

# Replicating the Status Quo: State-run Education and Neoliberalism in the Age of COVID

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## Ephemeral Freedom

When I was teaching social studies in Sarajevo, I used to show my economics classes a documentary called *The Trap: What happened to our dream of freedom* (Curtis, 2007). Episode 1 is entitled “Fuck you, buddy”—a title which was guaranteed to capture the interests of students. The episode focuses on the application of game theory on economics and society during the Cold War. Throughout the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the new millennium, capitalist countries increasingly trumpeted illusions of freedom and behavior intermixed with free market ideologies (i.e., Hayek and Friedman) and models—economic models that gave rise to the pervasiveness of neoliberalism which has permeated into nearly all aspects of our lives (Baird & Elliot, 2018; Garrett, 2019; Rohrer, 2018) in that neoliberal society overlaps personal freedom and free-market values; neoliberalism defines all human activity as economic (Wiebe, 2016). Showing this documentary always led to great discussions and provoked challenges to our championed notions of freedom and individualism, highlighting the inexorable parts of the establishment of neoliberalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (McCormack & Workman, 2016). I mention the above anecdote because I cannot help but wonder what the future of our society will look like, especially given the current pandemic and, at the time of writing this, the precipitous and reoccurring racist violence (Adjei, 2018; Maynard, 2017) and ensuing protests across the Americas. I reflect often about the interconnected notions of freedom, democracy, and capitalism and what my part is in this process as an educator. It is possible for educators to overcome the economic and political pressures of neoliberalism by politicizing curricula (Burkholder & Chase, in press) and disrupting the status quo (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2008).

The original incarnation of this paper was meant to be an oral presentation—then the COVID-19 pandemic changed my plans. Writing (and rewriting) this paper now mirrors a small part of the changes, both known and unknown, in social, economic, and political interactions that will have potentially drastic changes to education. This paper represents the process of revisiting past graduate studies in political theory and linking recent collaborative academic work prior to the commencement of doctoral studies in education. I seek answers to the troubling question: How do we continue to teach if we are complicit in replicating the status quo, as the world progresses beyond democracy and descends into populism, illiberalism, and post-democracy (Bauman & Kania, 2018; Bedford & Irving, 2001; Hudson-Miles & Broadey, 2019)? Furthermore, this paper seeks to highlight influences on education through political theory and philosophical traditions based on the ancients, Hegelian-Marxist theories, and late-modern political philosophies.

## Inherent Crises

Despite the perception of significant change and the hollow warnings of a “new normal,” perhaps we can take comfort in the theory of dialectical materialism—the *telos* of history—as a guideline for understanding our current state of education. We are currently witnessing an economic crisis, the scope of which is without precedence. Crises in capitalism are a product of the disturbances in the reproduction of capital and falling rates of profit (Marx, 1863/1978)—in

our contemporary situation, a crisis instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns of business (Evans, 2020) and state orders to quarantine or to practice physical distancing. After all, profit is the driving force of capitalism (Shaikh, 2004). However, capitalism, being a thoroughly historical phenomenon, must constantly change in response to the crisis tendencies inherent to it (Arendt, 1954/1968; Cook, 2018; Marx, 1863/1978; Pittis, 2020). Marx's (1863/1978) thoughts speak volumes to our contemporary crisis:

The *rate of profit* falls because the value of constant capital has risen against that of variable capital ... [t]he fixed charges—interests, rent—which were based on the anticipation of a *constant* rate of profit and exploitation of labour, remain the same and in part *cannot be paid*. Hence *crisis*. Crisis of labour and crisis of capital. (p. 457)

Our sensitivity toward the resulting crisis perhaps differs from the economic. Our perception of a crisis is the disruption of our banal routines: not being able to see family and friends at will, go shopping, or traveling, or having to stay home with children while the working class continue to labour and stock grocery shelves. The paradox of “low pay, high risk” (Wherry, 2020) where essential workers (convenience stores cashiers, grocery store clerks, meatpacking workers, delivery drivers, taxi drivers, etc.) continue to work (Burkholder & Chase, in press) while those who benefit most from the “liquidity” (Bauman & Kania, 2018; Bauman, 2017) of neoliberalism and capitalism continue to work from home, get paid, and profit from the crisis. In effect, neoliberalism in Canada has eroded many of the labour-friendly qualities established during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; over time, social policy has been retooled in a way that is better for profit and the accumulation of wealth (McCormack & Workman, 2015).

### **Social Decay**

The reality of the pandemic and its impact on our perception of freedom calls me to reflect on past graduate work where I examined the notion of social decay—namely social decay as recorded by Plato and Thucydides as a result of the Peloponnesian War which ravaged the entire Hellenic world for about 27 years (Chase, 2005; Thucydides, ca. 404 B.C.E./1972). All Hellenes (i.e., ancient Greeks) were affected by the decay of political and social life in the context of the Peloponnesian War (Chase, 2005). Various accounts of the war and other associated events of the period were recorded by Thucydides (as a history) and Plato (via philosophical dialogues), and as a result, we are afforded contrasting accounts of the effects of the war on society, politics, and the economy of fifth-century B.C.E. ancient Greece. Perhaps one of the most striking similarities between then and now is Thucydides' account of class struggle and the decline of reasoned political leadership after Pericles, especially after a plague devastated Athens during the war: “Athens owed to the plague the beginnings of a state of unprecedented lawlessness ... [f]or the catastrophe was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them, became indifferent to every rule of religion or of law” (Thucydides, ca. 404 B.C.E./1972, p. 155).

After the plague and successive Peloponnesian attacks on Athens, Pericles emerges as a form of moderate and effective leadership. Pericles cautions, however, that in order for the Athenians to continue to enjoy the privileges and greatness of their empire they must share its burdens (Chase, 2005). Pericles admits that the “empire is now like a tyranny: it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go” (Thucydides, ca. 404 B.C.E./1972, p. 161). In other words, the state is better off with strong leadership, while pandering to the masses, which is Plato's critique of the same Athenian political period. Plato's *Gorgias* dialogue is set

during the Peloponnesian War, during a period when Athens' government was changing from a democracy to an oligarchy. War and tyranny, for Plato, reflect the dysfunction of empire and democracy; similarly, Plato's philosophical critique of the time period's sophists reflect the emphasis given to speech and the expression of uncritical opinions (*doxa*) over the dialectical *logos* or logic as epistemology (Plato, 308 B.C.E./2004). The resulting social decay in political and social life is reflected in the popularity of the sophism as an educational form and leadership of the time. The "new" moralities and virtues of the sophists became the values and ideals we celebrate today: liberalism, individualism, appetite satisfaction, money-making, and action over deliberation—all of the pathologies that the ancient philosophers understood as the decay of life manifest (Chase, 2005).

### **The Ideal State**

The state's response (both provincial and the federal governments) to the COVID-19 pandemic calls into question the nature of state-citizen/individual relations. Considering the history of political theory, philosophers have wrestled with the notion of what constitutes the good life, especially in relation to peoples' relationship with the state. Until the Enlightenment, the general trend in political theory suggested that a strong central governments and absolute political leadership were among the solutions to providing the protection necessary for individuals (Arendt, 1954/1968; Bauman, 2017; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1972). Anyone familiar with the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes will recognize his suggestion in his *Leviathan* that an absolute, central, government is the only guaranteed form of political relationship between individuals and the state (Schostak, 2014); however, people must submit all of their freedoms and individual wants in turn for protection from what Hobbes considered to be the natural course of society which was "worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short [*sic*]" (Hobbes, 1651/1968, p. 186).

Hobbes's precept, often quoted, is used to justify the alternative or trade-off from the freedom to pursue individual and social desires versus the protection offered by the state. Arendt (1954/1968) counters the Hobbesian teleological single-mindedness of thought and history as the result of human interpretation and action, rather than the metaphysical contemplative tradition of philosophy gleaned from Plato and Aristotle. Not until Hegel (followed by Marx) does metaphysics transform into a philosophy of history (Hegel, 1837/1956). Arendt (1954/1968) notes that "Marx took the Hegelian meaning of all history—the progressive unfolding and actualization of the idea of Freedom—to be an end of human action" (p. 78). Hegel (1837/1956) understood the dialectic of history as Freedom in two aspects: the objective and the subjective. Freedom, according to Hegel, "consists in the individuals of a State all agreeing in its arrangements..." (p. 43). If the *telos* of history is freedom (Hegel) (see also deVries, 1991) or the withering away of class society (Marx) or the end of human action over deliberation, then Arendt (1954/1968), perhaps, sums it best, stating that "the growing meaninglessness of the modern world is perhaps nowhere more clearly foreshadowed than in this identification of meaning and end" (p. 78). Returning to the present, I question the teleological dialectic of history, which has resulted in the engrained neoliberal outlook on economic life, I also question whether education can transcend social and economic forces in order to question the status quo? Or, if Hegel (1837/1956) is correct, and the state is the external manifestation of human will and its freedom, is it inevitable that we exist in the immanence of the current (neoliberal/capitalist/hegemonic) state?

## **Alienation and the Surveillance Trade-Off**

Often, our relationship to the state—at times distant and alienating—is brought rapidly into focus when crises occur. Given the contemporary events with the pandemic and the significant race-based violence and protests, the state manifests itself sometimes as being strong, benevolent, incompetent, racist, oppressive, hostile—like a hydra capable of losing one attribute only to take on another. Being forced into quarantine, not allowed to travel, or socialize with friends and family affect people differently. We must also not forget increases in domestic violence and abuse, COVID-19 outbreaks in historically black communities, and outbreaks in Indigenous communities. The state decided to temporarily close schools, many small businesses, other areas of labour, and impose restrictions on citizens. This was done for the benefit of the greater good, rather than cater to the best interests and desires of the individual citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic forces a closer look into the nature of what the greater good is, and whether a strong central government is indeed the answer to successfully navigate the pandemic. Critical pedagogy analyses and challenges inherent power in social and political systems and can assist in making sense of contemporary education. Citizens ought to question authority systems and critically reflect on how and why things operate. What follows is a brief excursus into technological “progress” which has led to ever-increasing alienation and surveillance in our late-modern capitalist world.

The modern period has been marked by the progression of post-industrial civilization, increased alienation, and radical changes in the applications of ideology on politics, society, and economics (Arendt, 1954/1968; Bedford & Irving, 2001; Foucault, 1975/1995; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1972; Marcuse, 1964; Marx, 1863/1978; McCormack & Workman, 2016). With the advent of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the resulting closure of schools in New Brunswick on March 13, 2020, students and teachers have slowly come to experience a form of heralded technological “progress” in the form of at-home teaching/learning. In other words, the “new normal” for students and teachers is increased alienation and oppressive, disciplinary surveillance (Foucault, 1975/1995; Toshalis, 2010). Already an alienating experience, institutional schools commodify knowledge and learning in order to enhance the economic productivity and value of society and the state (Gereluk et al., 2016). This follows what Freire (1970/2018) describes as the banking model of education. It is important to question who benefits and who is disadvantaged by the increased use of digital technology for teaching/learning purposes. Marcuse (1964) perhaps articulates the sentiment best with an indictment of technological progress: “A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress” (p. 1); and “people recognize themselves in their commodities ... [t]he very mechanism which ties the individual to society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced” (p. 9).

The state exerts its power over individuals by maintaining systems of hierarchized surveillance and discipline (Foucault, 1975/1995). Buckner (2020) describes in an article the nature of working from home and how companies utilize surveillance and digital tracking applications on the computers of employees. Despite the potentially liberating practice of working from home, workers are continuously monitored to ensure continued productivity and use-value. Similar methods of virtual management and IT tracking occur with school technology (Schostak, 2014). I question how will the state or educators ensure that children’s privacies are

maintained in online pedagogy? I argue that it is paramount for educators to engage in critical consciousness dialectics in order to resist the inevitable process of alienating students' epistemological experiences from being commodities (Burkholder & Chase, in press); engaging in this process helps stave off the sobering notion proposed by Illich (1971) where "school makes alienation preparatory to life, thus depriving education of reality and work of creativity" (p. 47). Perhaps through a process of "deschooling" (Illich) or "unschooling" society, we can resist the establishment of the status quo which maintains neoliberalism and alienating modern society? Or, perhaps, educators throughout many jurisdictions can attempt the process of disrupting the status quo and replication of dominant society. The following, final, section will outline this process.

### **Replicating the Status Quo Without Conclusion**

The idea that education aids in the reproduction of dominant ideologies and assists in reproducing social and economic inequality (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2008) is not restricted to our contemporary experience. The Western philosophical tradition is steeped in excurses trying to make sense of the forces that establish and maintain dominant ideologies. The hegemonic aspect of ideology arises from its ability to build social consensus and to establish a status quo (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2008; Hill, 2009). Arendt (1954/1968) argues that "[t]he problem of education in the modern world lies in the fact that by its very nature it cannot forgo either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in the world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition" (p. 195). The notion of the status quo points to the inevitable and inherent hegemonic dominant society being replicated through political, social, and economic ideologies which are manifested in education. Horkheimer & Adorno (1944/1972) philosophize that the status quo is unceasingly produced as an objective tendency in history, so much so that even revolutionary imagination despises itself as "utopism [*sic*] and decays to the condition of pliable trust..." (p. 41). This begs the question of the role of educators and pre-service teachers: to what extent are teachers or pre-service teaching programs responsible for reproducing the status quo, which unknowingly or unreflectively replicate neoliberal and capitalist political economy? Another perspective may be to examine the forces that possibly hinder the critical moment or potential of teaching professionals.

Will there be paradigm shift in education due to the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic? It is quite likely that educational reform and policy will change to accommodate the "new age of COVID"—the question, then, is to what extent? As economic markets teeter on the verge of the worst recession in 100 years, how will neoliberal state education systems adapt to market pressures? I am cautiously optimistic, based on the potentials for politicizing course content for what would otherwise be unpolitical curricula (Burkholder & Chase, in press). Pre-service teaching programs are a logical embarkation points for establishing critical pedagogy and diversifying skills to student-teachers in order to recognize and potentially counter the status quo (Toshalis, 2010). The pressures of neoliberal institutions are great, and universities and schools are no exception. However, education is a critical nexus where potential remains in order to assume responsibility for the future and to save it from ruin (Arendt, 1954/1968). If Hegelian-Marxist theories of dialectics holds true, and capitalism's inherent crises are indeed part of a teleological process, then late-capitalist society's liberating praxis is the dialectic of nonidentity, freeing individuals from being agents and bearers of exchange value (Adorno, 1973/2004).

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