

The coronavirus pandemic is a world *perezhivanie*

The Black Plague which swept across Eurasia in the 1340s created a labour shortage which set off a process which over the next 300 years brought an end to feudalism as the dominant social system across Europe. By the time of the First World War, bourgeois development had created a world market, tying almost every corner of the world into a unified system of needs and labour. In a sense a 'world subject' could then be said to be 'in itself'. That is, a 'world subject' did not exist but a sufficient objective unification of the world had been achieved such that the potential for a world subject existed. A world subject was implicit.

The First World War gave us the 1919 Flu – spuriously called the 'Spanish Flu' – and the Russian Revolution and changed relations between the classes forever. The Second World War not only set off world-transforming events such as the rolling National Liberation Movements, the Civil Rights and Women's movements, but created transnational institutions such as the United Nations, WHO, the World Bank, the European Union, and so on, whose actuality may be constantly called into question, but nonetheless exist. Both these events are exemplars of world-transforming events, what I will call *perezhivaniya*.

Events such as the 9/11 attacks together with the US responses to it, and the GFC (Global Financial Crisis) together with the responses to it, also produced important changes in how the world works, albeit incomplete and overwhelmingly negative in their impact on the lives of billions of ordinary people.

Note that none of these experiences were world-transforming in themselves. The transformation came in the *response* by governments and economic actors to the initial event. Note further that these events are not properly called 'events' (like a volcano or even a traffic accident) because they were *activities*, something people *did*, not something which simply *happened to* people. Likewise, the aftermath was not a mere *effect* but the active *response* of people to the foregoing events, by means of which the existing institutions 'absorbed' and 'processed' and 'dealt with' what had happened.

I am convinced that the coronavirus pandemic – understood together with all the various responses to the pandemic both immediate and in the aftermath, if indeed there comes a time which could be called an 'aftermath' – is such a world-changing experience. In particular, I grasp this experience as a *perezhivanie*.

'*Perezhivanie*' is a Russian word which has no English equivalent which fully conveys the breadth and depth of the meaning in Russian language and culture.* Formally speaking, *perezhivanie* means 'an experience'. But there are two things about how this is understood in Russia generally, and in Vygotsky's Cultural Psychology in particular which are not conveyed in the English expression 'an experience'.

Firstly, as in Hegel and Marx and as John Dewey explained, 'an experience' is an *active* episode of a person's interaction with a challenging situation. Etymologically, '*perezhivanie*' is equivalent to 'survive' in English. When people write their autobiography, they pick out from the hundreds of thousands of hours of their life certain moments or episodes (sometimes very extended ones) which they survived, times when they made life-changing, personality-forming choices, situations which they handled and which forever changed not only the way they saw the world but (and this is important) *the way the world saw them*, or when a parent or significant

* See [Translating *perezhivanie* into English](#), MCA 23(4), November 2016.

other (especially in the case of children) or maybe the justice system confronted them with something they had done and forced them to take note of it, reflect on it. Those moments in life which *changed* them and made them who they are.

Secondly, as the ancient Greek dramatists knew and as Freud believed, it is not the experience as such which changes the person – it is well-known that the most traumatic events, such as a person's experiences in war or early childhood abuse can be 'repressed' or even pass unnoticed. Some people pass through a war and come out the other side quite unaffected. But in general, after the situation has passed, people reflect on it, maybe on their own in periods of quiet reflection, or together with a trusted other, but always and importantly in and through changing their relationship with those around them. Freud called this process 'catharsis' by analogy with watching a drama on the stage as a means of reflecting on one's own experience, and the medical practice of purging poison from the body. Catharsis is the active process of observing, working over, reflecting upon, processing and 'absorbing' an experience. It is the actual *work* of dealing with what happened and how you responded. It is through catharsis that the person is transformed, rather than the event itself. The event may be momentary, but the catharsis may take years. The *perezhivanie* is this whole process. It has a beginning a middle and an end. It is a single whole. It is the series of such *perezhivaniya* which makes the person.

Perezhivanie entered the English language through the study of Vygotsky's Cultural Psychology and correspondingly it is associated with the study of personal development in both adults and children, but especially children. Through this study a lot has been learnt about the formation of the personality and the various aspects of the concept of *perezhivanie* relevant to personal development. But it is not essentially a concept limited to personal development. It is the process of *subject formation*.

As Hegel said: the person is the series of their actions. A. N. Leontyev studied the formation of the personality in terms of a set of commitments to practices (activities) among which different life-projects take a leading role at different life stages, as the personality passes through critical periods. We could express this to say that the development of the person is the *work* of making the person, the self-transformation of the activity of a human being. And the same applies to any project, a.k.a., self-conscious social practice or activity.

A subject (and here I am talking indifferently about a social subject or a person) does not come into being *gradually*. It does go through periods of effectively gradual development in which it gradually adapts to its situation. But such periods of gradual adaptation are punctuated by periods of crisis which are relatively sudden and in which the subject does not simply adapt to their situation, but *changes* their situation. It is such critical periods of development which truly make the person by changing the world around them and their place in it. There comes a time in the life of every subject when it simply cannot go on living in the old way.

I am not here making a metaphor from ontogeny up to socio-cultural genesis. Both are instances of the same process. But personal development gives us the opportunity to study subject formation in a way which is more difficult when the subject in question is a self-conscious social practice or an entire world-historic formation.

It has been objected that the coronavirus cannot be a world-*perezhivanie* because every country, every social class, every ethnic group, experiences this differently and will process it differently. This is not an objection but simply a characterisation of the

work at hand. In the infant child, in general, each of the basic psychological functions is based in a biologically fixed neurological apparatus. But in the process of subject formation, these separate functions are combined into new 'higher' psychological functions which mobilise the entire body and the surrounding culture to boot. The bundle of flesh with its various reflexes is not a subject, but by virtue of sharing the same body and being treated as an infant human being by those around it, the infant grows into a subject, a person. Likewise a world.

What is unfolding around us is such an array of separate activity systems – the social practices of the various nations, classes and communities all subject to the same pandemic. But all see and learn about how the pandemic is going in other countries and in neighbouring suburbs and in the homes of our immediate neighbours. And we learn and act accordingly, and where possible collaborate.

Much has been written about what is going on. Neoliberal governments are handing out tens of billions of dollars, some approaching a universal basic income, nationalising health facilities and ending the disciplining of welfare recipients. Progressive leaders are acting as dictators, and people cannot take a stroll in cities which have been Meccas of freedom. Our heroes, our essential workers, are no longer soldiers, but nurses, teachers, hospital cleaners, delivery drivers and check-out workers in the supermarkets. And this at a time when the interbank lending rate is zero or 0.25% p.a. – the self-expansion of capital has ground to a halt. Governments can afford to pay everyone's wages for a year at a cost of a couple of dollars a week in interest. The world turned upside down – to use Christopher Hill's term for the English Revolution of the 1640s.

And keep in mind, at the time of writing, scientists never have developed a vaccine for SARS or MERS; only 0.3% of the world's population has yet had the virus and as soon as lockdown measures are removed, a single case can generate an exponential growth of infection. And if we are still in a pandemic in a year's time, the virus might well have mutated enough to re-infect those who have had the virus and acquired natural immunity.

All the myths of 21st century capitalism have been exploded. We cannot go on living this way. Liberal freedom is as bankrupt as authoritarian, anti-science populism. The world is sick and it wants a serious consideration of its condition. The reality show is over. Thousands of formative experiments are getting underway. The fragile global climate has been given a reprieve by the termination of industry and air travel, but it cannot escape notice that the people who were warning us about the climate emergency – Science – are the people we turned to when our lives were put in *immediate* risk, albeit a less serious risk than a climate disaster poses.

The world subject just barely exists at the moment, but the global means of communication and travel give us a shared body, and the climate emergency reminds us that we share an ecosystem. We have every reason to expect a world transformation in the months and years ahead. But quite honestly, I have no idea what the future will bring. But there is every reason for optimism, and the world is crying out for Science and an end to bull-shit jobs and bull-shit leadership.

Don't expect a fully mature socialist world government to emerge from this chaos. Let us just hope that this infant world-subject can enter childhood at least, with many difficult experiences ahead of it, and in need of an education, a self-education.

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13 April 2020