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**Transforming Theory for a Transforming World: An Essay in Review of Anna Stetsenko's *The Transformative Mind: Expanding Vygotsky's Approach to Development and Education***

Chik Collins, Peter E. Jones and Marjorie McCrory

*"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old dies, but the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid phenomena appear."* Gramsci

*"Now is the time of monsters."* Žižek

**Abstract**

Critical social science has long struggled adequately to theorise social change and transformation. Today, however, the questions of the moment are perhaps more clearly than ever all about those things. In this gap arise profound challenges – both theoretical and political. Anna Stetsenko's *The Transformative Mind* (2017) offers a major contribution to the reorientation of critical social science – providing foundations which ground and catalyse our urges to make our humanity in the struggle to create new forms of social relating, worthy of our human nature.

**'Critical' Theory and Change**

Something significant happened in the thinking around the politics of change in the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Much of what was commonly called 'critical' social science (in 'Western Marxism', see Anderson, 1976) became focussed on explaining, not so much how 'emancipatory' change might come about, but how it was that existing social structures, power relationships and ideologies endured through 'reproduction'. Often, a key theme was the alleged 'incorporation' of the great masses of western societies into the 'dominant ideologies' of ruling elites and classes. It was by no means unusual for it to be argued that it was only really marginal groups of intellectuals or artists who were able to grasp the real power relations, and to think and act with some 'freedom'. The 'agency', whether of 'ordinary' individuals, or of great social movements, counted for little in the face of overwhelming power relations and 'enduring' structures which changed – if they changed at all – according to a logic of their own.

Around the same time, 'critical' theorists of the right, like Hayek and Friedman (see Klein, 2007), were asserting the opposite. People, both as individuals and as movements, provided with appropriate intellectual leadership, were more than capable of challenging prevailing ideologies and

wisdoms, of abolishing existing structures and conventions, and of recreating the world according to a new vision. Indeed, the thinkers of this 'new right' went further: not only was change possible, it was happening all the time. Detesting the Keynesian welfare state, they set out to impose their own desired, neoliberal, vision – there was to be 'no alternative'. They encountered fierce opposition from organisations and movements of the working class (trade unions, tenants groups, community organisations, etc) mobilising the language of equality and social justice – and showing little sign of 'incorporation' into either old or emergent 'dominant ideologies'.

Around that same time, a new kind of ostensibly 'left' thinking came to the fore. Postmodernists like Foucault and Lyotard (see Jameson, 1991) asserted the all-pervasiveness of dominant power and the virtual impossibility of 'emancipation'. They sought radically to undermine the belief that there could be any 'true' understanding of the world as a basis for projecting a robust vision of a 'better' one. Increasingly, at the same time, the thinking of the left was focused away from issues of class and economic injustice and toward questions of 'identity', 'diversity' and 'new social movements'. This latter was something that could itself ultimately be 'ideologically incorporated' into the new right agenda of neoliberalism – as what Fraser (2017) called "a liberal meritocratic politics of recognition".

Notwithstanding the opposition from working class organisations and movements, and no doubt assisted in various ways by aspects of both of the above-described currents of 'left' thinking, the neo-liberals achieved much of what they set out to do. However, what they set out to do was very remote from what they *said* they set out to do, or in fact actually did. They said they set out to realize the 'freedom of the individual' from 'tyranny', and to 'roll back the state' in the pursuit of 'free' markets which they claimed would achieve the best outcomes for societies. The reality was of the fulsome use of an increasingly interventionist and intrusive state, remaking wherever possible all aspects of social life in the interests of the rich and of business corporations. Generally reactionary on questions of morality, this was a form of 'regressive neoliberalism'.

This project, for all of its undoubted 'success', was always unstable – lurching from one crisis to the next. It was 'saved' at critical moments by becoming the new common sense of parties of the left in both the US and the UK – under Clinton and Blair. These parties embraced the belief that there was, indeed, 'no alternative', and aligned a limited "politics of recognition" along lines of gender, sexuality and race, with the political economy of the new right, using the cachet of the former to obscure and legitimise the extravagant expropriations of the latter. This was what Fraser called "progressive neoliberalism" (Fraser, 2017).

## Consequences and Responses

The consequences of neoliberalism proved to be disastrous in very many respects. Forced deindustrialisation, intensifying financialization and a far-reaching attack on the labour movement and social welfare generated a growing crisis of inequality, insecurity and indebtedness. The resulting financial crisis of 2007-2008, coming in the wake of disastrous US-led war against Iraq (itself fuelled by US fear of the rising threat to its global hegemony from China), led to a near-collapse of the global economic order. This was followed by the imposition of austerity and by intensifying forms of hyper-exploitation of the disempowered. Increasingly, people felt or feared the loss of what they had held, believed in, or hoped for in the future.

This in turn set the context for a veritable uprising against progressive neoliberalism across much of the world – from both the left and the right. People *en masse* have demanded change, sought to create change, and have hotly contested both rival visions of the future and road maps for getting there, for better or for worse. With the ascendancy of the likes of Trump in the USA and the Brexiteers in the UK, there has been no shortage of ‘the worse’ on show.

So much for the reproduction of enduring structures. In fact, for decades we have been living through what Berman (1983, p.15) described as “a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish” in which it been apparent that, to paraphrase Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, all that might have seemed solid has been ‘melting into air’ – pretty much all of the time.

All of this economic, social, and political turmoil has also been taken to a new level by the acknowledgement of human-induced climate change, with its many associated and anticipated disasters and other consequences, including desperate crises of migration, set only to intensify, and by the calamitous pollution of the earth’s environments (Wallace-Wells, 2019).

Just a few years ago it was not uncommon to observe that it seemed easier to envision the end of the world than the creation of a better one, because there was ‘no alternative’. More recently, the fact that there seemed no alternative *other than change* created at least some greater sense of possibility of something ‘better’. The questions of the moment became fundamentally all about change, about the future and about how people, as part of social groups and movements, envisioned the future and then sought to bring that future into being.

Some of those who are broadly of the left have seemed at times uncomfortable with all of this. Left 'intellectuals' (academics, journalists, commentators, activists, public figures, etc) have often been able to occupy comfortable positions within neoliberal regimes, as public critics of neoliberalism, but also as proponents of the "liberal meritocratic politics of recognition" aligned with it. The crisis of neoliberalism has generated a challenge to that particular politics from others, including those whose positions have for long been made much less comfortable by neoliberalism, and who, having been variously ignored, taken for granted and even abused by much of the left in the UK, the USA and elsewhere, have been recruited to varying degrees by the reactionary populism of Trump, the Brexiteers and by other forms of nationalism. Such reactionary populism is explicitly hostile not only to minorities, but also to intellectuals.

There has been a pretty clear failure of political leadership in all of this – recognised by many in the aftermath of the 2019 General Election in the UK. Whole communities, desperate for change and for the leadership to achieve it, were abandoned by too many on the left and almost driven – castigated in the words of Hilary Clinton as 'deplorables' – into the arms of the political right. But there has also been a substantial intellectual – even theoretical – failure. Enduring aspects of 'critical social science' – as described above – remain poorly suited to theorising real processes of change, or how it is that people as individuals, groups and movements contribute to creating it.

Next, enter the global Covid-19 pandemic and within weeks it transpires that all the relations and structures of the contemporary global capitalist economy are in fact completely negotiable. In the UK and the US, all that was required was a widespread, spontaneous public revulsion for the policy of sacrificing at least hundreds of thousands of lives to the 'well-being' of corporate capitalism. The *Morning Star* editorial argued the day the UK lockdown was announced (23<sup>rd</sup> March), that: "At the end of this episode in human history no practical measure which does not serve our collective wellbeing will be easily accepted." A week later (30<sup>th</sup> March), it could confidently be asserted that the failure of the US "to confront the coronavirus crisis with competence is undermining the global credibility of the capitalist model." And at the end of that same week the *Financial Times* (4<sup>th</sup> April) editorial board was calling for a new "social contract that benefits everyone". "Radical reforms", it continued, "reversing the prevailing policy direction of the last four decades – will need to be put on the table". It finished by calling for "true leaders" who would mobilise *now*, "beyond the public health war", to "win the peace".

Of course, we have heard things like this before, particularly in the midst of the 2008 banking collapse. Then right wing commentators had seemed to promise to revise their positions along more social democratic lines. In practice, something very different transpired – brutal austerity in the interest of the banks and the rich. Just *who* will mobilise in the post Covid-19 crisis world, how effectively, and who ultimately will “win the peace”, remains to be seen. There is no guarantee at all that the outcomes will be what many hope for – and the response of the UK Labour Party has to date been seriously inadequate.

### **The Challenge of Relevance**

Paraphrasing Gramsci, the regime of neoliberalism has been ostentatiously dying, and the shape of a new social order which is to replace it is far from settled. Morbid phenomena abound. The literal morbidity – and mortality – of Covid-19 takes this existing challenge and crystallizes it rather more dramatically. This, as Žižek cryptically put it, may now even more be ‘a time of monsters’, but if it is to have been an interregnum of monsters, rather than an extended period of history to come, then active engagement and political struggle focused on the reality of the existing change and in pursuit of a desirable – even, for many, *liveable* – future is essential. If critical social science is to have any value at all, it surely must be fundamentally orientated to the reality of this, theoretically equipped to engage with it, and practically able to contribute to it. Otherwise, it is irrelevant – or worse.

There are important strands of critical social science which are contributing in various ways. Yet, in doing so they are seeking to counter the huge weight of disciplinary tradition in the so-called ‘human sciences’ (psychology, sociology, linguistics, etc), which is premised, not on envisioning and actively creating the future, but on notions of *responsiveness, reactivity, adaptability, reproduction, appropriation and assimilation*. Countering that weight requires, surely, an explicit focus on the *fundamental* orientation of an alternative approach – in terms of both ontology and epistemology, and cognisant of the above-described context. This is precisely what is attempted by Anna Stetsenko in her recent book *The Transformative Mind: Expanding Vygotsky's Approach to Development and Education* (2017).

For many the name may be unfamiliar. At first glance, the author is a developmental psychologist interested in education, albeit of a somewhat heterodox persuasion. Stetsenko trained in the Soviet Union as part of the school formed by L. S. Vygotsky in the 1920s. She was taught by some of Vygotsky’s surviving collaborators before leaving for Europe and later for the City University of New York – where she has sought to develop and renew Vygotsky’s thinking. Thus the subtitle of the

book. Notwithstanding the heterodox approach, this is perhaps *not* where people might first look for a major contribution to the reorientation of critical social science as a whole, at a time of global crisis. It is, however, what the reader will find.

The work of Vygotsky and his collaborators in the early years of the Soviet Union was itself fundamentally orientated to change; to the dying of an old world and the active attempt to create a better one. The Vygotskians saw themselves as contributing to this – motivated by values of equality, freedom and social justice for all, regardless of class, race, creed, gender or disability. It has been widely recognized that there was very much more to this collaborative endeavour than what we would tend to see as ‘psychology’; thus the various terms which have been used at the time and since to indicate its distinctiveness (‘socio-historical’, ‘socio-cultural’, ‘cultural-historical’).

But Stetsenko’s contention is not that we find in Vygotsky some ready paradigm for orientating critical social science at another time of overwhelming change. Rather, it is that in expansively reconstructing Vygotsky’s legacy we are able to grasp that the process of actively contributing to the bringing of the future into being is not something that some human beings do just some of the time – or at some key moments in history. It is, in fact, what human beings, as part of the groups and communities to which they belong are always and everywhere actually doing. The world is in fact always being realised and recreated as a dynamic and continually evolving flow of social practices, through which human communities, and the people within them, simultaneously create and recreate themselves. This process, moreover, is one in which people, groups and communities are *motivated* by ideas, values and visions of how they want the world, and the future of their lives, to be. Of course, this is seldom a matter of consensus. Multiple and countervailing views, opinions and interests are generally present, especially on fundamental questions, and the political contest over these is often highly uneven. But it is in fact in and through this process that the world is continually changing and being re-created. Stetsenko’s further insight is that all our being, doing and knowing is inextricably part of this active and motivated process of human self creation. And that means all of the activity of research and science is inextricably part of it too.

Stetsenko’s claim is that Vygotsky saw and understood all of this, but not necessarily consistently and without the time to elaborate it appropriately – in the increasingly difficult circumstances of a life cut short at the age of 38 by tuberculosis. While Stetsenko is always respectful and appreciative of the work done by Vygotsky’s Soviet colleagues and later followers, and also of those who later assimilated and developed his legacy in the West (like Michael Cole, James Wertsch, Yrjö Engeström,

Mariane Hedegaard and others) she clearly believes that they fall short in grasping and realising the potential and relevance of that legacy. Over at least two decades she has made it her aim to rectify this, and *The Transformative Mind* is the culmination of that work – though not, she believes, any final word on the matter.

### **The Transformative Mind**

There is something of a tradition in the Vygotskian school that books have “mind” in the title. In this case, that is perhaps a bit unfortunate, or as Stetsenko (p.2) acknowledges, “somewhat narrow”. Her actual “focus is on the broader dynamics of human development and social practices of which the mind is an integral part and an inherent dimension”. Indeed, perhaps the title risks losing at least some of the much wider readership the book deserves.

Stetsenko begins by explaining that the theoretical challenge is not that concerns with social change, and human agency in producing it, are entirely absent from contemporary accounts of development and mind. Rather it is that these should be *more* than matters of ‘concern’:

“What picture results if change and transformation, and human agency in instigating them, rather than stability and finished orderliness of the world in its status quo to which people actively adapt, are taken as *the guiding principles and foundational premises (?)*” (p.1, emphasis and question mark added).

The picture, as previously indicated is, she argues, best provided through an “expansive reconstruction” of Vygotsky’s approach. The requirement for it is rooted, not in abstract theoretical challenges, but in the urgent need to challenge regressive theoretical positions which are tightly linked to the catastrophic politics of neo-liberal and corporate capitalism, and “closely associated with practices of inequality and injustice”. These include neo-Darwinian approaches which espouse “principles of a natural hierarchy of inborn capacities presumably fixed by biological inheritance” and promote both “competition for resources” and an “ethos of adaptation and passivity” in the face of ostensibly ‘given realities’ (pp.13-14) They include too forms of dichotomous thinking and hyper-individualism, which theoretically separate human beings from “the social dynamics of context, culture, history, activity and discourse” (p.3). And they include also pseudo-naturalist and pseudo-objectivist positions on ‘facts’ and ‘evidence’, ostensibly considered in separation from society, context and history (pp.42-3).

Many of the existing critiques of such approaches see human activity as ‘situated’, and as involving participation in, social contexts. Stetsenko insists on more, however, mapping out “a transition ... to ... a more active and activist stance implying that all acts of being, knowing and doing take place at the sites of ideological struggles and are part and parcel of such struggles” (p.11). Ultimately, this involves moving from notions of human activity as being *adaptive* to social contexts, *through* those of *participation in and contribution* to contexts, to the view that human activity fundamentally *creates and transforms contexts* at every level, based, vitally on people taking motivated, ethical and political “stands” in the world and in relation to its future. In other words, the ‘realities’ we face as human beings are never simply ‘given’ – as has often been presented even by many Marxists – but also always actively ‘taken up’, evaluated, re-imagined and changed in the activity of ceaselessly transforming the present and creating the future.

Over the ensuing 11 chapters – and nearly 400 pages – Stetsenko maps out this movement from ‘adaptationism’ to what she calls ‘the transformative activist stance’ (TAS). It is not possible here to do justice to the depth and the detail of the argument, or to the incredible grasp and sensitive handling of the huge range of theory and literature marshalled by Stetsenko. Nor here will we seek to engage with aspects of the theory which perhaps need strengthened or challenged – Stetsenko herself recognizes that there is inevitably plenty of scope for that. Rather we will highlight some key aspects, hopefully to whet the appetite of readers who may in turn become discussants.

### **Guiding Principles and Foundational Premises**

Perhaps most importantly, while the author is clearly stressing how all social development and change is dependent on the creativity of individuals, no-one should imagine that the TAS is presenting some kind of abstract individualism – in which individuals in isolation conquer all and ‘succeed’. Far from it, development is understood: “to be fully contingent on individually unique contributions to communal social practices in ways that propel them forward” (p.35). The author continues:

“Development is therefore enacted and realized by individuals, yet by individuals acting as social subjects and actors of collective history who are brought into existence by collaborative practices, that is, as community members and co-creators of their communal world and collective history. In this approach, individuals come to be, to know and to act only within social practices and while critically relying on ... cultural resources and tools indispensable for development and learning. Yet these practices are co-created by individuals who, in contributing

to changes in communal forms of life, collaboratively enact ... both their own development *and* the social fabric of the world” (p.35).

Human development in this perspective is, as Stetsenko puts it later in the book, “an ‘achievement’ of unique individuality through togetherness” (ps.87 and 247).

This, as readers of this journal will recognise, reflects Vygotsky’s – and also Stetsenko’s – attempt to follow the thinking of Marx and Engels. As Stetsenko notes:

“The line of research that most directly integrates issues of values, interests and ideologies with knowledge production traces its philosophical roots to Marxism ... Marxist philosophy can be interpreted to be premised on the centrality of human productive activity, or praxis, for all forms of individual and social life including its highly interrelated economic, political, ethical, intersubjective and psychological (subjective) dimensions” (p.74).

However, “this central Marxist premise requires further elaboration” (p74), she argues. In particular: “if the full force of Marxist philosophy is linked to the centrality of material productive practices in their immediate existence and status quo, of which thought and mind are presumed to be derivative and faithful reflections”, as we know has often been the case, “then the possibility of social activism and of challenging domination and oppression is curtailed”(p.75).

This perspective leads ultimately to the “guiding principles and foundational premises” for the TAS which Stetsenko anticipates at the outset of the book. *Ontologically* – in terms of how we fundamentally conceive of the world – reality is to be understood “*as an arena of social practices*, enacted through individually unique acts and deeds that, at the same time, are profoundly social” (pp.200-201). Here, the author draws on Bakhtin’s (1993) account of human deeds and active becoming (in Russian, *postuplenie*) as conveying both “the material, historical and social character of human agency ... [and] ... the humanized, ethical and moral-political character of social practices” (pp. 209-211). Human agency, in this view, “is about how changing the world is changing us”, and its development “is contingent on gaining the tools of acting at the nexus of shaping the world while being shaped by it and at the intersection of individual and collective agency” (pp.225-226). It is through this process of actively grappling with society and its struggles that we, as humans, elaborate meaningful life projects and ultimately create – author – our identities and our selves.

*Epistemologically* – in terms of how we know about the world – the process of knowing is understood as always “contingent on activist involvements in, and contributions to, collaborative transformative practices” (p.201) which are always orientated beyond the present and into the future. As the author has previously put it:

“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 ... Knowledge is always an act of creating reality and inventing the future” (Stetsenko, 2015, p.109).

Stetsenko’s case for such grounding is clear. For all of the critiques launched against the regressive theoretical positions she is countering, precious few manage consistently to grasp and adhere to their own most important insights. Lacking clearly elaborated foundational premises, the most unhelpful perspectives and assumptions are too often “implicitly and unwittingly assimilated into the sociocultural and critical frameworks” themselves (p.54).

However, rather than simply being “depressed by the timidity and ambivalence” (Ingold, cited p. 58) of these approaches, Stetsenko seeks to provide a “coherent theoretical framework to unify or at least co-ordinate” the many and diverse critical and sociocultural approaches (p.58). In this light, she argues:

“Importantly, the social change and transformation enacted in the movement 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 seemingly unalterable ‘givens’ ... and ‘facts’. ... It is the process of co-creating, co-authoring, and inventing the future, 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” (p.32).

Thus, Stetsenko provides us with foundations and premises which ground and catalyse our urges to find – to *make* – our humanity in the struggle to create new forms of social relating, worthy of our

human nature. 'Social reality' as a solid, stable, recalcitrant system of impersonal structure, blocking the road to a better future, is, she insists, an illusion – a highly (and in the present moment, *evidently*) fragile result of the temporary channelling of our collective, transformative powers into destructive and self-destructive practices serving the few, not the many.

What 'reality' is, then, ultimately depends on our understanding of, and commitment to, our own creative and transformative powers. The 'reality' which appears to get in the way of desired goals is in fact an (unrecognized) product of our own activity, a reified *projection* of our own powers, for the time being (mis)directed in unhelpful ways that we can actually change. And in this light it also becomes apparent that the aforementioned weight of disciplinary tradition in the social sciences, premised on those aforementioned notions of *responsiveness, reactivity, adaptability, reproduction, appropriation and assimilation*, rather than on the active, creative, transformative and self-transformative reality of collective human endeavour, reflects precisely this 'reified' reality. It is the so-far insufficient and unsatisfactory results of the efforts to lift the weight of those traditions which Stetsenko is mostly seeking to address.

### **Human Potential and Political Leadership**

In re-thinking psychology within her 'TAS', Stetsenko introduces what is perhaps her most striking contribution to the whole interconnected landscape of disciplines centred on human development. It is one that is, she insists, "supported by scientific discoveries and advances of recent years in various research areas" (p. 26) which directly imply that:

"All human beings have unlimited potential – and are thus profoundly equal precisely in this *infinity of their potential*, regardless of any putatively 'natural' endowments and ostensibly 'intractable' deficits" (p.25).

However, she continues:

"This potential ... needs to be actualized by individuals themselves, as an 'achievement' (with no connotations of either finality or predetermined norms) of togetherness, while being supported with access to authoring requisite cultural tools and spaces for their own agency within the collaborative dynamics of shared community practices" (p.25).

Thus, people have infinite potential, a potential that resides in the active relations between individuals, their communities and society generally. That potential can only be made real by serious action to dismantle the social and cultural barriers to equal development, overcoming present inequalities and genuinely promoting equal rights for all.

Human potential, consequently, is not a fixed set of limits or boundaries on our capacities which can be discovered and studied, but something to fight for against all odds and against all obstacles: it is a challenge to all of us to struggle to create those conditions in which all people may rise to the promise which their humanity offers.

Thus, on the basis of a highly compelling synthesis of a huge body of research across a wide range of disciplines, Stetsenko offers this inspiring vision as a call to action, a call to arms, for a better world. However, in a manner that parallels the backwardness and lags in how social theory relates to the fundamental realities of our social existence and social research, contemporary political leadership is also seriously backward and lagging in terms of grasping the critical challenges and threats of the present, and the potentialities for the future. Our present crisis surely cries out more now than ever for leadership which can connect creatively with the need – and overwhelming desire – of many for those “radical reforms” the *Financial Times* itself has called for, “reversing the prevailing policy direction of the last four decades”, and for the “true leaders” who will mobilise *now*, “beyond the public health war”, to “win the peace”.

Arguably, it is not only social scientists who can find inspiration in Stetsenko’s *The Transformative Mind*, but also, we believe, political leaders – current or future – who want to believe in and actually fight for a better, even *liveable*, future. No more talk of ‘impossibilism’, please – for the ‘impossible’ has been unfolding before our very eyes these past few weeks, and there is clearly now, perhaps more than ever, a future world to win.

### **Authors’ biographies**

*Chik Collins* is Professor of Applied Social Science and Rector of the University of the Faroe Islands. He has published on language and social change, community development and urban policy, and more recently on health inequalities and the role of regional policy in relation to the phenomenon of ‘excess mortality’ in contemporary Scotland.

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