

# Transformative Learning and the Rhythms of Individual and Collective Changes

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*Ce texte a déjà paru dans Nicolaidis, A. & Holt D. (Eds.), Spaces of Transformation and Transformation of Space, Proceedings of the XIth Transformative Learning Conference. New York : Teachers College, Columbia University, 2014, p. 107-109. Nous remercions Michel Alhadeff-Jones de nous avoir proposé de le reproduire ici.*

My research around the paradigm of complexity (e.g., Alhadeff-Jones, 2008, 2012a ; Morin, 1990/2008) and the temporal and rhythmic dimensions of education (Alhadeff-Jones, in press, 2010 ; Alhadeff-Jones, Lesourd, Roquet & Le Grand, 2011) brings me to challenge three core assumptions that may limit our understanding of the relationships between individual and collective changes, as they relate to the experience of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991 ; Taylor, Cranton & Associates, 2012). First, Mezirow's contribution relies on a conception of individual and collective beings as « atoms » separate from each other within their own individualities. Second, his theory defines the idea of transformation assuming that it occurs in-between states of relative stability. Third, it tacitly assumes that emancipatory learning necessary leads to social change. Inspired by the experience of the birth of my first child, as part of my family - and my own - on-going transformation, this communication aims at challenging those three assumptions and suggests complementary views in order to consider the locus and dynamics of individual-collective transformations, as well as the way they relate to micro and macro power dynamics. In order to proceed, this communication will be mainly inspired by the rhythmic conception of power and individuation proposed by the contemporary historian and philosopher Pascal Michon (2005). Understood specifically « as a complex temporal organization of processes by which psychic and collective individuals are produced » (p.17), Michon's conception of *rhuthmos* (Ancient Greek term at the root of « rhythm », which literally means « way of flowing » (*manière de fluer*)) represents indeed a stimulating entry point in order to conceive the complexity of individual and collective transformations.

## Autonomy and Dependency of the Locus of Transformation

Modern psychological and sociological theories consider individuals (e.g., baby, parent, family) as separated and interacting with each other according to a more or less stable and structured system of interrelations. As already pointed out by sociologists such as Elias (1970, quoted in Michon,

2005), this « atomized » interpretation – as well as the stability of the structuralist or systemic views it supports – remains nevertheless problematic. Instead of positing the existence of a (psychological or social) being antecedent to the movements that animate it, Michon recommends to start from these movements in order to understand how these psychic and collective beings are formed. Thus, if we can still distinguish the members of a family as relatively autonomous from each other, we have to consider them as mutually dependent in order to grasp the *locus* of the transformations that affect them. For instance, a new born's lack of autonomy impacts directly the parents' margins of freedom, and how they relate on others for support. Such an organization is by itself in perpetual move. What changes with time is not only the baby's physical and psychological skills, it's the whole physical and living fabric they belong to. Behaviors such as breastfeeding, carrying, putting to sleep or singing are constituted of body and linguistic rhythms that influence simultaneously the parents' and the baby's own ways of moving, talking, thinking, positioning themselves in regard of each other, etc. Transformations affecting intimacy, trust, safety, shared values or identity emerge from this fabric as well. They are produced by the flow of interrelations between the intertwined and interdependent movements of the bodies, affects, thoughts, discourses and behaviors. As such, they are also the product of historical influences that determine such rhythms.

## **Discontinuities and Continuities of Transformation**

The evolution of the family fabric – and the broader social fabric within which it is intertwined – is at the same time ordered and chaotic, predictable and unpredictable. This is particularly true with a baby ! In this context, transformation can be interpreted at the same time as : a) the developmental process of a (psychological or social) being (e.g., baby, parent, family) punctuated by discontinuities ; *and* b) the expression of the on-going flow of changes that drives our lives. On one hand, Mezirow (1991) assumes that transformations require some forms of disruption and occurs in between two states of relative stability. From this perspective, critical events, *épreuves*, or epiphanies, play a central role as catalysts for changes and transitions. On the other hand, transformations can be experienced in a much more subtle way, occurring through periodic experiences that involve the regular repetition of small scale changes eventually leading to an emerging activity. From the very first beats of the embryo's heart cells to the first words spoken, the evolution of a child is made of such incremental changes. If the structure of its transformation (e.g., developmental stages) may be described, its singularity (e.g., its timing and movement) remains impossible to predict with accuracy. The same is true with the evolution of the parents, the family and society itself. This complexity requires therefore one to envision stability as a provisional state emerging from instable conditions (Alhadeff-Jones, 2012a, 2012b). In addition, transformative learning's duality (e.g., discontinuities and continuities, linearity and repetitions, stability and instability) suggests one to conceive it as a rhythmic phenomenon (Alhadeff-Jones, in press).

## **Power as a Capacity to Organize the Rhythms of Transformation**

Like other humanist contributions in adult education, Mezirow's theory assumes that perspective transformation and emancipatory learning implicitly lead to social change (Finger and Asùn, 2001). The nature of the relationship between power and transformation itself remains however unclear (Alhadeff-Jones, 2012a). Michon (2005) suggests one to conceive power as that which organizes, controls and influences the ongoing flow of transformations that characterizes the process of individuation experienced by psychological or social beings. From this perspective, if transformative learning involves rhythmic phenomena (e.g., body, language, thought, behaviors, social configuration), then power refers to the capacity to control and organize the way they flow. Considering the birth of a child from this perspective means that the rhythms that shape its

evolution represent an ongoing political process. For instance, the temporalities involved in the delivery (e.g., when to induce ? when to come to the hospital ? when to give pain reduction ? when to give a caesarian ? how long to stay for recovery ?) reveal critical tensions between the embryo's development, the mother's body, the doctor's expertise, their respective preferences (e.g., level of medical assistance), their interests and values, as well as society's standards (e.g., social expectations, pace of life). Later, the transformations of the family life are also shaped by temporal antagonisms revealing conflicting interests that require negotiation : between parents and child (e.g., setting limits, being patient), between parents (e.g., availability, flexibility, work-life balance) ; between family needs, state and institutional policy (e.g., health care and day care's age/duration requirements). Such decisions do not only involve (inter-) personal dilemmas ; they are embedded in a broader cultural and political arena, shaped by its own rhythms and history. According to this perspective, transformative learning appears therefore as : a) organized by the power struggles that determine the way it evolves through time ; and b) an opportunity to influence ongoing power dynamics by negotiating the rhythms experienced in the everyday life.

## **Individual and Collective Transformations as Complex Rhythmic Phenomena**

According to Michon (2005), the world we are living in shares many commonalities with the period of the first globalization (1890-1940) ; a period that a broad range of thinkers - from anthropology, sociology, linguistics and literary theory - has studied referring to the notion of rhythm (e.g., rhythmic aspects of social movements, psychic rhythm, rhythmic analysis of popular culture and political system, relationship between linguistic rhythms and social transformations). Michon's conception of *rhuthmos* - as a specific « way of flowing » (*manière de fluer*) - represents therefore an engaging approach to conceive individual and collective transformations. It should bring us to : 1) consider such phenomena as moving and flowing, rather than through their stable features only ; 2) embrace the duality of transformations as ordered and disordered phenomena involving discontinuities and continuities, linearity and repetitions, stability and instability ; and 3) interpret power dynamics as rhythmic organizers influencing, as well as they may be influenced, by the heterogeneous flow (e.g., embodied, linguistic, psychological, social) through which individuals form and transform themselves.

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