

**Dominant Society, Education, and Neoliberalism in the Age of COVID-19**

Allen Chase  
University of New Brunswick

**Ephemeral Freedom**

Throughout 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. These economic models laid the foundation for the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, which has permeated into nearly all aspects of our lives (Baird & Elliot, 2018; Garrett, 2019; Rohrer, 2018). Neoliberal society overlaps with personal freedom and free-market values; neoliberalism defines all human activity as economic (Wiebe, 2016). In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 global 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 often reflect 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 neoliberalism's economic and political pressures by politicizing curricula (Burkholder & Chase, in press) and disrupting the status quo (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2008).

This paper considers the following question from the framework of structuralist critical theory: To what extent are we 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)? The following intertwines perspectives of the pandemic within examples of Marxism and structuralist thinkers. My positionality as a cisgendered white settler-colonialist male is reflected as a critical student-researcher in conflict with my past (and ongoing) experiences as a public school teacher.

**Inherent Crises**

Despite the perception of significant change and hollow warnings of a “new normal,” perhaps we can question the theory of historical materialism (Marx & Engels, 1968)—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 the context of the global pandemic, the economic crisis is instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns of business (Evans, 2020) and state orders to quarantine. 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). Our collective crisis is not limited to economic systems but to the dire state of the environment.

Society's sensitivity toward the resulting crisis perhaps differs from the economic crisis. Popular perception of “crisis” is the disruption of banal routines: not being able to see family and friends at will, go shopping, traveling, or having to stay home with children—while the working class continues to labour and stock grocery shelves. The paradox of “low pay, high risk” employment

(Wherry, 2020a), where essential workers (i.e., 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 their labour work from home. The “liquidity” (Bauman, 2012; Bauman & Kania, 2018; Snyder, 2016) of neoliberalism and late-modern capitalism privileges those who continue to work from home, get paid, and profit from the pandemic. 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).

### **The *Telos* of History**

The state’s response (both provincial and federal governments) to the COVID-19 pandemic calls into question the nature of state-citizen/individual relations. Potentially valuable perspectives exist within the history of political theory and may help make sense of contemporary social and economic strife. Philosophers have wrestled with the notion of what constitutes the good life, especially to peoples’ relationship with the state. Until the Enlightenment, the general trend in political theory suggested that a strong central government and absolute political leadership were among the solutions to provide the protection necessary for individuals (Arendt, 1954/1968; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1972). Hannah Arendt’s understanding of human labour and creativity helps understand the notion of freedom. According to Arendt (2000), the “world” is composed of human labour and creativity (i.e., cultural, technological, and political artifacts) (p. 303). Furthermore, she articulates the philosophical connexion between the phenomenological theories of Hegel and Marx: “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 foreshadowed than in this identification of meaning and end” (p. 78).

Reflecting on the ongoing pandemic, I question the notion of 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 to upend the status quo? Or, from Hegel’s perspective, if 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? Teleological identification of meaning warps my positionality as an educator because of the implications of dialectical subject-object struggle towards something ephemeral. The real crisis and end point in history may be total environmental degradation beyond salvation. The following sections deal with the implications of late-modern capitalism and educators’ dilemmas.

### **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 (Žižek, 2020). Given the contemporary events with the pandemic and the

significant race-based violence and protests, the state sometimes manifests itself as 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 (Ireton, 2020), COVID-19 outbreaks in historically Black communities (Wherry, 2020b), and prolonged outbreaks in Indigenous communities (Stefanovich, 2021). The state decided to temporarily close schools, many small businesses, other areas of labour and impose restrictions on citizens. These government restrictions were 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 the greater good and whether a strong central government is indeed the answer to successfully navigating the pandemic. Critical pedagogy analyses and challenges inherent power in social and political systems and can help make sense of contemporary education. Citizens who question authority systems and critically reflect on how and why things operate (Žižek, 2020) better position themselves to challenge the status quo. 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 throughout much of Canada, 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 to enhance the economic productivity and value of society and the state (Gereluk et al., 2016). Freire (1970/2018) describes the commodification of knowledge as a form of “banking concept of education” (p. 72). 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). Educators should be critically reflexive of the ways new technologies in education further alienate students from one another and themselves. Technological progress and reforms to education perpetuate the commodification of knowledge.

The state exerts its power over individuals by maintaining systems of hierarchized surveillance and discipline (Foucault, 1975/1995). In a CBC News article, Buckner (2020) provides an example of the nature of working from home and how some companies utilize surveillance and digital tracking applications on employees’ computers to monitor duration on the computer and websites visited during work hours. Despite the potentially liberating practice of working from

home, workers are continuously monitored to ensure continued productivity and use-value. Similar virtual management and IT tracking methods occur with school technology (Schostak, 2014; Snyder, 2016). How will the state or educators ensure that children's privacies are maintained in online pedagogy? How are students and teachers monitored in their work at home or online (Schostak, 2014)? What companies, agencies, or "Big Tech" profit from these new education-providing technologies? In what ways is surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015) the new economic reality—utilized unreflexively—in virtual learning pedagogies?

I argue that it is paramount for educators to engage in critical consciousness dialectics 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 austere 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 to disrupt the status quo and replicate dominant society. The following, final section will outline this process.

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

The idea that education aids in reproducing dominant ideologies and assists in reproducing social and economic inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/2000; Giroux, 1989) is not restricted to our contemporary experience. Political philosophy is steeped in excurses trying to make sense of the forces that establish and maintain dominant ideologies. Hegemonic ideology arises from its ability to build social consensus and 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 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 educators' and pre-service teachers' roles: 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 may hinder the critical moment or potential of teaching professionals.

Will there be a 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 (Ross & Gibson, 2007)? I am cautiously optimistic, based on the potentials for politicizing undergraduate education course content for what would otherwise be unpolitical curricula (Burkholder & Chase, in press). Pre-service teaching programs are a logical embarkation

point for establishing critical pedagogy and diversifying skills for student-teachers 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 to assume responsibility for the future and save it from ruin (Arendt, 1954/1968). Suppose Hegelian-Marxist/phenomenological-structuralist theories of dialectics helps to explain that capitalism's inherent crises are indeed part of a teleological process. In that case, late-capitalist society's liberating praxis is the dialectic of non-identity, freeing individuals from being agents and bearers of exchange value (Adorno, 1973/2004).

## References

- Adjei, P. B. (2018). The (em)bodiment of blackness in a visceral anti-black racism and ableism context. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(3), 275-287.
- Adorno, T. W. (2004). *Negative dialectics* (E. B. Ashton, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1973)
- Arendt, H. (1968). *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*. Penguin Books. (Original work published 1954)
- Arendt, H. (2000). The concept of history. In *The portable Hannah Arendt* (P. Baehr, Ed.). Penguin Books.
- Baird, J. & Elliott, V. (2018). Metrics in education—control and corruption. *Oxford Review of Education*, 44(5), 533-544. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2018.1504858>
- Barakett, J. & Cleghorn, A. (2008). *Sociology of education: An introductory view from Canada* (2nd ed.). Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Bauman, Z. (2012). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. & Kania, A. (2018). That West meant to be declining. *Thesis Eleven*, 149(1), 91-99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513618811722>
- Bedford, D. & Irving, D. (2001). *The tragedy of progress: Marxism, modernity and the Aboriginal question*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (2000). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (R. Nice, Trans.). SAGE. (Original work published 1977)
- Buckner, D. (2020, May 14). No slacking allowed: Companies keep careful eye on work-from-home productivity during COVID-19. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/working-from-home-employer-monitoring-1.5561969>

- Burkholder, C. & Chase, A. (in press). Exploring geographies of work with pre-service Social Studies teachers: Exposing intersections of time and labour in New Brunswick, Canada. *McGill Journal of Education*.
- Cook, D. (2018). *Adorno, Foucault and the critique of the West*. Verso.
- deVries, W. A. (1991). The dialectic of teleology. *Philosophical Topics*, 19(2), 51-70.
- Evans, P. (2020, May 22). COVID-19 pushed Canadian retail sales to their biggest ever plunge in March. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/retail-sales-march-1.5580067>
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline & punish: The birth of the modern prison*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage. (Original work published 1975)
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition*. Bloomsbury. (Original work published in 1970)
- Garrett, P. M. (2019). Revisiting “The birth of biopolitics”: Foucault’s account of neoliberalism and the remaking of social policy. *Journal of Social Policy*, 48(3), 469-487. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279418000582>
- Gereluk, D., Martin, C., Maxwell, B., & Norris, T. (2016). *Questioning the classroom: Perspectives on Canadian Education*. Oxford University Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (1989). Schooling as a form of cultural politics: Toward a pedagogy of and for difference. In H. A. Giroux, & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Critical pedagogy, the state, and cultural struggle* (125-151). State University of New York Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1956). *The philosophy of history*. Dover. (Original work published 1837)
- Hill, D. (2009). A brief commentary on the Hegelian-Marxist origins of Gramsci’s ‘Philosophy of praxis’. *Educational philosophy and theory*, 41(6), 605-621. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2008.00495.x>
- Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T. W. (1972). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (J. Cumming, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1944)
- Hudson-Miles, R. & Broadey, A. (2019). ‘Messy democracy’: Democratic pedagogy and its discontents. *Research in Education*, 104(1), 56-76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034523719842296>
- Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling society*. Marion Boyars.

- Ireton, J. (2020, March 20). Isolation an unsafe option for women facing domestic abuse. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/50-million-dollars-for-sex-assault-centres-women-s-shelters-help-covid-19-1.5503288>
- Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. Beacon Press.
- Marx, K. (1978). *Theories of surplus value*. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx-Engels reader* (2nd ed., pp. 443-465). W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1863)
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1968). *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected works in one volume*. International Publishers.
- Maynard, R. (2017). *Policing Black lives: State violence in Canada from slavery to the present*. Fernwood Publishing.
- McCormack, G. & Workman, T. (2015). *The servant state: Overseeing capital accumulation in Canada*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Pittis, D. (2020, May 25). COVID-19 may be the catalyst—not the cause—of a painful but useful economic transformation. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/coronavirus-economic-change-1.5581084>
- Rohrer, J. (2018). 'It's in the room': Reinvigorating feminist pedagogy, contesting neoliberalism, and trumping post-truth populism. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(5), 576-592. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1455656>
- Ross, W. E., & Gibson, R. (Eds.). (2007). *Neoliberalism and education reform*. Hampton Press.
- Schostak, J. (2014). Supersurveillance, democracy, and co-operation – the challenge for teachers. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(4), 324-336.
- Snyder, B. H. (2016). *The disrupted workplace: Time and the moral order of flexible capitalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Shaikh, A. (2004). The power of profit. *Social Research*, 71(2), 371-382. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40971701>
- Stefanovich, O. (2021, February 25). COVID-19 tents, shacks turn into homes in First Nation facing housing crisis. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/eabametoong-housing-crisis-covid-isolation-tents-1.5924625>

- Toshalis, E. (2010). From disciplined to disciplinarian: The reproduction of symbolic violence in pre-service teacher education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 42(2), 183-213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270903267972>
- Wiebe, S. (2016). The teacher as silenced superhero. *LEARNING Landscapes*, 9(2), 535-550. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v9i2.791>
- Wherry, A. (2020a, May 10). The wages of fear: The pandemic and the future of low-paid 'essential' work. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/coronavirus-pandemic-covid-minimum-wage-essential-workers-1.5562318>
- Wherry, A. (2020b, June 13). One country, two pandemics: What COVID-19 reveals about inequality in Canada. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/pandemic-covid-coronavirus-cerb-unemployment-1.5610404>
- Žižek, S. (2020). *Pandemic! COVID-19 shakes the world*. Polity Press.
- Zuboff, S. (2015). Big other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization. *Journal of Information Technology*, 30(1), 75-89. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5>

*Allen Chase is a first-year doctoral student in Educational Studies at the University of New Brunswick. He is also a middle school teacher with over 10 years' experience at international schools and teaching in New Brunswick. Allen's research interests include critical pedagogy, school culture, teachers' professional praxis, and ethical and social justice issues in education. His doctoral work aims at documenting New Brunswick's teachers' experience during the post-COVID-19 era by an examination of neoliberal educational policies and practice. When not on campus, Allen can be found trail running or brewing beer. Allen Chase can be reached at [achase@unb.ca](mailto:achase@unb.ca)*