

Marxism in an Activist Key: Educational Implications of an Activist-Transformative Philosophy*

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Abstract

The urgent task in education today is to completely overturn its dominant foundational conception in light of the current deep crisis in the world and the resulting impossibility of continuing with the status quo in adhering to the ethos of adaptation. Drawing on Marxism—while radicalizing it along the lines of an *activist-transformative philosophy*—this chapter pursues this goal by focusing on this educational conception’s centerpiece, the notion of “learner.” I discuss, first, how Marxism needs to be pushed in its core tenets such as its notion of reality (based on my works on *transformative activist stance*), while merging Marxism with the scholarship of resistance by scholars of color and those from the Global South. Second, I outline how the resulting activist-transformative philosophy can be used to posit learners not as passive recipients of knowledge but instead as active contributors to the “world-historical activity” of revolutionizing the world. This dramatic change in perspective is achieved by taking *collective transformative praxis*—in which *every person matters* and which is driven by “what is not yet,” as per radical imagination and critical commitment to a sought-after future—to be the unified ethico-ontoepistemology of human development and learning. This approach implies that people (including as learners) do not, and never can, passively dwell in reality, nor deal with and know reality “as is,” because—most radically, in a conceptual step beyond Marx—*nothing simply “is.”* Instead, we all inevitably participate in and, more critically, contribute to a continuous making of the world via our own being-knowing-doing in a *mutual spiral of co-realizing-the-world-and-ourselves*. Therefore, the critical task for education is to support, promote, advance, scaffold, and furnish spaces and ways for learners to expand their abilities of joining in with politically nonneutral transformative struggles (collective projects) currently underway, including as these implicate projects of our own becoming. In expanding on Marx’s key message, *the goal of learning and education is not to interpret the world but to change it.*

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30.1.

Introduction

One of the urgent tasks in education today is to critically and radically challenge and change—in fact, to completely overturn—the dominant foundational conception of education in light of deep sociopolitical, economic, and environmental crises currently underway in “our world on fire” (Moraga, 1983). This situation requires novel and daring modes of thinking and acting, including in theorizing education, all while moving beyond the unsustainable status quo, which is in fact killing us—that is, killing both people and the planet itself, as is becoming increasingly clear (see e.g., Case & Deaton, 2021).

This foundational conception of education in need of a radical overturn consists of many interrelated aspects and layers such as a theory of the self/subjectivity and agency, mind and knowledge, teaching and learning, society and culture, and of history, ethics, and morality. In this chapter, I focus on the topic of agency as applied to the notion of “learner,” which is the centerpiece of the whole education system. Indeed, the notion of a learner relates to education systems and practices like their microcosm, absorbing and refracting all other assumptions about education. This is similar, to use Vygotsky’s metaphor, to how “the word is a microcosm of consciousness, related to consciousness like a living cell is related to an organism, like an atom is related to the cosmos” (1987, p. 285). The currently dominant notion of a learner is not the only culprit creating problems in education, which is currently in a state of crisis and disintegration, just like capitalism itself. Yet its role should not be underestimated. Being tacitly imposed (often via brutal top-down reforms) on education communities, both teachers and students, this notion is a powerful tool of neoliberal capitalist regimes with their ideologies of acquiescence with, and adaptation to, the status quo and its imposed normativity of reproducing “what is.”

The dominant conception of education, overall, prioritizes a top-down, unidirectional transmission of knowledge to learners who are supposed to absorb and process this knowledge, each as a solitary “achiever” in individualized pursuits of academic success and other personal gains. Relatedly, learners are posited to be *passive recipients* of education, rendered essentially powerless, agentless and voiceless, as they are literally *subjected* to what is *happening to them* in classrooms and beyond. Learners have practically no say in the process of education as they, essentially, *do not matter*—being “given” knowledge, information, and so on. Accordingly, their minds and identities are seen as in need of being molded through education, especially with the goal to fit in with the world as “it is.” Moreover, this is done with a clear agenda of

assimilating (aka “socializing”) learners into pre-established social structures—all supposed to be stable and indomitable, destined to continue in line with long-standing rules and norms guiding them, in no need of radical changes. Importantly, this dominant conception is inherently political and de facto oppressive since it operates as an instrument of producing the workforce for a supposedly immutable capitalist society, ignoring all of its flaws of exploitation, inequality, subordination, top-down control, individualism, cut-throat competition, alienation, and rigid hierarchies, including along the axes of class, race, and dis/ability.

My argument in this chapter is that Marxism—on a condition that it itself is radicalized and pushed to critical conclusions as an activist-transformative philosophy (as proposed in this chapter)—is a vital conceptual resource that is indispensable for challenging and changing the very core of how we theorize education, including the concept of a learner. An important dimension of radicalizing Marxism, I suggest, is coupling it with other theories of resistance, especially those developed by scholars of color and those from the Global South. I discuss, first, how Marxism offers a number of useful conceptual tools yet also can be pushed forward in some of its core tenets such as ontology and epistemology, including its notion of reality (based on my works on *transformative activist stance*, or TAS, see e.g., Stetsenko, 2017a). Second, I outline how a concept of learner can be reconceived from a radicalized Marxist perspective, with critical implications for other aspects of education (although not all are addressed due to space limitations). In particular, I suggest that in place of seeing learners as passive and agentless, Marxism lays grounds for positing them as active contributors to the “world-historical activity” (Marx & Engels, 1845–1846/1978, p. 163), or struggle, of making and remaking the world, which is in the process of ceaseless historical transformations. That is, I argue for seeing learners as *agentive actors (or active agents) of a continual world-and-history-making*.

Overall, I demonstrate how, in radicalizing Marxism, a solid philosophical foundation can be elaborated for a dramatic change in perspectives on education that overturns its currently dominant core. This change is premised on the notion of *collective transformative praxis* in which *every person matters* and which is driven by “what is not yet,” as per radical imagination and critical commitment to creating a better future. The radical implication of this position is that people (as learners, too!) do not, and never can, passively dwell in reality, nor deal with and know reality “as is,” because—most radically, in a conceptual step beyond Marx—*nothing simply “is.”* Instead (as I elaborate based on TAS), we inevitably participate in and, more critically, contribute to the continuous making of the world via our own being-knowing-doing in a *mutual spiral of co-realizing-the-world-and-ourselves*.

Therefore, for education, it is critical for learners not so much to grasp how things are in the “here and now,” since—to put it plainly and straightforwardly—this is an impossible and futile task. Rather, the critical task for education is to support, promote, advance, scaffold, and furnish spaces and ways for learners to expand their

abilities (which are in place from the get-go) of joining in with transformative struggles (or collective projects) currently underway, always already taking place in the world, including—importantly!—as these implicate projects of our own becoming. That is, the task of education is to facilitate learners' joining with, and finding their own unique place and role within, *ongoing struggles of synchronically co-realizing the-world-and-ourselves*.

One important caveat is that Marxism is not a rigid canon. Instead, it offers useful conceptual tools albeit as they themselves need further developments and upgrades, exactly in the spirit of this philosophy itself—which is all about historicity and continuous transformations without bounds. What I present in this chapter is my critical take (necessarily selective and partial) on Marxism, with some modifications, changes of focus, and expansions—conducted as a dialogue with Marxism in its various incarnations. This method (see Stetsenko, 2015, 2016, 2020a, 2022) aims to avoid the pitfalls of following historical legacies by the “letter,” thus risking an “antiquarian killing” of authors such as Marx (Bloch, 1986, p. 1361).

In this vein (centrally for this chapter and my other works on TAS), I foreground the learners' agency—itsself reliant on the novel transformative-activist concept of reality—much more than is typical for most versions of Marxism and Marx's own works. Importantly, I endeavor to coordinate Marxism with other related perspectives such as, especially, in the rich tradition of the intersecting scholarship of resistance by scholars of color and those from the Global South, which shares a great deal in common with Marxism (see Stetsenko, 2023, in press).

I see the task of radically changing the notion of “learner” along the lines of prioritizing agency to be part of larger efforts to shift away from eurocentric and neoliberal models (Stetsenko, 2022, 2023, in press) marked, as they are, with the ethos of adaptation, conformity, and political acquiescence. The alternative I outline aligns with the very gist of Marxism (even if not following it by the letter)—namely, its ethos of “revolutionising the existing world, of practically attacking and changing existing things” (Marx & Engels, 1845–1846/1978, p. 169). This alternative also aligns with perspectives of “trans-modernity” (Dussel, 1995) that move beyond both modernity and postmodernity, instead constructing an alternative invigorated by the *ethos of resistance*. This ethos elevates the voices of “the oppressed other,” as highlighted by Paulo Freire, Frantz Fanon, Enrique Dussel, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others.

30.2.

Problematizing and Radicalizing the Notion of Reality in Marxism

Marxism, typically, is associated with the economic theory of capitalism and the materialist theory of history, summarized by Marx in his premise that “the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life” (Marx, 1859, np). However, his economic and historical works, arguably, were subordinate to, or at least tightly intertwined with, his overall *ethical-political* system of thought pertaining to humanity’s struggles, possibilities, and aspirations, as a systematic theory of social reality premised (though only implicitly, in large part) on a future-oriented stance and commitment. This stance, ethical-political and conceptual at once (which is the hallmark of Marxism in need of explication), is about charting prospects for developing a just and humane society without exploitation, hegemony, alienation, and hierarchy. This ethical-political philosophy includes conjectures about human nature and development, directly relevant to education, premised on a broad worldview, ethical principles, and original onto-epistemology. Indeed, Marx can be seen to be “a great *philosopher-economist*” (Dussel, quoted in Burton & Osorio, 2011) and, in my view, quite critically, a great *activist philosopher-economist*.

The central idea developed by Marx, in ethical-political cum philosophical terms, is that the core of “humanness” coincides with, and consists of, the process of people materially and collectively producing conditions and means of their existence. In this process, according to Marx, human beings *create themselves*, contra dominant views (at the times of Marx and still today!) about some reified human nature that is somehow pregiven as a fixed and unchanging “essence.” In this approach, the answers about humanity, including its history and development, can be found in human activity—or social practice of labor (aka *praxis*). This is a process of an active interchange with the world through which people bring into existence (create, produce) both themselves and their world. In Marx’s words, “In creating an objective world by his [*sic*] practical activity, in working-up inorganic nature, human being proves himself a conscious species being” (Marx, 1844/1978a, p. 76). That is (as needs to be emphasized), labor does not stand merely for instrumentally producing materials and goods. Instead, it stands for processes that create all forms and expressions of human existence, individually and collectively—humans together engaging and acting in and on the world through changing conditions and circumstances of their lives.

One possible interpretation of these core Marxist ideas is that human *praxis* constitutes the process in which, out of which, and through which material production co-emerges and co-evolves with all aspects and forms of human subjectivity and interactivity (see Stetsenko, 2005, 2017a). This conjecture implies that *human praxis is what exists*, as the “fabric” of the world/reality itself and that, therefore, the reality/world is not separate from human beings and not “out there” as some neutral, human-less objectivity. My suggestion has been to see that this radical reading of Marx, in moving beyond Marx, breaks the spell of (a) identifying human existence with the principles of adaptation to the world in its *status quo*, in its “givenness” and stability in the present and (b) bracketing off human agency and

subjectivity from reality, as if they were some mysterious, other-worldly phenomena. Note that this interpretation goes against “canonical” and most popular readings of Marx. Indeed, it is commonly assumed that Marx conceived of reality as objectively existing outside of, and separately from, social practice, history, and human subjectivity. Accordingly, traditional interpretations of Marx portray knowledge as reflecting independent, objective reality. Indeed, “in education, orthodox Marxism is known for its commitment to objectivism” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 45).

However, it can be argued that Marx did offer preliminary steps to move beyond understanding the world/reality in such an objectivist (disenchanted) way. This is actually clear already from one of the most famous of Marx’s passages, from *The Theses on Feuerbach*, which is, strangely, overlooked in its core meaning. Namely, as Marx writes, “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism ... is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively” (1845/1978, p. 143, emphasis in original). Note how Marx states, apparently controversially, that it is not conceiving reality *subjectively* that is the main defect of existing philosophies! As suggested in my works (e.g., Stetsenko, 2014, 2017a, 2019a), Marx can be seen to move in the direction (though not without internal contradictions) of superseding the narrow notions of objectivity versus subjectivity, instead suggesting that reality is a *subjective*, sensuous human activity, or practice, while, importantly, *not* implying that reality is thus somehow non-objective (my term *s/objectivity* captures this dialectical merger of subjectivity and objectivity, see Stetsenko, 2014, 2017a, 2023).

Indeed, Marx also explicitly questions the notions of reality “out there,” as some pristine nature, in writing that “the nature that preceded human history ... is nature which today no longer exists anywhere” (Marx & Engels, 1845–1846/1978, p. 171). The whole world as it now exists, writes Marx, “is an unceasing sensuous labor and creation” (ibid.). In this emphasis, nature is understood as a human-made realm, that is, in its dynamic, historically evolving entanglements, and even a fusion, with human practices, rather than as an ahistorical and timeless “given.”

This interpretation, though on the margins of existing Marxist approaches, is consonant with Gramsci’s (1971, p. 446) notion that praxis signifies a “unitary process of reality”—a “dialectical mediation between man and nature.” In this position, nature is exactly not “a beyond” of the practical-historical reality, nor something alien to humanity (cf. Haug, 2001). Recent works by Marxist-feminist scholars also reimagine the social (albeit not reality as a whole) as a historically subjective human practice, connecting such practice to human experience and social relations (e.g., Allman, 2007; Bannerji, 2005). These authors stress that Marx’s emphasis on material relations does not entail economic determinism because these relations are historical and, thus, include mutual determination of subjectivity and material production. This is in affinity with a position explicated within the cultural-historical activity theory (e.g., Stetsenko, 2005) reformulating its premises toward a

more dialectical focus on material practice, social relations (and attendant forms of intersubjectivity), and phenomena of human subjectivity and agency as all co-arising and co-evolving together.

30.3.

Expanding Marx: Understanding Reality as a Lived Struggle

The central ontological and epistemological status of social praxis—taking it to be *what exists*—as well as the profound implications of this position for practically all aspects of theorizing human development and education, needs to be more fully explored and taken to its quite radical conclusions. In works on TAS (e.g., Stetsenko, 2008, 2017a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e, 2023, in press) my effort is to explicate and expand Marx’s philosophical worldview, starting with the core premise that reality is composed of communal praxis that is stretching through history, across generations, de facto uniting all human beings in “an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” (to use Martin Luther King Jr.’s, 1965, expression). In these works, I elaborate the following core points: *the transformative and forward-directed nature of social praxis, taken as the foundational reality both ontologically and epistemologically; the centrality of the world constantly changing and evolving beyond the present as grounding all forms of human being-knowing-doing; social praxis superseding the objectivity-versus-subjectivity dichotomy, instead implying that material reality is imbued with human interactivity and subjectivity, as a unified ethico-ontoepistemology; the nexus of the world-and-self-co-realization as one process; transcending the separation between individual and social dimensions of praxis through the notion that each person matters in the overall world-historical dynamics via unique contributions to it.*

One of the central deliberations in my works, as relates to education, is the need to elevate *human agency* within an expanded Marxist worldview. To do so, human praxis needs to be understood to transcend not only the objectivity–subjectivity and individuality–sociality dichotomies but also the very separation of human beings from the world (e.g., Stetsenko, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2019b, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2023). The alternative is to posit people and the world as being mutually enfolded, or blended and meshed together, in the process of them co-evolving, co-arising, and co-realizing each other.

The core process, in expanding upon Marx’s notion of reality, is that of a *seamless oneness, as duo in uno*—the dynamic flow of ceaseless back-and-forth transactions and exchanges between people and the world in the process of their mutual and synchronous co-realization. The emphasis is neither on the “objective” world that is somehow neutral and purged of human dimensions and presence, nor on any features and characteristics

of individuals taken as separate, autonomous, and self-sufficient “entities.” Instead, the emphasis is on *the dialectical nexus* in which these two poles are brought into one unified and *dynamically changing realm* with its own historicity and a fluid, forever emerging, and permanently fluctuating becoming. It is this dynamic, ongoing, and uninterrupted circuit of continuous transactions between human beings and the world—as one dynamic and unified (albeit not homogenous) processual realm—that is posited in TAS to be at the core of human reality and all forms of human being-knowing-doing including in education. That is, the “external” world, on one hand, and human development in all of its incarnations, on the other, appear as co-arising, co-evolving—and, even more radically, *co-realizing, each other*, since they do not pre-exist each other—all through fluid, bidirectional, conjoint, and continuous enactments in and by transformative practices.

Furthermore, in this activist-transformative (or TAS) approach, the world is understood to be a shifting and continuously evolving terrain of social practices that are constantly reenacted by people acting together in performing their *individually unique and authentically authorial*, or answerable, yet *always also* deeply and profoundly social, deeds. Each person joining in with this collective terrain, right from birth, is the core foundation for human development and personal becoming. That is, reality is reconceived as that which is being constantly transformed and brought forth by *people themselves*—and not as solo individuals acting alone, but as *actors* of social, communal practices. Importantly, as such actors, people are not only fully immersed in collaborative practices but, more critically, co-constituted by *their own active/agentive contributions* to them. In other words, what is brought to the fore is *the nexus* of people changing the world and being changed in this very process. These are but two poles of one and the same, perpetual and recursive, mutual co-realizing and bringing forth of people and the world, in and as the process of a simultaneous *self-and-world/history-co-realization*.

In the next conceptual step, the TAS approach posits human development to be grounded in purposeful and answerable—or, *agentive* and *activist*—contributions to the dynamic and ever-emerging world-in-the-making. These contributions constitute shared communal practices which are, therefore, imbued by visions of, stands on, and commitments to, particular sought-after futures, always ethico-politically non-neutral. People come to be themselves and come to know their world and themselves (and also learn about these) *in the process and as the process* of changing their world (while changing together with it), in the midst of this process and as one of its facets, rather than outside of, or merely in some sort of a connection with, it. In this dialectically recursive and dynamically co-constitutive approach, people can be said to co-realize themselves and the whole fullness of their being-knowing-doing in the agentive enactment of changes that bring forth the world, and simultaneously their own lives, including their selves and minds.

This ethico-ontoepistemologically primary realm (Stetsenko, 2013a, 2013b, 2020e, 2023) can be understood as the “lived world,” but not in the sense of people merely being

situated or dwelling in it as it exists in its *status quo*. Instead, this realm is better designated as a “lived struggle”—an arena of human historical quests and pursuits, enacted as collective projects and efforts at becoming fraught with contradictions and conflicts—infused with values, interests, struggles, power differentials, and intentionality including goals, visions, desires, and commitments to the future. This position aligns with Marx’s passionate statement at the very start of the *Communist Manifesto*:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles... oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978, pp. 473–474)

In this radical formulation, Marx strongly resonates with the scholarship of resistance which, not incidentally, has also prioritized theories stemming from struggles:

US peoples of color have long acted, spoken, intellectualized, lived out what Cherríe Moraga calls a ‘theory in the flesh,’ a theory that allows survival and more, that allows practitioners to live with faith, hope, and moral vision in spite of all else. (Sandoval, 2000, 6.7)

Marx’s emphasis on praxis, too, can be interpreted as prioritizing a “theory in the flesh” that comes out of struggles for justice and liberation and is premised on ethical-political visions and commitments. It is this linkage of theoretical work to the struggles on the ground, with a conviction that things should be different, that unites the resistance scholarship with Marxism. This is reflected in Marx insisting on “identifying our criticism with real struggles ... We develop new principles to the world out of its own principles” (Marx, 1844/1978b, p. 14). In further elaborating this view, my suggestion has been to understand people’s relations to the world as primarily *con/fronting* it in active work and effort at becoming via simultaneously co-realizing-oneself-and-the-world, while coming face-to-face also with ourselves because we simultaneously are co-created in and through such con/frontations.

Notably, at the core of both Marxism and the resistance scholarship is the standpoint of the oppressed—resulting in theories being created from *bottom up*, as a manifesto for the oppressed, exploited, and dispossessed, as tools of their struggles. It is in inspiration by the voices of the oppressed that the struggle for a better world, against all odds—as an incarnation of human praxis, its de facto mode of existence in the present historical context—can be seen to be ethically and onto-epistemologically primary in contrast to what is traditionally taken as an objective/neutral world. In this expansion upon Marx, in alliance with the scholarship of resistance (for more details, see Stetsenko, 2017a, 2023, in press), my suggestion is to understand reality

to be *an arena of human struggle and activist striving*, and therefore, as inherently infused with agency—while not ceasing to be material and practical/productive at the same time.

30.4.

The Radical Ungiverness of the World: Educational Implications

Marxism opens ways to see reality/world as constantly and irreversibly moving, permanently in the process of becoming and changing, where nothing is ever stable nor exempt from radical transformations. This can be understood to suggest that change is more real than any, ostensibly more permanent, and tangible, “things,” any established structures, regimes, and institutions. That is, in radicalizing Marx, reality itself can be posited to be, at bottom and through-and-through, a dynamic, fluid, perpetually on the move, ever-unfolding and changing process that is always in-the-making by people who are also making themselves in this very same process. Importantly, this is an immanent field of forces in perpetual imbalance, creating the present filled with tensions and conflicts, struggles and strivings, and hence tending towards, and even existing in a state of, unfolding crises and radical ruptures. In this TAS perspective, it can be further stated that, because the present/*status quo* cannot be presumed to endure, the forward-looking stance and a commitment to sociopolitical and ethical projects of social transformation—in view of a *sought-after future that people posit for themselves*—is a necessary, immanent dimension of all forms of being-knowing-doing including learning (on implications for education, see e.g., Stetsenko, 2010, 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2019c; Vianna&, 2011, 2014, 2019).

This *activist-transformative* take on reality (as part of TAS), suggested herein in the spirit of Marx, is strongly supported by a sociopolitical/economic rationale. Indeed, as applied to our current historical epoch, the present regime of capitalism is mutating and moving in the direction of disintegration and, therefore, a necessary, unavoidable transition to another social order—to be achieved through social revolution (as already diagnosed by Marx). Indeed, as Marx (Marx & Engels, 1882) stated in the Preface to *The Communist Manifesto*, this core work “had, as its object, the proclamation of the inevitable impending dissolution of modern bourgeois property.” I would add to this that it is this conviction about the impending dissolution of capitalism, as the core determination of reality, that needs to be taken centrally in theorizing human being-knowing-doing including in education. It is the fidelity in the impending collapse of capitalism—and not as an article of blind faith but a firm conviction based in sober (albeit not dispassionate) explorations into capitalism’s contradictions and failings—that grounds the need to commit to sociopolitical projects of working out new forms of society and humane relations, including in education. In the spirit of Marx, this is about the need to work on

providing conditions to transition to a society (a communist one, per Marx) that will realize ethical demands for freedom, social justice, and equality.

This *activist-transformative*, or TAS, approach has many radical implications for education. Most critically, in expanding upon Marx, it uncompromisingly rejects understanding humans—including as learners—to be recipients of outside stimuli and merely *products* of culture and society, who only adapt to the world in its *status quo* (as is typically assumed in mainstream approaches across the board, in philosophy, psychology, education, etc.). Indeed, traditional models of education (and broader, of dominant ways of thinking) are marked by the ethos of adaptation, conformity, and political quietism and acquiescence. In these models, the world is understood to be fixed, stable, and immutable, with people expected to merely adjust to, rather than change, it. Accordingly, research supposedly needs to record, catalogue, and document “what is,” objectively and dispassionately, while excluding political motivations and struggles. Most critically for education, people and their agency are believed to not matter, especially in terms of large-scale structural changes. Thus, the dominant models take the world in its *status quo* for granted and, therefore, expect learners to get to know it “as is”—since it is assumed to be fixed and immutable, extending into the future unchanged, supposedly impervious to changes and unaffected by learners’ agency.

The alternative view that I have been advancing is to understand humans as active co-creators of the world and themselves, who *agentively contribute to co-realizing the-world-in-the-making*. Moreover and critically, the TAS approach suggests that people come into being by developing their agency as an ability to matter, precisely through and as such contributions. Note that this is about simultaneously reformulating both the world (reality) and human being-knowing-doing, together with the very terms of their relationship.

Perhaps most critically, in a significant upgrade of Marxism, the TAS approach suggests that there is no world/reality “out there,” which people can simply dwell in, experience, know, and learn about, somehow objectively and dispassionately—all without personal engagement in terms of caring, struggling, and striving. Instead, the “givenness” of reality is understood to be superseded through the ever-changing dynamics of human praxis made up of transformative acts carried out by people in pursuit of their goals and commitments—all as parts of communal struggles for a better world. In this light, there is no aspect of being-knowing-doing, including in the process of learning, that can be carried out from nowhere, in a vacuum, that is, from ‘the hubris of the zero point’ (Castro-Gómez, 2007) and, I would add, from *the hubris of a zero commitment to a particular future*.

Therefore, in an activist-transformative (TAS) approach, learning is not about getting to know how the world *is*—because nothing simply “is,” that is, nothing is set in stone, out there to be grasped/understood/learned about in its ostensible constancy and putative “givenness.” Nothing exists outside and independently of our agentive con/frontations with, and contributions to, a collective

social praxis incarnated in struggles, such as those for social justice and a better world. This is because we, both together and one at a time, are continuously (with no interruption at any point) and *always-already* transforming “what is” (the world) and, *therefore*, also ourselves into something new and different, in a bi-directional and perpetually evolving spiral of a mutual co-becoming/co-realization.

One element of this view can be illustrated with Pirandello’s (2004/1921) poetic metaphor: “A fact is like a sack which won’t stand up when it is empty. In order that it may stand up, one has to put into it the reason and sentiment which have caused it to exist.” This is a great way to express the notion that all knowledge (“facts,” etc.) is produced in—and only exists as—part of the social fabric of human communal endeavors (praxis) and individual mattering that is constitutive of these endeavors. All knowledge needs to be understood in its often-hidden roots in, and as stemming from, these endeavors and struggles and also, importantly, as embodying these in the present (as is widely acknowledged, for example, in Vygotsky’s tradition; see e.g., Stetsenko, 2010, 2017a).

Yet critically important to add, in my view, is that in order for knowledge “to stand up”—that is, to be meaningful and mattering within the reality of human struggles—every learner also has to put into it *one’s own* reason and sentiment/commitment. In other words, for knowledge and learning to be meaningful, they have to be imbued with learners’ own feelings, positions, stances, and commitments to changing the world in view of their own sought-after futures. It is only in this case that knowledge gains relevance and significance—thus becoming alive and meaningful, rather than random and mechanical “information” to be “processed,” of questionable, actually less than zero, validity and relevance.

Given the activist-transformative take on reality (as suggested in TAS), to engage in meaningful learning, it is of prime importance for learners to con/front reality and grasp its struggles, as these are unfolding at a given historical moment. The challenge is for learners to take a stance on one or the other side in these struggles, positioning themselves vis-à-vis these struggles through, most critically, committing to a particular sought-after future. Note that doing so cannot be avoided since we all are always already and inevitably immersed and implicated in these struggles anyway (in various ways, with differential responsibility and accountability). Education, thus, is about making it possible for learners to establish and advance *their* interests, positions, desires, and passions (all of which they already have, even as very young children—which needs to be honored by educators), as these are refracted in an ability to take a stance and commit to particular life projects embedded in communal struggles.

This is grounded in understanding human existence/life itself as an indivisible and seamless, unitary (non-composite) process of humans engaging and co-realizing the world—in the totality of their lives. This process cannot be broken into disconnected parts such as learning, on the one hand, and being/becoming a certain sort of a person, on the other. Instead, all of these endeavors and acts need to be seen

as *one seamless flow*, where various facets and moments mutually interpenetrate, co-realize each other, and are represented in each other, as not reducible to a chain of discrete episodes or disconnected levels and dimensions (Stetsenko, 2017a).

Thus, to learn anything is possible *only* from within one own's life agenda, from a position *and* a forward-directed stance and, moreover, in a process and *as* a process of changing the world, all while contributing to the always politically non-neutral *collective projects* of world-changing and history-making. Learning is not about acquiring or processing information but instead, about advancing one's own life project of becoming an active community member, with a mission of contributing to this community's struggles. This indicates the radical need to go beyond situations one confronts and the very "*is-ness*" of the present. To paraphrase Marx, in expanding on his key message, *the goal of education is not to interpret the world but to change it*. This includes being able to envision the future—as an act of political imagination—and commit to realizing this future via activist deeds of being-knowing-doing (if even in only small ways).

Learning is possible only within and as part of learners' personal, yet never a-social, projects of becoming, through the lens of "what's in it for them," what is the significance and relevance of knowledge—and of learning about it—within their own becoming. Emphatically, this is *not* about individualized learning since this is not about learners as isolated individuals in pursuit of some self-serving goals. Instead, this is about *collectividual* learning (Stetsenko, 2013b), where learners are understood to be community members who *come into being* via *mattering in the struggles of their communities*. Knowledge must become part of learners' own meaningful, activist life projects, specifically as community members—that is, be drawn into the only reality of their own world- and history-making, in light of sought-after futures they commit to. This is the necessary condition for any humanely significant, alive, and *vital* learning that, therefore, can never be removed from communal struggles and, thus, can never be neutral, "objective" or apolitical.

By extension and quite critically, what is *not yet* can be actually rendered more real than anything in the present, in the immediate "here and now." This expansion is consistent with what marks Marxism as a unique ethical/political-cum-philosophical (or activist-transformative) system of thought, namely, its *fidelity to an event that has not yet happened* (c.f. Thompson, 2016). Moreover, I understand this as a fidelity to not being stuck in the oppressive present and instead, to commit ourselves to moving beyond this present in a struggle for a future that will bring freedom, social justice, and equality for all. In such a move, the future can be said to exist now, being always-already-in-the-making (see e.g., Stetsenko, 2017a).

The TAS approach can be illustrated with a research project carried out by Eduardo Vianna (in collaboration with this chapter's author as an academic advisor), together with and for the benefit of residents in a group home for adolescent boys (see Vianna, 2009; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011, 2014, 2019). As described by Vianna,

the institutional context, at the project's start, was marked by outright oppression and a self-perpetuating, vicious cycle of control and resistance, all under horrific structural pressures of the US foster care system with its racism, poverty, and class inequality. Although Vianna was initially hired to address the dire situation by individually working with youth, his work drastically expanded into a collaborative project to radically transform the institution into a more livable context and an alternative learning site. The project took great effort and even sacrifice from the lead investigator, Eduardo Vianna, who assumed a position of solidarity with residents (at first, against much resistance from staff and administration). Through several years of work, Vianna was able to gradually gain the residents' trust to then together work on changing the institution (including via organizing learning workshops and other collaborative projects for residents).

The core feature of this project was that youth were provided with space and tools, including conceptual knowledge, for them to develop and implement their own activist, transformative agendas while exercising agency in their community. Critically for the current chapter, the process of learning (first within workshops organized by Vianna, then expanding to school learning) gradually turned into a meaningful activity as part of the youth's activism coterminous with their identity development. The boys' initial view of learning as another form of control, tightly linked to white privilege, gradually gave way to them seeing how knowledge could be drawn for critique and resistance. Insofar as learning enabled the boys to see the possibility for change and the practical value of what they used to view as useless, "abstract" knowledge, learning turned into a tool of their activist agency and their projects of becoming (with many dramatic changes ensuing—from better living conditions, to boys developing solidarity among themselves, along with diverse interests and plans for the future, as well as them gaining staff and school teachers' respect and investment in them).

Thus, this TAS-based research project was a catalyst of a synergistic, simultaneous transformation within one and the same process of participants changing their community practices and themselves—while drawing on knowledge and learning that became, in the process, deeply meaningful as a vital tool of activism.

30.5.

Concluding Remarks: Drawing Links and Addressing the Next Steps

In activist-transformative (or TAS) approach, "what is" is in a constant flux, forever and continuously changing and becoming via individually unique contributions by each and every learner, each and every one of us. That is, we ourselves—including as learners (and we are all learners, no doubt, throughout life)—are not separate from the world's continuous changing/becoming since we all are directly entangled with,

and moreover, immediately implicated in, its co-realizing as co-authors and co-creators.

Learning, then, is directly and inevitably but a dimension of this process of the self-and-world-co-realizing. This approach elevates the future beyond the past and present—not as a utopian dreaming but as a *call to action*, to bringing future into existence here and now via our own actions and deeds. And indeed, many critical and sociocultural perspectives on education converge on the importance of critique and imagination for education. For example, what is often highlighted is that learners need to be compelled “to go beyond the situations one confronts and refuse reality as given in the name of a reality to be produced” (Greene, 1973, p. 7), in summoning up “the possible, the what is not and yet might be” (Greene, 1987, p. 14). However, from an expanded, activist-transformative Marxist perspective, I suggest that instead of summoning up the possible, it is important to insist on the need to summon up the sought-after—no matter whether it is deemed possible or not. This is in line with the Marxist resistance movements (even more than Marxist philosophies per se, which often lag behind realities on the ground) insisting on achieving the impossible (as in the slogan “be realistic, demand the impossible”). This is also in line with the gist of the resistance scholarship, more broadly. Indeed, Baldwin (1963/2008, p. 203, emphasis added) insisted on no less than the need to “go for broke,” in his seminal talk to teachers:

We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced ... from within. So any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to ‘go for broke.’ ... The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at *no matter what risk*. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.

This position is not about any future-oriented agendas being normatively defined, imposed by others, especially the powerful, or just taken for granted as established and invincible. Instead, these agendas need to be defined by learners themselves, as per their own commitments and convictions, based on their own explorations into the world and its ongoing struggles—as all of this can be facilitated by teachers. This is again in sync with Baldwin’s striking message: Addressing the Black child, he said that “the world belongs to this child, who does not “have to be bound by the expediciencies of any ... given policy, any given time—that he has the right and the necessity to examine everything,” with the whole world depending on each child.

Another expansion on existing critical approaches is the following. Freire’s (1998, p. 93) words, “My practice demands of me a definition about where I stand,” could be usefully expanded by saying that all of our being-knowing-doing,

including *all acts of learning*—demand of us a definition of where we stand and where we want to go next. The act of taking a stand and staking a claim—a position on sociopolitical struggles of the day, including as these are refracted in seemingly mundane situations that we all deal with on a daily basis—constitutes the core formative dimension of learning that can meet the challenges of today, where the stakes are extraordinarily high given unfolding crises and turmoil. At stake is figuring out what ought to be, coterminous with the process of a continuing self-definition/realization of who we are and where we speak from (cf. Dussel, 2011), and which direction to go, in a forward-looking activist stance.

There are no universal, timeless answers as to what the core struggles of today are. These answers need to be co-constructed in the process of learners taking up reality, facing up to its challenges, in and as a con/frontation with the world and themselves, from a distinctive place and historical time, with a unique commitment to a sought-after future. The contours of this struggle today are tied, in my view, to overcoming the “cosmology of capitalism ... built upon alienations and separations embedded within a world view of individualism, maximization of material gain and processes of subjectification” (Motta & Esteves, 2014, p. 1). The scholars of resistance have further insisted that the tasks of today have to do with “the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 44) and, hence, the need for a political struggle for “a new humanity” (Fanon, 2004/1961, p. 2; cf. Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

This struggle includes overcoming mindless profit-seeking, ruthless exploitation of people and natural resources, and exuberant consumption, all at the core of capitalism that is destroying the planet and its inhabitants. This also includes overturning worn-out conceptions of education that posit learners as passive and agentless, thus harming the prospects for a better future for these learners and the whole world. My understanding is that it is in joining with, and contributing to, such core struggles of today that the opportunities for a *radical-transformative agency* (Stetsenko, 2019a, 2020c, 2023) and, relatedly, for a meaningful and *vital* (as opposed to lifeless) learning are opened up.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1967) has prophetically distilled the essence of the historical moment of his time—and, importantly, this moment is still here with us today, more than a half-century later:

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. ... Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter – but beautiful – struggle for a new world.

These words are truly in the spirit of Marx and all those many activists, in education and beyond, who today risk their lives to protest and resist, all over the world, the deadly capitalist regime that is killing us, especially people who are marginalized and

oppressed. It is these activists who bravely reject the dominance of the present and the shackles of “is-ness” that prevent a much-needed movement beyond capitalism, including in education.

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