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Leaving the Meatrix? Transformative learning and denialism in the case of meat consumption

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ABSTRACT
Despite growing evidence of many environmental and other problems being caused by industrialized meat production, the issue of meat consumption is still generally seen as a private affair that has nothing to do with politics or education. This article problematizes meat consumption and discusses transformative learning theory in the light of the authors’ experiences with denialism in critical meat education. It reveals the potential of a cross-fertilization through which transformative learning theory gains complexity and critical meat education benefits from a more coherent theoretical and practical frame.

Introduction
Mimicking the film The Matrix, the video Meatrix (2003) reveals the dire animal ethical, environmental, health and social implications of factory farming. By equipping Leo, the pig, with glasses so that he can see through the romantic projections of happy animals on traditional small-scale farms, he can recognize the truth behind animal products. Leo sees the suffering of millions of nonhuman animals in concentrated animal feeding operations, where they endure living conditions that do not allow for a minimum of movement and natural behaviour, acute and chronic pain as well as emotional stress. He further sees the working conditions of humans and recognizes the interrelationships between violence and the exploitation of humans, nonhuman animals and nature (Dillard 2008; Nibert 2013; Porcher 2008; Purcell 2011). The Meatrix also draws attention to the environmental pollution (e.g. Eshel et al. 2014) and public health risks related to hormones, antibiotics, nitrogen, and ammonia (Gilchrist et al. 2007; Wing and Wolf 2000). Science demonstrates how animal-based products increase the use of land and water and contribute to the loss of biodiversity, species extinction and global warming (Eshel et al. 2014; Pelletier and Tyedmers 2010; Tilman and Clark 2014). Research suggests an effective link between healthier, meat-reduced diets and more environmental sustainability (Garnett 2016; Stehfest et al. 2009; Tilman and Clark 2014; Westhoek et al. 2014) as well as animal ethics (Allievi, Vinnari, and Luukkanen 2015; Foer 2010; Singer and Mason 2006). However, it seems that many individuals as well as organizations and institutions are still reluctant to put the glasses on to acknowledge complex problems associated with the Meatrix and take action for social change (Graça, Calheiros, and Oliveira 2015; Macdiarmid, Douglas, and Campbell 2016; Ruby et al. 2016).
This predicament raises important questions about the role of educational institutions, the adequacy of educational theories and the efficacy/possibilities of educational practices. While integrating the theoretical insights and practical suggestions of critical pedagogy (Freire 2014) and transformative learning theory (TLT; Mezirow 2000) in our own teaching, we found one phenomenon to be the lynchpin of change that, nevertheless, has not attracted much attention within these approaches: denialism. Both Mezirow’s and Freire’s approach to learning as deconstructing belief systems rest on the rationalist assumption that if people had the information and learned to recognize the problem, they would develop the consciousness necessary to solve it. In the field of environmental education, such an assumption is challenged by the persistent discrepancy between environmental knowledge and awareness on the one hand and actual pro-environmental behaviour on the other hand, as in the case of climate change (Norgaard 2011; Vetlesen 2016, 8; Washington and Cook 2011). Indeed, there are a number of significant social and psychological factors that prevent behavioural change (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Among these, emotions increasingly draw attention within environmental education research (Ojala 2016; Russell and Oakley 2016). With respect to meat consumption, the ideology of ‘carnism’ enables people to consume high quantities of industrially produced meat despite its emotionally troubling animal ethical and environmental implications (Joy 2010, 18).

Inspired by our experience with an attempt to apply transformative learning theory to the issue of meat consumption in an educational science bachelor seminar, the article discusses the challenge of denialism for transformative learning theory and practice. After an introduction to carnism and a short discussion of the role of education, the article presents the theoretical frame of transformative learning and the problem of denialism. It closes with an elaboration of the cross-fertilization between the challenges of a critical meat education and TLT.

Learning in the Meatrix

Living and learning in a carnistic society means first and foremost being socialized into the belief that meat eating is ‘normal, natural, and necessary’ (Joy 2010, 96). While children show a particular interest in and empathy for animals (Myers 2007) and are capable of making moral decisions concerning whether or not to eat animals (Hussar and Harris 2010), they are heavily influenced by their parents’ attitudes (Bray et al. 2016; Herzog 2010) and socio-cultural practices based on a fundamental separation between human and nonhuman animals (Bell and Russell 2000; Oakley et al. 2010). Children learn to like meat, for example, through repeated exposure within the family and educational institutions, through advertising and the association with toys (Rice 2013).

Meat eating thereby becomes an emotionally loaded factor in the formation of identity (Adams 1990; Rothgerber 2013; Stibbe 2004), social distinction (Hill Gossard and York 2003) and social belonging (Stapleton 2015). It is protected by psychological mechanisms of denial, avoidance, routinization, justification, objectification, de-individualization, dichotomization, rationalization, and dissociation’ (Joy 2010, 19) and linguistic means such as the use of euphemisms and passive voice (Bell and Russell 2000; Heinz and Lee 1998; Stibbe 2001). On the social level, the nonhuman animals behind the meat are usually hidden in removed locations of production and slaughtering (Adams 1990; Fitzgerald 2010; Franklin 1999), in processed meat and in cookbooks (Bjørkdahl and Lykke 2013). Demand for meat is driven by the international finance capital that trades in agricultural commodities including live animals and euphemistic advertising of the meat industry (Boggs 2011). The ‘animal industrial complex’ (Noske 1989) successfully rationalizes the risks involved in industrial animal agriculture, while governmental agencies, the media and even environmental organizations seem reluctant to problematize animal agriculture (Bristow and Fitzgerald 2011).

Meat eating is embedded in the generally anthropocentric and speciesist Western culture that also plays out in non-formal and formal learning contexts, which normalize the confinement, manipulation, use and killing of nonhuman animals (Spannring 2017). Animal industries, for example, are legitimized and the dominant food regime is protected by ignoring and forgetting the animal products in school canteens and obscuring dietary alternatives (Pedersen 2010; Rowe and Rocha 2015). Environmental
education is not necessarily non-anthropocentric and anti-speciesist, either (Kahn and Humes 2009; Kopnina and Gjerris 2015; Spannring 2017). Meat is sometimes offered uncritically in settings that promote sustainability education but are framed by neoliberal conditions (Lloro-Bidart 2017). In other instances, authors advocate hunting and the consumption of wild animals as environmental learning (e.g. Pontius et al. 2013). However, in the face of human overpopulation (Crist, Mora, and Engelman 2017), the loss of natural habitat (Kopnina 2016) and animal ethical concerns (Adams 2007; Kretz 2010), the killing of wild animals does not seem a viable approach to reducing meat consumption in modern mass societies.

Although more recently meat has become an ambivalent affair for consumers (Holm and Mohl 2000; Schroder and McEachern 2004), there is a lack of awareness of the environmental impact of meat production and resistance to the reduction of personal meat consumption (Graça, Oliveira, and Calheiros 2015; Lea and Worsley 2003; Macdiarmid, Douglas, and Campbell 2016).

Teaching and learning for transformation

To problematize meat consumption in the context of a broader vision of social justice within a more-than-human world (Castellano, Qu de Luca, and Sorrentino 2011; Kahn 2010), educators use aspects of Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 2014). In his endeavour to humanize and liberate oppressed people through popular education, Freire emphasizes the role of dialogue and participation in order to deconstruct power relationships and transform society. Although Freire has been criticized for his anthropocentrism (Bell and Russell 2000; Corman 2011), his aim of overcoming a naïve consciousness can also be applied to the ideology that supports and justifies the use of nonhuman animals as commodities and experimental devices in the name of economic, technological and scientific progress (Castellano, Qu de Luca, and Sorrentino 2011). However, Freire does not provide the theoretical tools to understand the learning processes implied in conscientization: ‘The process and problems involved in taking informed, collective, political action … are seldom addressed in the literature of critical pedagogy’ (Mezirow 2009, 97). In this respect, transformative learning theory (TLT) is helpful.

Mezirow originally developed TLT in a study of eighty-three women returning to college and undergoing a personal perspective transformation (1975). This process includes ten phases, starting with a disorienting dilemma, critical examination of one’s beliefs and behaviours, recognizing the problem, exploring new behavioural options, building competence and self-confidence and finally reintegrating in society with a new perspective and role. A central concept in his later work are the ‘habits of mind’, that is, webs of assumptions, evaluations and expectations, which filter the way we see the world. Learning takes place when a habit of mind is challenged through a dramatic event or an incremental process. It involves ‘becoming critically aware of one’s own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation’ (Mezirow 2000, 4). Transformative learning is fostered by dialogue and aims ‘to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers and democratic citizens (Mezirow 2000, 8).

TLT has been applied to the process of becoming vegan (Hirschler 2011; MacNair 2001; McDonald 2000). It has been shown to involve one or more catalytic experiences with animal cruelty, period(s) of repression of this knowledge (denialism), becoming oriented and willing to learn about animal abuse and veganism, the decision to become vegan and the development of a new practice and world view (McDonald 2000, 6). Important aspects in this process are empathy for animals and sensitivity to animal suffering (McDonald 2000; Pallotta 2008), the ‘mutually supportive roles of emotion and reason’ (McDonald 2000, 19), an openness for a new orientation and willingness to learn (McDonald 2000), the willingness and ability to overcome conformity effects, navigate relationships and manage conflict and stigma (Hirschler 2011), and the availability of a community of practice that provides learning resources, support and identity (Cherry 2006; Fox and Ward 2008; McDonald 2000).

Shifting from self-directed learning processes to educational settings, the question arises whether such a transformation can be taught. Authors have offered a number of suggestions for problematizing meat consumption. Rowe (2011, 2013) proposes the disruption of habits and belief systems through
visual and embodied experiences. Some authors emphasize the role of dialogue and critical reflection (Castellano, Qu de Luca, and Sorrentino 2011; Wright-Maley 2011) as well as empathy (Rice 2013). A number of academics also refer to the challenge of denialism (Castellano, Qu de Luca, and Sorrentino 2011; Rice 2013; Wright-Maley 2011). Based on our own teaching experiences, we will follow up on this phenomenon that was acknowledged by Mezirow only later in his life (2009) but was never elaborated. In the following section, we will therefore introduce denialism and illustrate the underlying difficult emotions.

Cognitive dissonance and denialism

Considering the effort necessary to change one’s behaviour in order to resolve the cognitive dissonance between caring about nonhuman animals and eating them, it is not surprising that most humans find it easier to actively ignore the issue altogether or to adapt their beliefs and/or perception of their behaviour (Festinger 1957; Joy 2010, 18). The direct strategy is to endorse pro-meat attitudes, deny animal suffering, insist that animals exist for human consumption and provide religious and health arguments (Rothgerber 2013). This tactic is in line with a set of underlying values that include an orientation towards hierarchical domination and a depreciation of emotional states and empathy (Allen et al. 2000). The indirect strategy involves the dissociation of animals from food and the avoidance of thinking about animal welfare (Rothgerber 2013).

Cultural practices, power relationships and ideology in a ‘carnistic society’ support these individual strategies (Joy 2010). Through them society provides ‘cognitive traditions’, which establish what to pay attention to and what to ignore, and organize denial by setting rules of good manners and ethical obligations to ‘look the other way’ (Zerubavel 2006). Society thereby offers strategies to manage and divert troubling emotions involved in particular issues. While emotion can spur action, it also plays a strong role in preventing a behavioural response (Cohen 2001). With respect to climate change, Norgaard identified four types of emotions: fear of loss of ontological security, helplessness, guilt and threat to the individual and collective sense of identity (2011, 80). Similarly, our students struggled not only with emotions connected with animal suffering and environmental degradation but also with guilt and shame, meat-based identity and social belonging, ontological insecurity and helplessness.

The students’ statements used in the following paragraphs are cited from their learning journals, which were part of their course assignment. The course (4 ECTS) had the title ‘Lifelong Learning’ and was a compulsory part of the curriculum for the bachelor in educational science at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. The seminar focused on transformative learning using meat consumption as an example. It first introduced TLT and then offered information about the social construction of human-animal relations and the social, ecological and ethical consequences of industrialized meat production for discussions in small groups and in the plenary. The students were encouraged to observe, reflect on and share their experience with their learning process as it evolved over the course of the seminar. Grading was based on the depth in which students dealt with TLT. This gave them the chance to write in a more abstract way and opt out of the ‘meat issue’, which 7 participants did to varying degrees. Altogether, there were 17 participants in the seminar, 2 male and 15 female. The students gave us explicit permission to use their learning journals for an academic paper. The statements used in the following paragraphs are marked with a letter to identify the respective students. The learning journals revealed a strong emotionality of the topic and the learning processes and led us to analyse these emotions inductively. In hindsight, the categories proved to be similar to those found by Norgaard (2011).

The evaluation of the seminar by the university showed exceptionally high rates of student satisfaction with the seminar. Some students also expressed this sentiment in their learning journals: ‘Thank you for giving us the time and space to grapple with something that moves us. I would not have thought that this issue would inspire and change so much in myself and in my family’ (R).

Nevertheless, an email asking students half a year after the end of the seminar whether and how the meat issue was still on their minds only got two responses. One woman replied that she was still conscious of this problem, while another woman reported having returned to meat consumption after
a period of experimenting with vegetarianism. While this suggests a failure of the seminar to mobilize change, the students’ learning journals give evidence of the difficult subjective experiences in the learning processes and deepen our understanding why information of the meat-problematic is repressed (cf. McDonald 2000). Two students were quite explicit on the connection between their emotional responses and emotion management strategies: ‘Because of the seminar, I asked the butcher about the origin of the meat. His answer was not satisfactory but I accepted it to be able to justify my meat consumption.’ (D) ‘Again and again I find myself adapting to society, not wanting to look, because it touches me deeply when it is about people and animals.’ (B)

Even without shocking pictures (Corman and Vandrocová 2014), discussions of the consequences of meat consumption cause strong emotions: ‘The seminar was very intense. The contents moved me more than I should have liked. They still do’ (H). Often, students found it difficult to express their emotions: ‘I don’t always find it easy to express what is going on inside me, although a lot is moving and working in me. I spend hours in front of the learning journal and find no end’ (K). It was primarily those students who articulated these difficult emotions who also experimented with behavioural change, while those who did not contribute to the sharing of feelings in class also avoided touching on the issue of personal meat consumption.

There were also strong feelings of guilt and shame about our entanglement in oppressive structures: ‘To admit that I have been wrong or that I have to partially revise my opinion is a very painful process’ (M). ‘I feel naïve and stupid because I realize that I have no idea how this system works’ (C). ‘To be honest, I was deeply shocked that I had never realized the relationship between my diet and animals. Meat had always been just a product’ (B). The critical assessment of one’s own assumptions and limited knowledge always reveals one’s vulnerability and touches one’s self-image and self-confidence. This is particularly problematic in this case because of the issue’s moral overtones: ‘Can I do or think anything at all without having a bad conscience?’ (H)

In line with Fiddes (1994) explorations of the social meaning of meat, some student statements document the intimate relationship between emotion, identity and belonging: ‘[T]radition, memories, smells and pictures. My grandma’s shining eyes when she served Viennese Schnitzel as the Sunday special’ (A). ‘Christmas and Easter, sitting together with the family’ (R). ‘Eating sausage and bread rolls at the village fete or at the local football match’ (K). It is not surprising that the prospect of being marginalized in these communities is daunting (cf. Stapleton 2015). This fear is not ill-founded, as the learning journals of two very enthusiastic women reveal: ‘I had taken 8 pages of notes during the seminar. I wanted to read them out to my husband but he did not want to hear it’ (H). ‘I realized that changes in my own personality have great effects on my close family. Changes irritate and strain relationships. I learned to take smaller steps to allow my family to follow’ (E).

Finally, ontological insecurity and helplessness were expressed: ‘Endless discussions with my friends. What can and may I eat, wear. It gets more complicated, unmanageable, time consuming’ (L). ‘If we want well-being in the future, we have to start talking about this problem. This step alarms me and I feel helpless and lame. It is unbelievable how we are trapped in our ways. To swim against the stream takes strength and stamina’ (C). This feeling hinges on the recognition that meat consumption is not only an individual problem but also a collective responsibility and matter of social and political action: ‘I have the impression that I am powerless, helpless and I do not want to endure the frustration in this context. All those people who are absolutely unscrupulous, remaining in their egocentric, consumptive orientation’ (L).

While in environmental education emotions can be a positive factor in fostering appropriate behaviour, the adverse impact of negative emotions also has to be taken into account (Carmi, Arnon, and Orion 2015; Ojala 2016; Russell and Oakley 2016). In the case of meat consumption, feelings are predominantly negative and therefore managed through strategies of denial. In this way, the deconstruction of one’s habits of mind and behavioural change become very difficult. TLT could therefore benefit from a more in-depth consideration of denial, since it leads to a more complex understanding of adult learning as non-linear, open-ended and reversible. Denialism also draws together other critiques of early TLT, including the overemphasis on rational thought, the disregard of power relationships and cultural
context, and the neglect of social change (Brookfield 2000; Cranton 2006, 39). However, TLT offers a theoretical and practical frame for efforts in critical meat education. In the final section, we will discuss some points of this cross-fertilization.

**Leaving the meatrix: discussion**

While for Mezirow the process of transformative learning was primarily a question of rationality, the students’ emotions around the disorienting dilemma further stress the importance of creating protected learning environments (Mezirow 2000) in which emotions can be expressed and shared (Corman and Vandrcová 2014). Emphasizing Cranton’s suggestion to use not only ‘content, process and premise questions’ but also ‘feeling questions’ to facilitate critical self-reflection among students (2006, 135ff), we propose to attend to the development of emotional self-awareness, expression and management and the critical reflective capacity to explore the connection between emotions and decision-making (Taylor 2001, 233).

The emotionality connected with the morality of meat consumption further adds significance to Mezirow’s (2000) and Cranton’s (2006) call to temper power relationships inherent in the structure of communication and teacher-student relationships. The issue’s moral overtone may silence some students, thereby implicitly excluding them from dialogue. In this particular seminar, some students who were already sensitive to environmental and animal ethical issues from the beginning, introduced vegetarianism and veganism to the debate and got the upper hand in the group dynamics. This seemed to silence the meat-eaters in the group. It took some effort on our part to bring meat-eaters back into a more open, multi-faceted dialogue. While this case may not represent a typical development in seminars like this one, it does highlight the significance of power dynamics.

Mezirow’s aim of empowering learners is further complicated by emotions connected with identity, group membership and cultural background. They stress the importance of open-ended dialogues on a wide range of (partial) solutions and lifestyles (Andrzejewski 2003; Corman and Vandrcová 2014; Stapleton 2015) which validate each individual’s starting point and possibilities to contribute to change on his/her own terms.

Students’ accounts of their frustration with society and politics highlight the intertwining of individual and social change, an issue that has been less elaborated in TLT (Cranton 2006; Schugurensky 2002). Mezirow focused on individual transformative processes as preceding social change. However, our students were quickly drawn back into the socially organized denial and their habitual behaviour. This demonstrates that as long as the taste for meat is the orthodoxy in society (Wilk 1997), individual change only happens at the fringes of society and sometimes at great personal risk (Kahn 2011). On the one hand, this puts the reproach of indoctrination (Mezirow 2009, 98) or worries about advocacy in environmental education (Jickling 2003) into perspective by suggesting a more humble approach to the role of the educator. Against the backdrop of our experiences with compulsory, non-advocative seminars (as this one) and non-compulsory, advocative seminars we propose that learning processes are more influenced by the students’ ability and willingness to connect with and make sense of the teacher’s (or other students’) input. As one of our participants wrote: ‘Vegans venture one step further into the depths of animal ethics. An undertaking that is completely alien to me’ (S). Thus, educators are participants in complex environments and processes beyond the classroom and can only inspire and support but not impose transformative change (cf. Cranton 2006, 135; Linné and Pedersen 2014).

On the other hand, it implies that helping students ‘make an educated decision about eating animals’ (Rice 2013, 119, org. emphasis) remains unsatisfactory for learners because meat consumption is not only an individual decision but also a socio-political issue. This suggests the need to foster participatory processes towards a healthy, democratic, caring and just more-than-human world (Brookfield 2000; Freire 2014; Schugurensky 2002). The development and democratic realization of a variety of cultural and political responses to the meat problem will be necessary, if they are to be realistic and appropriate to specific cultural contexts. Otherwise, alternatives to eating nonhuman animals will remain (to be seen as) a lifestyle phenomenon of the white middle-class insofar as social inequalities in access to
affordable and healthy plant-based food persist (Harper 2012; Stapleton 2015) and other approaches to alternative diets such as race-conscious veganism are obscured (Harper 2012). These considerations bring the need for transformative learning outside the classroom into focus: in school communities, youth work, community development, organizational learning as well as political engagement, for example, for the phasing out of government subsidies for factory farming.

Finally, discussing critical meat education in the context of TLT can bring the inspiring, but often single-standing ideas for pedagogic interventions into a coherent research frame. Most publications grappling with the meat problem, including our own, are based on teaching experiences rather than empirical studies. Research on the subjective meaning and impact of these pedagogic interventions for learners is necessary as well as a critical evaluation of the possibilities and limits of educational efforts. Further, it should widen our perspectives of learning processes in terms of time (e.g. long-term studies on lifelong and intergenerational learning), locations of learning (e.g. non-formal and informal education; community or organizational learning), as well as its cultural and socio-political contexts.

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