

# “To Transform” in Karl Marx and Paulo Freire: an intertextual analysis

## “Transformar” en Carlos Marx y Paulo Freire: análisis intertextual

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Received: 25-04-2025

Accepted: 25-06-2025

Online: 07-07-2025

Article available  
by scanning QR



### Cite as

Higuera Aguirre, E. F., y Ordóñez Guamán, S. V. (2025). “To Transform” in Karl Marx and Paulo Freire: an intertextual analysis. *Desafíos*, 16(2), 135-41. <https://doi.org/10.37711/desafios.2025.16.2.6>

## ABSTRACT

This article aims to distinguish the meaning of the verb “to transform” in the works of Karl Marx and Paulo Freire through an intertextual analysis method, in order to determine its scope and evolution. The intertextual analysis was applied to Marx’s *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach* and a fragment of Freire’s *Education, the Practice of Freedom* to establish possible discursive connections. A four-column matrix was used to examine the relationship between the Marxist *hypotext* and the Freirean *hypertext*. The results indicate that Freire did not resort to textual citation or plagiarism, but rather to the allusion of the terms “world” and “to transform,” and to a possible re-signification of the verb “to interpret” through the noun “reflection.” Freire employed the Marxist category of *praxis* to designate true education. Freirean *praxis* articulates reflection and action within a horizon of transformation, overcoming Marx’s dichotomy between interpreting and transforming. In this way, true education emerges as an emancipatory political practice. It is concluded that Freire used *praxis* to characterize true education, thereby assigning it a political function.

**Keywords:** transformation; praxis; intertextuality; Marxism; liberating education.

## RESUMEN

El artículo se propuso distinguir el significado del verbo “transformar” en textos de Karl Marx y Paulo Freire, mediante el método de análisis intertextual, con el fin de determinar su alcance y evolución. Se aplicó el análisis intertextual sobre la undécima tesis de Marx sobre Feuerbach y un fragmento de *La educación como práctica de libertad* de Freire para establecer posibles vínculos discursivos. Se utilizó una matriz de cuatro columnas para examinar la relación entre el “hipotexto” marxista y el “hipertexto” freireano. Los resultados señalan que Freire no ha recurrido ni a la cita textual ni al plagio, aunque sí a la alusión de los términos “mundo” y “transformar”, y a una posible resignificación del verbo “interpretar” mediante el sustantivo “reflexión”. Freire se ha servido de la categoría marxista de *praxis* para señalar a la educación verdadera. La *praxis* freireana articula reflexión y acción en el horizonte de transformación, como superación de la dicotomía marxista entre interpretar y transformar. De ese modo, la educación verdadera se configura como práctica política emancipadora. Se concluye que Freire se ha servido de la *praxis* para caracterizar a la educación verdadera y, con ello, le ha asignado una tarea política.

**Palabras clave:** transformación; praxis; intertextualidad; marxismo; educación liberadora.

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## INTRODUCCION

In the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Karl Marx outlined a disjunctive between interpreting the world and transforming it. This thesis contains a radical critique of the contemplative intellectualism that has defined much of Western philosophy, while at the same time inaugurating a new theoretical-practical horizon that conceives thought as a tool for social transformation. According to Marx, philosophers have limited themselves to offering multiple ways of interpreting the world, but what is truly decisive is its transformation. Transformation is not merely a consequence of theory, but the culmination of praxis, in which thought and action are articulated.

This idea has found resonance in the works of Paulo Freire, particularly in his notion of praxis as the subject's reflection and transformative action upon reality. In texts such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2023) and *Education, the Practice of Freedom* (2025), Freire argues that all genuinely critical education must be oriented toward the subject's conscientization and capacity to intervene in the world in order to transform it. Although the contexts of Marx and Freire are different, both authors coincide in assigning praxis a central role as a mediation between knowledge and liberating action. On this basis, it is justified to explore the possible textual links and theoretical dependencies between both authors, particularly with regard to the reception of the concept of transformation in the educational sphere. This article aims, precisely, to highlight those connections through intertextual analysis.

Intertextual analysis constitutes a critical approach that makes it possible to examine the internal configuration of a text through its structural and meaningful links with other discursive productions and with the authors who sustain them. This analytical methodology reveals the dense network of connections that a work maintains with previous textual traditions, as well as the relations of convergence or rupture it establishes with the works of other thinkers. In addition, this methodology allows tracing the transformations undergone by the concepts and categories employed, as well as the evolution of the authors' thought throughout their intellectual production (Higuera Aguirre, 2024). In this sense, it constitutes an appropriate method for identifying the probable textual relations between Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach and a fragment of Paulo Freire's *Education, the Practice of Freedom*. Through this process, it may be possible to determine the presence of citations, allusions, or transformations of the former author's text in the latter.

For this reason, intertextual analysis becomes an ideal methodological tool for identifying how discourses circulate, are transformed, and assume new meanings in different social and academic contexts. Texts are always embedded in interdiscursive networks that reflect power relations and ideological struggles, which justify their transformation and adaptation. In Freire's case, the creative appropriation of the Marxist legacy illustrates how the category of praxis shifts from a philosophical-economic context toward a pedagogical horizon with an emancipatory orientation (Mayo, 2020; Paulo, 2024).

This research conceives intertextuality as a process of "textual productivity" (Prieto, 2022), in which utterances are transformed according to the historical and social conditions that receive them. The relationship between Marx and Freire is not one of simple continuity, but of critical recreation, which makes it possible to speak of a transformative hypertextuality (López Romero, 2024; Risé, 2023). This perspective allows a better understanding of how critical categories circulate across different fields of knowledge and acquire new meanings in contemporary educational practice.

The research was guided by the following question: what is the scope of the verb *to transform* in Karl Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach and in a selected fragment of Paulo Freire's *Education, the Practice of Freedom*? Based on this question, the general objective of the article was to distinguish the meaning of the verb *to transform* in selected fragments by Karl Marx and Paulo Freire, using the method of intertextual analysis, in order to determine its scope and evolution.

## METHODOLOGY

To achieve the proposed objective, the method of intertextual analysis was chosen. In general terms, this method seeks to identify the presence of other authors and their discourses within a hypertext through citations, allusions, or plagiarism. Likewise, it encompasses the analysis of the modifications, appropriations, and even negations undergone by the sources used as hypotext in their incorporation into the hypertext.

The selection of the quotations was made after a careful review of the sources of both authors. Marx used the noun *transformation* in the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (2023) to describe the structural changes of society, and in *Capital* (1867) to explain the role of labor as

**Table 1**  
Selection of quotations from Marx and Freire

Karl Marx's quotation	Paulo Freire's quotation
"Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to transform it" (Marx & Engels, 2010, p. 18).	"True education is praxis, reflection, and action of man upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1987, p. 7).

an agent of transformation of human nature itself; but above all, he introduced the verb *to transform* in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach (Marx & Engels, 2010) to synthesize the doctrine of praxis as historical activity, capable of substantially modifying the world beyond the contemplative attitude of philosophical idealism. For his part, Freire used the verb *to transform* in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2023), in a text in which he links true reflection and action; in *Education, the Practice of Freedom* (2025), where he combines the terms *praxis*, *reflection*, *action*, and *transformation (to transform)*; and in a fragment of *Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (Freire & Mastrángelo, 2014), he uses the noun *transformation* to indicate the role of the teacher as an agent of social transformation. Although all these texts are important, the author considered especially representative the text of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach and the fragment from *Education, the Practice of Freedom*, which are shown in Table 1.

With the aid of a four-column matrix designed by the researcher, the probable relationships between the two selected texts will be shown. In it, Marx's text will assume the function of hypotext, while Freire's text will assume the function of hypertext. In the first column, the original text of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach will be presented; in the second, an analysis of its content will be provided; in the third, Freire's original quotation will be shown; and in the fourth, an analysis of the content of Freire's quotation in relation to Marx's original quotation will be offered. The analytical exercise will therefore be limited to verifying potential citations, allusions, and plagiarism

**Table 3**  
Comparison and general analysis of the fragments by Marx and Freire

Karl Marx's hypotext	Content analysis	Paulo Freire's hypertext	Content analysis
"Philosophers have so far done nothing more than interpret the world in various ways; but the point is to transform it" (Marx & Engels, 2010, p. 18).	The quotation establishes the opposition between interpreting and transforming. In the version that has come down to us through Engels, the emphasis falls on the need to transform the world rather than merely interpret it.	"True education is praxis, reflection, and action of man upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1987, p. 7).	For Freire, true education is explained through praxis. The components of this Marxist category are reflection and action. Through them, the transformation of the world is achieved.

Note. The author has highlighted in bold the most important terms of Marx's hypotext and Freire's hypertext, which will subsequently be the subject of analysis and discussion.

**Table 2**  
Marx's original fragment and the text published by Engels

Karl Marx's original quotation (1845)	English translation	Marx's quotation according to Engels's version (1888)	English translation
"Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert, es kömmt drauf an, sie zu verändern".	Philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it.	"Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert; es kömmt aber darauf an, sie zu verändern".	"Philosophers have so far done nothing more than interpret the world in various ways; but the point is to transform it" (Marx & Engels, 2010, p. 18).

of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach in Paulo Freire's *Education, the Practice of Freedom*. The validity of the procedure is guaranteed through strict fidelity to the fragments and to the interpretation commonly accepted in the scientific literature.

## RESULTS

Before presenting the results, it seems significant to highlight the modification undergone by Marx's original text at the hands of Engels prior to its publication. Among the most important changes, which condition the interpretation of the text, are the replacement of a comma with a semicolon at the end of the first proposition, and the addition of the adversative conjunction *aber*, which translates as "but," thereby accentuating the distance between interpretation and transformation.

The result of the comparative analysis of the selected fragments by Karl Marx and Paulo Freire is presented in the following table, after which a detailed content analysis is provided. As previously indicated, the first and third columns include the quotations by Marx and Freire, while the second and fourth columns present the respective analyses.

## DISCUSSION

Freire's hypertext contains no verbatim quotations or indications of plagiarism from the Marxist source. On the contrary, some allusions to the Marxist hypotext can be identified, among which mention may be made of the verb *to transform* and the noun *reflection*; the latter is used as a substitute for the verb *to interpret*, although with a different semantic weight. Both authors use the terms *world* and *transform (it)*. Additionally, it should be noted that Marx's text emphasizes the terms *interpret*, *world*, and *transform*, whereas Freire's text highlights *praxis*, *reflection*, *action*, *world*, and *transform*.

In light of the theoretical principles of intertextuality, it is necessary to underscore the importance of the substitution of terms. This action should not be interpreted as mere coincidence, but rather as a deliberate strategy; that is, as an indication of a "transposition of signifying systems" (Parveen & Radhakrishnan, 2024). In this process, Freire reworks Marxist terminology within a new discursive, educational, and political horizon (Paulo, 2024). According to Valenzano (2021), a more detailed analysis of this new model of theoretical understanding reveals the influence of several authors from the Marxist tradition, among them Erich Fromm, Jean-Paul Sartre, György Lukács, Karel Kosík, and Antonio Gramsci. In the same vein, Puiggrós (2019), Fernández (2019), and Santo and Alves (2025) recognize that Freire is indebted to contributions from personalism, existentialism, phenomenology, and anti-colonialism. With these clarifications in mind, Freire's substitution of *interpret* with *reflection* constitutes an example of intertextual resignification, in which a term originating in a philosophical semantic field is relocated to a pedagogical one in order to focus attention on the critical dimension of education (Chalaune, 2021).

According to Hoseini et al. (2021), this type of relationship may be considered a "hypertextuality through transformation," in which the hypertext (Freire) does not literally copy the hypotext (Marx), but rather reconfigures it in response to new historical and social conditions. From this perspective, Freirean discourse cannot be reduced to a copy of the original, but instead constitutes a creative exposition of the virtualities it contains (Paulo, 2024), since, by incorporating the verb *to transform*, it articulates it with *praxis*, a term absent from the thesis analyzed, yet decisive in the Marxist corpus. This procedure puts into practice the "death of the author" (Almujalli, 2023). By this means, Marx ceases to be the sole owner of his statements, which

become part of a new horizon of meanings in which Freire becomes a co-author of the critical tradition.

From the detailed analysis, it may also be inferred that, for Freire, the Marxist opposition between interpreting and transforming the world can be overcome through praxis. And although this term was not used by Marx in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, invoking it is not unwarranted given the strong semantic force of the term *transform*. For although there is no terminological correspondence between *interpretation* and *reflection*, the characteristics of Freire's text seem to indicate that praxis is nourished by an adequate "interpretation" (read: reflection) of the world. This means that transformative action begins with a profound "reflection" (read: interpretation) on the conditions of the world.

More profoundly, it should be pointed out that the Marxist distinction between *interpreting* and *transforming* must be considered a reflection of a deeper philosophical dispute, since the generic term *philosophers* in fact reveals Marx's distancing himself from Hegelian idealism and Feuerbach's contemplative materialism. With regard to Hegel, Marx declared in a text contemporary with the *Theses on Feuerbach* the "putrefaction of the Absolute Spirit" (Marx & Engels, 2021; Song & Wu, 2025); and with regard to the latter, that his materialism had come to a halt at the "abstract concept" of man (Marx & Engels, 2021; Chen, 2024), to the detriment of the historical and real conditions weighing upon concrete man. Authors of recognized prestige, such as Althusser (2019) and Lukács (n.d.), have analyzed the conditions of this epistemological rupture and of the critical distancing from Hegel and Feuerbach.

This philosophical background acquires a new dimension in Freire's reading. Thus, it is confirmed that intertextuality is detected not only in thematic traces, but also in silences and semantic displacements (Vázquez Rodríguez et al., 2022). By omitting the explicit polemic with Hegel and Feuerbach, Freire transfers the debate from the philosophical field to the pedagogical one, where the contradiction is no longer posed between idealism and materialism, but between "false" education and "true" education. This displacement constitutes an intertextual operation that allows Marxist thought to survive within the field of emancipatory pedagogy (Valenzano, 2021).

The opening formula of Freire's hypertext, "True education is praxis," makes use of praxis as an epistemological criterion (Puiggrós, 2022), from

which it becomes possible to distinguish between true education and false education. It is evident that the emphasis of the quotation falls on true education, characterized as *praxis*. For Freire, true education must be oriented toward liberation, humanization, and social transformation (Rodríguez & Fortunato, 2025). Moreover, it is characterized by dialogue (Harris & Roter, 2024), the development of critical consciousness (Da Costa, 2024), and the active participation of students in the learning process, in opposition to banking education (Morais et al., 2023).

The opposition between true education and false education may also be understood as a manifestation of "dialogism" (Petraikova, 2022; Somkin, 2023). Indeed, Freire's statement dialogues both with the Marxist text and with an educational tradition marked by authoritarianism and domestication. The dialogical character of this discursive construction reveals that intertextuality is not a unilateral process of influence, but a field of tensions in which voices, ideologies, and historical projects confront one another. In this sense, the category of *praxis* acquires not only theoretical value, but also ethical and political value, insofar as it establishes the horizon of an education committed to emancipation (Cakcak, 2021; Yulius, 2025).

As an additional element, it should be noted that although the term *praxis* does not appear in Marx's hypotext, it does appear in the rest of his *Theses on Feuerbach*. Indeed, in theses 1, 2, 3, and 8, Marx used the term *praxis* in different contexts. Nevertheless, due to the importance of the theme in the Marxist corpus as a whole (Pachón Soto, 2013), a detailed analysis of its meaning is indispensable. *Praxis* is the mode by which human beings produce historical reality outside themselves and produce themselves as well. In *Capital*, Marx (1867) established how this double transformation takes place through labor: "By acting through this movement upon external nature and transforming it, he simultaneously modifies his own nature" (p. 171). Within *praxis* are dynamically and interdependently articulated knowledge of social reality (Pereira & Moraes, 2020), its radical critique (Xiao & Jiang, 2022), and its project of transformation (Kien, 2025).

Because of this orientation toward the transformation of social reality, it may be argued that Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach implicitly and succinctly contains his doctrine. In the Freirean text proposed here, when he characterizes true education as *praxis*, he seems to take into account the three components that comprise it (knowledge of social reality, its radical critique, and its project of transformation); above all, its transformative

character. For this reason, true education, as opposed to banking education (Freire, 2023), would have to integrate reflection and action oriented toward the transformation of the world (Rodríguez & Fortunato, 2025).

In this sense, Freirean *praxis* is situated at the intersection of discourse and action, where pedagogy becomes a privileged mediation for carrying out the Marxist project of social transformation. The articulation between reflection and action is not only a methodological imperative, but also a strategy for overcoming the "referential illusion" (Freedgood, 2009), which arises when words are considered sufficient to transform reality. For Freire, as for Marx, words acquire meaning only insofar as they are embodied in acts (Buarque & Carvalho, 2024).

If the components present in both authors are compared, it may be pointed out that, for Freire, the point of departure lies in (true) education oriented toward transforming the world; whereas for Marx, the point of departure arises from critical consciousness of the alienating conditions of concrete human beings, which require transformation. In this way, Freire revealed that "true" education contains a political dimension, oriented toward the transformation of the world, which it must fulfill (Scocuglia, 2022; Misoczky, 2023).

Finally, this convergence invites us to think of the relationship between Marx and Freire not as a simple reception of the Marxist source, but as a creative overcoming of it (Paulo, 2024). "Educational *praxis*," understood as the articulation of reflection and action, emerges as a neologism coined by Freire that both extends and displaces the original meaning of the Marxist thesis. From this perspective, the liberating education proposed by Freire emerges as a new chapter in the history of struggles for emancipation.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it may be stated that Freire's hypertext contains two direct allusions (the terms *transform* and *world*) and one indirect allusion to Marxist doctrine (*praxis*). Whereas Marx emphasized the meaning of the verb *transform* in his dispute with Hegelian idealism and Feuerbach's contemplative materialism, Freire preferred the term *praxis*. Through it, he established the characteristics that true education must include, namely reflection and action oriented toward the transformation of the world.

Based on the analysis carried out, it may be presumed that Freire replaced the verb *interpret* with *reflection* with the intention of overcoming the mere contemplation of the world criticized by Marx. Additionally, it should be emphasized that, for both authors, the endpoint of the dialectical process of human action and true education coincides with the transformation of the world. Both authors agree on the need to transform the world. Although Marx did not elaborate in the eleventh thesis on how this objective is achieved, he did so in the remaining theses and in numerous places throughout his work. Freire, for his part, took up the Marxist teaching on *praxis* and used it as the predicate of true education, in which reflection and action are synthesized. In this way, he taught us that the political dimension, represented by *praxis*, forms part of ("true") education.

Intertextual analysis also allows us to conclude that the dialogue between Marx and Freire should not be interpreted as a linear dependency between the two authors, but rather as a relationship of critical reception. In this way, the Freirean text is configured as a space of transposition in which Marxist terms assume a new significant charge in response to new historical and pedagogical demands. In this sense, *praxis*, absent from the eleventh thesis, reappears in Freire as the articulating core of educational action, revealing the continued relevance of the Marxist legacy in the field of critical pedagogy.

By placing *praxis* at the center of transformation, both authors teach us that words attain emancipatory meaning only when they lead to action. From this perspective, intertextuality is not a merely literary exercise, but a critical tool that makes it possible to understand how ideas are reconfigured and operate in different fields of social struggle.

In summary, it may be affirmed that the two quotations respond to different contexts and purposes. Marx's reflects his philosophical position against Hegelian idealism and Feuerbach's contemplative materialism; Freire's, for its part, reflects the political dimension inherent in ("true") education, namely the transformation of the world. This study makes it possible to conclude that the method of intertextual analysis not only illuminates the explicit and implicit links between texts, but also contributes to understanding the processes of historical resignification. The transition from the verb *transform* in Marx to the category of *praxis* in Freire constitutes an example of how a philosophical concept can become a pedagogical category through a process of hypertextual transposition.

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#### Authorship contribution

EFHA: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, research, methodology, and writing – original draft.

SVOG: data curation, research, writing – original draft, and writing – review & editing.

#### Funding sources

This research received no external funding.

#### Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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