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Punishment Creep and the Crisis of Youth in the Age of Disposability

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In spite of being discredited by the economic recession of 2008, market fundamentalism has once again become a dominant force for producing a corrupt financial service industry, runaway environmental devastation, egregious amounts of human suffering, and the rise of what has been called the emergence of "finance as a criminalized, rogue industry"[1]. The Gilded Age is back with huge profits for the ultra- rich, banks, and other large financial service institutions while at the same time increasing impoverishment and misery for the middle and working classes. The American dream of economic and social mobility for all has been transformed into not just an influential myth but also a poisonous piece of propaganda.

America not only "has the highest level of inequality of any of the advanced countries"[2], but the gap between the rich and poor is increasing along with the widespread suffering and political corruption it creates, especially among young people. Money now dominates politics and has undermined any viable notion of democratic representational politics. Bankruptcy laws are now written to favor the rich and mega corporations while punishing students by preventing them from discharging their debts. American society is increasingly dominated by gated communities with luxury hideaways for the rich and foreclosure, homelessness, and incarceration for the remainder of the population. One measure of the upward shift in wealth in evident in Joseph E. Stiglitz's claim that

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1   Ch. H. Ferguson, *Predator nation*, Crown Press, New York 2012, p. 21.

2   J. E. Stiglitz, The Price of Inequality, "Project Syndicate" 2012, June 5., online: http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-price-of-inequality.

"in the 'recovery' of 2009-2010, the top 1% of US income earners captured 93% of the income growth"[3]. The degree to which the top 1% are benefitting from the obscene policies of the new Gilded Age becomes clear in the inflated and immoral bonuses handed out to CEOs who in some cases actually contributed to the economic bust of 2008. A number of statistics stands out for the economic injustice they portray. For example, "the average pay for people working in U.S. investment banks is over $375,000 while senior officers at Goldman Sachs averaged $61 million each in compensation for 2007"[4]. At the same time, the U.S. beats out every other developing nation in producing extreme income and wealth inequalities for 2012. The top 1% now owns "about a third of the American people's total net worth, over 40 percent of America' total financial wealth... and half of the nation's total income growth"[5]. Rarely are the social costs of casino capitalism analyzed as part of a broader attack on democratic values, non-commodified public spheres, young people, and those populations who live on the edge of survival.

Free market fundamentalism or casino capitalism working hand in hand with the rise of the punishing state increasingly exerts its influence over a vast range of public spheres extending from school and half way houses to airports and higher education. At the same time, political illiteracy and religious fundamentalism have cornered the market on populist rage providing support for a country in which as Robert Reich points out "the very richest people get all the economic gains [and] routinely bribe politicians" in order to cut their taxes and establish policies that eliminate access to public goods such as schools, social protections, health care, and important infrastructures[6].

It gets worse. Everywhere we look the power of the mega-corporations and financial elite aggressively promote failed modes of governance and a "suicidal state"[7]. This is particularly clear in the attempts by the bankers, hedge fund operators and their corporate cohorts to dismantle regulations meant to restrict their corrupting political and economic power while enacting policies that privilege the rich and the powerful. In this instance, casino capitalism produces an autoimmune crisis in which a society attacks the very elements of a society that allow it to reproduce itself, while at the same time killing off of any sense of history, memory, and social and ethical responsibility. As social protections are dismantled, public servants denigrated, and public goods such

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3   Ibidem.

4   Ch. H. Ferguson, *Predator Nation*, op. cit., p. 8.

5   Ibidem.

6   R. Reich, *The Fable of the Century*, Robert Reich's Blog April 6, 2012, online: http://robertreich.org/post/20538393444

7   P. Virilio, *The Suicidal State*, [in:] J. DerDerian (ed.), The Virilio Reader, Oxford University Press, New York 1998, pp. 29-45.

as schools, bridges, health care services, and public transportation deteriorate, the current apostles of neoliberal orthodoxy embrace the cruel and punishing values of economic Darwinism, with its survival of the fittest ethic and its winner-take-all belief system. In doing so, the major political parties now reward as its chief beneficiaries the too-big-to fail-banks, ultra-large financial industries, the defense establishment, and mega corporations. Corruption is overlooked and casino style speculation goes unchecked. JP Morgan's recent $2 billion dollar trading loss is the latest example of the risky trading and high risk speculation that demand regulatory reforms, which JP Morgan and other financial institutions aggressively oppose, in spite of the havoc these policies have imposed on the economy as a whole[8]. Fortunately, the question of what happens to democracy and politics when dominated by corporations is now being raised by young people and others in the Occupy Wall Street Movement, but this collective sense of outrage has yet to connect with a broader notion of politics that challenges not only the values of neoliberalism but also the power relations that structure its most powerful political and economic institutions.

Under neoliberalism, acts of translation become utterly privatized and removed from public considerations. Public issues now collapse into private problems. One consequence is not only the undoing of the social bond, but also the endless reproduction of the narrow register of individual responsibility as a substitute for any analyses of wider social problems, making it easier to blame the poor, homeless, uninsured, jobless, and other disadvantaged groups for their problems while reinforcing the merging of a market society with the punishing state. One consequence is that zones of social abandonment now proliferate while ever-growing disposable populations become normalized.

The varied populations made disposable under casino capitalism occupy a globalized space of ruthless politics in which the categories of "citizen's rights," "social protections," and "democratic representation," once integral to national politics, are no longer recognized. Disposable populations are less visible, relegated to the frontier zones of relative invisibility and removed from public view, and often placed in "a state of terminal exclusion"[9]. The "machinery of social death" now works its way from the prison to the halls and classrooms of public education. Poor minority youth, especially, are often warehoused in schools that resemble boot camps, dispersed to dank and dangerous work places far from the enclaves of the tourist industries, incarcerated in prisons that privilege punishment over rehabilitation, and consigned to the increasing army of the permanently unemployed. Rendered redundant as a result of the collapse of the social state, a pervasive racism, a growing disparity in income and wealth, and a take-no-prisoners neoliberalism, an increasing number of

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8   P. Krugman, *Why We Regulate*, "New York Times" 2012, May 14, p. A. 23.

9   J. Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005, p. 14.

individuals and groups are being demonized, criminalized or simply abandoned either by virtue of their status as immigrants or because they are young, poor, unemployed, disabled, homeless, or confined to low paying jobs. What Joao Biehl has called "zones of social abandonment" now accelerate the disposability of the unwanted[10].

The human face of this process and the invisible others who inhabit its geography is captured in a story told by Chip Ward, a former librarian, who writes poignantly about a homeless woman named Ophelia, who retreats to the library because like many of the homeless she has nowhere else to go to use the bathroom, secure temporary relief from bad weather, or simply be able to rest. Excluded from the American dream and treated as both expendable and a threat, Ophelia, in spite of her obvious mental illness, defines her existence in terms that offer a chilling metaphor that extends far beyond her plight. Ward describes Ophelia's presence and actions in the following way:

> "Ophelia sits by the fireplace and mumbles softly, smiling and gesturing at no one in particular. She gazes out the large window through the two pairs of glasses she wears, one windshield-sized pair over a smaller set perched precariously on her small nose. Perhaps four lenses help her see the invisible other she is addressing. When her "nobody there" conversation disturbs the reader seated beside her, Ophelia turns, chuckles at the woman's discomfort, and explains, *"Don't mind me, I'm dead. It's okay. I've been dead for some time now." She pauses, then adds reassuringly, "It's not so bad. You get used to it."* Not at all reassured, the woman gathers her belongings and moves quickly away. Ophelia shrugs. Verbal communication is tricky. She prefers telepathy, but that's hard to do since the rest of us, she informs me, "don't know the rules" (my emphasis).[11]"

Ophelia represents just one of the 200,000 chronically homeless who now use public libraries and any other accessible public space to find shelter. Many are often sick, disoriented, suffer from substance abuse, or mentally disabled and on the edge of sanity du to the stress, insecurity, and danger that they face every day. And while Ophelia's comments may be dismissed as the rambling of a mentally disturbed woman, they speak to something much deeper about the current state of American society and its desertion of entire populations that are now considered the human waste of a neoliberal social order. People who were once viewed as facing dire problems in need of state intervention and social protection are now seen as a problem threatening society. This becomes

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10   J. Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005.

11   Ch. Ward, *America Gone Wrong: A Slashed Safety Net Turns Libraries into Homeless Shelters,* "TomDispatch.com" 2007, April 2, online: www.alternet.org/story/50023.

clear when the war on poverty is transformed into a war against the poor; when the plight of the homeless is defined less as a political and economic issue in need of social reform than as a matter of law and order; or when government budgets for prison construction eclipse funds for higher education. Indeed, the transformation of the social state into the corporate-controlled punishing state is made startlingly clear when young people, to paraphrase W.E.B. DuBois, become problem people rather than people who face problems.

Already disenfranchised by virtue of their age, young people are under assault today in ways that are entirely new because they now face a world that is far more dangerous than at any other time in recent history. Not only do they live in a space of social homelessness in which precarity and uncertainty lock them out of a secure future, they also find themselves inhabiting a society that seeks to silence them as it makes them invisible. Victims of a neoliberal regime that smashes their hopes and attempts to exclude them from the fruits of democracy, young people are now told not to expect too much. Written out of any claim to the economic and social resources of the larger society, they are increasingly told to accept the status of "stateless, faceless, and functionless" nomads, a plight for which they alone have to accept responsibility[12]. Like Ophelia, increasing numbers of youth suffer mental anguish and overt distress even, perhaps especially, among the college bound, debt-ridden, and unemployed whose numbers are growing exponentially.

If youth were once viewed as the site where society deposited it dreams, that is no longer true. They are now viewed mostly as a public disorder and inhabit a place where society increasingly exhibits its nightmares. Many young people now live in a post-9/11 social order that views them as a prime target of its governing through crime complex. This is made obvious by the many "get tough" policies that now render young people as criminals, while depriving them of basic health care, education, and social services. Punishment and fear have replaced compassion and social responsibility as the most important modalities mediating the relationship of youth to the larger social order. When war and the criminalization of social problems become a mode of governance, youth is reduced to a target rather than a social investment. As anthropologist Alain Bertho points out, "Youth is no longer considered the world's future, but as a threat to its present"[13]. The only political discourse available for young people is a disciplinary one. Youth now represents the absent present in any discourse about the contemporary moment, the future, and democracy itself and increasingly inhabit a state that mimics what Michel Foucault calls "an absolutely racist state, an absolutely murderous state and an absolutely suicidal

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12   Z. Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, Polity Press, London 2004, p. 76-77.

13   Quoted in: J. M Durand, *For Youth: A Disciplinary Discourse Only*, "TruthOut" 2009, November 15, trans. Leslie Thatcher.

state"[14]. How young people are represented in both historical and contemporary terms tells us a lot about "the social and political constitution of society"[15]. Young people have always been defined through what Jean and John Comaroff have termed a kind doubling in which young people are perceived ambiguously as both a threat and a promise[16]. While this has been less true of poor minority youth, young people historically still occupied that middle ground between being seen as a nightmare and a "source of yet-to-be-imagined futures"[17]. Youth no longer occupy a middle ground between despair and hope, especially poor youth of color. On the contrary, young people today are largely seen as either markets, commodities, or as disposable populations.

Part of this transformation of young people from facing problems to being a problem can be traced to the collapse of the social state and the rise of a market driven society. The social contract, however feeble, came crashing to the ground in the late 1970s as Margaret Thatcher and soon afterwards Ronald Reagan in the United States. Both of these infamous hard line advocates of market fundamentalism announced respectively that there was no such thing as society and that government was the problem not the solution. Democracy and the political process was soon hijacked by corporations and hope was appropriated as an advertisement for the whitewashed world of Disney. At the same time, larger social movements fragmented into isolated pockets of resistance mostly organized around a form of identity politics. Given the deepening gap between the rich and the poor, a growing culture of cruelty, and the dismantling of the social state, I don't believe youth today will have the same opportunities of previous generations. The promise of youth has given way to an age of market-induced angst, a view of many young people as a threat to short term investments, rampant self-interest, and fast profits.

Today's young people inhabit an age of unprecedented symbolic, material, and institutional violence–an age of grotesque irresponsibility, unrestrained greed, and unchecked individualism–all of which is rooted in an anti-democratic mode of economic globalization. Youth are now removed from any talk about democracy. Their absence is symptomatic of a society that has turned against itself, punishes its children, and does so at the risk of crippling the entire body politic. Many young people are now disappeared from the neoliberal landscape of quick profits, short term investments, and gated communities.

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14   M. Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*, Picador, New York 2003, p. 260.

15   J. Comaroff, J. Comaroff, *Reflections of Youth, from the Past to the Postcolony,* [in:] M. S. Fisher, G. Downey (ed.), Frontiers of Capital: Ethnographic Reflections on The New Economy, Duke University Press, Durham, New York 2006, p. 267.

16   Ibid. J. Comaroff, J. Comaroff, *Reflections...*, op. cit., p. 280.

17   Ibidem.

Under such circumstances, all bets are off regarding the future of democracy. Besides a growing inability to translate private troubles into social issues, what is also being lost in the current historical conjuncture is the very idea of the public good, the notion of connecting learning to social change, and developing modes of civic courage infused by the principles of social justice. Under the regime of a ruthless economic Darwinism, we are witnessing the crumbling of social bonds and the triumph of individual desires over social rights, nowhere more exemplified than in the gated communities, gated intellectuals, and gated values that have become symptomatic of a society that has lost all claims to democracy or for that matter any sense of utopian thrust.

The eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman is right in claiming that "Visions have nowadays fallen into disrepute and we tend to be proud of what we should be ashamed of"[18]. Politics has become an extension of war, just as state sponsored violence increasingly finds legitimation in popular culture and a broader culture of cruelty that promotes an expanding landscape of fear and undermines any sense of communal responsibility for the well-being of others. Too many young people today learn quickly that their fate is solely a matter of individual responsibility, legitimated through market-driven laws that have more to do with self-promotion, a hyper-competitiveness, and surviving in a society that increasingly reduces social relations to social combat. Young people today are expected to inhabit a set of relations in which the only obligation is to live for oneself and to reduce the obligations of citizenship to the demands of a consumer culture. There is more at work here than a flight from social responsibility. Also lost is the importance of those social bonds, modes of collective reasoning, and public spheres and cultural apparatuses crucial to the formation of a sustainable democratic society. "Reality TV's" mantra of "war of all against all" brings home the lesson that punishment is the norm and reward the exception. Unfortunately, it no longer mimics reality, it is the new reality.

THE WAR AGAINST YOUTH

I want to address the intensifying assault on young people through the related concepts of "soft war" and "hard war" that I developed in my two recent books *Disposable Youth* and *Youth in a Suspect Society*. The idea of soft war considers the changing conditions of youth within the relentless expansion of a global market society. Partnered with a massive advertising machinery, the soft war targets all children and youth, devaluing them by treating them as yet another "market" to be commodified and exploited, and conscripting them into the system through relentless attempts to create a new generation of consuming subjects. This low intensity war is waged by a variety of corporate institutions

18   Z. Bauman, *Introduction and in Search of Public Space*, In Search of Politics, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, p. 8.

through the educational force of a culture that commercializes every aspect of kids' lives, using the Internet and various social networks along with the new media technologies such as cell phones to immerse young people in the world of mass consumption in ways that are more direct and expansive than anything we have seen in the past.

The influence of the new screen and electronic culture on young peoples' habits is disturbing. For instance, a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that young people ages 8 to 18 now spend more than seven and a half hours a day with smart phones, computers, televisions, and other electronic devices, compared with less than six and a half hours five years ago[19]. When you add the additional time youth spend texting, talking on their cellphones, and doing multiple tasks at once, such as "watching TV while updating *Facebook* – the number rises to 11 hours of total media content each day"[20]. There is a greater risk here than what seems to be emerging as a new form of attention deficit disorder, one in which youth avoid the time necessary for thoughtful analysis and engaged modes of reading. There is also the issue of how this media is conscripting an entire generation into a world of consumerism in which commodities and brand loyalty become both the most important markers of identity and primary frameworks for mediating one's relationship to the world. Many young people can only recognize themselves in terms preferred by the market. This only makes it more difficult for them to find public spheres where they can locate metaphors of hope.

Public time, which is time for thoughtful and critical reflections on social issues, is being replaced increasingly by corporate time through the use of hyper-paced technologies that penetrate every aspect of kids' lives. Corporate time is fast-paced, leaves little time for reflection, and is evident in the ways in which many young people are commercially carpet bombed endlessly and feel as if they are caught on a consumerist treadmill that speeds up and never slows down. The stark reality here is that the corporate media are being used to reshape kids' identities into that of consumers rather than critically engaged citizens. And as Zygmunt Bauman points out, "life and politics are now shaped after the likeness of the means and objects of consumption," as evident in the dominant culture's selective elimination and reordering of the possible modes of political, social, and ethical vocabularies made available to youth. Corporations have hit gold with the new media and can inundate young people directly with their market-driven values, desires, and identities, all of which fly under the radar, escaping the watchful eyes and interventions of concerned parents and other adults. Of

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19   T. Lewin, *If Your Kids Are Awake, They're Probably Online*, "New York Times" 2010, January 20, p. A1.

20   C. Christine, *Kaiser Study: Kids 8 to 18 Spend More Than Seven Hours a Day With Media*, "Spotlight on Digital Media and Learning: MacArthur Foundation" 2010, January 21, online: http://spotlight.macfound. org/blog/entry/kaiser_study_kids_age_8_to_18_spend_more_than_seven_hours_a_day_with_media.

course, some youth are doing their best to stay ahead of the commodification and privatization of such technologies and are using the new media to assert a range of oppositional practices and forms of protest that constitute a new realm of political activity.

The hard war is more serious and dangerous for certain young people and refers to the harshest elements of a growing crime-control complex that increasingly governs poor minority youth through a logic of punishment, surveillance, and control. The youth targeted by its punitive measures are often young people whose work is not needed, youth who are considered failed consumers and who can only afford to live on the margins of a commercial culture of excess that eagerly excludes anybody without money, resources, and leisure time to spare. Or they are youth considered both troublesome and often disposable by virtue of their ethnicity, race, and class. The imprint of the youth crime-control complex can be traced in the increasingly popular practice of organizing schools through disciplinary practices that subject students to constant surveillance through high-tech security devices while imposing on them harsh and often thoughtless zero-tolerance policies that closely resemble the culture of the criminal justice system.

In this instance, poor and minority youth become the object of a new mode of governance based on the crudest forms of disciplinary control often leading to the growth of what has been called the school-to-prison pipeline. With the growing presence of police, surveillance technologies, and security guards in schools more and more of what kids do, how they act, how they dress, and what they say is defined as a criminal offence. Suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and jail time has become routine for poor minority youth. The most minor infractions both in schools and on the street are now viewed as criminal acts. Rather than treating such behaviours as part of the professional responsibilities of teachers and administrators, such infractions are now the purview of the police. What might have become a teachable moment becomes a criminal offense[21].

Young people are now subject to stop and frisk policies in out nation's cities (code for racial profiling), the object of school disciplinary policies that turn schools into an adjunct of the police state, and viewed as throwaways and criminals, subject to police intervention rather than the supervision of qualified teachers. The punishment creep that has moved from prisons to other public spheres now has a firm grip on both schools and the daily rituals of everyday life. As Margaret Kimberly points out, "Black people are punished for driving, for walking down the street, for having children, for putting their children in school, for acting the way children act, and even for having children who are killed by

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21   Staff, *Rethinking Schools. Stop the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, "TruthOut" 2012, January 15, online: http://truth-out.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=6106:stop-the-schooltoprison-pipeline

other people. We are punished, in short, because we still exist"[22].

Youth now inhabit a social order in which the bonds of trust have been replaced by the bonds of fear. As Bauman puts it, "Trust is replaced by universal suspicion. All bonds are assumed to be untrustworthy, unreliable, trap-and-ambush-like – until proven otherwise"[23]. Fear rather than trust and compassion now define schools that have become sites of intellectual conformity, mediocrity, containment, and, even worse, terminal exclusion. The notion of school as a public good gives way to school as a private right. Critical teaching and modes of pedagogy are now replaced by a call to teach to the test, just as more and more youth find their behavior criminalized and subject to state violence. How else to explain the fate of generations of many young people who find themselves in a society in which 500,000 youth are incarcerated and 2.5 million are arrested annually, and that by the age of 23, "almost a third of Americans have been arrested for a crime"[24]. What kind of society allows 1.6 million children to be homeless at any given time in a year? Or allows massive inequalities in wealth and income to produce a politically and morally dysfunctional society in which "45 percent of U.S. residents live in households that struggle to make ends meet, [which] breaks down to 39 percent of all adults and 55 percent of all children"?[25]. Current statistics paint a bleak picture for young people in the United States: 1.5 million are unemployed, which marks a 17-year high; 12.5 million are without food; and in what amounts to a national disgrace, one out of every five American children lives in poverty. Nearly half of all U.S. children and 90 percent of black youngsters will be on food stamps at some point during childhood[26].

As is evident in the recent killing of 17-year old Trayvon Martin, poor minority youth are not just excluded from "the American dream" but are relegated to a type of social death, defined as waste products of a society that no longer considers them of any value. Under such circumstances, matters of survival and disposability become central to how we think about and imagine not just politics but the everyday existence of poor white, immigrant, and minority youth. Too many young people are not completing high school but are instead bearing the

22   M. Kimberly, *Jail for Sending Their Kid to School? How America Treats Black Women and Children Like Criminals*, "AlterNet" 2012, May 9, online: http://www.alternet.org/story/155330/jail_for_sending_ their_kid_to_school_how_america_treats_black_women_and_children_like_criminals.

23   Z. Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, Polity Press, New York 2004, pp. 92-93.

24   E. Goode, *Many in U.S. Are Arrested by Age 23, Study Finds*, "New York Times" 2011, December 19, online: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/19/us/nearly-a-third-of-americans-are-arrested-by-23-study-says.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print.

25   Reuters, "45% Struggle in US to Make Ends Meet," MSNBC: *Business Stocks and Economy* (November 22, 2011), online: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/45407937/ns/business-stocks_and_ economy/#.T3SxhDEgd8E.

26   L. Tanner, *Half of US Kids Will Get Food Stamps, Study Says*, "Chicago Tribune" 2009, November 2, online: http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-us-med-children-food,0,6055934.story.

brunt of a system that leaves them uneducated and jobless, and ultimately offers them one of the few options available for people who no longer have available roles to play as producers or consumers – either poverty or prison. This leads us back to the youth-control complex.

THE YOUTH CRIME-CONTROL COMPLEX

Against the idealistic rhetoric of a government that claims it venerates young people lies the reality of a society that increasingly views youth through the optic of law and order, a society that appears all too willing to treat youth as criminals and when necessary make them "disappear" into the farthest reaches of the carceral state. Under such circumstances, the administration of schools and social services has given way to modes of confinement whose purpose is to ensure "custody and control"[27]. Hence, it is not surprising that "school officials and the criminal justice system are criminalizing children and teenagers all over the country, arresting them and throwing them in jail for behavior that in years past would never have led to the intervention of law enforcement"[28].

For instance, as the logic of the market and crime control frame a number of school policies, students are now subjected to zero tolerance rules that are used primarily to humiliate, punish, repress, and exclude them[29]. What are we to make of a society that allows the police to come into a school and arrest, handcuff, and haul off a 12-year-old student for doodling on her desk? Or, for that matter, a school system that allows a five-year old kindergarten pupil to be handcuffed and sent to a hospital psychiatric ward for being unruly in a classroom? Where is the public outrage when two police officers called to a day care center in central Indiana to handle an unruly 10 year-old decide to taser the child and slap him in the mouth. How does one account for a school administration allowing a police officer in Arkansas to use a stun gun to control an allegedly out of control 10-year-old girl? The contempt that schools and the justice system have for young people was recently played out in the case of a 17-year-old high school junior and honor student, Diane Tran, who was tossed in jail for a night because she was "missing too much school"[30]. What was overlooked beyond the larger issue of whether jail is the answer for any young person under the age of 18 is

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27   Z. Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, Polity Press, London 2004, p. 82.

28   B. Herbert, *School to Prison Pipeline*, "New York Times" 2007, June 9, p. A29.

29   For an extensive treatment of zero tolerance laws and the militarization of schools, see: Ch. Robbins, *Expelling Hope: The Assault on Youth and the Militarization of Schooling*, SUNY Press Albany 2008; K. Saltman, D. Gabbard (eds.), *Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools*, Routledge, New York 2003.

30   S. Seltzer, *What Does It Say About America That We Jail Teens for Having Sex or Being Late to School?*, "AlterNet" 2012, June 5, online: http://www.alternet.org/story/155747/what_does_it_say_about_america_that_we_jail_teens_for_having_sex_or_being_late_to_school_/?page=entire.

that Tran was not only taking advanced level classes but was working two jobs to help support her two siblings without the help of her parents who had moved out of town. In the face of a public uproar over the case and the elevation to Tran as " a poster-girl for both the recession and for the criminalization of youth," the judge who sentenced Tran stated that "A little stay in the jail for one night is not a death sentence"[31]. What is disturbing is that this disturbing and dangerous use of punitive disciplinary practices seems to exceed all notions of reason when it comes to young people. Moreover, as prison becomes a fundamental fact of American life, more and more young people are being sent to for-profit juvenile detention centers where they experience what Booth Gunter calls "unbelievable brutality"[32].

Even more shocking is the rise of zero tolerance policies to punish students with disabilities. Instead of recognizing the need to provide services for students with special needs, there is a dangerous trend on the part of school systems to adopt policies "that end in seclusion, restraint, expulsion, and–too often–law enforcement intervention for the disabled children involved"[33]. Sadly, this is but a small sampling of the ways in which children are being punished instead of educated in American schools, especially inner city schools.

All of these examples point to the growing disregard American society has for young people and the number of institutions willing to employ a crime-and-punishment mentality that constitutes not only a crisis of politics, but the emergence of new politics of educating and governing through crime[34]. Of course, we have seen this ruthless crime optic in previous historical periods, but the social costs of such criminalization was viewed as a social issue rather than as an individualized problem. That is, in which crime and reform were viewed as part of a broader constellation of socio-economic forces. For one example of this broader understanding of crime, I want to turn to Claude Brown, the late African-American novelist, who understood something about this war on youth. Though his novel, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, takes place in Harlem in the 1960s, there is something to be learned from his work. Take for example the following passage from his book, written in 1965:

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31 Ibidem.

32 B. Gunter, *The Unbelievable Brutality Unleashed on Kids in For-Profit Prisons*, "AlterNet" 2012, May 11, online: http://www.alternet.org/story/155326/the_unbelievable_brutality_unleashed_on_kids_in_for-profit_prisons.

33 S.E. Smith, *Police Handcuffing 7-Year-Olds? The Brutality Unleashed on Kids With Disabilities in Our School Systems*, "AlterNet" 2012, May 22, online: http://www.alternet.org/story/155526/police_handcuffing_7-year-olds_the_brutality_unleashed_on_kids_with_disabilities_in_our_school_systems?page=entire.

34 J. Simon, *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear,* Oxford University Press, New York 2007, p. 5.

"If Reno was in a bad mood – if he didn't have any money and he wasn't high – he'd say, "Man, Sonny, they ain't got no kids in Harlem. I ain't never seen any. I've seen some real small people actin' like kids, but they don't have any kids in Harlem, because nobody has time for a childhood. Man, do you ever remember bein' a kid? Not me. Shit, kids are happy, kids laugh, kids are secure. They ain't scared a nothin'. You ever been a kid, Sonny? Damn, you lucky. I ain't never been a kid, man. I don't ever remember bein' happy and not scared. I don't know what happened, man, but I think I missed out on that childhood thing, because I don't ever recall bein' a kid[35]."

In *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Claude Brown wrote about the doomed lives of his friends, families, and neighborhood acquaintances. The book is mostly remembered as a brilliant, but devastating portrait of Harlem under siege – a community ravaged and broken by drugs, poverty, unemployment, crime, and police brutality. But what Brown really made visible was that the raw violence and dead-end existence that plagued so many young people in Harlem, stole not only their future but their childhood as well. In the midst of the social collapse and psychological trauma wrought by the systemic fusion of racism and class exploitation, children in Harlem were held hostage to forces that robbed them of the innocence that comes with childhood and forced them to take on the risks and burdens of daily survival that older generations were unable to shield them from. At the heart of Brown's narrative, written in the midst of the civil rights struggle in the 1960s, is a "manchild," a metaphor that indicts a society that is waging a war on those children who are black and poor and have been forced to grow up too quickly. The hybridized concept of "manchild" marked a liminal space if not liminal drift in which innocence was lost and childhood stolen. Harlem was a well-contained, internal colony and its street life provided the conditions and the very necessity for insurrection. But the many forms of rebellion young people expressed – from the public and progressive to the interiorized and self-destructive – came with a price, which Brown reveals near the end of the book: "It seemed as though most of the cats that we'd come up with just hadn't made it. Almost everybody was dead or in jail"[36].

Childhood stolen was not a plea for self-help – that short-sighted and mendacious appeal that would define the reactionary reform efforts of the 1980s and 90s, from Reagan's hatred of government to Clinton's attack on welfare reform. It was a clarion call for condemning a social order that denied children a viable and life-enhancing future. While Brown approached everyday life in Harlem more as a poet than as a political revolutionary, politics was embedded in every sentence of the book—not a politics marked by demagoguery, hatred,

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35   C. Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Signet Books, New York 1965.

36   Ibidem, p. 419.

and orthodoxy, but one that made visible the damage done by a social system characterized by massive inequalities and a rigid racial divide. *Manchild* created the image of a society without children in order to raise questions about the future of a country that had turned its back on its most vulnerable population. Like the great critical theorist, C. Wright Mills, Claude Brown's lasting contribution was to reconfigure the boundaries between public issues and private sufferings. For Brown, racism was about power and oppression and could not be separated from broader social, economic, and political considerations. Rather than denying systemic causes of injustice (as did the discourses of individual pathology and self-help), Brown insisted that social forces had to be factored into any understanding of both group suffering and individual despair. Brown explored the suffering of the young in Harlem, but he did so by utterly refusing to privatize it, or to dramatize and spectacularize private life over public dysfunction, or to separate individual hopes, desires, and agency from the realm of politics and public life.

Nearly fifty years later, Brown's metaphor of the "manchild" is more relevant today than when he wrote the book, and "the Promised Land" more mythic than ever as his revelation about the sorry plight of poor and minority children takes on a more expansive meaning in light of the current economic meltdown and the dashed hopes of an entire generation now viewed as a generation without hope for a decent future. Youth today are forced to inhabit a rough world where childhood is nonexistent, crushed under the heavy material and existential burdens they are forced to bear.

What is horrifying about the plight of youth today is not just the severity of deprivations and violence they experience daily, but also how they have been forced to view the world and redefine the nature of their own childhood within the borders of hopelessness, cruelty, and despair. There is little sense of a hopeful future lying just beyond highly policed spaces of commodification and containment. An entire generation of youth will not have access to decent jobs, the material comforts, or the security available to previous generations. These children are a new generation of youth who have to think, act, and talk like adults; worry about their families, which may be headed by a single parent or two out of work and searching for a job; wonder how they are going to get the money to buy food and how long it will take to see a doctor in case of illness. These children are no longer confined to so-called ghettoes. As the burgeoning landscapes of poverty and despair increasingly find expression in our cities, suburbs, and rural areas, these children make their presence felt—they are too many to ignore or hide away in the usually sequestered and invisible spaces of disposability. They constitute a new and more unsettling scene of suffering, one that reveals not only the vast and destabilizing inequalities in our economic landscape but also portends a future that has no purchase on the hope that characterizes a vibrant democracy.

DEFENDING YOUTH AND DEMOCRACY
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

One way of addressing collapsing intellectual and moral visions regarding young people is to imagine those institutions, policies, values, opportunities, and social relations that both invoke adult responsibility and reinforce the ethical imperative to provide young people, especially those marginalized by race and class, with the economic, social, and educational conditions that make life livable and the future sustainable. Clearly the rudiments of such a vision, one that moves beyond what Alain Badiou has called the "crisis of negation"[37], which is a crisis of imagination, historical possibility, and an aversion to new ideas, can be found in the emerging global protests of the Occupy Movement in North America and other youth resistance movements around the globe. What is evident in this world wide movement is a bold attempt to imagine the possibility of another world, a rejection of the current moment of historical one-dimensionality, a refusal to settle for reforms that are purely incremental.

The Occupy Wall Street movement suggests that the young people are once again a source of creativity, possibility, and political struggle. Moreover, the movement points to a crucial political project in which new questions are being raised by many young people about emerging anti-democratic forces in the United States that threaten the collective survival of vast numbers of people, not exclusively through overt physical injury or worse, but also through an aggressive assault on social provisions on which millions of Americans depend. What is partly evident in the Occupy Wall Street movement is both a cry of collective indignation over economic and social injustices that pose a threat to humankind, and a critical expression of how young people and others can use new technologies, develop democratic social formations, and enact forms of critical pedagogy and civil disobedience necessary for addressing the diverse anti-democratic forces that have been poisoning American politics since the 1970s.

The protesters are making a claim for a sense of collective agency in which their voices must be heard as part of a concerted effort to shape the future that they will inherit. This effort is part of a new form of politics that offers resistance to the frontal assault being waged by casino capitalism against the social good, economic justice, immigrants, unions, worker rights, public servants, democratic public spheres, the notion of the common good, and human dignity itself. And it does so by delineating the contours, values, sensibilities, and hidden politics that now shape the commanding institutions of power and everyday relations of the

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37   J. van Houdt, *The Crisis of Negation: An Interview with Alain Badiou*, "Continent" 2011, vol. 1.4 (2011), online: http://continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/viewArticle.

99 percent, who are increasingly viewed as excess, disposable, and unworthy of living a life of dignity, shared responsibility, and hope. This task of delineation is not easy: the conditions of domination are layered, complex, and deeply flexible. Yet while the forms of oppression are diverse, there is a promising tendency within the Occupy Wall Street movement to refocus these diverse struggles into new forms of collective struggle and modes of solidarity built around social and shared, rather than individualized and competitive values.

The current protests make clear that this is not--indeed, cannot be--only a short-term project for reform, but a political movement that needs to intensify, accompanied by the reclaiming of public spaces, the progressive use of digital technologies, the development of public spheres, new modes of education, and the safeguarding of places where democratic expression, new identities, and collective hope can be nurtured and mobilized. America is losing its claim to democracy, prompting a new urgency for a collective politics and social movements capable of both negating the established order and imagining a new one. Until we address what Stanley Aronowitz has brilliantly analysed as our "Winter of Discontent" American society will continue to engage in autoimmune practices that attack the very values, institutions, social relations, and struggles that keep the ideal of democracy alive[38]. At the very least, the American public owes it to its children and future generations, if not the future of democracy itself, to begin to dismantle this machinery of violence and reclaim the democratic spirit of a future that works for life, justice, and human dignity rather than support the registers of social and ethical morbidity dressed up in the spectacles of consumerism and celebrity culture. It is time for the 99 percent to connect the dots, educate themselves, and develop social movements that can rewrite the language of democracy and put into place the institutions and formative cultures that make it possible. It is also time for such movements to acknowledge that while condemning corruption and greed are not unimportant, the path to real democracy most go beyond such moralism and address the systemic forces at work that produce corruption, massive levels of inequality, greed, and the rise of a form of economic Darwinism.

Such a project suggests making evident not only how casino capitalism intensifies the pathologies of racism, student debt, war, inequality, sexism, xenophobia, poverty, unemployment, and violence, but also how to take up the challenge of developing a politics and pedagogy that can actualize a democratic notion of the social–that is, further understand and collectively organize for a politics whose hope lies with defending the shared values, spaces, and public spheres that enable an emergent radical democracy. There is no room for failure here because failure would cast us back into the clutches of an authoritarianism--that while different from previous historical periods--shares nonetheless the

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38   S. Aronowitz, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, "Situations" 2012, IV, no.2, pp. 37-76.

imperative to proliferate violent social formations and a death-dealing blow to the promise of a democracy to come.

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SUMMARY

The paper consists of four parts. First there come general premises of the critical perspective. Then „The War Against Youth" is considered and characterised. Next there come deliberations on „The Youth Crime-Control Complex". Finally the Author puts forward the goal of „Defending Youth and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century". (LW)

Key words: youth, democracy, education, work, economy, crime.

PEŁZAJĄCA KARA I KRYZYS MŁODZIEŻY
W WIEKU ZUŻYWALNOŚCI
STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł składa się z czterech części. Najpierw mamy w nim ogólne przesłanki dla jego krytycznej perspektywy. Następnie rozważana jest i charakteryzowana część określona jako „Wojna przeciw młodzieży". Z kolei podjęte są analizy wskazujące na „Kompleks młodzieżowej przestępczości i jej kontroli". Wreszcie Autor wskazuje na konieczność działania na rzecz celu określonego jako „Obrona młodzieży i demokracji w XXI wieku". (LW)

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież, demokracja, edukacja, praca, ekonomia, przestępczość.