

## The coronavirus pandemic is a world *perezhivanie*

Andy Blunden, April 2020

The Black Plague which swept across Eurasia in the 1340s created a labour shortage. This labour shortage 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. At that point, a world subject was implicit. It could be said to be 'in itself'. That is, a 'world subject' did not yet exist but a sufficient objective unification of the world had been achieved such that the potential for a world subject existed.

The First World War gave us the 1919 Flu pandemic and the Russian Revolution. Relations between the classes were changed forever. The Second World War not only set off world-transforming events such as rolling National Liberation Movements, the Civil Rights and Women's movements. Transnational institutions such as the United Nations, WHO, GATT, the World Bank, the European Union, and so on, were created. Their authority may be constantly under challenge, but nonetheless they continue to exist. Both world wars are exemplars of world-transforming events, what I will call world *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 immediate impact on the lives of billions of ordinary people. 9/11 and the GFC were not in themselves world-transforming, but were triggering events,. The transformation came in the *responses* by governments and other actors to the initial events. Events like the 9/11 attacks, are not properly called 'events' (like a volcano or a traffic accident) because they were *activities*, things people *did*, not things 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 processed and 'dealt with' what had been done.

I am convinced that the coronavirus pandemic – understood together with the various responses 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 see this experience as a *perezhivanie* (see Chapter 4, this volume).

Formally speaking, *perezhivanie* means 'an experience'. But '*perezhivanie*' is a Russian word which has no English equivalent which fully conveys the breadth and depth of its meaning in Russian language and culture. 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, 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 (or failed to handle) and which forever changed not just how they saw the world but (and this is important) *how the world saw them*, or when a parent or significant other (especially in the case of children) or maybe the justice system confronted them with something they had done and forced them to take reflect on it. Those experiences which *changed* them and made them who they are.

Secondly, as the ancient Greek dramatists knew, it is not the experience as such which changes the person. As John Dewey (1939) explained, 'an experience' is an *active* episode of a person's interaction with a challenging situation. It is well-known that the most traumatic events, such as early childhood abuse, can be 'repressed' or passively accepted. Some people pass through a war and remember only the comradeship and solidarity. 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. However, *perezhivanie* always entails the subject changing their relationship with the world. 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 the catharsis that the person is transformed, rather than the event itself. The event may be momentary, but the catharsis may take years. This is what *perezhivanie* means: 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.

Life is a series of *perezhivaniya* with long periods in between of gradual adaptation to the new you, solving the problems that life is throwing up, until the next *perezhivanie* changes your relation to the world.

*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. Through this study a lot has been learnt about the formation of the personality and the various aspects of *perezhivanie* relevant to personal development. But it is not essentially a concept limited to personal development. It is the process of *subject formation*. In this case, we are talking about the development of a world subject.

As Hegel (1821) said: the person is the series of their actions. A.N. Leontyev studied the formation of the personality in terms 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 human activity. And the same applies to any project, a.k.a., self-conscious social practice or activity.

A subject (be that a person or a project, movement, enterprise or institution) does not come into being and mature *gradually*. It goes through periods of effectively gradual development in which it 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 actively *transforms* their *situation*. It is in such critical periods of development that the work of self-creation is done, by changing themselves and their place in the world around them. There comes a time in every life when you simply cannot go on living in the old way. In this case, we are talking about a complete realignment of the world system. It must be said though that *perezhivanie* is *work* because the outcome is indeterminate. The dramatic experience which may lead to development, may also destroy the subject forever. Survival and a life-affirming recovery is not guaranteed.

I am not here making a *metaphor* from personal development up to socio-cultural development. Both are instances of the same human process. Group *perezhivaniya* have been studied in classrooms, for instance. But personal development gives us the opportunity to study subject formation in a way which is easier than when the subject in question is an institution 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, every person, experiences covid *differently* and will process it differently. This is not an objection but simply a characterisation of the work at hand. In the infant child, each of the basic psychological functions is located 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 its human body and being treated as a human being by those around it, the infant grows into a subject, makes itself into a person. Likewise a world.

My claim is that this pandemic may be the traumatic experience in which the potential for a world subject is realised. Just as a personality not only shapes itself but comes into being through the work of surviving these challenging experiences, the world-subject, at the moment still only a potential, can give birth to itself in the time ahead – solving the existential problems facing the whole world with the participation, in one way or another, of everyone. Because the world cannot survive any other way now.

What is unfolding around us is an array of separate activity systems – the social practices of the various nations, classes and communities are all subject to the same pandemic. But we all *see* and learn about how

the pandemic is going in other countries and in neighbouring suburbs and in the homes of our neighbours. And we learn and act accordingly, and where possible collaborate.

Neoliberal governments are handing out tens of billions of dollars, some approaching a Universal Basic Income, nationalising health facilities and some ending the disciplining of welfare recipients. Some progressive leaders are acting like military commanders, and people can no longer take a stroll in cities which have been Meccas of freedom. Our heroes, our essential workers, are nurses, teachers, hospital cleaners, delivery drivers and supermarket check-out workers. And this while the interbank lending rate in the OECD countries is zero or 0.1% p.a., access to the proceeds of capital is limited to those who are already wealthy – in the absence of new investment, existing stocks are simply up-valued. Governments in these countries can afford to pay everyone's wages for a year at a cost of a couple of dollars a week in interest. It's the world turned upside down.

And at the time of writing, scientists never have developed a vaccine for SARS or MERS, and no-one knows if the vaccine will prevent transmission or how long immunity will last. Only 1% of the world's population has yet had COVID-19, and the loss of trust in authority will mean that millions will not take the vaccine when it comes, and some will never get access to it. 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 it and acquired natural immunity, and we still *don't know* what the long term effects of COVID -19 are going to be. And there will undoubtedly be more pandemics to come.

We cannot go on living this way. Liberal freedom is as bankrupt as authoritarian, anti-science populism. The world is sick and needs fixing. The reality show is over. The fragile global climate has been given a slight reprieve by the termination of 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. In fact, it is the same uncontrolled destruction of nature which is at the root of the pandemic, and which is destroying all the conditions for human life.

The world subject just barely exists at the moment, but the global means of communication, travel, food supply and virus transmission and the climate emergency remind us that we share *one world*. We have every reason to expect a world transformation in the months and years ahead. Thousands of formative experiments are underway. I have no idea what the future will bring. All the myths of 21st century capitalism have been exploded. 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 its childhood, with many difficult experiences ahead, and in need of a self-education.

This is my conclusion: like life, history is a series of upheavals in which we remake ourselves all over again. The world is much more grown up than we were after World War One and World War Two. We are like the stropky 13-year-old who doesn't really know much but is discovering her/his new body, how little the adults seem to know and ready to take on adult responsibilities. So turbulent times lie ahead. But the world is simply going to have to learn, and change how things are done. The pandemic is already rewriting every rule book we have.

## References

Blunden, A. (2016). Translating *perezhivanie* into English, *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 23(4).