

## **Covid-19, education and the new abnormal**

In what sense is the COVID-19 pandemic 'new'? Historically speaking it is a reassertion of the normal, or as the historian William McNeill might well see it, the latest counteroffensive by infectious diseases against the specifically modern growth of human resistance to pestilence and plague. In his classic work *Plagues and Peoples*, McNeill argued that eventually what he saw as the familiar ecological pattern of mutual accommodation between human hosts and parasites was almost sure to prevail. Indeed, he concluded, although it now required imagination to understand what infectious diseases meant to humanity even a few short generations ago, infectious disease would last as long as humanity itself, and would continue to be 'one of the fundamental parameters and determinants of human history'.

So, taking the long view, this contemporary plague is itself the normal, while heightened resistance to such pandemics is a function of modernity, and late modernity at that. What is novel is the particular nature of the collision between a potent strain of disease and human society at a particular stage of globalisation. International travel and the digital revolution have transformed global communications. At the same time, at least in the West and in the most privileged social classes, scientific and medical advances have created an illusion that humanity can control or insulate itself from the demands of nature and the limitations of the planet. The combination of these features with the coronavirus creates a shock to the system, a disillusionment leading to profound social, economic and educational consequences: the new abnormal.

When the initial shock has passed, what can we expect for the future? Again, a glance back at our history can provide some clues. The world wars of the twentieth century provided a stimulus to social change, as the leading protagonists resorted to state control and collectivist methods to conduct total war which had lasting social effects. Elites tended to survive even if they had to adapt to new conditions, but significant social reforms including in education were possible. Especially where reformers were able to move quickly before the immediate radicalising effects of stimulus wore off, and the economic effects of warfare took over, progressive ideas have often become mainstream. Where they hesitated, the opportunity was lost.

It seems likely too that there will be a nostalgic yearning for a golden age, when diseases seemed to be largely eradicated and there appeared to be no social limits on growth. A renewed understanding of world history is of paramount importance as a counter to this. And it may be that neoliberalism, the dominant social and economic influence of the past generation, will now face its greatest test. How can a free market contend with the forces set loose by a pandemic that respects no private interests? It may indeed be that environmental concerns, living within the resources of the planet and supporting public health, can take centre stage, even to help displace the strongest of current orthodoxies. If so, the fresh thinking of the new abnormal may indeed have a chance of challenging the *ancien regime*..

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