implicit *moment* in every genuinely materialist philosophy, had always been congenial to me. My first acquaintance with philosophy came through Schopenhauer; my relation to Hegel and Marx and my desire to understand and change social reality have not obliterated my experience of his philosophy, *despite the political opposition* between these men (Horkheimer, 2002, p. IX, my emphasis).

Doubt no longer remains, therefore, that Horkheimer sees the emancipatory potential of pessimism in a peculiar way. Veauthier (1988, p. 593) states his interest in Schopenhauerian philosophy targets nothing more important than human suffering, its cause, and the possibility of its suppression. Admitting that the human well-being is socially conditioned also influences the notion of suffering and, consequently, that of pessimism. And with the facets of Horkheimerian pessimism, we would have to note, moreover, the disagreement already noticed by specialized literature (Chiarello, 2001) regarding Habermas's well-known evaluation, elaborated in *Theory of Communicative Action*, about the well-known turn of Critical Theory in the 1940s. The latter owed less to Lukács's theses of reification than to a greater (critical) approximation to Schopenhauer. The implicit moment of *metaphysical* pessimism in all genuinely materialism would not be just "a moment". Afterwards, one would not be able to arrive at some optimism, but it would be necessary to move on to another form (or face) of pessimism, the *critical* one.

Ultimately, the guiding question is whether past and present suffering can be justified, rather than delimiting what can or cannot be expected

⁸ The five articles are: *Schopenhauer and Society* (1955), *Schopenhauer's Actuality* (1961), *Religion and Philosophy* (1967), *Pessimism Today* (1971), and *Schopenhauer's Thought Regarding Science and Religion* (1972). It is more than proven that Horkheimer's interest in Schopenhauer is not restricted to the late phase. Besides the noted presence in various texts and publications from all phases, two attestations are: at the age of 18, the founder of Critical Theory started in philosophy by reading Schopenhauer's *Aphorisms for the Wisdom of Life* (Wiggershaus, 2002), and on the wall of his office at Goethe University, Schopenhauer kept company with Marx (Ruggieri, 2015).

⁹ I will not dwell on the phases of Schopenhauer's reception by Horkheimer, as there are already various studies on this. I will limit myself to mentioning, as examples, Chiarello (2001), Fazio (2023b), Miggiano (2017), Post (1971), Ramos (2008, 2017), Ruggieri (2015), Schmidt (1977), Sembler (2013), Veauthier (1988), Zanghi (2023).

¹⁰ As Lütkehaus synthesizes in *Schopenhauer und Marx*, "Schopenhauer generally prefers the term 'suffering' in its singular form, while Marx speaks more of 'misery' or 'sufferings' - for obvious reasons: Schopenhauer is concerned with an ontology of misery, dealing with the 'negativity' and the disillusionment with the irreversible 'suffering of life'; Marx, on the other hand, in the context of his discussion of Proudhon's *Philosophie de la misère*, targets historically and socially specific forms of misery, with the 'categorical imperative' of its elimination. However, neither made any explicit terminological differentiation" (Lütkehaus, 1985, p. 35, my translation).

of the future. This is Lukács's precise point of opposition to Horkheimer. The former critiques Schopenhauer's pessimism by asserting that the philosopher justifies status quo. Schopenhauerian pessimism would be co-responsible for promoting the misery upon which he feeds. In the service of the bourgeoisie and desiring the "tranquility of the salons", this rentier philosopher's pessimism would consist exactly of the philosophical justification for the lack of meaning of all political (and social) action, thereby fulfilling its social function. Instead of any contribution to solidarity, generally required by the working and disadvantaged classes, for Lukács (1988, p. 186) the individualistic-bourgeois egoism "of the capitalist type" constitutes the other face of such metaphysical pessimism. So selfish that it could build a sort of "grand hotel abyss" for its own pleasure from which it could contemplate [the abyss] of misery. However, if Lukács reads grim reality as justified and demonizes Schopenhauer, as well as Kierkegaard, Schelling, and Nietzsche as reactionary preachers of quietism, and precursors of Nazism, in no way does he deny the praxis of such pessimism. He merely sees it as enabling destruction and founding irrationalism. Thus, it is also possible to differentiate here both a reactionary type of praxis as well as an emancipatory one.

Let us now see the latter can be articulated.

3. Horkheimer's Critical Pessimism

What specifically would a Horkheimerian critical pessimism consist of? If we focus on two of the author's five mentioned articles on Schopenhauer, we will obtain answers. I refer to *Schopenhauer and Society* (1955) and *Pessimism Today* (1971), which are the ones where we find the term "pessimism" more expressly recorded by Horkheimer. Specifying which pessimism is indicated in them avoids more securely that pessimism described as critical suffers from the same generalization that philosophical pessimism in general suffers from. It is worth considering that these five articles, after being presented one by one as lectures at the headquarters of the Schopenhauer Society in

Frankfurt a.M., were published in the respective following years in the Yearbook of that same Society (the *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch*). Focusing on them allows us to verify much of what constitutes the above-mentioned "non-canceled experience" with Schopenhauer.

In the first article, the peculiarity of critical pessimism, against Schopenhauer, consists in the outright refusal to generically attribute to a dynamic inherent to the volitional world the causes of the lack of promised and unfulfilled satisfaction by progress: "*Pessimistic philosophy* has become the rationalization of the disturbing state of reality; it has helped to attribute to the essence of the world the lack of satisfactions or reliefs that were expected from technical progress, instead of deducing the announced misfortunes from an organization of society in which technology escaped from human hands" (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 161, my translation, my emphasis).

In order to differentiate "pessimistic philosophy" in general from critical pessimism, it is very important to consider what Horkheimer refers to here by "pessimistic philosophy". It would be possible to conjecture that he was referring to Schopenhauer and the *Pessimismusstreit* of the 19th century, since he would be aware that these were the two main landmarks of pessimism as philosophical worldviews. However, in the published work and in the Archives of the Goethe-Universität, which house the author's unpublished manuscripts and notes, we do not find any reference to the authors of *Pessimismusstreit*, which indicates that Horkheimer did not consider them for this concern. It is noteworthy, however, that in the aforementioned Archives, in one of the typed versions of the article *Schopenhauer and Society*, the above quotation is elaborated with the following difference in relation to the version published in the *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch* and later in the Complete Works: "*Pessimism* helped attribute the lack of expected relief from technical progress to the nature of the world, instead of attributing the imminent disaster to the state of society in which technology surpassed people" (Horkheimer, Archiv Na 1, 762, 2024, p. 5, my trans-

lation, my emphasis). In other words, Horkheimer crossed out "pessimism" from one of his drafts of the aforementioned article, replacing the expression with "pessimistic philosophy". Implicit here is the concern of the founder of Critical Theory in differentiating "pessimism" in general, something vague, from "pessimistic philosophy". Or rather: here we would have an implicit differentiation between (i) uncritical pessimism, (ii) pessimistic philosophy and (iii) - his - critical pessimism.

In line with the concept of critique that founded the School, critical pessimism, instead of burdening "the essence of the world", links social failures to their respective societies, dynamics, and commitments. Horkheimer specifically refers, in this article, to aspects of the failures of objective reason already described in previous texts on instrumental reason. Using Schopenhauer's thesis that social progress is always compensated by new pains and burdens of suffering, Horkheimer diagnoses the post-war *pessimus* through what we can call Schopenhauerian elements of the theses on instrumental reason and cultural industry: "the progressive elimination of women's domestic servitude, the equalization of worker and entrepreneur modes of being, the democratization of existence" do not prevent "the displacement of economic energies in favor of the instrumental" (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 52, my translation).

Two opposing, apparently inconsistent, statements about Schopenhauer's supposed justification of the *status quo* appear in the same article and are decisive. Initially, Horkheimer states that Schopenhauer can have justified: "The proclamation this senselessness [of historical efforts and movements] lies the consecration of the existing [...]. In the absence of a prevailing theory of society and given the assumption of the unimportance of all the fruits of that creative idleness for which Schopenhauer claimed tranquility and order, it is difficult to understand why the interest of an independent philosopher for maintaining the *status quo* should have more philosophical importance than the interest of auxiliary workers in its change: *in logical rigor, philosophical pessimism either commits itself better to rational argumentation in*

favor of the status quo or to subversion" (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 162, my translation, my emphasis). As strange as it may seem, this latter option by Schopenhauer had always attracted Horkheimer. It is not a question of inconsistency. In fact, would this possible contradiction not be inherent to this dialectic of pessimism? Horkheimer, unlike Lukács, differentiated Schopenhauer's well-known personal interests from the content of his philosophy: "your censure of subversion is not philosophically motivated" (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 163, my translation). This type of stance, illustrative of Schopenhauer's political conservatism, is also indicated in Horkheimer's aforementioned retrospective elaboration from 1968: "despite the political opposition".

A contraposed is presented, however: "the existing is not glorified by Schopenhauer's distrust of reform and revolution" (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 164, my translation). Nothing is promised, neither in heaven nor on earth. What is more, all fanaticism and idolatry are thoroughly denounced including populisms Führer of all races, times, and political orientations use to lead their followers (a theme revisited in the second article, *Schopenhauer's Actuality*). His surprising 1955 statement: "in Schopenhauer's nominalism regarding society lies the root of his greatness" (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 47, my translation) is complemented in 1961 by the claim that he "did not lose sight of the variations of social injustice that were peculiar to different eras and that has impressed upon most populations the stamp of *proletarii* or *servi*" (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 195, my translation). Yet, metaphysical pessimism regarding *society* would again yield to a critical pessimism of *societies* or specific social beings.

In *Pessimism Today* critical pessimism critiques the diminishing importance of the individual and culture within the administered society, following Auschwitz and the horrors of Hitler and Stalin. The diagnosis of a non-resigned or non-conformist pessimism is that "the horror of the past will be succeeded by an administered future" (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 39, my translation), in which humanity would turn into a unitary kind like other living beings; and fantasy, religion, longing, and

autonomous thought would overcome illusions. This pessimism, unlike Schopenhauer's, would be unconditional in that it does not count on any quietist or redemptive alternative of returning to the universal will of those who overcome selfishness. It arises from the very development of society: "Even when revolutions, just like technical progress, produce new orders with greater material balance, culture does not proportionally extend to the formerly oppressed the capacity to be happy that once belonged to their masters" (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 40). Thus, despite the potential and much-desired material progress, the past of oppression will remain irremediably insurmountable in cultural and spiritual terms. Without returning pessimism to its conformist and resigned form, it is endowed with an essential and determining critical characteristic. It addresses the past more than the future. The example of slavery in so many societies, implied in the term "masters" cited above serves as one of the most obvious historical cases. Its indelible mark will remain as a humanitarian scar, notwithstanding all abolitionisms.

4. An Inconsistency of Horkheimer's Critical Pessimism? In Defense of a Practical Critical Pessimism

There is something more for our question at the end of Horkheimer's article *Pessimism Today*. It concerns what the author understands as the "product of pessimism", which is why it is called "productive pessimism"¹¹, but defined as a kind of *optimistic praxis*. It is one of the main characteristics of Horkheimer's critical pessimism that we propose to rethink, which would even imply a redefinition of the notion, without abandoning the qualification of "productive". The question consists of how the philosopher sees the practice of solidarity or praxis in general as a consequence of the previous pessimistic critique. This concept of solidarity, which is known to link the founder of the Frankfurt School with current representatives of Critical Theory, principally Habermas.

Indeed, Horkheimer argues that Schopenhauer was the first to propose a principle of solidarity among humans without relying on any consolatory metaphysics, grounding it instead on human finitude and the abandonment of humanity in a world without any benevolent divinity. But in the mentioned end of *Pessimism Today*, we have an explanation that seems problematic:

Today we can say that the reasons for comfort are becoming increasingly fragile. Only the longing remains - itself threatened by progress - that is common to all men aware of the misery of the past, the injustice of the present, and the prospect of a future devoid of spiritual meaning. If these people met, such a desire could allow for a form of solidarity that would also include theological aspects, in a non-dogmatic manner. Their ultimately *negative* attitude would be connected with what here, in Frankfurt, is called Critical Theory. The men united by this longing could not affirm anything about the Absolute, about a purely intelligible reality, about God and redemption, they could not attribute an absolute truth value to their knowledge, to any form of knowledge; they could, however, spread solidarity, indicate - taking into account the progress that is necessary, although it must be paid at a high price - what must be changed or preserved to alleviate human suffering. To theoretical pessimism, a *non-anti-optimistic praxis* (*nicht unoptimistische Praxis*) could be associated - that, mindful of universal evil, would still try to improve the world as much as possible (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 232, my translation).

This excerpt is extremely rich in elements that identify pessimism with Critical Theory, especially due to the negative character of the conjectured praxis. However, such praxis seems strange insofar as it appears to arise from an impossible source. How might pessimism turn into optimism just like that? This appears to be a blatant *non sequitur*. Adding to this strangeness, we know that shortly after the death of his great friend and partner Theodor Adorno, Horkheimer wrote the following, in *Critical Theory Yesterday and Today*:

To conclude, I would like to say a word about the difference between pessimism and optimism. The conception of humanity's guilt is indeed pessimistic; and pessimistic is the belief that history is moving towards a managed world, such that what we call spirit and imagination will largely regress [...]. But what,

¹¹ In the original: "[...] habe ich versucht, etwas zur Angemessenheit des *Pessimismus* an die heutige Welt beizutragen, wie auch noch anzudeuten, inwiefern er *produktiv* sein könnte" (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 232).

then, does the optimism I share with Adorno, my late friend, consist of? In the belief that, despite everything, we must try to do and achieve what we believe to be true and good. This was our principle: *pessimist in theory and optimist in practice* (Horkheimer, 2022, p. 353, my translation, my emphasis)¹².

This is a revealing confession on the part of one member of a long and fruitful intellectual partnership; a declaration of love and loyalty from a rare authorial duo in Western Philosophy. Yet the question of the philosophical status of pessimism is more than merely rhetorical or terminological. Even if it were, as it probably was, the only way Horkheimer found to suggest the unfolding of theoretical pessimistic evidence into praxis, it could not simply be the applied face of the same pessimism. Using "optimism" or "optimists" here causes more than mere discomfort. This is true both regarding the position that pessimism should be just "a moment" of materialism or critique as well as - as I would like to defend - for the argument that it should be a *continuum*, a reiterated device of all moments, until emancipation is achieved. It potentially leads to a semantic problem that would indicate incoherence in reserving pessimism only for theory.

Can it be understood that Horkheimer dissociated the theory and practice of pessimism in order to distance himself from Schopenhauer, who, as we have seen, affirmed that if "expressed *practically*, [the world] should not be, then it would not be a problem *theoretically* either" (Schopenhauer, 2018, p. 594), which would imply for Horkheimer also defining the praxis of theoretical pessimism as a metaphysical question of being or not being, or the preference for non-being? This, as we have seen, really could not define a critical pessimism in the manner of Critical Theory, including because Horkheimer does not recognize all conclusions of Schopenhauerian metaphysics. Alternatively, was Horkheimer merely using pessimism and optimism in their uncritical senses, as day-to-day ide-

as of "bad expectations" and "good expectations"? In fact, uncritical uses of pessimism do appear in Critical Theory, including texts on Horkheimer and Adorno (e.g., Wiggershaus, 2002, p. 311, 565, 614, 647 etc.). Indeed, Horkheimer himself often used the term "pessimism" in an uncritical sense. Anyway, if the "practice of pessimism" is not an exception to how Horkheimer and Adorno assimilate Marxist-rooted praxis, i.e., as dialectically unitary in relation to theory, then it would indeed be a glaring inconsistency. However, when he does not use the terms in an uncritical sense, we can affirm that the philosophical content of what Horkheimer calls "practical optimism" is everything that makes up the defense of the search for the "entirely Other", in the late phase of his production. This is a declared positivization, through the so-called "non-dogmatic theology" and solidarity, in search of a just world, instead of fighting an unjust world.

Another aspect of the question refers to the interesting and necessary delimitation of theoretical pessimism to a critical role concerning the past and present. Horkheimer himself left implicit in many of his mentions of philosophical pessimism that its task would have little to do with the future. As Cacciola (2021, p. 7) correctly observes, this approach is reminiscent of Schopenhauer's concept of temporality in which "time is circular, approaching an eternal present, a *hic et nunc*". Yet would this essential premise for defining the criticality of pessimism have to turn into optimism in order to address the future?

No philosophical optimism, no optimistic praxis, not even the effective construction and implementation of various urgent types of solidarity - which seem to have been Horkheimer's most direct reasons for optimistic praxis - would be able to either preserve the critique or to help implement emancipations. The two elements eliminate each other: any optimism, even a critical one, would immediately put an end to any

¹² This proposal for a practical optimism by Horkheimer has nothing to do with his critique of theses on the denial of will and on the Book IV of *The World* in general, a topic that I will not analyze here (cf. Ramos, 2017). Or rather: it has to do with it, but in the sense of being the opposite of Schopenhauer's proposal that leads to the praise of quietism and asceticism. In a posthumous fragment entitled *Schopenhauer als Optimist*, Horkheimer accused Schopenhauer of being contradictory in relation to his pessimism through theses such as the return of the individual will to the one will (Horkheimer, 1985, p. 388).

critical project of society. Would be some God, some absolute, or some theodicy (insurers of metaphysical optimism) be required for optimism to assert itself in the name of some good, thereby compromising all the negative characteristics of critique? The negative character of the praxis of solidarity, expressly indicated, in particular, in the above-cited fragment of the article Pessimism Today, would easily be compromised by being proposed as practical optimism. It would, in fact, be too affirmative¹³.

To avoid this *contradiction in adjecto*, it would be crucial to assume the applied face of critical pessimism, to refer to the future, simply as practical critical pessimism, as an alternative to practical optimism. What would it consist of and what would be its main components? The (re)definition can be organized from the two mentioned aspects of the initial project of Critical Theory: diagnosing social pathologies and transforming reality in search of social emancipation. These two elementary premises, common to any generation, sphere, or facet of Critical Theory, could benefit from something inherent in a critical theoretical pessimism that becomes critical practical pessimism, in the following terms.

1) For the ever-renewed social diagnoses, the unparalleled capacity for nonconformity and the fundamental presupposition of the unjustifiability of (supposedly) past evils would ensure that it is not possible to yield to the naturalization of miseries and horrors. To avoid overburdening - generically and metaphysically - the "essence of the world" with new forms of evil, the dialectic of the resolute rejection of any justification of past horror would be a presupposition that would highlight one of the great advantages of adopting a pessimistic worldview, which no other worldview could provide with so much force. One of the beneficial consequences for any emancipatory project would be the refusal to be convinced that the combated domination has been definitively overcome. For example, historical injustices

would not be "repaired", in sense that they are generally assumed by great historical efforts or by present-day social movements, even if the best compensations in terms of rights and well-being for the formerly oppressed are now provided.

2) For the elaboration of emancipatory promises, theoretical critical pessimism must turn into practical critical pessimism rather than practical optimism. For each instance of social deprivation, suffering, or exploitation, as the poverty, specific contributions are required so that overcoming forms of oppression may become truer and more authentic than if they had merely been inspired by promises of optimism. Practical critical pessimism can detect illusory aspects of emancipatory and future promises. Strictly speaking, all optimism has something perverse and false, even if its most dangerous premises have been theoretically defenestrated before becoming praxis. A practical critical pessimism can function as a safeguard to detect what would be illusory in emancipatory and future promises. Moreover, it would not aim at the positive, so that the social struggles would not become positivized projects of seeking a great good, in which case, for example, the oppressed could easily become the oppressor. Such pessimism would ensure the refusal to direct emancipatory causes toward new domination projects. The social struggles, then, would need to focus much more on the acquisition of historical consciousness of injustices, accumulating social motives so that they do not recur, preventing regressions, rather than the pursuit of a positive end of establishing justice.

The greatest potential contribution of critical pessimism to social critique and to Critical Theory as a whole is the guarantee of its negative character. This is why pessimism will never be able to unfold *practically* into optimism. No other philosophical tool can match this potential, because denying the positive by negating the optimisms of philosophical systems (speculative or practical) is its very *raison d'être* and primary responsibility.

¹³ It is glaringly significant for our hypothesis that the current Israel-Palestine war is a horror produced by formerly oppressed people who now positively assume a goal and, in the name of defending the Jewish people, practice against the Palestinians the same evil they once suffered.

It is not by chance that Adorno recognized the following: "Like the immanence of fate, the world spirit drips with suffering and fallibility. As total immanence is blown up into essentiality, the negativity of the world spirit becomes an accidental trifle. Yet to experience the world spirit as a whole means to experience its negativity. This was the point of Schopenhauer's critique of the official optimism" (Adorno, 2004, p. 305). Therefore, Critical Theory and (critical) pessimism are complementary, not solely owing to the aforementioned consonance between philosophical wonder, nonconformity, and critique, but also to the basic recognition that pessimism is the very voice of the negative. Horkheimer and Adorno seemed aware of this, but for the present time it does not seem meaningless or obvious to us to argue that any emancipatory project of Critical Theory would necessarily have to be – and not just at first – a project of pessimism. In this sense, the Saramago's quotation (1997) of our epigraph, if it seems exaggerated in stating that "*the only ones interested in changing the world*" would be the pessimists – and perhaps by now it is clear what kind of "pessimists" would serve this purpose – would be even more true if said this way: it is impossible to wish to change the world without somehow being a pessimist. Alternatively, it is futile for an optimist to hope to change the world, since it would be impossible to be philosophically optimistic without "being enchanted with what is there", that is, being dazzled and satisfied with the *status quo*.

Conclusion

In addition to reiterating the liberation of pessimism from the labels of quietism, immobilism, and resignation, we note that a critical pessimism – unlike other pessimisms – would have "citizenship" as a first-order ally of Critical Theory and emancipatory projects. This is to the extent that it presents itself as a subversive guarantee of nonconformity, as a determining device to guarantee the negative character of criticism through the constant criticism of optimism as synonymous with positivity. There is a subversion that could

only be guaranteed by critical pessimism, since it would be the critical device that would best ensure that spirit of nonconformity, exhaustively explained by Demirović (1999), which marks the beginnings of Critical Theory. Nonconformity in relation to the past and the present, without interfering in expectations of the future as uncritical pessimism.

An uncritical and unproductive pessimism would be that of common sense, identified with lamentation and negative future expectations, as well as all those philosophical versions that limit themselves to acknowledging the world's miseries. Critical and productive pessimism narrates society's most diverse evils and individualizes them, while metaphysical pessimism merely narrates universal evil in a predictably vague fashion when addressing social issues. It does not end in itself, rather it aims to expose and subvert the order that enables misery and social evil.

In summary, three premises must be established in order to (re)define critical pessimism. The latter two must be rethought in light of Horkheimer's view of pessimism's contributions to formulating diagnoses ranging from *malum metaphysicum* to *malum physicum*. This, in turn, will help formulate proposals for emancipation. 1) To be considered "critical", philosophical pessimism needs to prioritize social evils over metaphysical ones, or moving beyond than metaphysical evil. It needs to define, therefore, which social evil, social wound, or social domination it refers to. 2) Critical pessimism cannot be limited to a "moment of all genuine materialism", but must be a necessary *continuum* for any critical project of society. 3) The type of praxis associated with theoretical pessimism should not be that which is a practical optimism, but rather a *practical critical pessimism*, which corresponds to a *productive pessimism*, as guarantee of a permanent refusal to the positivation of future emancipatory processes. The horizon to be aimed at as a result of this productive and critical force of pessimism would need to dispose hopes, but not optimisms. This is, above all, a matter of logical coherence. Hopes for emancipation from unjustifiable past

and present suffering, the driving force of critical pessimism, would always be partial emancipations, not redemptions. They can negate something worse, they may prevent something worse, and they must therefore be seen as negative in a Schopenhauerian and also in the sense of the early Critical Theory with Horkheimer and Adorno.

A productive critical pessimism would first help Critical Theory diagnose the present, then aid it in avoiding the temptation to make the future positive, preventing it from confusing emancipation from social scourges with the total overcoming of an oppressive past and a utopian pursuit of a great good. It would function as a device designed to detect the worst of the past, nonconformity with the present, and seek to avoid the worst of the future. In this last instance, it ceases to be theoretical pessimism to become practical pessimism. In this view, there is no great good, no great end, no great goal that does not present itself as a complication rather than a beneficial mobilizing element. The significant contributions that, in this way, a critical pessimism would offer to Critical Theory would require that its representatives refrain from using the term "pessimism" to refer to "low expectations", exactly as happens in the uncritical - and unproductive - employment of pessimism. To be productive, pessimism does not need to become optimism.

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Vilmar Debona

Professor of the Department and Graduate Program in Philosophy at the Federal University of Santa Catarina. PhD in Philosophy from the University of São Paulo. He completed postdoctoral studies at the University of São Paulo and the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main. He is a member of the ANPOF GT-Schopenhauer, an associate member of the Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft (Frankfurt a.M.) and its Brazilian Section, and co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Voluntas: International Journal of Philosophy*. His research interests include the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, ethics, social suffering, Critical Pessimism, and Critical Theory.

Mailing address

VILMAR DEBONA

Rua Fernando Machado, 192, apto. 507
Centro, 88020-130
Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brasil

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