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THE PRAXIS OF TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH: REVISITING PAULO FREIRE

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Ulli Vilsmaier, Gerald Faschingeder, Juliana Merçon

Learning from Paulo Freire for Transformative Research

1. Introduction

Transformation is one of the key catchwords of the early 21st century. In light of severe social-ecological and political crises, and an unprecedented acceleration of socio-technical changes, transformation is called for in all sorts of discourses. A short online search shows: business consultants recommend transformation competencies and consider up-to-date leadership as transformational; life coaches provide guidance for personal transformation; a transformation church promises spiritual transformation; the European Union has a digital transformation strategy, Germany a transformation minister, and the United Nations a strategy to transform our world. In fact, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is currently the main international framework of “universal and transformative goals” that set out a “transformative vision” for “people, planet and prosperity” (UN 2015: 3, 1). Also in academia, transformation is gaining increasing importance – as both a subject of research (How does the world transform?), as a research practice (How can research transform the world?) and as a self-reflexive stance and claim (How must academia transform to transform the world?). In the past, other terms described phenomena of socially intended change: for instance, “revolution or reform” was the dominant debate for decades (Demirović 2012). Today, we are a long way from that; transformation seems to be the best that can be said and conceived in this respect. It can hardly be denied that the success of this term is also due to the fact that it is multifaceted and blurred. Nevertheless – or precisely because of this discursive development – with this special issue we want to add to an evolving transformative research paradigm by learning from Paulo Freire, exploring the praxis of transformative research.

The notion of transformative research, currently in use internationally, has emerged and spread from dominant academic discourses. Yet, looking back on the last century, this is not where the praxis of transformative research originated from. Saul Alinsky comes into mind – his move from academia to ghettos and industrial areas in Chicago, as early as in the 1930s, to support systematic ways of organising communities in tackling their own problems of marginalisation, exploitation, poverty, and injustice (Alinsky 1989) – and so does Paulo Freire. Many of the questions raised in the current discourses on transformative research are at the core of the work of the Brazilian pedagogue. He proposed a radical vision of research and learning, seeing these as abilities to understand and transform the world. Developed in highly unequal and unjust socio-political and economic environments in the 1960s in Brazil, his approach to alphabetisation consisted in learning *to read and write the world* as an act of liberation through conscientisation. For Freire, transformation is, above all, a situated process, emerging from dialogue of people who problematise concrete, existential situations, driven by hope and nurtured by love. At the same time, he considers transformation to be an existential necessity – not only of those oppressed in feudal systems of exploitation, but to overcome all sorts of dehumanisation and destruction. For current discourses and practices of transformative research, Paulo Freire’s work constitutes an insightful resource. Precisely because of the engaged, collaborative and dialogical nature of transformative research, his thoughts and experiences of humanisation and liberation, his praxis of action and reflection as radically intertwined, and his approaches to transforming supposedly unalterable situations (in his terminology, ‘limit situations’) through ‘limit acts’ may help shape the potential of transformative research for people and communities and the epistemic qualities resulting from action-based research.

This special issue is the third collection in a series that explores principles and practices of Paulo Freire’s work for research and learning to tackle the pressing problems of our times. The first collection emphasised methods for inter- and transdisciplinary research and was published in this journal in 2020 (Vilsmaier et al. 2020a: “Methods for inter- and transdisciplinary research based on Paulo Freire”), followed by an edited volume (in Spanish) on principles, methods and experiences of transdisciplinary

research, published in 2024 (Vilsmaier et al. 2024: “Aprendiendo de Paulo Freire para la investigación transdisciplinaria: Principios, métodos y experiencias”). This special issue emphasises the transformative potential of research and adds to an emerging transformative research paradigm.

2. The concept of transformation in research

The term ‘transformation’ has different functions and uses in different disciplines and subject areas. Material or energetic states are transformed, and so are semantic and geometric shapes, as well as organisations, governance systems, value and knowledge systems, worldviews, politics and belief sets, to name just a few (Vilsmaier/Ross 2024). In political science, for example, the term transformation is used – with reference to Karl Polanyi’s main oeuvre “The Great Transformation” – as an analytical and normative category to describe the experience of globalisation and to indicate the need for radical change towards more justice and sustainability (Brand/Daiber 2012). Approaches for enabling transformation range from techno-scientific solutionism to critical theories that, for example, consider modern dualistic thinking and capital accumulation – contemporary societies’ guiding principles – as key drivers for the polycrisis humanity is facing (Morin/Kern 1999). An OECD report on the concept of transformation in the social sciences indicates that “[t]ransformation has ambiguities and multiple meanings in the social sciences, and can imply shifts in structures (changes to institutions or cultures) and in agency (empowering people to envisage and implement alternative pathways).” (Brown et al. 2013). Similarly, the use of the term transformation can be traced in development studies’ discourses, as structural, economic, rural or gendered transformation and its use as adjective to indicate a quality of change of effects, policies, and learning, to name just a few dimensions. In a recently published article, Sumner (2024) proposes a typology of development studies that organises schools of thought, distinguishing between those considering development as transformatory and those which view it as improvement of the status quo. The author shows that both classical and post-development studies may pursue transformation, but with highly

diverging theories, underlying worldviews and methodological approaches. A particular use of the term is to describe a paradigmatic shift in research on social justice, one that moves from researching *about*, to contributing *to* enhancing human rights (Mertens 2007; 2021). This is the context where the first forms of action research emerged, with Kurt Lewin introducing already in the 1940s a form of collaborative and interventionist research that involves those being researched in knowledge production and problem solving. A large variety of action research approaches have been differentiated since then (Streck 2014). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is heavily informed by the work of Paulo Freire and his ideas of profound social transformation (Merçon 2022). More recent forms bridge action research with sustainability transformations, such as “Action Research for Transformation (ART)” (Bradbury et al. 2019).

In the fields of global change and sustainability research, a distinction between “transformation research” and “transformative research” (WBGU 2011) has been made for distinguishing research *about* transformation and transformation *through* research, the latter describing an engaged, interventionist form of research. Both research approaches are framed as “transformative science” (Schneidewind et al. 2016). The terms ‘transformative science’ and ‘transformative research’ are also used to label a specific form of science that aims at paradigm shifts, in a Kuhnian sense, by means of profound discoveries through research (Trevors et al. 2012; Elrahman/Giannopoulos 2011). Here, the property ‘transformative’ indicates a way of thinking and doing science that leads to “overthrowing entrenched paradigms and generating new ones” (NSB 2007: 1). It has been adopted by large science policy and research funding organisations, mainly in the U.S., such as the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. We can, thus, identify two significant differences in the discourse on transformative research: firstly, the concept is used to describe transformation in scientific research (epistemic transformation) and secondly, we note a use of the concept to characterise research producing actionable knowledge and action for social and ecological transformation (onto-epistemological transformation). Both discourses describe paradigm shifts but differ highly in the objectives pursued through research, and, as a corollary, in epistemological and axiological premises and research methodology.

3. Transformative research: conceptual approximations and discourses

A closer look at the discourse of transformative research for social and ecological transformation – to which we want to contribute with this special issue – reveals that certain shared characteristics and premises exist, but that it is not, in itself, a consolidated discourse. Wittmayer et al. (2024: 2) describe the field as a “broad and loosely connected family of research disciplines and approaches, with the explicit normative ambition to fundamentally question the status quo, to change dominant structures, and to support just sustainable transitions”.

Over the last two decades, the discourse on transformative research has gained momentum in re-framing the role of research in tackling pressing social and ecological crises on an international level (Augenstein et al. 2024; Wittmayer et al. 2024; Ross/Michell 2018; WBGU 2011). In stark contrast to an ivory tower idea of scientific research that draws strength from isolation and separation, the new paradigm that is on the rise relies on connectivity and commonality with the aim of being transformative (Mertens 2021). This includes moving away from a transfer model, which organises knowledge production and application sub-sequentially, to introducing an entangled approach of co-producing knowledge and social action (Stirling 2014). As a consequence, transformative research is constituted in a pluralisation of research objectives. It links knowledge production *about* with societal action *on* pressing problems, while re-structuring organizational conditions *for* such kinds of research (Fritz et al. 2022a; WBGU 2011). Stirling argues that “[e]ntwining knowledge and action in ways that are not as separate and sequential as prescribed in notions of control, a caring disposition recognises that transformative interventions are best undertaken as combining both” (Stirling 2014: 19). This shift has significant implications for the understanding of what is considered research and who is considered a researcher (Vilsmaier et al. 2020b), and for how, where, and with what purpose research is conducted. It affects all dimensions of research, including questions related to epistemology, axiology, methodology, ethical-political considerations, professional identity and research organisation (Mertens 2007, 2021). The discourse on and experimentations with transformative research are spread across multiple

disciplines, including, first and foremost, social-ecological research and sustainability science, as well as social, political and health science. They also gain increasing importance in a number of specialised knowledge fields such as agroecology, urban studies and adult education, as well as development studies.

In transformative research, the adjective *transformative* characterises an epistemic quality, an ethical attitude, a procedural and methodological type, and an organisational mode of research (Vilsmaier/Ross 2024). The noun *transformation* describes a “profound, substantial, and irreversible change” (Brown et al. 2013) that is perceived as a necessity for healthy, diverse, just, equitable, and sustainable futures (WBGU 2011). Methodological approaches such as living-labs (Backhaus et al. 2023; Crosby et al. 2018), T-labs (Pereira et al. 2021; Charli-Joseph et al. 2018), real-world labs (Parodi et al. 2023; Defila/Di Giulio 2019) and different kinds of creative transformative methods – including cooking and painting (Franklin 2022) – are examples for the changing ways of conducting research in collaborative, transformative spaces.

Much of the work around transformative research has in common to associate the subject of research with multi-dimensional, dynamic change that involve interactions and interdependencies as well as high degrees of uncertainties and unknowns (Vilsmaier/Ross 2024). Other commonalities include pursuing multiple objectives – to advance knowledge (epistemic objective) and to transform situations at stake (transformative objective) – (Fritz et al. 2022a) and in conducting research within heterogeneous teams from different sectors and communities in trans-sector research alliances (Novy/Howorka 2014). Differences exist with regards to epistemic, axiological and ontological premises and their according methodologies and process design. These include the extent to which epistemic, axiological and ontological pluralism is considered (Wittmayer et al. 2024; Keestra 2022; Mertens 2021) and social and epistemic control of research processes is taken into account (Herberg/Vilsmaier 2020). Approaches also differ in the extent to which researchers engage with ethical-political considerations (Wittmayer et al. 2024; Merçon 2022), hegemonies and power relations in collaborative teams (Augenstein et al. 2024; Minna et al. 2023; Fritz et al. 2022b), as well as the roles and responsibilities of those involved in transformative research (Hilger et al. 2021).

The variety of conceptualisations of transformative research reflects what we also encounter in the discourse of transdisciplinarity (Vilsmaier et al. 2023). This does not come as a surprise, as the two have significant overlaps (Vilsmaier et al. 2020). Some authors consider transdisciplinary and action oriented research approaches essential for transformative research (Minna et al. 2023), while others, including ourselves, propose combining the two as *transformative transdisciplinarity* (Augenstein et al. 2024; Herrero et al. 2018) or *transforming transdisciplinarity* (Ross/Mitchell 2018). Ross and Mitchell, building on the work of Erich Jantsch, Basarab Nicolescu and Manfred Max-Neef, characterise a transforming transdisciplinarity as a profound paradigm shift from a linear and reductive logic towards more complex views of reality, stretching “the entirety of the meaning system of our paradigms and worldviews [...]” (Ross/Mitchell 2018: 49) which, according to the authors, “requires a rare level of reflexivity that in itself challenges the fundamental structures of much of the academy and society” (Ross/Mitchell 2018: 52).

We encounter such a profound and radical shift in Paulo Freire’s contribution to education and learning, one that Enrique Dussel identified as a Copernican revolution in pedagogy (Vilsmaier/Streck, in this issue). Revisiting Paulo Freire’s work to learn for transformative research may help us to lay bare ideas and experiences of a research praxis that puts the researcher as a situated, affected and connected person at centre stage.

4. This special issue’s contributions at a glance

The first contribution in this special issue examines the understanding of transformation in Paulo Freire’s work. Ulli Vilsmaier and Danilo Streck explore what they consider to be a striking and radical transformative momentum that influenced pedagogies and research practices around the world. The contribution offers an analysis of his main books and the emergence of his conceptualisation of transformation, layered through the phases of Freire’s work. In the article, a series of concepts that have been introduced by Paulo Freire are presented to re-thing ideas of transformative research: his concept of praxis as entanglement between action and

reflection; the situationality of the human being as the starting point for transformation; the role and importance of performing limit acts in order to achieve transformation; his radical understanding of transformation as a way of becoming more human; and the relationship of the oppressor and the oppressed in transformation.

The contribution authored by Juliana Merçon explores Paulo Freire's notion of critical hope to argue for the crucial role played by affects in Participatory Action Research (PAR) and other collective endeavours that aim at transforming realities. Critical hope is defined in this article as an affect linked to the problematisation of the status quo and to the active commitment to the creation of fairer worlds. As such, it constitutes a key driver of collective praxis. Considering the fact that hope can also be passive and non-critical, it should be constantly nurtured and educated. Merçon proposes that Freire's 'education of hope' can be applied to PAR as "an intentional effort to address different aspects of the collective work that sustain its sensitive, critical and transformative potential". Various suggestions are thus presented in this article to foster critical hope through collective care in relation to the affective, epistemic and ethical-political dimensions of PAR.

Danilo Romeu Streck, Sandro de Castro Pitano and Nilda Stecanela emphasise 'connectivity' in their contribution to this special issue. In their decades-long and close explorations of Paulo Freire's life and work, the authors identify connectivity as a research principle for research that is transformative. The article offers both theoretical insights into the conceptualisation of connectivity and practical examples of how it plays out in research. The authors describe connectivity as a way of being of Paulo Freire, as an epistemic and social quality of his work, and discuss it as an attitude in engaging with the world. This fresh view on research as a 'collective act of pronouncing the world' helps further the understanding of the fundamental role of connectivity for inter- and transdisciplinary research and its transformational force. Examples shared by the authors come from the fields of education and participation, including the elaboration of a reference framework to understand the pedagogies of participation, a collective practice for the elaboration of a municipal atlas, and research on teaching practices.

Alain Santandreu's contribution is also linked to the question of connectivity and solidarity. Written from the perspective of an experienced Latin American activist intellectual, Santandreu is criticising the dominance of the project logic which has been noticeable for decades. He refers particularly to development projects, which in his view aim to demotivate, separate and paralyse people's struggles by not recognising their self-determined paths to change. According to the author, it is therefore important to identify the 'antagonists' who are weakening the people's struggle with this strategy. According to Santandreu, the logical framework has a fatal effect because it leads to inequality and injustices in the social and political context being given too little weight. In this respect, he argues in favour of subversion, because of the necessity to work on a shared world view, as Freire explains in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. On this basis, Santandreu is able to open up optimistic perspectives. With the concept of retropia, which goes back to Zygmunt Bauman, he refers to a backward-looking view that Freire would probably have labelled necrophilic. To this end, Santandreu introduces the concept of 'diatopia', an ideal image of reality developed through dialogue, and calls for truly transformative action. This contribution invites to reflect on the project logic in academia, and its consequences for transformative research.

The last article deals with the question of what a truly effective and self-determined transformation is, offering a clear counterpoint to the rest of the issue. Walter Kohan and Ceane Andrade Simões question the meaningfulness of the concept of transformation and criticise it as a Eurocentric and ultimately imperialist approach. Based on an analysis of Freire's writing with regards to social change, they bolster their criticism with reflections from the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who considers 'transformation' and 'change' merely as disguises of the underlying hierarchical discourse of domination. The authors argue that what is needed are differentiated epistemologies that enable new thinking with a new language. According to Kohan and Simões, the approaches of decolonial theories, particularly those of intellectuals Ailton Krenak and Nego Bispo, have a liberating effect in this respect. The reflections in this contribution aim to create a new grammar for the imagination and a different form of education. Here, transformation is conceived beyond the conventional notion of transformation which is based on concepts of European

philosophy and social sciences. Thus, this article introduces the perspective of a world full of post-transformational change through the potential of transformative research from the authors' perspective: 'The dream of the Earth is a metamorphosis' (Krenak 2020 in Kohan/Andrade Simones in this issue).

This collection of contributions invites readers to explore new visions, principles and practices of research that are transformative in multiple dimensions, including the research field and situation at stake, the pathways, logics and organisational frameworks of research, and ultimately, all those who are involved in transformative research.

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