Encounters in Theory and History of Education
Rencontres en Théorie et Histoire de l'Éducation
Encuentros en Teoría e Historia de la Educación

A Pandemic's Punitive Pedagogy: Education and the Organic Crisis of the Global Neoliberal Order
Une pédagogie punitive pandémique : l'éducation et la crise organique de l'ordre néolibéral global
Educación y la crisis orgánica del orden global neoliberal

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Volume 22, 2021

The Crisis of Neoliberalism and Education

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085280ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24908/encounters.v22i0.14804

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Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, Queen's University

ISSN

2560-8371 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

McKay, I. (2021). A Pandemic's Punitive Pedagogy: Education and the Organic Crisis of the Global Neoliberal Order. *Encounters in Theory and History of Education / Rencontres en Théorie et Histoire de l'Éducation / Encuentros en Teoría e Historia de la Educación*, *22*, 7–40. https://doi.org/10.24908/encounters.v22i0.14804

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Vol. 22, 2021, 7-40

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic entailed a cruel pedagogy with regard to neoliberalism. Neoliberalism embodies a multifaceted process whereby the post-1945 Fordist compromise was gradually transformed, after the mid-1970s, into a world order privileging business competition, both as a daily practice and a philosophy of rule. This order has been enmeshed in an "organic crisis" since 2007-08, which has progressively revealed neoliberalism's problematic status in relation not only to the practice of democracy, but to the survival of the species. This article focuses specifically on the ways in which the pandemic has not only illuminated neoliberalism's core contradictions, but portends their intensification and widening impact.

Keywords: Covid-19, Gramsci, EdTech, neoliberalism

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Une pédagogie punitive pandémique: L'éducation et la crise organique de l'ordre néolibéral global

Résumé

La pandémie COVID-19 a occasionné une cruelle pédagogie au sujet du néolibéralisme. Le néolibéralisme incarne un processus présentant de multiples facettes selon lesquelles après les années mi-1970, le compromis Fordiste post-1945 a été graduellement transformé en un ordre mondial qui privilégiait la rivalité ou concurrence dans le monde des affaires comme pratique quotidienne et philosophie de règle. Cet ordre d'affaire fut empêtré dans une crise organique depuis 2007-8. Ceci a révélé progressivement le statut problématique du néolibéralisme en lien non seulement avec la pratique démocratique mais surtout avec la survie de notre espèce. Cet article se centre surtout sur les manières dont la pandémie a mis en lumière non seulement les contradictions au cœur du néolibéralisme, mais elle présage également leur impact grandissant.

Mots-clés: Covid-19, Gramsci, EdTech, néolibéralisme

Educación y la crisis orgánica del orden global neoliberal

Resumen

La pandemia de Covid-19 acarrea una pedagogía cruel en relación al neoliberalismo. El neoliberalismo encarna un proceso multifacético en el que el compromiso Fordista pos-1945 fue gradualmente transformado después de mediados de los años de 1970 en un mundo que privilegia la competición de los negocios como práctica diaria y como filosofía dominante. Este orden ha sido enmarañado en una "crisis orgánica" desde 2007-8, la que ha revelado progresivamente el *status* problemático del neoliberalismo con respecto no solo a la práctica de la democracia sino a la sobrevivencia de la especie humana. Este artículo discute específicamente las maneras en que la pandemia ha iluminado no sólo las contradicciones centrales del neoliberalismo sino presagia su intensificación y amplio impacto.

Palabras clave: Covid-19, Gramsci, EdTech, neoliberalismo

Introduction

The order inspired by neoliberalism[1]—first conceptualized in the 1930s as a select group of theorists' somewhat arcane antidote to collectivism, popularized during the

[1] Neoliberalism has generated a rich and complex historiography, five strains of which are particularly pertinent to this discussion. There is first that examining the origins of the doctrine in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, the body of political theory associated with F.A. Hayek and the Mont Pèlerin school, which from the late 1930s mounted a spirited defence on behalf of traditional liberal individualism, which it juxtaposed to such milestones on a presumed road to serfdom as state planning, social welfare

Cold War as a coherent alternative to "totalitarianism," and transformed after the late 1970s into a working philosophy, first of particular states and then, after the 1990s, of a global project advanced by powerful institutions—has entered what theorist Antonio Gramsci described as an "organic crisis," by which he meant one of such magnitude that fundamental elements of the order must be reordered in order to prevent its dissolution (Gramsci, 1971, 1975, 1994, 1996-2011; for discussion, see Babic, 2020; McKay, 2020). In 2020-21, the Covid-19 pandemic, an event seemingly external to that order, but in all probability generated by its ever-more-aggressive and accumulation-

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programs, trade unions, and capacious concepts of human rights, all of them inherently illogical attempts to interfere with the spontaneous order generated by individuals competitively pursuing their material interests. Second, as a body of social evolutionary theory, drawing heavily on the 19th-century legacy of Herbert Spencer, neoliberalism also advanced a quasi-theological vision of human advancement through time, according to which "the market," humankind's most advanced computational device, created "spontaneous order" (or *catallaxy*) from the self-seeking activities of acquisitive individuals, interference with which spelled disaster. Third, it refers to the subsequent evolution of this paradigm as it attained hegemony in the discipline of economics (especially in the 1970s) and in the practice of many western states (from Chile in the 1970s to the US and UK in the 1980s, and the European Union in the 2000s), elaborating seemingly authoritative, often highly mathematized, and self-assuredly "scientific" ideas promising rationality and order to a Cold War world. Fourth, it pertains to the project of "constitutionalizing" this paradigm, especially since the 1990s, in such global institutions as the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and even the United Nations and its affiliates, to insulate it from the popular pressures manifest within particular countries and in attempts to reconstruct the entire world system. Fifth, neoliberalism has meant a pervasive popularization of this paradigm as a philosophy of life, one in which rigorously disciplined individuals are enjoined to internalize the competitive ethos and structure their support-systems in families and networks in ways that maximize their own effectiveness as profit-making "brands," with the corollary that all the activities that go to reproduce the human units at the centre of the system (the care of the young and elderly, emotional support networks, "the family"—i.e., all that socializes, educates, feeds, and otherwise sustains the neoliberal subject) are subordinated to the overriding goal of creating free-standing individuals endowed with a competitive ethos facilitating their acquisition of more and more material objects. Twenty-first century neoliberalism, as it is conceptualized in this article, encompasses all five of these phases: from an abstruse thesis by Hayek to an overwritten novel by Ayn Rand, or from The Economist fulminating against state interferences with the natural order of world trade to the maxims circulating in social media advising us how to achieve material success through calculated representations of ourselves, it entails a totalizing, holistic conception of life and how individuals, states, societies, and the entire species can find success in it by becoming self-possessed individuals centred on the acquisition of property (Bromley, 2019; Macpherson, 1961). On the first theme, see especially Colantuono et al. (2021); Bhattacharya & Jaffe (2020); Tarnoff (2020). On the second, less fully explored, see Gamble (1996); Hayek (2011); Konings (2018); Kotsko (2018). On the third, see Albo & Fanelli (2014); Bockman (2011); Burgin (2012); Callison & Zanfredi (2019); Johnson & Saad-Filho (2005); Leys (2001); McKay (2018); Mirowski (2013); Mirowski & Plehwe (2009); Offner (2019); Penner (2021); Plehwe, Walpen & Neunhöffer (2006); Plehwe et al. (2020); Wasserman (2019). On the fourth, see Gill (2012), Slobodian (2018); Zevin (2019). On the fifth, see especially Brown (2015; 2019); Burns (2009); Cooper (2008; 2017), Harvey (2008; 2026), Leys (2001). For contemporary commentaries, see Monbiot (2018); Shaikh (2016). For useful historiographical overviews, see Jackson (2021); Cahill & Konings (2017). Although, at all five levels, neoliberalism did entail casting doubt on the legitimacy of state institutions, it does not generally entail "dismantling" the state but "repurposing it," transforming it from a potential expression of the public interest into a disseminator of competitive market values. I see these various (and sometimes competing) interpretations as moments in the unfolding understanding of neoliberalism. To my mind, they complement each other.

driven interventions into the natural world, has revealed both the strengths and weaknesses of the neoliberal paradigm (Davis 2005, 2020; Foster, 2002, 2020; Foster & Clark, 2011; Ieven & Overwijk, 2020; Malm, 2018, 2020; Wallace, 2016; 2015; 2016; Wallace & Wallace, 2016; Wallace et al., 2016). Well over a billion students, confronting the challenge of locked-down schools, have experienced this pandemic as an unprecedented and often wrenching personal challenge, while entrepreneurs, following a pattern famously charted by Naomi Klein, have glimpsed in it an opportunity for more profits (Klein, 2008; 2017). Like a lightning flash, the pandemic has starkly revealed how extensively a long evolving but little-publicized neoliberal pedagogical counterrevolution has cast aside all progressive visions of education as a seedbed of a democratic and egalitarian social order.[2] Treated as objects within a system beyond their control, one they have every reason to associate with a dismal future for humanity and the planet, some students may respond to their alienation with quiet despair, but others, taking seriously its promise of liberation through knowledge, are growing defiant of an agenda that promises them so much—nothing less than the full realization of their human capacities—but delivers, instead, prospects of endless precarity and planetary devastation.

Traditionally regarded in post-Victorian liberal theory as a sphere in which the state lived up to its "social contract" with its citizens by endowing their progeny with the capacities required for democratic citizenship, education over four decades has been transformed into a business-friendly (and increasingly business-dominated) sphere. As specialists Stephen Ball and Deborah Youdell (2007, p. 10) explain, the advent of the Global Education Industry (GEI) meant something more significant than the marketing of an astonishing diversity of commercial products (EdTech). Rather, it entailed "a new language, a new set of incentives and disciplines, and a new set of roles, positions, and identities within which what it means to be a teacher, student/learner, or parent are all changed." In this new pedagogical paradigm, education is conceived as a commodity "owned by and benefitting the individual and her/his employer," rather than "a public good that benefits the society as a whole" (p.53). Sociologist Antoni Verger remarks that "education is increasingly populated by actors and firms motivated by profit," with all the competitive dynamics, mergers, and speculative stock promotions conventionally associated with business. He draws out some of the implications: "the commodification of schooling as a positional good for families; the increasing influence of financial institutions in the educational sector (for both the demand and the supply sides); recent changes in the governance of education" and "the prominent role of information and communication technology for learning and testing." Proponents of

[2] Articulated in a Marxist idiom by Gramsci and taken up by Freire (2018); for discussion, see Borg et al. (2002); Cole & McKay (2019); for somewhat parallel discussions within the liberal framework, see Dewey (1916) (although his legacy for democrats is a fiercely debated one). Giroux (2020) distills the leading precept: "Democracy needs a polity that is not only informed and knowledgeable, but also willingly inhabits a linked fate and sense of shared responsibility. This is a space in which our different experiences, identities, and ways of living share a collective fate of solidarity, care, and justice" (p. 35).

this new neoliberal dispensation can be found in chains of private schools, big education corporations and conglomerates, consultancy firms, philanthropic foundations, and advocacy networks (Verger, 2016, para. 3; see also Verger et al., 2016).

From kindergartens to doctoral programs, in one country after another, across a wide range of disciplines, the details of this counterrevolution differ, but its essence remains the same, largely because its central gods, its core precepts, its implicit common sense have come to be revered around the world. These gods of neoliberalism have constructed a totalizing matrix of ideas, one that is hegemonic on the upper decks of global governance and on the lowermost ones of the working K-12 classroom. Neoliberalism constitutes an evolving paradigm and not an eternally fixed set of scriptural verities, but that paradigm has at its heart a coherent, rigorous, and consistent program. Its central premise is the defence of the self-possessed individual, defending his or her liberties to acquire possessions against all the destructive and irrational proclivities of the demos. Neoliberalism is centrally about safeguarding the market from egalitarian democrats and their irrational egalitarian iconoclasm.

In the field of education, neoliberals are those who apply to it market criteria of productivity, profitability, and performance, all to be enhanced by privatizing many of the functions hitherto performed by the state. Following the suggestive account provided by Ball and Youdell (2007), we can see that it sometimes entails developments *exogenous* to educational institutions, i.e., the acquisition of GEI products and services sedulously promoted by such global agencies as the World Bank, UNESCO, and the OECD, co-ordinating a vast array of private and public actors.[4] At other times, as in much of the charter school phenomenon, it entails

[4] Williamson and Hogan (2020, pp. 17-19) enumerate some of the linkages developed by the World Bank. "The World Bank strategic fund, while not directly supporting commercial organisations, is building evidence to support educational technology solutions to mass educational disruption. It also extends the World Bank's existing provision of guidance and resources dedicated to remote learning, EdTech and Covid-19, its international 'best practice' catalogue of how different countries are using EdTech to support access to remote learning, and a further resource list compiled by the World Bank's EdTech team. These documents highlight partnerships with internet service providers to enable online learning on subsidised data plans, use of commercial platforms for remote teaching and learning (such as Google's G Suite for Education, Microsoft 365, YouTube channels), online learning providers (EdModo, Schoology, Khan Academy), learning management systems (Moodle, Canvas), mobile e-learning apps, videoconferencing (Zoom, Skype, Amazon Chime), social media communications tools (WhatsApp, Google Hangouts) as well as government-led portals, resource banks, websites, online learning platform, and radio and television broadcasting . . . UNESCO, while not endorsing any commercial product, created the Global Education Coalition, a 'multi-sector partnership to provide appropriate distance education for all learners,' which 'enrolled partners from across sectors, including international multilateral organisations (UNICEF, the WHO, World Bank, Global Partnership for Education, OECD, Education Cannot Wait), civil society/not-for-profits (Khan Academy, code.org, ISTE), private sector companies (Microsoft, Facebook, Google, Weidong, Zoom, Coursera, Moodle), and a variety of other media organisations and networks […] The resource bank included learning management systems (Google Classroom, Edraak, EdModo, Nafham, Moodle, ClassDojo, Schoology, SeeSaw), mobile apps, online learning platforms (EdX, Coursera, Canvas, Udemy, FutureLearn, Khan Academy), live video communication platforms (DingTalk, Google Hangouts, MS Teams, WeChat, WhatsApp), and a range of other resources for teacher-created

endogenous ones, i.e., "the importing of ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector in order to make the public sector more like business and more business-like" (p. 8). And more recently it has entailed something even more totalizing: "the opening up of public education services to private sector participation on a for-profit basis and using the private sector to design, manage or deliver aspects of public education" (p. 9). In all three forms, markets are seen either as inherently efficient and value-neutral or as carriers of "positive moral values" (thrift, effort, self-reliance, entrepreneurship) in their own right (p. 17). Rather than constituting the withdrawal of the state from education, the neoliberal educational counterrevolution aims at something more ambitious: liberating free-standing individuals from their social chains so that they might pursue their own self-determined destinies, with minimal obligations to the society that shaped them, to their competitors in the great race of life, or to the humankind to which they still belong.

This immensely far-reaching and holistic project of cultural counter-revolution meant a rethinking of political and social theory. Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s noted in particular a markedly expansionist tendency of the state, required in a time of crisis to reorder fundamental economic relationships in the interests of the survival of the entire social system (McKay, 2020; Thomas, 2009). The coming of this "integral state" meant departing in key respects from laissez-faire (which itself had been consciously facilitated by the state in an earlier era). In our own time, the integral state means not just a particular government (or set of them); rather, it denotes a bloc of powerholders within the state and outside it, operating both nationally and transnationally, animated by the neoliberal ideal of the autonomous individual, and working to achieve neoliberalism's transcendent pedagogical project: that of rendering their countries, and the citizens comprising them, competitive, market-oriented, self-reliant, property-centred and (in their narrow sense) rational (all descriptors given a particularly individualistic meaning within neoliberal ideology). In the sphere of education, this integral state has called for the creation of multisector coalitions, private-public partnerships, and other elaborate networks in which commercial actors are decisive players. Such a shift to "private, corporate, and global actors" has had untold implications for teacher and students (Williamson & Hogan, 2020, p. 66).

If in Gramsci's day the integral state referred to governments of various ideological hues taking on more and more planning tasks in response to capitalism's demonstrable volatility, in our time it often entails something quite different: the planned contracting-out of state functions, with the underlying assumption that any systematic future planning of them should be beyond the horizon of responsible statecraft. (Most such attempts to confine the logic of the market, a neoliberal would say, constitute milestones on Hayek's "road to serfdom.") Much of what had been regarded as the state's terrain (even its supposed definitional monopoly on legitimate

content hosting and self-directed student learning." And theirs is but a partial list of this vast global industry.

violence)[5] has been contracted out on the (questionable) assumption that doing so enhances efficiency. The very notion of "public education"—premised on the notion that a *public* exists to which the state is ultimately answerable, whose education is chiefly its responsibility—is placed in question, as more and more of its essential functions are commercialized. In the neoliberal dispensation, education is relieved of its traditional responsibility for creating informed democratic citizens serving the wider purposes of the community. Rather, it is conceptualized as a market in which consumers (whether students, teachers, schools, school districts, or entire departments of education) are sold commodities, advertised to be efficacious in generating capacities, purchased with the hope that such *positional goods* might in turn might be turned to good purpose in a competitive socio-economic order. "Education," Ball and Youdell remark, "comes to be regarded solely in terms of its exchange-value rather than its intrinsic worth, or social purposes" (Ball & Youdell, 2007, p. 58). And so, a once largely non-commercialized public sphere is transformed into a market by a bloc of "non-government organisations, commercial enterprises and philanthropists," many operating transnationally outside the boundaries of any particular state (Verger et al., 2016).

One consequence of the neoliberal counterrevolution in education has been the wholesale downgrading of what was once considered the profession of teaching. Once considered to be securely positioned within the middle class, today's teachers seem to be more like proletarians-in-waiting. (Across 40 countries studied in 2019 by the OECD, the middle-income group has shrunk since the 1940s and its economic influence has correspondingly declined [OECD, 2019].) In the neoliberal model for education, teachers are at most mediators between curriculum- and technology-providing corporations and their customers. Many are required, because of the system's scheduling requirements, to teach subjects in which they are untrained and for which they have no enthusiasm. Moreover, beginning in the 1970s, a "new public management" approach has entailed performance-related pay levels, limits on funds for professional development, the minimization of academic qualifications for teaching particular subjects, and annual appraisals based on purportedly objective outcomes, all working to create schools that run like businesses and classrooms reminiscent of pedagogical production sites (Bryant, 2020). For teachers, the downward mobility characteristic of so many of the world's middle classes is coupled with the degradation of their profession.

[5] For the notorious case of Blackwater, which revealed that the state could contract out significant parts of what had been considered a key component of its sovereignty, i.e., the making of war, see Scahill (2007), which is analytically very interesting for students of the "integral state." Similarly, in 2020, the very notion of "public health" has been retrieved from the ruins of the social welfare state, but only partially: even on issues decisive to the survival of citizens, states have deferred to Big Pharma, whose transnational property rights many have ardently affirmed, distancing themselves from the age-old precept according to which a state's legitimacy is founded upon its protection of the lives of its inhabitants.

Gramsci hoped to see forms of democratic education that would empower working people. In his "pedagogy of the oppressed," to echo the phrase of Paolo Freire, perhaps his most influential 20th-century disciple, subalterns would not only articulate an alternative to the system exploiting them, but through a dialogical relationship of student and teacher, acquire the tools necessary to revolutionize it (Freire, 2018). Gramsci sensed in the Italy of his time the advent of forms of schooling, presented as the latest words in science, modernity, and progress, likely to have the opposite effect. Such "progressive" reforms would, notwithstanding the *faux* populism with which the Fascists framed them, place non-bourgeois students in positions of permanent cultural inferiority (Borg & Mayo, 2002; Cole & McKay, 2019; Gramsci, 1971, 1994a, 1994b, 1996-2011; Thomas, 2009). Working-class students would be still confined to subaltern positions, limited to their often irrational and "commonsense" (Crehan, 2016) apprehensions of the social world, and denied equal participation in a polity structured to benefit their social superiors. Gramsci's project of democratic education was exactly the sort of thing neoliberals wanted to combat. Prominent neoliberals, many with far-right attachments and sympathies, shared a vivid sense that the demos must be tamed and that the Higher Power of the Market must be defended against the people's unpredictable energies. Over time, especially from the late 1990s on, they succeeded in insulating economic decision-making from many state initiatives, often by repurposing global institutions. The neoliberal counterrevolution in pedagogy is one aspect of this more far-ranging program of sheltering capitalism from the dread virus of democracy.

Accordingly, neoliberals have little time for visions of democratic education, especially ones requiring substantial public investments. (Taxation for many of them, even for such social services as education, is little better than theft.) Foreign to their outlook are the potentially dialectical relationships of teachers and students, proceeding on the basis of personal trust and the democratic notion (dear to Gramsci) that over time, leaders should be willing to become followers and their followers, leaders. Such democratic dreams have little bearing on the world reshaped by EdTech. When "education" is provided through a program constructed by a massive profit-seeking corporation, any notion of Socratic mentorship between teacher and student is risible. This deskilling imperative means many teachers can be replaced with remotely administered programs and platforms, leaving them vulnerable to the global trend to replace living labour with computer programs, algorithms, and artificial intelligence (AI) (Rockeman et al., 2020). Neoliberalism in education has in essence entailed the replacement of a professional ideal of service to students, and to the democratic polity, with a culture of self-interest.

The neoliberal integral state is, thus, not necessarily *smaller* in size than its Keynesian ancestor (in fact, once one factors in military expenditures, most western states have grown in size since the 1970s) but *different* in its modality. Its coming entailed a radical transition from delivering forms of *education,* holistically designed (at least in part) to create informed and self-actualizing citizens, to facilitating the *training*

that future producers should bring to the global capitalist labour market. Here is a "new architecture of government based on interlocking relationships between disparate sites in and beyond the state," a "new mode of state control," which uses "contracts, targets and performance monitoring to 'steer' from a distance" (Ball & Youdell, 2007, p. 38).

Under neoliberalism, it becomes progressively more and more difficult to ascertain where the state ends and civil society begins: what might appear to be a state initiative (i.e., coming from the government and paid for by the taxpayer) might be so warrened from within by private interests and agendas that labelling it "public" would be actively misleading. The state and the business sector, in many such cases, operate as one. In fact, in the contemporary world of neoliberal education, the very categories of the "public" and the "public interest" have been put under enormous pressure. Some of the biggest players in it are, obviously, profit-oriented. In the United States, more than $4.1 billion of public money went towards the Charter Schools Programs. "Publicly funded but privately managed," in one succinct characterization, "the virtual charters, serving about 300,000 pupils in the U.S., rake in more than $1 billion in taxpayer dollars while functioning with minimal oversight" (Rodov, 2020). Pearson's Connections Academy, offering tuition-free virtual schooling for K-12 students, served more than 70,000 American students in 2018; many more were reached via other elements of the vast Pearson empire (Williamson & Hogan, 2020, pp. 49-50). The Koch Brothers, the Heritage Foundation, Betsy DeVos, evangelical Christians, and the ardent opponents of desegregated public schools: disparate as these players were in their motivations and outlooks, the pedagogical bloc to which they adhered was capable of so "reforming" education that the private, charter school model became a near-universal norm. Notwithstanding frequent controversies and scandals, K12, one of Pearson's leading competitors, flourished, in part because cash-strapped public authorities were persuaded by the pitch that such corporations would provide high-quality, personalized learning.[6] (By *personalized learning* is generally meant the provision of products to students who can access them on their own timetables, not their development into rounded, well-educated individuals). Notwithstanding their innocence of educational theory and their philosophical shallowness, Silicon Valley philanthro-capitalists in the new dispensation have attained the status of esteemed sages.[7]

[6] Rodov (2020); see also Bryant (2021). K12's founder became controversial for his argument that aborting Black babies would reduce crime levels; and promoters of another charter school operation did jail time for funnelling funds supposedly meant for schools into such necessities as private jets and luxurious real estate.

[7] In the case of the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI), which has figured in some pandemic-themed educational ventures, the founder of Facebook and his partner committed themselves to "advance human potential" by creating a limited liability company. They set aside some tax advantages by doing so, but their "philanthropy" is liberated from bothersome state regulations, and its backers enjoy both more power and less publicity, as they pursue solutions commensurate with their underlying ideological perspective.

Dysfunctional when viewed from a Gramscian (or even a liberal Deweyan) perspective attuned to the creation of equal, informed, and socially oriented individuals, this pedagogy can nonetheless be considered highly functional with respect to the maintenance of neoliberal capitalism. By treating individuals as so many bundles of exploitable resources, responsibility for whose acquisition, management, and "branding" rests with them alone, it obscures the logic allocating each such individual his or her position in the social order. Holistic understandings of society and culture are rendered unthinkable, in a pedagogy focused relentlessly on the acquisition of profitable skills, the application of technical fixes, and piecemeal remedies for particular problems. The paradigm entails high levels of epistemic violence, as teachers, students, and administrators are obliged to conform to its entrepreneurial philosophy (Warren, 2017). In many of the learning management systems pervasive within it, the algorithm assumes centre stage. Between student and instructor are inserted new forms of automation. Just as the state has progressively downloaded onto schools its responsibility to educate citizens, so too have schools imported many platforms that (in Williamson's words) "encourage the delegation of judgment to automated systems, as decisions … are deferred to advanced analytics and automation" (Williamson, 2020, para. 26). Teachers are progressively deskilled, students disempowered, and communities undercut in a shift of pedagogical authority to external, often corporate, actors.

In one way, the pandemic has constituted a triumph for this neoliberal paradigm, accelerating and intensifying its earlier tendencies (Mullan, 2020). In the pandemic's first year, an estimated $3 billion (US) flowed into the sector, boosting the number of EdTech companies valued at over $1 billion to 18 (Williamson & Hogan, 2020, p. 37). Similar patterns are reported from around the world. EdTech's "organic intellectuals"—to use Gramsci's expression for those who function as organizers and mobilizers in undertaking fundamental socio-economic roles—were not slow to see the silver lining in the pandemic's dark cloud. "It's a great moment," remarked Andreas Schleicher, the education director of the OECD. "All the red tape that keeps things away is gone and people are looking for solutions that in the past they did not want to see" (as cited in Williamson & Hogan, 2020, p. 21). It seemed to many that a novel "set of unprecedented natural experiments" was unfolding, with "entire student bodies … compelled to take all of their classes online" (Zimmerman, 2020, para. 7). Many corporations visualized the pandemic, writes Naomi Klein, as a "living laboratory for a permanent—and highly profitable—no-touch future." And from that laboratory may emerge, she writes, "a future in which our every move, our every word, our every relationship is trackable, traceable, and data-mineable by unprecedented collaborations between government and tech giants." The core of this vision, Klein argues, "is seamless integration of government with a handful of Silicon Valley giants—

Once more, lines separating hitherto distinct entities—state-regulated philanthropies, private businesses—have been deliberately effaced. See Reiser (2018) for an in-depth, fascinating exploration.

with public schools, hospitals, doctor's offices, police, and military all outsourcing (at a high cost) many of their core functions to private tech companies" (Klein, 2020, para. 15; Klein & Viner, 2020; see also Klein, 2008). The irony is palpable: advertised as an experiment in liberty, neoliberalism instead warrants the formation of an integral state intruding massively on the private lives and public expressions of its citizens.

"At transnational scale," write education scholars Bob Williamson and Anna Hogan (2020), "the reformatory aspirations of organisations with global scale and influence, such as UNESCO, the OECD, World Bank, Pearson, Gates Foundation, Microsoft, and Google, have translated into 1) short-term emergency responses to the pandemic; and 2) long-term reforms enabling education systems to recover from the pandemic in transformed and more effective forms" (pp. 56-57). Departments of education have also been active "in promoting digital solutions to school closures," they remark, but "they have often lagged behind the leadership of these organisations" (p. 57). And implicit, unofficial but potent endorsements by such global bodies as UNESCO has meant the program seemingly has the imprimatur of highly respected, quasi-state institutions operating on the global level (p. 19). Neoliberalism's integral state no longer adheres to the boundaries of any conventional nation-state.

During the pandemic, the "digital turn" was orchestrated from the top. In one jurisdiction after another, teachers went largely ignored, as their superior officers parlayed with corporations and designed schedules of mind-boggling complexity.[8] Notwithstanding the storms of its early years, the K12 company flourished (Rodov, 2020). The Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd), founded and chaired by former Florida governor Jeb Bush, pushed for measurable results from online education; it was one of many beneficiaries of the Gates Foundation. The California-based Khan Academy witnessed a threefold increase in the numbers of visitors pursuing its online services. In the United Kingdom, the government committed over £100 million to boost remote education capacities for students, including provision of laptops, and school access to services provided by Google and Microsoft. On the global level, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), a trust fund of the World Bank with substantial links to Microsoft and Pearson, popularized the neoliberal model throughout the Global South (Williamson & Hogan, 2020, p. 15).

Microsoft, Amazon, and Google have all had highly profitable pandemics, delivering services on a global scale. Microsoft's record in education goes back decades. It offers not only conventional software and hardware but also certified Microsoft Educators and Teacher Academy programs for practitioners who, on graduation, can be relied upon to promote the brand. During the pandemic, it rolled out (among other

[8] Education analyst Jeff Bryant notes the case of Providence, Rhode Island, where, in preparation for virtual teaching in Fall 2020, the "district announced the creation of a new Virtual Learning Academy operated by Scottsdale, Arizona-based company Edgenuity." Its parent company was owned by a private equity firm, which in turn had recently acquired Odysseyware, a problem-riddled outfit. Not only did this complicated chain of corporate ownership make it hard to tell who owned what and why, but, as per the neoliberal model, the teachers' expertise in education was devalued (Bryant 2020).

initiatives) a new digital learning platform, Learning Passport, in partnership with UNICEF. Such developments revealed three key trends coalescing in 2020, write Williamson and Hogan (2020): "1) the expansion and acceleration of public-private partnership arrangements to create 'solutions' to education globally; 2) increasing focus on data-intensive tracking and analytics across education systems; and 3) emphasis on international comparisons between local and national education systems and curricula as a way of assessing educational quality and outcomes" (pp. 42-43). Although Microsoft might be accurately seen as a corporation pursuing its own economic interests, such evidence suggests it has more grandiose ambitions. It also aspires to shape humanity's future, exemplifying the new "public-private partnerships for global education delivery," operating as a "key participating node in policy-influencing networks," and offering its hyper-individualized version of "student-centred learning" as a gold standard for the world. It is "mobilizing the 'unprecedented opportunity of the pandemic' to seek to shape education systems to its preferred (and pre-existing) vision of a hybrid, agile, and highly digitalised future of education" (Williamson & Hogan, pp.42-44). Microsoft's achievements have been paralleled by those of Amazon and Google.[9]

And alongside this global "big three," one found many other corporate contenders for pedagogical influence, such as TikTok, Disney, and a host of China-based initiatives. Many of them operated in close alliance with the state. Nor could any working educator in 2020 overlook Zoom—founded in 2011, on the market since 2013, reaching a valuation of $16 billion after going public in April 2019, and becoming, thanks to the pandemic, "the fastest-growing videoconferencing service in the world," with 200,000,000 daily users by March 2020 (Fry, 2020, para. 6). "Today's education will turn into tomorrow's technology and bear economic fruit the day after," gloated the organizers of Sensetime, an AI learning platform (as cited in Williamson & Hogan, 2020, p. 23). It was a good time to be an EdTech investor.

In this new pedagogical integral state, state bureaucrats theoretically accountable to the public have been sidelined by GEI's organic intellectuals. For some of them, any refusal of their vision of education structured primarily by the private sector constitutes

[9] Amazon marketed cloud computing and machine learning. It promoted the digital learning platform EVERFI, and provided "millions of dollars of Amazon devices to schools in the US." It supported a controversial "Cloud Ambassador Program," leveraging "its vast network of educators with experience teaching online" to provide "guidance and support on remote teaching." The corporation has leapt on the "opportunity to market and promote its range of cloud computing, machine learning, and voice technologies to schools," with Alexa broadening its horizons from household management to the training of the young. For its part, Google, which trailed its high-tech competitors in developing the new market, launched "the G Suite of apps in 2006 (originally known as Google Apps for Education), followed by Chromebook laptops in 2011, with Google Classroom (its hub for classroom activities including attendance, classroom discussions, homework, and communication with students and parents) launching in 2014." Since its products were offered to schools free of charge, Google was able to bypass the usual red tape involved in procurement, and it became the dominant provider of hardware and software globally for schools (Williamson & Hogan (2020), pp. 41-48).

nothing more than anti-modern Luddism, a refusal of the glittering visions of rational progress and transnational enlightenment offered by Hayek's neoliberal gods, i.e., the market forces whose spontaneous order (*catallaxy* in neoliberal newspeak) is the *sine qua non* of the constitution of liberty.

The Neoliberalization of the University

Post-secondary education, conventionally seen as taking place within ivory towers well removed from the hustle and bustle of real life, might be thought to contradict these patterns. The opposite is the case. Over the past four decades, many universities have been integrated as nodes in the global supply chains of capital accumulation. Those resistant to the trend have been marginalized, as have departments and faculties whose knowledges are not directly commodifiable (or, even worse, apt to awaken doubts about global capitalism). Academic hurdles on the path to full commercialization have, one by one, been overcome. Today's universities confront the very real prospect of being "consumed by capitalism" (Blakeley, 2020, p. xvii). In many respects, they have already become marketplaces for the generation and marketing of its products. Sociologist John Smyth sums up some of the results: "competition, commercialisation and vocationalisation; the synthetic values of docility, conformity, and image/impression management; the calibration and metrification of all facets of university activity … the containment of universities as places of dissent and social critique" (Smyth, 2019, p. 716).

Pre-pandemic, one of the most glaring indications of neoliberalism's impact on universities and colleges was its imposition upon them of the logic of "flexible labour." As in many other businesses restructured under neoliberalism, wages (and the organizations defending them) were an early target. Operating under conditions of austerity (i.e., the dismantling of much of the welfare state in the interest of promoting possessive individualism), postsecondary institutions increasingly rolled back tenured appointments. In the 1970s, roughly 70% of academics in the United States were tenured or tenure-track; by the 2020s, only about 30% enjoy that status (Belkin, 2020, para. 7). In Britain, the same logic has led to roughly one-third of all academics being slotted into highly precarious positions, governed by fixed-term contracts. Such precarity is disproportionately the fate of racialized academics. Non-academic staff are particularly vulnerable to cutbacks (Grady, 2020, para. 2).

But neoliberalism had many other academic manifestations as well. Since the 1980s, most universities and colleges have invested considerable time and money in branding themselves. Entire administrative departments, some with bigger staffs than can be found in those actually teaching students, are devoted to boosting name recognition and improving their institution's position in transnational or national league tables. Although most concede the arbitrariness of such measures and the conformist politics suffusing them, these competitive tables make a considerable difference when it comes to generating money in the marketplace, whether from philanthropic donors,

corporations eying profitable partnerships, or status-seeking students. Within universities, such tables have become major "engines of anxiety" (Espeland & Sauder, 2016). Then, at a higher level, the state in turn uses such results to divvy up its educational budget, rewarding the market-oriented and prosperous institutions while punishing the marginal and poor—driven, almost invariably, by starkly utilitarian goals.

Meanwhile, the same market logic is applied within the institutions themselves. In the "new budget models" that came on stream in the early 2000s, each faculty and department (or *unit* in neoliberalism's suggestively productivist lingo) is expected to compete with every other unit: for funds, prestige, appointments—even room space. (Monetizing the air we educationists breathe seems, as yet, to be beyond the neoliberal planners' grasp, but it would be unwise to underestimate them). Winners in this hyper-utilitarian game are the useful and profit-generating units: the money-makers—above all, the STEM departments—capable of winning mega-grants for projects directly tied either to business or to a state program linked to its agenda. Thanks to them, universities come to be conceived, certainly by many central granting agencies, as nodes in global supply chains or as emerging incubators (many fondly hope) of the next Silicon Valley: in short, as so many cogs in the planetary "megachine" of capital accumulation (Scheidler, 2020).

Conspicuous among these new connections between campuses and capital are those tying institutions of learning with the pharmaceutical sector ("Big Pharma"). Big Pharma benefits directly from the publicly funded work of armies of university-based researchers, many of them overworked and underpaid. Once they deliver the goods, its corporate leaders are then free to exert their intellectual property rights over their patented products. They can sell them at marked-up prices with minimal competition and reap extraordinary profits (Taibbi, 2020). That the drugs (vaccines, for instance) have emerged because of public money and the researches of publicly-supported academic researchers is largely forgotten, as such products compete in the world as distinct brands (with the state, in 2020-22, obligingly buying up mass quantities of them at inflated prices). Throughout this process, it becomes almost indelicate to remember the state's indispensable role in the entire business (for the general background, see Mazzucato, 2015).

Altruistic academic schemes to rein in Big Pharma's acquisitive instincts have been systematically stymied. In 2020, this logic played out on a world scale in the common front mounted by rich countries to resist any mitigation, even over the short term, of property rights over vaccines, at the probable cost of hundreds of thousands of lives in the Global South. In the neoliberal integral state, Big Pharma is thus subsidized by the government at both ends of the process through which vaccines are produced: it is the beneficiary of research undertaken at publicly funded institutions and, once the vaccine is ready to be marketed, also blessed with guaranteed markets organized by the state, which can then be counted on (more or less) to defend its interests. Here we have a fine example of the neoliberal integral state in action.

The losers in this neoliberal dispensation are the humanities, social sciences, and liberal arts, all rightly suspected of distance from the academy's central money-making mission, and some, even more worryingly, notorious as the homelands of heretics sceptical of neoliberal orthodoxy. Under pandemic conditions, entire institutions have been reconfigured to become more profitable. In the US, the College of Saint Rose in Albany cut sixteen majors and six master's degrees. The University of Evansville eliminated seventeen majors and three entire departments. Marquette in Milwaukee planned to terminate over two hundred faculty and staff positions (Burke, 2020, para. 13). At Medaille College, New York, as Douglas Belkin notes, the coronavirus pandemic allowed a crusading president and board of trustees to remake their institution—cutting entire programs, rescinding tenure, and rewriting the faculty rule book—by invoking an Act of God clause. The American Association of University Professors complained that it had received about 100 complaints from professors about similar, if not so radical, power grabs by presidents (Belkin, 2020). One Canadian university, although a state institution in the sense that it has been amply sustained for many decades by taxpayers' dollars, invoked bankruptcy protection legislation and put unprofitable programs and tenured professors on the chopping block. It thereby provided not only a fine example of Klein's "shock doctrine" (Klein 2008) but also revealed the extent to which, within an integral neoliberal state, universities once considered to be state institutions have been transformed into entities comporting themselves very much like business enterprises (Peters, 2019).

Although the spigots of state funding have been opened wide for some academics through the pandemic, such money is overwhelmingly targeted at programs offering technical fixes and utilitarian remedies (they are suffused, one might say, with "solutionism"). Those addressing the core contradictions generating the catastrophe are unlikely to receive the same treatment, in part because they cannot be advertised as money-makers, and in larger part because they challenge an ideology that has become hegemonic throughout civil society and the state. To profit in the neoliberal era, one must play by its rules and speak its hegemonic language.

Neoliberal globalism has meant that cash-strapped postsecondary institutions have relied increasingly on tuition fees to survive. In the United States, where it costs roughly $20,050 a year to attend a four-year public college (private institutions cost more than double that, and the Ivy League universities even more), many graduates are indebted. (One contemporary estimate of the debt load borne by around 44 million former students has it at about $1.6 trillion [Aratani, 2020, para. 3]). International students—over 600,000 annually from China alone, with many others coming from the Middle East, Latin America, and India (Huizhong Wu, 2020, para. 26)—have been extensively recruited since 2000. Partly, no doubt, this has happened with the hope that they will help transform campuses into incubators of the next Silicon Valley; but the more salient explanation is that such students are necessary for many campuses struggling to balance their books. The greatly heightened tuition fees they have to pay make up the budgetary shortfalls created by austerity-oriented neoliberal

governments. Such students are, to put it bluntly, cash cows for the precariously funded postsecondary institutions of the Global North.

The pandemic has revealed the subaltern status of such students, many of them forced into precarious gig work in order to survive. (For example, many of the Instacart shoppers in North America hired by those sheltering in place to do their grocery shopping were beleaguered university students [Ayala, 2020, para. 3]). One senior academic in the United States remarked upon the "cruelty" of the treatment of international students by his country's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) authorities, who declined to issue visas or otherwise accommodate them in the event their institutions moved to online delivery exclusively. "And so it has come to this," he exclaimed. "If you are a college, choose whose health and well-being to put at risk; if you are an international student, choose between your health—maybe even your life—and your education" (Rosenberg, 2020, para. 10). "Remaining closed in the fall means losing as much as half our revenue," complained Brown University president Christina Paxson, a loss she characterized as "catastrophic" for a post-secondary sector employing as many as three million Americans and contributing some $600 billion to the economy (Aratani, 2020, para. 13). In the pandemic, universities were reckoning with a cold, hard truth: their functioning, indeed their survival, depended upon deftly marketing themselves to an increasingly transnational population of consumers.

In Britain, it remained unclear into September 2020 whether universities would be open for in-person instruction. Many of them, highly dependent on international students, feared losing their custom. Students who left dropping out too late were on the hook to pay high fees. By the time that the universities were instructed to move their teaching online, many students had already "paid the rent for their halls of residence, and some were already in town, promises of a near-normal university experience ringing in their ears" (Hinsliff, 2020, para. 3; see also Fazackerley, 2020). At Trinity College, Cambridge (reported assets: £1.5 billion), students were required to sign a new contract warning them they might well be required to move, without any assistance from the college, and at very short notice. Holdouts might well confront porters wielding eviction orders. As one critic noted, "For these students, Trinity's statement holds them hostage: they are being told that they will not be entitled to any accommodation unless they sign a statement accepting that they could be asked to leave at any time and at their own expense" (Menin & Adams, 2020, para. 14).

In 2020, and in country after country, post-secondary educational institutions, massively incentivized since the 1970s to behave like businesses, were tempted to reopen in advance of a vaccine. If outbreaks occurred, feckless students could always be blamed (Marcus & Gold, 2020). Many students were asked to sign waivers, exonerating their institutions from any responsibility in the event of a Covid-19 outbreak, even one directly traceable to institutional misconduct. "These waivers are take-it-or-leave it," observed one critic, "if you want to be a university student this fall, you'll have to sign away your legal rights. If you don't, you can't have access to your education" (MacLean & Young, 2020, para. 12).

Such practical and moral contradictions affected teachers as well, journalist Gaby Hinsliff notes. As one asthmatic and at-risk junior lecturer remarked, if she refused to enter the classroom, her "chances of landing a permanent post" would decline steeply. She felt, given her lowly status, that she had "no ability to push back," no matter the health consequences. In the view of some university lecturers in Britain, "the fear of scaring students off, or having to give them refunds, has trumped safety concerns in a marketized higher education system where universities compete against each other to put bums on seats" (Hinsliff, 2020, para. 5). For some seasoned observers of the British scene, the likeliest post-pandemic outcome is that the headlong expansion of distance education will continue, with increasing stratification among institutions: the proles will be presented with off-the-shelf courses demanding little interaction with professors in institutions indifferent to them and which they will rarely (if ever) visit; their social superiors will benefit from one-on-one instruction at famous institutions rich enough to construct immunologically-sound bubbles wherein students can safely work. "As everyone scrambles to protect their interests, inequalities will magnify," cautioned Jonathan Wolff, professor of values and public policy at Oxford (Wolff, 2020, para. 9). His is a maxim that sums up the entire logic of the neoliberal age

Neoliberal Pedagogy and the Undermining of Democracy

Overall, it can hardly be doubted that the pandemic has accelerated the neoliberalization of education and afforded profitable opportunities to GEI. Yet the neoliberal project in education is riven with such deep contradictions that its partisans should pause before breaking out the champagne. Two of the most salient of them are its dependence on systems of social reproduction it can neither fully colonize nor abolish and its transparent incapacity to live up to its promise of an enlightened, progressive future.

Social reproduction encompasses, as social theorist and historian Tithi Bhattacharya explains, all that contributes to the health, education, and wellbeing of individuals (particularly those in emerging and declining generations). It is most closely linked to the private sphere of households and families, but its institutional dimensions in such "caring" institutions as hospitals, schools, and nursing homes are also noteworthy. All such activities are prerequisites for a functioning capitalist economy—without families and schools, capital would lack for the workers it requires—but they do not themselves generate surplus value (Bhattacharya, 2017). Women undertake the lion's share of this necessary work, often subsidizing with their unpaid household labour a capitalist system benefiting from their nurturance and training of the young. As philosopher Nancy Fraser argues, "every form of capitalist society harbours a deep-seated social-reproductive "crisis tendency" or contradiction: on the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the

other, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies" (Fraser, 2016, p. 100).

In the pandemic, many parents have experienced this rather abstract contradiction in the most down-to-earth of ways. As day care centres and schools shut their doors, many scrambled to care for their children. In a society designed to maximize the privileges of the powerful, but largely unplanned and chaotic when it comes to caring for the vulnerable, activities distant from profit-making have been conventionally portrayed by neoliberals as unproductive sinkholes for public money, generating little in the way of concrete benefits. The privatization of social reproduction—in commercial nursing homes, for-profit health services, private day-cares and so on—is often depicted as a promising way of amending this wasteful pattern. And from nursing homes to prisons, the pandemic has revealed the tragic deficiencies of this neoliberal vision.

In education, after four decades of intensifying neoliberal hegemony, and according to the quantitative measures neoliberals themselves hold so dear, the results of their grand experiment in liberty have hardly been encouraging. After many decades of the misnamed "progressive education" against which Gramsci polemicized in the 1930s, supplemented since the 1990s by neoliberal strategies promising an equally misnamed "personalized learning," many graduates of educational institutions are unable to spell common words, or craft complete sentences, or provide the most rudimentary of outlines of the political system within which they live, or offer up even the beginnings of self-reflexive accounts of their own responsibilities as historically informed citizens. As journalist David Rothkopf notes, the statistical record of the United States, homeland of the neoliberal experiment, is striking: eighth out of 40 countries ranked by the OECD for educational attainment; 26th in terms of the years students spend in schools, 24th in the world in science and reading, 39th in math (according to a Pew Survey)—and, according to one World Economic Forum metric, plagued (from 2016 to 2020) with *declining* student capacities (Rothkopf, 2021, para. 10). Drawing on other survey results, one former senior White House functionary finds evidence of systemic disinvestment in education in statistics revealing that illiteracy and innumeracy afflicts one in five high school graduates, with only 13% fully functional in both language and mathematics (Francis, 2020, para. 8). Another observer notes that the United States is "at the bottom of the international rankings among comparable countries" when it comes to numeracy (Onion & Wermimont, 2020, para. 9).

From a democratic perspective, such results are telling. They suggest that the ruling class has, essentially, lost interest in any notion of democratic accountability that entails nurturing a critical and informed populace. Political theorist Dylan Riley points out that for many political theorists—he is thinking of J.S. Mill, but his point could probably be applied to Gramsci as well—grassroots discussions among citizens are supposed to "*produce* the truths that come to be commonly accepted." Yet, in the neoliberal dispensation, "truths are produced by experts" (Riley, 2021, para. 8). "Truth" is imposed from above, not generated through consensual discussion from below. And

since, for proponents of neoliberalism, we already know what "the truth" is going to tell us—that capitalist social relations are the inherently superior manifestations of a godlike market intelligence operating on the planetary level—consultation with the demos is pretty much a pointless exercise. True neoliberal believers, furnished with a worldview impervious to empirical or logical refutation, know in advance that, in the event of what they term "market failure," the solution is more (and often even more aggressive) marketization. And since a population, made up of ill-educated, ill-informed and, in 2020, often critically ill people, is by design incapable of generating many counter-knowledges capable of unsettling this comfortable common sense, such 'deplorables' can simply be disparaged and ignored.

Miseducated and misled, such individuals are simply unaware of the socio-economic structures shaping their everyday lives. Many of them, working double or triple shifts to keep body and soul together, simply lack the time or cultural resources to engage with them. As novelist and contrarian Lionel Shriver remarks, "In a polarised and broadly illiterate digital universe, full of predators gorging on animosity who are determined to read whatever they wish to, words cease to function … the language no longer serves to communicate" (as cited in Levy, 2020, para. 21). As linguist N.J. Enfield observes, the problem is not so much that people are believing in falsehoods, but that language itself has been debased; if statements can be likened to money, the entire currency within which they acquire their value seems to be at risk of collapse (Enfield, 2020). In his pathbreaking reconnaissance of 2020, writer Anthony Barnett considers "the dismantling of veracity" as the right's "most vicious weapon of all" (Barnett, 2020, p. 43). Through its relentless commercialization of speech-acts, neoliberalism, one could conclude, confirms Gramsci's prognosis that the attainment of genuine objectivity, a universally shared "truth," would require the overcoming of capitalist social relations (McKay 2021).

During the pandemic, many people, incapable of grasping scientific debates, were unprepared for a world in which informed experts routinely disagreed with one another about decisions with life-or-death implications. Some retreated to forms of solipsism: I have *my* truth about the pandemic, proclaimed a million voices on social media—and that's good enough for the likes of me. Violently expressed and passionately maintained opinions proliferated; soberly presented and evidence-backed arguments, for their part, were a harder sell, in part because the educationally disabled masses had lost many of the habits of critical thought and responsible rational analysis necessary for an informed citizenry (for one detailed account of the great mask debate, see Mohammed et al., 2020).

A cottage industry has evolved tracking the transnational networks through which rumours and outright falsehoods have spread through the pandemic, including at least one website devoted to exposing them (Centre de Suivi de la mésinformation sur le Coronavirus, 2021). Conspiracy theories—the "poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age," in cultural theorist Frederic Jameson's discerning words (Jameson 1988, p. 356)—are everywhere. Distrust of 5G towers has led to their destruction in

Europe, apparently because they are linked to a grand scheme of malign globalizers (Meek, 2020). In Britain, school playgrounds reportedly buzzed with purported predictions from Nostradamus (Anderson, 2020). Unable to understand narratives based on scientific reason, largely because they have been miseducated by a system that has sidelined any quest for an informed democratic citizenry respectful of logic or even cognizant of reality, many people prefer far-fetched explanations of the crisis shaping their lives to no explanation at all—or to scientific evidence that challenges the opinions they have absorbed through extensive exposure to a hyper-commercialized and predatory media world (Ostroff, 2021; Oreskes, 2019; Stöcker, 2020).

A standard approach on the part of many liberals to the waning fortunes of truth in society is to mock the unwashed for their ignorance, thereby blaming the victims of neoliberal pedagogy for the deficiencies of a system they had no hand in creating. From a more critical perspective, the "post-truth" phenomenon testifies to the extent to which neoliberal states have abandoned even the pretense of genuinely educating their citizens, largely left to sink or swim on the basis of their own individual qualities and the cultural resources available to their families. Any public commitment to sharing the logico-historical and social insights developed over decades and centuries has waned. And into this void have stepped a legion of supposed experts, some who even have their own dubious commodities to sell to the frightened and the uninformed.

The consequences for the young of the "2020 effect" have been tragic (Parramore, 2021, para. 16). In the US, one poll suggested that, of people between 18 and 24, more than half reported suffering from depression or acute anxiety (Greenwald, 2020, para. 9). The "pandemic within the pandemic" is how one medical researcher characterizes the mental health crisis unleashed by Covid-19. He notes a Centres for Disease Control survey suggesting that by spring 2020, 11% of adult respondents had seriously considered suicide (as cited in Carr, 2020, para. 12). The "deaths of despair" associated with alcohol and opioid addictions have, since 2000, become notorious in working-class North America, much of it deindustrialized thanks to neoliberalism's global supply chains and the supposedly scientific analyses of planners and intellectuals (Case & Deaton, 2020; see also Jenkins & Gadermann, 2020). In 2020, such tragic patterns worsened. In the United Kingdom, one British Academy report from the first lockdown found that young people between the ages of 16 and 24 were the most prone to feelings of loneliness, but since spending on youth services had been cut by as much as 70%, there was not much of a support system left for them (Harris, 2021, para. 9). Spending on such a frill would entail rulers investing in the ideologically-suspect sphere of social reproduction, which neoliberals contend is best left for individuals and their families to navigate pretty much on their own.

EdTech's pandemic successes have taken place in this chaotic context. True, many teachers, wrestling with Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Echo 360, etc., etc., have struggled valiantly to connect with the living human beings behind the wan visages they encounter on their computer screens. And some succeeded—at least to a point. Yet the emergent consensus is that, for most students in most contexts, the online

experiment has succeeded only partially, while failing conclusively for most of them. There is little evidence from 2020 that EdTech remedied the emerging generation's widespread sense of cognitive chaos and cultural despair.

This is hardly surprising. Passively absorbing input from a screen, with minimal social interaction with others, predictably turns out to be boring and alienating, no matter how determined an instructor may be to animate Zoom sessions. Such a disappointing outcome was well-anticipated by pre-pandemic assessments of online education. As Florida Rodov notes, one 2018 report in the US found that virtual charter schools graduated only about 50% of their students; another, documenting significant gaps between the results recorded by conventional schools and their virtual counterparts, concluded: "Academic benefits from online charter schools are currently the exception rather than the rule" (Rodov, 2020, para. 5, citing a report from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University).

During the pandemic, the roll-out of virtual learning was often chaotic and scandal-ridden. In Florida, the Miami-Dade school district, fourth largest in the U.S., "abruptly fired online learning company K12 just two weeks into the beginning of the 2020-21 school year," because "disaster" and "absolute mess" had accompanied the platform's roll-out (Bryant, 2020, paras. 18-32). Rodov reports erratic sign-ins on the part of students, teachers juggling 60-hour work weeks with impossible teaching loads, massive drop-out rates, and steeply declining learning expectations. Yet, in an increasingly precarious profession undergoing systematic deskilling, few dared to complain about such problems (Rodov, 2020). Hers was a critique shared by tens of thousands of instructors.

Although it might have seemed that remote learning offered an opportunity for student/teacher connections unmediated by the stuffiness of university classrooms (and in some moments it did do that), it also opened a door to more intense surveillance of students. In essence, the scientific management techniques associated with F.W. Taylor in early-20th-century industry have been taken up and extended in the new pedagogical order. Recalling the ethical and copyright quagmire raised by TurnItIn, a corporate anti-plagiarism product, or the disturbingly Orwellian "learning analytics" associated since the 1970s with learning management systems, critics interpreted pandemic-induced innovations as more of the alienating same. Schools deploying AI seemed capable of equipping states, including the most authoritarian ones, with eternal ledgers of each individual child's development, mirroring the brutal surveillance imposed on Amazon employees (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2020; MacGillis, 2021; see also Warburton, 2020). Quantified as so many entries in spreadsheets, visualized as passive units in top-down algorithm-driven planning exercises, objectified as so many passive consumers of products they had no hand in designing or selecting, and sometimes stereotyped as fraudsters intent on gaming the system, many flesh-and-blood students responded to this pedagogic purgatory with feelings of loneliness and alienation.

Second, in addition to demonstrating the failure of remote learning to replace face-to-face education, the neoliberal model has, contemporary evidence suggests, sharply intensified social inequalities. In 2020-21, rich parents accustomed to gifting public schools with superior equipment and facilities—better gyms, libraries, auditoria, field trips, etc.—turned during the pandemic to funding plexiglass shields and air purifiers (Alphonso, 2020). Some private schools boasted of their deluxe virtual education. Affluent parents in California formed "small private classrooms known as 'pandemic pods'" and poached teachers from the public system to guide their children through distance learning (McMahon, 2020). At the other end of the social spectrum, thousands of poor and racialized students could not participate in distance learning programs at all. Jonathan Wolff notes that, for many working-class and poor families, a decent internet connection and a quiet place to study were completely out of reach—and he was speaking of the Global North (Wolff, 2020).

Neoliberal pedagogy recapitulated neoliberal sociology. In both cases, the "individual" was assumed to be free-standing and propertied; the racialized and the poor were often excluded. And, consistent with its general disregard of the gendered realities of social reproduction, the neoliberal paradigm assumed that parents could easily take time off to tutor their children. Some sheltered white-collar workers could manage it; many blue-collar families, reliant on two income earners to survive, could not. Workers died because they could not afford to turn down dangerous jobs. Sometimes, their children did as well.

Such contradictions, and there were many more, suggested that educational neoliberalism, for all its strengths, was enmeshed in the contradictions of the very capitalism it sought to shield from democratic meddling. Most basically, it has not proven that EdTech and remote learning have offered a meaningful substitute for face-to-face instruction. What's advertised on the label—Freedom to choose! Equality through education! Education for prosperity!—is pretty much the opposite of what's inside the can.

Citizens or Consumers?

In the neoliberal dispensation, commercialization, once tightly associated in the late 20th century with such issues as soft drink machines in school halls, has proceeded much further in the 21st. The "common sense" of neoliberalism has "percolated into all public and private institutions and, by implication, despite their own autonomy, into institutions of higher education," writes C.A. Torres (2013, p. 83). Students are customers. They are sold corporate products called courses and programs with the promise that such commodities will pay off in the long term. Teachers are service workers—not professionals with a claim to sophisticated understandings of teaching nor scholars who have mastered their disciplines. It is their job to locate and administer the appropriate EdTech commodities, many of them arriving from on high and without their input. Evaluations of customer satisfaction indicate how well or

poorly they are doing. The schools employing them also compete with each other, and are judged by somewhat similar metrics. Much depends on locating external sources of money, whether this entails high school teachers moonlighting to deliver state-of-the-art gym floors for inner-city youth, or high-flying universities seeking to nab mega-donors with offers to immortalize their names on buildings. From K-12 to doctoral programs, such institutions aim not at the advancement of human civilization in general but at the development of particular knowledge-based commodities (including labour-power) *useful* to corporations and the state, now often integrated together in a near-seamless combination.

The undeclared purpose of these institutions is the social reproduction of the system: the creation (through competition, intense surveillance, and eventual accreditation) of bearers of labour-power with useful capacities and, eventually, products and services useful to capital. Leadership in fulfilling that purpose resides with the CEOs and CFOs who run the institutions, along with foundations and donors setting much of the educational industry's global agenda. Such administrators are still often "state employees," but the integral state for which they work itself now comports itself like a business. Educational institutions are nodes in a vast global market system, held to be sublimely capable of generating beneficial order, yet nowadays seemingly both out-of-control and incomprehensible. At every phase and in every way, the educational journey is about creating possessive individuals (Macpherson, 1961). With apologies to Paolo Freire, this might be called the "pedagogy of the oppressor."

Over the past four decades, this pedagogical model has worked powerfully, but, like the neoliberal order itself, its contradictions are also becoming more and more apparent. The self-serving individual at its core (who, as Adam Smith taught, without desiring or knowing it, works for the general interest as she advances her own) has turned out to be a fiction. As a host of communitarian commentators have pointed out since the 1980s, any given individual is the product of a much broader social and cultural context (Zaretsky, 2020).

Neoliberals sought to protect capitalism from democracy by reinforcing age-old precepts of possessive individualism with elaborate politico-economic theories and by aggressively recruiting one branch of the state after another to their wider project. But, while brilliantly successful in that project, they have been largely undone by the impossibility of protecting capitalism from itself. It is a self-subverting system, intrinsically fated to undercut the natural and social preconditions of its own survival. Millions of students, condemned to precarity and purposelessness, are visibly disillusioned by a neoliberal order they can see is hastening a planetary crisis, of which the pandemic is but one relatively modest moment. It is a looming crisis, an organic crisis of capitalism, that will dominate and damage all their lives.

Young people who survived 2020-22 in the Global North (their counterparts in the Global South may well confront a purgatory extending to 2025 and beyond) will want to understand the world-shaping event through which they have passed (for useful resources, see American Historical Association, 2021). Many of them, their lives

disrupted by the pandemic, will want analyses from their teachers. The comfortable myth that all citizens united to combat a common enemy in Covid-19 is unlikely to satisfy them. And such students may well demand, as well, not just answers delivered from on high by a teacher (or app), but the intellectual capacity to frame their own strategies within historical and holistic frameworks of understanding, of the sort that neoliberalism—"this alien, interloper ideology that has invaded, occupied and damaged so much of our lives"—has always disparaged (Smyth 2020, p. 717). These are conditions, Ben Tarnoff suggests, in which revolution becomes thinkable (Tarnoff, 2020).

Well before the pandemic, students were asking the question posed by Fred van Leeuwen of Education International at the 5th World Congress of that body in 2007: "To put it in the starkest possible way: is education about giving each child, each young person, the opportunity to develop his or her full potential as a person and as a member of society? Or is education to be a service sold to clients, who are considered from a young age to be consumers and targets for marketing?" (Ball & Youdell, 2007, p. 4; see also Alcántra et al., 2013). Around the world, the next left, made up of those insulted and injured by this harsh pedagogy, is taking shape. Much of it is comprised of young people who, having discovered Hayek & Co. to be the gods that failed (to remember an old Cold War classic, now coming back to haunt its originators), will be keen to find something else. Many people, both within the classroom and outside it, are impatiently demanding alternative deities—or maybe even a break with such secular religions altogether. The pandemic has rung out an ear-splitting warning signal: the "death spiral" of humanity looms over us as a real possibility (Monbiot, 2018). Many students find neoliberalism's suicide pact with capital accumulation profoundly repugnant. And they are asking, insistently, and often angrily: how can we arrange things so that a new order —more egalitarian, rational, and genuinely educational — can take its place?

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