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## Contrastive research through dialectic lens

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### Abstract

The permanent scientific production (and profusion) in the field of social sciences and education, amid the macro-social context of great uncertainties and changes that the world is experiencing, requires continuous reflections and debates regarding old and new questions about the research method(s) in the field of social sciences in general, and education in particular. This article aims to highlight problematizations around traditional methodological approaches and to present theoretical and methodological outlines of contrastive research, conceived here through the lens of three core categories – totality, contradiction, and mediation –, taking as its epistemological and methodological point of view the materialist and dialectical perspective. In search of the goal, a study of these theoretical categories was carried out, as well as analysis of methodological outlines, with a view to the proposition that singles out studies of a contrastive nature. As the foundations of this text indicate, the dialogue with the reader is essential for the corpus of the study.

Keywords: Scientific methodology. Contrastive research. Dialectics. Historical and dialectical materialism.

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### Pesquisa contrastiva pela lente da dialética

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### Resumo

A permanente produção (e profusão) científica no âmbito das ciências sociais e da educação, em meio ao contexto macrossocial de grandes incertezas e mudanças que o mundo vivencia, requer reflexões e debates contínuos acerca de antigas e novas questões sobre o(s) método(s) de pesquisa nas ciências sociais em geral e na educação em particular. O presente artigo pretende evidenciar problematizações em torno de abordagens metodológicas tradicionais e apresentar delineamentos teórico-metodológicos da pesquisa contrastiva, concebida aqui pela lente de três categorias nucleares – a totalidade, a contradição e a mediação –, tomando

como ponto de vista epistemológico e metodológico a perspectiva materialista e dialética. Em busca da finalidade supracitada, foi realizado um estudo das categorias teóricas em tela, bem como análise de delineamentos metodológicos, com vistas a proposição que singularize os estudos de natureza contrastiva. Como indiciam os fundamentos deste texto, o diálogo com o leitor é essencial para o *corpus* do estudo.

Palavras-chave: Metodologia científica. Pesquisa contrastiva. Dialética. Materialismo histórico-dialético.

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## La investigación contrastiva por la lente de la dialéctica

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### Resumen

La permanente producción (y profusión) científica en el ámbito de las ciencias sociales y de la educación, en medio del contexto macrosocial de grandes incertidumbres y cambios que el mundo vive, requiere reflexiones y debates constantes sobre el(los) método(s) de investigación en las ciencias sociales en general y en la educación en particular. El presente artículo pretende evidenciar las problematizaciones en torno a los abordajes metodológicos tradicionales y presentar delineamentos teórico-metodológicos de investigación contrastiva, concebida aquí por la lente de tres categorías nucleares – la totalidad, la contradicción y la medición –, tomando como punto de vista epistemológico la perspectiva materialista y dialéctica. En busca del propósito mencionado, se realizó un estudio de las categorías teóricas en cuestión, así como un análisis de los lineamientos metodológicos, con miras a la proposición que singulariza los estudios de carácter contrastivo. Como indican los fundamentos de este texto, el diálogo con el lector es fundamental para el *corpus* del estudio.

Palabras clave: Metodología científica. Investigación contrastiva. Dialéctica. Materialismo histórico-dialético.

### Introduction

The search for references on the contrastive approach in social research studies, particularly in education, led to the discovery of a certain conceptual dispersion about its meaning, its foundation and its praxis. This instigated us to do further reading and develop a basic text capable of synthesizing its understanding and uses. The proposal for a synthesis is directly related to the principles of historical-dialectical materialism, the theoretical axis that anchors the perspective of this study.

The permanent challenge of producing and socializing knowledge in the ambience of the education macro-field is a reality to which we are all

called. However, the foundations, trails and paths of research and debate are different and involve distinct realities and argumentative possibilities. In times of great (in)certainties and the expansion of the world's frontiers, there is a need for science to take a fresh look. In this sense, multiple studies aim to analyze social phenomena, problematize issues and indicate new benchmarks for scientific research.

In the set of investigative approaches in contemporary times, contrast is a structuring category and a methodological composition. It should be emphasized that, in this text, as conceptual overviews of contrastive research and analysis are captured, new readings of the theoretical the construct in question become possible.

This article starts with the overarching idea of contrast, which in some way permeates all areas of knowledge, then presents its theoretical foundations and, finally, lays out a path that points to possibilities for appreciating reality based on the idea of contrast. The issues discussed here are related to the theoretical contribution of historical-dialectical materialism, the paradigmatic axis that underpins the analysis of human action and, therefore, of educational phenomena, with an emphasis on dialectics.

## First captures: the contrast

Given the polysemic nature of the word "contrast", its understanding starts from different points. The term "contrast" is an entry in the Portuguese language used in various writing and language contexts. Its meaning is part of the social practice experienced in each context; however, it is possible to build a foundation around the term based on different sciences and perspectives.

In the field of advertising and graphic design, for example, the contrast of colors and lights is used to arouse the viewer's interest in what you want to highlight, since color is a basic element of visual communication and an important aspect of image construction. In the field of health, it is recognized as a chemical substance used in medical imaging procedures, with the aim of facilitating the visualization of normal and/or pathological states of cells, tissues, and organs in patients, providing more effective diagnoses and more precise treatments by Western medicine. In both examples, by highlighting the

parts that make up a whole without detaching it from its context, contrast leads to a broader understanding of that whole.

In the humanities and social sciences, the idea of contrast has ambivalences that bring it closer to the meaning of dialectics, allowing for connotations and denotations coming from its dynamics of thought. This understanding highlights what is essential in each reality identified: the simultaneous relationship of opposition and complementarity, which reveals the similarities and singularities of phenomena, transposes appearance and leads to an approximation to the essence. In this respect, we deduce that:

The world of pseudo-concreteness is a chiaroscuro of truth and deception. Its own element has a double sense. The phenomenon indicates the essence and, at the same time, hides it. The essence manifests itself in the phenomenon, but only inadequately, partially, or only from certain angles and aspects (Kosik, 1969, p. 11).

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The excerpt above makes it clear that the composition of meanings based on the phenomenon as a single, cohesive reference is ambiguous and prone to misunderstandings. In contrast, the composition of meanings based on dialectics leads to the idea of movement, contrary to the fixed generalities of the empiricist methods of the natural and mathematical sciences, which, when transposed to the social sciences, attributes to the phenomenon an existence.

The referenced pseudo-concreteness (Kosik, 1969), which supposedly leads to an idea of accuracy, was claimed by the social sciences at their birth to give legitimacy to the refutation of the inevitable relationship between researcher and object as inseparable parts of the same subject: society. Thus, in order to give the social sciences their character of objectivity, the attempt of reality reification superimposed its purpose of knowing a higher level than the understanding of life itself, given that the multiplicity of manifest forms is a hallmark of human existence.

It is the role of science to question the ontological and epistemological truths that have consolidated the processes of building knowledge, since reality cannot be contained in static truths, as human being is constantly becoming. It is necessary to unveil its internal content in relation to its determinants and respective constituent categories, in order to achieve ontological knowledge of human being in its immanent temporary situation.

From this perspective, arises the need to build possibilities that consider the concrete real, which only exists in relation to the dimensions that constitute it and with which it relates. It is from this point that contrastive research emerges as an alternative approach to what has been posed.

However, it is necessary to resolve the persistent difficulty of distinguishing, contrasting, and comparing. Although the words “contrast” and “comparison” can be taken as synonyms in certain contexts, the aim of this article is to affirm contrast as a type of research that goes beyond the limits set by comparison. However, the need to affirm and consolidate the uniqueness of contrastive research does not exclude the recognition of the importance of comparative research for the development of the social sciences and for education.

In view of the particularities of the social sciences, these studies point to comparison in multiple ways, under different names: comparative research, comparative method, comparative analysis, comparative approach, comparative history, comparative education etc.

The precursors of the social sciences, each in their own time and with their own vision, found in comparison a path to objectivity and scientific rigor. According to the authors,

The use of comparison, as a perspective for social analysis the, has a series of implications situated at the epistemological level, referring to a debate about the very foundations of knowledge construction in the social sciences (Schneider; Schmitt, 1998, p. 1).

As a result, we search on the classics of the social sciences the foundations which constitute the basis for comparison applied to social research, encompassing the other fields of the human sciences. In this way, it seems pertinent to revisit some of the central points of this historical process, starting with Comte’s positivist approach, in order to make more evident the determinations that underpin the argument around the defense of contrastive research.

Comte’s positivism was inspired by physics, as the author believed that society should be studied according to the methodological rigors applied to the natural sciences, based on observation, comparison, and experimentation (Giddens, 2012; Quintaneiro, 2002). From this perspective, Comte

argued that sociology, initially called social physics, should discover its general and invariable laws, just as physics did in relation to the natural world, by comparing, in time and space, different historical eras or different human groupings (Schneider; Schmitt, 1998).

However, it was Durkheim who further developed comparative research in the social sciences, defining that the comparative method is the only one that suits sociology, so that causal relationships can be extracted to enable the researcher to establish generalizations about the study of society through social facts (Durkheim, 2004). In this sense, comparing two social facts allowed the sociologist to determine what was essential to investigate based on the regularities between them, establishing the causes, effects and consequences (Durkheim, 2004; Schneider; Schmitt, 1998).

Weber, for his part, denied the view of society as a system that can be understood in its entirety. It should be noted that the *Essays in Sociology*, which bring together Weber's constructs, conclude in their introduction that his writings on method reject objective meanings (Gerth; Mills, 1982). Thus, they infer that understanding and interpreting the meaning of individuals' actions can only be explained through the agent's subjective intentions. It would be through understanding the smallest particle of society, the individual, that the meaning of social action would be extracted, considered by Weber to be the object of study of sociology.

On the other hand, for this "capture" to occur, ideal individual types are created, which make it possible to adapt meanings, in an attempt to define "pure" conceptual models, in order to extract approximations to different realities through comparison (Weber, 2022). By focusing on the diffuse meanings that individuals attribute to action, as well as the multiplicity of its forms, Weber recognizes that the complexity of social life would prevent any generalizations, which is why he said it was necessary to subordinate reality to the concept, in order to compare what is qualitatively the same.

The premise has been repeated that the science of sociology tries to formulate typological concepts and general rules of empirical processes. In this way, it stands in contrast to history, which strives for the analysis and causal explanation of the culturally significant actions of individuals, institutions and certain personalities. The data that underpins sociology's conceptualizations consists essentially, although not exclusively, of the same relevant processes of

action that historians work with. Its concepts and generalizations are based on the premise that sociology claims to make a contribution to the causal explanation of certain historical and culturally important phenomena. As is true of any other generalizing science, the abstract nature of sociological concepts is responsible for their relative lack of concrete content when compared to real historical reality. But what sociology offers, on the contrary, is an increase in the precision of concepts (Weber, 2002, p 33).

In this sense, the comparison between concrete realities and ideal individual types stripped the former of their differentiating, contradictory and diffuse elements, in order to ensure commonalities and establish scientific clairvoyance.

In order to differentiate the comparative method from contrastive research, it is necessary to point out that the former seeks to establish links that make common and invariable explanations possible. This occurs when these links are inspired by the natural sciences, thus detaching the object from its context, attributing to it the character of a "thing" and, consequently, discarding the multiple connections it establishes with its context, and when they analyze it through ideal types, which have never existed (and, perhaps, never will exist), to the detriment of the contradictory aspects that particularize it.

Contrastive research, on the other hand, seeks to give visibility to the parts of reality, including their contradictions and admitting them as belonging and pertinent to the unity. This refutes the objectification of reality and admits its permanent becoming, its manifest pluralities and contextual interactions as historical and socially produced movements. It is possible to recognize this idea of contrastive research in the following considerations:

[...] the material formations of the world simply exist and nothing more. They are in continuous interaction. In this process of interaction, their properties are manifested, which characterize them as isolated, determined bodies, phenomena that, in certain circumstances, pass through each other. The result of this is that all the phenomena of reality are in a state of universal correlation and interdependence. But, in this case, the concepts, through which man reflects the reality of the environment in his consciousness must be equally interdependent, linked to each other, mobile and, in certain circumstances, pass through each other and become their opposites, because it is only in this way that they can reflect the real situation of things (Cheptulin, 1982, p. 19).

This complex relationship between the parts and the whole and between the whole and the parts, as well as the break with the binary thinking that things are “this” or “that” to admit their coexistence with their opposite – in other words, that in antagonistic and complementary simultaneities – requires a way of thinking that considers totality as its point of departure and arrival. From the perspective of dialectics, we seek an understanding of contradiction, which gives continuous movement to objective reality through historical transformations, with their antagonisms and syntheses.

## Theoretical categories captured along the way

8 In historical-dialectical materialism, taken as a lens that captures social relations, reality is conceived as a unit, in relation to which the parts are compositions that have particular contours, but interdependent, in a continuous interaction, conferring a dynamic character to this reality. This dynamism comes from the contradictions present within all reality, which, in permanent dispute, result in imbalance, shock, and the continuous search to overcome them. Otherwise, “[...] the mind would tend to eradicate all sensations, creating a climate of death and absence of being” (Dondis, 2015, p. 108).

It is therefore essential to understand reality and the complex, multiple and transitory nature of matter and the materiality of life, without which any inference would be a fictional narrative. Matter comprises objective reality, while human consciousness, conditioned by its historical time, acts as a mediator of reality. In other words, there is no relativity to material existence and life is produced and reproduced in the interactions of the human being as materiality and *with* this materiality.

Understanding materialism as opposed to idealism is fundamental to understanding historical-dialectical materialism as a methodological structure that anchors and gives meaning to contrastive research. It is worth pointing out that, “[...] from a philosophical point of view, the opposition and incompatibility of materialism and idealism are absolute” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 58). In other words, two essential philosophical currents are in constant conflict: one presupposes matter as the primary factor and the other its exact opposite, i.e., the idea.



My investigations led me to the following result: legal relations, as well as the forms of the state, cannot be explained by themselves, nor by the so-called general evolution of the human spirit; on the contrary, these relations have their roots in the material conditions of existence, in their totality, conditions which Hegel, like the Englishmen and Frenchmen of the 18th century, understood under the name of "civil society". I also came to the conclusion that the anatomy of bourgeois society must be sought in Political Economy. [...] The general result I arrived at and which, once obtained, served as a guide for my studies, can be summarized as follows: in the social production of their own existence, men enter into certain, necessary relations, independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a certain degree of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis on which a legal and political superstructure rises and to which certain social forms of consciousness correspond. The production mode of material life conditions the process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being; on the contrary, it is their social being that determines their consciousness (Marx, 2008, p. 47).

Materialism starts from the understanding that matter precedes the idea, and, therefore, it advocates that consciousness arises from the interactions of men and women with nature and of both with each other, in other words, from the material relations that enable the continuous (re)production of their existence. But that is not all. Consciousness is material and historical because these interactions are situated in time and space and are, therefore, subject to the possibilities and impossibilities of their time.

Finally, consciousness is material, historical and dialectical because its flow is one of continuous and dynamic movement. The coherence between the contrastive perspective and historical-dialectical materialism is based on the necessary understanding that there is an objective reality outside of consciousness. Matter is the first principle and consciousness is the secondary, derived aspect. In this way, consciousness is a property of matter, the most organized that exists, and its function is to reflect objective reality (Triviños, 1987). This is a contradiction to idealist thinking, for which,

[...] although external reality exists in and by itself, we can only know it as our ideas formulate and organize it and not as it would

be in itself. We can neither know nor say whether external reality is rational in itself, because we can only know and say that it is rational for us, that is, through our ideas. This philosophical position is known as idealism and only affirms the existence of subjective reason. Subjective reason has principles and modes of knowledge that are universal and necessary, i.e. valid for all human beings in all times and places. What we call reality, therefore, is only what we can know through the ideas of our reason (Chauí, 2000, p. 84).

In other words, the idea precedes matter, because one can only attribute the status of existence to what thought recognizes. It follows that the philosophical problematizations about reality and reason, materiality and idea are fundamental to the dialectical conception, which Marx seized from Hegel as a reference for creating dialectical materialism.

The notion of dialectics emerges from ancient Greek philosophy, initially as the art of dialog (Clément, Demonque, Hansen-Love, Kahn, 1999), and then, starting with Heraclitus, it points to the fruitful interaction between opposing elements, producing the idea of the mutability of the world through the confrontation with contradiction, which inhabits everything that exists. The perception of these games of opposites, which weave webs and syntheses that are both singular and plural, results in the admission of the multidimensional, mutable and transitory nature of the world.

From Hegel onwards, the concept takes on a radically new meaning, in which thought acquires “[...] a ternary rhythm: affirmation (or thesis), negation (or antithesis), negation of the negation (or synthesis)” (Clément, Demonque, Hansen-Love, Kahn, 1999, p. 98). In this sense, dialectics is a concept that creates an idea of process around the movement of contradiction, establishing an internal link from which movement and transformation derive in the sphere of spirit thought and concrete history. Hegel understood dialectics from an idealist perspective, whereby the contradictions that animate human history would come from spirit and ideas.

This understanding is open to criticism insofar as it mystifies this trajectory of succession of states, rooted in idealist thinking, by giving spirit the character of beginning and end. In other words, by superimposing the idea (spirit) on the materiality of the world, the concrete relationships between nature and human beings (reciprocally), and among human beings, which are

established in different ways and by different means as the triggering elements that create the movement of history around the movement of contradiction.

In this way, Hegel's historical, but idealist, dialectics is contradicted by the historical and materialist dialectics of Marx and Engels, which bases Marxian thought. By appropriating the concept of Hegelian dialectics, Marx and Engels (2001) make a significant inversion, which inaugurates a new epistemological field, by affirming that the driving force of history are the contradictions unleashed by the materiality of the world and human social life. In the afterword to the second edition of *Capital*, Marx clarifies the assumptions that explain the exact point at which he inverts the idealist Hegelian dialectics and converts it into a materialist dialectics.

My dialectical method, in its fundamentals, is not only different from the Hegelian method, but its exact opposite. For Hegel, the thought process, which he even transforms into an autonomous individual under the name of Idea, is the demiurge of the actual process, which is only the external manifestation of the former. For me, on the other hand, the ideal is nothing more than the material, transposed and translated into man's head. [...] The mystification of dialectics in Hegel's hands does not in any way prevent him from being the first to expose its general forms of movement comprehensively and consciously. In him, it is upside down. It needs to be turned upside down in order to discover the rational core within the mystical shell. In its mystified form, dialectics was fashionable in Germany because it seemed to glorify the existing. In its rational configuration, it constitutes a scandal and a horror for the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokespeople, since, in the positive intellection of the existing, it includes, at the same time, the intellection of its negation, of its necessary perishing. Moreover, it captures every form developed in the flow of movement, therefore including its transitory side; because it is not intimidated by anything and is, by essence, critical and revolutionary (Marx, 2013, p. 78-79).

To understand the idea of contrast and the discussion on contrastive research, it is necessary to delve deeper into the study of Marxian dialectics and its categories and laws. For Marx, categories go beyond the practice of defining ideal concepts to become forms of being that exist and interact with concrete reality, as well as showing its wealth of determinations. Thus, through the category of mediation, by elevating reality to the level of abstraction, we overcome the immediate knowledge given by simple contemplation of the

phenomenon. It is in this critical and creative interplay between the singularity and totality of concrete reality that the construction of knowledge of reality becomes possible (Cheptulin, 1982; Kosik, 1969).

What characterizes the study of concepts in general is, of course, also related to the study of categories – the concepts that reflect the universal forms of being, the universal aspects and links of objective reality. Unveiling the richness of dialectical laws is only possible if we analyze the categories that reflect them in their correlation and interdependence, if we make a system in which each of them occupies a rigorously defined place and in which it has the necessary relationship with all the others (Cheptulin, 1982, p. 19-20).

All this processualism, which gives reality its dynamic-continuous character, is explained by Engels in *Dialectics of Nature*, a work in which he systematizes the laws established by Hegel to govern dialectical thinking. Engels emphasizes the materiality of the laws of dialectics, since they do not produce reality on the level of the idea, but originate from the concrete real, reflected by thought. In particular, there are three laws of materialist dialectics: 1) the law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa; 2) the law of the interpenetration of opposites; and 3) the law of the negation of negation (Engels, 1979).

This whole explanatory framework leads to the notion of contrast, insofar as reality, in its phenomenal form, does not reveal itself as if it were the real thing, but rather as a figure that can present itself as something it is not, or even, in another perspective, present itself in a different way.

The phenomenon is a set of external aspects, of properties, and is a form of manifestation of the essence. [...] Although it is a form of expression of the essence, the phenomenon does not coincide with it, but differs from it and even deforms it. The deformation is produced by the fact that the essence of the object manifests itself through the interaction of the object with other objects, which surround it, have an influence on the phenomenon, introduce certain modifications into its content and, precisely because of this, enrich it. As a result, the phenomenon appears as the synthesis of what comes from the essence, what is conditioned by it, and what is introduced from outside, what is conditioned by the action of the reality that surrounds the object, that is, the other objects that are connected to it (Cheptulin, 1982, p. 278).

In this sense, the phenomenon is variable according to the context and contrasting means highlighting the constituent parts of the whole in interaction, in movement, considering that its internal aspects are invariably related to external aspects, which (re)produce a peculiar appearance and can lead to error, to a false understanding of the essence. Appearance/phenomenon and essence are opposites, but understanding the essence cannot do without capturing the contingent factors that shape the appearance of the phenomenon. Because from the contingent emerge the clues that lead to the apprehension of the essence, which is concretized in the partial totalities, although it is not the result of the sum of the parts, because each part contains some of the characteristics present in the universal. The contrast would then act by highlighting the phenomenon in the light of the theory, which would enable it to be interpreted.

Contrastive research, based on this logic, emphasizes the different object points of view, considering its historical movement and progress. In this way, it broadens its scope, making it more concrete and real, without privileging one aspect over another, since everything that makes up reality is relevant. Harmony is found in exactly the opposite: they agree with each other, because they complement each other, and there is no exclusion or dichotomous opposition, as Marx announced. Essence overcomes appearance. Marx and Engels state that:

[...] the real production of life appears at the origin of history, while what is properly historical appears as separate from ordinary life, as extra-terrestrial and supra-terrestrial. The relations between men and nature are therefore excluded in history, which engenders the opposition between nature and history (Marx; Engels, 2001, p. 47).

It is also important to consider all the categories and laws of dialectics, especially the law of the unity and struggle of opposites. This relationship of opposition, inherent in the material existence of life, guides the passage from one state to another. Thus, life and death, the past and the future, illness and healing are opposites that are not mutually exclusive. They interact, complement each other and give rise to the new, which is not another in itself, but a synthesis. In this sense, we can include the need to distinguish contradictions – interior and exterior, essential, and non-essential, fundamental and

non-fundamental, principal and accessory (Cheptulin, 1982) – as forms of abstraction from reality.

In this context, to abstract is not to make incomprehensible, a connotation commonly given to abstraction, but the opposite: it is elevating reality to thought, making it capable of understanding it in its contradictions, of detaching it from the background without losing its historical concreteness. Background and scene are continually in contrast.

From this theoretical framework, contrastive research emerges and concludes itself, temporarily, in social practice. This allusion to an ephemeral temporality results from the awareness of the continuous flow of history, material relations and thought, which excludes the idea of static and absolute truths, which stigmatizes science.

## Routes for contrastive research

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Contrastive research aims to be a type of qualitative research, based on the assumption that quality and quantity are inseparable as attributes that affect reality simultaneously. It is sustained by the historical-dialectical materialist approach, which seeks to interpret the object of analysis in a critical and historical way, based on its contradictions and its social, political, and economic interrelationships.

By overcoming the assumptions of comparative research, contrastive research can draw on different research epistemologies that make use of the notion of contrast. However, we call for its use to be linked to the categories of *totality*, contradiction, and mediation, all within the framework of the dialectical perspective as the central logic for approaching the problems of knowledge, history, and reality itself.

By articulating these three core categories – totality, contradiction, and mediation – Marx discovered the methodological perspective that enabled him to erect his theoretical building. By offering us an exhaustive study of “bourgeois production”, he left us the necessary, indispensable basis for social theory (Paulo Netto, 2011, p. 58).

Understanding contrast from the perspective of dialectics refers to the articulation between three core categories, which make up the methodological

triad elaborated by Marx to understand objective reality, as the author explains (Paulo Netto, 2011). The category *totality* refers to a complex of multiple totalities that are specific and interdependent on each other, which make up the concrete and macroscopic totality. It is important to emphasize that the concrete and macroscopic totality does not result from the juxtaposition or sum of other totalities, but precisely from the relationship that is established between them, which requires the identification and analysis of each of these complexes as singularities that are constituted in the relationship between the parts. This is a fundamental aspect for understanding and developing contrastive research, as it demarcates non-negotiable boundaries with other methodological approaches, from the point of view of conceiving the *modus operandi* that leads to understanding reality. Thus,

[...] for Marx, the method is not a set of formal rules that are “applied” to an object that has been cut out for a specific investigation, nor, even less, a set of rules that the researcher chooses, according to his will, to “frame” his object of investigation. [...] The method therefore implies, for Marx, a certain position (perspective) of the researcher: the one in which the researcher places himself in order to, in his relationship with the object, extract from it its multiple determinations (Paulo Netto, 2011, p. 52).

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For contrastive research, from the perspective of historical-dialectical materialism, the method is wrapped up in the aim of getting as close as possible to the concrete totality, which implies understanding that reality is complex and made up of other complexes. Therefore, there is no way (or formula) of knowing it through simplification, as positivism had intended, starting from the simplest things and Cartesian clairvoyance (Descartes, 2001). It is necessary to recognize that all reality is part of a whole, the totality. From this, it is necessary to clarify that totality is understood as:

[...] concrete totality, that is, as a structured whole in the process of development and self-creation [...]. Totality means: reality as a structured, dialectical, whole, in which or from which any fact (classes of facts, sets of facts) can be rationally understood. Accumulating all the facts does not yet mean knowing reality; and all the facts (taken together) do not yet constitute totality. Facts are knowledge of reality if they are understood as facts of a dialectical whole – in other words, if they are not immutable, indivisible, and

indemonstrable atoms, from which reality is constituted – if they are understood as structural parts of the whole. The concrete, the totality, is therefore not all the facts, the set of facts, the grouping of all aspects, things, and relationships, since this grouping still lacks the essential: totality and concreteness. Without understanding that reality is concrete totality – which becomes a meaningful structure for each fact or set of facts – knowledge of concrete reality is nothing more than mysticism, or the unknowable thing itself (Kosik, 1969, p. 36).

Therefore, the whole cannot be known through its separate parts, since the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In this sense, it refers to the totality from which no fact or object can be apprehended in isolation, outside of its context and interactional relationships.

Knowing that these complexes of totalities are articulated, the approach of the category of *contradiction* as a producer of the dynamism, movement and continuous transformation of each totality is carried out, although it is evident that “[...] the nature of these contradictions, their rhythms, the conditions of their limits, controls and solutions depend on the structure of each totality [...]” (Paulo Netto, 2011, p. 57). The aim of this research is to identify and highlight them. In the same direction, it should be noted that,

By analyzing contradiction, Hegel shows that it is general, that it enters the content of everything, of every being. “Everything that exists,” writes Hegel, “is something concrete and therefore something different and opposed in itself. The finite character of things, Hegel continues, consists in the fact that their immediate being does not correspond to their essence!”, therefore, they are always striving to resolve this contradiction and realize what they have in themselves and, as a result, they are constantly changing. The modification of things is therefore the consequence of their contradictory nature. In other words, contradiction is the source of movement and vitality; “[...] it is only to the extent that something contains a contradiction that it moves; that it has an impulse, an activity!”. Opposing the authors who considered that we could not think in contradiction, Hegel exclaimed: “It is contradiction that actually sets the world in motion, so it is ridiculous to say that it is impossible to think contradiction!” (Cheptulin, 1982, p. 28).



Contradiction, in this sense, is not just negation, but a condition of existence for everything that exists. In other words, it is part of the organic formation of things, which makes it part of the thing itself. In this organic relationship, thesis and antithesis make up the unity of opposites.

And finally, the category of *mediation* is fundamental to the investigative process since, through its internal and external systems, it articulates the aforementioned totalities. Without capturing and understanding the mediating relationships, taken in their diversity, the totality would become undifferentiated, that is, it would lose its concrete character (Paulo Netto, 2011, p. 57).

The progress from abstraction to concreteness is therefore, in general, movement from the part to the whole and from the whole to the part; from the phenomenon to the essence and from the essence to the phenomenon; from the totality to the contradiction and from the contradiction to the totality of the object to the individual and from the individual to the object. The process from the abstract to the concrete, as a materialist method of knowing reality, is the dialectics of the concrete totality, in which reality is ideally reproduced in all its planes and dimensions. The process of thought is not limited to transforming the chaotic whole of representations into the transparent whole of concepts; in the course of the process the whole itself is concomitantly delineated, determined and understood (Kosik, 1969. p. 30).

According to the same author, therefore, to know and understand the whole, make it clear and explain it, man must make a *détour*: the concrete becomes comprehensible through the mediation of the abstract; and the whole, through the mediation of the part (Kosik, 1969). Mediation is also presented as “[...] a central category of dialectics which, in conjunction with ‘reciprocal action’, makes up, along with ‘totality’ and ‘contradiction’, the basic categorical framework of the dialectical conception of reality and knowledge” (Saviani, 2015, p. 26). Thus,

[...] access to the concrete does not occur without the mediation of the abstract. Thus, what is called formal logic takes on a new meaning and ceases to be logic and becomes a moment of dialectical logic. The construction of thought therefore takes place in the following way: it starts from the empirical, passes through the abstract and arrives at the concrete. In other words: the passage from the empirical to the concrete takes place through the mediation of the

abstract. Unlike the belief that characterizes empiricism, positivism etc. (which confuse the concrete with the empirical), the concrete is not the starting point, but the point of arrival of knowledge. And yet the concrete is also the starting point. How can we understand this? We could say that the concrete starting point is the real concrete and the concrete end point is the concrete thought, i.e., the appropriation by thought of the real-concrete. More precisely: thought starts from the empirical, but this is supported by the concrete real. Thus, the real point of departure, as well as the real point of arrival, is the real concrete. In this way, the empirical and the abstract are moments in the process of knowledge, that is, the process of appropriating the concrete in thought. On the other hand, the process of knowledge, as a whole, is a moment of the concrete process (the real-concrete). Process, because the concrete is not the given (the empirical) but an articulated totality, constructed and under construction. The concrete, when appropriated by man in the form of knowledge, is the expression, in thought, of the laws that govern reality. Dialectical logic is therefore characterized by the construction of categories saturated with concrete. It can therefore be called the logic of content, as opposed to formal logic, which is, as the name suggests, the logic of forms (Saviani, 2015, p. 28).

18 Mediation thus enables the analysis of phenomena, leading to the construction of concepts, abstraction, and simple determinations. Once this theoretical elaboration has taken place, in the opposite direction, mediation favors synthesis, from which theory will be presented to objects, understood as bearers of totalities of determinations.

This reciprocal connection and mediation of the part and the whole means at the same time: isolated facts are abstractions, they are moments artificially separated from the whole, which only when inserted into the corresponding whole acquire truth and concreteness. In the same way, the whole of which the moments have not been differentiated and determined is an abstract and empty whole (Kosik, 1969, p. 41).

To expand the framework for producing knowledge in the social sciences, the counter-hegemonic perspective demands historical reflection and the dynamics of phenomena, in order to capture their totality, set in motion by contradiction, without surrendering to hierarchical reductionisms of human life. It is therefore a qualitative approach because, as explained, qualitative research

seeks to investigate human-social reality through similarity and completeness in diversity, valuing and highlighting what is fundamental and singular, as well as overcoming the purely classificatory and hierarchical aspect of difference, since this is not opposed to quantitative research, since quantity is a property and therefore part of matter (Minayo, 2001).

The difference between qualitative and quantitative is one of nature. While social scientists who work with statistics only grasp the “visible, ecological, morphological and concrete” region of phenomena, the qualitative approach delves into the world of the meanings of human actions and relationships, a side that is not perceptible and cannot be captured in equations, averages, and statistics. Quantitative and qualitative data, however, are not opposed to each other. On the contrary, they complement each other, because the reality they cover interacts dynamically, excluding any dichotomy (Minayo, 2001, p. 22).

Our perspective sees quality and quantity as dimensions of research and as categories that can be amalgamated. Quality is associated with essentiality, quantity with greatness and the particular, the general, given that both are, at the same time, constituted and constituent in this reciprocal interaction. Understanding this dynamic goes beyond the phenomenon itself and gains power from the perspective of contrast through the lens of dialectics.

Thus, in the ambience of historical-dialectical materialism, we base the proposal of contrastive analysis, which seeks to overcome positivist traces, the world of pseudo-concreteness and apparent nature and affirm a qualitative-quantitative approach as a radical, substantive, and essential methodological possibility.

It should be emphasized that the understanding of social phenomena, when combined with dialectical logic, indicates an expanded theoretical-methodological quality, which seeks to avoid “false dualisms”, which depend more on the “[...] logic of the articulations of the ways of approaching problems, the processes of elaborating answers to these problems, the ways of understanding science and the production of knowledge, than on technical choices” (Gamboa, 2003, p. 403). While formal logic, by scrutinizing reality through characterization and classification, ends up distancing reality from itself, dialectical logic, through the category of “mediation”, abstracts reality, its multi-determinations and its interactional links, in order to return to the concrete

real embodied in its totality – the synthesis of dialectical movement in its temporariness, historically situated.

Thus, the most elementary and banal phenomena of everyday life in capitalist society “[...] prove to be a superficial appearance, determined and mediated by profound and essential processes of capitalist society” (Kosik, 1969, p. 54).

Overcoming the analysis of statistical regularities or fixed and dogmatic events opens new ways of approaching phenomena and subverts superficial scientific consensus to embrace objectivities and subjectivities with dynamic criteria of scientificity that make up unity. Unity, as a concrete and cohesive totality, is not the one, it is not an isolated manifestation, but is made up of multiplicity, which is only singularity in this interactional relationship.

The contrastive research in question, based on the historical-dialectical materialist paradigm, is therefore anchored in the categories of *totality*, *contradiction*, and *mediation*, establishing, at the same time, a way of apprehending reality and a conception of reality.

By following this path, the researcher is invited to go beyond the phenomenon itself and break away from mysticism, which cover up reality in the designation of the spirit, in order to understand it from the material relations of human beings with nature and each other. With this, reality is shown to be a synchronic historical determination (which reveals the current moment) and a diachronic one (which reveals its origin and the process that generates the current moment and, at the same time, makes it possible to better understand its predecessor). But these revealing and unveiling are not acts given by the phenomenon in its immediacy, but rather compositions of the real constructed through the abstraction of this real and the mediations that connect its multi-determinations.

Basically, what differentiates the object of the natural sciences from the object of the social and human sciences is the complexity inherent in the latter. Reality is a complex totality that can only be grasped through the mediation of its equally complex determinants, which are interconnected and make up specific and unparalleled scenarios and contexts. Reality is not a whole made up of gears that fit together.

Understanding totality in its complexity implies admitting that this complexity is triggered by contradiction. It is this interplay of antagonisms and

paradoxes that deprives existence of the causal simplicity that this follows from that. This permanent game between thesis and antithesis, composing syntheses that, in principle, already contain their antitheses, is the very game of history. And if the players change, if the fields/boards/scenarios change, then the conditions of the game also change.

The nature of these contradictions, their rhythms, the conditions of their limits, controls and solutions depend on the structure of each totality – and, again, there are no aprioristic formulas/forms to determine them: it is also up to research to discover them (Paulo Netto, 2011, p. 57).

It is like a kaleidoscope: each movement requires a specific critical lens to interpret the new composition. Analysis from a contrastive perspective advocates a conception of reality that presupposes that the real/phenomenon is in permanent composition, construction, and transformation. The synthesis obtained from the saturation of the analysis of the links between reality and its multi-determinations, through abstraction, returns to concrete reality not as absolute truth but as historically situated knowledge.

## Final considerations

Given the theoretical and methodological foundations of contrastive research through the lens of dialectics, presented throughout the text, it is important to reaffirm its dialogical nature and its essential contribution to scientific research in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in education. As a field of political and ideological disputes, education requires a commitment to a perspective of emancipatory science, committed to overcoming social inequalities.

Contrastive research is therefore a means of capturing reality without stripping it of its objectivity and singularity, which constitute it and make up its own totality. The aim of contrastive research is to engage in dialog with other research perspectives, in keeping with the ethical commitment of science to never reduce or encapsulate reality.

Through the lens of contrast, this research favors and strengthens the attempt to broaden the conception of scientific research, especially in

education, so that it is understood as an epistemological and methodological perspective, inscribed in materialist and dialectical logic. With this, it provides a vision of complementarity between what is contrasted, replacing ideas of comparison, which tend to have their end in themselves and are insufficient for analyzing the totality of concrete social reality and its historical and dialectical movement. For this reason, it is said that neither social scenarios nor individuals, in their ultimate representations, can be deprived of their complexity and contradictions, nor of the dynamic mutability to which life is fated.

Defined on epistemological and ontological grounds, with an interest in emancipatory education, contrastive research through the lens of dialectics implies the adoption of a societal project committed to social transformation.

This is the challenging stimulus of articulating contrastive research, of a dialectical nature, with themes from the social and educational realities, such as studies on the internationalization of education, youth, and the juvenile condition, as well as on basic education, professional education, higher education, transversal health studies, trade unionism and teaching work, public policies, body cultures, leisure studies, the training of educators, among others.

This text is also an invitation to continue the reflections begun here and a challenge to think collectively about theoretical and methodological paths that deepen the knowledge and praxis of contrastive research.

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