

Theory for and as Social Practice of Realizing the Future: *Implications from a Transformative Activist Stance*¹²

Anna Stetsenko¹³, PhD

Abstract

There is a pressing need today for alternative models of science – at the intersection of theory, methods, and practice – that abandon claims to “objectivist” scientism with its notion of knowledge as a mirror-reflection of reality and its belief in “raw” facts disconnected from human practices. The challenge, at the same time, is to move beyond postmodernist approaches marked by relativist indecision, self-defeating skepticism, and lack of activist positioning. This article offers steps in elaborating such an alternative in building and critically expanding on insights from Vygotsky’s project. What is suggested is a model of science as a nonneutral, transformative activist endeavor that transcends the separation between theory and practice while embracing human agency grounded in political imagination and commitment to social transformation.

Key words: Transformative; Activist; Social Practice; Sociocultural

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¹³ Professor at The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY)

Introduction

Central to a transformative activist stance is the shift away from the notion that people are merely *situated* in the world, and in need of adapting to it, as recipients of external stimuli, or passive hosts of brain chemistry and information processing, or products of culture shaped by social structures and processes. The alternative broad premise is that people are agentive co-creators not only of their own lives and development, but also of the very world which they collaboratively create just as they are themselves interactively created, in a dynamically recursive and bidirectional process, by their own creative and agentive acts of collaboratively realizing the world. The deliberate, goal-directed, and purposeful *transformation* of the world based in a commitment to social change, therefore, is taken as the foundation for human development, encompassing processes of being, doing, and knowing.

What lies beneath this conceptual shift is a strong refutation of the ethos of adaptation (so far not sufficiently challenged within sociocultural scholarship) that takes the “givenness” of the world for granted and assumes that individuals have to fit in, each on one’s own, with its status quo while competing with others for its resources. The alternative model, termed “transformative activist stance” (TAS) (see Stetsenko 2012, 2010, 2008 and for application, Vianna and Stetsenko 2011) is premised on the sociopolitical ethos of solidarity and equality that counters principles of adaptation as the core grounding for human development. In place of adaptation, the TAS predicates ontology and epistemology on the notion of moving beyond the status quo and enacting the future through agentive contributions to collaborative practices carried out across the dimensions of the past, the present, and the future at the intersection of individual and collective agency. In capitalizing on social transformation and activist agency, the TAS revives the abiding urgency of the struggle for a better future and, moreover, theorizes such a struggle as ontologically and epistemologically central to all forms of human being, doing, and knowing. This approach follows with the critical tradition that connects theorizing with politically engaged activism (e.g., Freire 1970; for details, see Stetsenko and Arievitch, 2004) and joins in with the efforts to provide an antidote to the cynical relativism and political quietism.

Landscape

There have been many important advances in recent critical scholarship encompassing feminist, critical race, (dis)ability and post-colonial theories, critical literacy, postmodernist, hermeneutical, and Marxist frameworks, sociocultural and Vygotskian approaches, critical pedagogy and participatory action research, among others. One of the central achievements

of this diverse scholarship, in fact conceptually unifying its various strands (their differences at other levels notwithstanding), contests the centuries old objectivist canon according to which the pursuit of knowledge is a value-neutral endeavor independent of practices, histories, and contexts of its production. Common to many of these perspectives indeed is the premise about the entanglement of knowledge with the practices of its production, inclusive of dimensions such as

historically evolved power differentials, culturally situated interests, political values, and ideological positions.

However, there remain ambiguities and tensions, especially pertaining to the question of how knowledge claims can be evaluated in terms of accuracy, reliability, and validity. The continuing conundrum is that, on one hand, it is clear (after decades of work in critical scholarship) that a one-to-one correspondence between reality and knowledge posited by objectivist science leads to intractable problems. On the other hand, the position that knowledge is situated within practices, organized by discursive resources, and therefore contingent, contextually relative, and historically specific, has come to be associated, especially in postmodernism, with the view that it is impossible to discern among competing knowledge claims and justify choice among them to ground social actions. Although groundbreaking and progressive in many respects, various strands within critical scholarship lead to relativism and radical indeterminacy that are ontologically mute and politically indecisive. Most critically, these works do not provide grounds for how knowledge claims could be justified if it is understood that they are not impartial and instead, *de facto*, always pursue specific interests and agendas. As a result, insofar as researchers accept that values, interests, and power dynamics permeate knowledge, they still are facing (and themselves grapple with) the charge of ideological partiality that is considered to be incompatible with the traditionally understood “objective” science.

Emblematic of this conundrum is that the notion of *experience* used as central in many perspectives is too strongly tied to what is going on in the present and does not sufficiently engage future-oriented dimensions of human practices. Experience and related notions of interpretation, dialogue, and situativity of knowing have been important in challenging traditional “objectivist” models and accounts. Yet these notions require further critical elaboration to more resolutely break away from the idea that individuals need to adapt to what is “given” in the present in order to develop and learn. The notion of participation (Lave and Wenger 1991) only partly revokes this connotation because it implies similar dynamics of persons being *situated* in present community practices, rather than transforming and transcending these practices in creating a different future.

Moreover, many researchers, including those in the Vygotskian tradition, have been reluctant to ally themselves with any explicit political position (for examples, see Prilleltensky 1997; Stetsenko and Arievitch 2004), apparently believing that this would tie them to dogmatic approaches. As a result, critical approaches are still often ridden with anxiety that adopting goals (*telois*, endpoints) may lead to “partisan politics” and thus, not meet the expectations of stakeholders (Penuel and O’Connor 2010). Ambiguity is evident in that researchers are often merely satisfied to *accept* that our knowing is from a perspective, calling on researchers to articulate and pay attention to what is seen as partialities presumed somehow to saturate or even “pollute” research and knowledge. The assumption is that researchers

cannot escape perspectival “blind spots” and have to live with what is understood to be an unavoidable limitation imposed on knowing and doing research.

In order to provide strong foundations for nonneutral positions, since “objective” foundations and warrants for knowledge are rejected, a radically revised ontology and epistemology, and a general worldview that embeds them, are required. Critical scholarship that wants to pursue social change and action beyond those of interpretation, description, and deconstruction, requires a worldview that implicates knowledge as perspectival (not value and politics free), yet provides grounds for adjudicating among knowledge claims while legitimizing how people come to form accurate and veridical, albeit neither disinterested nor incontestable, knowledge of the world.

Vygotsky’s Project

In many ways, Vygotsky’s project – conceived and implemented in the crucible of a radical revolutionary project in Russia in the early 20th century – predated many of the later developments in critical and postmodernist frameworks. In fact, it remains unique in the history of psychology for its clear grounding in dialectical materialist philosophy and its commitment to ideals of social justice and equality directly embodied in its theoretical tenets, methodology, and practical applications. The profound saturation of Vygotsky’s project by these ideals and the sociopolitical ethos at its core (often ignored in contemporary interpretations) makes it relevant and applicable within current

struggles, of great urgency given the current sociopolitical and economical crisis, to improve social practices, especially in education.

The unique vision on human development, mind, and learning developed within the cultural-historical school has radical, and quite contemporary, implications for theory and methodology that resonate with critical scholarship today. In particular, this project evolved as a value-laden, collaborative endeavor immersed in the sociopolitical practices of its time, came to embody these practices, and ultimately contributed to them through its participants’ civic-scholarly activism. Indeed, rather than being confined to an “ivory tower” of purely academic pursuits, Vygotsky and his followers were directly engaged in practical endeavors, first and foremost in policies of reorganizing the national system of education and devising special programs for the homeless, poor, and children with special needs. This engagement situated Vygotsky and his colleagues directly at the epicenter of highly charged sociopolitical practices of the time, as immediate participants and actors (Vygodskaya and Lifanova 1996), turning their pursuits into a unique blend of theory, practice, ideology, and politics (Stetsenko and Arievidch 2004). Participants of this project worked not on abstract ideas, but rather, on developing theory in the midst of advancing new approaches for a society that *itself was in the process of being created* – under the aegis of an emancipatory agenda rooted in ideals of social justice and equality (the subsequent retreat from this agenda notwithstanding). One of the immediate goals

was to provide equal access to education for *all* children, especially those with special needs and from underprivileged backgrounds.

This goal was directly coupled with the stance of solidarity and egalitarianism—an unwavering belief in fundamental human equality that knows no boundaries imposed by nature yet requires cultural supports and mediations interactively provided by others for it to be realized. It is likely the embedding of this project within the highly turbulent context of an unprecedented sociopolitical turmoil and transformation – spanning two revolutions, World War I, and a civil war – that opened up the opportunity for its participants to take a uniquely activist stance attuned to immediate realities of human struggles and dramatic expressions of human agency at the nexus with historical change. In actively and agentively contributing to ongoing social transformation, in a direct link to creating new radical alternatives in the conditions of social existence, especially education, this project de facto challenged traditional models of science steeped in the ethos of adaptation.

Participants of this project did not explicitly address ideological-political issues and the embedding of their project within transformative social practices of their time, nor how their own commitments, values, and ideology were parts of their theory and methodology. Yet, Vygotsky elaborated a number of critical elements for a new model of psychology premised on activism and the ethos of solidarity and equality. These elements included (by way of a brief account for a lack of space): (1) insistence on cultural-

historical origins of mind in shared and collaborative, culturally mediated activity and on psychological processes being co-constructed by interacting individuals relying on historically evolved cultural resources within the ever-shifting and dynamic zones of proximal development, (2) the notion of disability as a socially constructed phenomenon contingent on access to requisite cultural tools for development, and (3) the positing of practice to be the linchpin of knowledge and science. In this conception, the mind and its products, such as knowledge (and other forms of human subjectivity traditionally understood as an inward “mentation”), were conceived of as forms of social activity – initially always intersubjective, that is, carried out as *inter-actions* that only gradually are turned into intrasubjective *actions* that have their antecedents, constituents, and consequences in material social practice. Also remarkable was Vygotsky’s nontraditional model of experimentation that eschewed a moral order of disinterestedness and distance central to so-called “objective experimentation” (cf. Morawski 1994). Instead of copying reality and striving to disclose it “as it is,” this model actively and intentionally created artificial conditions to co-construct the very processes under investigation in order to study them in the act of co-construction via cultural mediation. The radical crux of this approach was captured by Leontiev, whose words were conveyed by Bronfenbrenner (1977: 528), a scholar directly and profoundly influenced by Vygotsky’s project, in concluding remarks of his influential work:

It seems to me that American researchers are constantly seeking to explain how the child came to be what she is; we [however]...are striving to discover not how the child came to be what she is, but *how she can become what she not yet is*. (emphasis added)

This approach thus posited a number of principles and above all, directly *embodied* and *enacted* in its own realization, a model of science that does not fit with the exclusively positivist goal to provide a naturalistic account of human development based on a “view from nowhere.” Instead, its paramount goal can be interpreted to be about overcoming the separation between scientific exploration, on one hand, and an ideological-critical orientation and emancipatory action, on the other. In this work, theory and methodology were developed in close (though implicit) alliance with an ideology and an ethics of social justice and equality in order to make possible a practical intervention into the course of human development as the pathway to social change. This project, in other words, laid the grounds for a novel type of psychology with a new mission. This was a psychology devoted not to pursuit of knowledge per se, but to creating knowledge as part and parcel of larger scale projects that self-consciously commit to and participate in creating new forms of social life and communal practices.

Transformative Activist Stance

Vygotsky's project thus outlined a number of conceptual premises that can be used in elaborating models of science attuned to activism and social change. Moreover, coupling these premises with an account of how this project came to be enacted in its own implementation as an activist contribution to radical social change

suggests a number of ways to advance a model of science as a transformative endeavor of an activist nature. In articulating and furthering this approach, the transformative activist stance elaborates an ontology and an epistemology that put a premium on the broad goals and visions of what researchers aim to achieve and contribute to – as their *endpoints*. The notion of endpoints represents an important addition to that of standpoints (Harding 1991; for further discussion, see Stetsenko 2008).

Central to transformative ontology and epistemology is the notion of the dual and ceaseless dynamics at the *shifting nexus* of people collaboratively transforming their world while bringing it into existence through the very process of agentively contributing to collaborative and communal modifications of existing realities. Although the notion of transformation is very familiar to scholars in the critical tradition and especially honored in Marxism, its radical implications at all levels of theorizing, including about the process of knowledge production and its warrants, have not been fully addressed. Working out this premise is fraught with difficulties – philosophical as well as political and ethical ones. Many critical and postmodernist scholars associate this premise with the legacy of perpetuating oppressive social structures and policies. This requires that conditions for reinstating this premise within a dialectical-transformative worldview (rather than a mechanistic and even a contextualist-relational one), underpinned by notions of social change and activism and by ideals of social equality and solidarity, be carefully worked out.

The suggested twin assumptions of the TAS that expand on Vygotsky's project are that, first, the world is dynamic, fluid, and constantly changing (this assumption is broadly shared in critical scholarship); moreover and most critically, the world is understood as changing through people's own activities and activist contributions to their communities and practices. The world therefore is a continuous process that is turned into an actuality through human action (Stetsenko 2012) and made *real* to the extent that it is *real*-ized (to borrow the expression from Castañeda 2002) by people themselves, in their day-to-day lives, struggles, and pursuits. Therefore, human beings are agentive actors who *co-create* their worlds and their futures, the very reality they live in as they transformatively realize (enact and embody) this reality through their own acts and deeds, thus always incurring changes in the status quo, rather than merely adapting to what exists in the present.

Second, in collectively realizing changes in the world, human beings themselves come into existence precisely through these very acts of their social agency and activism, that is, in and through them coming to matter in the world understood as a dynamic flow of social practices.

Ontologically, the assumption is that the world is not just "given" in its status quo, as a fixed and static structure "out there" that exists independently of us and unfolds on its own grounds, no matter what we do. Instead, the world is seen as historically evolving, that is, continuously changing and constantly moving

because of what people do in their collaborative practices and enactments of social life.

Thus, the world is understood as being "in the making" and moreover, not on its own, but in *the making by people*, that is, as composed of collaborative practices to which all individuals qua social actors contribute in their own unique ways. Reality, therefore, is seen as an *arena of social practices*, enacted through individually unique acts and deeds that, at the same time, are profoundly social. A related assumption is that human beings do not preexist social transformative practices to then join in with and adapt to them. Instead, human beings are "always already" constituted by social practices that are formative of their lives and development, yet by those practices as they are carried out and constantly transformed by people *themselves* in their own pursuits and efforts at becoming.

Epistemologically, the process of knowing is understood to be contingent on activist involvements in, and contributions to, collaborative transformative practices. This is in line with the well-known Marxist maxim that in order to know the world, we have to change it. This maxim is extended by highlighting that because change is impossible without an orientation to the future, a commitment to a destination of one's projects and pursuits indelibly colours the process of knowing in all of its dimensions and expressions. Thus, knowing is fully reliant on how we position ourselves vis-a-vis ongoing social practices and their historically evolved structures and conflicts (reliant on our knowledge of these practices and their histories).

Yet such positioning is possible in light of how we imagine the future and what we take “ought to be.”

Human development, in this approach, is a constant work-in-progress by people who simultaneously create the world and, in and through these creative acts of change, also bring themselves into existence. In other words, development is a collaborative achievement of an activist nature in that it relies upon people forming and carrying out their future-oriented agendas and projects of social transformation. These agendas centrally involve taking an activist stance grounded in a vision, or “endpoint,” of how present community practices *ought* to be changed and, thus, what kind of future *ought* to be created. The key point is that our practices and therefore our reality (coterminous with our own becoming) is already shaped, or tailored, to a future that is sought after and posited as desirable and necessary – and not as an abstract notion, but rather, as something one commits to and *brings into reality*. The future, therefore, never simply awaits us, but instead, is created by our own actions in the present – through even seemingly mundane deeds by common people in their ordinary lives (implying that actually *no* deed is completely mundane, *no* person completely common, and *no* life completely ordinary). This horizon of where people strive to get to, this “yet to come” reality, therefore, is taken as no less real than anything going on in the present.

The transformative ontology and epistemology posit that we live in the world that we ourselves create, through social practices and while relying on cultural tools, always in relations with other

human beings and in view of the goals and endpoints that we imagine and also to which we aspire and commit. Therefore, knowledge too – embedded in and derivative of social practices, in the presently existing conditions and their contradictions that are only understandable in light of their historical unfolding (as broadly acknowledged in critical scholarship) – is at the same time, and most critically, premised on and constituted by a projection into the future. That is, knowledge is constituted by our activities not merely in the “here and now,” but at the intersection of the past, the present, and the future. Knowing, as all forms of social practice, is understood to be ontologically determined by *acts of transformation* in the connotation of creating novelty and moving beyond the given, of transcending the status quo, rather than by passive processes of people being situated, merely dwelling in, or experiencing the world (as the ethos of adaptation implies).

The suggested approach of the TAS bears some similarity to, yet is not identical with, other notions that also tap into the future such as addressivity (Bakhtin 1986) and prolepsis (Cole 1996) that both draw attention to the future as already existing in and affecting the present. The difference, however, is that whereas both prolepsis and addressivity highlight that the future is anticipated and even posited as if it *already obtains*, the TAS notion of commitment to the future, predicated on what one believes ought to be, is more agential and purposive.

The focus on commitment suggests that persons do not so much expect or anticipate the future, but

rather, *actively work and struggle* to bring this future into reality through their own deeds, even if the future is not anticipated as likely and instead, requires struggle and active striving, often against the odds, to achieve it. This refers to persons and communities struggling for their ideals, for what “ought to be,” thus bringing the future into the present in spite of the powerful forces that are pulling in other directions, that is, while resisting and overcoming the present in its status quo, power hierarchies, and contradictions. The notion of commitment, therefore, is agentic and ethically valuational because it entails *struggle for the future* rather than merely its anticipation.

The resulting model follows a long tradition in critical scholarship that links understandings of human development to value-laden conceptions about self and society, exemplified in Freire’s works. The TAS highlights that it is precisely the envisioned endpoint of social practices – such as fundamental human equality and equal access to resources – that forms the key to the model of human development and sciences that study it across dimensions of theory, methodology, and practice. The complex dialectic implied in this premise is that it is impossible to imagine a possible future unless we have located ourselves in the present and its history; however, the reverse is also true in that we cannot locate ourselves in the present and its history *unless* we imagine the future and commit to creating it.

Marx treated knowledge as inherently related to the practical realization of human ideals, with pursuit of each serving the other. While the implication about close ties, and in fact an

ontological blending, of theory and practice is one aspect of this position, its other emphasis is on the centrality of ideals, or endpoints. To highlight this, it is useful to return to the unique blending of theory and practice within Vygotsky’s project to address how in fact this blending was made possible by this project’s reliance on overarching ideological commitment and endpoint.

The ideological vision at work in Vygotsky’s project had to do with a commitment to creating psychology for a society in which all individuals are fundamentally equal and where each one attains freedom and autonomy in and through contributing to the freedom and autonomy of others, thus blending one’s self-realization with that of others in a truly collaborative and solidaristic endeavor.

Two interrelated themes that can be inferred from his works are important here. The first one is Vygotsky’s passionate egalitarianism – the idea about the inalienable and profound equality of people, including the implication that all students have unlimited potential to learn with no rigidly preimposed “natural” constraints or *ceiling*. No limits, putatively imposed by some “indomitable nature,” such as believed to be expressed in genes, are in principle set on the outcomes of development and learning in advance of learners engaging with the world and in disregard of them getting access to (or being deprived of) *adequate cultural supports*. Although individual differences exist and are especially pronounced by the time children get to school, these differences result from interactions with the environment and are thus contingent on what the environment has or

has not offered by way of cultural mediation and support. Because development and learning are thoroughly contingent on cultural tools provided by society, no biological endowment (natural predispositions) can be evoked to account for, let alone justify, failure or success in development and learning by either groups or individuals.

The second theme is the imperative of a dynamic connectedness and ineluctable sociality of people as beings who only come to be through collaborative endeavors conducted together with, and through, the merged efforts with other human beings – as implied in the notions of shared practices and cultural mediation. Vygotsky was involved in the radical project of creating theory and research for a new society that was supposed to create conditions for setting individuals free. Yet freedom was seen as coming about, in line with the Marxist ethos, only if individuals are provided with the social and cultural tools for their development and only if they achieve their own freedom through contributing to the larger societal project of achieving freedom *for all*. Thus, individual freedom was seen as a condition that can be attained only together, in tandem and collaboration with other people, while using tools that society provides, and on the condition of coordinating the goals of individual and collective freedom. In thus placing egalitarianism and solidarity together, Vygotsky, like Marx before him, can be interpreted to associate human freedom with our dependency upon each other for our very existence and development, while inserting the quest for equality and solidarity right into the midst of the active project of seeking freedom. In this sociopolitical ethos, the concepts

of freedom and solidarity are coordinated and rendered simultaneously political, ontological, and epistemological.

It is arguably this ethos that underlies and marks the uniqueness of Vygotsky's project. Most remarkably, this notion of equality (still radical by today's standards) is used in a dual way, serving as both a presupposition for, and a product of, research and theory building. On the one hand, it is derived from an ethical-political commitment to social equality taken as *an ideal* that underwrites and guides theory and explorations into human development and learning. On the other hand, this ethos and its principles are arrived at in the course of a systematic study of human development along dimensions of history, phylogeny, and ontogeny. These dual aspects in utilizing the notion of equality are not in contradiction because studying how things are is taken to be possible under a commitment to how things should be; that is, while overcoming the infamous "is" versus "ought" dichotomy.

Such an approach, counterintuitive from the standpoint of the traditional experimentation paradigm, is consistent with Vygotsky's notion that the methods and objects of investigation are always intimately linked with one another, whereby the methodology of research and its knowledge products are not ontologically separate but indivisibly merged as tools and results (Vygotsky 1997; see Newman and Holzman 1993, for a related but not identical interpretation). From this position, methodological tools, strategies, and techniques result not in the uncovering of facts "as they are" at the present

moment, but rather, in constructing phenomena and processes in nonneutral ways in line with researchers' epistemological and ideological commitments. The resulting broad dialectical framework itself is developed precisely with an intention for it to be part and parcel of practices, policies, and research grounded in ideals alternative to social Darwinism with its malignant belief in inborn inequalities and its emphasis on competition for resources in place of solidarity, coupled with a "testing mania" of educational strategies steeped in assess-and-control ideology.

This approach, therefore, does not take the ideal of equality as an abstract notion. Instead, it *takes a stand* on, and commits to, matters of equality as the first analytical step that leads all other methodological strategies and theoretical choices and, thus, attempts to *realize equality* in the process of knowledge building – with theory and knowledge themselves understood as not opposed to, nor separated from, larger sociopolitical practices and projects. This approach, therefore, consists in privileging the act of taking a stand on matters of sociopolitical and cultural-historical significance.

In this approach, the questions "Who is talking?" and "What is the location from which one is talking?", highlighted as central in all critical scholarship, are augmented by the "What for?" question that addresses the purposes, goals, and endpoints as central to doing science. This is the question as to what our scientific endeavors "do" in bringing about the future. These questions are embraced in elevating the demand to explicate

and reflect upon the endpoints and goals of science, which is understood as a facet of transformative practice, a form of doing that participates in the enactment and transformation of the real.

The strategy, in other words, is not to test the assumption of equality in some abstractly neutral, detached and "objective" sense but instead, to undertake efforts to provide conditions for *making this assumption true*, including at the level of supportive theoretical construction, as one of the steps in the overall project of creating equality in education (see Rancière 1991, on a related though not identical view). This approach departs from the traditional standards of objectivity as a study of "naked," brute facts disconnected from the histories, contexts, and practices that spawn and give them meaning. It also departs from understanding equality as a self-executing "given," attending instead to the need to bring about equality through *continuous efforts* of supporting, sustaining, and achieving it, including efforts at the level of theory building. That is, the approach is not so much to prove that all human beings are equal, as to work out a theory of human development and learning within an explicit quest to achieve equality and create conditions in which this can be done *under the assumption that equality ought and can be achieved*. This strategy epitomizes the TAS in its claim that the taking up of a stance on matters of social and political significance is the key onto-epistemological step and an inherent dimension in any investigation – as the foundational principle for human being, doing, and knowing.

The role of knowledge and theory, in this approach, is radically recast as they are turned into instruments of social practice imbued with activism and transformative change whereby research is carried out *not* with the neutral goal of uncovering what is “out there” in the world and somehow posited to exist independently from human practices, but rather, with the goal of creating and inventing new forms of social practices and human development. Knowledge is never about getting “impartial” facts about how things are, as broadly acknowledged in critical scholarship. What the TAS helps to clarify in addition, is that this is because things are already and constantly changing by the mere act of our presence (especially because our presence is never “mere”) and even more so, by our investigations, our posing questions and especially by envisioning things being otherwise and acting on these visions. Thus, our “access” (if this term is appropriate at all) to reality, being carried out through and in the form of active engagement that *creates* the world rather than mirrors it, is infused with our subjectivity – with goals, hopes, expectations, beliefs, biases, and commitments. That is, because we always act in pursuit of goals rather than mechanically react to the world as it “impinges” on us as if we were passive recipients of outside stimuli, the production of knowledge is profoundly contingent on what individuals and communities consider *should be* while actively realizing these commitments in the present. Moreover, because knowledge is seen as but one dimension within the ceaseless flow of social practices that constitute no less than reality itself, entwined with

processes of being and doing, producing knowledge is always an act of creating reality and inventing the future.

The TAS offers a way out of conundrums spawned by the rigid dichotomy of relativism versus objectivist fundamentalism and absolutism. Instead of this dichotomy, the methodology charted on the basis of Vygotskian and other activist scholarship such as Freire’s, suggests how *to relativize relativism itself* – a fair move given that relativism insists on relativity as the supreme lens and thus should itself be subjected to its major prescription. According to the TAS, people are “flagrantly partisan” (to use Deweyan expression) and so too is truth flagrantly partisan. But this does not make truth relative in any traditional sense, that is, not in the sense of various viewpoints and positions all being equal because they are all “equally relative,” that is, all partial, situated, and subjective. Instead, truth is historically and politically relative if viewed on the scale of infinite dynamics of human history, yet robust and concrete within a *historically particular epoch*, as defined by its specific predicaments that are determined, in no uncertain terms, by concrete sociocultural and political-economical conditions. These conditions are immediately accessible to anyone living in their midst, because these are processes that are carried out by people themselves in their own ongoing struggles and strivings, with these activities constituting no less than the fabric of human development and of the world itself. The truth about these contradictions and conflicts is therefore positively (not positivistically) and, in historical terms, concretely

(not universally) determinate. Truth is relative *vis-a-vis* practical projects and agendas of resolving existing conflicts and contradictions, such as a struggle by disadvantaged groups for equal access to resources. Yet within these historically concrete conditions, truth is far from relative; instead, it is strongly determinate and robustly concrete. For anybody experiencing first-hand or merely sharing and witnessing the plight of disadvantaged groups and individuals – and it is hard not to witness this plight given its powerful presence for anyone willing to see and feel – there is nothing relative about its urgency and truth and not much relative about the need to take a stand and a commitment on one or the other side in the struggle to overcome this plight.

Claims to knowledge and its validity are as determinate and robust as it gets, though only within the practical-political projects – defined by goals and visions for a better future – that spawn this knowledge and which purposes knowledge serves. This does not make claims to truth and warrants for knowledge any less valid – in the sense that this position constitutes not a relativity of truth but, on the contrary, *a truth of the relative* (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1994), such as the truth of struggling against inequality. That is, while any struggle is always historically and politically specific and contingent, it is also determinate and concrete within a given historical epoch that each “knows” its own truth (to use Sartre’s (1968) expression).

It is widely acknowledged in critical scholarship that knowledge is contextually and historically situated, and that only if we have gained insight

into the kind of historically situated reality to which knowledge is tied can we raise questions about its relevance and validity. To this claim, the more radical critical scholarship, including feminist writings (e.g., Harding 1991), adds that it is the subjugated who, through experiences of oppression, produce knowledge that is privileged to unmask the truth, such as prevalent social injustices. The TAS offers one addition to these important directions, namely that knowledge claims are contingent not only on presently existing conditions and their histories (hence the value of standpoint epistemology and historical ontology, the latter claimed by Foucault, cf. Chapter 11); knowledge claims are also, and perhaps most critically, contingent on the future-oriented projects that aim to overcome existing conditions and their injustices, carry out changes in the present community practices, and thus enact the future and realize it the present. Therefore, to interrogate knowledge claims in terms of their validity, it is imperative to interrogate and validate sociopolitical projects and movements that spawn and necessitate knowledge in the first place.

Thus, the critical matter in validating knowledge claims is to interrogate them in terms of what kind of a future they contribute to and whether they contribute to creating a society in which individuals are free to create themselves in pursuit of solidarity and equality. In this approach, truth is taken to be an essentially practical rather than purely philosophical matter. However, an additional specification is crucial. For pragmatists too, truth does not have to do with copying but rather, with coping with the world (Wood 2000).

Within the TAS developed on the grounds of Vygotsky's project, as suggested herein, this position can be accepted on a condition that coping with the world is recast away from connotations of adaptation to the status quo. Instead, coping needs to and can be replaced with the notion of activism as the process through which people actively and deliberately transform circumstances and conditions of their life in simultaneously creating their world and themselves.

It is within this radically revised notion of transformative social practice as the foundation of human existence that the warrants for knowledge and truth can be recast. In this perspective, truth is not established, nor found, but instead *created* in the course of ethical-political endeavors – including endeavors of research and theory building – of concretely realizing socially just conditions of life. Again, there is no place for relativity of truth in this approach – truth is not relative although it is not obtained through a direct correspondence with some putatively independent reality. Truth is obtained in, and as the process of, creating the world in overcoming its status quo. Knowing therefore is about neither copying the world, nor coping with it, but instead, about *creating the world and getting* to know its truth in the very act of bringing about transformative and creative *change* – in the act of making a difference in communal forms of life and thus mattering in them, and through this, of us coming to be and to know.

Conclusions

The model of science built on transformative ontology and epistemology steers a course between detached objectivism with its myopic rejection of human subjectivity and agency and blind faith in “naked” facts, on one hand, and relativism in which all is interpretation and no claims to validity of knowledge exist, on the other. The transformative activist stance is intentionally and consciously devised (hence the term *stance*) in ways that start from a set of values and goals (endpoints) and proceed to exploration and theory building under commitments to realizing these values and goals, as an intervention into the status quo.

Vygotsky (2004, 343) expressed an important insight when he stated that to master the truth about persons and persons themselves is impossible before humankind masters the truth about society and society itself. In further developing this view from the TAS, it can be argued that mastering truth about society and ourselves requires that we figure *out our stake* in society and its practices and commit to changing them.

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