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Confronting Right-Wing Extremism and Authoritarianism in Germany: The Role of Critical and Emancipatory Education

Christian Keldenich[1*]

[1]Teacher Land Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany ✉ christian.keldenich@gmx.de

Abstract: *German society, like many others, experienced trends and developments that posed a threat to democratic values. These manifested on the individual level through authoritarian attitudes and on the societal level through the spread of resentment and anti-democratic ideologies. This article proposed educational principles aimed at countering such developments, drawing on the framework of Critical Theory. Through a comprehensive literature review, the study examined recent studies that analyzed contemporary sociopolitical trends in Germany, thereby enabling an adaptation of Critical Theory to current challenges. Based on these insights, the article outlined a concept of education that was both critical and emancipatory.*

Keywords: *Aggression; Authoritarian Dynamics; Authoritarian Syndrome; Maturity; Criticism; Critical Theory; Resentment*

INTRODUCTION

Authoritarian attitudes are becoming increasingly popular in democracies worldwide and are also becoming more widespread in Europe (Silver and Janell 2024). This also applies to Germany. Here, especially in the last two to three years, there has been a worrying rise of authoritarian populism, authoritarian, radical right-wing and right-wing populist attitudes. These developments are related to the ever-emerging crises that have been affecting societies worldwide and thus also German society for more than a decade (Decker, Kiess, Heller, and Brähler 2024; Zick, Küpper, and Mokros 2023; Mathias et al. 2024). However, crises are not the sole cause of the emergence of these authoritarian attitudes and therefore do not suffice as an explanation for this development.

This article aims to develop starting points and principles for education against authoritarianism, radical right-wing and anti-democratic attitudes in order to counter these social developments. To this end, current socio-political studies will first be evaluated, which examine current social trends and their causes in Germany. The theoretical framework for this objective is the Critical Theory, i.e., both the causes and manifestations of authoritarian, right-wing and anti-democratic attitudes and the development of pedagogical principles to counter these social developments are evaluated, examined and developed using Critical Theory. This article also takes into account the inherent limitations and internal contradictions of education with regard to its emancipatory potential. This approach will allow theoretically consistent pedagogical-didactic ideas and settings for emancipatory and anti-authoritarian education to be developed in the future. Analogous to Critical Theory, it is assumed that anti-democratic and

authoritarian aspirations and attitudes are immanent to civilization, the Enlightenment, and ultimately to democratic societies—that is, civilizational regression is already inherent in society and civilization.

According to Theodor W. Adorno (1971b), a key representative and co-founder of Critical Theory, the imperative that "Auschwitz should never happen again' is the foremost demand of education." (p. 88). Klaus Ahlheim (2010) also refers to Adorno's "pedagogical imperative" (p. 39). If one agrees with Adorno's assessment of the most important and fundamental task of pedagogy, then the ultimate goal of education can only be "education to maturity" (Adorno 1971c, 133ff). A democratic society can only exist, according to Adorno, in the style of Immanuel Kant, if each individual is able and willing to form their will autonomously and maturely (Adorno 1971d, 133).

Critical Theory is used for this purpose, since it still serves as a reference point for research on authoritarianism and prejudice (Decker et al. 2024, 9ff.) and is therefore particularly suitable to develop approaches for an education oriented towards maturity (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Ahlheim 2010). Critical Theory and thus its understanding of maturity must be considered in the historical context and are bound to the current events. This means that the pedagogical imperative formulated by Adorno, the understanding of maturity of Critical Theory as well as Critical Theory as an analytical instrument for today's conditions, developments, and crises need to be put in relation and updated accordingly (Messerschmidt 2010, 127).

Furthermore, the use of Critical Theory allows the results of studies on political attitudes to be embedded within a broader social theory, thereby enabling the recognition of anti-democratic and Authoritarian Dynamics within democratic societies (Decker, Kiess, Heller, and Brähler 2022, 11 and 20f.).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Theory is bound to its period of origin and must be considered in this context. For this reason, Critical Theory as an analytical tool must be adapted and updated to today's times and challenges (Messerschmidt 2010, 127). In order to achieve this goal, a literature study will evaluate current studies that capture the current socio-political developments, thus the emergence of right-wing radical and right-wing populist attitudes in Germany and their causes. For this purpose, the so-called Authoritarianism Study (Decker et al. 2024) and the Middle-Study (Zick et al. 2023) are used to show developments in society as a whole in Germany. These two studies are to be considered as representative and allow, by their structure, not only superficial developments but also deeper and not immediately recognizable phenomena to be captured and revealed. These studies are complemented by studies that focus on the attitudes, values and perceived problems of young people in order to specify further the challenges and requirements for an education against authoritarianism.

METHODS

The above-mentioned studies will be evaluated as part of a literature study with regard to authoritarian, radical right-wing and anti-democratic social developments, trends and their reasons. The focus is on current social attitudes, trends, and resentments of adolescents and

young adults, as these are likely to be the main addressees of school education against authoritarianism. These studies are analyzed through the lens of Critical Theory. In particular, specific elements such as the concept of the Authoritarian Syndrome and Adorno's notion of totality within democratic societies are employed. The entire analysis rests on the fundamental assumption that the path to authoritarianism—or, in Adorno's terms, to barbarism—is already embedded in civilization, the Enlightenment, and thus within modern democratic societies themselves. On the basis of these analytical results, necessary starting points for emancipatory education against authoritarianism and anti-democratic social attitudes and aspirations are then developed. To this end, elements of Critical Theory will be used to identify elements of such emancipatory education. These elements are adapted to current challenges and the current context. In the following, the main assumptions of the analytical categories of Critical Theory used are presented.

Basic Assumptions of Critical Theory: The Dialectic of Enlightenment and Barbarism

Already at the beginning of "Dialectic of Enlightenment" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1969/2008), one of the foundational works of Critical Theory, Adorno and Horkheimer anticipate their historical conclusion (Borst 2011, 114):

> Ever since the Enlightenment has pursued the goal in the broadest sense of progressive thinking—to dispel fear and establish human beings as masters of nature—the fully enlightened earth radiates under the sign of triumphant calamity. The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world. It sought to demythologize and to overthrow myth through knowledge (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1969/2008, 9).

The central aporia encountered in their work is stated as follows:

> The self-destruction of the Enlightenment is the first object to be examined. We have no doubt—and herein lies our *petitio principii*—that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightened thought. However, we believe we have recognized just as clearly that the concept of this very mode of thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms and institutions of the society in which it is embedded, already contains the germ of that regression which is taking place everywhere today (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1969/2008, 5).

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the anti-civilizational tendencies are inherent in civilization and the Enlightenment itself (Adorno 1971a, 88). Society thus produces within itself the very forces that threaten it from within (Decker et al. 2022, 29). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the process of Enlightenment—understood as the "disenchantment of the world" and the dissolution of myth—paradoxically gives rise to new myths and ultimately leads to catastrophe (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969/2008, 9). It is precisely this dialectic, this internal contradiction, that characterizes the mode of thought and reasoning of Adorno and Horkheimer (Ahlheim 2010, 41-52).

According to the Critical Theory, civilization and culture are the origin of all suffering by limiting impulses and aggressions and converting them into social feelings, general civilizational

discomfort and civilizational pressure. People feel trapped in civilization and try to free themselves from these shackles, which leads to violence and ultimately to anti-civilizing, barbaric and evil. The pressure of civilization, culture and society, Adorno describes this as the dominant general, on the people, on the special becomes so great that one's own identity and the will to resist with which one can oppose the dominant general is less and less (Adorno 1971b, 90). The general is becoming more and more prevalent, whereby deviations are perceived. This leads to a social compulsion for conformity and identity. Man should adapt to the order and rationality created by himself (Borst 2011, 114f.).

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment was a battle against old myths. The Enlightenment did not overcome these myths, but rather new, modern myths emerged. The old myths have been transformed into new ones (Decker et al. 2022, 21ff.). Old systems and myths are overthrown and replaced by new ones, with the basic conditions and relations of domination continuing in a changed form in a new system, in new myths. The conditions of companies do not change. According to Adorno (1942/2003): "The new does not add itself to the old but remains the need of the old, its neediness, as it becomes current through its thinking purpose, its indispensable confrontation with the general in the old itself as an immanent contradiction. In all antithetical mediations, history thus remains an immoderate analytical judgment. This is the historical essence of the metaphysical teaching on the identity of subject and object in the absolute" (p. 374).

An essential part of modern myths is their instrumental use as ideology. Old, pre-Enlightenment myths wanted to make opaque phenomena like nature transparent (Decker et al. 2022, 23f.), while modern myths suggest above all an unalterability and immutability of the existing conditions. Through the subjugation of nature by man, there is an alienation of man from nature and himself; that is, man is subjected to the rationalization constraints created by him. People are alienating themselves from what they exercise power over themselves (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969/2006, 15ff.).They fall into the delusion of being able to explain everything by their rational system, but according to Horkheimer and Adorno, this turns out to be an illusion. The uncontrollable is dialectically interwoven with reason, and thrusts back more strongly the more people try to exercise control and detach themselves from their inner nature (Borst 2011, 115f.). Modern myths thus have a greater destructive potential than old myths. The desire for omnipotence, the desire to be connected with everything in order to control everything, does not lead to autonomy, but destroys the condition for the possibility of autonomy (Decker et al. 2022, 23f.). The people can change the conditions. Adorno speaks here also of how society no longer penetrates their thoughts and feels itself defenseless against it. They push their being to the circumstances, whereby these do not change (Adorno 1971a, 16). People thus bow to existing conditions, and overlook the fact that these same conditions are made by humans and therefore also changeable (Ahlheim 2010, 54).

According to Adorno, the Dialectic of Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment, civilization, culture, and barbarism represent a mode of thinking characterized by irresolvable contradictions (Adorno 1970, 15f.). Thinking in contradictions does not mean that a thing has two sides, but these contradictions are immanent to the things (Adorno 1970, 16). Objects and things considered do not fit in their terms; objects and their terms become contradictory. This contradiction consists in "untruth of identity, of the emergence of the conceptual into the concept (...), the primacy of contradictory thinking in dialectics measures the heterogeneous in

unitary thinking" (Adorno 1970, 15). Dialectics is "the consistent consciousness of non-identity, but the appearance of identity is immanent to thinking. Thinking means identifying" (Adorno 1970, 15). Dialectics, the entanglement of identity and non-identity, the uncovering and thinking in contradictions, is not a law of thought but one of reality and practice (Adorno 1970, 16). The society is also contradictory. These contradictions must be considered in the analysis of political attitudes (Decker et al. 2024, 9) and thus also in educational contexts and their analysis.

Critical Theory considers political attitudes in connection with social contradictions; that is, political attitudes and prejudices are closely related to the criticism of social conditions which these attitudes produce, considered (Decker et al. 2024, 9). Therefore, the concept of education and the closely related concept of emancipation, in particular the possibility of individual emancipation of people under current conditions, can also be found through the reference to Critical Theory, that is, to let people in a non-alienated life to the social conditions surrounding them come to themselves (Borst 2011, 111). Adorno's lectures and talks on education for maturity are based, among other things, on his or her. Studies on the Authoritarian Character (Ahlheim 2010, 43), so that the evaluation of the studies based on Critical Theory and the concept of authoritarianism allows a theoretically consistent approach. However, it should be noted that the Critical Theory is not a developed method box, not a fully developed theory, but rather shared common theoretical foundations, which can be shaped differently (Holzer and Daniela 2019, 722).

The Authoritarian Syndrome as an Analytical Category of Social Developments

In order to identify and expose social trends, democratic, pluralistic, anti-democratic, anti-Semitic or authoritarian attitudes, terms such as left- and right-wing extremism or center are frequently used in politics and the media to describe social phenomena, which is not very suitable. The use of these terms is criticized by science, as this polarization obscures the view of social developments. However, resentment and extremism are also present in the so-called middle of society; the "middle" only produces it (Decker et al. 2022, 15; Decker et al. 2024, 12; Zick et al. 2023, 27). National Socialism in Germany also arose from the middle of society and was supported by it (Zick et al. 2023, 27). The focus on the social special case of extremism is obscuring the view on socially inherent phenomena, which are not only found at the edges but are widespread in all areas of society. Thus, society does not engage with itself, and deeply rooted phenomena and trends are not recognized (Decker et al. 2022, 17). The observation and analysis of attitudes, expectations, feelings and resentments of individuals thus serves to gain access to the so-called "center" (Decker et al. 2024, 12).

For this reason, Authoritarian Dynamics and the Authoritarian Syndrome, closely related to the Authoritarian Character, are used as categories of analysis in the sense of an individual response to social dynamics (see Decker et al. 2022, 77). These can also be attributed to Critical Theory in a broader sense, which allows for a consistent methodological and analytical approach. The studies on Authoritarian Character reveal the vulnerable zone of this character (Horkheimer et al. 1952, 291) and can therefore be used as a starting point for an education against authoritarian attitudes and an education to maturity (Adorno 1971b, 91).

An analysis of social trends and attitudes based on these theories can therefore simultaneously serve to reveal social phenomena and provide starting points for emancipatory, age-oriented education.

The concept and exploration of the Authoritarian Character goes back to Erich Fromm, who at the beginning of the 1930s wanted to explain the rise of fascism in the 1920s, that is, what drives people to fascism, antisemitism and authoritarianism, with his studies conducted at the Institute for Social Research (Fromm 1936). According to Fromm, the Authoritarian Personality includes the types of the ruler and the dominated. The Authoritarian Personality is incapable of being autonomous and living in freedom. The authoritarian man is unable to love, incapable of using his mind and therefore lives in deep fear. He needs an authority with which to merge, since he cannot bear his fear, and in doing so, he destroys his own identity. The Authoritarian Character has a passive, masochistic side that makes itself small and subservient to make itself part of a larger whole. This frees him from having to make decisions and take responsibility. The active, sadistic Authoritarian Character is just as filled with fear as the passive character. He feels strong when he has power over others, so he depends on other people. The active and passive Authoritarian Characters are thus dependent on each other as in a symbiotic existence. Many Authoritarian Characters contain both elements, an active and a passive part. In one reference group, they realize their sadistic urges, in the other, they satisfy their masochistic impulses (Fromm 1957, 1ff.). Fromm's studies on authoritarianism and the Authoritarian Character were from the 1940s onwards, among others, by the Institute for Social Research with the studies on "Authoritarian Character" (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford, and Aron 1950) and with the "Studies on Authority and Family" (Horkheimer, Fromm, Marcuse, Mayer, Wittvogel, and Honigsheim 1936/1987).

Modern theories of authoritarianism have expanded upon the Authoritarian Syndrome and the Authoritarian Personality by incorporating additional analytical elements. Socially or politically threatening developments can intensify the Authoritarian Syndrome. Based on Decker et al. (2022, 77), the sadomasochistic element of the Authoritarian Character is represented by the categories Authoritarian Submissiveness, Authoritarian Aggression and Conventionalism. The sadomasochistic side of the Authoritarian Character is also a mirror of a society and thus also allows for social and ruling analyses (Decker et al. 2024, 10). These three elements comprise the submission to political and social authorities, the satisfaction of aggression through the condemnation of socially dissenting groups, as well as the retention and maintenance of an existing order. The element of Authoritarian Aggression can effectively capture anti-democratic attitudes and reflexes, as these are not necessarily tied to specific ideologies such as neo-Nazi beliefs. Political ideologies, on the other hand, which legitimize and rationalize Authoritarian Aggression, can be very different and shared only by a part of the population in a fragmented society. The extent of anti-democratic attitudes and values can therefore be greater than, for example, a pure focus on a right-wing radical attitude would imply. The use of Authoritarian Character, as an analytical category, thus enables a deeper understanding of the true extent of Authoritarian Dynamics (Decker et al. 2022, 78f.). Furthermore, the reference to Critical Theory and its analysis regarding the origin of aggression in connection with the Authoritarian Personality can reveal deep-seated reasons for authoritarian attitudes and dynamics.

The Authoritarian Syndrome has been extended by the research on authoritarianism to a second dimension of projectivity, with the categories of conspiracy mentality and superstition

(Decker et al. 2022, 77). Submission to an authority includes the recognition of the reality represented by that authority, even if this contradicts one's reality. Denial of reality is, from a psychoanalytic perspective, a defense mechanism that helps individuals cope with conflicting realities and make them bearable. This contradiction often leads individuals to join particular groups when their connection to reality no longer offers them a sense of power or control over their own lives. In such cases, the group—and its shared values, norms, and beliefs—becomes an ideal to which they aspire. Authoritarian individuals do not necessarily require a strong leader; they can also connect to an abstract group ideal through collective identities. For this reason, the population's desire for a strong leader may be lower than the overall level of Authoritarian Aggression. Focusing solely on the demand for a strong leader when assessing social authoritarianism risks underestimating the true extent of Authoritarian Dynamics (Decker et al. 2024, 11).

RESULTS

Current Social Attitudes, Trends, and Resentments

Elements of the Authoritarian Syndrome were also quite widespread before 2022 (Decker et al. 2024, 12). Right-wing extremist attitudes declined steadily before 2022. However, surveys conducted after 2022 show a reversal of the trend (Decker et al. 2024, 22; Zick et al. 2023, 84). There is an increase in all dimensions of right-wing extremist attitudes, especially concerning antisemitism and xenophobia (Decker et al. 2024, 87). Social and ethnic statements are increasingly accepted (Zick et al. 2023, 84); almost 40% of the respondents support a strong national community (Decker et al. 2024, 88). This development can also be observed among young people in Germany (Albert et al. 2024), although it cannot be said that the youth are drifting away to the right (Faas, Roßteutscher, and Schäfer 2024). This increase is mainly due to young men. The proportion of young people who consider themselves to be right-leaning is more than twice as high among male adolescents at 25% (Albert et al. 2024, 16).

This analysis shows that right-wing extremism is not a problem at the so-called fringes of society, but is present in the entire population. At the same time, the proportion of people who explicitly reject right-wing extremist attitudes is falling. Right-wing extremist attitudes seem to be becoming more and more normal, with latent approval rising. These developments overall indicate a significant disruption of the democratic system (Zick et al. 2022, 84ff.).

There is also an increase in the already high levels of Muslim hostility, antigypsyism, trans-hostility, homophobia and sexism (Decker et al. 2024, 66ff.). This development can also be seen among young people in Germany. Also, 34% of respondents have resentments against migrants, and almost half of the young people think that refugees are preferred by the state over German citizens (Albert et al. 2024, 14ff.). Traditional antisemitism seems to be less common among young people, while Israeli-related antisemitism is much more widespread than among adults and continues to increase (Schubert 2024, 27).

These resentments are present in all political circles and among supporters of all political parties, especially anti-Semitic resentments and antigypsyism. This one in particular reaches alarmingly high values (Decker and Brähler 2025, 2). These aggressions are directed against groups that supposedly deviate from the norm. In this context, there are also high approval

rates for a violence-related ideal of masculinity, as well as broad acceptance of violence (Decker et al. 2022, 12f.). Additionally, 18% of young people support the use of violence as a means to resolve social conflicts (Albert et al. 2024, 17). In addition, there has been a marked decline in satisfaction with democracy and confidence in it and a marked increase in political deprivation. Overall, there has not been such a high level of dissatisfaction with democracy since the studies were started in 2006 (Decker et al. 2024, 71ff.; Zick et al. 2022, 23).

On the other hand, there is always strong support for an authoritarian state. Also in the categories of Authoritarian Syndrome, almost all increases can be observed (Decker et al. 2024, 88). Moreover, 44% of young people support a strong state order, and 88% endorse conformity to the existing social order (Albert et al. 2024, 17 and 20). A further development is that the desire for authority does not necessarily manifest itself in a strong leader but rather in group identities and group dynamics, a longing for collectivity (Decker et al. 2024, 87ff.).

Group dynamics are related to chauvinism, which has also risen. Chauvinism manifests itself in the distinction between one's group and groups perceived as outsiders. One's group is valued, the others are devalued. Group dynamics are based on authoritarian needs, which in turn are based on Authoritarian Aggression. This leads to resentment and hatred toward deviant groups (Decker et al. 2024, 58f.). The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, contributed to radicalization and the growing significance of chauvinism by fostering new ideological groups that are no longer easily classified as right-wing radicals, right-wing populists, or left-wing radicals. Instead, these groups draw on ethnic or authoritarian ideological elements and can be described as rebellious (Zick et al., 2023, p. 22). These mixed and ambiguous worldviews are increasingly common among young people under 20 and are especially dynamic within this group. Young people's perceptions of the world are primarily shaped by social media (Brace, Baele, and Ging 2023).

People seem to be becoming more and more susceptible to radical, anti-human and anti-democratic ideologies (Zick et al. 2023, 25). Overall, society seems to be increasingly permeated by Authoritarian Dynamics. These include people in all socio-economic areas and all political camps (Decker et al. 2024, 19). Authoritarian Dynamics is also widespread and growing among young people (Pösl and Fereidooni 2023; Albert et al. 2024, 17). Both in the general population and among young people, Authoritarian Dynamics and elements of the Authoritarian Syndrome are much more common than right-wing extremist attitudes, even if there are overlaps here.

Even if resentment, right-wing radical attitudes and Authoritarian Dynamics are present in all political milieus, at all levels of education and in all age groups, they are among voters of the AfD (Alternative for Germany) and probably among non-voters at the highest. The political milieu of the AfD voters is characterized by resentment, a high willingness to anger, destructiveness and a devaluation of people due to an alleged group affiliation. The election of the AfD as part of the democratic, political decision-making process is driven by authoritarian-destructive needs and should be effective through the electoral decision. This is increasingly becoming a threat to liberal democracy, and it is striking that men are over-represented among the AfD voters. At the same time, the AfD has the lowest average educational level of all parties. The presence and extent of resentment and aggression seem to be related also to the level of education (Decker et al. 2025, 2ff.).

A similar pattern emerges when examining the prevalence of resentments and radical right-wing or right-wing populist attitudes among young people. These attitudes and resentments are notably overrepresented among male adolescents and those with lower educational attainment (Faas et al. 2024).

In the spread of resentment and Authoritarian Dynamics, people's perception of crises also plays a role. Only when people subjectively perceive objective developments as being critical of the state can we speak of a crisis. Whether one can speak of a crisis depends less on the objective events than on their perception and processing by people. Nevertheless, the destructive potential and challenges posed by crises are undeniable realities. When multiple crises occur consecutively, people develop a continuous sense of crisis. This psychological dimension is closely intertwined with economic factors (Decker et al. 2024, 13f.). During crises, adverse economic conditions emerge, such as underinvestment in infrastructure, education, and healthcare (Truger 2024, 10ff.), alongside growing income and wealth inequality (Ederer and Rehm 2020). These developments are perceived negatively by the public.

The destructive potential of society and its crises often appears overwhelming and indifferent to people, manifesting as social brutality and violence. This violence, in turn, transforms into aggression directed against other individuals and society as a whole (Horkheimer et al. 1969/2008, 15ff.; Adorno 1971b, 90; Borst 2011, 115f.). Crises, therefore, have the potential to escalate people's aggression further. Consequently, struggles over resource distribution, identity, and status increasingly affect society, leading to growing resentment and polarization (Decker et al. 2024, 13f.). This dynamic compels individuals to reposition themselves and, in some cases, to abandon solidarity with minorities and renounce democratic principles (Zick et al. 2023, 25f.).

The resentments, aggressions and fears associated with the crises are exploited by populists who often act as multipliers of opinion (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1949). They conjure up and force the crises by further dramatizing them, by speaking of downfall, conspiracy or subversion and by fueling fears and resentments (Zick et al. 2023, 21ff.).

A further explanation for the development of aggression is based on how society secures its livelihoods. According to Adorno, society and the people's conception of society are completely occupied by economy and technology; that is, the economy confronts humans as both a visible and invisible repressive totality (Adorno 1942/2003). This overwhelming control leads to more aggression.

The totality of the market economy is also felt by people in practice through the pressure and stresses of everyday life, which is reflected, among other things, in an increasing number of mental illnesses. Ever faster technological developments, especially in the context of digitalization and the economization of almost all areas of life, mean that people are increasingly required to be more flexible and are increasingly overwhelmed (Decker et al. 2024, 17ff.).

DISCUSSION

Education for Maturity and Against Authoritarian Dynamics in Society

Although the vast majority of young people and young adults identify with the state and society, they are positive about democracy and tolerant of social minorities (Albert et al. 2024, 16ff.). Nevertheless, both in society as a whole and among the young people and young adults, worrying developments can be observed that are partly threatening democracy. Thus, resentment against minorities and right-wing radical attitudes is growing throughout society. Authoritarian Dynamics are also expanding.

In order to protect liberal democracy, it is therefore necessary to develop a corresponding defense strategy. An important element of such a strategy is the field of education. If one refers to the inherent thinking of Critical Theory in contradiction to this problem, one could despair because of the great challenges. According to Adorno, Enlightenment and civilization ultimately lead to disaster. Barbarism is itself inherent in the principle of civilization (Adorno 1971b, 88). Education is a component of civilization and culture, and as such, also part of the processes that can lead to catastrophe. At the same time, according to Adorno, the only viable response lies in an education oriented toward emancipation—an emancipatory education capable of counteracting authoritarian and anti-democratic tendencies and, ultimately, preventing a repetition of Auschwitz. Adorno reveals himself as a skeptical realist regarding the possibilities of education. Despite its inherent limitations and the likelihood of failure, emancipatory education remains the only hope (Ahlheim 2010, 41-52).

Education is, therefore, inherently contradictory, and this contradiction cannot be fully resolved. However, the recognition of both the necessity and the limits of Enlightenment education should not lead to resignation. Instead, it must inspire the development and implementation of emancipatory educational approaches aimed at combating resentment and authoritarianism. People's willingness to resist, along with their capacity for compassion and empathy, must be strengthened. Mechanisms that foster conformity and aggression should be exposed, and courage to engage in deviant or dissenting behavior must be encouraged (Ahlheim 2010, 41-52). The necessity of (emancipatory) education is also rooted in the lived realities and conditions of students. Although there is no perfect protective effect of education against resentment, authoritarian or right-wing radical thinking (Zick et al. 2023, 84), yet these attitudes and prejudices and ideologies seem to fall on a more fertile soil in people with a low level of education than in people with a higher level of education (Decker et al. 2025, 2ff.; Faas et al. 2024).

Realizing the aims of emancipatory and enlightenment-driven education requires a prior recognition of its intrinsic limitations. These limitations, however, do not mark an endpoint but rather a point of departure for emancipatory educational efforts. When Critical Theory is employed as the foundation for educational processes that counter authoritarian tendencies, its core principle lies in confronting and mediating irresolvable social contradictions (Ahlheim 2010, 54; Adorno 1970, 15f.). Authority, aggression and barbarism are already embedded in culture and civilization; the basic constitution of society is thus constructed through contradictions. In the understanding of Critical Theory, society is also constituted by its inherent contradictions, discontinuities and breakpoints (Messerschmidt 2010, 141ff). Education cannot resolve this

contradiction, but it can show and reveal it to people and thus make previously unconscious mechanisms explicit and thus accessible for reflection (Horkheimer 1952, 17ff.).

In addition to thinking in contradictions, the ability to criticize and the associated understanding of social totality in the sense of a theory of society are also inseparable from an emancipatory education (Adorno 1969a, 8f.). These abilities can reveal social connections and contradictions to criticism (Dahrendorf 1969, 146).

People can no longer penetrate the conditions with their thoughts and feel defenseless. They push their being to the circumstances, whereby these do not change (Adorno 1971a, 16). People thus bow to the existing conditions, and overlook that these conditions are made by men and therefore also changeable. This is another starting point for emancipatory education, by making these mechanisms explicit to people (Ahlheim 2010, 54).

Adorno refers to the concept of totality in democratic societies. He does not understand this as a direct form of domination, but rather as a way of conveying domination through ideology. The relations of power, contradictions and correlations in a society can only be understood by analysing the totality (Adorno 1969c, 127). Since all data, questions, and theories—Adorno explicitly refers here only to those within the social sciences and economics, excluding the natural sciences—are themselves part of and expressions of the societal totality, any claim to objectivity must be critically examined in light of the structures and contradictions inherent in that totality (Adorno 1969c, 125–132ff.). These inherent mechanisms can only be uncovered through criticism—and above all, through self-criticism—of one's theories, modes of thinking, and the questions one poses (Adorno 1969b, 82). The goal is the self-clarification of society and the creation of rational conditions (Horkheimer 1937, 172). Modern myths, such as the myth of the market economy, which today are primarily ideology and above all suggest that the current conditions are indispensable and immutable, could form a starting point to approach the totality. The method of ideological criticism can be used (Blankertz 1974).

The origin of all aggression lies in the inherent contradiction of civilization and culture, which cannot be directly altered by education or pedagogy. However, education aimed at combating authoritarianism must address the roots of aggression, because only through this understanding can the emergence and impact of the Authoritarian Syndrome, authoritarianism, resentments, and anti-democratic ideologies—such as Neo-Nazi ideology—be fully comprehended (Adorno 1971a, 25f.). Therefore, a crucial element of education oriented toward maturity must be the Enlightenment about the origins and mechanisms of aggression (Adorno 1971c, 123-128).

Aggressive tendencies may manifest through diverse ideologies and forms of resentment. Thus, an exclusive educational focus on Neo-Nazi ideology proves insufficient, as it overlooks the deeper psychological and societal causes that enable the redirection of aggression into such ideological frameworks. This also defies the reality of the lives of many young people, as they increasingly compose their worldview from different ideologies. Therefore, various ideologies and resentments that are particularly present in young people should be considered. In this context, group dynamics and bonds should also be considered. Individual fates, which have been subjected to violence due to resentment or ideologies and their divergent group affiliation, could be used for concrete implementation (Adorno 1971b, 95).

In connection with the development and satisfaction of aggressions as well as the economy, inextricably interwoven with the social totality, economic relations should also be

subject to enlightenment education. Economics confronts people as an impenetrable and all-powerful totality, overpowering them and thus leading to aggression, destructiveness and fear. Education cannot directly change the economic conditions, but it can make people aware of and show them the mechanisms of economics, that the economic conditions in a contradictory historical process have been made by people themselves and that long-term changes are possible in this area. People must be encouraged and empowered to intervene in social processes and change them towards more humanity (Horkheimer 1952, 18ff.). This is all the more necessary as young people are increasingly looking at their future in the face of crises, including economic crises. Worries, fears, feelings of loss and loss of control increase (Albert et al. 2024, 17). People perceive the crisis-like developments in society, social, political, economic and ecological as overpowering and partly as social violence. Crises can thus further intensify existing aggressions (Decker et al. 2024, 13f.). Education must therefore also make the mechanisms of crises explicit to people. It must be shown to people that crises are not an objective phenomenon, but arise only in the subjective perception.

Maturity in connection with educational processes, therefore, means above all also being able to act and judge independently and autonomously, not only within existing conditions. Rather, people must be enabled to think beyond existing conditions and also to actively intervene in them in order to change society into a more humane one. Only in this way can the rising aggressions in people be reduced to a certain extent, which in turn leads to more democratic and humane conditions.

Finally, education aimed at combating aggression must also address individuals' personal dispositions (Adorno 1971b, 101). Adorno describes "coldness" as a subjective feeling of discomfort that can be linked to economic, social, or societal structures, as well as to actions and human nature (Gruschka 1994, 7ff.). According to Adorno, "coldness" is a fundamental characteristic of modern societies and a basic element of human anthropology (Adorno 1971b, 101). The economization of many aspects of life in contemporary societies—often experienced as overwhelming or even violent—along with social and economic conditions that disregard the individual, contributes to the development of this "coldness" (Gruschka 1994, 53ff.). Both individual and social coldness result in people who possess only limited capacity for empathy and compassion and who seek to assert their interests at the expense of others. This leads to indifference toward the suffering of others (Adorno 1971b, 101), which in turn impedes, and paradoxically may even facilitate, the rise of resentment and authoritarian tendencies. The nature of coldness must be made explicit to individuals (Adorno 1971b, p. 102). Based on this awareness, education should aim to cultivate conscience, independent judgment, empathy, and compassion (Fromm 1957, 4). In this regard, educational approaches that rely on repression, oppression, or competition are counterproductive. Authoritarian behavior, even when exhibited by teachers, should neither be glorified nor tolerated in the classroom; rather, it must be actively overcome (Adorno 1971d, 141). Authority, as Decker et al. (2022, 23f.) argue, destroys the conditions necessary for autonomy.

CONCLUSION

The use of Critical Theory as an analytical tool offers a distinct perspective on social change and helps uncover the underlying causes of contemporary developments. The studies analyzed in this article indicate that German society, especially since 2022—likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the onset of the Russian war against Ukraine—has experienced a troubling shift marked by democratic erosion. These multiple crises have intensified pre-existing aggressions, which manifest individually as authoritarian tendencies and socially as Authoritarian Dynamics, resentments, and anti-democratic ideologies across almost all areas examined.

According to Critical Theory, however, the root causes of aggression and its expression through various channels do not lie solely in crises, but in deep-seated, insoluble contradictions within civilization, culture, society, and economic systems. While crises may amplify these aggressions, they fundamentally stem from these structural contradictions. These contradictions reveal both the limits and opportunities of education aimed at fostering maturity and resisting authoritarian attitudes. To effectively counter these developments, education must teach individuals to think dialectically—understanding social and economic contradictions and the origins of both personal and societal aggression. Following Adorno's view, despite education's limitations, only an Enlightenment-oriented education can provide such understanding.

Counteracting the alarming rise in Authoritarian Dynamics requires education to cultivate empathy, self-reflection, autonomy, critical thinking, openness to contradiction, and resistance. Moreover, education must address the "coldness" in human behavior that contributes to social alienation. Although these general principles of emancipatory education are essential, they need to be further specified and translated into concrete educational goals and curricula, highlighting a clear need for additional research.

Furthermore, advancing the economic analysis of authoritarianism is crucial for better explaining the rise of authoritarian, right-wing extremist, and anti-democratic attitudes. Such insight could also offer new avenues for effective intervention. Given the serious threats these social trends pose to democracy, freedom, and tolerance, fundamental efforts should be made to orient school education more closely toward realizing Adorno's pedagogical imperative. This article provides theoretically grounded starting points to support such efforts.

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