

Transcendent Anthropology

Correspondence/ Q&A with Elvira Wepfer And Michael Grenfell

EW: You write that, in order to resist the dominant narrative of a capitalized relation to the world, social activism plays an important part. How exactly do you, and did Bourdieu, see activism engaging with metanoia? Part of my argument is that activists employ metanoia for social change as a form of prefiguration: the latter aims to create a more viable future by (necessarily imperfectly) acting it out in the present. The metanoic self, so to speak, stands for the future-in-the-present. How do you conceive of activism engaging metanoia?

MG: The short answer with respect to social activism engaging with *metanoia* is the relationship to the language used to express it. Bourdieu became more activist towards the end of his life. This was when he had come to some conclusions and he wanted to fight against neoliberalism. That being said, he did not really bring his philosophy into such activism - and its language/ concepts. Adopting his concepts as epistemological tools changes relationship/ views of the world.

The problem is, of course, that 'prefiguration' on the basis of capitalist based ideas only reproduces the same. He was very clear that the dominant collude in their own domination. The argument in *Masculine Domination* is that resistance mounted against it is already shaped by it. He upset feminists with that.

So, activism is OK - in as far as it goes - and he was a pragmatist - but liable to yield disappointing results since the basic epistemology/ ontology is not changed - indeed, has already been 'pre-figured'..

Under the heading 'Time and the Conscious Act' you paraphrase an earlier argument about the subject who, as a researcher, makes herself neither an empirical nor a scientific object but considers the practical reason, ethos or ultimately consciousness behind it. (Clarification: what exactly do you mean by 'scientific?')

The *Metanoia* he talks of implies very distinct relations to time, etc. Ultimately, it is about the difference between 'deductive reason' and 'practical reason', but at the level of foundational ethos. The nature - in time and space (social and physical) - to the object. Where things are not capitalised.

'Scientific' is knowledge' derived from work with his theory of practice - so that the basic ontology (habitus) of the researcher is transformed. So, it is one thing, through reflexivity, to see the biases of empirical thinking, another thing to see the nature of this seeing - and go beyond it.

I understand this argument as supporting a phenomenological approach to participant observation / objectification; specifically, fieldwork circumstances led

me to employ phenomenological auto-ethnography to examine transcendentalist self-transformation, and I see in your argument support for this choice as a way to 'grasp' the process of becoming . Do you agree, or am I misunderstanding?

I think so, but Bourdieu stresses the social because it has to be practical and body based – hexis - not just ideas. I don't think there is a transcendence – quite the opposite, it is a 'coming home'. But, it disappears as it is grasped – Ouroboros - *An understanding in the act of understanding* (with understanding in the Kantian sense). It is 'objectivation' for Bourdieu - not 'objectification' - but this raises the issues of what intellectual resources are needed to be able to do it. He sometimes describes it - like in *La Misère* - as seeing all possibilities - at that instance. But, even this is expanding and not substantialised - an 'adding to'. The ambition for 'Self-transformation' is always a kind of 'violence to oneself' - rather than coming home to it.

*Other than this, I am superficially familiar with the Fourth Way, and I'm looking forward to delving deeper into your Esoteric writings!
As for my own work, my Greek eco-activist informants employ vowel meditation, therapeutic playing of the gong and other sound-related practices to raise awareness and broaden consciousness.*

It is nice to play with sounds but 'awareness' is always memory. You cannot 'broaden' consciousness – it is absolute and permanent. Even impermanence has a nature of permanence - so, its nature is invisible and a non-capitalist ethos.

There is non-permanent meditation which is palliative and therapeutic and permanent meditation which is continuous.

You can, however, work on 'attention', 'intention' and 'commitment' – and this can open the door to consciousness: Bennett's 'energies'.

Ironically, it is open already but so close, most do not see it

They see such self-development as essential for social and ecological change, as they adhere to an ontology of relationality. This ontology is based in transcendentalist spirituality (i.e. a western approach to Asian spiritual practices and worldviews), metaphysical philosophy and ecology, and places the condition of being relational at the core of existence. As everything relates to everything in dynamic and ever-becoming processes, transforming the self both transpires as the first step to change and will necessarily have an impact beyond the personal.

It **is** relational. This begins with the type of relational structure Bourdieu is writing of, but ends up with the force that forms structures in the first place - ethos. However, eventually, it becomes a relational as a 'oneness'. Since we all see relationally is with the same consciousness IF liberated from the capitalistic world-view. So, yes, on the relational – but not in a substantial way.

Yes, also: we cannot change the world, but we can change our relationship to it. But, it is an odd sort of change because it is essentially returning to what is already there. Everything else is culture. Even that is part of 'the oneness' – since you mention Eastern spirituality. But, it is not the things or relations themselves but the permanence in which they all share consciousness. So, I understand this language you use but one has to guard against idealism.

Ultimately, the ego is like the thief dressed as a Policeman. It comes up with fancy schemes to deal with stuff it only imagines...

Once you stop trying to change, you change - and not only yourself but with respect to your entire view of the world - metanoia.

On a social level, an important aspect of my informants' activism is to practice and promote non-violence through becoming aware of one's emotions and the needs that underlie them (in this they follow Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication).

People try to 'deal' with emotions rather than except them for what they are: both real and unreal. When they exist, they are 'unreal' – although that unreality is itself real. Once we see that, they go quiet. Similarly, with needs – they are a natural part of our individual manifestation – and should be respected but not indulged. Pat them on the head, they soon calm down. Ultimately, it is more about 'attitude' than 'awareness'.

As they employ the term metanoia to their transcendentalist engagement and connect it to emotions, this 'modern metanoia' (Ellwanger, 2020) focuses on a personal experience of an ontology of relationality for socio-environmental change.

I am sure it is good to work for ecology but projects are often a bit dodgy. Ultimately, to come home, establish the freshness of consciousness, love, truth, permanence is probably more reliable. Ultimately, the ontology is at the level of consciousness not environment - the constituting force beyond/ behind it. But, yes, sure, working for 'the good' - why not! It is good, I am sure Bourdieu would agree, that individuals and groups are fighting for the climate. We just need to be clear what is actually going on here.

Once you begin to see like this, there are two possibilities: you either become a monk/ nun. Or, you go out into the world and become adulterated in its ways. Both are necessary. Both require different disciplines. The problem with socio-political groups is that they are all over the place and this fragments - capitalist mode!! Global *metanoia* is unlikely but one can represent it in the world. The butterfly in China....!!

Additionally, as metanoia signifies both change itself and a tool for change, it parallels my informants' prefigurative activism in which their subjectivities become both tools for change and are changed in the process.

This is kind of the fourth way equation: non-judgemental self remembering or self-observation. Many find it difficult to do this without developing conclusions and narrative. Gurdjieff/ Bennett express it in terms of a hierarchy of 'energies': Sensitive, Conscious, Creative, Cosmic. There is something in that, especially in terms of the differences between the 'automatic' and the 'intentional'. 'Change' is ultimately an expression of time, so metanoia is

similarly linked to what we see 'in time' - although somewhat 'outside of it'. It is ex-static - the surfboard!

These considerations are part of my larger argument: that regenerative socio-environmental change (which is needed for a viable future on this planet) requires personal transformation, and that in this change, the concept of relationality is political in ontological terms.

This is true but I still stand by my line that it is ultimately about 'the nature of the relationship between the subject (personal) and the object (socio-environment) – with the focus on the 'between'. That 'between' cannot be idealism, it needs to be epistemological in terms of the breaks from various knowledge paradigms Bourdieu sets out and the personal struggle to go beyond the limits of one's thinking, and indeed relationship to the world. Otherwise, we risk just 'imagining' a better future and devising ways of realising it – which is already confined by our old, capitalist ontology - the limits of our thinking, which we take as true - even our acknowledged relativism!!

Coda

On the issue of personal transformation, I find that most people I encounter only define change mechanically – what might make life better. They take it more seriously when they have suffered a trauma – physical or psychological. So, the change they seek is again quite mechanical and limited to their perceived problem.

The kind of work we have done with music (Guitar Craft) aims to give direct experience. When someone sits in a circulation of guitars – each passing one note – something happens. But, to go beyond the palliative, there has to be a degree of self-observation, both in that experience and one's life. That might not happen in any active way. The experience remains somatic.

Another problem is that people think what they think is true – even when they say, 'I know what I think is not true'. Neither is the case. As with Gurdjieff, often 'self observation' can become intellectual – a kind of self-counselling.

What I was trying to convey was the need to go beyond this to a kind of 'ontology regarding an ontology' with a focus on the very nature of the essence of observation (how this might evolve and change nature). I expressed this sense as 'coming home'. The connect with Bourdieu is the way the empirical and scientific habitus can open up an epistemological space. Once that is felt, then more object/ conscious ways of observing become possible. Even in Bourdieu, one no longer needs to use the language of habitus and field – one just sees it.

Admittedly, it is a long process just as in western music one begins by learning all the scales – but one has to see all of them *as one thing*. Then, one becomes

aware of the nature of this seeing – and seeing the nature of the seeing.
A *metanoia* indeed.

Ulimataley, however, it all depends on levels of commitment – and indeed suffering. I think JGB said that ‘we cannot achieve the aim without suffering’: *ipso facto*, the amount of change possible depends on the level of suffering that can be endured. At some point, only a saint can continue. (although, of course, the mistake is to believe that if one is suffering, it must be good!! Not true!!!) Anyway, obviously, not many sign up for this suffering. Which is fine – best to know one’s limits. Good to be familiar with what might be possible as well, though. I think the work focus can be various but in the Fourth way, the head (intellect), hands (body) and heart (emotions) are challenged and taken care of – although this may not always be obvious: for example, the way emotional trauma gets embodied. As Krishnamurti said, it is good to keep the body in good shape, but meditation or yoga will not produce enlightenment in itself.