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**CLASS CASUALTIES:**  
*DISAPPEARING YOUTH IN THE AGE OF GEORGE W. BUSH*

Ironically, children are unsafe in public schools today not because of exposure to drugs and violence, but because they have lost their constitutional protections under the Fourth Amendment. —Randall Beger, 2002: 127

There is a war being waged in the United States. It is a war being waged on the domestic front that feeds off the general decay of democratic politics and reinforces what neoliberals are more than pleased to celebrate as the death of the social. The enemy for conservative forces is "big government." And yet, as Kevin Baker (2003) recently pointed out in *Harper's Magazine*: "Since the advent of Reagan and the current Republican hegemony, the federal government has by almost all objective measures become larger, more intrusive, more coercive, less accountable, and more deeply indebted than ever before. It has more weapons, more soldiers, more police, more spies, more prisons" (38-39). But, given that the current administration has such a massive government when it comes to the military, law enforcement, deficit spending, control over public schooling, etc., this is really a war against the welfare state and the social contract itself—this is a war against the notion that everyone should have access to decent education, health care, employment, and other public services. The following quotes signal what is at stake in such an unprecedented attack on the democratic social contract. The first quote comes from Texas state representative, Debbie Riddle. The second comes from Grover Norquist, the president of Americans for Tax Reform and arguably Washington's leading right-wing strategist.

Where did this idea come from that everybody deserves free education, free medical care, free whatever? It comes from Moscow...from Russia. It comes straight out of the pit of hell.

My goal is to cut government in half in twenty-five years, to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub.

As these quotes suggest, Norquist and his ilk target some parts of government for downsizing a little more energetically than others. They are most concerned with dismantling the parts of the public sector that serve the social and democratic needs of the non-affluent majority of the American populace. The parts that provide "free" service and welfare to the privileged and opulent minority and dole out punishment to

the poor are reserved from that great domestic war tool—the budgetary axe. Hence, democracy has never appeared more fragile and endangered in the United States than in this time of civic and political crisis. This is especially true for young people. While a great deal has been written about the budget busting costs of the invasion of Iraq and the passing of new anti-terrorist laws in the name of "homeland security" that make it easier to undermine those basic civil liberties that protect individuals against invasive and potentially repressive government actions, there is a thunderous silence on the part of many critics and academics regarding the ongoing insecurity and injustice suffered by young people in this country. As a result, the state is increasingly resorting to repression and punitive social policies at home and abroad.

1.2 The "war" on working-class youth and youth of color is evident not only in the disproportionate numbers of such youth who provide the fodder for Bush's preventive war policy, it is also evident in the silent war at home, especially since the Iraqi war and the war against terrorism are being financed from cuts in domestic funding on health care, children's education, and other public services. The class and racial war being waged against young people is most evident in the ways in which schools are being militarized with the addition of armed guards, barbed-wired security fences, and "lock down drills." As educators turn over their responsibility for school safety to the police, the new security culture in public schools has turned them into "learning prisons" (Chaddock, 1999: 15). It would be a tragic mistake for those of us on the left either to separate the war in Iraq from the many problems Americans, young people in particular, face at home, or fail to recognize how war is being waged by this government on multiple fronts.

1.3 Slavoj Zizek (2003) claims that the "true target of the 'war on terror' is American society itself—the disciplining of its emancipatory excesses" (28). He is partly right. The Bush "permanent war doctrine" is not just aimed at alleged terrorists or the 'excesses of democracy', but also against disposable populations in the homeland, whether they be young black men who inhabit our nation's jails or those unemployed workers who have been abandoned by the flight of capital, as well as those levels of the government that provide any semblance of a social contract for the people. The financing of the war in Iraq, buttressed by what Dick Cheney calls the concept of "never ending war," results not only in a bloated and obscene military budget but also economic and tax policies that are financially bankrupting the states, destroying public education, and plundering public services. These multiple attacks on the poor and much needed public services must be contested by an expanding political and social vision that refuses the cynicism and sense of powerlessness that accompanies the destruction of social goods, the corporatization of the media, the dismantling of workers' rights, and the incorporation of intellectuals. Against this totalitarian onslaught, progressives need a language of critique, possibility, and action—one that connects diverse struggles, uses theory as a resource, and defines politics as not merely critical but also as an intervention into public life. We need a language that relates the discourse of war to an attack on democracy at home and abroad, and we need to use that language in a way that captures the needs, desires, histories, and experiences that shape people's daily lives. Similarly, as democratic institutions are downsized and public goods are offered up for corporate plunder, those of us who take seriously the related issues of equality, human rights, justice, and freedom face the crucial challenge of formulating a notion of the political suitable for addressing the urgent problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—a politics that as Zygmunt Bauman (2002) argues "never stops criticizing the level of justice already achieved [while] seeking more justice and better justice" (54).

1.4 As the wars abroad and at home are interrelated, this suggests that the concept of war has taken a distinctly different turn in the new millennium. These days, wars are rarely waged between nations. Instead, wars are more frequently waged against drugs, terrorists, crime, immigrants, labor rights, and a host of other open-ended referents that have become synonymous with public disorder. War no longer needs to be ratified by congress since it is now waged at various levels of government in diverse forms that escape the need for official approval. War has become a permanent condition adopted by a nation-state that is largely defined by its repressive functions in the face of its refusal and increasing political powerlessness to regulate corporate power, provide social investments for the populace, and guarantee a

measure of social freedom. As a permanent state of politics, war and its accompanying culture of fear are now, in part, a response to the impotence of public institutions to improve conditions of radical insecurity and the threat of an uncertain future.

1.5 Wars are almost always legitimated in order to make the world safe for "our children's future" but the rhetoric belies how their future is often denied by the acts of aggression put into place by a range of state agencies and institutions that operate on a war footing. This would include the horrible effects of the militarization of schools, the use of the criminal justice system to redefine social issues such as poverty and homelessness as criminal violations, and the consequential rise of a prison-industrial complex as a way to contain disposable populations such as youth of color who are poor and marginalized. Under the rubric of war, security, and anti-terrorism, children are "disappeared" from the most basic social spheres that once provided the conditions for a sense of agency and possibility, as they are rhetorically excised from any discourse about the future. What is so troubling about the current historical moment is that youth no longer symbolize the future. And yet, any discourse about the future has to begin with the issue of youth because more than any other group they embody the projected dreams, desires, and commitment of a society's obligations to the future. This echoes a classical principle of modern democracy in which youth both symbolized society's responsibility to the future and offered a measure of its progress. For most of this century, Americans embraced as a defining feature of politics the idea that all levels of government should assume a large measure of responsibility for providing the resources, social provisions, security, and modes of education that simultaneously offer young people a future and the possibility of expanding the meaning and depth of a substantive democracy. In many respects, youth not only registered symbolically the importance of modernity's claim to progress, they also affirmed the centrality of the liberal, democratic tradition of the social contract in which adult responsibility was mediated through a willingness to fight for the rights of children, enact reforms that invested in their future, and provide the educational conditions necessary for them to make use of the freedoms they have while learning how to be critical citizens. Within such a political project, democracy was linked to the well-being of youth, and the status of how a society imagined democracy and its future was contingent on how it viewed its responsibility towards future generations.

1.6 Yet, at the dawn of the new millennium it is not at all clear that we believe any longer in youth, the future, or the social contract—even in its minimalist version. Since the Reagan/Thatcher revolution of the 1980s, we have been told that there is no such thing as society and, indeed, following that nefarious pronouncement, institutions committed to public welfare have been disappearing ever since. Rather than being cherished as a symbol of the future, youth are now seen as a threat to be feared and a problem to be contained. A seismic change has taken place in which youth are now being framed as both a generation of suspects and a threat to public life. If youth once symbolized the moral necessity to address a range of social and economic ills, they are now largely portrayed as the source of most of society's problems. Hence, youth now constitute a crisis that has less to do with improving the future than with denying it. A concern for children is the defining absence in most dominant discourses about the future and the obligations this implies for adult society. To witness the abdication of adult responsibility to children, we need look no further than the current state of children in America.

1.7 Instead of providing a decent education to poor young people, American society offers them the growing potential of being incarcerated; buttressed by the fact that the U.S. is one of the only countries in the world that sentences minors to death and spends "three times more on each incarcerated citizen than on each public school pupil" (Wokusch, 2002: 1). Instead of guaranteeing them food, decent health care, and shelter, we serve them more standardized tests; instead of providing them with vibrant public spheres, we offer them a commercialized culture in which consumerism is the only obligation of citizenship. But in the hard currency of human suffering, children pay a heavy price in the richest democracy in the world: 12.2 million children live below the poverty line, more than 16 million are at the low end of the income scale, and 9.2 million children lack health insurance (Clemetson, 2003). On top of that, millions lack affordable child care and decent early childhood education, in many states more money is being spent on prison

construction than on education, and the infant mortality rate in the United States is the highest of any other industrialized nation. *New York Times* op-ed columnist Bob Herbert (2003) reports that in Chicago "there are nearly 100,000 young people, ages 16 to 24, who are out of work, out of school and all but out of hope.... Nationwide...the figure is a staggering 5.5 million and growing" (A35). The magnitude of this crisis can be seen in the fact that in some cities, such as the District of Columbia, the child poverty rate is as high as 45 percent (Childhood Poverty Research Brief 2, 2001). When broken down along racial categories, the figures become even more despairing. For example: "In 2000, the poverty rate for African Americans was 22 percent, basically double the rate for the entire nation....In Chicago the poverty rate for blacks is 29.4 percent and only 8.2 for whites. The poverty rate for black children is 40 percent, compared to 8 percent for white kids" (Street, 2003).

1.8 While the United States ranks first in military technology, military exports, defense expenditures and the number of millionaires and billionaires, it is ranked 18<sup>th</sup> among the advanced industrial nations in the gap between rich and poor children, 12<sup>th</sup> in the percent of children in poverty, 17<sup>th</sup> in the efforts to lift children out of poverty, and 23<sup>rd</sup> in infant mortality.<sup>1</sup> Economically, politically, and culturally the situation of youth in the United States is intolerable and obscene. In his 2003 budget, Bush has done something no other president has done. He has pushed through an immense tax cut that largely benefits the rich—estimated at \$3 trillion—in the midst of a war whose cost down the road for future generations will be staggering. The U.S. budget deficit for 2003 is already \$290 billion and the current national debt is \$6.84 quadrillion and is estimated to reach \$9.3 quadrillion by 2008 (Carter, 2003). The war on Iraq is costing about \$4 billion a month and the Republican controlled congress has just passed a bill authorizing an additional \$87 billion to support the "war against terrorism" being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time that the Bush administration is giving huge tax cuts to the rich, it is cutting veterans programs by \$6 billion, including money for disabilities caused by war, and benefits in education health care for their kids. He is also cutting \$93 billion from Medicaid, making huge environmental cuts, and whittling away a vast array of domestic programs that directly benefit children. One of the most shameful cuts enacted in the federal budget took place in December 2002 when Bush eliminated \$300 million from a "federal program that provides subsidies to poor families so they can heat their homes in the winter" (Carter, 2003: 69).

1.9 Under this insufferable climate of increased repression and misplaced priorities, young people become the new casualties in an ongoing war against justice, freedom, citizenship, and democracy and this can be seen in the images this society provides of children in trouble. In a society that appears to have turned its back on the young, what we are increasingly witnessing on prime time media are images of children handcuffed, sitting in adult courts before stern judges, facing murder charges. These images are matched by endless films, videos, ads, documentaries, television programs, and journalistic accounts in which urban youth—depicted largely as gang bangers, drug dealers, and rapists—are portrayed as violent, dangerous, and pathological. Or, when working-class youth are not being directly demonized, television offers images of ruling-class youth in programs such as "Born Rich," "Rich Girls," and "The Simple Life," suggesting that they are the group with real problems, such as coping with envy management and figuring out ways to "dispel the voodoo of inherited wealth" (Garner, 2003: 29). Such images invoke ruling-class youth as an unapologetic paean to class power—affirming the privilege of class as a way of both offering a voyeuristic glimpse at the rich while simultaneously dehumanizing those middle-class and poor youth who can't run up \$1000 bar tabs whenever they wish. In a society where 59 percent of college students say they will eventually be millionaires, the dominant press provides enormous coverage to celebrities such as Paris Hilton, a famous New York debutante, who, as reported in the media, "has stood for the proposition that wealth comes with no obligations of tact, taste or civic responsibility. For people who dream of someday putting unearned wealth to poor use, Ms. Hilton has been a beacon" (Leland, 2003: ST1). In the age of Bush, class becomes less a metaphor for marking the unjust inequities of class privilege than a way of celebrating wealth and power and rubbing it in the face of the poor. This is the popular culture version of the neoliberal view of the world now so popular among neoconservatives and the ultra right whose policies reproduce and legitimize a growing appeal to "tough love" which in reality is marked by contempt

for those who are impoverished, disenfranchised, or powerless. This is class politics waged in the realm of popular culture with a vengeance.

1.10 No longer seen as a crucial social investment for the future of a democratic society, youth are now demonized by the popular media and derided by politicians looking for quick-fix solutions to crime. A whole generation of youth is being depicted as superpredators spiraling out of control. In a society deeply troubled by their presence, youth prompts in the public imagination a rhetoric of fear, control, and surveillance. The impact of such rhetoric is made all the more visible with the 2002 Supreme Court decision upholding the widespread use of random drug testing of public school students. Such random drug testing of all junior and senior high school students who desire to participate in extra-curricular activities registers a deep distrust of students and furthers the notion that youth should be viewed with suspicion and treated as potential criminals. Along with drug testing, increasingly, school officials subject students to vehicle search policies and unannounced weapons searches. In some schools, students have been "stripped-searched by police officers to locate money missing from a classroom" (Beger, 2002: 124). Police and drug-sniffing dogs are now a common fixture in public schools as schools increasingly resemble prisons, and students are treated like suspects who need to be searched, tested, and observed under the watchful eye of administrators who appear to have less interest in education than in policing. In Biloxi, Mississippi surveillance cameras have been installed in all of its 500 classrooms. The school administrators call this school reform but none of them have asked the question about what they are actually teaching kids when they are put under constant surveillance. The not so hidden curriculum here is that kids can't be trusted. At the same time, they are being educated to passively accept constant surveillance, one of the conditions of a police state. It gets worse. Some schools are actually using sting operations in which undercover agents who pretend to be students are used to catch young people suspected of selling drugs or committing any one of a number of school infractions. The consequences of such actions are far reaching. As Beger (2002) points out:

Opponents of school-based sting operations say they not only create a climate of mistrust between students and police, but they also put innocent students at risk of wrongful arrest due to faulty tips and overzealous police work. When asked about his role in a recent undercover probe at a high school near Atlanta, a young-looking police officer who attended classes and went to parties with students replied: 'I knew I had to fit in, make kids trust me and then turn around and take them to jail'. (123)

Children have fewer rights than almost any other group, and fewer institutions protecting these rights. Consequently, their voices are almost completely absent from the debates, policies, and legislative practices that are developed in order to meet their needs.

1.11 In many suburban malls, working-class youth of color cannot even shop or walk around without either appropriate identification cards or being accompanied by their parents. Excluded from public spaces outside of schools that once offered them the opportunity to hang out with relative security, work with mentors in youth centers, and develop their own talents and sense of self-worth, young people are forced to hang out in the streets. There, they are increasingly subject to police surveillance, anti-gang statutes, and curfew laws, especially in poor, urban neighborhoods. Gone are the youth centers, city public parks, outdoor basketball courts, or empty lots where kids can play stick ball. Play areas are now rented out to the highest bidder and then "caged in by steel fences, wrought iron gates, padlocks and razor ribbon wire" (Kelley, 1997: 44).

1.12 Liberals, conservatives, corporate elites, and religious fundamentalists are waging a war against those public spaces and laws that view children and youth as an important social investment. Peter Cassidy (2003) argues that young people are being subjected to forms of emotional violence and privacy intrusions that were unimaginable twenty years ago, except for prison inmates. He claims that

a veritable Kindergulag has been erected around schoolchildren, making them subject to arbitrary curfews, physical searches, arbitrarily applied profiling schemes, and...random, suspicionless, warrantless drug testing....If you're a kid in the U.S. today, martial law isn't a civics class lecture unit. It is a fact of life as the war on drugs, the war on violence, and a nearly hysterical emphasis on safety has come to excuse the infliction of every kind of humiliation upon the young. (3)

Youth have become the central site onto which class and racial anxieties are projected. Their very presence represents *both* the broken promises of capitalism in the age of deregulation and downsizing *and* a collective fear of the consequences wrought by systemic class inequalities and a culture of "infectious greed" that has created a generation of unskilled and displaced youth expelled from shrinking markets, blue collar jobs, and any viable hope for the future. It is against this growing threat to basic freedom, democracy, and youth that I want to address the related issues of democracy, zero tolerance policies, and public schools.

### **Class/Race and the Politics of Punishment in Schools**

2.1 When the *War on Poverty* ran out of steam with the social and economic crisis that emerged in the 1970s, there was a growing shift at all levels of government from an emphasis on social investments to an emphasis on public control, social containment, and the criminalization of social problems. The criminalization of social issues—starting with President Ronald Reagan's war on drugs,<sup>2</sup> the privatization of the prison industry in the 1980s, escalating to the war on immigrants in the early 1990s, and the rise of the prison-industrial complex by the close of the decade—has now become a part of everyday culture and provides a common referent point that extends from governing prisons and regulating urban culture to running schools. This is most evident in the emergence of zero tolerance laws that have swept the nation since the 1980s, and gained full legislative strength with the passage of the *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act* of 1994. Following the mandatory sentencing legislation and get-tough policies associated with the "war on drugs," this bill calls for a "three strikes and you're out" policy which puts repeat offenders, including nonviolent offenders, in jail for life, regardless of the seriousness of the crime. As is widely reported, the United States is now the biggest jailer in the world. Between 1985 and 2002 the prison population grew from 744,206 to 2.1 million (approaching the combined populations of Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana), and prison budgets jumped from \$7 billion in 1980 to \$40 billion in 2000 (Delgado, 2000; Vicini, 2003).<sup>3</sup> As Sanho Tree (2003) points out:

With more than 2 million people behind bars (there are only 8 million prisoners in the entire world), the United States—with one-twenty-second of the world's population—has one-quarter of the planet's prisoners. We operate the largest penal system in the world, and approximately one quarter of all our prisoners (nearly half a million people) are there for nonviolent drug offenses. (5)

In addition, we are adding 700 inmates every week of the year (Vinci, 2003). Yet, even as the crime rate plummets dramatically, more people, especially people of color, are being arrested, harassed, punished, and put in jail.<sup>4</sup> Of the two million people behind bars, 70 percent of the inmates are people of color; 50 percent are African Americans and 17 percent are Latino/as (Barsamian, 2001).

2.2 A Justice Department report points out and that on any given day in this country "more than a third of the young African-American men aged 18-34 in some of our major cities are either in prison or under some form of criminal justice supervision" (Donziger, 1996: 101). The same department reported in April of 2000 that "black youth are forty-eight times more likely than whites to be sentenced to juvenile prison for drug offenses" (Press, 2000: 55). When poor youth of color are not being warehoused in dilapidated schools or incarcerated they are being aggressively recruited by the military to fight the war in Iraq. For example, Carl Chery (2003) recently reported:

With help from *The Source* magazine, the U.S. military is targeting hip-hop fans with custom-made Hummers, throwback jerseys and trucker hats. The yellow Hummer, spray-painted with two black men in military uniform, is the vehicle of choice for the U.S. Army's 'Take It to the Streets Campaign'—a sponsored mission aimed at recruiting young African Americans into the military ranks. (1)

It seems that the Army has discovered hip-hop and urban culture and rather than listening to the searing indictments of poverty, joblessness, and despair that is one of its central messages, the Army recruiters appeal to its most commodified elements by letting the "potential recruits hang out in the Hummer, where they can pep the sound system or watch recruitment videos" (Chery, 2003: 1). Of course, they won't view any videos of Hummers being blown up in the war-torn streets of Baghdad.

2.3 Domestic militarization in the form of zero tolerance laws, in this instance, functions not only to contain "minority populations," deprive them of their elector rights (13 percent of all black men in the U.S. have lost their right to vote) (Street, 2001), and provide new sources of revenue for a system that "evokes the convict leasing system of the Old South" (Featherstone, 2000: 81), it also actively promotes and legitimates retrograde and repressive social policies. For example, an increasing number of states, including California and New York, are now spending more on prison construction than on higher education (Lotke, 1996). In addition, School Resource Officers—armed and unarmed enforcement officials who implement safety and security measures in schools—are one of the fastest growing segments of law enforcement in the United States (Beger, 2002).

2.4 What is one to make of social policies that portray youth, especially poor youth of color, as a generation of suspects? What are we to make of a social order—headed by a pro-gun, pro-capital punishment, and pro-big business conservative such as George W. Bush—whose priorities suggest to urban youth that American society is willing to invest more in sending them to jail than in providing them with high quality schools and a decent education? How does a society justify housing poor students in schools that are unsafe, decaying, and with little or no extra curricular activities while at the same time it spends five times more annually—as high as \$20,000 in many suburban schools—on each middle-class student, housing them in schools with Olympic swimming pools, the latest computer technology, and well cared for buildings and grounds? What message is being sent to young people when in a state such as New York "more Blacks entered prison just for drug offenses than graduated from the state's massive university system with undergraduate, masters, and doctoral degrees combined in the 1990s" (Street, 2001: 26)? What message is being sent to youth when as federal deficits are soaring, the Bush administration provides tax cuts for the rich—in one instance \$114 billion in corporate tax concessions—while at the same time children face drastic cuts in education and health aid, as well as other massive cuts in domestic programs such as job training and summer employment opportunities? In this instance, the culture of domestic militarization, with its policies of containment, brutalization, and punishment become more valued to the dominant social order than any consideration of what it means for a society to expand and strengthen the mechanisms and freedoms of a fully realized democracy.<sup>5</sup>

2.5 Zero tolerance policies have been especially cruel in the treatment of juvenile offenders.<sup>6</sup> Rather than attempting to work with youth and make an investment in their psychological, economic, and social well being, a growing number of cities are passing sweep laws—curfews and bans against loitering and cruising—designed not only to keep youth off the streets, but also to make it easier to criminalize their behavior. For example, within the last decade "45 states...have passed or amended legislation making it easier to prosecute juveniles as adults" and in some states "prosecutors can bump a juvenile case into adult court at their own discretion" (Talbot, 2000: 42). In Kansas and Vermont, a 10-year-old child can be tried in adult court. A particularly harsh example of the draconian measures being used against young people can be seen in the passing of *Proposition 21* in California. This law makes it easier for prosecutors to try teens, fourteen and older, in adult court if they are accused of a felony. These youth would automatically be put in adult prison and be given lengthy mandated sentences. The overall goal of the law is to largely eliminate intervention programs, increase the number of youth in prisons, especially minority youth, and

keep them there for longer periods of time. Moreover, the law is at odds with a number of studies that indicate that putting youth in jail with adults both increases recidivism and poses a grave danger to young offenders who, as a Columbia University study suggested, are "five times as likely to be raped, twice as likely to be beaten, and eight times as likely to commit suicide than adults in the adult prison system" (Nieves, 2000: A1, A15).

2.6 Paradoxically, the moral panic against crime and now terrorism that increasingly feeds the calls for punishment and revenge rather than rehabilitation programs for young people exists in conjunction with the disturbing fact that the United States is now one of only seven countries in the world that permits the death penalty for juveniles (Rimer & Bonner, 2000). In many states, youth cannot get a tattoo, join the military, get their ears pierced, or get a marriage license until they are 18, but youth as young as ten years old can be jailed as adults and condemned to death in some states. The prize-winning novelist Ann Patchett (2002) suggested in *The New York Times* that perhaps the problem is that "as Americans, we no longer have any idea what constitutes a child" (17). This strikes me as ludicrous. The ongoing attacks on children's rights, the endless commercialization of youth, the downsizing of children's services, and the increasing incarceration of Young people suggest more than confusion. In actuality, such policies suggest that, at best, adult society no longer cares about children and, at worse, views them with scorn and fear.

2.7 As the state is downsized and basic social services dry up, containment policies become the principle means to discipline working-class youth and restrict their ability to think critically and engage in oppositional practices. At the academic level, this translates into imposing accountability schemes on schools that are really about enforcing high-stakes testing policies. Such approaches deskill teachers, reduce learning to the lowest common denominator, undermine the possibility of critical learning, and prepare young people to be docile. Schools increasingly resemble other weakened public spheres as they cut back on trained psychologists, school nurses, programs such as music, art, athletics, and valuable after-school activities. Jesse Jackson (2000) argues that under such circumstances, schools not only fail to provide students with a well-rounded education, they often "bring in the police, [and] the school gets turned into a feeder system for the penal system" (16). Marginalized students learn quickly that they are surplus populations and that the journey from home to school no longer means they will next move into a job; on the contrary, school now becomes a training ground for their "graduation" into containment centers such as prisons and jails that keep them out of sight, patrolled, and monitored so as to prevent them from becoming a social canker or political liability to those white and middle-class populations concerned about their own safety. Schools increasingly function as zoning mechanisms to separate students marginalized by class and color and as such these institutions are now modeled after prisons. This follows the argument of David Garland (2001), who points out that, "Large-scale incarceration functions as a mode of economic and social placement, a zoning mechanism that segregates those populations rejected by the depleted institutions of family, work, and welfare and places them behind the scenes of social life" (B4).

### **Schools Emulating Prison Policies**

3.1 Across the nation, school districts are lining up to embrace zero tolerance policies. According to the United States Department of Education, about 90 percent of schools systems nationwide have implemented such policies in order to deal with either violence or threats (Zernike, 2001). Emulating state and federal laws passed in the 1990s, such as the federal *Gun-Free Schools Act* of 1994, that were based on mandatory sentencing and "three strikes and you're out" policies, many educators first invoked zero tolerance rules against those kids who brought guns to schools. Schools soon broadened the policy and it now includes a gamut of student misbehavior ranging from using or circulating drugs, harboring a weapon, to *threatening* other students—all broadly conceived. Under zero tolerance policies, forms of punishment that were once applied to adults now apply to first graders. Originally aimed at "students who misbehave intentionally, the law now applies to those who misbehave as a result of emotional problems or other disabilities" as well (American Bar Association, 2003: 3).

3.2 Unfortunately, any sense of perspective or guarantee of rights seems lost, as school systems across the country clamor for metal detectors, armed guards, high-tech surveillance systems, see-through knapsacks, and, in some cases, armed teachers. Some school systems are investing in new software in order to "profile" students who might exhibit criminal behavior (Moore, 2000). Overzealous laws relieve educators of exercising deliberation and critical judgment as more and more young people are either suspended or expelled from school, often for ludicrous reasons. For example, two Virginia fifth-graders who allegedly put soap in their teacher's drinking water were charged with a felony (Goodman, 2000). A 12-year-old boy in Louisiana who was diagnosed with a hyperactive disorder was suspended for two days after telling his friends in a food line "I'm gonna get you!" if they ate the all the potatoes. The police then charged the boy with making "terroristic threats" and he was incarcerated for two weeks while awaiting trial. A 14-year-old disabled student in Palm Beach, Florida was referred to the police by the school principal for allegedly stealing \$2.00 from another student. He was then charged with strong-armed-robbery, and held for six weeks in an adult jail, even though this was his first arrest.<sup>7</sup> There is the absurd case of five students in Mississippi who were suspended and criminally charged for throwing peanuts at each other on a school bus (Beger, 2002). There is also the equally revealing example of a student brought up on a drug charge because he gave another youth two lemon cough drops.

3.3 As *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman (2000) points out, zero tolerance does more than offer a simple solution to a complex problem; it has become a code word for a "quick and dirty way of kicking kids out" of school rather than creating safe environments for them (8). For example, the *Denver Rocky Mountain News* reported in June of 1999 that "partly as a result of such rigor in enforcing Colorado's zero tolerance law, the number of kids kicked out of public schools has skyrocketed since 1993—from 437 before the law to nearly 2,000 in the 1996-1997 school year" (38A). In Chicago, the widespread adoption of zero tolerance policies in 1994 resulted in a 51 percent increase in student suspensions for the next four years, and a 3000 percent increase in expulsions, jumping "from 21 in 1994-1995 to 668" the following year (Michie, 2000: 24). In Connecticut, students are being pushed out of schools like never before. For example:

The number of suspensions jumped about 90 percent from 1998-1999 to 2000-2001. In 2000-2001, 90,559 children were suspended from schools around the state, up from 57,626 two years earlier. (Gordon, 2003: 14CN)

Within such a climate of disdain and intolerance, expelling students does more than pose a threat to innocent kids, it also suggests that local school boards are refusing to do the hard work of exercising critical judgment, trying to understand what conditions undermine school safety, and providing reasonable support services for all students—and viable alternatives for the troubled ones. Moreover, the *No Child Left Behind* program, with its investment in high-stakes testing puts even more pressure on schools either to push underachieving students out or do nothing to prevent them from leaving school. Raising test scores is now the major goal of educational reformers and it puts a huge amount of pressure on principals who are expected to reach district goals. Such pressure played an important role in the Houston School System, held up as a model by President George W. Bush, which not only does nothing to prevent students from leaving school but also falsified dropout data in order for principals to get financial bonuses and meet district demands. Tamar Lewin and Jennifer Medina (2003) reported in *The New York Times* that large number of students who are struggling academically are being pushed out of New York City schools in order to not "tarnish the schools' statistics by failing to graduate on time" (A1). As the criminalization of young people finds its way into the classroom, it becomes easier for school administrators to punish students rather than listen to them or, for that matter, to work with parents, community programs, religious organizations, and social service agencies.<sup>8</sup> Even though zero tolerance policies clog up the courts and put additional pressure on an already overburdened juvenile justice system, educators appear to have few qualms about implementing them. And the results are far from inconsequential for the students themselves.

3.4 Most insidiously, zero tolerance policies and laws appear to be well-tailored for mobilizing racialized codes and race-based moral panics that portray black and brown urban youth as a frightening and violent threat to the safety of 'decent' Americans. Not only do most of the high profile zero tolerance cases involve African-American students, but such policies also reinforce the racial inequities that plague school systems across the country. For example, the *New York Times* has reported on a number of studies illustrating "that black students in public schools across the country are far more likely than whites to be suspended or expelled, and far less likely to be in gifted or advanced placement classes" (Lewin, 2000: A14). Even in a city such as San Francisco, considered a bastion of liberalism, African-American students pay a far greater price for zero tolerance policies. Libero Della Piana (2000) reports that "According to data collected by Justice Matters, a San Francisco agency advocating equity in education, African Americans make up 52 percent of all suspended students in the district—far in excess of the 16 percent of [African-American youth in] the general population" (A21). Marilyn Elias (2000) reported in an issue of *USA Today* that, "In 1998, the first year national expulsion figures were gathered, 31 percent of kids expelled were black, but blacks made up only 17 percent of the students in public schools" (9D).

3.5 Feeding on moral panic and popular fear, zero tolerance policies not only turn schools into an adjunct of the criminal justice system, they also further rationalize misplaced legislative priorities. And that has profound social costs. Instead of investing in early-childhood programs, repairing deteriorating school buildings, or hiring more qualified teachers, schools now spend millions of dollars to upgrade security, even when such a fortress mentality defines the simplest test of common sense. As mentioned earlier, school administrators in Biloxi, Mississippi decided to invest \$2 million to install 800 cameras in 11 schools rather than use that money to hire more teachers to reduce class size, provide more books for the library, fund extracurricular programs or a host of other useful school improvements (Dillon 2003). Young people are quickly realizing that schools have more in common with military boot camps and prisons than they do with other institutions in American society. In addition, as schools abandon their role as democratic public spheres and are literally "fenced off" from the communities that surround them, they lose their ability to become anything other than spaces of containment and control. In this context, discipline and training replace education for all but the privileged as schools increasingly take on an uncanny resemblance to oversized police precincts, tragically disconnected both from the students who inhabit them and the communities that give meaning to their historical experiences and daily lives. As schools become militarized they lose their ability to provide students with the skills to cope with human differences, uncertainty, and the various symbolic and institutional forces that undermine political agency and democratic public life itself.

### **Schooling and the Crisis of Public Life**

4.1 Zero tolerance policies suggest a dangerous imbalance between democratic values and the culture of fear. Instead of security, zero tolerance policies in the schools contribute to a growing climate of bigotry, hypocrisy, and intolerance that turns a generation of youth into criminal suspects. In spite of what we are told by the current Bush administration, conservative educators, the religious right, and the cheerleaders of corporate culture, the greatest threat to education in this country does not come from disruptive students, the absence of lock-down safety measures, and get tough school polices. Nor are young people threatened by the alleged decline of academic standards, the absence of privatized choice schemes, or the lack of rigid testing measures. On the contrary, the greatest threat to young people comes from a society that refuses to view them as a social investment, that consigns 13.5 million children to live in poverty, reduces critical learning to massive testing programs, refuses to pay teachers an adequate salary, promotes policies that eliminate most crucial health and public services, and defines masculinity through the degrading celebration of a gun culture, extreme sports, and the spectacles of violence that permeate corporate controlled media industries. It also comes from a society that values security more than basic rights, wages an assault on all non-market values and public goods, and engages in a ruthless transfer of wealth from the poor and middle class to the rich and privileged.

4.2 We live in a society in which a culture of punishment, greed, and intolerance has replaced a culture of social responsibility and compassion. We have increasingly become a society in which issues regarding persistent poverty, inadequate health care, racial apartheid in the inner cities, and the growing inequalities between the rich and the poor have been either removed from the inventory of public discourse and progressive social policy or factored into talk-show spectacles. This is evident in ongoing attempts by many liberals and conservatives to turn commercial-free public education over to market forces, dismantle traditional social provisions of the welfare state, turn over all vestiges of the health care system to private interests, and mortgage social security to the whims of the stock market. Emptied of any substantial content, democracy appears imperiled as individuals are unable to translate their privately suffered misery into public concerns and collective action. The result is not only silence and indifference, but the elimination of those public spaces that reveal the rough edges of social order, disrupt consensus, and point to the need for modes of education and knowledge that link learning to the conditions necessary for developing democratic forms of political agency and civic struggle. This is a society in which biographical solutions are substituted for systemic contradictions, and as Ulrich Beck (1995) points out, institutions "for overcoming problems" are converted into "institutions for causing problems" (7).

4.3 Within such a climate of harsh discipline and moral indifference, it is easier to put young people in jail than to provide the education, services, and care they need to face the problems of a complex and demanding society.<sup>9</sup> Conservative critics such as Abigail Thernstrom (2003) actually reinforce the ongoing criminalization of school policy, the expansion of police power in schools, and the vanishing rights of children by arguing that zero tolerance policies are especially useful for minority and poor children. Thernstrom's comments on educational reform not only expand zero tolerance policies to include the most trivial forms of transgression, but they also suggest a barely concealed, racially-coded standard for punishing students. She writes: "They need schools where there is zero tolerance for violence, erratic or tardy attendance, inappropriate dress, late or incomplete homework, incivility toward staff and other students, messy desks and halls, trash on the floor and other signs of disorder" (B17). The notion that children should be viewed as a crucial social resource who present for any healthy society important ethical and political considerations about the quality of public life, the allocation of social provisions, and the role of the state as a guardian of public interests appears to be lost in a society that refuses to invest in its youth as part of a broader commitment to a fully realized democracy. As the social order becomes more privatized and militarized, we increasingly face the problem of losing a generation of young people to a system of increasing intolerance, repression, and moral indifference.

4.4 The growing attack on working-class youth, youth of color, and public education in American society may say less about the reputed apathy of the populace than it might about the bankruptcy of the old political languages and the need for a new language and vision for expanding and deepening the meaning of democracy and making the education of youth central to such a project. Made over in the image of corporate culture, schools are no longer valued as a public good but as a private interest; hence, the appeal of such schools is less their capacity to educate students according to the demands of critical citizenship than it is about enabling students to master the requirements of a market-driven economy. This is not education but training. Under these circumstances, many students increasingly find themselves in schools that lack any language for relating the self to public life, social responsibility, or the imperatives of democratic life. In this instance, democratic education with its emphasis on social justice, respect for others, critical inquiry, equality, freedom, civic courage, and concern for the collective good is suppressed and replaced by an excessive emphasis on the language of privatization, individualism, self-interest, and brutal competitiveness. Lost in this commercial and privatizing discourse of schooling is any notion of democratic community or models of leadership capable of raising questions about what public schools should accomplish in a democracy and why under certain circumstances, they fail; or for that matter, why public schools have increasingly adapted policies that bear a close resemblance to how prisons are run.

4.5 Zero tolerance has become a metaphor for hollowing out the state and expanding the forces of domestic militarization, reducing democracy to consumerism, and replacing an ethic of mutual aid with an

appeal to excessive individualism and social indifference.<sup>10</sup> Within this logic, the notion of the political increasingly equates power with domination, and citizenship with consumerism and passivity. Under this insufferable climate of manufactured indifference, increased repression, unabated exploitation, and a war on Iraq that Senator Robert Byrd believes is rooted in the arrogance of unbridled power, young people have become the new casualties in an ongoing battle against justice, freedom, social citizenship, and democracy. As despairing as these conditions appear at the present moment, they increasingly have become the basis for a surge of political resistance on the part of many youth, intellectuals, labor unions, educators, and social movements.<sup>11</sup> Educators, young people, parents, religious organizations, community activists, and other cultural workers need to rethink what it would mean to both interrogate and break away from the dangerous and destructive ideologies, values, and social relations of zero tolerance policies as they work in a vast and related number of powerful institutional spheres to reinforce modes of authoritarian control and turn a generation of youth into a generation of suspects. This suggests a struggle both for public space and the conditions for public dialogue about how to imagine reappropriating a notion of politics that is linked to the creation of a strong participatory democracy while simultaneously articulating a new vocabulary, set of theoretical tools, and social possibilities for re-visioning civic engagement and social transformation. We have entered a period in which class warfare offers no apologies because it is too arrogant and ruthless to imagine any resistance. But the collective need for justice should never be underestimated even in the darkest of times.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These figures largely come from Children's Defense Fund, *The State of Children in America's Union: A 2002 Action Guide to Leave No Child Behind*. Washington, D.C.: Children's Defense Fund Publication, 2002: iv-v, 13.

<sup>2</sup> For an insightful commentary on the media and the racial nature of the war on drugs, see Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, The Anti-cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> These figures are taken from the following sources: Gary Delgado, "'Mo' Prisons Equals MO' Money." *Colorlines*. Winter (1999-2000): 18; Fox Butterfield, "Number in Prison Grows Despite Crime Reduction." *The New York Times* 10 August 2000: A10.

<sup>4</sup> For some extensive analyses of the devastating affects the criminal justice system is having on black males, see Michael Tonry, *Malign Neglect: Race, Crime, and Punishment in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; Jerome Miller, *Search and Destroy: African-American Males in the Criminal Justice System*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; David Cole, *No Equal Justice: Race and Class in the American Criminal Justice System*. New York: The New Press, 1999; Marc Mauer & Meda Chesney-Lind, Eds. *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*. New York: The New Press, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Even more shameful is the fact that such discrimination against African Americans is often justified from the Olympian heights of institutions such as Harvard University by apologists such as lawyer Randall Kennedy who argue that such laws, criminal policies, and police practices are necessary to protect "good" blacks from "bad" blacks who commit crimes. See Randall Kennedy, *Race, Crime, and the Law*. New York: Pantheon, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> For a moving narrative of the devastating effects of the juvenile justice system on teens, see Edward Humes, *No Matter How Loud I Shout: A Year in the Life of Juvenile Court*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> These examples are taken from a report on zero tolerance laws by the American Bar Association. <[www.abanet.org/crimjust/juvius/zerotolreport.html](http://www.abanet.org/crimjust/juvius/zerotolreport.html)> 29 May 2003.

<sup>8</sup> It was reported in the *New York Times* that in responding to the spate of recent school shootings, the FBI has provided educators across the country with a list of behaviors that could identify "students likely to commit an act of lethal violence." One such behavior is "resentment over real or perceived injustices." The reach of domestic militarization becomes more evident as the F.B.I. not only takes on the role of monitoring potentially disruptive student behavior, but also to the degree to which teachers are positioned to become adjuncts of the criminal justice system. The story and quotes appear in the editorial, "F.B.I. Caution Signs for Violence in Classroom." *The New York Times* 7 September 2000: A18.

<sup>9</sup> As has been widely reported, the prison industry has become big business with many states spending more on prison construction than on university construction. See, Anthony Lewis, "Punishing the Country." *The New York Times* 2 December 1999: A1.

<sup>10</sup> For a provocative analysis of the relationship between what Norman Geras (1998) calls "the contract of mutual indifference" (30) and neoliberalism's refusal of the social as a condition for contemporary forms mutual indifference; see Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*. London: Verso Press, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> For some recent commentaries on the new student movement, see Liza Featherstone, "The New Student Movement," *The Nation*. 15 May 2000: 11-15; David Samuels, "Notes from Underground: Among the Radicals of the Pacific Northwest." *Harper's Magazine*. May (2000): 35-47; Katazyna Lyson, Monique Murad & Trevor Stordahl, "Real Reformers, Real Results." *Mother Jones*. October (2000): 20-22. Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair & Allan Sekula, *5 Days that Shook the World*. London: Verso Press, 2000; Mark Edelman Boren, *Student Resistance*. New York: Routledge, 2001; See also, Imre Szeman, "Learning from Seattle." Special Issue of *The Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 24(1-2) January-June (2002).

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