**The Sociological Imagination and Transformation Theory:**

**A Tribute to Oskar Negt**

Ted Fleming

Teachers College Columbia University, USA

**Abstract:** The psychological imagination has played a significant role in the evolution of transformative learning (TL). This paper explores the sociological imagination as an under-utilized ingredient in TL relying on C. Wright Mills and Alfred Schutz to reclaim the unrealized potential of their ideas in the early development of TL. It is also an enriching thread for TL today. The paper goes beyond these authors and integrates the sociological imagination of the German critical theorist/adult educator Oskar Negt with TL. Mills and Schutz were known to and quoted by Mezirow. Negt’s concepts of sociological imagination, exemplary learning, obstinacy, imploitation and the dialectical nature of the personal social connection are explored and form a basis for moving TL toward a critical theory of adult learning.

Key Words: Sociological Imagination, Exemplary Learning, Oskar Negt

Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble. (Lewis, 2018)

I recently came across a letter from Jack Mezirow that started; ‘Glad to hear from you and know that you are still causing trouble’ (Mezirow, 1996, p. 1). Causing ‘trouble’ was a perennial ambition that Jack had for himself, and others. The conference theme suggests there is a value in making ‘good trouble’ for TL.

Mezirow relied on the psychological imaginations of Piaget, Kohlberg, Fingarette, Gould and others for the development of TL and also on the sociological imaginations of Marx, Habermas and Freire. In prioritizing the psychological imagination, the sociological imagination may have been neglected. Finnegan perceives a ‘stuckness’ in TL (Hoggan, et al., 2016, p. 49), an emphasis on ‘rationality at the expense of emotional’ intelligence (p. 55), and ‘downplaying’ the role of sociological imagination in what Mezirow borrowed from Habermas (p. 59). There are also (Finnegan, 2023, p. 127) relatively low levels of work done on ‘social justice’, and integrating critical sociology, political philosophy and social class with TL. This paper attempts to integrate the historic sociological imaginations of C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) and Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) with TL and the contemporary sociological imagination of Oskar Negt. These help address some of the ‘stuckness’ and progress TL. Though aware of Schutz and Mills, Mezirow did not integrate their work on the sociological imagination with TL.

What is Sociological Imagination?

For C Wright Mills, the originator of the concept, sociological imagination means a study of the historical context of social events in terms of the meaning they have for the individual’s inner life. It takes into account ‘how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions’ (Mills, 1959, p. 5). Sociological imagination connects individual experiences and problems with the broader structures of society. This connecting is important in TL when connecting one’s individual problems with broader social issues.

**The Plan**

This paper explores the sociological imagination as understood by Mills and Schutz as an under used, even neglected, ingredient in TL but an enriching thread for TL today. It goes beyond these authors to the German critical theorist/adult educator Oskar Negt. Together these make ‘good trouble’ - ‘necessary trouble’ - for TL (Lewis, 2018). Mills and Schutz were known to Mezirow and quoted by him.

**C Wright Mills: Sociological Imagination**

In *The Sociological Imagination,* Mills (1959) outlines the impact of society on individuals by constructing social reality and individual experience so that ‘neither the life of the individual - nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both’ (Mills, 1959, p. 3). We can only know our own chances in life by ‘becoming aware of those of all’ (Mills, 1959, p. 5). One’s biography is lived in society. Biography and history are grasped and connected by the sociological imagination allowing us to ‘shift perspective from the political to the psychological’ (1959, p. 7). The remedy for over using the psychological imagination in TL is not to abandon it, or latch onto the sociological imagination, but to integrate them as dialectically intertwined.

Mills conveniently uses the concept of ‘troubles’ to refer to problems that occur in everyday life (1959, p. 8). The second stage in the process of TL involves making connections between one’s individual ‘troubles’ and (social) issues providing an opportunity to integrate the sociological imagination of Mills. Making ‘good trouble’ can have this resonance, predating John Lewis. Including Mills is necessary trouble! This should have provided a way to address some of the critiques of TL that suggested, and indeed convincingly argued, that TL had an inadequate concept of the social. Social science must include ‘both troubles and [social] issues, biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations’ (Mills, 1959, p. 226). Including sociological imagination in sociology makes it ‘more sprightly’ (1959, p. 18) - with the same potential for TL.

Mills (1959, pp. 195ff) outlines how ‘intellectual craftmanship’ helps integrate the sociological imagination in studies of reality. He intended to keep the ‘imagination spurred’ (p. 211) with a ‘playful mind’ (p. 211) and a fierce drive to make sense of the world (p. 211). This will ‘release the imagination’ (p. 215). Mills (1959, p. 186) describes the work of social scientists:

What he ought to do for the individual is to turn personal troubles and concerns into social issues and problems open to reason - his aim is to help the individual become a

self-educating man [sic], who only then would be reasonable and free. What he ought to

do for the society is to combat all those forces which are destroying genuine publics and

creating a mass society…his aim is to help build and to strengthen self-cultivating

publics.

It is clear that our authors explicitly connect their ideas with supporting vibrant public spheres - the supporting infrastructure of democracy (Schutz, 1976; Negt, 1973).

**Alfred Schutz: Sociological Imagination**

Mezirow (2003, p. 326) references Schutz, quoting him in his paper at the 5th TL Conference in TC. He (1979) borrowed from Schutz, but Schutz has a low profile in TL scholarship and conference papers. Schutz described the *lifeworld* as the preconscious and taken-for-granted presuppositions, understandings that determine how reality is experienced. It is the taken-for-granted horizon within which we understand the world (Schutz, 1970). It is subject to a ‘sociopathological form of *internal colonization’* by the system (Habermas, 1987, p. 305). For Habermas this is the pathology of modernity. Mezirow used lifeworld to describe uncritically accepted frames of reference and sets of unquestioned assumptions that inform our thinking and actions. The lifeworld (frames of reference) gets transformed in TL. Much of the sociology of Schutz centers on the lifeworld.

*Typification* (Schutz, 1967) refers to the process that we use to make meanings and to categorize people and things in order to better understand them. Typifications act as form of *recipe knowledge* or handy unquestioned projections onto others as to how we perceive them. For Mezirow, our ways of typifying are unquestioned sets of meanings that make sense – until they do not. Typifying uses imagination to abstract from reality. We make meaning by taking for granted our beliefs in the world by the ‘suspension of doubt’ (1967, p. 229). We are always pre-acquainted with the world through socially given meanings as a ‘stock of knowledge at hand’, ‘ biographically determined’ and ‘sedimented’ (p. 247). These form a ‘socially approved set of rules and recipes for dealing with reality’ (p. 34) and are the ‘sediment of previous experiences’ (p. 33).

The sociologically imagination also includes *bracketing* suggesting that in making meaning what we put ‘in brackets is the doubt that the world and its objects might be otherwise than it appears to him’ (1967, p. 46). If some event arises that brings into question the reality as we experience it, then we may change the assumption that we have been seeing things as they actually are (Schutz, 1967). This requires an active sociological imagination. These concepts also inform TL. According to Mezirow, bracketing (of doubt) is an example of uncritical thinking. But seeing these concepts as part of sociological imagination has not been utilized in TL. The necessary concept - indeed necessary trouble - of the sociological imagination escapes attention.

Other concepts from the phenomenological sociology of Schutz also form part of the vocabulary of TL and the theory of sociological imagination. These (Schutz, 1967) include *role taking* (the ability to see the self through the eyes of others) and *multiple realities* (the experience of being able to interpret experiences from different perspectives). Mezirow (1979) was able to suggest that multiple realities were suggestive of frames of reference or provinces of meaning (Schutz, 1970) – but never named as involving sociological imagination.

Schutz (1945, p. 571) theory of sociological imagination has a well-developed concept of *dialectic thinking* that is surprisingly neglected in TL scholarship. Dialectical thinking involves a dynamic relationship between individual actors and social structures; between objective reality and subjective phenomenon; between structure and agency; between the body and world (Fleming, 2024). Two things are achieved by integrating it with TL. We integrate a necessarily troubling ingredient of TL. It also forms a bridge to the sociological imagination as understood by Negt. The idea that our personal problems, or disorienting dilemmas are connected to broader social issues now needs to be re-defined within TL. Without identifying the dialectic connection between the personal and the social we misunderstand both the individual problem and the social context. An early stage of TL involves making connections between one’s own individual problem and broader social issues. That connection is dialectical. A number of the stages of TL must now be reinterpreted.

The political is personal – but dialectically. For example, the actions one takes as the essential completing stage of TL are dialectically interconnected actions at personal and social levels. It requires that one perceives how internal oppressions and external injustices operate dialectically. This critical reconstruction of TL moves it toward a critical theory of adult learning.

**Oskar Negt: Sociological Imagination for Transformative Social Change**

Negt was a critical theorist in the Frankfurt School tradition. He died in early 2024 – prompting this paper’s dedication to him (Langston, 2024). His first book (1971), *Sociological imagination and exemplary learning,* provoked considerable discussion in European workers’ education circles. He worked with his movie-making colleague Alexander Kluge (Kluge, 2024; Negt, 2024) and they also assert that individual experience cannot be properly understood unless it is seen in dialectical relationship with one’s social environment. Disorienting dilemmas then become more complex than Mezirow’s version (1991) and changes how TL is understood. Without the dialectical relationship between individual experience and social contexts each is misconstrued. In the literature on TL the dialectical nature of these connections is absent. We must avoid falsely dichotomizing social and personal aspects of TL - we need to integrate them.

Habermas (2008, p. 14) addressed this forcibly when he wrote that the ‘public domain of the jointly inhabited interior of our lifeworld is at once inside and outside’. Even in the most personal moments our consciousness thrives on the ‘impulses it receives from the cultural network of public, symbolically expressed, and intersubjectively shared categories, thoughts and meanings’ (Habermas, 2008, p. 15). It is difficult to imagine a stronger statement than this of the false dichotomy between individual and society. TL requires an ability to imagine the world in this connected way. There is not a psychological imagination and another unconnected sociological imagination with which we understand experience and the world. The final stage of TL involves taking action on the basis of new transformed perspectives. These actions are both individual and social.

Negt (1971, p. 27) links his teaching technique that he calls exemplary learning with the sociological imagina­tion of Mills. He organized instructional materials that addressed workers’ interests and class consciousness with a view to supporting them taking emancipatory actions. Uniquely, among critical theorists Negt (and Kluge) present teaching materials and instructional methods as part of his pedagogy of the sociological imagination.

Kluge and Negt were aware that our imaginations are compromised by neoliberalism which subverts people’s inner resources. They borrowed the concept of ‘*imploitation*’ from Bertolt Brecht to describe this impact. Quoting Brecht, Kluge and Negt (2014, p. 445) state how exploitation operates in the inner world: ‘Since the object of exploitation is put inside them, they are, so to speak, victims of imploitation’ that prevents understanding the real conscious experience of oppression and how systems undermine ‘workers’ imagination’ (Negt & Kluge, 2016, p. 35). They reclaim imagination calling it the ‘productive force of the brain’ (Negt & Kluge, 2016, p. 37) - neglected and ‘barricaded into the ghettos of the arts, dreaming, and the “delicate feelings”’ (p. 36). In typical expressive language they see this undermined imagination as the ‘vagabond, the unemployed member of the intellectual faculties’ (Negt & Kluge, 2016, p. 37). According to Kluge and Negt an obstacle is erected for emancipatory practices when this productive force of the brain is divided (imploited) so that it cannot obey its own laws of operation. The imagination cannot imagine. An important tool is lost for the ‘self-emancipation of the workers’ (Negt & Kluge, 2016, p. 37). But all is not lost. They introduce the imaginatively original concept of *obstinacy* to describe the extraordinary capacities of human nature to not only survive imploitation but to have the potential to be awake (Kluge, & Negt, 2014). We recall that Mills (1959, p. 197) and Schutz (1967, p. 212, 1970, p. 72) associate the sociological imagination with being ‘awake’. The struggle for recognition, the resilience of learners and the drive for learning that is transformative are multiple ways of expressing obstinacy and a deeply engrained posture of being wide awake (Fleming, 2024).

Negt’s pedagogy involves, thinking independently, dialectically, systemically, with sociological imagination, utilizing critical reflection. Adult learning is a process of analyzing and bringing into awareness the historical process of how learners’ interests are defined for them and how relationships of power are experienced, so that they can learn about their roles in society (Negt, 1973). He goes beyond the teaching of competencies and emphasizes understanding ‘workers existence as a social problem’ (Negt, 1971, p. 4). This involves learners, analyzing social situations, in order to understand the causes of these situations and informing actions to change them. He developed a transformative pedagogy and teaching manual so that learners may identify actions to change unjust realities. When Negt and Kluge (2016) assert that experience is the most important thing that ‘workers actually produce’ (p. xlviii). I suggest that learners, acting as learners, produce experience. When we then understand how experience is influenced by social structures, there is the possibility of what Maxine Greene (1995) - quoting Schutz - calls breaking through the inertia of convention when people ‘are enabled to explain their “shocks” and reach beyond’ (p. 39). Such a pedagogy, Greene continues, ‘offers life; it offers hope; it offers the prospect of discovery; it offers light’ (1995, p. 133). These moments can help engage one’s sociological imagination in the process of social transformation (Negt & Kluge, 2016) and TL. Negt’s pedagogy involves an exercise in sociological imagination in order to re-imagine the lived experiences of learners and the submerged possibilities that emerge through exemplary learning. Exemplary learning is Negt’s pedagogy that combines six competencies and sociological imagination.

Negt’s (2010, pp. 218ff) six competences essential for exemplary learning include the competences of: Identity; history; social justice; technology; ecology and economics. His curriculum of exemplary learning links learners’ individual experiences (of misrecognitions and injustices) with social issues; investigates and explores the interconnections in order to see how individual experiences and structural issues are connected – dialectically. Exemplary learning is transformative.

In contrast to TL, with its much-criticized focus on abstract critical reflection, it is imagination - sociological imagination - that provides the firm grounding for transformation. Negt’s education goes beyond views of education that emphasize personal growth that may lead to fitting into the social structures of the current world (Negt & Kluge, 2016).

TL has an absence of teaching methods in publication about TL. Kluge and Negt (2014) collect an archive of pedagogical methods for facilitating the exploration of how things could be different. Using literature, science fiction, satire, fairy-tales, film, documentaries and a range of innovative materials they support the critical and sociological imaginations of learners. They make trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble, trouble that leads to disorienting dilemmas. It makes trouble for what is preconceived and taken for granted. Making trouble may be mild expression compared to Kluge’s (1996) book title that refers to their pedagogy as *Learning processes with a deadly outcome*.

In contrast to TL’s rather tame political interest, Negt’s learning nudges TL toward social and political arenas. It provides a framework for an historical and material interpretation of subjectivity as produced by capitalist systems as well as a source for a new more just and caring social order – this demands sociological imagination. All our accomplices (Mills, Schutz, and Negt) are aware that social change is difficult, involving what Kluge (2017) calls in his book title (quoting Weber), a slow and powerful *Drilling through hard boards*. This is a rare excursion into adult learning theory by a scholar linked to the Frankfurt School.

Conclusion

As a tribute to Oskar Negt, and in the style of his teaching for exemplary learning with a sociological imagination, I offer this fragment. Beyoncé - a prominent singer and cultural figure - has recently published a recording of Paul McCarthy’s civil rights inspired song ‘Blackbird’. It makes, I think, ‘good trouble, necessary trouble’. Listen with a sociological imagination and a TL ear! Play on YouTube (Simpson, 2024).

Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
[Take these broken wings and learn to fly](https://genius.com/29392046/The-beatles-blackbird/Take-these-broken-wings-and-learn-to-fly)  
All your life, you were only waiting  
For this moment to arise.

Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see  
All your life, you were only waiting  
For this moment to be free.

**References**

Finnegan, F. (2023). A many-splendored thing? Transformative learning for social justice. *New*

*Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2023, 119–133. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20483>

Fleming, T. (2024). Experience and sociological imagination: Transforming the researcher’s

learner identity. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*,

*15*(1), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.4841>

Greene, M. (1973). *Teacher as stranger: Educational philosophy for the modern age*.

Wadsworth.

Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action, Volume 2: The critique of functionalist*

*reason*. Polity.

Habermas, J. (2008). *Between naturalism and religion*. Polity.

Hoggan, C., Mälkki, K., & Finnegan, F. (2017). Developing the theory of perspective

transformation: Continuity, intersubjectivity, and emancipatory praxis. *Adult Education*

*Quarterly, 67*(1), 48-64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713616674076>

Kluge, A. (1996). *Learning processes with a deadly outcome*. Duke University Press.

Kluge, A. (2017). *Drilling through hard boards: 133 Political stories*. University of Chicago

Press.

Kluge, A. (2020). *Alexander Kluge: Homepage*. <https://www.kluge-alexander.de/>

Kluge, A., & Negt, O. (2014). *History and obstinacy*. Zone Books.

Langston, R. (2024, March 8). Oskar Negt (1934-2024). [Web blog post]. Retrieved from

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/oskar-negt-1934-2024>

Lewis, J. (2018, June 27). On line Twitter post. Retrieved from

<https://x.com/repjohnlewis/status/1011991303599607808?s=20>

Mezirow, J. (1979). *Perspective transformation: Toward a critical theory of adult education*.

Unpublished preprint/draft. Copy in possession of author.

Mezirow, J. (1991)*. Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1996, August). [letter to T. Fleming]. Copy in possession of T. Fleming.

Mezirow, J. (2003). Epistemology of transformative learning. In C. A. Wiessner, S. R. Meyer,

N. L. Pfhal, & P. G. Neaman (Eds.), *Transformative learning in action: Building bridges*

*across contexts and disciplines.* Proceedings of the IV International Conference on

Transformative Learning, pp. 326-333. Teachers College. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qwxxjoN1qMTonpX7VOfWgc1US3vkOxxe/view>

Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.

Negt, O. (1971). *Soziologische Phantasie und Exemplarisches Lernen: Zur Theorie und Praxis*

*der Arbeiterbildung, [Sociological imagination and exemplary learning: On the theory*

*and practice of workers’ education*]. Europäische Verlagsanstalt.

Negt, O. (1973). Don’t go by numbers, organize according to interests!: Current questions of

organization. *New German Critique, 1, 42-51.*

Negt, O. (2010). *Der politische Mensch: Demokratie als Lebensform* [The political person:

democracy as a way of life]. Steidl Verlag.

Negt. O. (2024). [*Alexander Kluge*](https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/)*: Cultural history in dialogue*. Webpage retrieved at:

<https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/conversations/negt/>

Negt, O., & Kluge, A. (2016). *Public sphere and experience: Analysis of the bourgeois and*

*proletarian public sphere.* Verso.

Schutz, A. (1945). On multiple realities. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 5*(4), 533-

576. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2102818>

Schutz, A. (1967). *Collected papers I: The problem of social reality*. Martinus Nijhoff.

Schutz, A. (1970). *On phenomenology and social relations: Selected writings*. University of

Chicago Press.

Schutz, Alfred. (1976). The well-informed citizen. An essay on the social distribution of

knowledge. In A. Schutz, *Collected papers II: Studies in social theory*, 120-134.

Martinus Nijhoff .

Simpson, D. (2024, March 29). A new moment to arise: Beyoncé’s cover of the Beatles’

‘Blackbird’ is a timely masterstroke. Analysis Section *The Guardian*

<https://youtu.be/xhempeEjGUA>