OUTLINES - CRITICAL PRACTICE STUDIES

The Challenge of Individuality in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory: "Collectividual" Dialectics from a Transformative Activist Stance

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Abstract

In addressing the persistent challenge of fully integrating individual dimensions and human subjectivity within the cultural-historical activity theory, this paper suggests several steps to revise its core onto-epistemology in an expansive approach termed the transformative activist stance. This approach outlines the subtle dialectics of individual and collective planes of human praxis whereby each *individual is shaped by collective history and collaborative practices while* at the same time *shaping and* real-*izing them through contributing to their collective, dynamic materiality in moving beyond the status quo. In capitalizing on people always transcending what exists in 'the here and now,' in a non-adaptive fashion, based in a commitment and vision to how the world "ought to be," the individual subjectivity is* reclaimed *as itself a fully social, embodied, material-discursive process. Individual subjectivity and agency gain status through contributing to changes in "collectividual" practices as the primary onto-epistemology of a unitary realm that is individual and social/collective at the same time.*

Introduction

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is currently enjoying much popularity and success in a variety of fields and disciplines ranging from organizational and human-computer interactions studies to research on self-regulation, second language acquisition and literacy, among many others. This theory has launched a number of theoretical breakthroughs (not yet fully explored) that are in close unison with directions that are now spearheading no less than a conceptual revolution such as dynamic systems theory,

developmental systems approach, participatory learning, embodied, dynamic, enacted and situated cognition, and developmental epigenetics, among others. All of these causes for celebration notwithstanding, it is important to continue to expansively critique and interrogate this theory's basic tenets and propositions. Theories are kept alive by continuously revisiting and re-figuring their grounds in what can be called "a critique from within" (Stetsenko, 1990/1995) – a type of analysis meant to advance, rather than refute, a given theory through working out contradictions within its ever-evolving zones of proximal development that result from its dynamics within the shifting social contexts of which it partakes (see also Langemeyer, 2006). Paraphrasing a famous saying, one can say that if there had not been any controversies in the CHAT, they would have to be invented just to keep it alive. No less significantly, self-reflection is needed to address possible liabilities of the CHAT's entanglement with the historical-political dynamics, including during the recent tumultuous decades, to avoid the risk of being blind to the issues of context, power, and social change.

This strategy of critically interrogating, revisiting, and reconfiguring broad theoretical premises of CHAT does not signify a move away from practical and empirical investigations but instead, can be seen as inherently a part of such investigations. Success of CHAT has always been associated with its authors' deep engagement with theoretical and philosophical issues and its most remarkable practical applications directly resulted from such an engagement. These include developmental programs for children with disabilities (works by Mesheryakov and Sokolyansky, for overview, see Bakhurst & Padden, 1991) and educational programs (Davydov, e.g., 1988, 1995; for overview, see Arievitch & Stetsenko, 2000). It is no accident that the authors of these educational programs were primarily committed to developing very broad, philosophical conceptualizations of human development. For example, Vassily V. Davydov's works have been marked by his deep grasp of the Hegelian-Marxist legacy and supported by his close collaboration with philosophers such as E.V. Ilyenkov. These works stand as a direct example of realizing the credo shared by Vygotsky and other CHAT founders – the conviction about the *deeply practical nature of theory*, the capacity of the seemingly abstract theorizing to shape and even determine solutions for the utmost practical problems, and at a deeper level, about inseparability of theoretical and practical dimensions of all human activities and endeavors.

In this spirit, I undertake a critical revision of some of the grounding, worldview-level assumptions of CHAT in their implications for understanding human subjectivity – with the goal to delineate contradictions in this approach that can serve as the growing points for its further advances and developments. These contradictions are related to gaps in defining the ontological status of human subjectivity, including the mind and its constituents such as concepts, and the resulting tensions in fully integrating psychological processes and individual levels of activity more broadly. These tensions are important to address especially given the present socio-political climate of acute global crisis and rapid social changes, in order to do full justice to the notions of transformation and activism in accounts of human development. These conceptual gaps can be discerned in Davydov's approach and CHAT in general and, moreover (as I will illustrate in the following sections), they still reverberate in today's literature and research. Addressing these controversies might help to expansively advance CHAT so that its explanatory power and practical import are strengthened by drawing together potential allies working in directions close to CHAT such as critical pedagogy and participatory action research,

among others. This can also help repair some rifts that have occurred within CHAT splitting it into somewhat separate research directions – hardly to the advantage of either one of them, especially given the relentless march of alternative, starkly biologically reductionist approaches.

The argument developed in this paper is that it is possible to understand human subjectivity while remaining true to the major dialectical, non-dualist tenets and presuppositions. This can be done if subjectivity is *not* understood as some inherently private, self-sufficient realm that is ontologically distinct from collaborative activities out in the world. The suggested alternative is to explain individual subjectivity in terms of manifest and inherently collaborative processes of individuals acting *as social subjects* (even while they engage, as they often do, in their own, seemingly withdrawn and private pursuits) – that is, as members of community practices and *agents of communal history* who enact collectivities by changing them through their own, individually unique contributions instantiated in each and every act of knowing, being, and doing.

In this rendition, the difficult problem of theorizing individual processes, traditionally termed mental, is integrated as a legitimate task within the overall project of developing a fully dialectical view of human development. This includes conceptualizing the subtle dialectics of individual and collective planes of human praxis whereby *each* individual – in all expressions including psychological phenomena -- is revealed as constituted by, embodying, participating, and most importantly, *contributing* to the dynamic materiality of collective history and collaborative practices. The critical task is to understand and explain even the seemingly solipsistic endeavors, such as apparently solo or "inner" processes of thinking and concept formation, within the non-dualistic framework, while revealing them as in fact never just solipsistic or inner. This strategy substitutes for theories which, rather than explaining the processes of human subjectivity, de facto explain them *away* -- as if any account of their status and development must automatically imply Cartesian dualism. Rather than resolving traditional dualisms by simply wiping out one of its constituent parts, the approach suggested herein is undertaken in the spirit of *reclaiming* traditional notions such as individual concepts, and processes such as internalization and authoring, that are otherwise left under the purview of outdated approaches that unduly psychologize, individualize, and mentalize them.

The Challenge of Individuality within the CHAT Research

The hallmark of CHAT is that it takes social practice, defined as human goal-directed collective activity, as the core grounding for human development and learning and does so for multiple reasons, including those derived from research into phylogenesis and ontogenesis. Although many practice theories have proliferated in social sciences taking root from diverse sources (such as, in addition to Marx, the philosophies of Max Weber, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, see e.g., Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault, Garfinkel, and others), the works of Vygotsky (e.g., 1997, 1998a,b) and his school remain the true staple of this approach, directly continuing the legacy of Marxist philosophy and deserving a status of a pioneering perspective (cf. Langemeyer, 2006). According to this approach, humans come to be and come to know – each other, themselves and the world – while jointly enacting collective practices mediated by cultural tools (starting with the tools of labor, all the way to complex symbolic systems such as language), building on efforts of each other and on achievements of previous generations, while cumulatively expanding on and amplifying

these achievements. Therefore, human activity -- material, practical and always by necessity social, collective processes reliant on and mediated by cultural tools – is seen as the basic form of human social life that is formative of everything that is human in humans, including their subjectivity and its forms such as the mind, knowledge, concepts, and personhood. These subjective (psychological) phenomena are understood as related to human collaborative practices/activities and evolving in their midst.

One of the most significant elaborations of this theory, as already mentioned, was Vassily V. Davydov's works (e.g., 1988, 1995) which deserve a critical scrutiny precisely because of their strengths. In continuing activity theory, Davydov maintained that in the acts of labor, people move beyond the "natural" immediacy of the world and instead, discern events and objects in their interrelations which are critical to human collective practices and which otherwise remain hidden. It is because people engage in practical transformations of their world and accumulate their experiences and discoveries across generations, in forms of universal practice of humanity as a whole, that the systemic relations among phenomena and processes gradually become revealed and reflected in concepts. The collective practice of humanity -- social both in its genetic roots and methods -- was thus posited as the foundation that gives rise to thinking including its theoretical forms that grasp reality in its essential, that is, abstract yet at the same time practical characteristics (a point that will be discussed in more detail in the last section of this paper).

However, in terms of ontological specifications of how psychological processes exist, Davydov (1988) seems to acknowledge (following Ilyenkov) two realms, or two modes of existence – that of ideal phenomena of a collective nature embodying collaborative discoveries of humanity, and that of individual concepts developed when persons *acquire* collective concepts. The link between these two realms, according to Davydov, consists in individuals acquiring cultural forms of knowledge as tools of socio-historical practices that lie 'behind' each concept. This process of cultural knowledge acquisition was posited to take place within the practical, culturally mediated, and socially situated activities. However, the relationship between material activity and psychological processes was further specified, unfortunately, only by stating that the two are somehow intertwined, yet without much exploration into how exactly this is possible and how the two realms are ontologically commensurate. Without such a specification, it is no wonder that the mental processes essentially became equated with the rather traditionally understood process of reflection (otrazhenie –[Russian]) which, although posited as stemming from and existing in the context of activity, is nonetheless not much different from the connotation of an internal display of images in individual consciousness. The first step in the development of the mind, for example, was seen by Davydov (1988) as the forming of *representations*, whereby a sensuous image of a class of objects is separated within practical activity from the objects themselves due to the work of imagination ("voobrazhenie" - Russian), with these images then generalized by linguistic means. This analytical solution, however, left many gaps in place especially in that it did not challenge traditional notions that psychological processes serve to 'reflect' reality. The old mental connotation, although challenged by a focus on psychological processes originating in practical activities, their reliance on cultural tools, and their embedding within situated activities, was in significant ways left in place.

Similar tensions and gaps continued into later works affiliated with Vygotsky's and activity theory approaches (for examples, see Stetsenko, 1995). Because there is no space to review all the forms that these tensions and gaps have taken across the years, it is useful to turn for illustrations to a recent chapter by Vladislav A. Lektorsky (2009), the leading authority in

this field in the present day Russia. In his well informed and thoughtful overview of recent trends and debates in philosophy and psychology, Lektorsky essentially reproduces the dual view that typified the original approach of CHAT. Admitting that the opposition between the 'inner' and the 'outer' worlds, between the "immediately given" and mediated phenomena, remains a problem, Lektorsky goes on to present his interpretation of activity theory:

> From the point of view of activity theory, consciousness and "the inner" are social and cultural constructions and exist first of all in forms of collective activity. …The subject as the unity of consciousness, the unity of an individual biography, and the center of making decisions can exist only as the center of "the inner world." But the appearance of "the inner world" is possible only when the idea of "the inner" arises in culture, in other words, when it is realized in forms of collective activity. (p. 80) …The "we" feeling exists only in the minds of individual subjects, participating in a certain kind of activity. (p. 82) In reality, the "inner space" of consciousness is a result of individual appropriation of certain kinds of external collective activity. So we may say that the so-called inner space first exists in outer, external actions as a part of collective activity. Internalization is impossible without participation in external mediated activity. (p. 83)

This account essentially re-states the core (and the now 'classical' or canonical, cf. Sawchuk & Stetsenko, 2008) tenet of CHAT that human consciousness is a result of individuals appropriating external collective activity in the course of participating in it and that the inner space first exists in the outer, collective activity. This position does not move beyond the insights of the early works of activity theorists (certainly progressive for their time in the early to the mid-20th century) and de facto leaves the same conundrums unresolved which is especially unfortunate given that many decades have passed since this theory's conception. This position, to reiterate, does not theorize, nor show in any sufficient detail how to reconcile the 'inner space' (the psychological realm) with the notion of collective activities, leaving its ontological status ambiguous and uncertain.

Transformative Activist Stance

Several steps to resolve the difficult problems outlined in the previous section have been suggested in what I have termed *the transformative activist stance*. To recapitulate the logic of this approach, my efforts have been focused, first, on explicating the general Marxist foundation that was, albeit in a nascent form, at the core of both Vygotsky's and his immediate followers' approaches, while also revealing differences between their respective foci – in contradistinction to positions (e.g., see works by Kozulin and van der Ver & Valsiner) that separate the works by these scholars into independent, and even contradictory, research directions (for details, see Stetsenko, 2004, Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004a). Explicating the general foundation present in the works by the founders of activity theory, and the differences among their positions (often obscured in interpretations that focus on more specific topics such as cultural mediation), is presented as the three-fold dialectics of human social practices (see Stetsenko, 2005; for further explication, see Sawchuk & Stetsenko, 2008). This dialectics is revealed to be comprised of the following three layers or dimensions – the practical processes of materially producing conditions of existence reliant on employment of tools (i.e., human labor); the intersubjective processes of social communication that organize, structure, and coordinate these practical processes; and the

processes of human subjectivity, inclusive of cognition, the self and agency, that allow individuals to be full participants within the processes of materially producing their lives while socially interacting and interchanging with others. These three layers or dimensions are posited as all belonging to, and together comprising, *one* unified and dynamic realm of social practices -- the complex system of *human collaborative praxis* (Stetsenko, 2005).

An additional specification (Stetsenko, 2008, 2010a, 2012, 2013) consists in expanding and accentuating this general foundation unifying works by the CHAT founders through highlighting the ontological status of collaborative praxis as the primary realm (or the 'fabric') of human life and development, including its interrelated aspects of knowing, being and becoming. This specification puts the emphasis on the ontological primacy of collaborative praxis as a *way of life* or existence (Lebensweise [German]; способ существования [Russian]) unique to humans that constitutes *the foundation for their development* in all of its expressions, dimensions, and facets including phenomena of the self, the mind, and cognition. An important analytical strategy used in laying out this position – in preparing the next step towards the transformative activist stance – consists in addressing how the CHAT is in fact built on fully relational and situated premises in an acknowledgement that people are inextricably embedded in their world and constituted by relations with it, including relations with other people and the whole of humanity. This allows for a meaningful comparison of CHAT with equally relational approaches that posit social interactions and bonds, sometimes understood as dialogicality or discourse, at the core of development. For example, according to Markova's (2012) recent explication,

> …interdependence among minds, rather than their isolation, is deeply rooted in the human nature and it permeates all fundamental faculties like cognizing, acquiring knowledge and believing, imagining, feeling and acting. Sociality is so basic that it defines the human existence: we can call it *dialogical ontology.* (p. 211; emphasis added).

My suggestion has been to acknowledge that this dialogical perspective is compatible with CHAT at one, though not all (!), conceptual levels in theorizing human development and social practices. Since human beings come to be and develop in and through the dynamics of their way of life that relates them to their world including other people, the primary ontology of development is indeed fully relational and dialogical. What the transformative activist stance highlights at another level, however, in continuation of Vygotsky and Leontiev's legacy, is that the dialogical ontology and other relational ontologies, such as those that prioritize discourses, experiences and participation, are superseded by a unified (indivisible though not homogenous) *ontology of collaborative praxis* in its materiality and historicity. It is an explicit materiality, collectivity, and historicity of human collaborative practices that make them more suited for the status of *originary* and primary onto-epistemology than is dialogical ontology. The embodied enactment of social life in and through uninterrupted collaborative practical activities of humanity unfolding in history is ontologically and epistemologically *primary* and supreme vis-à-vis dialogical relations, discourses, and experiences -- essentially superseding them. The term 'superseding,' used in a dialectical sense, denotes a conceptual move that does not eliminate a given phenomenon or its properties but instead, lifts them up and includes them, albeit in a subordinate role, into a new systemic whole comprised, in this case, by human collaborative practices. That is, these practices are fully dialogical and relational, yet what makes them what they are, their formative feature and character cannot be reduced to dialogicality only. Instead, their

formative feature has to do with people collectively and materially producing the conditions of their existence, while along the way necessarily interacting, dialoguing, relating, as well as and coming to develop specifically human psychological processes, agency, and subjectivity.

My further, and 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 and activism into the most basic descriptions of the very reality of human development and social dynamics. The resulting *transformative ontology of human praxis* suggests that it is directly *through* and *in* the process (rather than in addition to) of people constantly transforming and creating their social world and thus *moving beyond the status quo* that people simultaneously create and constantly transform their very life, therefore also changing themselves in fundamental ways while, in the process, becoming individually unique and gaining knowledge about themselves and the world. Although the theme of people transforming their world and being transformed by it is common to many works in Vygotsky's and other Marxist and social practice frameworks, its ontological and epistemological significance and profound implications for practically all aspects in accounting for social life and human development have not been fully explored, nor sufficiently absorbed, often resulting in this radical premise being coupled with old-fashioned ideas and views.

The analytical import of taking transformative social change as the core characteristic of human social practices, first 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 (see Stetsenko, 2010a, 2011). Whereas Darwin introduced the notion of change into what had been a static thinking about nature as fixed and inert, the Marxist philosophical-conceptual innovation consisted in overturning traditional, and similarly static, modes of thinking about not only nature but human development and society as well.

What these traditional modes of thinking about society and human development were tacitly based on during the time of Darwin and Marx, and what they continue to be based on today, is the assumption about the superiority of the socio-political and cultural *status quo* present at a given time and place as a somehow static and fixed, immutable and unchanging "given" that can be taken for granted in way of an essentialist reification. Similarly to the Darwinian insight, yet also moving beyond it, the conceptual and analytical shift implied by transformative onto-epistemology presupposes a kind of a 'mindquake' – a profound change in the habitual mode of thinking whereby the processes such as social practices and their products are not reified at any analytical step in their descriptions and analysis. Instead, the *very mode of existence* of social practices and their products is taken to be characterized as the dynamics of ever-shifting and moving, continuously re-structuring and re-organizing *movement and flow of ceaseless changes, transformations, transmutations, and re-assemblages*. In this perspective, the 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 communal praxis. This is a radical shift away from the current ideals of science that are still based in essentialist

substance ontologies, holding variation and change as anomalies to be eliminated in grasping some presumably static essences and their a-historical, "universal laws."

In my interpretation, it is the *simultaneity* and *the unity* of human transformative practice on the one hand, and the process of knowing and becoming, on the other, that needs to be addressed more centrally. Perhaps the most striking implication is the emphasis on the non-adaptive nature of human development as always moving beyond the 'given,' always transcending the status quo of the world as it exists in 'the here and now.' That is, knowing, being, and doing are understood to be ontologically determined by (though not reduced to) *acts of transformation* that contribute to social communal praxis in the connotation of creating novelty and moving beyond the given in transcending its status quo. This position contrasts with "situationist" and "contextualist" explanations focused on development as a passive processes of people being situated in their context or environment (as that which simply surrounds them), that is, as merely dwelling in, or experiencing, the world as in the metaphor of 'being there' (see Clark, 1997) and many works in distributed, sociocultural, and situated cognition theories, including those that follow with the Heideggerian notion of *Dasein*.

The point that transformative onto-epistemology brings across is that development is not a process that somehow happens to people so that they can and sometimes also do transform conditions of their existence, for example, through ostensibly supplementary efforts that are carried out in addition to development. Instead, the radical implication of the transformative onto-epistemology is that it is *in* the process, and *as* the process of instigating changes in social practices that human development takes place, whereby these changes constitute the core reality of development, the stuff (or the fabric) that the development is made up from. This interpretation of the materialist, Marxist dialectics permeating works within the CHAT founding tradition (albeit implicitly), stresses that social practices and activity systems refer not just to doing certain things to obtain specific results, but to creating new forms of reality through the process of reframing and re-fabricating ongoing activities and social structures and therefore, of moving beyond them in creative acts of doing, being, and knowing. These creative acts (as all human acts essentially are) do not just take place in the world as in the notion of situated and embedded cognition and development; rather, these acts of being, knowing and doing *bring forth the world*, the reality itself, essentially creating the world in its continuous becoming and historicity.

Importantly, the social world itself is posited in TAS (Transformative activist stance) as constituted by and through social transformative practices enacted and carried out by individuals acting collaboratively as social subjects – thus also emphasizing transformations and changes in the immediately present reality as its core ontology, rather than this reality beings a metaphysical 'given' that exists independently of social praxis in its enactment by people and, thus, independently of human presence (as was often assumed in 'canonical' Marxism and, by extension, in the founding works by the CHAT scholars). The world, in other words, is understood as being always in the process of change, as a constantly shifting and moving terrain where there are no separate entities but a continuous flow of ever changing processes. Moreover, because it is composed of human acts and deeds, the world can be conceptualized as a shifting and moving *collective forum* of human deeds. In other words, the world is understood in its *human relevance* – as a dynamic uninterrupted flow of actionable social practices carried out in the form of human deeds stretching through time, thus effectively comprising history as a continuum brought into existence and enacted by people. Thus understood, the world does not exist separately from human beings and cannot

be described apart from them, in isolation from what people actually do and perform in their lives, with human actions constituting no less than the lived world itself (Bakhtin, 1990, 1993; see Stetsenko, 2007). At the center stage, eliminating the polarity of human beings and the world, is a unified process of people transforming their circumstances of life and simultaneously, *in this very process*, being transformed by their own transformative practices. This conceptual move takes into account that the sheer *'givenness' of reality or matter is superseded through the imposition of a purposive human activity that is made up of the ever-changing dynamics of transformative efforts and struggles.* Therefore, the world itself, since it is understood to be made up from and by collaborative transformative practices, needs and can be posited as a unique, specifically human realm inherently imbued, right at its core, with human dimensions such as relationality, social significance, meanings, strivings, struggles, and values.

In a related conceptual move, TAS highlights the notion that individuals *contribute* to collaborative transformative practices (in contradistinction with and a dialectical expansion of the notion of *participation*) through their own unique deeds and their co-authoring of historically unfolding social practices. In this vein, collaborative practices are posited as ontologically primary, yet they are understood to be continuously and cumulatively evolving through *unique activist contributions* by individual participants, who always act as social subjects, and always matter in one way or another because they are directly implicated in creating their realities of existence and their development, and thus, in social transformations of the world. This model gives full credit to collaboration and collectivity and, moreover, to solidarity and communion emphasized in emancipatory approaches such as Freire's (e.g., 1990) critical pedagogy, reinstating the initial political message contained in Vygotsky's overall orientation as well (though less pronounced in later works of this research school due to the pressures of the top-down regime which did not assign individuals with any significant role in creating their world).

Within the transformative ontology, human beings are seen as active agents in their own lives and their own society, responsive and responsible – indeed answerable, in Bakhtin's terms -- agents who *co-create*, together with other people, their world and their society (the Russian term *созидатель* [literally co-creator], with its prefix 'co-' standing for collectivity, conveys this meaning very directly and forcefully). This portrayal challenges views of human beings as simply "undergoers" of solitary experiences (and the notion of experience as the prime ontological building block as well), or as responders to brain chemistry and unconscious drives and habits, or as merely participants in the world in the connotation of them simply dwelling and partaking of what *already exists* in the world in its status quo.

The transformative ontology of social praxis—augmented by the notion of individual contributions to this praxis as its carriers and embodiments (as suggested in TAS)—can be seen as superseding the very distinction between collective and individual levels or dimensions of social practices. What is offered instead is one unitary realm or process in need of new terms to convey the dialectical amalgamation of the social and the individual -- such as the "collectividual practice." This term suggests that individuals always act together in pursuit of their common goals, being inescapably bound by communal bonds and filaments, yet each individual acts from a unique socio-historical position (standpoint) and with a unique commitment (endpoint), though always coordinated and aligned with the social projects/practices to which this commitment contributes. In this dialectical approach, there is no need to get rid of an individual because *there is no such a thing as an*

individual—a solitary human being performing anything in disconnection from other people and outside of paramount social practices and their bonds. Instead, each individual human being *is an ensemble of social relations* (as Marx famously stated), being first formed within and out of these relations and then coming to embody, carry out and expand these social relations through one's own deeds. To truly appreciate this point, a resolute break away from the dualism of the individual and the social is needed, whereby each and every *individual human being* is conceived as profoundly and deeply social—that is, as instantiating the common history and humanity in their vicissitudes and local expressions, carrying them on and bearing responsibility for their future. To see history and society embodied and expressed in, or even 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.

From this perspective, development and learning are collaborative achievements of activist nature not confined to adapting to what is "given" in the world; instead, these processes are reliant upon individuals forming and carrying out their *future-oriented agendas* that contribute to collaborative projects of social transformation. These agendas centrally involve taking an activist stance grounded in a vision, or "endpoint," of how community members believe present practices *can* be changed and what kind of future *ought* to be created. The key implication from this set of premises is that an individual person, who in order to be needs to act in the *social world that is constantly changing*, and moreover, that is changing *through one's own deeds*, cannot be neutral or uncertain because such acting (unlike reacting, passively dwelling, or participating) presupposes knowing "which way is up" and what direction to go. This puts the notion of activist stance vis-à-vis the world, embodied in goals and commitments to social transformation, at the core of onto-epistemology of human development. Thus, the most critical point in TAS is that unlike in moral philosophy and in some neo-Marxist interpretations, the levels of individual and collective activities are bridged through ascertaining that each individual person, while being shaped and constituted by material-semiotic practices and processes and fully reliant on their resources and tools, at the same time profoundly *matters* in everything that is going on – in our collective practices, our communal history, and the very future that is to come. Not only does each person matter in collective praxis, but the way he or she matters is what constitutes development and allows for the formation of one's identity which, therefore, is at once ineluctably social *and* deeply individual. Moreover, in a paradoxical way, the deepest and most authentic expressions of individuality are profoundly social and collaborative -- reflected in the notion of a person's social mission out in the world that marks truly unique individuals (for examples, see Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004).

On this premise, activist positioning and taking a stand are the prime dimensions of development and learning, which are present already at the level of even presumably "elementary" processes, such as perception and experience, and even more fully expressed at levels of conceptual understandings and identity/personhood. This means that even 'simple' acts of human mind are determined by goals and commitments, that is, by an activist striving that necessarily entails moving beyond the status quo in one's life and also, simultaneously, in one's community practices. What is at stake is the all-encompassing centrality of activist engagement in and with the world, implicating that there is no way that we can extract ourselves out of this engagement. We can never take a neutral stance of a disinterested observer uninvolved in what is going on in the world. The latter point has been expressed in various ways in critical and feminist scholarship (e.g.,

Harding, 1992; Howe, 2003; Morawski, 1994). What TAS adds to this is that we can never take a neutral stance of a disinterested observer uninvolved in what is going on in the world because what is going on in the world is a process in which we ourselves are directly implicated as its co-creators, through our activist contributions (if only on a small scale and in modest ways) that always matter and, moreover, that *make up the world and ourselves*. That is, what is added by TAS is the deep ontological grounding to legitimize the point about ineluctable partiality of knowing derived from considerations of the key dialectical principles and conditions of human and social development premised on non-dualist ontology.

Implications of TAS for the Human Subjectivity and the Notion of Future

It is *on a firm foundation* of a social and communal view about human development as a collective process instantiated through contributions to collaborative socio-historical practices that the centrality of personal agency, commitment, and responsibility – and of all forms of human subjectivity – can be ascertained. Because human communal praxis enacted through individual contributions is conceptualized in TAS as the primary and unified ontological realm constitutive both of human development and of the social (life-)world in which development takes place*,* with both co-created through praxis, this conceptual extension opens up ways to reveal how human subjectivity and intersubjectivity are incarnations of social practices – *without any ontological breaks or gaps* posited between them on the one hand, and the social praxis they stem from and serve, on the other. Establishing this connection is possible if we attend to the *full scope* of how a person acts as a social subject and also disclose the complexity of the ways in which this person's actions contribute to the changes in the ongoing community practices and, thus, to their future. This account allows for a non-dualist concept of human subjectivity that rejects viewing it as a purely mentalist and contemplative process, such as implied by the notion of reflection and instead, considers it a fully legitimate dimension of collective and individual instantiations of social praxis.

What substitutes for the traditional views is the notion of subjectivity in its radical "facticity" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002), or in its practical relevance – as a process that is involved and implicated in changes and transformations in collaborative practices that take place out in the social world understood as a forum of human deeds. Human subjectivity then gains its ontological status through its role and place in the ongoing social transformations – as contingent on and determined by how it *matters* in the larger realms of communal social life and its ongoing transformations. The practical relevance of human subjectivity can be ascertained by duly acknowledging the materiality of human social practices and their constitutive deeds – as established precisely in light of the ceaseless and permanent changes they incur (as they always do) in the world that itself unfolds as the flow of social practices and in which people and their world are interanimated.

In other words, the phenomena of human subjectivity are revealed in their practical relevance, that is, in their role and their "mattering" in the totality of individual life, which itself is a facet of collective practices, that is, itself endowed with meaning in the light of individuals' pursuits that allow (or sometimes do not allow) to contribute to these practices and communal forms of life. An important caveat is that individuals might not

always be aware of how exactly their activities contribute to the world, or they might be in a constant search for such activities, struggling to make sense of their lives and find "their way." However, the lack of awareness and the often continuous struggle to find a meaningful life project (leading activity) notwithstanding, people always *do* contribute to something that goes on in the world. This is so even if these contributions are only on a small scale, and even if they are brought about by abstaining from activist contribution to these processes – because the latter type of a 'contribution' often works to perpetuate the existing status quo, to stifle changes in society and, thus, does make a difference too, albeit in the form of a negativity. Therefore, ultimately, what it is that the person is positioned by his or her activities to change in the world and oneself as a part of the world—what objective and what kind of the future a person contributes to—is the pivotal question, the answer to which is necessary in the analysis of human subjectivity that breaks away from, and breaks down, the Cartesian dualism.

The type of onto-epistemology predicated on activist deeds that contribute to social practices and enact the future, means that the direction of our deeds (unified as one continuous life project) is central to forming concepts. This directions is formed by goals and commitments to the future enacted through contributions to collaborative projects of social transformation, by the stand we take vis-à-vis the world and the path we chart to achieve our destination. That is, what TAS highlights is the activist, forward-looking stance and therefore, the *future, the horizon and the destination* of development and personhood. This dimension has been under-theorized by cultural-historical theory where the major focus has been placed on history, and thus, on the past to the exclusion of questions about how the future, conceived in activist terms as a vision to which individuals commit, plays a formative role in development.

The notion of activist stance bears some similarity, yet is not identical, with the notion of prolepsis as a "ubiquitous feature of culturally mediated thought" (Cole, 1996, p. 183) that draws attention to "the representation of a future act or development as being presently existing" (ibid.). What TAS accentuates is that rather than focusing on the representation of the future as being presently existing (a concept with inevitably mentalist connotations), human acting is contingent on individuals committing to a certain version of the future and, most importantly, "always already" gradually creating this future through actions in the present. This allows for a more direct linkage of acting in the present to how individuals enact the world they want to live in, and what they take as an "ought" for the projected futures of community practices – thus breaking the absolute barrier between the present and the future and highlighting *the making of the future in and through the presently ongoing activities and actions*.

That is, prolepsis is akin to an expectation that a certain future is impending or likely, and thus similar to Bakhtin's notion of addressivity – acting with an expectation of the response to one's utterance in Bakhtin's works (e.g., 1990) or to one's action in a broader position such as prolepsis. In this approach, the future response, although only anticipated, mediates the production of the utterances and actions already in the present. The difference with TAS, however, is that whereas both prolepsis and addressivity are based in the notion that the future is imagined and anticipated, while the person is acting *as if* this future already obtains, the notion of human deeds predicated on a *commitment* to the future – as something that ought to be – is more agentive and purposive. What the notion of commitment suggests is that a person not so much expects or anticipates the future, but rather, *actively works* to bring this future into reality through one's own deeds, often

against the odds, that is, even if a particular version of what is to come in the future is not anticipated as likely and instead, requires struggle and striving to achieve it. This applies in cases when a person struggles for one's vision of "what ought to be" in spite of the powerful forces that might be pulling in other directions. In this sense, the notion of commitment central to TAS is closer to Nikolai N. Bernstein's (e.g., 1966) notion of "the requisite future" or, (what I believe is a better translation) "the *sought-after* future" (potrebnoe budushee – [Russian]), rather than to the notions of prolepsis and addressivity.

Bernstein (and related works by P. K. Anokhin) posited that organisms base their activity not only in responses to what exists in "the here and now," but on what a person is anticipating and forecasting will, and also *projecting what should*, exist in the future. In Bernstein's (1966) words,

> We have, by all accounts, two connected processes. One of them is *probabilistic forecasting* in accordance with the perceived current situation [akin to prolepsis – AS]. . . . Alongside this probabilistic extrapolation of the course of surrounding events . . . there is the process of programming of the act that must lead to the realization of the *sought-after* [or needed, requisite– AS] *future*. (ibid., p. 438).

The latter process of seeking the future and acting based on what *should be and what is sought*, can be understood as a continuing struggle to attain one's own goals in carrying out goal-directed activities. Extending this notion to capture what is unique about humans acting as social subjects, as "collectividuals" (rather than what is characteristics of all living organisms, as in Bernstein and Anokhin's works), the following specification can be made. The 'sought-after future' is the taking up of what one aspires to achieve in the present through acting on the premise of *what ought to be created* – enacted and invented in the present as a realization of the future to come. In this emphasis, the notion of a commitment to the future accentuates not so much that the future is brought into the present through imagination or representation, as in prolepsis, but *that the future is created and invented in the present*. The key distinction is precisely between an expectation that something will happen or is likely to happen in the future, while preparing oneself for it, versus a commitment to a future that a person believes "ought" to come and thus, acts to carry out in the future in efforts to bring this future into reality *now*, thus actively inventing the future – rather then merely preparing oneself for it. This conceptualization is derived from and itself supports the overall message central to transformative activist stance – about development and learning as activist projects of historical becoming at the intersection of individual and collective processes in the zone of proximal development understood as what is being created now in the form of a *realization of the future in the present*.

Implications of TAS for Human Subjectivity: Concepts as a Process of Co-authoring

Community Practices

In the account presented in the previous sections, human subjectivity is not an independent module or gadget in the service of individuals' separate and discrete goals, such as cognitive understanding, disconnected from the totality of individual life that itself is somehow disconnected from social and collective processes and practices. Instead, subjectivity is posited as but one dimension in the realization of the *totality of the live* of each social actor, or

their life projects —as a stepping stone in carrying out a unitary and unique (though dynamical and constantly changing), seamless and ceaseless (though not without contradictions) path of becoming a human being through making a difference in the world (see Stetsenko, 2010a). Within this overall "collectividual" and transformative ontology, the human subjectivity can be regarded as a part, or a dimension, of carrying out one's life project – a path of meaningful and answerable deeds that bring forth the communal world through our enacting of who we want to become and what we want our world to be.

One of the implications is that, in this sense, the development of knowledge is also, and simultaneously, the development of the identity and self. The strong ties and connections between learning and identity have been highlighted in sociocultural scholarship, suggesting that learning involves the construction of identities – whereby learning creates identity, and identity creates learning (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nasir & Saxe, 2003; Wenger, 1998; Packer & Goecoechea, 2000). Furthermore, in expanding these ideas, several researchers have noted that participation in community practices is not without tensions and costs (e.g., Hodges, 1998; Linehan & McCarthy, 2001; Packer & Goecoechea, 2000) and that participation should not be reduced to a process of complying with the normativity of community rules and roles. This line of research overlaps to some extent with a broader critique of overreliance in sociocultural research on processes of internalization and appropriation at the expense of understanding participants' own agency that challenges and resists community practices (Engestrom, 1999; Holland et al., 1998; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004b; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011).

For example, Packer and Goicoechea (2000) have made a number of useful suggestions about ontological and epistemological underpinnings of sociocultural and constructivist theories. Their resulting proposal is for the nondualist ontology, in which it can be revealed how "the sociocultural perspective's notion of learning—gaining knowledge or understanding— is an integral part of broader ontological changes that stem from participation in a community" (p. 234). Along these lines, these authors maintain that "learning involves becoming a member of a community, constructing knowledge at various levels of expertise as a participant, but *also* taking a stand on the culture of one's community in an effort to take up and overcome the estrangement and division that are consequences of participation" (p. 227; emphasis added). In this account, however, *what* learners take a stand on refers primarily to how community membership has positioned them and how they are seeking to overcome alienation. Thus, the core ontological process involved in identity and learning is portrayed as the learners' striving to come to terms with how community practices position them, and thus concerns most of all individual conundrums, self-interests and feelings stemming from individual's experiences of participation, including its negative aspects such as alienation, rather than a stand on the overall dynamics and politics of community as a social institution. That is, the 'taking a stand' notion is understood differently. Therefore, although these authors acknowledge that "[l]earning entails transformation both of the person and of the social world" (p. 227), an activist transformation of what goes on in community practices along the lines of one's commitment to the future is not considered as the core, direct ontological dimension of both learning and identity. Thus, the ontology discussed in Packer and Goicoechea (2000) is primarily the ontology of individuals as persons (i.e., in the consideration of what it means for somebody to be), especially as they participate in communities.

The critical specification to these lines of research offered by TAS and its onto-epistemology of individual contributions to social practices as a unified social praxis, is

that the core of both identity and learning is directly connected to taking a stand by the learners *as social actors* on how their communities as social institutions need and *should be changed* for the better (not just a stand on how communities position them) – imagining the future worth struggling for, and making a commitment to carrying out these changes. Thus, learning and identity are seen as co-extensive with, and only possible through, the charting of a life agenda premised on a vision for social change for one's community enacted through collaborative transformative practice and one's own contribution to it (for details and empirical illustrations, see Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). In this respect, the transformative activist stance is akin to the critical democracy's model of dialogic action (Jaramillo, 2011), tracing its roots to Marxist-Freirian critical framework that begins with an understanding that human existence depends on the "right and the duty to opt, to decide, to struggle, to be political" (Freire, 2001, p. 53).

That is, from TAS, the key process at the interface of learning and identity has to do with our active engagement with events and practices, circumstances and conundrums, contradictions and predicaments of social practices of which we partake – and moreover, with these engagements in their contingency on our *personal stake* we claim and our *activist stand* we take in the overall dynamics and the social drama of these practices. Yet, these personal stake and stand are never 'just' personal – instead, learning and development coalesce when in fact we break away from concerns only about "oursleves," only about how we are individually positioned, treated etc. – as if we were independent of others, which of course is an illusion. The meaningful stake in the events then is about an active – indeed activist – process of becoming which is enacted through our past, present, and future deeds that create the world we live in *together*. Thus, learning becomes truly personally meaningful when it is put in the service of making sense of 'who I am' and 'who I want to become' – with these processes being contingent on and only possible through figuring out *what I want my world to become*.

All of this implies that human beings – already by virtue of being human – always act and know in ways that are meaningful and that matter within their evolving life agendas and visions for the future tied up with the social dynamics and politics of our communities. That is, development is possible based on people acting as activists who cannot, nor should try to avoid acting and knowing from their activist positions and stands, with visions and commitments (and attendant emotions, feelings and passions) critically embodied in every act of knowing including every act of conceptual understanding. To expect or demand that people should be doing otherwise, for example, that they understand things merely intellectually, in a dispassionate, impartial or somehow 'objective' way amounts to nothing less than *de-humanization*. Unfortunately, many powerful social forces, including formal education in its existant forms, act exactly in ways that dehumanize learners and take away their activism – by prioritizing compliance and adaptation to the status quo, by restricting spaces for activist engagement and denying the tools needed to develop and exercise it. In these dominant educational models and forms, learning and knowledge are turned into a machine-like exercise of tossing facts that have neither human meaning, nor practical relevance and import, thus thwarting the development of both individuals and society.

Returning to the current debates in CHAT, the position outlined in this paper helps to illuminate the role of human subjectivity as not reducible to that of merely reflecting the world. To use the example from Lektrosky's work (2009) again, his take on the notion of reflection is captured in the following illustration. In his words, "reflection as an act of

individual consciousness does not necessarily change its object" (p. 86). This belies an old connotation that reflection is somehow separate from activity embodied in the overall project of becoming understood as a part and parcel of communal praxis that *always* changes its object. As Lektorsky further states, "[f]or example, when individuals reflect on their personality and as a result do not like themselves, it changes something in them. Something like an identity crisis may arise. But this does not necessarily mean that the personality changes" (ibid.). In this example, Lektorsky not so tacitly turns reflection into a process that is somehow separate from and even prior to, as well as inconsequential for, an active transformative engagement with the world (including oneself as its participant). This process of reflection, according to Lektorsky, can sometimes result in changes and sometimes not have transformative effects. From the TAS perspective, however, "reflection" (if this term is to have any currency at all) has to be conceived of as but a *facet* of a transformative engagement which only comes about *if and insofar* such an engagement – inevitably always transformative of both the person and the social world – *already takes place*. To "reflect on one's personality" and to be dissatisfied with oneself not only necessarily changes the person, as in fact it always does; more importantly, undertaking such a "reflection" needs to be re-construed away from connotations of mirroring "what is" and instead, renederd an inherent dimension of doing something in the world, as an act that matters and makes a difference. Within this example, being dissatisfied with oneself *does* mean that the person has already embarked on a transformative project – because it is precisely from a position of a changed person, or at least a person who is struggling to change, that one's present self might be seen, reflected upon, and critiqued (and found lacking in some ways). A critical reflection is only possible from within a changing trajectory of engaging in the world as a social actor –not as a separate mental "reflection." As suggested herein, critical reflection and critical knowledge are forms of critical transformative activity out in the world, possible when the elements of a new activity path have already been created, if only in a nascent form. This position is in line with the Marxist logic as expressed in the deeply dialectical statement that "[w]hen people speak of ideas that revolutionize society, they do but express the fact, that within the old society, the elements of a new one have been created..." (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978, p. 489).

Conclusions: Implications for Education

In place of conclusions, it is useful to illustrate practical applications that can be derived from an account presented in the previous sections. These especially concern the principles of teaching and learning. In Davydov's approach (e.g., 1988) as it was widely implemented in developing curricula and educational practices, the strategy was fully in line with the 'canonical' (cf. Sawchuk & Stetsenko, 2008) theory of human development including its assumptions about the nature of human subjectivity. Based in the conjecture that human subjectivity has to do with *acquiring* sociocultural experiences of humanity developed through the history of human practices, the strategy was to immerse students in socio-cultural practices stemming from the past and also to introduce students to knowledge as cultural tools for solving problems encountered in these practices. Thus, knowledge and its variegated embodiments in concepts were introduced as practical, valuable tools derivative of and applicable within particular socio-cultural practices, with meaning of concepts inherently tied up with their applicability and historically evolved practical relevance in these practices (for details, see Arievitch & Stetsenko, 2000). This

remarkable strategy afforded to efficiently close the gap between practice and theory – rendering concepts meaningful through revealing practices and histories 'hidden' behind them was shown to be the way to make concepts tangible and practical while at the same time and precisely through this strategy making them *also* truly theoretical. This kind of teaching-learning was shown to allow students to grasp the often ostensibly abstract, utmost theoretical concepts in utterly practical ways, that is, acquiring these seemingly 'merely' theoretical concepts as de facto practical guides for action. This methodology followed the key principle that it is through understanding how concepts "come to be" in history, as tools of social practices, that these concepts can be simultaneously grasped in terms of how they can be put to work in practice and, precisely through this, theoretically understood. Theory thus was seen not as a separate way of knowing that was disconnected from practice but as a form of practice that encapsulates (in a generalized and abbreviated form) the most efficient and historically relevant ways of acting. Moreover, one related teaching strategy entailed introducing knowledge to students not only as a tool that emerges from and makes sense within the *past* practices but as itself embodying activity and representing abbreviated templates for practice that needs to be learned through acting in the present (as in the "learning by doing" principle employed in constructivist approaches too). For example, the concept of number was introduced as a template for carrying out practical activities of measurement that have emerged in the history of civilization and that students need to actively engage with and replicate in carrying out their own activities in the present.

One way to further expand this conceptualization from the transformative activist stance is to consider concepts in their relevance not just within the historical past and the ongoing present, whereby learners are introduced into practices that replicate the historical legacy "behind" the concepts and instructed how to carry out these practices in the "here and now" (see Stetsenko, 2010b). In addition – not instead! – the learners have to employ knowledge in its relevance for *future* activities that they seek, as these are envisioned by the learners *themselves* in their gradually forming meaningful pursuits of their own goals and visions for the future, of what *ought to be*. From the transformative activist stance, concepts, as all cultural tools too, need to be actively drawn upon and re-invented by learners, rather than acquired or replicated, and thus *authored* in the light of forming their own path *and their own nascent life projects as these are aimed into the future,* yet are always already launched in the present. In this case, learning and development are highlighted as related not only to one's position in community practices in their past and present but at the same time, and centrally, to a commitment to *changing* these practices through one's own (individual yet not a-social) goal-directed pursuits. That is, the strategy is to render concepts meaningful by turning them into the tools of the learners' forming their life pursuits and agendas (or life projects), wherein both concepts and life projects begin to coalesce and co-evolve.

In other words, teaching– learning should be organized in ways where knowledge is revealed: (a) as stemming *out of social practice* – as its constituent tools; (b) *through social practice* – where tools are rediscovered through students' active explorations and inquiry; and (c) *for social practice* – where knowledge is rendered meaningful in light of its relevance within activities significant to students, that is, where concepts are turned into tools of their own development and their own emerging identity as social subjects who matter in the unfolding dynamics of collaborative practices. This position represents an extension of the Vygotskian approach to teaching–learning by adding emphasis on the

need to establish mutual relevance between students' identities and their knowledge, that is, on establishing interdependences between concepts and students' emerging life agendas as a context in which these concepts are applicable in truly 'personalized' – that is, profoundly social – and thus, deeply meaningful ways. It is within this context that the event of understanding is uniquely possible – as the act of creating the future at the intersection of individual and collective agency in the ever growing and shifting zones of proximal development.

To summarize the key position advanced in this paper, the resolute repudiation of the Cartesian dualism and its notion of isolated individuals outside of collectivities, endowed with solipsistic minds that parade concepts and process information within the isolated realm of the brain or in the "mental depths," can be achieved *while recovering and reclaiming individuals as social actors – co-creators of community practcies and our common history; and individual subjectivity* as itself a fully social, embodied, material-discursive process that gains its status through contributing to social practices and *mattering* in them (borrowing this term from Barad, 2007). This goal can only be achieved based in a radical re-construal of the foundational premises about not only individual and collective layers of social practices but the basic ontology and epistemology of these practices as the core of human development, social dynamics, and reality itself. The steps towards such a transformative re-construal, away from the notions of adaptations, is what is endeavored in the transformative activist stance, in line with the core spirit of this approach that suggests constant renewal, innovation, and movement beyond the given.

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