

Critical Challenges in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory: The Urgency of Agency

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The article addresses the challenge of conceptualizing agency within a non-dichotomous, dialectical approach that gives full credit to the social roots of agency and does justice to it being an achievement of togetherness possible only in a communal world shared with others. Critical steps in this direction are undertaken by the Transformative Activist Stance (TAS) approach advanced by this article's author and further developed and applied to various topics by scholars from many parts of the world. This approach is firmly rooted in cultural-historical activity theory yet also moves beyond it in overcoming some of its impasses. The core elements of TAS are discussed to reveal how they coalesce on the nexus of social practices of self- and world-making. Agency is the process that enacts this nexus of ongoing, ceaseless social-individual transformations whereby people simultaneously, in one process, co-create their world and themselves so that each individual person makes a difference and matters in the totality of social practices. Ethical-political entailments of TAS are discussed to combat the legacy of passivity and inequality still permeating psychology and neighboring fields.

Keywords: transformation, nexus of social practices, Vygotsky, ethics, politics, ontoepistemology, equality.

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We are all actors: being a citizen is not living in society, it is changing it.
Augusto Boal

No society has yet lived up to the principle that everybody matters...
Kwame Anthony Appiah

Introduction

In this paper, I address what can be considered to be one of today's major challenges in theorizing human development and mind including within cultural-historical activity theory and related approaches such as sociocultural, cultural, and critical frameworks in psychology, education, literary theory, and communication studies, among others. This challenge is how to conceptualize human agency yet not slip into the pitfalls of traditional approaches premised on assumptions about agency as an autonomous, solipsistic achievement of isolated individuals understood either as "free-will" subjects or, on another spectrum of views, as puppets of extraneous influences at the whim of powerful forces outside of one's control and even awareness. These traditional approaches, formed largely in the 19th century, are unfortunately increasingly powerful and popular, resurrected on the heels of advances in biological fields such as genetics and brain research (typically, with psychology and

education uncritically borrowing from these fields) that are hailed as providing answers to all the core questions about human beings, while in fact being still in their infancy [69; 71] or, at best, adolescence [43].

The traditional approaches are exemplified especially in what I term, with a great dose of irony, the "new grand synthesis" [59; and see next section] with a focus on individuals as essentially isolated strivers, walled-in by self-interest and acting in a vacuum, a lonely and fictitious character equipped with inborn endowments and traits. The challenge I pursue in this paper and my other works is to unequivocally reject such understandings yet to do justice to every person's ability to make one's own decisions and determinations, chart one's own path in life and, generally, make a difference and thus *matter* in the world in one's own unique, inimitable way and from one's unique, irreplaceable position. All of this, importantly, is about persons mattering in the world that is existentially and profoundly, fully and to its very core social and communal, that is, *shared with others*. In other

words, the challenge is about theorizing human agency with an emphasis on individuality and uniqueness that are at the same time understood to be irrefutably and incontrovertibly, through and through, from start to finish, thoroughly collective and social, as instantiated in collaborative and communal, shared and distributed achievements of uniqueness through togetherness.

Why is this important? In my view, cultural and critical theories, including cultural-historical activity theory, still have to reckon with the long-lasting legacy of passivity — and closely related assumptions of inequality — in accounting for human development and social functioning, as expressed at its infamous and deeply flawed extremes in behaviorism and other mechanistic modes of thinking. This is not about merely stating that individuality and agency need and can be understood in social terms and that humans are not passive — there have been many general proclamations to this effect that remain hollow due to them not being supported by solid conceptual work showing how this is in fact possible and which specific processes are at play in such a view. What is required is a painstaking and detailed exploration into the philosophical, conceptual, and logical warrants and supports for, and implications from, this position.

Formulating such a task might sound paradoxical — after all, behaviorism is supposed to be done with and buried long ago, since severe cracks emerged in its foundation around the 1960s (typically associated with Chomsky's 1959 critical review of Skinner's book) followed by its subsequent gradual demise. However, the rumors of behaviorism's death, unfortunately, have been greatly exaggerated and, in fact, it has survived till today under various guises. It is not surprising to read the revelatory — and also deeply ironic — assessment proudly made recently by no less than the President of the Association for Psychological Science in the US that "... behaviorism is less discussed and debated today because *it actually won the intellectual battle*. In a very real sense, all psychologists today (at least those doing empirical research) are behaviorists" [50; emphasis added].

The residue of passivity consists in positing that people are shaped by the world (culture, biology or any other extraneous factors acting upon people from either outside or inside, or in some combination of both), depend on a "given" context, and act "under" its existing circumstances, in "responding" to these circumstances, after the fact of them impinging on us. Seemingly innocuous, the language of "stimuli" and "reactions," or of even just one term of this infamous pair (since no "reactions" exist without "stimuli" and vice versa) and of related terms such as of people "responding" to circumstances and situations in their lives is actually strongly suggestive and even emblematic of a number of deeply seated (albeit often unarticulated) assumptions directly affiliated with behaviorism. If these assumptions are made, and even if they are accompanied by general assurances that people are active rather than passive, there is no way to avoid ultimate surrender to viewing human beings as essentially shoved around by the all-powerful forces not under their control. This is what has happened again and again in conceptions of personhood and agen-

cy — including even those that profess co-determinism [see 81; 83; 69].

The assumptions of passivity are non-coincidentally related to a number of closely associated and deeply flawed ideas including about (a) the separation of human beings from the world/reality whereby a false sense of distance between them is created and, consequently, the need for people to "represent" and "access" reality through special channels or modes of connection is posited and (b) the inevitability of social hierarchies and inequalities according to which some modes of thinking and living, and even some people, are privileged over others, in line with psychology's colonialist heritage. These deeply harmful assumptions are concomitant with the legacy of passivity, behaviorism and other mechanistic and reductionist approaches still prevalent in modern-day mainstream psychology.

The need to overcome assumptions of passivity has to do with many conceptual considerations including that these assumptions fail to account for significant features of human development such as creativity, resistance, ingenuity, inventiveness, and spontaneity. These assumptions also fall far behind the realities on the ground when it is quite obvious (one could say, painfully obvious) that humans are shaping the world with unprecedented force, with our collective activities dominating the planet to a previously unthinkable degree and with drastic consequences, as reflected in the notion of Anthropocene. This is further illustrated with astounding clarity by the current pandemic, when human agency is front-and-center, revealing how we are all interconnected and interdependent, literally as a matter of life and death, requiring us all to be active agents who are conscious and conscientious, responsive and responsible — and implicated in the world's overall dynamics and change (see last section for details). Thus, the urgency of agency is by no means a theoretical notion only; in my view, at stake is the need for societies in which, and theories according to which, everyone matters and makes a difference.

This is in line with the egalitarian, non-hierarchical and anti-hegemonic ideals that do not erect barriers and status hierarchies among people, while privileging some and subordinating others, and instead validates and celebrates agency, creative powers, and infinite potential of *each and every person*. I understand that calls to developing theories premised on ideals of social justice and equality are currently not in favor with many scholars in Russia, including even those who are working within the legacy of Vygotsky, for whom this was a paramount concern [57; 68; 73; 82; 84]. Yet the world is finally awakening to such calls especially at this moment in history when, to quote Jameson [34, p. 86], "the present — and above all our current present, the [presumably] wealthy, sunny, gleaming world of the postmodern and the end of history, of the new world system of late capitalism — unexpectedly betrays us" (insert added). On the heels of recent events, including in hopefully learning from the current pandemic and the broader crisis of which it is a part, there is a hope for a strengthening of critical scholarship that is mindful and inclusive of ethical-political considerations exemplified, for example, by approaches

of resistance, striving to act as “a species of dialectical thought, a mode of critical engagement that refuses to leave the world unchanged and static in its hubristic and procrustean ways” [100, pp. 29–30].

The main argument in this paper is that although much progress has been made in cultural-historical activity theory and related approaches, now is the time to more resolutely address and capture the dynamism of transformation and change and the enormity of humans’ role in this dynamism, while theorizing agency within complex relationships between the social constitution of human subjectivity and the possibility of social justice [cf. 1]. This approach puts premium on the radical-transformative agency of people understood to be agentive co-creators of social practices in their historical unfolding and endless transformations and thus co-creators of the world and, simultaneously and critically, of themselves. In this account, termed *transformative activist stance* [TAS; for detailed exposition, see 69], *agency is accorded no less than a world-forming and history-making role*. This approach suggests not merely that people are situated in the world, or co-constructed by it, but that they are its co-creators, who come into being precisely through their own acts of *real-izing* the world [i.e., literally making it real; cf. 8] — acts that are possible only in solidarity with others, in shared spaces and through joint efforts. Placing agency in such a radically central role as belonging to the foundations and even *the very fabric* of human development, society, and even the world/reality itself — yet staying on the grounds of a non-transcendental and non-individualist position — requires careful elaborations of worldview-level premises about not only human development but also the world and our position “in” it.

To reiterate, there is an important ethical-political component in this position, inextricably related to its conceptual-analytical components, together forming a seamlessly merged ethico-ontoepistemology [73]. This ethical-political component is the notion that *every person matters* in everything that is going on in the world — because the world *as a whole* is evoked, *real-ized*, and created by each and every one of us, in each and every event of our being-knowing-doing — notably, by us *as social actors and agents* of communal practices and collective history, who only come about within the matrices of these practices through realizing and co-authoring them in joint struggles and strivings. This position is a departure from the canonical interpretations of Marxism and also an expanded and critical take on Vygotsky’s tradition in which agency was under-theorized for various reasons including political ones [58; 69]. At a deeper level, the key premise of ethical-political nature is that all individuals are endowed with equal potential for social achievement, intelligence, creativity, and any and all other capacities and faculties. That is, all individuals are truly considered equal, not just in their legal and moral rights, nor only in opportunity, but in their fundamental capacities and abilities — albeit as these can and have to be brought to realization within shared collaborative practices and communities. This further implies that all human beings have unlimited potential — and are thus

profoundly equal precisely in the *infinity of their potential* regardless of any putatively “natural” endowments and ostensibly “intractable” deficits. This potential, however, needs to be actualized by individuals themselves, as an “achievement” (with no connotations of either finality or predetermined norms) of togetherness, while being provided with access to requisite cultural tools and spaces for agency within the collaborative dynamics of shared community practices [69; 71].

Building on the heels of relational approaches and moving beyond them

There have been important developments on the topic of agency, including by a group of interrelated approaches focusing on the role of context, situativity, embodiment, historicity, and interactivity including collaborative, situated, and distributed cognition theories; dynamic systems and actor-network theories; participatory learning approaches; and theories of embodiment, enactment, and cultural mediation [e.g., 18; 53; 36; for recent overview, see 21]. Several of these approaches, in addition, focus on the continuously unfolding, historically situated, and culturally mediated developmental dynamics of human embodied acting in environments. Typically, these approaches emphasize relational co-constitution of human beings and the world. This includes highlighting that all phenomena of human development are dynamically relational and contextually situated in thus stretching beyond the person alone. Given such emphasis, these approaches are de facto aligned with the recently influential *relational* perspective (or relational ontology), sometimes dubbed as standing for a conceptual revolution in psychology and neighboring disciplines [40; 60].

At the core of relational approaches is the notion that people evolve and develop within continuous relations with their surrounds and with other people, rather than as separate, self-contained “thing-like” entities with fixed inner essences unfolding from some primordial sources and following pre-programmed scripts or rules. Instead, people and their environment are posited to have shared existence, emphasizing mutual co-construction, co-evolution, continuous dialogue, belonging, participation and similar processes of relatedness and interconnectedness, blending and meshing — the “coming together” of individuals and their world that transcends their separation. Relational perspective, in its overcoming the Cartesian dualism, can be considered to be one of the staples and major achievements of the 20th century in psychology and neighboring disciplines. For example, all three major theories of human development of that century — those by Piaget, Dewey and Vygotsky — represented relational perspective that aimed precisely at overcoming the subject-object dualism and therefore, bearing much similarities, juxtaposed with significant differences, across them [59; 69]. Relationism is influential in developmental psychology [47], cultural anthropology [31], social psychology [27], studies of communication and cognition [11; 15], and educational ethnography [37], among others.

These developments are important and laudable especially as they represent a much-needed front of resistance against the all-powerful trends of biologically reductionist frameworks. These latter frameworks are recently uniting, in what can be termed, tongue in cheek, a “new grand synthesis” [59]. This synthesis is drawing together the resurrected tenets of sociobiology, innatist linguistics, narrowly conceived neuroscience, orthodox modular cognitivism, with the impoverished and ineffectual test-and-control, knowledge-transmission education models following suit. The biggest irony of this “new grand synthesis” (and associated brainism) is that there is nothing new and nothing grand about it except for extraordinary ambitions and pompous declarations about its capacity to explain everything — from altruism, criminal behavior, motivation, religious beliefs to even political choices and affiliations, not to mention learning and development [for critique, see 3; 40; 48; 59; 75; 78].

In my works through the past years, including in collaboration with other scholars, I have drawn attention to both strengths and limitations within relational approaches to agency including a residue of passivity present in them. As an illustration, I have analyzed influential works on agency by Giddens, Bourdieu, Archer, Emirbayer and Mische, and especially Biesta and his colleagues to expose their reliance on the notions that make them susceptible to assumptions of passivity and, in terms of ethico-political implications, those of accommodation to the status quo and political quietude [69; 77; 83].

In order to overcome this residue, as I will further elaborate herein, it is important to reconstrue no less than the very basic premises about human development including about how we are and how we can be in the world, what constitutes humanness, what is reality and, most critically, what could a humane and just society be in which this humanness is possible, together with a set of closely and non-coincidentally related ethical-political issues. What is needed, in other worlds, is a philosophically grounded revision and re-articulation of the major assumptions about human development away from assumptions of passivity, accommodation, quietism, and adaptation to the status quo.

These are monumental questions and shifts and they are typically supposed to be the province of a “big philosophy” and “big theory” — approaches advanced by hero-figures, such as Hegel or Marx, or by a select coterie of currently prominent elite scholars who offer solutions that are then followed and implemented by rank-and-file researchers. Most researchers and educators are unfortunately trained to not count themselves among such elites and typically tend to stay away from formulating their own answers to philosophical questions they inevitably encounter, relinquishing efforts to advance *their own* worldview-level conceptions and notions. However, in my view, this goes against the spirit of what science and research are arguably all

about: An open-ended, free-spirited, personally responsible, endlessly creative, unending adventure at the edge of uncertainty filled with contestation and dissensus [to paraphrase Bronowski; cf. 72]. That is, science and research are uncertain and unsettled through and through — constituted by processes of questioning, critiquing, exploring, confronting, deconstructing, falsifying, refashioning, reimagining, refuting, and interrogating — wherein no answers can be used ready-made and treated as pre-given recipes. Since the processes of questioning, interrogating and moving beyond the status quo are the very fabric of knowing, we cannot expect ready-made answers from the classics or from anybody else, for that matter. Instead, *each and every researcher has an obligation and privilege to come up with one’s own answers* (however provisional and incomplete they might be), including on core philosophical questions. Certainly, this is not about inventing such answers from scratch or in a vacuum but rather, about hard work based in a critical and in-depth personal engagement with the legacy and views of those who one deems important to dialogue with, though never accepting everything *in toto* as a “final truth.”

Accordingly, although carried out in continuation of Vygotsky’s tradition, the approach I am developing also critically reassesses and moves beyond it. Vygotsky’s project cannot be employed to develop novel approaches without expansive critique and creative elaboration — which, of course, is very much in the spirit of this project itself, given its Marxist legacy, with its celebration of critique as a major, indispensable premise and a methodological condition without which it ceases to exist. This approach to Vygotsky’s legacy is consonant with what has been captured by Osip Mandelstam — a striving to advance “a resilient tradition that *draws from the very sources it is intended to combat*” [quoted in 9, p. 11; emphasis added]. This is also what Boris Eikhenbaum captured in his notion of the ongoing “battle with the craft” of other poets (and, I would add, scholars). In his words, those who wish to learn from others must likewise be prepared to do battle with them: “you must conquer Mandelstam [or any other predecessor-AS]. Not study him” (*ibid.*). Thus, the strategy I am using is to navigate and balance two opposite attitudes towards historical legacy and tradition, namely, the notion that “none of the systems, none of the doctrines transmitted to us by the great thinkers may be convincing or even plausible” anymore [2, p. 12], on the one hand, and the notion that “our classics are like a powder keg that has not yet exploded”¹ [41, p. 308], on the other. The expansive elaboration of the worldview-level premises seeks to overcome a number of polarities especially with regards to the status of reality and change in conceptualizing human development, the role of human agency in enacting them, and the notions of contribution and commitment to the sought-after future as central to human ways of being, knowing, and doing.

¹ This expression sounds really great in the original Russian: “Наши классики — это пороховой погреб, который еще не взорвался”.

The transformative worldview and agency

In building upon the legacy of Vygotsky's project — combined with insights from contemporary critical scholarship (e.g., philosophy of practice, critical pedagogy, postcolonial and feminist perspectives, new materialism, and science studies, among others), and also works by Bakhtin, Gramsci, Fanon, Sartre and others — my proposal has been to dialectically expand ideas about human development, as a relational and situated process, through the notions of transformation and agency while exposing and drawing connections to ethical-political dimensions indelibly present in these matters. That is, human development, in addition to being relational and situated, and even more originary, needs and can be understood as grounded in purposeful and answerable — in other words, *agentive* or *activist* — contributions to the dynamic and ever-shifting world-in-the-making composed of shared communal practices colored by visions of, stands on, and commitments to, particular sought-after futures at the core of various transformative pursuits (or projects), always ethico-politically non-neutral. This position, termed Transformative Activist Stance (TAS), places agency that all human beings exercise (whether they know it or not) at the core of not only human nature and development but also — most critically and quite contentiously (vis-à-vis both Vygotsky's school and Marxism) — of reality itself. The focus is on the bidirectional and dynamic nexus of social practices simultaneously realizing human development, social life, and reality — while at the same time placing emphasis on these practices being realized by people contributing to social change at the intersection of individual and collective agency across the time dimensions (and with a particular emphasis on the sought-after future), while exactly through this process, and simultaneously, also creating themselves as agents and co-authors of the world.

Some of these themes and notions, or their elements, might appear to be immediately familiar to many researchers knowledgeable about or working within critical sociocultural frameworks and Vygotsky's tradition. For example, the emphasis on collaborative practices is present, in addition to approaches in the Marxist tradition, in works by Foucault, Bourdieu, the feminist and standpoint theories, some currents of pragmatism and, quite centrally, Freire's critical pedagogy, among others. Within Vygotsky's lineage, this emphasis can be found, for example, in [13; 20; 31; 51; 98], among many others. Many Russian scholars in Vygotsky's school or working in affiliation with it made similar points — most prominently, Alexei N. Leontiev, Evald V. Ilyenkov, Vassily V. Davydov, Alexey A. Leontiev, and Valdimir P. Zinchenko (in his early works) and their followers. As I will discuss, the ways to concretely fashion and then proceed from such broad premises can still differ in many respects. To paraphrase Viveiros de Castro [97]: admitting the familiar is one thing; it's a very different kettle of fish drawing from it all the possible consequences. Adding to this, I would say: The devil is truly in the details.

One of the specific elaborations in my works has to do with vigorously, consistently, and unequivocally ex-

plicating and ascertaining the role of collaborative transformative practice/activity as an *ontological foundation* for human development and, importantly, also reality itself. This entails positing such practice — that unfolds and gradually expands in time connecting each human being with everybody else and each generation with all others — as a new relation to the world, precisely *as a new form of life* unique to humans that has brought about their emergence in evolution and that continues to constitute the foundation for their development in all its expressions, dimensions and facets. This ontologically primary realm can be understood as the “lived world” [жизненный мир-Rus.; for a recent analysis, see 39], but not in the sense of people merely being situated or dwelling in it as a given, nor in its present status quo. Instead, this realm is, in my view, better designated as the “*lived struggle*” — an arena of human historical and life quests and pursuits, enacted as collective efforts at becoming fraught with contradictions and conflicts — infused with dimensions of values, interests, struggles, power differentials, and intentionality including goals, visions, and commitments to the future. Because of its grounding in collaborative social practices, that is, in people acting and doing things together while co-producing their life, the designating term for this realm, I would suggest, can be *actuality* [in its etymology deriving from the term *act* in many languages, in addition to English — *Wirklichkeit* (German), *действительность* (Russ)]. This is a realm where human activities, actions, and deeds form the ultimate grounding for the world that is not discovered, nor merely experienced, but instead enacted and realized (or co-created) by people themselves.

That is, ontologically, the world is understood as a constantly shifting and continuously evolving terrain of social practices constantly enacted and reenacted by people acting together in performing their individually unique and authentically authorial, or answerable, yet deeply and profoundly social, deeds. Each person entering, or rather joining in with, this collective forum, right from birth, is the core condition and foundation for personal becoming and development. The radical import of this position is that the human subjectivity and agency extend to the very core of reality because nothing exists outside of the temporal fabric woven by human communal practices and deeds [cf. Bakhtin; 46].

The second and related proposition is that a close synergy between ontological (what reality is taken to be) and epistemological (what the process of knowing about reality is taken to be) aspects or dimensions of the transformative worldview is ascertained. That is, the process of knowing is understood to be contingent on activist involvements in, and contributions to, collaborative transformative practices and thus, *a form of practice itself that is coterminous with being and doing*. This is in line with the well-known Marxist maxim that in order to know the world, we have to change it. However, this maxim draws attention to and has been typically interpreted only in its epistemic dimension, as suggesting that humans know the world through changing it. While fully accepting this premise, the suggested expansion goes beyond the epistemological level alone to instead link it to the on-

tological one by stating that while there is indeed no gap between changing one's world and knowing it, there is also no gap between changing one's world and being (becoming) a unique person, with both processes simultaneously created as people agentively change conditions and circumstances of their lives. There is, in other words, no knowledge and no person that exist prior to and can be separated from a transformative activist engagement with the world (including, importantly, with other people and oneself), with knowing being fully reliant on how we position ourselves vis-a-vis ongoing social practices and their historically evolved structures and conflicts and on us taking a stand vis-à-vis them. Moreover, knowing is inextricably related to being and doing — representing a practically relevant, ideologically saturated, and politically contingent, that is, *agentive endeavor* that partakes in and directly contributes to changing, and thus co-creating the world (if even sometimes unbeknownst to its creators), always in collaboration with others. For example, to know oneself in a new way means simultaneously to be altered in that very act of knowing — to be literally a changed person who emerges in the act of knowing that alters what it contemplates [17]. The process of knowing, thus understood, is profoundly imaginative and creative, passionate and partisan, as well as deeply personal and authorial, yet also social through and through, because it involves a simultaneous work of self-understanding, identity development, and world-making. Thus, the resulting transformative *onto-epistemology* operates with the notion of knowing-being-doing as a unified (though not uniform) process.

A third, and perhaps most critical, suggestion has been to emphasize the *transformative* nature of collaborative practices, in their status of the primary onto-epistemology of human development, as their key formative feature, thus more explicitly integrating notions of *social change, agency, and activism* into the most basic descriptions of the very reality of human development and the world itself. The analytical import of taking transformation to be the core characteristic of social practices as it has been suggested (though not fully explicated) by Marx, is actually enormous, implying a conceptual shift in theorizing human development and society that is no less radical than the import of Darwin's revolution in biological sciences [62; 69]. The conceptual and analytical shift consists in positing the *very mode of existence* of social practices and their products — and therefore, of reality itself — as the dynamics of ever-shifting and moving, continuously re-structuring and re-organizing movements and flows of ceaseless changes, transformations, transmutations, and reassemblages. In this perspective, it is not only that the world is constantly changing, which is quite a trivial assumption currently accepted by many approaches across the board. Instead, a more conceptually radical conjecture is that *changes and transformations in social communal praxis is what exists* and what substitutes for the world in its fixity and “givenness.” The change, in other words, is *ontologically primary*, whereas stability and static forms, structures, and patterns are derivative of what is the primary reality comprised of ubiquitous and ceaseless changes and

transformations in the ever unfolding and dynamic *flow of reality*. Importantly, social change and transformation enacted in moving beyond the given is taken to be no less and, in fact, *more real* than what is often believed is the abstract and neutral, “brute” reality of the world as it exists now, in its status quo and its seemingly unalterable givenness reified in the taken-for-granted states, structures, circumstances, and “facts.” This insistence on seeing change and agentive movement beyond the given as foundational to human development and the world itself is in sync with what Fanon [23] described as the true leap that consists in *introducing invention into existence* [cf. 99].

Fourth, the notion of individually unique contributions to the ongoing communal dynamics and changes in the inherently social, distributed, collaborative practices — at the interface of social and individual levels of human life and development — is highlighted to overcome the traditional polarization of persons and societies/communities. In particular, the collective and open-ended collaborative practices, although social through and through, are understood to be realized through unique contributions by individual agents acting from their own, uniquely irreplaceable positions and inimitably authentic stances. Importantly, each person not only enters communal social practices, but agentively realizes them while making a difference in them, thus gradually *co-authoring* these practices, and therefore oneself too, through enacting and transforming them in view of one's own unique strivings, struggles, and agendas. This process not only coincides but is fully merged with people becoming agentive actors of the communal world shared with others. The transformative onto-epistemology of social praxis — augmented by the notion of individual contributions to this praxis as its carriers, embodiments, and enactments (i.e., its operational units) — is used to supersede the very distinction between collective and individual levels of social practices and life. What is offered instead is one unitary realm in need of new terms to convey the dialectical amalgamation of the social and the individual — such as the “*collectivoidual*” practice and agency [64]. This move indicates a resolute break with the dualism of the individual and the social, so that each and every individual human being is conceived as in fact instantiating common history and the totality of humanity in all their vicissitudes (albeit in local expressions), realizing and carrying them on, as well as bearing responsibility for their future. This invitation to see history and society embodied and expressed in, even co-created through, the deeds of *each and every single person* — albeit ultimately in the form of collective processes to which these deeds contribute — is a truly challenging task that still requires much attention and elaboration.

Fifth, the TAS elevates the dimension of the *future* ontologically and epistemologically by rendering future-oriented goals and endpoints integral to and constitutive of knowing-being-doing in the present. More specifically, this critical expansion concerns the centrality of the *forward-looking activist positioning* — what people imagine, deem important and strive for in the future — and

a commitment to bringing this future into reality. The critical point is that we cannot locate ourselves in the present and its history unless we imagine the future and commit to creating it and nothing is determinate outside such imagination [69]. Moreover, commitments grounded in values, principles, and ethical projects, guided by a *sought-after future*, are critical to human development understood as an activist project of becoming. The notion of commitment foregrounds specifically the struggle for the future, rather than its mere anticipation or expectation as is alternatively expressed in the notions of hope, utopia and political imagination. In addition, though similar to the notion of prolepsis [12; 52] used to highlight that the future affects the present, the TAS posits a more agentive and activist notion of human deeds as *enactments of the future in the present* via their predication on commitments to the future. Thus, the process of creating the future in the present is understood as a reality in its own right. In this approach, “analyses of the past, present and future are not split into independent inquiries, but are instead lodged... within each other and carried out in light of their synthetic amalgamation infused with the ethics” [79, p. 6]. This position is in stark contrast especially with many of today’s trends in social sciences and psychology such as postmodernism that continue to predominantly focus on the “historical present” without much regard for how the future might be implicated in shaping the present. Indeed, for example, Butler is unequivocal in stating that “the critical point of departure is *the historical present*” [6, p. 8]. This position is also typical of American pragmatism according to which knowledge is inseparable from human action, yet action itself is understood as embedded within and defined by the immediately given context in its situational concreteness [69].

The sixth point — last but certainly not the least one — is the notion that ethical-political dimensions belong right into the very fabric of reality including processes of knowing-being-doing. The ethical dimensions come to the fore because the transformative praxis/engagements are taken as ontologically and epistemologically supreme, and given that transformation can only be achieved from a certain position and with certain sought-after futures in view. In simple terms, a human being who in order to be and to know needs to act in the world that is constantly changing and, moreover, that is *changing through our own deeds*, cannot be neutral or uncertain because such acting (unlike reacting or passively dwelling) presupposes knowing what is right or wrong, and which direction one wants and needs to go next.

In the transformative worldview, any and all acts/deeds entail and carry “the right” and “the wrong” directly in them, because they inevitably change the world for better or for worse, for oneself and for others, albeit that the incurred changes are sometimes not immedi-

ately transparent even to the actor herself. The ethical is therefore a distinctive and inherent characteristic of human activity, rather than some sort of an extraneous add-on to it that comes about in some “special” circumstances such as when people are solving moral dilemmas. Ethical and purposeful dimensions inhere in how we do things in the world in the first place — that is, they are integral to acting and realizing the world in collaborative transformative practices and, therefore, to knowing and being as well.

With the gap between ethical dimensions and ontoepistemology eliminated, they all can be merged into one amalgamated ethico-ontoepistemology. That is, epistemology enters the realm of “ontological politics” [44] pertaining to questions not merely about what there is in the world — because nothing simply is, in light of the world being ceaselessly changed by us! — but instead about *how the world can be changed in light of what there should be*, given our commitments and ideologies, our politics and ethics. This implies that all acts, including those of knowing and being, presuppose a forward-looking striving and activism — acting with the purpose of changing the world in view of a sought-after future.

These points, taken together (as they should be, since they all presuppose and implicate each other, making sense almost exclusively in light of each other) have various implications and applications², summarized in large part in [69], such as for education and pedagogy [5; 25; 26; 28; 61; 67; 72; 92–96], creativity and play [66; 76; 80; 87], literacy and critical literacy practices [7; 19], child-adult interactions and child’s agency [30], online communication [22], social movements and activism [52], disability [49; 88], social care work [16], health issues and health inequalities [14; 24], history of psychology [57; 58; 82; 84; 86; 89], as well as for theoretical debates such as on agency [42; 77; 83; 90], personhood and identity [63; 64; 65; 81; 85], cultural mediation [4], language development [55; 56], sociological understandings of power [54], natureculture/epigenetics [60; 62; 71; 74; 75; 78], the concepts of work and learning [91], and methodology [10; 29; 69; 70], among others.

Explorations at the nexus of self- and world-realization

The resulting *transformative ethico-ontoepistemology*, as follows from the discussion in the previous section, suggests that it is directly *through* and *in* the process, and moreover, precisely *as* the process of people constantly transforming and co-creating their social world and thus *moving beyond the status quo* (rather than as an addition to it) that people simultaneously

² I am providing a selected (non-exhaustive) list of works where the TAS approach is used as a grounding framework. With the exception of several authors (Hougaard, Podlucká, Sawyer, and Vianna), these are not works by my current or former Ph.D. students. Note that the authors working with TAS are located in various parts of the world — in addition to the US, in Brazil, Denmark, Sweden, South Africa, New Zealand, Italy, India, England, Scotland, and the Netherlands.

create and constantly transform their very life, therefore also changing themselves in fundamental ways while, also in and *as* this very process, becoming individually unique and gaining knowledge about themselves and the world.

Critical, in my view, is to focus on the notion of the dual and ceaseless dynamics at the *shifting nexus* between people collaboratively transforming their world and thus bringing it into existence through the process of agentively contributing to collaborative modifications of existing realities and, at the same time, in this very process and *at once* — without any gaps in either spatiotemporal, experiential, ontological, or any other terms — being themselves changed and de facto constantly created as unique individuals who are social agents and actors of communities and the world shared with others. The proposition of focusing precisely on the nexus of these processes might easily slip attention if not duly explicated and elaborated, as de facto continues to happen in existing interpretations. To highlight again, at stake is the centrality of the nexus of people changing the world and of themselves being changed in this very process — as poles of *one and the same* (as “duo in uno”), bi-directional and recursive co-constitution of people and the world in a continual and ceaseless communal process of self- and world-realization. People exist while creating themselves in and through transformative practices of creating the world, at the nexus of these processes — suggesting that there is no neutral, separate world and no isolated, detached individuals. Instead, there is one process of people simultaneously co-creating themselves and the world, as a nexus of these two currents within communal, historical praxis (composed of social practices) realized through individually unique contributions by actors of this praxis.

It is the *simultaneity*, or in even stronger terms, *the unity* of human transformative practice on the one hand, and the process of becoming (and being) human and of knowing oneself and the world on the other, that is conveyed in the TAS. Human beings come to be themselves and come to know their world and themselves *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 realize their development *in the agentive enactment of changes that bring the world, and simultaneously their own lives, including their selves and minds, into reality.*

Therefore, it is the process of co-creating, co-authoring, and inventing social practices and the world itself, all embodied in the struggle to change the world and the ways in which it is shaping us — in the acts of taking a stand, staking a claim, making a commitment, and claiming a position; and thus coming to know and to exist, while working and laboring to realize them — that is rendered foundational to human development and subjectivity. That is, the core constituent of human development and teaching-learning is posited to consist

in taking stands and staking claims on ongoing events, conflicts and contradictions in view of the goals, commitments, and aspirations for the future — the process of *making up one's mind* as literally a process through which human subjectivity, including mind, and processes of teaching-learning, come about and which they are made up of. From this position, psychological processes have to do with people *authorially taking up* social practices, in contributing to changing them, by individuals qua actors of society and history in always creative, novel, agentive, and transformative — that is, *activist* — ways.

The term *activism* conveys the sense that all individuals and communities are immersed within, and are always contributing to, not just the neutral contexts or environments that somehow peacefully “surround” them. Instead, human development is part and parcel of the unfolding drama and struggle that constitute the world infused with conflicts and contradictions, dilemmas, and challenges — which even in their daily expressions and everyday contexts are always about the struggle for transformation of the world (cf. critical pedagogy).

From this position, not only are agency and human subjectivity this-worldly parts of the natural world (as claimed already by James [33]), but the world and reality are not some neutral, unitary, unchanging realms separate from us. Instead, the world is imbued with human dimensions including struggle, rupture, disputability, contestation, commitment, and imagination. Importantly, the primary emphasis is on struggle and striving — on people *en-countering*, *con-fronting*, and overcoming the circumstances and conditions that are not so much given as *taken up* by people within the processes of actively grappling with them and, thus, realizing and bringing them forth in striving to change and transcend them.

This approach insists that any contact or encounter with the world has a form not of a neutral relationality and rationality but of active (and also emotional and passionate) striving and struggle, even confrontation. Therefore, from the TAS position, people do not just find themselves within the conditions and circumstances of the world. Any contact with the world is only possible based in people playing partial, even “partisan,” roles and occupying non-neutral positions, directly implicating issues of power and social antagonism but also, and equally importantly, issues of belonging and care. In this sense, reality is not “given” — rather, it is *taken* by persons as social actors, that is, as community members who are simultaneously creating themselves and the world — always in collaboration with others and with the tools that communities provide. More precisely, one could say that *reality is given in the act of taking it.*

The key premise in setting up this approach is that human agency in carrying out and realizing changes in the shared, communal practices of the social world is a natural part of the material reality and the key dimension of ontology and epistemology of human development and the mind. Within the broadly transformative-dialectical worldview, human agency

and subjectivity — including hope, imagination and commitment — find their place not merely as linked to social practices, but as themselves a transformative material-semiotic process that emerges as part (or dimension, layer) within the matrix of social practices and makes this matrix possible. That is, all forms of human subjectivity are understood to be a genuine part of our world — embedded within and composed of the material fabric of social practices, as full events of social praxis imbued with histories and meanings. This means that subjectivity is simultaneously a form of acting, knowing and being by people collaborating in active pursuits of social transformations. In this rendition, the mind is posited to be not ontologically distinct from, though not identical with, the other processes of people engaging with their world (based in elaborations of L.S. Vygotsky's and A.N. Leontiev's ideas).

This approach avoids the extremes of mentalist views that limit the mind and agency to individual mental constructs, neuronal processes in the brain, and computation or information processing — even if these are acknowledged to be embodied and situated in context and augmented with external tools. However, it also overcomes limitations of relational approaches — including ecological, dynamic, distributed, situated, and embodied cognition theories, and theories of participatory and situated learning — that fuse the mind with the context and relatively disregard agency and other forms of human subjectivity. The intention is to open ways to advancing a fully non-mentalist, situated, and dynamic approach to mind and agency while also capitalizing on their transformative power and relevancy in realizing communal forms of social life and human development.

Instead of conclusions: Agency and the Covid-19 pandemics

The current situation with the pandemic is a magnifying lens with which to address the dramatic and drastic social dynamics — at the nexus of collective and individual layers of social practices and with human agency at the forefront — that typically remain hidden from view. At a first glance (for many in the general public and even among policy-makers, unfortunately, this remains the only glance), the pandemic is caused and driven by purely biological forces that have spawned and then spread a new virus, Covid-19, due to virus jumping from animals to people, subsequently attacking vast human populations and unleashing havoc around the globe. However, nothing can be farther from the truth in terms of the actual scope, driving forces, contingences, and complexities of the processes at the core of the pandemic. In particular, all pandemics are very far from being just, or merely, biological — in fact, they are and have always been geopolitical, historical, financial, and sociocultural. That is, *pandemics are phenomena and products*

of human practices, the fruits of our own doing. This does not mean that viruses are not real or that they are literally man-made (as some conspiracy theories speculate). Instead, this means that a pandemic cannot be brought down to, nor explained, by biological factors as such, taken *alone*, since it is what people do, their collective practices unfolding in history, that is the core reality at stake in the pandemic. These collective practices are the “fabric”³ into which biological factors are absorbed to then be reassembled and refashioned in their effects and relevancy *within* this fabric and in line with its dynamics and driving forces. As Lavell et al. [38] formulate, “In the same way that people do not die from earthquakes but from poorly designed and constructed houses that fall when strong earthquakes strike, the disasters and catastrophes currently enveloping the public health systems in many countries..., and their social and economic consequences cannot be understood only as a consequence of a virus.”

First of all, a virus “jumping” from animals to people (an official expression in epidemiology) is not a common event and, counterintuitively, it happens predominantly due to human activities, such as animal habitat erosion and destruction of various ecosystems. The emergence and spread of zoonoses (human infections of animal origin) has to do with industrial-scale farming and the resulting destruction of millions of small farms. Through these and other human practices such as urbanization, road-building, mining and so on, “we have created a global, human-dominated ecosystem that serves as a playground for the emergence and host-switching of animal viruses...” [45].

Second, the specific effects of the virus and its advancement to the pandemic level are, too, directly contingent on a variety of effects and contexts of human practices (drawing on [38]). While Covid-19, as a sickness, or the capacity of health systems, can be analysed from the perspective of public health and medical science only, they are also, and quite critically, “the materialization of socially produced risk in time and in space” (ibid.). Actually, the infectious agent (virus) per se is not a direct hazard, unless it is transported and spread in ways that expose large numbers of people. With the current pandemic, it is quite obvious that the vector that spreads the virus is directly attributable, chiefly, to global air travel. There is a plausible hypothesis that the rapid spread of virus “would not have been possible except through the increasingly dense network of transport corridors and air routes that connect territories, countries and continents and with China at the centre of many global supply and value chains” (ibid.) — with globalization and the move of much industrial production into China away from many countries, especially the US, as the major culprit.

Third, the impact of the virus is also mediated through the territorial structure of societies and their social and cultural patterns (building from ibid.). For

³ As in the expression *The fabric of cosmos*, see book with this title.

example, in the proximity conditions of people living in crowded, densely populated areas and mostly using public transport, exposure to Covid-19 is dramatically magnified. Fourth, individual health vulnerabilities (e.g., previous illness, low immunity etc.) are known to exacerbate virus effects. However, there are many vulnerability factors that are socially constructed, for example, through dietary habits, cultural acceptance and accessibility of substances such as alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, and lack of physical exercise, among others. Finally, and most drastically, there seems to be a close relationship between vulnerability to Covid-19 and vectors of socio-politically constructed daily risks such as unemployment, lack of income, addictions, social and personal insecurity, poor housing and habitat, a lack of access to basic services (water or drainage) and, quite critically, an absence of health and social protection. As Lavell et al. [38] state, “Social construction of vulnerability is also concatenated with lack of access to and the quality of public health services. Being able to rapidly access good quality and affordable health care can quite dramatically reduce vulnerability. ... In the United States, there are broad sectors of society that simply do not have access to public or private health services due to lack of insurance and due to not being entitled to paid sick leave.”

Thus, what people suffer from with the current pandemic is not merely a new virus attacking us but a complex and multi-layered, socio-economically and politically-historically constructed reality within which the virus is impacting people the way it does. This is a human-made pandemic and its effects are far from restricted to biological factors. What is at stake here is not some fleeting phenomenon of an airy, fanciful social construction as this notion is often interpreted in the sense of such construction being unreal and intangible, made up in our minds only and fully at our whim. On the contrary, socially constructed phenomena such as the current pandemic are actually as solid, substantial, and consequential as it gets; in a sense, they are *more real than real*, if reality is reduced to rigid thing-like entities impacting us from outside and irrespective of our own social practices and actions. The pandemic is also clearly beyond any one person’s control and will as it is contingent on socio-politically and economically coordinated policies and actions. The outcomes of the present struggle come down to our collective agency, ingenuity, and creativity — or, as the late Nobel laureate Joshua Leder-

berg observed, “It’s our wits versus their genes” (meaning the viruses’ genes; see [45]).

However, the role of individual agency in the pandemic has also been highlighted with unusual clarity. Although the solutions, to reiterate, can only be found in collective actions and policies, the pandemic also gives us a chance to recognize that our health and lives are completely and inextricably linked to our fellow human beings and all of humanity. This is a situation where it is truly obvious that everyone matters and makes a difference, for everyone else, across far and wide contexts and circumstances. In particular, as one illustration, it has been shown that one person with the coronavirus passes it on average onto three people, and those three people pass onto three more people and so on (based on current data, estimates can change with subsequent analysis and more data collected). If this continues for ten cycles, as it often does, there will be 59,000 infections stemming from one person (for a drastic visual illustration, visit <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/3/26/21193851/coronavirus-covid-19-staying-home-social-distancing>). As Montgomery, director of the Institute for Human Health and Performance at University College London, puts it, “If you are irresponsible enough to think that you don’t mind if you get the flu, remember it’s not about you, it’s about everybody else,” illustrating the importance of self-isolating to slow the spread of the Covid-19 disease around the world (ibid.).

The pandemic has brought home the message as to an extraordinary responsibility we bear toward each other and the future, our role in all the events including catastrophic ones that we encounter and co-create, and how this responsibility and the future we are creating together depends on each and everyone. Indeed, in beautiful words of Martin Luther King Jr., “all mankind is tied together, all life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” [35]. At the same time and simultaneously, as emphasized in this paper (and argued throughout my works), it is also the case that everybody matters, and people are not only agents of communal practices for whom “things matter” and who are faced with the challenges of a rapidly changing society, but *who themselves matter in history, culture, and society* — being directly implicated in and co-authoring everything that is going on, including how societies are changing, now and in the future.

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Критические проблемы в культурно-исторической теории деятельности: неотложность субъектности

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Статья посвящена проблеме осмысления субъектности (agency) в контексте недихотомического, диалектического подхода, в рамках которого уделяется полное внимание социальным корням субъектности и подчеркивается её статус как достижение совместности, возможное лишь в мире разделенном с другими. Существенные шаги в этом направлении предпринимаются в рамках теории «трансформирующей позиции активизма» (TAS), предложенной автором настоящей статьи и разрабатываемой

многими исследователями из разных стран. Этот подход уходит корнями в культурно-историческую теорию деятельности и в то же время выходит за её пределы, позволяя преодолеть некоторые её ограничения. В статье раскрываются ключевые положения TAS, показано, как они фокусируются на сплетении в единую цепь социальных практик ко-конструирования человека и мира. Субъектность является процессом, запускающим эту цепь непрерывных социоиндивидуальных трансформаций, в которых люди симультанно, в едином процессе, совместно конструируют мир и самих себя таким образом, что каждый человек вносит свой вклад и оказывается значимым в совокупном пространстве социальных практик. Этические и политические следствия TAS обсуждаются с целью преодолеть наследие пассивности и неравенства, по-прежнему пронизывающих психологию и смежные области.

Ключевые слова: трансформация, сплетение социальных практик, Выгосткий, этика, политика, онтоэпистемология, равенство.

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