

**Homeschooling or education besieged in the *intérieur*:
notes from Walter Benjamin**

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Lidnei Ventura*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4310-2632>

Abstract: This paper studies the homeschooling movement from the perspective of Walter Benjamin's fragmentary hermeneutics. The objective is to define this movement as an epiphenomenon linked to the loss of communicability and poor experience that configures modernity, especially in the current period characterized by the control of education policies by financial hegemony's neoliberalism. This text is underpinned by a Benjaminian methodology in order to construct monadological structures that characterize domestic education as a phenomenon derived from the increasingly accentuated process of interiorization of the bourgeois society, which assigns the private sphere to an important achievement of the liberal revolution itself: the modern universal school. As a provisional result, it appears that the homeschooling movement is another expression of the reactionary and solipsistic physiognomy of the bourgeois *intérieur*.

Keywords: Homeschooling. Benjaminian Hermeneutics. Neoliberalism.

Resumo: Este artigo estuda o movimento *homeschooling* na perspectiva da hermenêutica fragmentária de Walter Benjamin. O objetivo consiste em definir tal movimento como epifenômeno ligado à perda da comunicabilidade e da pobreza de experiência que configura a modernidade, principalmente no período atual de controle das políticas educacionais pelo neoliberalismo de hegemonia financeira. Parte-se da metodologia benjaminiana para construir-se estruturas monadológicas que caracterizem a educação doméstica como fenômeno derivado do processo cada vez mais acentuado de interiorização da sociedade burguesa, que retrai ao plano privado uma importante conquista das próprias revoluções liberais: a escola universal moderna. Como resultado provisório, infere-se que o movimento *homeschooling* é mais uma das expressões da fisiognomia reacionária e solipsista do *intérieur* burguês.

Palavras-chave: *Homeschooling*. Hermenêutica benjaminiana. Neoliberalismo.

* Adjunct Professor in the Department of Pedagogy at the Center for Distance Education, State University of Santa Catarina (UDESC). PhD in Education from the Federal University of Santa Catarina. Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil. E-mail: <llventura@gmail.com>.

Resumen: Este artículo estudia el movimiento *homeschooling* en la perspectiva de la hermenéutica fragmentaria de Walter Benjamin. El objetivo consiste en definir tal movimiento como epifenómeno vinculado a la pérdida de comunicabilidad y de la pobreza de experiencia que configura la modernidad, principalmente en el período actual de control de las políticas educativas por el neoliberalismo de la hegemonía financiera. Se parte de la metodología benjaminiana para construir estructuras monadológicas que caractericen la educación doméstica como un fenómeno derivado del proceso cada vez más acentuado de interiorización de la sociedad burguesa, que retrae al plano privado un logro importante de las propias revoluciones liberales: la escuela universal moderna. Como resultado provisional, se infiere que el movimiento *homeschooling* es una expresión más de la fisionomía reaccionaria y solipsista del *intérieur* burgués.

Palabras clave: *Homeschooling*. Hermenéutica benjaminiana. Neoliberalismo.

Introduction

The sociometabolic condition of contemporary capitalism has presented systematic crises (Mészáros, 2002) that put in check old modern institutions considered stable, among them, the school. Whether public or private, school appears in modernity as an integral part of the concept of *Bildung* (education) that dominated the imagery of the “century of lights”, being at the base of the ideal, cultured and self-sufficient man of Illustration (*Aufklärung*) and which was “perhaps the greatest idea of the eighteenth century” (Gadamer, 2014, p. 44).

Although it falls far short of the people’s need to understand social reality (Alves, 2005) and the construction of critical-emancipatory thinking, school has served at least to contribute to the process of humanization of new generations due to the subsumption of parents to the labor market since the beginning of the universal, secular and free school, still in the midst of the Bourgeois Revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries that instituted the Nation-State. Even considering more than two centuries of the advent of the modern public school¹, in Brazil, the process of universalization of the primary school is something very recent and it is only from 1980 that it is possible to talk, still with many reservations, about a “certain universalization” (Ferraro & Machado, 2002) of access to Basic Education.

In spite of the bumps experienced by the implementation of the constitutional precepts of a public, compulsory, universal and free school, under the principle of “guarantee of quality standards” (Federal Constitution of Brazil, 1988, p. 138), there is a risk, today, of going beyond these concerns due to the increasingly ferocious attacks of neoliberalism against the State and in favor of the privatization of this important social field of hegemonic disputes.

On the rise, after the global systematic crises of the Welfare State, neoliberalism, as a regime of accumulation of financial hegemony (Chesnais, Levy, Dumenil, & Wallerstein 2003), dominant from the end of the 1970s, has controlled public policies as a way to control the State and, as a result, the social supply of education. The Brazilian case, as well as any peripheral capitalist country, could not pass unscathed from this true avalanche, so that, in recent times, Brazilian education policies have mainly focused on neoliberal programmatic reforms, something that is currently intensifying with the resurgence of organized conservative thinking (liberal and/or neoliberal). In this context, public school has been the main target of propaganda for disqualification, resource constraint, as well as the inhibition of public investment and incentive to initiatives of charter schools, vouchers and homeschooling proposals, growing in a progressive wave of minimal State policies, constantly reverberated by mass media.

¹ It refers to the advent of the modern public school that became popular and universalized between the 19th and 20th centuries (Alves, 2005).

Amid the criticism of the “weight” of the State, a neoliberal epiphenomenon emerges in Brazil, homeschooling, mainly inspired by the United States, whose growing interest has attracted new followers, usually linked to the conservative thinking which found in the new government² an important partner in making educational legislation more flexible, restricted so far to this type of education³.

After a long process of struggles within the Brazilian State, markedly oligarchic and elitist, which aimed at the establishment of a national system of universal and free public education, it was only after 1996, with the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (Law no. 9.394, of December 20, 1996) that it was possible to glimpse prospects for consolidating the mandatory enrollment in Basic Education⁴. However, this obligation is at risk with the flexibilization of education legislation, as proclaimed by the adepts of the regulation of homeschooling as an educational modality, with a rhetoric that intends to place family law above the State and, therefore, “seems to resume, as the basis of its argument, at least in a broad way, the thesis or theses of jusnaturalism, be it through the medieval aspect, or through the modern one” (Cury, 2017, p. 110).

Although it is possible to critically analyze the homeschooling movement under several aspects, as it has already been done in Brazil and abroad, such as economic (Barbosa, 2016; Oliveira & Barbosa, 2017; Brewer & Lubienski, 2017), political-pedagogical (Apple, 2001; Cury, 2006), legal (Cury, 2017; Vasconcelos & Boto, 2020) or political-sociological (Paraskeva, 2001), this paper intends to focus on it from a less common angle: the loss of the sense of collectivity and interiorization of life in modernity (Benjamin, 2012) and the consideration of homeschooling as one of the last solipsist “novelties” in the bourgeois world with regard to education.

The study starts from Walter Benjamin’s conceptions about the loss of experience in modern life and the progressive advance of private and individualistic life in big cities, focused on the bourgeois *intérieur*. Based on significant texts such as “Experience and Poverty”, “The narrator” and “Paris, the capital of the 18th century”, among others, the intention is to relate the author’s reflections to the homeschooling proposal, understanding this phenomenon as another fragment of the loss of communicability of modern experience and expression of an education under siege in a new ivory tower: the private home.

Therefore, a few notes on Benjamin’s hermeneutic-fragmentary methodology are presented *a priori* (Ventura, 2018), which served as a guide for the study of the object in question. Then, a review of this author’s work is done, seeking to find elements in it to understand the advances of individualism as a central category of (neo)liberal thinking. From there, implications for the withdrawal of communicative and shared experiences are inferred which have, as a side effect, the

² Proposals to legalize homeschooling through legislature have been repeatedly presented by conservative sectors. The last attempt presented to parliament is Bill no. 2.401/2019, authored by the Executive Branch. For an excellent historical retrospective of these initiatives, see Vasconcelos and Boto (2020).

³ The understanding of the Supreme Federal Court, in 2018, considered the authorization for home education unconstitutional, dismissing the case of a child from Rio Grande do Sul (Supreme Federal Court, 2018).

⁴ As of Constitutional Amendment no. 59/2009, the Brazilian Federal Constitution foresees, in Article 208, compulsory and free Basic Education from 4 (four) to 17 (seventeen) years of age, including its free offer for all those who did not have access to it at the appropriate age (p. 8). And, according to the Law no. 9.394/1996, in Article 208: The State’s duty with education will be carried out by guaranteeing:

§ 1 Access to compulsory and free education as a subjective public right.

§ 2 The non-provision of compulsory education by the public authority, or its irregular offer, is the responsibility of the competent authority.

§ 3 - It is the responsibility of the public power to register students in Elementary School, verify their presence and watch over, along with their parents or guardians that they are attending school.

loss of collectivity as a parameter of life in society, culminating in narcissistic aesthetic and educational perspectives. Finally, some arguments in favor of homeschooling are analyzed based on the Benjaminian reference, pointing out its socially reactionary character.

Brief notes on Walter Benjamin's fragmentary hermeneutics

It is not a simple task to locate a plural thinker like Walter Benjamin. One of his most important translators for the Portuguese language, João Barrento (2013), tries to define it like this:

Walter Benjamin is, in fact, one of the great polygraphers of the 20th century, a philosopher of history, language, politics, ideology, aesthetics, sociologist, historian of literature and art, critic, chronicler and short story writer, poet and collector, theorist of the new media (photography, cinema, advertising) and author of some of the great literary essays of the 20th century, about Kafka and Proust, Goethe and Brecht, Baroque and Surrealism. (Barrento, 2013, p. 113).

As a result of this vast spectrum of interests, he became “what was almost inevitable, a fragmentarist” (Barrento, 2013, p. 114). However, far from being a fault, this condition is an indelible mark of his thinking and great influence due to the creation of a research methodology that starts from the fragments, ruins and noises that inform the phenomena, whose multiple meanings are studied and interpreted, following traces from a hermeneutic-fragmentary process. Far from thinking of anything unsystematic or aphoristic, his procedural rigor is comparable to the task of the archaeologist, whose excavation task consists of removing the various sedimented layers and making the constellation of meanings that radiate from the object flash. However, such constellations do not arise promptly to the observer (researcher), as they depend on his/her ability to read, interpret and assemble the mosaic pieces from the hermeneutic gesture that would invent the origin⁵ (*Ursprung*) of the investigated phenomenon. Each piece points to the limits in which the image of thinking that expresses the idea that one seeks to find is processed. Hence the importance given to fragments, as Benjamin (2016) well pointed out in the study of the Baroque (*Trauerspiel*⁶). To Benjamin (2016), the value of the fragments of thinking is more decisive as less immediate is its relation with the background conception, and on this value depends the brightness of the representation, in the same measure that the mosaic depends on the quality of the glass paste (p. 17). In this process, what we are looking for are physiognomic⁷ marks of a biography, of a century or an era based on sparks of illumination contained in small pieces that are juxtaposed to form images of thinking (*Bilddenken*). Thus, applying the fragmentary Benjaminian hermeneutics to objects of knowledge in the human sciences requires an understanding of the method as a deviation whose “first step of the way will be to apply the principle of montage to history. To erect large

⁵ In Benjamin (2016), the concept of origin goes beyond genesis, the birth of a phenomenon, it is its own historical constitution that is expressed not in the continuum of history, but as a leap (*Sprung*), as a rupture in empty time. “Origin (*Ursprung*), although a thoroughly historical category, nonetheless has nothing in common with beginnings (*Entstehung*). The term origin does not mean the process of becoming and disappearing. The origin stands in the flow of becoming as a whirlpool” (p. 34) that drags in its movement the material produced in the genesis process.

⁶ The original title of Benjamin's work is *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*.

⁷ Physiognomy (neologism for physiognomy), known since antiquity as the art of deducing personality traits by the features of the face, head and skin, as in medicine by Hippocrates, has been used throughout history by philosophers, artists and scientists. In Benjamin's time, physiognomy had achieved great projection and scientific prestige based on the classifications of Gall's phrenology and César Lombroso's criminal types. In Benjamin, we find several assertions to it, as found in the book *Arcade Project*: “To write history means giving dates their physiognomy” (Benjamin, 2007, p. 518).

constructions from the tiniest, sharply, fashioned materials. Indeed, to discover the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, discrete moment” (Benjamin, 2007, p. 503).

These fundamentals have direct implications for the constitution of a method, but as construction and assembly, not as an organ (*ὄργανον*), whose Greek tradition of method led to modernity not as a “way of doing” or as “paths already travelled”, but as a path to be pioneered. In the Benjaminian sense, method means deviation, as in the aphorism presented in *Truener Spiels: Methode ist Umweg. Darstellung als Umweg*⁸. In this sentence, the double sense of negation of the method should be highlighted, starting with the German prefix “Um”, opposing, on the one hand, the straight path (inductive or deductive) of the natural sciences and their rules of adequacy; and, on the other, the refusal of an objective and syllogistic form of representation (presentation).

The unfolding of this way of thinking leads to the search for the establishment of relations between the parties and the totality that historically entangle and condition the phenomenon. It is, therefore, to assume that the relationship between the minute precision and of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) is only grasped through the immersion in the most minute details of the subject matter (*Sachgehalt*) (Benjamin, 2016, p. 17).

To the extent that we understand, as Bakhtin (2003) points out, that the object of the human sciences is the expressive and talking being (p. 395), the key to hermeneutical interpretation becomes history as a manifestation of dialectic contradictions between men and between men and nature. The process of excavating the sediments has the function of revealing the “phantasmatic” side of history, obstructed by a naive or malicious view, which excels in a universal historiography with an “empty and homogeneous time” whose guide is the inalienable progress.

In the case of the critical investigator, that Benjamin (2012) calls a historical materialist, he/she starts a determined life at the time and, from the work composed during that life, a determined work. The result of this procedure is that in this way the work as a whole is preserved and transcends (*aufheben*) in the work, in the whole of the work the epoch, and in the epoch the totality of the historical process (p. 251). However, unusually, the totality of the historical process should not be sought in the total event, but in its thresholds, in its contact zones, details pulverized in myriads of splinters that keep, in a micrological scale, the miniature image of the world (physiognomy).

In a unique way of appropriating Leibniz’s monadology⁹, Benjamin removes his idealistic profile in order to (re)constitute from it the infinitesimal tracks dotted with crumbs of time and stories that have the capacity to immobilize the substantial content (*Gehalt*) of the whole.

Since the book on the Baroque, Benjamin had been using monadology as a form of methodological organization and principle of exposure in his essays. Later books such as *One-Way Street* and *Childhood in Berlin around 1900* are composed of fragments of images immobilized by the author, each containing a whole universe of meanings whose function is to establish dialectical relations between thinking (*Entelechy*) and its form of expression.

⁸ This is the context of Benjamin’s (2016) complete sentence: Method is a non-direct path. Representation as a non-direct path: this is the methodological character of the treaty. Its first characteristic is the renunciation of the uninterrupted course of intention (p. 16).

⁹ *Monadology* is a small treatise written by the German philosopher Leibniz, in 1714. Thus he defines it: “All simple substances or created Monads might be called Entelechies, for they have in them a certain perfection (échoise tō entelés); they have a certain self-sufficiency (autarkéia) which makes them the sources of their internal activities and, so to speak, incorporeal automata” (Leibniz, 2007, p. 2).

The book *Arcades Project (Das Passagen-Werk)*, a project on which Benjamin worked from 1928 to 1940, is itself the result of the unity between research method and form of exposure. Each of the more than 4,000 fragments that make up the work has the monadal intention of shining reconstructive images of thinking (*Bilddenken*) from the 19th century. According to the author:

The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings - concealed in its own form - an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas, just as, according to Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686). (...). The idea is a monad - that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world. (Benjamin, 2016, p. 36-37).

In the theses *On the concept of history*, despite the allegorical and often hermetic character, the monad is the great guide of the researcher, having the function of removing the phenomena from the continuous flow of history, immobilizing it with a monad image in order to find its meaning because:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic cessation of happening (...). (Benjamin, 2012, p. 251).

Based on this dense frame of reference, we can already glimpse keys of interpretation of the object of study in this paper, homeschooling, as a crystal that contains in itself a whole universe of meanings from the contemporary bourgeois world. However, not only as an external manifestation of its hypocritical *facies*, but as an important physiognomic trail. However, before entering this field, it is necessary to still evoke other Benjaminian categories that are also keys to the reading of our object of study.

Modernity and poverty of experience according to Walter Benjamin

Since his early studies, still in his youth, Benjamin's concern was with living conditions in modern times. The work of the *Arcades Project*, already mentioned here, aims to reconstruct the physiognomy of the 19th century, when the great exhibitions make Paris the center of the capitalist world at a time when merchandise takes on its most developed and fetishized form, throwing the world into a dazzlement never imagined before. In the dialectic of this spectacularization process, at the same time that it transforms the crowd into a large mass, to whom fashion and "novelties" are addressed, it also creates its opposite, the exacerbation of *intérieur*, the refuge of the bourgeois man, who finds himself through the individual tracks that cultivates in his ivory tower. The collectivity loses its "aura", its sense of existence, because the rise of the merchandise to the *sine qua non* of existence triggers an increasingly intense and radical process of civilization's objectification (Benjamin, 2007) and liquefaction of communal values.

The mass reproduction of merchandise initiates a similar process of massification of life as such, from the modernity analyzed by Benjamin, inaugurating an era of high-tech supremacy. This process is studied by Benjamin also in the famous essay of 1936, *The work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility* (hereinafter *Work of art*), whose central question is, mainly, the influence of technique on nature and the concept of art from the reproduction¹⁰ of the serial artistic work, as it happens

¹⁰ Although the German word *Reproduzierbarkeit* literally means reproducibility, in a less common sense it can also be found as a correlated repeatability and replicability. In any case, the Latin prefix "re", both in English and in German, is indicative of reproduction, so that in this paper, the terms "reproducibility" and "reproduction" are used indistinctly.

in modern times. However, to limit it to this aspect would be to greatly reduce the scope of the original and sharp reflections that Benjamin makes in this study. The essay must be located in the larger set of his work so that it can be reasonably understood, because, as we have seen, the methodological procedure must allow the researcher to immobilize what is essential, of monad, in the analysis of any historical object.

In the case of studying the work of art, Benjamin proceeds in the same way - he seeks the monad of modern times, which is essential. He finds a work of art located (and besieged) in the process of capitalist production, when it becomes merchandise in the wake of new reproduction techniques. Here is the historical totality that Benjamin (2012) talks about in Thesis 17 about the *Concept of History*. Contrary to a tasteless historical materialism, which sought a formal relationship between infrastructure and superstructure, reflecting the first on the second, he proposes to study precisely what is most fragmentary, most original and most irreducible, to find a determined life at the time. This seems to be the guiding element of the *Paris Arcades Project*, to which the essay of the *Work of Art* is indelibly linked¹¹ and which he summed up in the *Exposé* of 1939, *Paris, the capital of the 19th century*, where he wrote in order to open the work: “Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequence of this reifying representation of civilization, the new forms of behaviour and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria” (Benjamin, 2007, p. 53).

It seems that the phantasmagoria of which Benjamin speaks is precisely the subsumption of an entire civilizing model to the canons of merchandise, whether one considers the reproduced products or the processes of production and socio-metabolic reproduction of life in general. The term, moreover, adapted from Marx’s concept of commodity fetish, in *The Capital* (1845), is revitalized by Benjamin to refer to the cult value acquired by the commodity from universal exhibitions, which occurred throughout Europe from 1798, promoting a new cultural model. Still in the *Exposé* of 1935, Benjamin makes it clear that Paris in the 19th century embodies the way of life in which the reproduction of merchandise and its adoration establish new perceptions and new ways of seeing the world. In these terms, he refers, in the subheading *Grandville, or the world exhibitions*:

World exhibitions are the places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish. “Europe is off to view the merchandise”, says Taine in 1855.

(...) World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted.

[...] World exhibitions propagate the universe of commodities. (Benjamin, 2007, p. 43-44).

And as speaking to the method, Benjamin (2007) concludes by saying that: “Grandville’s fantasies transfer commodity character to the universe” (p. 44). Based on this last statement, it is suggested, here, to paraphrase the great Benjaminian synthesis: in the merchandise, the work, and, in the whole of the work, the time of reproducibility; and, at the time, the totality of the historical process of bourgeois life.

¹¹ On the links between *The work of art* and the *Arcades Project*, Rolf Thiedemann (2007), in an introductory text to the Brazilian edition of the *Arcades Project*, says the following: “Since a simple reading would not allow understanding Benjamin’s intentions, a study of the *Arcades Project* would then have to take into account the essay on the work of art, the texts linked to Baudelaire and the theses ‘On the Concept of History’, always keep them in mind (...)” (p. 14).

Contrary to an idealistic and mechanical materialism, Benjamin is not intimidated by the criticisms received¹² and proposes a historical conception contrary to that which he denounced to be supported by the continuum of history and in an empty and homogeneous time (Thesis 13), concurrent with the vision of progress bourgeoisie that also contaminated historical materialism. For this reason, he advocates that “History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now”, with the historian who “exploded out of the *continuum* of history” (Benjamin, 2012, p. 249). From this dynamite, the remains emerge which, at the same time, destroy the totality and pulverize it in myriad fragments. Similarly, this is the sense for the materialist historian to self-assign the task of brushing “history against the grain” (Thesis 7), as he digs where others are not interested or ideologically omit. It is based on this understanding that he analyzes the fragmentary manifestations of the bourgeois world in order to find his physiognomy.

This way, the example of interpretation that gives the artistic style of *Jugendstil*¹³ follows. Benjamin sees, in this movement, the evidence of investigative literature, whose detectives became famous for looking for clues to a crime within the private and individualistic life of large cities, aimed at the bourgeois *intérieur*. Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle exemplify the rise of a literary genre based on private life, in which traces of a crime are sought. It is there, in these tiny monads of bourgeois life, that Benjamin analyzes the rise and death of the main characters of his theoretical constellation, such as the *flâneur*, who has his “last walkway” in the department store, or the prostitute, who, symbolizing the modern subject, becomes a commodity like any other. Finally, *On some motifs in Baudelaire* express, in practice, the theoretical assumption of historical research from its fragmentary expression, in order to constitute the face of an era, the era of technical reproducibility.

The crowd is the indelible mark of modernity, the emergence of the metropolis and loneliness. With it come the shocks for which tradition has not prepared humanity. The feverish traffic, the runaways, the bumps forge the city man so well characterized in the reading that Benjamin (2017) makes of the poet Paul Valéry:

Valéry, with his critical eye on the symptom complex called “civilization”, characterizes one of the most significant aspects: “The inhabitant of the great urban centers”, he writes, “reverts to a state of savagery – that is, of isolation. The feeling of being dependent on others, which used to be kept alive by need, is gradually blunted in the smooth functioning of the social mechanism. Any improvement of this mechanism eliminates certain modes of behavior and emotions..”. Comfort isolates. (Benjamin, 2017, p. 127).

Such a scenario directly resembles Poe’s *The man of the crowd*, whose vision of the mob predicted both the rise of the automatism of the masses and that of the murderer and the withdrawal of sociability. Thus, Benjamin (2017) recovers from Poe:

Even more surprising is the description of the crowd if you look at the way it moves: “By far the greater number of those who went by had a satisfied business-like demeanor, and

¹² The text of *The work of art* received much criticism from Adorno and Horkheimer, when they were editors of the journal of the Social Research Institute, of which Benjamin was a scholarship holder. These criticisms led to many changes and cuts in the first version, published by the journal, in 1935-1936. The changes were grudgingly accepted by Benjamin due to economic reasons, but he would not have valued that version much, looking by all means for an alternative way to publish it in full (Schöttker, 2012).

¹³ *Jugendstil* (youth style). It was an aesthetic movement of German architecture and design from the late 19th century focused on decorative art. Benjamin (2007, p. 45) says that, in this style “Individualism is its theory” and that “represents art’s last attempt to escape from its ivory tower, which is besieged by the technology”. In the book of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin dedicates himself to the study and criticism of *Jugendstil* in the *Exposé* of 1935, in item IV. *Luis Felipe or the intérieur* (Benjamin, 2007, p. 45-46).

seemed to be thinking only of making their way through the press. Their brows were knit, and their eyes rolled quickly; when pushed against by fellow-wayfarers they evinced no symptom of impatience, but adjusted their clothes and hurried on. Others, still a numerous class, were restless in their movements, had flushed faces, and talked and gesticulated to themselves, as if feeling in solitude on account of the very denseness of the company around. When impeded in their progress, these people suddenly ceased muttering, but re-doubled their gesticulations, and awaited, with an absent and overdone smile upon the lips, the course of the persons impeding them. If jostled, they bowed profusely to the jostlers, and appeared overwhelmed with confusion". One would think that people are talking about drunken people, poor devils. In fact, "They were undoubtedly noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stock-jobbers". (Benjamin, 2017, p. 123).

Responses to the shock of the crowd are reified in the *intèriour*, when the house becomes a kind of shell (Benjamin, 2017, p. 48) and consolidates the antisocial spirit of the petty-bourgeois, pulverizing once and for all the ruins of tradition, the opening to the public space, besieging sociability in the interior with furniture lined with plush and velvet in order to guarantee at least fingerprints to remember a lost humanity. The shocks of the new urban-industrial civilization, in a dialectical contradiction, create just the opposite: the "good" savage.

It is in this inhospitable scenario that Benjamin sees the decay of experience and the loss of communicability. In two complementary texts, *Experience and Poverty* (1933) and *The storyteller* (1936), the author warns of an era in which communal values are dissipated. *The storyteller* (1936) is one of his most famous texts, whose subtitle is "*Considerations on the work of Nikolai Leskov*", the Russian novelist who would still preserve that quality of the true storyteller, composing them from the reports of ancestral experiences of the peoples of the interior of Russia.

In this review, Benjamin (2012, p. 214) says: "Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn". However, journalistic literature, aimed at the masses, decreed the end of this type of experience of tradition and its communicable possibility. The lonely experience of the reader of the modern novel or the reader of the newspaper are momentary experiences. In this case, the Russian author is both the symbol and the mark of the end of the true storytellers, because the art of storytelling is in extinction (Benjamin, 2012, p. 213).

In the text, the author also speaks of a certain denied experience, in other words, the experience of war, inflation, the moral decay of the government and the battle for material life under capitalism, always alienating and expropriating. These are inauthentic experiences because they exhaust themselves and silence the subject as they impose themselves on him as a "field of force of destructive torrents and explosions", leaving under them "the tiny, fragile human body" (Benjamin, 2012, p. 214). Hence the classic (and shabby) distinction that Benjamin makes between the German words *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. Although radicals are alike and words are commonly translated as experience synonymous, in Benjamin's thinking they do not mean the same thing at all. *Erfahrung* refers to the classic community experience, the product of sociocultural exchange, passed on by word of mouth in the form of popular advice, proverbs and wisdom. In the brief essay before Leskov's review, *Experience and poverty*, Benjamin (2012) talks about the transmissibility of this type of collective experience, now lost:

Such experiences were passed on to us, in a benevolent or threatening way, as we grew up: 'He is still very young, but soon he will be one of ours'. Or: 'One day he'll try it on his own flesh'. It was known exactly what the experience was: it had always been communicated by the oldest to the youngest. Concisely, with the authority of old age, in proverbs; verbose, with its loquacity, in stories; sometimes as narratives from distant countries, in front of the fireplace, told to children and grandchildren. (Benjamin, 2012, p. 123).

In turn, the German word *Erlebnis* refers to another type of experience, the best translation of which would be “experience”, whose root is in the verb *Erleben*, which indicates living something in the present moment. To Benjamin, *Erlebnis* is the fleeting modern experience, the individual experience, exhausted in itself, and cannot be transmissible because it lacks content and even because it has no roots in the past or in a tradition that would claim the condition of transmissibility. While *Erfahrung* dispenses with the communicability of what was experienced and transmitted to others, requiring continuity and the attribution of meaning in time, *Erlebnis* is content with the dryness of the act experienced and consumed in the present moment. The German word *Fahren*, which gives rise to *Erfahrung*, means travel; thus, experience is something that accumulates from knowledge that travels, that comes from afar, in time and space. So much so that the classic Benjaminitic storyteller is the sailor or old peasant, both travelers in their own way or “as someone who comes from afar” (Benjamin, 2012, p. 214).

Evidently, the experience depends on what has been lived, because one cannot have experience without what has left its impressions on the subject’s life. The difference lies in the fact that communicability, exchange, attributing shared meanings to what has been lived, which can only occur in community life, in social spaces, so that the life enclosed in the countryside only produces experiences (*Erlebnis*), because it lacks the experience of otherness.

Here, then, in these previous discussions, are the keys to reading and interpreting homeschooling as a monad of physiognomic expression of a decadent era of experiences in which the subject is reduced to pseudo-individuality (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1985) and who sees him/herself as the epicenter of universe.

School: deprivation of the last stronghold of the *Erfahrung*

Modern life has been exterminating, one by one, the true experiences and putting in place the fleeting experiences (*Erlebnis*), denied experiences, which cannot be communicated, as they do not leave their marks on the unconscious by exhausting themselves. The interiorization of life undermined the community experience in a way that does not even recall what Benjamin (2017) describes as festive days that were related to the identity of a collectivity, because just like the chimes that once accompanied the festive days, were, like men, expelled from the calendar (p. 140). The end of life on the street, where “sock ball, marble”¹⁴ was played also marks the death of the “other” in life, whether they were brothers, relatives or friends who lived in the same way. The restriction of the family to three or four members is another “reducer” of experiences that force the narcissistic encasement of generations that tend more and more to take refuge in technique, in digital social networks or entertainment platforms. In these cases, the process of parental identification ends up being limited to pseudohomestic domestic taboos. As unique as it is, the experience is by no means a one-way street; it needs the other to receive its real content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*). Baudelaire’s verses, in the sonnet *To a passer-by (À une passante)*, seem to demonstrate well how much modern life is limited to experiences, including erotic love. The poet says goodbye to his love at first and last sight in the last verses: “Somewhere else, very far from here! Too late! Perhaps never! / For I do not know where you flee, nor you where I am going / O you whom I would have loved, O you who knew it!” (Benjamin, 2017).

Other authors have questioned the acute consequences, in the contemporary awareness of this state of affairs, causing what Freud characterized as the “malaise in civilization”. Bauman (2001) spoke repeatedly about the liquefaction of relationships, the lack of continuity and

¹⁴ “*Bola de meia, bola de gude*” - reference to Fernando Brant and Milton Nascimento’s song, from 1996. Retrieved from <https://www.lettras.mus.br/milton-nascimento/102443/>.

solidification of feelings in contemporary times. Elliott (2018), in turn, speaks of a “new” individualism that is characterized by “short-term life” and “living on the highway” (p. 478).

In this context of life, the homeschooling movement, for whatever reasons, seeks to exterminate one of the last resistances of life in common: the school. If you think about it, with labor relations increasingly atomizing and making work processes more autonomous (homeoffice, informality, etc.), the school is one of the last remaining sociability strongholds. With all its mishaps and problems, the school is still the privileged place to see the other, for constitution and exchange of experiences, for self-account and exercise of empathy, to put oneself in the other’s place against the winds of “liquefaction of the patterns of dependence and interaction” (Bauman, 2001, p. 14).

From this point of view, homeschooling is the condemnation of education to the poverty of living in the *intérieur*. And in this case, it is not about education as formation (*Bildung*), but rather as what Adorno (1995) called *Halbbildung* (semi-training). The full formation of the personality can only take place in contrast to its inside out, the “other self” with which identifies him/herself or not and from which he/she is constituted as individuality (*Selbstbildung*). As in the sense of translation, as studied by Antoine Berman (1983), in the essay *Bildung et Bildungsroman*¹⁵, in which *Bildung* means openness to the stranger (foreigner), a launching out of oneself, in order to understand the other. It is in this cyclical movement of leaving oneself and return that one of the main aspects of formation consists of. This leaves a lot to think about, since, apparently, the loss of modern communicability, so well described by Benjamin and mentioned above, lies mainly in the decline of the ability to “translate” (understand) the other, whether in our own language or another. So it can also be seen in the sense of *Bildung* as a journey, which Berman identifies in the classics of German romanticism, whose formative process also has the “other” as a parameter for constituting oneself. The author says:

In *Wilhelm Meister's* Goethe and Iena’s romantics, *Bildung* is characterized as a journey, *Reise*, whose essence is to launch ‘the same’ in a movement that makes it ‘another’. *Bildung*’s ‘great journey’ is the experience of *otherness*. To become what the traveler is, he experiences what he is not, at least apparently. For it is understood that, at the end of this process, he finds himself again. (Berman, 1984, p. 147 as cited in Suarez, 2005, p. 194).

In this way, the constitution of the experience that turns into formation is a journey in search of the other for the encounter with oneself. To Benjamin, as we have seen, the archetypes of good storytelling are the old elder and the sailor, as both have gathered their experiences from a long journey and, therefore, can communicate it. The withdrawn and reified experiences of private life, on the other hand, result in a lack of transmissibility, and can be framed in those inhuman “denied experiences”, of which Benjamin (2012, p. 214) referred to, such as war, poverty and hunger, and to which the domestic cloister is added.

What experiences a cloistered life at home can accumulate? Which storytellers are found there? The father, the mother, possibly an uncle or a brother? It is always the most of the same, the return of the always equal, without the contradiction of the other, his/her tormentor and fellow traveler. The result in the constitution of the subject tends to be a heap of experiences exhausted within themselves, resulting in a generalized poverty of shared experiences; not only because one does not really have them, but because one does not have anyone to share them with. At the same time, the experiences do not settle, do not create long-term memories, as they are separate shocks to which the subjects respond in their immediacy. The results can already be seen: increasingly selfish and desensitized generations of social problems in the name of the endless search for instant individual pleasure, that see the other not as equal, but as something to be consumed. Elliott (2018)

¹⁵ This essay was published in 1983 in the *Le temps de la réflexion* Collection (n° 4), by Gallimard publisher. For an excellent synthesis of Berman’s text and translations of some parts, see Suarez (2005).

talks about this “new individualism”, which is nothing more than the classic way of life of the bourgeois *intérieur*:

There is an emerging generation of people who might be called the “Instant Generation” and who treat individualism as on par with shopping: consumed fast and with immediate results. Today’s ‘want-now’ consumerism promotes a fantasy of the self’s infinite plasticity. The message from the makeover industry is that there’s nothing to stop you reinventing yourself however you choose. But your redesigned sense of individualism is unlikely to make you happy for long. For identity enhancements are only fashioned with the short-term in mind. They are until “next time”. This relentless emphasis on self-reinvention thus equates to a culture of “next-ness”. (Elliott, 2018, p. 472-473).

This culture of the following day is the transformation of what Freud called the “pleasure principle” that now wants to become a reality principle.

The belief that homeschooling can anesthetize the shocks of modernity is, at the same time, naive and malicious. It is naive because the repression of social shock, in the short or medium term, will take its consequences in the form of antisocial or neurotic conduct, since, at some point in life, the individual has to leave the home to face, now without any antibodies, the shocks inherent to the challenges that life inevitably calls for or that drives demand, such as erotic, affective relationships, work, etc. In a way that it is too risky to produce, through homeschooling, self-centered personalities whose death drive is a powerful anesthetic for their frustrations.

Evidently, schooling is not an antidote to trauma and frustration. The difference consists precisely in their training possibilities that precede adulthood as a training journey. At home, there is the daily, the immediate, the repetition of isolated, narcissistic experiences, when desires are not conquered, but, rather, satisfied in the domestic universe. Such recurrence leads to the erosion of social ties and affective bonds oxidize immediately, which can lead to affective pettiness that tends to separate those from “inside” and those from “outside”. In an important diagnosis of our time, Zuin writes (1999):

To an evident incompatibility between speed and affective bonds. In the poet’s astonishment [Baudelaire in *À une passante*] in the face of the fact that people defend themselves against this shock - represented by the social obstacle of affective experience when considering it a trivial event, as if it were a second nature -, it is identified the lament of something that is already absent beforehand: the bonds of solidarity and empathy that collapse due to a specific cultural climate that needs the perpetuation of meanness and coldness in order to survive. (p. 68).

Although school has difficulties in preparing the subject for social life, it still presents itself as a microcosm of what the subject will find in the adult world. And such experiences tend to provide a small piece of collective life that late modernity can still spare.

It is true that some school memories are unwanted and even cruel, but one cannot dispense with that dimension of communal life that Freire (2013) called “connective boys”. Even the boring moments recalled by Benjamin in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* act like Proust’s *madeleine* to connect past and present through an involuntary memory. What significant memories can an adult recall from his/her bubble in homeschooling? Nothing shocked him/her, nothing destabilized him/her, nothing risked him/her, nothing surprised him/her, except the repressed harmony of domestic daily life.

To infer about these dangers, just remember that it is inside the bedroom, the most secluded mainstay of individualism, that Kafka’s extraordinary creatures emerge. It is from the suffocation of the subject that the author describes the process of decay of his heroes, dehumanized

from the broken family relationships¹⁶, confining them to a tragic end, like Joseph K. in *The Process*, or transformed into a despicable cockroach, as Gregor Samsa, in the emblematic book *The Metamorphosis*. If Kafka's work, as Benjamin points out, represents a "disease of tradition", as it is no longer able to bring together contents from the particular past with the collective, homeschooling also decrees the end of one of the last modern traditions in which subjects from different social classes are still seen and touched, the school.

The arguments of homeschooling, that at school children and young people are subject to drugs, violence or early sexual initiations, are other attempts to deprive them of shock, as if the tribal behavior of the cocooned house could forever alienate the subject from reality in the name of the parents' pleasure principle, whose overprotection does nothing more than repress by transposing the displeasure that life would bring to their children. Such overprotection not only weakens the subject, infantilizing him/her in the present, but also makes him/her vulnerable as soon as real life breaks through the house bubble, which inevitably ends up happening sooner or later.

It may not be inappropriate to evoke here a similarity between Benjamin's analysis of *Jugendstil* (see footnote 13) and homeschooling and to paraphrase the author: *Individualism is its theory and represents the last attempt to escape education besieged by (neo)liberalism in its ivory tower.*

Homeschooling as a physiognomy of (neo)liberalism: the decline of the public sphere of education

It is not by chance that homeschooling is a phenomenon that manifests itself precisely at this moment that capitalism is under the hegemony of the accumulation regime with financial hegemony. The neglect of public, universal, secular and compulsory education has always been at the heart of liberalism. The *laissez faire* claimed by Adam Smith, in the period when the bourgeoisie was battling against the regulations imposed by the mercantilist economy of European monarchies, is at the origin of liberalism and is reissued by (neo)liberals against the regulations of the Welfare State, as advocated by heralds and contemporary followers, such as F. Hayek and M. Friedman. The central issue is the same: to remove from the State the monopoly of sectors that are of interest to the private initiative through flexibilisations and deregulation, leaving the "invisible hand" of the market to act freely. In the case of education, the proposals for school vouchers by these authors also coincide with the proposal for financing the education proclaimed in Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, since, to him, the funding of the masters rests with the students, and this burden does not fall on the State. Even considering the differences, especially historical ones, between classical liberalism and neoliberalism (Apple, 2001), the reasoning is the same: the subtraction of the State in the production/maintenance of public policies and free competition, not only commercial, but also among individuals, where the strongest survives, including among teachers, if they want to survive.

To acquire this fortune or at least to earn their subsistence, they must, over the course of a year, perform a certain volume of service of a certain value; and, when competition is free, rivalry between competitors, who, without exception, strive to eliminate each other

¹⁶ In Benjamin's analysis, Kafka's characters who still have some hope are the only ones who have fled the family. He says: "These are not the animals, not even those hybrids or imaginary creatures like the Cat Lamb or Odradek; they all still live under the spell of the family. It is no accident that Gregor Samsa wakes up as a bug in the parental home and not somewhere else, and that the peculiar animal which is half kitten, half lamb, is inherited from the father; Odradek likewise is the concern of the father of the family. The 'assistants', however, are outside this circle" (Benjamin, 2012, p. 152).

from employment, obliges each one to try to perform his work with a certain degree of precision. (Smith, 1996, p. 228).

The current preaching is the same: more individual and less State in the jungle called market. *Laissez faire* could easily be replaced by save-yourself-if-you-can. And, in this context, homeschooling fits like a glove for renewed liberal (as well as neoconservative) speeches, since the responsibility for education lies with the family, “liberating” the State from public investments, minimizing its performance. In this regard, domestic education is an important feature of the physiognomy of today’s society, radicalizing the movement towards the *intérieur* of bourgeois life previously analyzed by Benjamin. Using a term that Marx (1983) liked to use in the analysis of bourgeois self-sufficiency as the cornerstone of society, the so-called *robinsonades*¹⁷, we can situate homeschooling as another one of them, but now focused on the educational field, which raises the individual above society and its historical-social determinations. As in the time of Marx (1983), “until today, this mystification has been characteristic of all new times” (p. 6).

With surgical precision, Brewer and Lubienski (2017) synthesize this aspect well: “In this [neoliberal] context, home education may very well be the closest personification to neoliberalism, as it probably represents the closest form of education which is based on self-regulation, decentralization and elevation of the individual/private over the collective/public” (p. 33). Thus, public interests are subsumed to private ends.

However, if we return to the concept of education as human formation (*Bildung*), we see that the purposes of education go far beyond purely private interests, whether of the individual or the family, as it is expected that there is a *sensus communis* as a mediating element so that a community can be built. And the State is a great patron of this achievement, because, in itself, it exists so that, as Locke (1998, p. 391) said, in the *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, they do not kill each other or, what means the same thing: “the proper remedy for the inconveniences of the state of Nature, which must certainly be great where men may be judges in their own case”. And as a society cannot be imagined without the existence of a brake on individual aspirations for the common good, education also suffers from this need, under penalty of the loss of the sense of collectivity. This is in view, of course, of the fundamentals of a republican education.

Following this line of reasoning and starting from the historical studies of Giambattista Vico, Gadamer (2014) recalls that, along with *Bildung*, common sense is of the archetypes that instituted modernity and humanism. He says:

The theme of education would also be another: the formation of the *sensus communis* (...). Well, what interests us here is the following: *sensus communis* does not only mean that universal capacity that exists in all men, but it is also the meaning that institutes community. Vico believes that what gives guidance to the human will is not the abstract universality of reason, but the concrete universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation, the whole of the human species. The development of this common sense is, therefore, of decisive importance for life. (Gadamer, 2014, p. 58).

So, without the *sensus communis*, what we have is the deepening of the social gap that already exists between social classes, separating via educational apartheid those who will have access to an elite educational modality, in the form of preceptorship, whether from parents, hired tutors or *delivery* teachers, of those who remain dependent on a historically scrapped system that nevertheless insists on resisting “extreme unction” (Paraskeva, 2001), insults and sanctions from neoliberal managers who work for its decline.

¹⁷ Reference to the character of the classic book by Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, from 1919.

At the same time, with homeschooling, hard conquests of the human race, which universalized schooling, fall to the ground. This was, in fact, one of the great progressive merits of liberal revolutions, the institution of public education, whose universal character establishes what Gadamer called *sensus communis*, because the modern school arises with the intention of serving boys and girls, apart from religions for being secular, mandatory for all social classes, having a public character regarding the formative principles (*Bildung*) and being financed and/or regulated by the State. In turn, homeschooling is a shovel in these achievements and in its improvement process, hence its reactionary character.

Final considerations

Based on Walter Benjamin's fragmentary hermeneutics, this study investigated homeschooling as a physiognomic trait of the bourgeois way of life which, since its origin, has increasingly focused on the *intérieur*, encasing itself in the solipsism of the house as a "shell" that tries to protect itself from the emergence of the crowd and the masses, to which has always been refractory.

From the point of view of the Benjaminian referential, homeschooling can be conceived as a monad that holds within itself the representation of a universe of objective conditions that condition life in contemporary times, marked by the degradation of experience and its possibilities of communicability, as well as the critical conditions of the sociometabolic reproduction of capitalism under financial aegis.

In the midst of the turbulent cyclical crises that the bourgeois economy has been going through, there is an unrestrained generalized process of withdrawing the contemporary subject to private life, demolishing, one by one, all traces of any community life or any traditions in which the communicability of formative experiences can be exercised (*Bildung*). Public, secular, universal and compulsory school, which has withstood the process of neoliberalizing and neoconservative disqualification, is still one of those traditional places for building experiences through the intergenerational and interclass meetings that it promotes. Its inside out, homeschooling, is yet another sign of a long and terminal "disease of tradition", which besieges education in the *intérieur*, exacerbating individualism and reducing *Bildung* to semi-education (*Halbbildung*), since there can be no complete human formation without the presence of the other, without polyphony. As Bakhtin (2003) said, "I hear voices in everything and dialogic relations among them" (p. 409); this is because the search for the voice of others, dialogue, is what gives us meaning to existence, since "life is dialogical in nature" (Bakhtin, 2003, p. 348). In turn, homeschooling reserves itself to the monologue, to the reification of language and *Erfahrung*, limiting the subjects to the sterility of the experiences that do not sediment (*Erlebnis*). This status (re)produces what Elliott (2018) called "instant generation", marked above all by the desensitivity towards social misfortunes, since the "insiders" have nothing to do with the problems of the "outsiders", sharpening the more diverse social *apatheids*.

Another physiognomic trait that shines from homeschooling, in this study, is its connection with neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Not because its heralds have any other liberal motivation than the individualistic ideology, but because this proposal feeds the poor quality speeches of the public school and, in some way, it discourages the State from expanding public policies in education, which falls like a glove in the production interests of a minimal state. In this context, the movement that aims to encourage and regulate, in Brazil and in the world, homeschooling is clearly reactionary and refractory to the construction of any common sense around an education based on community values.

In the end, what we have is a re-issue of Margaret Thatcher's *robinsonade* with the jargon that haunts the hypocritical face of (neo)liberalism: "There are individual men and women, individuals and there are families".

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