Toward a "thoughtful lightness": Education in viral times

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Abstract   The Covid-19 pandemic has changed our way of life temporarily and perhaps forever. As such, how educators respond to the contemporary situation is not without consequence. Inspired by the writings of Giorgio Agamben, this article argues that, while the way forward is not unambiguous, the Covid-19 situation offers educators an unanticipated opportunity to pause; to reconsider our aspirations; and, ultimately, to reclaim education as an ethico-political activity. To embrace this opportunity requires the interpretation of our current situation as a real state of exception in which the neoliberal order and its utopian-learning culture can be suspended. In a state of suspension, one can begin thinking afresh about the Covid-19 pandemic and what reactions to and conversations about the event reveal about (more desirable) ways of learning and living together in schools and society.

Keywords   Covid-19 · Teaching · Giorgio Agamben · Ethico-politics · Neoliberalism

> *The desperate situation of the society in which I live fills me with hope.*
>
> Agamben (2004, p. 123)

Few would argue that in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world and life are heavy, or serious, in the sense that we are weighed down with material considerations of life and death, burdened with responsibilizing imperatives to stay home and save lives, and encumbered with a profound sense of political (collective) vulnerability. A particular rhythm seems to be at play in our lives, as the impression that we know what needs to be done oscillates between "certainty and uncertainty, leading and being led, patience and

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impatience" (Kishik 2012, p. 70). Who or what to believe? Who or what will guide our thoughts and actions? Whether crises are imagined or real, the major fear is that no one is in control (Bauman 2005). That said, it is our prerogative to bite the finger of those who point in the direction we need to go (Kishik 2012, p. 70) and to not act like an obedient dog that blindly follows its master's command. What we are underscoring—and the current pandemic magnifies—is that our lives are immersed in ethical and political questions that have no clear answers or directions for action. As human beings, we live paradoxically between "opposing forces" that try "to take possession of our thoughts and actions" (p. 69). The point is that we should not rush to resolve the matter in either direction but pause to revisit and reappraise our guiding beliefs and values; it is in the absence of such reconsideration that a crisis becomes a catastrophe. Put differently, we must, as Badiou (2001) argues, take time to open up and learn from the particular situation in which we find ourselves and not act as if we already know how it should be interpreted and handled. As educators, we ask: What might be the role of education in these viral times? How might we, as educators, keep the gravity of life bearable but also "thought-full"? What form of thinking is called for?

In this article, we explore these questions against the backdrop of neoliberal efforts to promote a utopian learning culture and of the educator as a skilled clinician stripped of an ethico-political form of life. Inspired by the poetic philosophizing of Giorgio Agamben (1998) on states of exception, we argue that, while the way forward is not unambiguous, a pandemic offers educators an unanticipated opportunity to reclaim and reinstate education as an *ethico-political* activity, and thinking as a form of "thoughtful lightness" (Calvino 1988, p. 12) that embraces paradox and tensionality and that "evokes the heaviness of life and the world in which we live…and a way to keep this world and life aloft" (Kishik 2012, p. 56). As was the case with Marx and Benjamin, Agamben's hope hinges on desperation, his optimism on pessimism. Such thinking, it seems to us, is precisely what the Covid-19 pandemic calls for. Such thinking, however, lies in stark contrast with the kind of utopian thinking that characterizes neoliberal education.

Neoliberal utopias: The erasure of ethico-political thought

Utopian thought provides enticing visions of a better future. In its neoliberal variety, the future is defined within the terms of global economics. Oriented toward uncontested endings and predetermined destinations, neoliberalism offers a sort of user manual that guides our thinking and living in certain directions. This means that ethics and politics are run into the ground because, we are told, there are no alternatives to consider, no other directions to look for.

Within the neoliberal utopian ideal, a better economic future is entangled with education. Education becomes little more than "a 'resource' to be used as part of the standing reserve in the game of national economic competition" (Peters and Humes 2003, p. 432). As educators, we become instrumental means to commercial ends: good teaching is viewed as a sort of clinical practice positioned within an audit culture and directed at predetermined, desired effects—namely, the improvement of student test scores on international comparative tests (Hattie 2013; McMahon et al. 2015). To this end, we are expected to become: (a) classroom managers who can manage, as well as be managed by means of data, numbers, statistics, and standards (Rose 1999; Williamson 2017); (b) sensitive therapeutic facilitators who can motivate unmotivated students

(Furedi 2009); and (c) alchemists who, by means of so-called evidence-based methods, can transform complex matters into ones that can be easily learned and compared (Popkewitz 2002). The problem is that, as educators, we are assigned a predetermined learning mission, thereby erasing the need for any ethical or political consideration and judgment. This means that we are regulated by a sovereign political power and order that legitimizes different claims of learning necessity. A link in education between quality teaching and its effects (e.g., test scores) has been installed. This reflects an idealized dogma, or what Larsen (2019, p. 3) calls an "effect-centered learning outcome logic" that frames time and space in education. This logic is supported by soft technologies (governmentalities), such as state-sponsored teacher mentoring programs, teaching standards, charter teacher schemes, merit pay, and other subtle forms of political control and monitoring (Mau 2019).

Seeking a harmonious—utopian—reconciliation of purpose and outcomes leaves little time and space for antagonism, conflict, and dissensus. Utopian ideals are problematic because they support educational communities and cultures reliant on sacred mythologies (e.g., quality educators as managers of quality learning) and ritual practices (e.g., standardized testing and school ranking) that make it difficult for us to construct spaces in which ethico-political forms of thinking can be supported and valued.

"While utopian thought easily provides us with elaborate visions of a better future, it cannot really lead us there, since its site is by definition a non-place" (Prozorov 2010, p. 1057). That said, it could be argued—as did Foucault (1970, 1984)—that, while utopian ideals, such as those evident in contemporary policy, cannot be realized in reality, they still have consequences for our reality. That is why they must be contested, for example, in heterotopian spaces that serve a disruptive role, because they "reflect the inverse or reverse side of society" (Sohn 2008, p. 44). Foucault (1984, p. 47) wrote,

> In every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites … in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.

According to Foucault, "the ship" is "heterotopia par excellence", and "without boats, dreams dry up" and it becomes difficult to experience and imagine differently (p. 49). With this metaphor, one can think of a journey or adventure orientated toward places or spaces in which someone or something familiar can be experienced from a distance, in novel ways, or from other positions and perspectives. Within a *Bildung*-horizon, the ship reflects a fundamental idea about transcending the familiar (the well-known world) in meetings with others and othernesses (Rüsselbæk Hansen and Phelan 2019).

In the educational field, heterotopian spaces in which rituals, norms, and rites follow their own logic exist to a certain degree (Blair 2009, p. 99). A case in point might be found in the classical Greek idea that school is a place for "free time", in which to study societal matters, challenges, and dominant orders (Masschelein and Simons 2013, p. 9). We would not deny that heterotopian spaces exist in education. If we follow Brown's (2015, pp. 35–36)) lines of reasoning, however, we can argue that utopian neoliberal ideas and logics are like termites boring into our educational institutions in ways that makes it difficult to maintain counter spaces for ethico-political thinking, for example, about the Covid-19 pandemic and what it reveals about our ways of a living (Latour 2020). That is why we turn to the work of Giorgio Agamben.

States of exception: The Covid-19 situation and education

Agamben shares Foucault's interest in the possibility of counter spaces. However, where Foucault's heterotopian counter spaces exist within the given social and symbolic order (i.e., they are an extension to law), Agamben's counter spaces exist beyond this order (i.e., they are extraterritorial to the law) (Dehaene and De Cauter 2008, p. 5). This means that if we are able to support counter spaces in education, it is not enough to do it in the light of the neoliberal (lawful) order. Instead, it is this particular (lawful) order in itself that must be suspended; only then we will be able to perceive ourselves, others, and reality in new and different ways.

Characterizing the suspension of the law as a state of exception, Agamben (2004) was careful to distinguish between real and fictional states. The fictive is based on Carl Schmitt's definition of the *sovereign* as "the one to whom the juridical order grants the power of proclaiming a state of exception and, therefore, of suspending the order's own validity" (Agamben 1998, p. 15). Agamben's critique of this definition is that, paradoxically, the law still works despite its suspension. Lawless spaces are produced and legitimized by the same law that is suspended in the first place. The point is that necessity knows no law but is still protected by it; thus, a "maximum of anomy and disorder can perfectly coexist with a maximum of legislation" (Agamben 2004, p. 612):

> The declaration of a state of exception cannot be grounded in a norm, because there is always the possibility of a situation of danger that would exceed normative codification. But neither can the declaration be immediately grounded in the fact situation that ostensibly poses a threat to the state, because it is never self-evident whether a situation of danger actually exists. The sovereign is necessary because neither law nor fact can ultimately determine the exception: their role is to decide when a situation of danger exists and suspend the law in response. (McLoughlin 2016, p. 517)

The problem is perfectly illustrated in the quote above—that is, the sovereign decides or judges without being able to legitimate the decision/judgment in unequivocal laws or norms. In other words, the sovereign power to declare conditions of exception is not based on a valid, positive, and legal order, because such an order does not have a "positive existence" (McLoughlin 2016, p. 523). So, this ungroundedness gives us a starting point and a reason to "confront the means and methods of law—and to try to invent a potentially new use of the law" (de la Durantaye 2009, p. 346) and to separate political matters from the law. This means that we must seek to construct spaces in which we can play with the law so it does not work in typical ways. To do this, according to McLoughlin (2016), we must focus on the ways in which the inoperativeness of the abstract law is hidden in concrete practices, carried out by Kafkian doorkeepers, messengers, authorities, guardians, and protectors of the law. Put differently, as educators, we must suspend any doorkeeper role that is framed and maintained in a certain way by, for example, the neoliberal order.

The point is not, though, to eradicate sacred orders, such as authorities, but to live with the paradox that results when opposing forces—rule and exception—can occupy our thoughts and demand no resolution. Here, it is important to introduce Agamben's (1998) concept of *bare life*—a life, that is both outside and inside the political sovereign order. This life has two different meanings. First, it means that one loses all political rights—that is, one is deprived of protection by the law, but one is still controlled by the sovereign state apparatuses, as mentioned above. Second, a bare life can be understood as a by-product of the sovereign power. It is a form of life that "constitutes a form of being that inhibits a

space where sovereign power cannot draw lines or further exclusions…. It attacks sovereign power 'from the outside' where the categories of acceptance, inclusion or exclusion no longer hold" (Zevnik 2009, p. 89). Agamben named this form of bare life a "whatever being". The term illustrates that it is a life outside binary logic (i.e., logic installed, for example, by law and norms) and is defined as "not a being"—that is, it is without a particular identity (e.g., gender), belonging (e.g., ethnicity), or capacity (e.g., citizenship) that can be determined in a positive or negative sense (p. 90). Such an uncoded life does not make any sense within the existing social and symbolic order.

By suspending existing utopian (lawful and normative) ideas and orders and setting them free from their normal use, Agamben (1993) invited us to focus on possibilities that may not be possible without such a suspension. Here, it is important to emphasize that we cannot exist in only anarchistic spaces. We also need spaces in which we can rely on different forms of orderly ritualization and regulation. However, such spaces always produce a risk of totalitarian control and surveillance (Zuboff 2019), which is why we must try to sustain a field of tension between freedom and regulation in educational spaces and in life more generally.

Sustaining tension in the contemporary Covid-19 situation is challenging, of course, not only because powerful forces favour either regulation or anarchy. In this situation, we have become accustomed to governance by state of exception. But we might also ask whether what we experience in the pandemic constitutes a fictional or a real state of exception in an Agambian sense. The answer to this question is crucial because, as we have outlined, it indicates the possibility or impossibility of a different kind of thinking and living in during these viral times. Whether the current pandemic constitutes a real or a fictional state of exception depends in part on how we interpret and respond to the situation.

In Europe and North America, for example, it is seemingly expected that education—in its institutional form—will soon return to business as usual. That is perhaps why teachers have been encouraged to act in a customary fashion: prepare lectures and learning activities (now in digital form) and offer them remotely to ensure no student falls behind—the neoliberal logic of learning as production is maintained. From this perspective, we might claim that we find ourselves in a fictional state of exception in which much is still the same—that is, things function in typical neoliberal ways. A survey seeking to support teacher effectiveness during the pandemic was recently circulated across all Canadian provinces. School teachers were asked to respond to questions regarding their online teaching practices (e.g., instructional and assessment strategies, management of children's disruptive behavior, student motivation) and to describe various technological malfunctions as well as their more impressive online teaching performances. The call for participants ended with the now-familiar refrain that "we're all in this together". Meanwhile, on social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), schools and educators compete among themselves, with claims about online teaching prowess and high ratings for student satisfaction.

Nowhere has this business as usual been more "swift and stunning" than in higher education in North America, where the majority of postsecondary institutions shifted to online teaching (Wolcott 2020, para. 5). Informing his readers that Goldman Sachs had already sent out a memo about the possibility of online education for its investors, Wolcott argues that the move to online teaching during the pandemic reflects a desire for education to be commercialized and compelled to go online. Instead, he insisted that it is time for the humanities and social sciences to abandon online efforts and "to step out of the ivory tower and into the community" to show what really matters doing this crisis: "critical thinking, ideas and practices of care, community-making, understanding culture…the meaning of human life" (paras.12–13).

Does the prompt move to online teaching not illustrate a form of fictional state of exception in which the neoliberal social and symbolic order is maintained and where any possibility of tension, disjuncture, or fracture is controlled or eliminated by a kind of user manual response? As educators, we might find ourselves having to be digitally faithful to the predetermined learning mission for which we are made responsible. Nothing seems to have changed—really.

But what if these viral times constituted—or are interpreted as—a real state of exception rather than a fictive one? What if we relate to the current situation in a way that suspends the neoliberal (lawful) order? We might find in the pandemic an opportunity to reclaim (educational) spaces—that is, as zones of indistinction in which the suspension of normal rules and innovative leaps from the neoliberal utopian logic that ordinarily governs education—in which we not only focus on and discuss ethico-political questions related to socio-economic inequality, human vulnerability, and public spirit but do so in ways that playfully embrace paradox and tension.

A "thoughtful lightness": Counter spaces as zones of indistinction

Any refusal to follow the neoliberal user manual does not leave us condemned to meaninglessness or "disenchanted drifting" (Kishik 2012, p. 71). Meaning can be found beyond the neoliberal order. That is why we are invited to consider how we can live and think otherwise during these heavy, even dystopian, times. What aesthetics of existence is offered by a thoughtful lightness?

Agamben (1998) encourages us (as educators) to identify zones of indistinction where questions of ethics and politics are heightened, and where play maintains a generative tension between the law and ethos. Play liquefies that which has become solid and taken for granted. As an act of profanation, play refuses what has been designated sacred (set apart; revered); it frees things up from their proper use (Masschelein and Simons 2013)—that is, from what has become designated as lawful or appropriate. Learning, for example, becomes about something other or more than achievement scores on standardized tests. The point is not to eradicate the sacred but to deactivate the power associated with it, even temporarily. The thing that is returned to common use of all of us is profane and free of any connotation of the sacred; it exists, as it were, in a zone of indistinction.

In zones of indistinction, we take a second look at the sovereign acts of separation that deny relations between things (e.g., life/death; equality/inequality; inside/outside) and we witness the interval, or the in-between, of those disavowed relations (Lewis 2007). In his retelling of the story of the kiss of the frog prince, Agamben illustrates how any attempt to separate not only "humanity from animality but also culture from nature, form from matter, idea from fact, before from after" (Kishik 2012, p. 60) can be undermined. To witness the in-between relation, by keeping a distance from both sides of the solidifying bipolar oppositions and immersing ourselves in the intervening whirlpool of difficult ethical and political questions and complications that undermine easy dualisms, is to restore our capacity to respond to the pressing demands of our time. Before responding, however, we encounter and engage thought at a standstill, "immobile and immediate" (p. 53). As such, we can live with the paradox that results when opposing forces (e.g., rule and exception, sacred and profane, rite and play) can occupy our thoughts and demand no resolution. Significantly, the thinker—a whatever being—is freed, temporarily, from the weight of habitual thought, becoming conscious of the traditions that shape one's thinking and living, while not being ensnared and restricted by them.

A thoughtful lightness is a concept, a form of thinking, that is worthy of the pandemic because it can enable an understanding of the event as both apocalyptic and revelatory (Bryant 2020). In what follows, we illustrate what it might mean to engage thoughtfully and lightly—to play—with three binary oppositions (i.e., inside/outside, equality/inequality, and life/death) that structure reactions to and conversations about Covid-19 and reflect particular ways of living and thinking.

Inside/outside: Keep out!

A recent news report (Boynton 2020) showed how police arrested 14 homeless advocates who occupied a Vancouver school to demand more housing amid the Covid-19 pandemic. "We're just trying to find a place that's safe to go", one activist explained, "…there's not anything being done for the people on the street" (para. 4). "Police were met with hostile and combative suspects inside the school who, at one point, threw wooden pallets and other large pieces of wood at officers", the police spokesperson stated (para. 8). The spokesperson clarified that no officers were injured "despite the aggression and violent behaviour of the suspects" (para. 9). In a public statement issued shortly after the incident— "the school occupation"—Vancouver's mayor expressed "sympathy for homeless populations seeking security during the pandemic" and promised "detailed plans for the hundreds of hotel spaces and other shelter beds" (para. 22). Boynton, the reporter, concluded the news items by stating, "The activists had said the school takeover was intended to send a message to [the Mayor] to open up the city's hotels to the homeless" (para. 25).

Homeless activists go to a school, thereby suspending the state order not to do so. Asserting the school as a safe place (when the state claimed otherwise) in which those without homes could shelter, maintaining social distance, activists put schools to a new use. But did they not know that schools are not shelters and that the distinction is not just a matter of architecture? As sites of socialization and qualification, schools operate for those inside society. Shelters, on the other hand, accommodate those on the outside—those who refuse actualization within dominant (neoliberal) frames of achievement and success, and as a result, are deemed the "most contemptible" objects of society (de la Durantaye 2009, p. 206). Shelters effectively cut the homeless off from society (see Adelman 2016). In violating the distinction between school and shelter, the activists drew attention to the leftover, or the remnants, of the binary of inside/outside the political order—that is, human beings who are compelled to live a bare life on the streets of Vancouver, devoid of protection by but subjected to the law.

One might deem the intellectual freedom of the homeless activist to think as not unlike that of the refugee—as "a fool's freedom for nothing they think matters anyhow" (Arendt 1973, p. 296). The homeless are not deprived of the right to think but rather of the right of opinion. Reduced to the substratum of personhood, the homeless activist is neither fully alive/legitimate/inside nor dead/dismissed/outside but is committed to a half-life haunted by the possibility that they will soon be found wanting and banished (Clarke and Phelan 2017). Vancouver activists asserted their right to have an opinion but were promptly charged for their "disruptive" behaviour. Positioned as "suspect", their rejection, disqualification, and exclusion were justified—again. So while they lost their political right of opinion, they were still controlled by the sovereign state apparatuses.

The paradoxical interlinking of the sacred and the taboo, the inside and outside, and *bios* (political life) and *zoe* (biological life) in the political order evident in the foregoing news story can also be applied to students' lives as well as life under the ban more

generally: "Life is held in suspension, neither inside nor outside the *polis*, neither fully alive nor dead" (Lewis 2006, p. 161); bare life emerges as life exposed to death, especially in the form of sovereign violence—be it issued by state medical officers, city mayors, or presidents. Bare life is not natural, biological life but that which emerges when natural life is abandoned to the power of sovereignty and the state. Bare life is therefore, paradoxically, a highly politicized form of natural life.

Equality/inequality: We're all in the same boat!

The coronavirus is "the great equalizer", Madonna, the singer, proclaimed to her fans from a milky bath sprinkled with rose petals. In the clip posted on Instagram and Twitter, she continued: "What's terrible about it is that it's made us all equal in many ways and what's wonderful about it is that it's made us all equal in many ways" (Owosye 2020, para. 1). Apparently, Covid-19 "doesn't care about how rich you are, how famous you are, how funny you are, how smart you are, where you live, how old you are, what amazing stories you can tell" (para. 3), the singer reflected. Žižek (2020, p. 42) seemed to agree, as he declared that the "virus is democratic, and it doesn't distinguish between poor and rich or between the statesman and an ordinary citizen". We may all be in the same boat, as Žižek and Madonna suggest, but that does not necessarily mean we are on the same level in the boat or have the same privileges and the same chances of surviving. We might be witnessing a 21st-century version of the Titanic hierarchy.

How do we begin to reconsider the sacred myth that we are all in this together—and the relation between rich/poor, Black/White, privileged/precariat it disavows—in the statements of the singer and the scholar, when it is juxtaposed with a news headline detailing the "Racial divide of Covid-19 patients in US grows even starker as new data suggests disproportionate black patients" (Morrison 2020)? Some political leaders claim that the racial demographic of the virus reflects "the systemic policies" that have rendered African Americans "far more vulnerable to the virus, including inequity in access to health care and economic opportunity" (para. 1). While the virus might very well be "democratic" (metaphorically speaking), as Žižek (2020) suggested, the societies through which it is spreading are not. It has become visible how, for example, the rich (the privileged) can stay in quarantine in gated communities or work from home in safe isolation, while the poor (the precariat) have to work outside the home, just so they can make a living as essential workers, and thereby are at risk of being infected.

What forms of pseudo-democracy exist that allow radical forms of inequality to be (re) produced in such ways that we can be in the same boat and still live in totally separate societies? As the Danish philosopher Lars-Henrik Schmidt argues, the Covid-19 situation requires that we all show public spirit, because we all are globally connected (Gerstenberg 2020). Again, it is difficult to show such spirit if we are not experiencing that we are part of the same world—that is, if the differences between us continue to escalate.

Some argue, however, that there are differences between us that must be taken into consideration, but perhaps not in the way we alluded to above. Take, for example, what the moral philosopher Peter Singer did in an interview when he stated that we must not overlook the potential costs of containing the coronavirus (Bennike 2020). Singer used a famous example to make his point clear. When the 18-month-old Jessica McClure fell into a well in Texas in 1987, it was wrong to spend so many resources to save her, according to Singer. Instead, the money could have been spent more wisely if it had been sent to Africa or India, where the same amount could have saved many more lives. Singer argued that we should prioritize lives by calculating what it will cost to save one life—for example,

what saving one life in the United States would cost, compared with what saving one life in Africa would cost. The philosopher's reasoning suggests that life is calculable according to some abstract formula, and there is little reason to bring suffering into the equation. Paradoxically, because some lives are literally worth less within market capitalism, it is possible and necessary to save more of them. In fact, given the reliance of the global economy on sweatshop workers in India, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia, for example, the argument that it is more economically beneficial to save many lives than to save one makes some sense. Some economists have argued that from the point of view of sweatshop workers, "The misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all" because "the wages and conditions in sweatshops might be appalling, but they are an improvement on people's less visible rural poverty" (Blattman and Dercon 2017, paras. 1–2).

Should human worth be measured in economic terms, represented as a statistic, and compared abstractly? Most of us, we speculate, would answer no. Yet, within the neoliberal logic that pervades educational institutions, we persist in doing so. Would we want to live in a world in which the child in Texas was left to die for reasons based solely on cost and pure calculation? Again, we guess not. But why do we still live and die in a world that tolerates sweatshops? Formulating such questions draws our attention to the absurdities that characterize our lives and provokes thought about our intentional and unintentional complicity in their reproduction.

Life/death: Stay home, snitch, and save lives!

In London, Ontario, Canada, "city officials have set up new ways for residents to report businesses and individuals who aren't following the rules around Covid-19" (Taccone 2020, para. 1). Working with the police service and a local health unit, citizens can use a new phone number and email address to report violations of provincial and municipal orders, such as "activities at closed outdoor structures including playgrounds" and "individuals not following self-isolation orders" (para. 6). Everyone is responsible for slowing the spread of the virus, according to the division manager for the city's Corporate Security and Emergency Management Department. "Despite every effort to reinforce the importance of social and physical distancing", the manager reported, "we continue to see people who aren't paying attention" (para. 8).

The foregoing account reminds us of Agamben's (2020) recent observation that it seems that "people no longer believe in anything other than a bare biological existence, which must be saved at any cost", but "the fear of losing one's life", he continues, "can only serve as the foundation of tyranny" (para. 3). Esposito (2020, para. 3) similarly argues that while the "first task this wretched virus entrusts us with…is to stay alive…we must also defend the second life…life with others, for others, through others". The challenge of *snitch lines* is that the spirit of such measures does not allow and indeed forbids a second life. Snitch lines pit us against one another (Gardiner 2020).

In the interval between life and death, there is so much to believe in, to value, and to lose. But now that everyone is menacing—either as informant or virus transmitter—are we ignoring that everyone was dangerous all along? How do we imagine that we can return to some second life after the pandemic? Gardiner (2020) asks what it might mean to comply during these viral times: Is there a necessary distinction between consent and obedience? Recalling Arendt (1973), Gardiner cautions her readers, "It is not appropriate for adults to obey leaders, to go along with whatever is asked. Rather what we do is consent…when we agree with a leader's actions" (para. 3). The question is whether obedience, as compliance

without thought and judgment, has a place or if indeed it is a harbinger of Agamben's tyranny. As Gardiner expressed her discomfort with snitch lines, she asked how much compliance is too much. Perhaps in some pseudo-democracy, as discussed earlier, or more likely in an autocracy, snitch lines are signs of our civic responsibility.

Concluding thoughts

> *Thought, for me, is just that: the courage of hopelessness. And is that not the height of optimism?*

<div align="right">Agamben (2014, para. 8)</div>

We began and are ending this article with a quotation by Giorgio Agamben. Both quotations embody the tensionality (between hope and desperation) so characteristic of his thinking—a form of ethico-political thought that reflects our inherently conflicted relationship to life and to the world (Ruti 2014). Kishik's (2012) characterization of Agamben's thinking as thoughtful lightness (a playful thinking in the interval) captures something profoundly educational in that it does not fill us and our students with false or empty hope—a form of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011). Instead, it invites an encounter with a world full of challenging ethico-political questions about how we might coexist (i.e., somewhere between desperation and hope, between life and death) and how we might, even temporarily, imagine living somewhere between sacred law and profane responses; between solidifying myths and liquefying play; and between hot events, such as the pandemic, and cold structures, such as stay-at-home orders. The time of Covid-19 underscores the rhythm of life and the time of study—full of potential but with no guarantee of actualization. Immersed in questions about how we live together, we see ourselves for what we are: incomplete, unredeemable, remnants.

A way to interpret the Covid-19 situation is as a real state of exception in which spaces can be opened for thinking, imagining, and handling education in new and other ways. For example, we might create a place in which we, as educators, together with our students, can play with and suspend the law that legitimizes neoliberal-infected curriculum plans that are orientated only toward predetermined learning objectives. This may allow us to address and discuss fundamental (but often neglected) education issues related to what it means to be a singular as well as a social human being and what it means that we all are interconnected to others, both locally and globally, in different as well as in similar ways.

We have attempted to illustrate a distinct way of thinking that Covid-19 renders possible if interpreted as a real state of exception in which neoliberal business as usual is suspended. What is distinctive is its preoccupation with indistinction—that is, its preoccupation with the complication and ethico-political messiness that lies in between (e.g., a contest that cannot be resolved, a problem with no solution, a question without an answer, a dystopia without utopia). The interval or gap reflects a pause wherein the potential to interrupt utopian neoliberal thinking is palpable and user manuals have no role to play, for the moment. Kishik (2012) suggests that living or thinking at a standstill means not trying to "be up to date with whatever goes on…not to [be] the one who perfectly coincides with the present" (p. 52) but to be slightly out of sync with one's time. Being out of sync means suspending the urgency to identify and deal with perceived problems in typical ways and opening ourselves up to new ways of thinking. Let us end with an example that illustrates how the Covid-19 situation can provide us with an opening for new reflections on and conversations about, for example, fairness in education.

On May 9, 2020, Ireland's Leaving Certificate—an uninterrupted national matriculation examination for well over 100 years—was cancelled due to Covid-19. It will be replaced by teachers' predictive grade calculations, calibrated with school performance history (termed school *profiling*), and national averages. This is not a unique decision but one that has been made in other countries, such as Denmark and the United Kingdom. While many would characterize national examinations as part and parcel of a barbaric curriculum by which students are ranked and pitted against one another in their efforts to enter university programs, vocational apprenticeships, and the job market, there has never been a wide-ranging public conversation in Ireland or Denmark, for example, about the matriculation examinations. Their fairness, via blind review, as markers of students' intellectual development, progress, and achievement has been their assumed value. In recent days, however, ethico-political questions about the fairness and unfairness of predictive calculations and school profiling—as opposed to the national examination—have been raised by students, parents, and politicians from across socioeconomic classes. Educators are being asked to make judgments, but fears abound about the nature of their bias, especially with regard to students from poor and working-class neighborhoods. So, while in neoliberal fashion, education and achievement continue to be conflated, we are witnessing a slightly different kind of public conversation about education. The relationship between equity and inequity in the context of schooling, formerly erased by the myth of fairness and the rite of the standardized examination, is being highlighted. These conversations enable consideration of how abstract ideas, such as fairness, are manifested in concrete educational practices, which might reveal, for example, how unfair fairness can be.

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