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This article claims that contradictions are inherent in social existence while highlighting that they can be articulated in numerous ways. Exploring our contemporary culture, it is argued that neoliberalism thrives by utilising our contradictory devotion to exploit ourselves. It is fully acknowledged that we, as neoliberal subjects, are constituted by discourse and our critique of neoliberalism is inevitably articulated within the framework of a hegemonic discourse. The article also shows that critical thought cannot but take on board and utilise its contradictions in order to develop its full capacity.

Keywords: contradiction; critical thought; neoliberalism; social change; subjectivity

INTRODUCTION

In 1956, Adorno and Horkheimer came together to produce, as Adorno announces, a contemporary version of *The Communist Manifesto*. With this aim in mind, Adorno and Horkheimer (2019: 37) converse:

Horkheimer: People like advertisements. They do what the ads tell them and they know that they are doing so. American magazines and comics.

Adorno: If I had said to my father that mass culture is untrue, he would have answered: but I enjoy it. Renunciation of utopia means somehow or other deciding in favour of a thing even though I know perfectly well that it is a swindle. That is the root of the trouble.

Horkheimer: Because the strength you need to do the right thing is kept on a leash. If we formulate the issues just as we speak, it all sounds too argumentative. People might say that our views are just all talk, our own perceptions. To whom shall we say these things?

In the end, as one could already sense from the conversation above, Adorno and Horkheimer had not proposed any manifesto, so their exchange was eventually published under the title *Towards a New Manifesto* (2019). Instead of yet another platform for acting that takes itself very subversively, they have produced something far more valuable. In their conversation, Adorno and Horkheimer question critical theory and its contradictions, taking a critical perspective on the meaning of their own work. After all, there is no reason to spare critical theory from a “ruthless criticism of everything existing” (Marx 1978a). Adorno and Horkheimer are disappointed but also ready to admit that there are not many people who would like to hear what they have to say. Adorno does try to introduce some positivity back in their conversation, saying “I see no way out, apart from making these considerations explicit. There is a particular way of writing that offends against specific taboos. You have to find the point that wounds. Offending against sexual taboos,” but Horkheimer remains unimpressed, mocking Adorno by replying: “Marcuse, take care” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2019: 38). Eventually, they reach the spirit of the agreement, which is that people simply enjoy mass culture more than they would like to learn about the achievements of critical theory. As they invested significant effort in developing critical theory that is supposed to benefit people who do not really care what it has to say, this leaves Adorno and Horkheimer in a contradictory situation. However, and this is important to note, Adorno and Horkheimer do not try to deny or resolve this contradiction but proceed with building critical theory while taking the contradiction on board. One cannot, as Adorno says, “find the point that wounds” and expect a warm welcome. Thus, it could be said that this contradiction is constitutive of a type of thought that dares to question the hegemonic belief system of society.

When it comes to social theory today, as this article will argue, it is crucial to engage its contradictions. The spirit of contradiction still lives in contemporary debates and, if it is constitutive of critical thought, we should take care to keep our contradictory voices in existence. We can see a concern quite similar to the one expressed by Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, in the interview that Boeing and Lebert (2015) conducted with the philosopher Byung-Chul Han. At some point in the interview, their conversation turns to Primark and how its customers purchase their products not to wear them but to make videos for YouTube, thereby basically both buying from and advertising for the company. The interviewer, with a sense of urgency, asks: “Should we protest against it?” and Han, conveying the contradiction that still marks social theory, replies with the question: “Why should I protest if Primark arrives and makes my life perfect?” (in Boeing and Lebert 2015). Again, as it is clear from the conversation between Adorno and Horkheimer, critical thought cannot but work *with* the contradiction that one might as well enjoy the status quo. This surely is a contradiction because the status quo is characterised by the proliferation of distress and Han (2015), as we read in his *The*

Burnout Society, is perfectly aware of this contradictory relation that we have with the way things are. Han (2015: 10) claims that we are witnessing a novel form of subjectivity that suffers from the excess of social consensus: “The new human type, standing exposed to excessive positivity without any defense, lacks all sovereignty. The depressive human being is an *animal laborans* that exploits itself – and it does so voluntarily, without external constraints. It is predator and prey at once.” The contradiction that we stand for while acting both as a predator and prey, more precisely the way this contradiction is managed today, is a very important resource for neoliberalism. The burnt-out subject makes it obvious not only that she is working beyond her capacities but also that neoliberalism is always already beyond its own capacities. Neoliberalism thrives on burnt-out subjects, it exceeds itself by recognising and utilising our contradictory devotion to exploit ourselves.

The article nonetheless aims to make it apparent that contradictions are the lifeblood of critical thought. The structure and implications of the contradiction between being a predator and prey at once are explored. While we are in danger of losing sight of this contradiction due to the proliferation of neoliberal subjectivity, I argue for recognising it as an important analytical and political category. If, as Han (2015: 44) claims, “burnout represents the pathological consequence of *voluntary* self-exploitation”, are there any lessons that this pathology teaches us? Neoliberalism has articulated the contradiction between being both the subject that acts and the subject that is being acted upon in a particular way. As it stands, it is deployed and made into a basis for the burnout society. The article argues that this contradiction is not the sole property of neoliberal society; it is constitutive of our existence and it can be engaged in a number of ways. Furthermore, as it remains crucial for the immense productivity of contemporary society, it would be misleading to confuse “the general positivization of society” (Han 2015: 45) with the vanishing point of this and other contradictions that mark our existence in the field of discourse. Acknowledging the positivisation of society, the article emphasises the importance of engaging contradictions in social theory.

THE LINE OF CONTRADICTION

While examining the excess of consensus nowadays, we should be careful not to portray a too harmonious picture, thereby imposing further and unwarranted positivity. It is not as if we are simply burnt-out subjects; ‘we’ is quite a heterogeneous category and the emphasis on the positivisation of society might easily slide into obscuring this important distinction. To say that we are living in a society that is marked by the lack of dissensus is not to imply, in this article at least, that we are experiencing a growing consensus in just about the same way. Žižek (2020: 22–23), reflecting critically on

Han's work, reminds us that "there are still millions of manual workers in Third World countries [...]. A gap separates the top manager who owns or runs a company from a precarious worker spending days at home alone with his/her personal computer – they are definitely not both a master and a slave in the same sense." This is a very important remark by Žižek as it does not allow us to forget that there are different modes of being a predator and prey at once. There indeed are differences among burnt-out subjects and these should not be merely glossed over. Some people have it worse than others and our analyses would be incomplete without acknowledging that. Žižek (2020: 23), however, proceeds to argue that today "we get a new division of work: self-employed and self-exploited workers (described by Han) in the developed West, debilitating assembly line work in the Third World, plus the growing domain of human care workers in all its forms (caretakers, waiters...) where exploitation also abounds." What Žižek's emphasis on this new division aims to bring into the picture, and he himself is ready to make this clear, is a new class division. Han, on the other hand, is dedicated to examining the novel form of subjectivity that cuts through such a division, namely the achievement-subject. These are, I believe, not mutually exclusive approaches and a turn to subjectivity might as well prove to illuminate what a strict focus on class division loses sight of.

Han (2015: 46) highlights that "the achievement-subject finds itself fighting with itself. The depressive has been wounded by internalized war. Depression is the sickness of a society that suffers from excessive positivity. It reflects a humanity waging war on itself." The achievement-subject competes with herself in order to make a better living yet ends up severely wounded by her self-entrepreneurial spirit. This contradictory character provides a common ideology for a neoliberal humanity that is leading an internalised war. The achievement-subject, which Han (2015: 10) introduces as "the new human type", is the essence of the burnout society.

However, this 'new' human type seems to have been with us for quite some time. In his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault (2008: 26) conceptualised and examined the neoliberal subject as "an entrepreneur of himself", thereby providing the most novel and conceptually refined depiction of the contemporary subject. The achievement-subject or the burnt-out subject is basically a further development of an entrepreneur of herself – and this in itself is quite telling. Foucault's lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* took place in the late seventies at the Collège de France and now, about forty years later, neoliberalism has not lost one bit of its momentum. Of course, Foucault had not brought the neoliberal subject into being. He introduced a sophisticated analysis of this type of subjectivity that surely precedes his work on neoliberalism. Considering the amount of time that has passed, the burnt-out subject should not make us think that neoliberalism is approaching its limits. We should refrain

from any undue optimism when we read Han's account that "the achievement-subject competes with itself; it succumbs to the destructive compulsion to outdo itself over and over, to jump over its own shadow" (Han 2015: 46). Yes, the achievement-subject will most likely burn out while competing with herself, thus destroying her own wellbeing or, more precisely, sacrificing her wellbeing to the altar of neoliberalism. However, instead of succumbing to the temptation to think of burnout as a debilitating yet in some strange way emancipatory end of competition, we should see burnout for what it is, namely vivid proof "that contemporary capitalism is already a fully collective project entailing the most massive mobilization of interconnected energies ever witnessed" (Jones 2020: 234). Following burnout, an entrepreneur of herself is expected to 'recover' or, in other words, build up her strength to compete even more efficiently. The show must go on. The contradiction that she embodies cannot be burnt out; an entrepreneur of herself is this very same system that she worships by bringing her wellbeing to the altar of neoliberalism. An entrepreneur of herself, strictly speaking, is not the neoliberal subject but neoliberalism itself.

Such a state of affairs can be further illuminated by revisiting Václav Havel's essay, that was written in the late seventies, 'The Power of the Powerless' (2018). In his analysis, what is most important for our discussion here, Havel (2018: 366) is wary of dividing society into 'the rulers' and 'the ruled': "Position in the power hierarchy determines the degree of responsibility and guilt, but it gives no one unlimited responsibility and guilt, nor does it completely absolve anyone. [...] [O]nly a very generalized view (and even that only approximative) permits us to divide society into the rulers and the ruled." Thus, we are not all the same when it comes to our position in the system, so neither do we share the same degree of responsibility and guilt. However, there is not one of us who could claim complete innocence today. This might be difficult to accept because there is something very comforting in believing that 'the rulers' have reduced us to the category of 'the ruled' and declaring, with a sigh, that we are not asked to provide any input when it comes to politics and other matters dealt by the government. But we are. In fact, we are burning out for neoliberal politics. Considering the division of society into 'the rulers' and 'the ruled', Havel (2018: 366) claims that "here, by the way, is one of the most important differences between the post-totalitarian system and classical dictatorships, in which this line of conflict can still be drawn according to social class. In the post-totalitarian system, this line runs *de facto* through each person, for everyone in his own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system." Havel's analysis is particularly valuable as it is precise and makes it clear that we are all, *in our own way*, both a predator and prey at once. We embody the same contradiction, yet we accommodate it in different ways. In any case, the line of conflict runs through the post-totalitarian subject, exposing her self-contradictory

constitution and her radical implication in the system. The post-totalitarian system certainly allows us to see the manifestations of this, for example burnout, in front of us.¹ That is, of course, if we do not confuse neoliberalism with a harmonious society where all our contradictions have been merrily resolved.

Havel argues that, in a classical dictatorship, the line of conflict can still be drawn according to social class. This surely can be done, actually we could draw the line of conflict according to social class even today and there are many authors who are already doing this in a convincing way (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004; Žižek 2020). On the other hand, we should also explore those uncomfortable consequences that stem from the fact that there is no way for 'the rulers' to maintain the status quo without receiving any support from 'the ruled.' While it is more obvious in a neoliberal society, this applies regardless of whether the system is post-totalitarian or a dictatorship. The line of conflict always runs, first and foremost, *de facto* through each person. A dictatorship cannot be a one-man show and, no matter how much the importance of individual responsibility is stressed, there would be no Hitler or Stalin without 'the ruled' supporting their ideologies to at least a certain extent. Power, let us not forget, is not force. Power is a relation and a dictatorship that is established as a social system cannot be but a power relation between 'the rulers' and 'the ruled'. Once this relation has been established, strictly speaking, it is no longer possible to draw a clear line between 'the rulers' and 'the ruled'. Without any doubt, this is unsettling as it means that 'the ruled' cannot be completely absolved of the most atrocious crimes in our history.

At this point of analysis, one should not fail to point out, without harbouring any illusions, that neoliberalism is an immensely violent social system. It has been causing suffering for decades and we, as neoliberal subjects, cannot be completely absolved of its crimes. We could argue that these crimes are the sole responsibility of 'the rulers' today, however nowadays there is no dictator that would make this sound more convincing and, being self-governed as we are today, it is getting harder and harder to sell that story. Instead, it would be a good starting point to make it apparent that we are constituted by neoliberal discourse and, therefore, we cannot avoid internalising it to a certain extent. At the same time, we should insist on the fact that we are not determined by neoliberal discourse and that this enables rather than precludes our capacity to act. To be constituted by discourse and act on transforming this very same discourse which has constituted us cannot be but taking our contradiction on board. The line of conflict, as Havel argues, runs through each person. Understanding this, of course, does not allow us to unleash a hidden capacity within ourselves and change society as we wish. It allows us to see that there is no meaningful attempt at social

¹ For my analysis of anxiety, see Krce-Ivančić (2018).

change without engaging this line of contradiction that divides the subject into 'the ruler' and 'the ruled'.²

THE VOICE OF CONTRADICTION

In this context, it is productive to remind ourselves of an imaginary but exemplary conversation between the two characters that Adorno and Horkheimer put forward in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002). As they note, "this conversation is repeated wherever someone refuses to give up thought in face of praxis" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 199). In this conversation, one of the interlocutors, who happens to be a writer, is arguing that she would not want to be a doctor as, among other reasons, "with advanced institutionalization the doctor represents business and its hierarchy vis-à-vis the patient. He is often tempted to act as an advocate of death" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 198). Nonetheless, at the same time, she is ready to use medical services, saying: "I do, of course, think it better to have doctors and hospitals than to leave sick people to die" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 198). The other interlocutor is chasing after her contradictions, trying to make it apparent that she is inconsistent and, basically, that her intellectual efforts as a writer are irreparably tainted by her hypocritical contradictions:

A. You are in contradiction with yourself. You yourself constantly make use of the advantages provided by doctors and judges. You are as guilty as they are. It is just that you don't want to be burdened with the work which others do for you. Your own life presupposes the principle you are trying to evade.

B. I do not deny it, but contradiction is necessary. It is a response to the objective contradiction of society. In a division of labor as complex as that of today, horror can manifest itself in one place and bring down guilt on everyone. If word of it got about, or if even a small proportion of people were aware of it, lunatic asylums and penal institutes might be humanized and courts of justice might finally be superfluous. But that is not the reason why I want to be a writer. I just want to be clearer about the terrible state in which everything is.

[...]

² For my critique of Ernesto Laclau's model of emancipation, where I emphasise the importance of neoliberal subjectivity and deploy Foucault's understanding of the contemporary subject as an entrepreneur of himself, see Krce-Ivančić (2020).

A. But if you knew that by studying medicine you might one day save the life of a loved person which would quite certainly be lost without you, would you not take it up at once?

B. Probably, but by now you can see for yourself that with your love of implacable logic you are forced to offer the most absurd examples, while I, with my impractical obstinacy and my contradictions, have remained within the bounds of common sense. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 198–199)

We can see that the interlocutor B is not trying to establish the consistency of her position by denying that she is indeed contradictory. She makes it perfectly clear: “I do not deny it, but contradiction is necessary. It is a response to the objective contradiction of society.” Contradiction is what has enabled her to remain within the bounds of common sense. It is what makes her existence coherent and her writing meaningful. We should also note that the aim of her writing is *not* to resolve our contradictory state of affairs but to make it apparent or, as she puts it, “I just want to be clearer about the terrible state in which everything is.” The interlocutor B is ready to question and recognise her difficult position, however this does not stop her from proceeding in a way that she judges to be the best she can do considering the objective contradiction of society. She writes for the sake of clarity and harbours certain optimism that, if a small proportion of people were to become aware of the horrible state in which everything is, there might be social change.

The interlocutor A, on the other hand, adopts an ‘all or nothing’ position. This position maintains that either one acts in a way that is relieved of any contradiction, in which case one’s role in society is moral, or one acts while entertaining certain contradictions. The former case, of course, does not exist. It presupposes the subject that would be able to exist and act outside discourse. In the latter case, one is delegated to the category of ‘those who are contradictory’ and is, consequently, portrayed as hypocritical and vain. In the ‘all or nothing’ perspective, there is effectively no difference between being constituted and determined by discourse. The fact that the subject is constituted by discourse is misleadingly assumed to mean that the subject is determined by discourse. If we choose to follow this peculiar sort of reasoning consistently, as our actions are understood to be doomed by the objective contradiction of society, in the end we cannot but arrive at the absurd conclusion that we are all the same.

To be more precise, the interlocutor A is not a figure but a type of reasoning that Horkheimer is actively looking to expose and to which he often critically returns in his work. In *Dusk and Dawn*, there is a fragment in which Horkheimer (1978: 35) illustrates the ‘all or nothing’ reasoning:

All or Nothing: Be mistrustful of the person who says that unless everyone is helped, it's no use. That is the fundamental lie of those who actually do not want to help and hide behind a theory to excuse their failure to do their duty in a concrete case. They rationalize their inhumanity. There is a resemblance between them and the devout: both preserve their good conscience by pleading 'higher' considerations when they abandon you to your helplessness.

'All or nothing,' therefore, is a conservative position. It argues that, unless everyone is helped, we are in contradiction with ourselves and our willingness to help. We are hypocritical and our efforts to help as much as we can are so meagre that they do not really count. However, to acknowledge only the ultimate help that reaches everyone is not to abide more closely by our sense of duty. The ultimate help serves as a rationalisation for not helping or, and this is just the other side of the same coin, for doing only what is in one's own interest. The ultimate help is merely a seemingly altruistic excuse for a radical egoism. Insisting on resolving all contradictions as a prerequisite for acting is nothing but devoutly maintaining the status quo.

Adorno and Horkheimer are painfully aware of the status quo, yet what distinguishes their work is a certain despair that they introduce in critical theory and which precludes unwarranted optimism (Adorno 2005; Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 2019; Horkheimer 1978). This allows them, while reflecting on the conversation above, to recognise that "in an age when education is radically focused on reality, conversations have become rarer, and the neurotic interlocutor B needs superhuman strength in order not to become healthy" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 199). The problem with the neoliberal subject is not that she is openly contradictory. Quite on the contrary, "the terrible state in which everything is," that the interlocutor B is aiming to make clearer, is nowadays marked by the imperative to lose her contradictions. The neoliberal subject has been healed of voicing her contradictory character. Cioran (2019: 69) was not joking when he said that "the skepticism which fails to contribute to the ruin of our health is merely an intellectual exercise." And to ruin our health by thinking too much about ourselves indeed takes superhuman strength in neoliberal society.

The healthy subject is not concerned with those unexciting – and, most importantly, unproductive – conversations on the value of thought. It is widely accepted that there is simply not enough time for those vain philosophical exchanges. Critical thought takes time and it is not particularly exciting; the most important thing today is to stay focused on reality and be goal-oriented. No hard feelings but one must prioritise. The neoliberal subject is enthusiastic and excited about those things that make her more competitive and push her forward, for example a career opportunity. Covering letters nowadays are

bursting with energy and eagerness to embark on a new job, while the job adverts more often than not expect a candidate to be passionate and excited about the job that she is applying for.³ The candidate who is not eager enough about the job reflects some doubt and is, actually, in contradiction with herself. If you do not really want this job, why did you apply in the first place? There is no time for such an attitude. Contradictions, therefore, are not healthy and should be avoided by all means. They consume our productive time and there is no place for contradiction in neoliberal society.

This is exactly why we should insist on the value of contradiction in the present day. Discussing philosophy or, more precisely, what they would like philosophy to be, Adorno and Horkheimer (2002: 203) claim that “the taste for the grandiose is foreign to it. Thus it is at the same time remote from the existing order and deeply complicit with it. It lends its voice to its subject, against the latter’s will; it is the voice of the contradiction which otherwise would not be heard, but would triumph silently.” The notion of contradiction is essential when it comes to their understanding of what philosophy as a critical thought is. Adorno and Horkheimer consider it the mission of philosophy to ensure that the voice of contradiction is heard. In fact, philosophy should be the voice of contradiction as it is precisely contradiction that opens up the space for social change.

Rethinking Marx’s eleventh thesis that “the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (Marx 1978b: 145), Žižek (in Green 2019) suggests that “maybe in the 20th century we wanted to change the world too quickly. Now, instead of only changing the world, we should also learn to step back and interpret it again in a better way.” The lesson of Adorno and Horkheimer in relation to the eleventh thesis at the present time would be to focus on reanimating critical thought that is essential for interpreting the world in a better way. Yet we should be careful when it comes to simply calling for more thought. As Jones (2018: 187) reminds us: “the world of business is far from a simple enemy of thought. [...] The fact that a company such as IBM takes as a slogan and registered trademark the expression ‘Think!’ functions in a complex, multi-layered space that speaks both the truth and the falsity of contemporary capitalism.” Quite paradoxically, thought has both a rather excessive and impotent presence in neoliberal society, so we should be clear and say that we are interested in critical thought. Let us also note that while critical thought might not appear in IBM, despite the company’s slogan being ‘Think!’, there is nothing that would allow us to simply assume that it appears at the university, despite the university promising ‘the life

³ The imperative of excitement, *nota bene*, also appears in academic job adverts. This includes those jobs that are so temporary and underpaid that, let us admit, they expose any excitement about such ‘opportunities’ as proof of the relentless clinging to neoliberal ideology in academia. It was only a matter of time before we came across a university proposing a “pilot project” that aims to recruit “volunteer adjuncts” (Cote 2018) – what an exciting time to be an academic.

of the mind' and other things with which it has very little to do these days. Fortunately, there is no need to limit critical thought to a particular institutional setting or try and reach a precise definition of this type of thought. That would be merely to limit the potential of thought. Nonetheless, we need to insist on critical thought that structures those interpretations which, while being ready to recognise our contradictions, enable us to interpret what we embody and see around ourselves, thereby unearthing the field of the political. Alternatively, we might end up embracing "the vacuity of 'philosophies' that are as servile as they are ubiquitous" (Badiou 2011: 71), thereby confusing the excess of thought for a critique of society.

CONCLUSION

In *The Burnout Society*, Han (2015: 8) declares: "Twenty-first-century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society [*Leistungsgesellschaft*]. Also, its inhabitants are no longer 'obedience-subjects' but 'achievement-subjects.' They are entrepreneurs of themselves." In this article, I made it clear that, in actual fact, we have never been simply 'obedience-subjects'; we have always been, *in our own way*, both a predator and prey at once, thus inhabiting a contradictory existence. The article has argued in favour of engaging the contradictory character of our existence, thus acknowledging that it is not possible to resolve the contradictions that are an essential part of our subject-formation. While it could be said that "burnout represents the pathological consequence of *voluntary* self-exploitation" (Han 2015: 44), we should not dream of the subject that is relieved of all contradictions. Such a 'healthy' subject would be a true pathology if ever there was one. Bearing this in mind, the article has not called for a clear break with a hegemonic discourse as a necessary condition for working towards social change. Reflecting on the character of political activity and the persistent danger of our actions being co-opted by a hegemonic discourse, Foucault (in Gandal 1986: 16–17) makes a very interesting point:

Won't everything that is said be inscribed in the very mechanisms we are trying to denounce? Well, I think it is absolutely necessary that it should happen this way: if the discourse can be co-opted, it is not because it is vitiated by nature, but because it is inscribed in a process of struggle. Indeed, the adversary pushing, so to speak, on the hold you have over him in order to turn it around, this constitutes the best valorization of the stakes and typifies the whole strategy of struggles. As in judo, the best answer to the opponent's manoeuvre never is to step back, but to re-use it to your own advantage as a base for the next phase.

We, therefore, should not run from what is inevitable, namely that critical thought is inscribed in the very mechanisms that it aims to denounce. This is a necessary contradiction that marks the field of the political and it cannot be resolved. Trying to resolve it would be, at best, a naïve waste of time or, at worst, to adopt the 'all or nothing' lifestyle examined in this article. The latter would be to say that, if we want to achieve social change, a hegemonic discourse must leave no traces in our being. As critical thought has been constituted in a discursive field, which is heavily marked by a hegemonic discourse, that would be to require something that is impossible. That would also allow the one who requires this to remain perfectly passive and keep on dissecting every critical presence to determine and denounce its links with a hegemonic discourse. Instead of following this type of reasoning, we should recognise that, yes, critical thought as a discourse is always already co-opted to a certain extent. However, rather than succumbing to this contradiction, we should use it to our own advantage. Just as they do it in judo, Foucault says.

The parallel with judo is indeed a well-placed one, though it might prove to be incomprehensible to a lot of people. While judo is one of the most popular sports in France, this is not necessarily so elsewhere. For this reason, let us see how Jigoro Kano (2013: 44–45), the founder of judo, explains the strategy of judo:

If that person [your opponent] applies his energy to move forward, you cannot resist that force and push back, but pulling or pushing in the direction of that force will cause his balance to break, and at that moment you can defeat him. Even if your opponent has two or three times your power, if you can execute your move at the precise moment he is off balance, you can easily throw him by something as simple as tripping him.⁴

It could be said that in judo your opponent defeats herself as it is precisely her force that you use to execute a throw and win. Now, for Kano, this is by no means a strategy that is limited to judo combat. It is a principle or, to put it more precisely, a pedagogy that is applicable to each and every domain of one's life. Judo is a modern martial art and Kano's vision of the sport most certainly does not shy away from the idea of universality, in fact he claims that "judo is not merely a martial art but rather the basic principle of human behavior" (Kano 2013: 77). For Kano, a judo tournament is not where we can see the highest value of judo. Judo is at its prime when it is applied as a pedagogy of social conduct or, as he puts it, "the study of how to put one's

⁴ If interested, for a quick guide to judo, see this video produced by the International Judo Federation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgfKasol5yc> (accessed 2 July 2021).

energy to use in society comes last, so let us call it upper-level judo” (Kano 2013: 95). What was also made perfectly clear by Kano is that it is impossible to get good in judo without losing your fights for some time. It is only through meaningful practice that you get better in this pedagogy. There is no reason for upper-level judo to be any different. Bringing together Foucault and Kano, we might say that the wisest strategy, when faced with force, is not to respond with force. Instead, we should play along with the force of our opponent, thereby establishing a power relation and, what the ultimate goal is, defeating our enemy while using her force to our advantage. It is based on the contradiction; we engage with someone who is exercising force, all the more we establish a relation with this source of force, but only for the sake of rechanneling her force to our benefit. Judo, what makes it appealing to Foucault, is the martial art that teaches us how to thrive on the contradiction. While judo does take practice to master, and this includes learning from failure, the strategy of judo is *not* to celebrate the contradiction. Quite on the contrary, judo is all about exploiting this contradiction in order to achieve a particular aim and, in judo, it is apparent whether this has been successful. The feedback is almost instant; you win or you lose.

In society, nevertheless, things are far more ambiguous. The line that separates being inscribed in the mechanisms we are trying to denounce and being the very mechanisms we are supposedly trying to denounce is not always apparent. For example, it is perfectly viable to imagine a social movement that is not only influenced but entirely absorbed by a hegemonic discourse and which, despite this being so, still takes pride in being radical and subversive. In judo, the competitor who keeps on losing will not get very far. However, in society, being absorbed by a hegemonic discourse is mostly a rewarding experience that does not necessarily take away one's subversive appearance. In neoliberal optics, subversion is perfectly fine as long as it does not amount to anything. Subversion can even prove to be a profitable enterprise, yet another device that the achievement-subject deploys to compete with itself and by which “it succumbs to the destructive compulsion to outdo itself over and over, to jump over its own shadow” (Han 2015: 46). Thus, Foucault's parallel with judo can take us only so far. Let us not take Jigoro Kano too seriously; judo is surely a very interesting sport, but it is not the basic principle of human behaviour. There is no such thing as the basic principle of human behaviour. Neither judo nor any other discipline or school of thought, including critical theory, can provide us with a definite answer when it comes to how we should deploy our contradictions to our advantage. Understanding that our struggles are always shaped by a particular context which makes universal solutions empty, this article has not produced any advice on transforming society or, even worse, the principle that would, if followed closely enough, guarantee a better society. It would be equally pointless to try and determine exactly which contradictions could or could

not be useful for critical thought. The article, much more productively, made it clear that we should keep our contradictory voices alive as this enables us to continue developing critical thought and allows us to recognise the possibilities of engaging the contradictions that constitute our existence. While this is not to say what is to be done, it is to make it obvious that our contradictions illuminate the fact that society remains open to change at all times. However, achieving social change, and the direction in which it will take us, remains dependent on our capacity to engage contradictions in a way that would challenge the status quo.

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Ovaj rad tvrdi da su kontradikcije inherentne društvenoj egzistenciji, ističući kako one mogu biti artikulirane na različite načine. Istražujući suvremenu kulturu, pokazujem da neoliberalizam iskorištava našu kontradiktornu posvećenost eksploataciji samih sebe. U radu se u potpunosti uvažava da smo mi, kao neoliberalni subjekti, konstituirani diskursom te je naša kritika neoliberalizma neizbježno artikulirana u okviru hegemonijskoga diskursa. Naglašavam da se kritička misao mora uhvatiti u koštac s vlastitim kontradikcijama kako bi ih upotrijebila da u potpunosti razvije svoje kapacitete.

Ključne riječi: *društvena promjena, kontradikcija, kritička misao, neoliberalizam, subjektivitet*



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