The Global Pandemic Did Not Take Place: Cancellation, Denial and the Normal New

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1 Introduction

> Human beings must be everyday people or they will cease to exist. (Lefebvre 1977: 135)
> And what remains when disbelief is gone? (Larkin 2011)

Perhaps because it exists at an intersection between knowledge and biology, the global pandemic forces us either to address, or ignore, its existential and epistemological threats. This chapter draws on various theories, philosophies and other forms of writing, applied to education and politics, to examine the extent to which the pandemic offers an opportunity to rethink and redo. In this our immediate context is the UK, and in particular England, presented as an illustrative and extreme, rather than representative, case of how the pandemic has magnified issues and problems that preceded it (Davies 2020) and how they have been, and can be, understood, resisted and ignored. This situation is awash with contradiction in an English culture riven by the enduring symptoms of long Brexit, which just adds to the tension. As we emphasise, the pandemic is made up of both the virus and our responses to it. In fact, the promise of a return to 'normal' manifests as both a forlorn hope and a considerable threat: being lost is ever more attractive than being found. The chapter's title draws on Baudrillard's (1994, 1991) notions of simulacra and simulation in relation to the Gulf War: 'The idea of a clean war, like that of a clean bomb or an intelligent missile, this whole war conceived as a technological extrapolation of the brain is a sure sign of madness.' (Baudrillard 1991: 55) In the understandable

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concern with achieving a 'new normal' since the initial lockdowns were introduced, the emphasis has been much more firmly on the normal (the pandemic did not take place) than the new (we have all been irretrievably altered). Here we explore the normalness of the new, building on Baudrillard's (1994, 1990) notion of irreversibility and insight that 'the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it'.

Informed also by Frederic Jameson's (1984) concern that a sense of historicity has been unsettled by the 'discontinuous flow of perpetual presents', we read Baudrillard's analysis as a call to arms for the return to an effective historical sense to restore complexity, disorder and contention in a world that potentially wants none of it. This is congruent with Lefebvre's (2002: 226) notion of a critique of everyday life, which aims to 'render ambiguities bearable, and to metamorphose what seems to be most unchangeable in mankind'. Thus, it requires both careful and multidisciplinary analysis, as Rancière identified:

> Basically I tried to combine two things: one is transversality, I think the things that matter for theory turn up at crossover points where the different jurisdictions disappear … the other feature is precision. That's a quality that's been fostered in me by my constant practice as a gardener. With plants you can't be vague. I've done the same with texts. (Rancière 2016: 32)

Education is our field of enquiry because it is the area in which we work but also because it constitutes a practice, process and experience within which and around which these generally troubled and troubling times might be mediated. As (of all people) the former Church of England leader Rowan Williams (2021) noted recently, educational issues have been a 'lightning rod' and 'a vehicle for anxieties about national priorities, social disadvantage, mental health, the calculation of risk and a good deal more' in the period during the pandemic. We contest that education remains captive to notions of pragmatism and 'what works', which have drained much of the joy out of learning. Our approach in opposition to this is to draw on a range of theoretical insights in a spirit of questioning and playfulness. This does not mean we are not serious, rather that we are approaching the unanticipated, if not unprecedented, challenges of the last year and a half in the spirit of Madison (in Spry 2016: 176–177) who is clear: 'I am playful, but I am not playing. I do not appreciate carelessness. I pay attention. I do not let go or look away, because I have learned that all the meanings, languages, and bits of pain will come into clarity and utility like a liberation song.'

2 Cancellation, Denial and Education

> Everything could be dispensed with if we only had the strength and the courage. (Bernhard 2013: 30)

Knowledge has been at the centre of our viral present through a renewed and enduring, if unstable, focus on education. The pandemic has both magnified the unequal effects of disadvantage in education at all levels and offered politicians and

policy-makers a means to overlook the existence of such disadvantage and resist change. This is clear from the facile focus on children's short-term lost learning (which has also not taken place and will only occur if we require or allow it to), that has distracted from its effects on other areas such as their mental health, for example. It was also clear when at the moment of the first lockdown the unthinkable happened in the UK and other countries and exams were cancelled. The fact that few could still imagine why anyone would want to learn anything for the sake of learning was an indictment of how corrosive the neoliberal approach to education has been in England. Later, after an uproar when everybody learned (and at the same time did not learn) that every year exam results are distorted by algorithm, this abject betrayal of the great project of education was repeated. Once again the gauntlet was thrown down by the cancellation in England in 2020 of high stakes exams for 11, 16 and 18-year-olds. This resulted in teachers being set to work compiling evidence to support their predicted grades with an explicit acceptance that that year's assessment would not cover all of the course content. No one considered the value of just teaching the rest of the course content because 'population management' trumps education every time (Peim 2013). Middleton reminds us that Lefebvre (2004) calibrates three 'qualities' of pedagogical endeavour: 'dressage, education and learning', explaining that '[m]ilitary in character, dressage is "training" or "drill", based on routine, repetition and obedience' (Middleton 2017: 413). Here is the English system of high stakes examinations.

By contrast, reflecting on another period of pan-European disorder, Lefebvre observed: 'Education ought to centre on concrete problems that are both practical and theoretical, both empirical and conceptual' (Lefebvre 1969: 157), the 'real' problems of 'lived' experience. These were a long way from 'what works'. Pandemic or not, they are the very elements that the neoliberal-inspired reforms in England sought assiduously to excise to the extent that the school curriculum offers a student of history no opportunity to engage with the historical moment they are living though. This is denial on a grand scale. The identification of contradictions, which Lefebvre argued 'give rise to problems, and thus to a set of possibilities' (2002: 209), is not for them.

Like whole currents of prevailing philosophical and cultural thought, such notions have been long denied in politics and in education policy in England. This has been the case in particular since clocks were turned back and traditional forms of knowledge and assessment were reinstated in 2010. After this, the post-truth seeds of Brexit and some responses to the pandemic were sown. We should remember that the director of the Vote Leave campaign rehearsed the approach in England's Department for Education a handful of years earlier. The move towards traditionalism is founded on a series of myths, which Barthes showed us long ago emerge out of simplification and denial:

> In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident,

> it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (Barthes 1972: 143)

Myth also informs Matthew Clarke's exploration of educational policy as a series of fantasies and disavowals. Clarke (2020: 155) explores how we are asked to fantasize, for example, about more excellence, everywhere while disavowing 'the role of middle-class values and socioeconomic power in educational success', indeed reframing these as 'purely personal characteristics of aspiration, resilience and resolve'. In this way 'social discrimination and economic exclusion are rendered invisible in the interests of preserving a putative but fantasmatic egalitarian meritocracy', which, in anybody's money, is 'wallowing in the evident'. This process reinforces the core myth of education as the path to individual opportunity and social redemption, regardless of circumstance or disadvantage (Peim 2012). It also offers the reassurance of closure (order) and the utopian reach of openness (chaos) and more importantly and inevitably 'paradox' and 'contradiction'. These are represented by some as 'postmodern' characteristics, but they might more accurately and pertinently be described as 'post-truthisms'.

Thirty years ago, Jameson (1991: ix), dismissed the postmodern as 'an attempt to think about the present historically in an age that has forgotten to think historically in the first place'. Thirty years before that, Raymond Williams (1961) identified three functions of education which exist in tension: the production of a labour force; the transmission of (traditional) forms of culture; and enabling individuals to develop their full capacities. Therefore, we are asking in this chapter, how do we take the tensions and contradictions of the pandemic to create new knowledge ecologies and forms of education? How can we ensure that this moment of transition leads to change (a normal new) and to do this do we need a fourth (fifth, sixth) function of education around which to develop a new plan of action?

3 A Brief History of Simulation: A Lesson Too Late for the Learning?

> Theory, meanwhile has itself also changed and offered its own type of clue to the mystery. (Jameson 1984)

The paradox embodied in our title is, like Baudrillard's, conceived as a provocation. It is multi-layered and multi-modal, bringing together pure myth and brute facticity. The myth of the pandemic, like the myth of education itself in Peim's (2013: 32) coining, 'is a dynamic structure, a series of specific myths in a turbulent system of differences', but with even greater and grimmer impact. Regarded variously as humanitarian and economic catastrophe, inevitable 'wake-up' call, test, hiatus, consequence of the connected world, natural break and certainly powerful message/lesson, it will offend many at the deepest and simplest level to suggest it did not happen. However, our polemical stance does not place us in league with Covid-19 deniers, the 'anti-vax' libertarian fringe, but rather as inquisitive observers of what

largely looks like 'business as usual'. Indeed, the crisis seems to have provided a further excuse for subjection and exploitation within the ironic promise of a new normal (same as the old normal – if you're lucky). Of course, Barthes addresses this in his exploration of myth, pointing out that 'the signifier in myth exactly reproduces the physique of the *alibi*' and where 'there is a place which is full and one which is empty' (Barthes 1972: 122) (emphasis in original).

Thus the pandemic can be represented in the UK, and in England in particular, as part of the ubiquitous 'levelling up' process (with death masquerading as the ultimate leveller) while inequality escalates. The unedifying spectacle of allocating grades for untaken public exams has already been held up as a sad and brief chronicle of our time. No reckoning though can ever be made, so brinksmanship remains the order of the day because, while 'the ordinary alibi (for the police, for instance) has an end … [m]yth is a value, truth is no guarantee for it; nothing prevents it from being a perpetual alibi' (Barthes 1972: 122). In other words, myth, in Barthes' memorable phrase, 'always has an elsewhere at its disposal'.

This is the basis of Baudrillard's critique of Marxism, which he dubbed the alibi of capital, because it invests in a battle for meaning which can never be brought to the point of crisis as it battles with a bourgeois opponent that has ex-nominated itself so it appears only in the guise of nature and the nation. It is also about battling a spectral archive, 'a language which does not want to die' but 'wrests from the meanings which give it its sustenance an insidious, degraded survival' (Barthes 1972: 132).

Here is the real battleground, what Rancière (2006: 10) calls the intelligibility of the debate, a place for the practice of theory and the theory of practice. While we take very seriously Jameson's critique of postmodernism as the cultural dominant of late or multinational capitalism and recognise the points he makes about history and nostalgia, it is also difficult in our current context to argue with Mark Fisher's (2021) evaluation of the prescience of Baudrillard's accounts of the way we live (and learn). It is hard also not to recognise that it is neoliberalism which has not only become an accepted cultural dominant, fusing the economic and cultural to survive repeated predictions of its demise (Plehwe et al. 2020), but also how it has done so by neutralising postmodernism's warnings through deeming them 'mere' theories, albeit dangerous ones.

This had the bizarre effect in the UK of having the British Minister for Women and Equalities blame Foucault for children's supposedly poor literacy in a speech that was later redacted for 'party political content'. What Liz Truss was making clear in a contradictory fashion was that theory gets in the way of practice, that teaching 'theories' like racism and sexism leaves little time for 'making sure everyone could read and write' (in Zorzut 2020). She then compounded this by indicting a more significantly theoretical villain: 'postmodernist philosophy – pioneered by Foucault'. Without evidence she dismissed it as follows: 'In this school of thought, there is no space for evidence, as there is no objective view' (Truss in Zorzut 2020). At the root of this is perhaps an unknowing rejection of Fisher's (2018: 766) insight that one of the impulses that runs through all of Foucault's work is a recognition of 'the arbitrariness and contingency of any system, its plasticity'.

Here in part is the culture war between common sense, rational, objective action and symbolic gestures. The Māori scholar Maria Bargh (2007: 14) has argued that '[t]he usage of the term "rational" by neoliberals can be seen as "a propaganda coup of the highest order … It carries the implication that any criticisms of it, or any alternatives put forward, are by definition irrational, and hence not worthy of serious contemplation."' For example, though Baudrillard's work is based on observation and careful argument about consequences, it is dismissed as fanciful and abstract (Fisher 2021: 49). Neoliberalism though hardly appears to be a theory at all, operating rather in the 'real world' into which we're thrown and which deals us the hand we're expected to play to the best of our, also 'thrown', abilities, like riders on the storm.

We need to consider how this plays out more specifically but not before acknowledging Baudrillard's (1983: 86) prophetic blueprint of simulation because as he says, '[t]he impossibility of reconciling theory with the real is a consequence of the impossibility of reconciling the subject with its own ends'. Our evocation of Baudrillard is vital because the most significant viral infection is of 'the real', whose degradation Baudrillard (1994: 6) tracked as a precession from 'signs that dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing'. Of course, this can be written off as 'fancy' theory, but in our image-saturated digital age, this points to the failure of imagination and certainly of the empty signifier, 'education'.

Curriculum reforms in England since 2010, which as we have hinted have painstakingly preferred the academic and traditional to the personal and contemporary, give credence to Fisher's (2014: 9) assertion that '[t]here's an increasing sense that culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present'. It was culture that Debord quipped captured 'the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world' in *The Society of the Spectacle*, claiming that '[e]verything that was directly lived has receded into a representation' (Debord 2005: 7). This was in 1967, though its prequotation cited Feuerbach from 1841: 'But for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence … truth is considered profane and only illusion is sacred.' (Feuerbach in Debord 2005: 6)

If we go back to this 'normal', the pandemic did not take place, although grief remains. As we wrote elsewhere, '[t]he first casualty of hyperreality is "the real", historically, geographically and culturally situated' (Bennett 2017: 82). Writing in 1981, Baudrillard (1994: 354) entirely anticipates the nature of the threat and the longing for an illusory golden past that lies behind so many populist appeals: 'When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity.'

In his *Requiem for the Media,* Baudrillard (1986: 124) added obliquely that 'the media revolution has remained empirical and mystical'. This is a fateful and possibly fatal combination which clarifies our relationship with what Berardi (2017: 203) calls 'the epistemological and practical hegemony of the economic paradigm' as onto-theological. This act of faith is essentially nostalgic, an essentialism that longs, post-truth, for some kind of reckoning, hence the daily bulletins from medical

experts in so many countries documenting the war on Covid-19. We are asked to believe a common sense notion that there is indeed a reality that is incontrovertibly 'there', relating to Heidegger's notion of 'thrownness', which is revealed emotionally and 'trumps' theory in some unspecified way. There is a kind of brinksmanship at play here, albeit without possibility of resolution, and a naïve faith in 'brute facticity' as the ultimate standard (where once we relied on honour and integrity). This appeal to reality also authenticates what appears to be a rationalist approach.

It is interesting to contrast this with Lefebre's critical pedagogy which is predicated on the mythification of these abiding 'truths' of returning the historical, which Barthes was so tired of seeing confused with nature at every turn. The Marxist Lefebvre (2002: 20) works rather from the notion that the 'human being is historical and its historicity is inherent to it: it produces and is produced, it creates a world and creates itself'.

4 The Global Pandemic Did Not Take Place: A Lesson from History

> Is this the promised end?
> Or image of that horror? (Shakespeare 1997)

So much for rationalism. The pandemic has also been a godsend (*sic*) for the anti-vax movement to further their form of rationality, however irrational it might seem to others. Andrew Wakefield, struck off the medical register in the UK for making unfounded claims about links between autism and the MMR jab, remains alive and well and living in South Florida. He makes high profile documentaries, lots of money and co-habits with former supermodel Elle 'The Body' MacPherson. It seems that Marston (1603) was right: 'fortune still dotes on those who cannot blush'. However, the more serious point concerns the absence of any restraint on the casual lie which might perhaps be understood in terms of Baudrillard's (1990: 47) observation that 'we grant meaning only to what is irreversible: accumulation, progress, growth, and production'. In the same treatise he argues that '[p]roduction only accumulates, without deviating from its end. It replaces all illusions with just one, its own, which becomes the reality principle' (Baudrillard 1983: 83). Moreover, he relates this to a crisis in our 'all-too-beautiful strategies of history, knowledge, and power' which, he says 'are erasing themselves' (86). In some ways the 2008 economic crash, which Critchley (2021) characterises as a 'crisis of faith' in the value of money, was a dry-run for the pandemic. Yet we still get fooled again. Berardi (2017: 35) describes this as 'the exorcism that failed', arguing that 'the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the crisis of subprime mortgages in my expectation set the conditions for changing the regime of financial capitalism'.

For Berardi this new moment of crisis constitutes a horizon of possibility. He had previously argued that '[c]orporate capitalism and neoliberal ideology have produced lasting damage in the material structures of the world and in the social,

cultural, and nervous systems of mankind' (Berardi 2011: 8), but now it is time to fight back. He proposes that we reclaim what Marx describes, using the English words, as 'The General Intellect' (the technical, social and professional knowledge of workers) through using 'consciousness of knowledge as the weapon' (Berardi 2017: 197). In this way, knowledge becomes a means of abandoning capitalism, rather than merely resisting or rejecting it.

The key here is subjectivity, acting as a foil to all forms of authority in which knowledge is not part of uncovering truth or describing reality: 'it is rather about the creation of meaning and the invention of technical interfaces projecting meaningfulness into reality' (Berardi 2017: 198). Berardi is drawn to 'The Fragment on Machines' in *The Grundrisse* where Marx himself proves fairly far-sighted in setting us a challenge. The question is 'to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it' (Marx in Berardi 2017: 202). The potential here is for education is to become what Berardi calls 'the actor of disentanglement', since for Berardi (2017: 202) the general intellect is 'the field of the next struggle and of the next creation: a task for the twenty-first century beyond the fog of neoliberalism and the miasma of the identarian brainless body'.

This moves us formally to the critique of universities and research for succumbing to the neoliberalist agenda (Mintz 2021), a development which the apparently neutral pandemic has paradoxically only made worse. Berardi (2017: 203–204) is optimistic because he recognises that the autonomy of knowledge depends on individuals working to 'produce value inside the semiotic machine'. However he is also aware that '[t]he autonomy of knowledge presupposes the independence of those who animate the general intellect' (Berardi 2017: 204). This means not only university vice-chancellors, governors and government, but also students, teachers and researchers.

Berardi provides a historical overview of 50 years in which the General Intellect has been in submission. During this period common notions of 'the future' have been rendered unfeasible and a flirtation with the theoretical principle of social mobility, which Reay (2017), drawing on Berlant (2011), calls a form of 'cruel optimism' because it so often offers false hope, has largely run its course. However, in universities profound changes continue and for Berardi these are to be resisted. There is 'no longer a space for the integration of technical skills and humanist culture' because '[i]t is being transformed into a space of mere acquisition for specialised knowledge, a space where individualism and competition are cultivated to the detriment of solidarity and consciousness' (Berardi 2017: 210).

5 Meritocracy and Depersonalization

With a heavy whiff of Baudrillard, Berardi (2017: 210–211) also claims that 'here, in the neoliberal transformation of the educational process, lies the ultimate danger of the final desertification of the future of humankind'. At the centre of this transformation has been the reinvigoration of the ideology of meritocracy, which Williams (1958) argued long ago 'weakens community and the task of common betterment' and 'sweetens the poison of hierarchy'. This has justified the emphasis placed on high-stakes examinations in England, which Foucault (1991: 187) reminds us transforms people into analysable objects and forces them into a system of competition, translating 'the economy of visibility into the exercise of power'.

For Berardi (2017: 212), meritocracy is 'the Trojan horse of neoliberal ideology, the hot bed of precariousness fostering competition' with individuals obliged to fight for position in the 'pecking order' and the skills and knowledge with which they fight merely a means to an end. In this way, competition becomes the rule. Meritocracy acts as 'a stimulus for ignorance' which 'diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common fate' (Sandel 2020: 47). This is a process familiar to teachers in our schools and colleges. As Berardi (2017: 212) points out, 'as the criteria of evaluation are fixed by those who have power, the learner is invited to adopt the evaluation criteria corresponding to the existing powers'. As he emphasises, accepting meritocracy cancels students' ability to learn autonomously.

The stakes are too high for Berardi to sweeten the pill, for this neoliberal turn is also a global force, which Eve Tuck (2013: 324) has described 'as nihilistic, as death-seeking'. Like a virus. Thomas wrote with concern that:

> The surveillance of students, and now the surveillance of teachers (and ultimately of all citizens of a corporate state), is not covert, but in plain view in the form of tests, that allow that surveillance to be disembodied from those students and teachers – and thus appearing to be impersonal – and examined as if objective and a reflection of merit. (Thomas 2013: 215)

The notion of depersonalised, disembodied surveillance parallels some of the restrictions introduced with little resistance following the pandemic (and our point here is to highlight the lack of political and intellectual scrutiny of their implications, rather than the implementation). It underlines that this disembodiment has become 'business as usual', an element of twenty-first century alienation: the way we live now. In this disjointed, disembodied existence where 'the work of the brain is subjected to the heartless rule of finance' people end up 'sick at heart in many ways' (Berardi 2017: 206). Here living, as in being in the world, is undermined, deprived of its 'poetry'. Lefebvre borrows from Heidegger the notion that '[d]welling, in its essence, is poetic' and cites the German decisively on the possible reasons for the absence of the poetic and 'our inability to take the measure of man and his heart', suggesting that these deadening influences 'spring from a strange kind of excess: a rage for measurement and calculation' (Lefebvre 2003: 122).This is about being free and everywhere in chains, but also reflects a worsening infection since it problematizes Rancière's assumption that teachers might be at least emancipated intellectually. His recipe for intellectual emancipation only requires teachers to be

emancipated themselves, an ingredient he cannot have imagined would soon be in such short supply (Rancière 1991: 15). In 2021 teachers spent weeks collating evidence to support the grades they were awarding their students. Nobody even suggested that time might have been better spent educating them. The map had clearly preceded the territory.

Berardi is clear where this is going but also optimistic that it can be remedied. His bare statement of the former is designed to encourage us to the latter. His view is that if this separation between educational achievement as technical formation and critical education persists: 'By the 2nd generation no trace of autonomous self-consciousness will be left in the social brain, the legacy of modern culture will be reduced to vestiges for antique dealers and the general intellect will be forever subjugated.' (Berardi 2017: 210–211) He calls on universities in particular to defend the autonomy of knowledge because it is 'the only way to overcome the corporate devastation of the world and the global identitarian civil war' (214). It is also in what Berardi calls 'the Age of Impotence' and 'the horizon of possibility of our time'.

6 The Age of Vulnerability

> We're all vulnerable right now. (Latino farmworkers, California)

This impotence is also intertwined with the uncertainty and fragility which characterise our times: 'As Berardi has argued, the intensity and precariousness of late capitalist work culture leaves people in a state where they are simultaneously exhausted and overstimulated.' (Fisher 2014) This sense of exhaustion leads to a heightened sense of vulnerability. During the past decade, vulnerability has become a ubiquitous term in social policy and politics to the extent that we could as easily refer to an age of vulnerability as to one of impotence. As so often, this has simultaneously expanded and contracted its meaning(s), although they rarely tend towards the positive. The pandemic focused attention on vulnerable groups to the extent that 'vulnerability scores' were used in England in April 2020 to ration Covid-19 treatment – the more vulnerable patients were on this measure, the less likely they were to be admitted to hospital or treated (Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021). Something sinister was afoot.In their overview of its 'many faces', Brown et al. assert that vulnerability tends to appear in three forms across a range of literatures:

> as a policy and practice mechanism, which plays out in interventions, sometimes overtly and explicitly, sometimes subtly or unnoticed; as a cultural trope or way of thinking about the problems of life in an increasingly pressured and unequal society; and as a more robust concept to facilitate social and political research and analysis. (Brown et al. 2017: 498–499)

Analysis of social policy has tended to focus on the first form. In neoliberal social and education contexts, notions of vulnerability have tended to regard individuals as 'architects of their own disadvantage' (Potter and Brotherton 2013: 7). The UK, which Fisher (2018: 459) described as 'the world capital of apathy,

diffidence and reflexive impotence', has often been a pioneer in this. The troubled families programme launched in England in 2011 to 'support' 120,000 families facing disadvantage is the pre-eminent example. More social democratic social models, such as those common in Scandinavia, recognise the role played by context and the social environment, but tend to undervalue individual factors. Identifying and measuring vulnerability in the neoliberal context – blaming the victim – also allows it paradoxically to be depoliticised and ignored (Potter and Brotherton 2013). By May 2015, the UK Government was claiming that '99 per cent of troubled families had been turned around' (Crossley 2017). The fact that this was widely contested and ridiculed was unimportant. The improvement, which had not taken place, had occurred.

However, what is striking is that even theoretical approaches that are hostile to the processes and effects of neoliberalism tend to default to reductive notions of vulnerability: 'Unless there is a challenge to the construction of the idea of human beings as vulnerable and diminished that is being strengthened through therapeutic education, it will be impossible for workers to confront and resist the therapeutic workplace.' (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019) It is notable that Ecclestone and Hayes' (2019) acute exploration of the negative effects of the therapeutisation of education elides the notion of vulnerability with being 'at risk', which seems a rather narrow view. This means that, rather than Brown et al.'s (2017) 'more robust' concepts of vulnerability, the suggestion here is we use the complexities and duplicities that Covid-19 has spotlit and magnified to co-opt broader notions of what being vulnerable can mean.

Drawing on Foucault's work on sexuality and desire, Angel (2021) highlights the danger of regarding vulnerability primarily as a state to be overcome or resisted: 'When you feel vulnerable, it's tempting to brace yourself against vulnerability – the fantasy of hardening yourself so that nothing can hurt you. The collateral, however, is that nothing can reach you, either.' This notion of admitting, rather than concealing, one's sense of vulnerability is something we have addressed in relation to education (Jopling 2019). As Larrivee (2000) has emphasised, in this context the capacity to reflect in teaching is closely related to the acceptance of uncertainty when addressing a problem. This requires teachers to relinquish control and reveal their vulnerability, rather than regard it as something to be suppressed. Revealing vulnerability in this way can be an effective way of reaching and building trust with vulnerable young people, who are typically written off as 'hard to reach' (ironically echoing Angel's description). Here vulnerability is a precursor of an emancipatory form of collaborative learning.

This can be taken further with reference to Judith Butler's (2020) more resilient and engaged conceptualisation, in which rather than being a state to be resisted, vulnerability is recast as a form of activism: 'What if the situation of those deemed vulnerable is, in fact, a constellation of vulnerability, rage, persistence, and resistance that emerges under these same historical conditions?' Here vulnerability becomes part of a more complex conglomeration of responses to the situation which causes it. Butler's language recalls Fisher (2018: 459), who followed the characterisation of the UK as apathetic, already cited, by describing it as 'the country that

periodically explodes into rage'. Despite the fears of the Government and its advisors (and leaving the conspiracy theorists to one side), this was not a common response to the extreme restrictions of lockdown in 2020.

In fact, like so many administrations, the UK Government was largely given the benefit of the doubt when a rapid vaccine roll-out in 2021 drew the public's attention away from its sluggish early responses to the pandemic, captured most vividly in its repeated failures to keep its regular promises to open schools, universities or pubs. The irony here is of the punctum of the vaccine which causes the recipient to forget earlier fears, agonies and vulnerabilities, reflecting most poignantly Barthes' (1981) celebrated 'punctum of a photograph' – 'some detail that has an unexpected and inordinate capacity to wound' (Royle 2018). Barthes' punctum exercised its power through bringing memory and an image of the past together. The vaccine's punctum effectively wiped the past, bringing its recipients closer to the old normal than the normal new, and persuading many that the threat can be ignored or forgotten. At least for a while.

7 (Not) Forgetting/(Not) Remembering

> I have no memory for things I have learned, nor things I have read, nor things experienced or heard, neither for people nor events; I feel that I have experienced nothing, learned nothing… (Kafka 1973: 270)

In *Forgetting*, Gabriel Josipovici (2020: 23) quotes from Beckett's book on Proust: 'Only he who forgets, remembers.' Pleasingly, this itself is a misremembering of Beckett's (1965: 29) '[t]he man with a good memory does not remember anything because he does not forget anything'. Although Josipovici is correct in finding his distillation pithier, it also loses something. Beckett's double use of the negative is characteristic in pinpointing the necessity of forgetting, which itself echoes Josipovici's (2020: 58) later use of Nietzsche's assertion in *The Genealogy of Morals* that 'it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting'. This has an unsettling effect on us as we wonder whether not remembering or not forgetting is preferable. Josipovici's (2020: 58) point is that they are interdependent: 'In each case the question is of the right balance between remembering and forgetting, between waking and sleeping, between that which can help us live, can invigorate our activity as Goethe put it, and that which paralyses us'.

This recalls Fisher's (2018: 757) characterisation of the recent past in a hauntological gesture which undoes forgetting: 'to recall these multiple forms of collectivity is less an act of remembering than of *unforgetting*, a counter-exorcism of the spectre of a world which could be free' (emphasis in original). The paradox of this counter to easy nostalgia is itself reflected at the end of Josipovici's book, where, referencing Beckett and Wallace Stevens, he identifies the necessity and impossibility of reaching an understanding that is beyond memory and forgetting:

> Imagining forgetting is as impossible as imagining the absence of imagination, yet with the one as with the other, we are hungry for that experience, feeling that if only we could reach behind our imaginings, behind our memories, we would find our true place in the world. This remains, however, always tantalisingly out of reach. (Josipovici 2020: 143)

For an education system that has focused on the pandemic in terms of 'learning and earning loss' for school and university students, rather than as a challenge to the very notions of knowledge and learning, this may well look like theory getting in the way of practice. In fact, it offers a potential way to understand what we have experienced and continue to experience. If in a time of post-truth, cancellation and denial are the dominant forms of willed forgetting, education has a key role in play in asserting the interdependence of both remembering *and* forgetting in order to understand how we have come to this pass and how to move past it.

This is the promised end. As we seek UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's fabled, irreversible 'opening up' and education's mythical 'catching up', all within the 'paradise postponement' which is 'levelling up', so Baudrillard's dark and difficult later work, his fatal theory, slides into view. Irreversibility is a cornerstone of Baudrillard's critique, which suggests that only according to this principle do we allow meaning to ensue. However, somewhere between the virtual and the illusionary, the pandemic refuses to conform. The biological resists the process of naturalisation and the rhizomatic refuses to become the genealogical. As Deleuze and Guattari emphasise:

> The rhizome is an anti-genealogy. It is a short-term memory, or anti-memory. The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. Unlike the graphic arts, drawing or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectible, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21)

Not only anti-genealogy, this is anti-memory: not rock and roll but genocide. Baudrillard offers the radicalization of all hypothesis as part of his campaign of theoretical violence. The pandemic unsurprisingly proves a fertile case study since it both supports and apparently confounds Baudrillard's assertion that symbolic exchange is over and signs cannot cross to the objective world, testing his belief that 'simulacra prevail over history' (Baudrillard 1993: 56). This challenge is not provided theoretically but rather practically by the refusal of the biological to be possessed or controlled. Thus, although clearly virtual and subject to illusion, the pandemic is also immanently a manifestation of excessive practice, which Baudrillard argues abolishes systems by pushing them into hyperlogic.

We recognize Baudrillard's image of politics as a form of manipulation employing surface appearance and empty forms, precisely in the politics of the pandemic: indeed it has rarely been more apparent. However, it may also be the case that in the current circumstances, postmodern (post-truth) society's unchecked need for fascination, which Baudrillard believed had usurped the need for meaning, has been, in simple terms, reversed. This is not to argue for a society coming to its senses or indeed a society presented with this opportunity, although of course these versions will have purchase for some. However, it might constitute a previously

unimaginable opportunity to reconsider Baudrillard's late career dilemma with new information and propose a way forward that is less fateful or indeed fatal.

Baudrillard's concept of fatal strategies derives from his inability to conceive of a productive function for theory which was not futile (and both politics and education constitute theories in this sense). Fatal theory embraces futility, dramatically and poetically, but perhaps not conclusively if it is ultimately outflanked by its own desire to make an end, an apotheosis: the vanishing point. Interestingly, for Baudrillard (1983) memory represented a threat, the preservation of the past in the present which contributes to the derealisation of the moment and the loss of the present to memory. As such it is a kind of 'suspension of disbelief' and dreaded deferment of extinction: like the Sybil who hangs suspended over Eliot's Wasteland and only wants to die or the little boy who promises Godot will come tomorrow.

Meanwhile, at the centre of the pandemic, both literally and symbolically, is the virus. It exists only to make more viruses. It may not be properly alive but it is a rewriter of scripts including this one. In this stand-off there may be a moment to reconsider. Derrida embraced something of this alternative in the law of genre, conceiving of 'a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy' and also 'the law of abounding, of excess, the law of participation without membership, of contamination' (Derrida 1981: 59, 63). In simple terms the pandemic is reversible and that changes everything: adapt or die.

8 Conclusion: Beyond Our Depths

What implications does this have for how we approach knowledge, learning and education in the broadest senses? It seems clear that the pandemic has both accelerated and magnified social, cultural and political issues that were already dominant. In this the UK is a peculiar but by no means unrepresentative case. Barthes (1972: 131) wrote that 'myth is always language-robbery' and the pandemic has allowed the post-truth linguistic denials and cancellations that have characterised the Brexit saga (to name one example) to proliferate further. It would be tasteless to refer to the 'fatal strategies' and prevarications that led to so many deaths, but the pandemic has showed the gap between the 'scientific advice' that has been offered and the linguistic distortions and denials of history in real time that have been 'justified' by that advice. The challenge for all of us is to attempt to remain inquisitive observers in real time. In the educational context, that has played out in terms of a narrow focus on 'catch-up' and 'loss'. Unfortunately, this has more often than not been based on simplistic calculations of time out of school or college and fanciful projections of future earnings, rather than a more considered reckoning with how to rethink learning for the normal new (Riordan and Jopling 2021).

In his critical review of Camus's *La Peste,* to which so many turned at the beginning of the pandemic, Barthes (2002: 7) wrote that '[e]vil sometimes has a human face and *La Peste* says nothing of this … Everything begins where the plague is not

only the plague, but the image of evil in the human face'.[1] While he is specifically referring *La Peste'*s allegorical concern with the second world war, Barthes' observation also highlights how important it is to recognise that the pandemic is constituted of both the virus itself and our actions in response to it. This justifies our use of theory (as practice) to provoke different understandings of our predicament (and practices) because it is only by seeing through the language-robbery and attempts to revise history in real time that we can resist the mythologisation.

In fact, resistance, one of the emergent themes of this chapter, may itself represent one of the new functions of education that we sought in response to Williams (1961) and the form of action to which it needs to contribute. The complexity of the virus and its mutations has been increased by the multiplicity of our varying responses to it, both individually and collectively. This means our resistance to its implications need to be similarly deft. At the end of Kafka's (1961: 91) story, 'The Silence of the Sirens', it is characteristically unclear whether or not Ulysses is complicit in the sirens' silence: 'Perhaps he had really noticed, although here human understanding is beyond its depths, that the sirens were silent, and held up to them and to the gods the aforementioned pretence merely as a sort of shield.'

We are in this kind of territory in response to the pandemic, where so much human understanding is out of its depth. As a result, we need both to see through and outplay the pretences that have been used to disguise that failure of understanding. The ways in which the pandemic has focused our attention on the issues we have explored: simulation, denial, vulnerability and remembering/forgetting means it is imperative to use the knowledge we have developed of these issues to move out of our depths, which is of course also a movement into depth. It is important to recognise that the pandemic extends the widespread sociocultural disembodiment and depersonalization that the relentless surveillance of teachers and learners symbolizes. It is also crucial to understand it in terms of Baudrillard's notion of irreversibility, particularly in the light of the apparent memory-cancelling functions of vaccines. Barthes (1972) reminds us that myths create a simplified world without depth and we need to reject the myths perpetuated by neoliberalism in order to rethink so much, both in education and more widely. While the viral aspects of the pandemic will withdraw, its human elements and consequences will be much more enduring.

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[1] Authors' translation.

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