

We might all be socialists; we might all be alone

By [Will Brehm](#)

Human life around the world has radically changed in a matter of weeks because of the novel coronavirus, known scientifically as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). Some see the possibility of new futures in the making. The Slovenian philosopher [Slavoj Zizek](#), for instance, argues social distancing is a sign of “respect to others” since everyone, regardless of class, race, gender, or age, must be assumed to have the virus. The virus, in this respect, is a great equalizer and has created types of unity and solidarity (e.g., mutual aid groups) unimaginable during the hyper-individualist, neo-liberal order before SARS-CoV-2. In times of crisis, we might all be socialists.

Others see the exact opposite. Italian philosopher [Giorgio Agamben](#), for instance, argues “the state of emergency” caused by the novel coronavirus “has become the normal condition.” As governments of all types use authoritarian measures in their efforts to stop the virus, humans are left more divided and controlled than ever before. Doctors now decide who deserves a ventilator and who deserves a death sentence, leaving each person to fend for him or herself. In times of crisis, we might all be alone.

When it comes to education, change – and potential change – is everywhere. In a [FreshEd podcast](#) I recorded last week with Western University Associate Professor [Prachi Srivastava](#), she suggested countries in the Global South that have had long histories of providing education in emergencies could offer valuable lessons to countries in the Global North on ways to make education systems more resilient. This is a tantalizing reversal of power relations I can only hope will materialize.

[insert Prachi podcast here]

In times of change, capitalism, of course, never misses an opportunity. The recent shift to online learning is a new “gale of creative destruction,” to borrow from Joseph Schumpeter, or form of “disaster capitalism,” to borrow from Naomi Klein. The mutation of educational delivery from face-to-face to online is a ripe space for businesses to find new ways to extract profit. Digital platforms, such as Zoom, have profited from the new data produced by the increasing number of online meetings. Only a few days ago did Zoom remove code that [sent user data to Facebook](#), but questions [remain](#) as to whether the company complies with European Union digital privacy laws. We have willingly – and perhaps unknowingly – become unpaid producers of (educational) data sold for someone else’s profit. Zoom’s stock price has, unsurprisingly, skyrocketed in recent weeks in an otherwise bear market.

[Insert Zoom stock image here]

These rapid changes to education have felt like whiplash. As cultural theorist [Arjun Appadurai](#) recently remarked on a Zoom call for [vCIES](#), the inherent slowness of education is radically called into question because of the fast-paced changes demanded by SARS-CoV-2. How might we manage these changes when yesterday is no longer a good predictor of tomorrow? How might we re-think education in these turbo-charged times of exponential growth?

[YouTube clip]

Regardless of the way in which we manage educational change, it is important to recognize change itself will be experienced unevenly around the world. Power relations have not magically balanced because of the novel coronavirus; digital divides continue to disadvantage remote and rural communities; and inequality is still with us and perhaps expanding because of the pandemic.

Many of the institutions that created the unequal world before SARS-CoV-2 are actively mobilizing responses to the pandemic in ways that protect their own interests. The World Bank, for instance, has [tied its new emergency loans](#) to structural adjustment policies not seen since the 1980s. That powerful institutions resort almost reflexively to free market ideology in times of crisis should give us pause. Will education post novel coronavirus see a return to the neo-liberal economic policies that forced deadly austerity measures on millions of people in low- and middle-income countries? I desperately hope not.

What then are the meanings, practices, and theories of education and development in a world *post* SARS-CoV-2? The word *post* is used intentionally here to signify a departure of some sort, the emergence of new socio-cultural and political-economic conditions. Like any historical transformation, though, there will of course be continuities with the world before SARS-CoV-2. Nevertheless, the designation of “post” may help us map and guide the future of education systems worldwide by suggesting something indeed new is upon us. Our goal must be to document and try to interpret changing or changed educational landscapes; and to imagine a world radically different than before. We must struggle with Zizek and Agamban’s opposing take on our current moment. I believe we are living through what Thomas Piketty, in his new book *Capital and Ideology*, calls *trajectoires et bifurcations*, or “switch points” in history, where an important turn takes place that has lasting consequences. Education post SARS-CoV-2 is open for interpretation. What will we make of it? In which direction will we turn?

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