

“Tales From Disaster Capitalism: The Capitalist Transformation of Education by Exploiting the Pandemic Crisis”

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Most New Orleans schools are in ruins, as are the homes of the children who have attended them. The children are now scattered all over the country. This is a tragedy. It is also an opportunity to radically reform the educational system.¹

Milton Friedman

This [pandemic] is the first time many universities will have to rely on a fully online experience for their undergraduate population. Doing so could dramatically accelerate the long-term acceptance of online learning.²

Adam Nordin, the managing director of the Goldman Sachs' Technology (TMT) Group

The uncanny resemblance of these responses to two different crises is the subject of this article. The first one is a response to 2005's Hurricane Katrina, and the second one is a reaction to 2020's COVID-19 pandemic. Once the stay-at-home procedure started in different countries in 2020, calls for moving communications online began immediately. Many businesses needed to carry on, and in a globalized world, dependent on an increasingly extreme division of labor, effective communication was crucial. The Internet was the common answer. Schools, businesses, film festivals, and meetups started to search for ways to move online. In response to that massive demand, many tech companies offered their services for free or for cheaper prices temporarily, especially for schools. Zoom lifted its 40-minute limit on free accounts for K-12 schools in some regions,³ and Adobe made its Creative Cloud free for some students.⁴ Among others, instructors and administrators praised such moves by tech companies

enthusiastically.⁵ However, I argue that one needs to look at these actions in the broader context of the growing control of corporations over different sectors of the (global) society, causing increasing inequalities. The exploitation of Katrina to transform education sheds light on the new capitalist response to the pandemic in the education sector.

It took only about three months after Katrina for Friedman to call for embracing the destruction of public schools and replacing them with publicly-funded but privately-run (charter) schools. Explicitly calling students “consumers,” he asked to use the same free market strategies used in “other industries” in the education sector.⁶ Friedman had long been a proponent of utilizing tragedies to implement (capitalist) ideas that were not feasible before,⁷ a strategy Naomi Klein calls “Shock Doctrine” or “Disaster Capitalism.”⁸ Currently, charter schools make up New Orleans’ entire public school system.⁹ This “*Reconstruction* of a newly governed South”¹⁰ mainly helped the white upper-class use public funds for private gains¹¹ and resulted in further racial segregation, lower public education quality, as well as racial and economic inequalities.¹²

If the capitalist response to a hurricane in one region took a few months to take off, the sudden shutdown of most schools around the world in the middle of the school year called for an immediate response. The corporations investing in educational and communication technologies wasted no time to exploit the crisis to take over their suddenly expanded market. The pace of pandemic-related developments put school administrators and educators in a state of panic, leading them to embrace the software tools that let them “continue” their education. “Instructional continuity” became a buzz word, with the purpose of using “the best tools available” to “continue” instructions despite the disruption. Educators, students, and staff members had very little time to adopt new tools and scrutinize the effects of such adoptions. For example, the University of Wisconsin-Madison gave less than two weeks to its employees to move the courses completely online.¹³

People began to share documents and spreadsheets listing tech tools, and schools set up workshops and made contracts with tech companies as a response to the “new situation.” Most of the conversation centered around digital tools’ capabilities for implementing this supposed “continuity” with little attention to the human aspects and long-term effects of such moves on people and the educational system. Schools and universities invested in software while laying off their working force. When students are considered “consumers,” academic “business” becomes more important than the wellbeing of the humans within the system. Educational institutions pushed everyone to adopt “the new norm” quickly, resulting in a boom in the edtech sector as most other industries were declining.¹⁴

The Shock Doctrine is effective, exactly because it exploits people’s fear of disruption, the (sometimes manipulated) fast pace of developments, and people’s disadvantage in economic and social capitals to compete with wealthy and powerful institutions. In a typical capitalist move, disguised as “philanthropy,”¹⁵ the Gates Foundation made a deal with Andrew Cuomo, New York’s governor, to “reimagine education” in New York. The information provided on this “reimagining” is too broad but aspires to be sweeping, transforming in-person education to virtual learning.¹⁶ The lack of details gives the involved entities an alarming decision-making power, especially considering that the council for this transformation includes “[n]o current NYC educators.”¹⁷ Goldman Sachs also hoped that universities’ financial struggles as well as their forced adoption of online teaching during the pandemic would lead to accepting online education more quickly, arguing that financially-minded agents such as CFOs and Presidents are involved in weighing the costs of online versus traditional education.¹⁸ Zoom and Adobe’s moves, hence, should also be considered a marketing strategy in this broader context, as voiced by 2U, Zoom’s close partner.¹⁹ New Orleans provides a lesson in whom such exploitations serve and how they increase economic, social, and racial inequalities.²⁰

Corporations, tech companies, and billionaires’ takeover by exploiting the pandemic extends to almost any aspect of human life involving communication—which is almost all of

human life. New technologies can provide helpful tools for facing unexpected problems. However, the predatory way tech companies exploit their capital advantage over the general public to make them purchase or rent products or share profit-making personal data for free,²¹ and more broadly, to restructure human communications increases inequalities in domestic and global societies. Inclusive, human-centered, and community-engaged decision making as well as open-source software should replace a premature acceptance of “the new normal.” As corporations make deals with states and other institutions to “reimagine” our ways of life, we need to collectively reimagine our mutual future.

¹ Milton Friedman, “The Promise of Vouchers,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2005, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB113374845791113764>.

² “How Coronavirus Is Reshaping Classroom Learning,” Insights, Goldman Sachs, March 17, 2020, https://www.goldmansachs.com/insights/pages/from_briefings_17-mar-2020.html.

³ Ryan Gallagher, “Zoom for Online Learning Updates: Expanded Access for Schools,” *Zoom Blog*, last modified March 29, 2020, <https://blog.zoom.us/wordpress/2020/03/29/how-to-use-zoom-for-online-learning/>.

⁴ “Enabling students access to Creative Cloud during COVID-19 campus closures,” Enterprise & Teams, Adobe, accessed June 5, 2020, <https://helpx.adobe.com/enterprise/kb/covid-19-education-labs.html>.

⁵ See, e.g.: Jordan Novet, “Why Zoom has become the darling of remote workers during the COVID-19 crisis,” *CNBC*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/21/why-zoom-has-become-darling-of-remote-workers-amid-covid-19-outbreak.html>.

⁶ Friedman, “Vouchers.”

⁷ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), xiv.

⁸ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 6. Klein starts her book discussing the transformation of New Orleans' public schools as a case of disaster capitalism.

⁹ Rick Cohen, "New Orleans Becomes Nation's First All-Charter School System," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, June 2, 2014, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/new-orleans-becomes-nation-s-first-all-charter-school-system>.

¹⁰ Kristen L. Buras, "Race, Charter Schools, and Conscious Capitalism: On the Spatial Politics of Whiteness as Property (and the Unconscionable Assault on Black New Orleans)," *Harvard Educational Review* 81, no. 2 (June 2011): 297.

¹¹ Buras, "Race," 317.

¹² Buras, "Race"; "The State of Public Schools in Post-Katrina New Orleans: The Challenge of Creating Equal Opportunity," *Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School*, May 15, 2010, http://scholarship.law.umn.edu/imo_studies; Jeannie Haubert, ed., *Rethinking Disaster Recovery: A hurricane Katrina Retrospective* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

¹³ Todd Richmond, "UW Suspends Face-to-Face Classes; Barrett Seeks Declaration," *US News*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/wisconsin/articles/2020-03-11/uw-suspends-face-to-face-classes-barrett-seeks-declaration>.

¹⁴ Natasha Mascarenhas, "Edtech is surging, and parents have some notes," *TechCrunch*, June 9, 2020, <https://techcrunch.com/2020/06/09/edtech-is-surg-ing-and-parents-have-some-notes/>.

¹⁵ See: Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018); Chris Lehmann, "The Philanthropy Racket or: How The People Destroying The World Anoint Themselves Its Saviors," *In These Times*, August 22, 2018, <http://inthesetimes.com/article/21346/philanthropy-global-elite-neoliberal-marketworld-economy>.

¹⁶ Reema Amin and Matt Barnum, “Cuomo taps Gates Foundation to ‘reimagine’ what schooling looks like in NY,” *Chalkbeat*, May 5, 2020, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/5/5/21248648/cuomo-taps-gates-foundation-to-reimagine-what-schooling-looks-like-in-ny>.

¹⁷ Reema Amin, “No current NYC educators named to Cuomo’s ‘reimagine education’ council,” *Chalkbeat*, May 8, 2020, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/5/8/21252576/no-current-nyc-educators-named-to-cuomos-reimagine-education-council>.

¹⁸ Goldman Sachs, “How Coronavirus.”

¹⁹ Emily Bary, “‘This is online education’s moment’ as colleges close during coronavirus pandemic,” *MarketWatch*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/this-is-online-educations-moment-as-colleges-close-during-coronavirus-pandemic-2020-03-17>.

²⁰ Online education has already caused more inequalities, even in such a short time and before structural and permanent changes in the scale of New Orleans’ public education take place. For some statistics, see: Benjamin Herold, “The Disparities in Remote Learning Under Coronavirus (in Charts),” *Education Week*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/10/the-disparities-in-remote-learning-under-coronavirus.html>.

²¹ “A Silicon Valley adage says, if you’re not paying for it, you’re the product being sold.” (William Poundstone, “How Do Tech Companies Make Money From Our Personal Data?” *Forbes*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2019/06/27/how-do-tech-companies-make-money-from-our-personal-data/#e4e1fda4788c>); see also: Max Eddy, “How Companies Turn Your Data Into Money,” *PCMag*, October 10, 2018, <https://www.pcmag.com/news/how-companies-turn-your-data-into-money>.