

**YOUTH IN DARK TIMES:
BROKEN PROMISES AND DASHED HOPES**

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By almost any political, economic, and ethical measure, Barack Obama's election victory in 2008 inherited a set of problems produced by one of the darkest periods in American history (see Giroux, 2008; Hedges, 2006; Wolin, 2008). In the eight years prior to Obama's presidency, not only did the spaces where genuine politics could occur largely disappear as a result of an ongoing assault by the market-driven forces of privatization, deregulation, and unrestrained corporate power, but there was also a radical hardening of the culture that increasingly disparaged democratic values, the public good, and human dignity—and with these the safety nets provided by a once robust but now exiled social state. George W. Bush, the privileged and profligate son of a wealthy Texas oilman, became the embodiment of a political era in which willful immaturity and stubborn civic illiteracy found its match in an emerging culture of excess and irresponsibility (see Hedges, 2009; Monbiot, 2008).¹ As the age of finance capital reigned supreme over American society, the ongoing work of democratization—along with the public spheres needed to sustain it—became an increasingly fragile, perhaps even dysfunctional, project. Market principles now reached far beyond the realm of the economic and played a formative role in influencing and organizing every domain of human activity and interaction, while simultaneously launching a frontal attack on notions of a common good, public purpose, non-commodified values, and democratic modes of governing.

Yet—even in the aftermath of the October 2008 global financial crisis and the historic election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States—the vocabulary and influence of corporate power and hapless governance can still be heard as the expansion of market fundamentalism continues, albeit more slowly, along the trajectory of privileging corporate interests over the needs of the public good, ignoring the rising demands of millions of people struggling for economic, racial, and political justice. Tragically, the

Obama administration seems complicit with what has become an element of common sense for a large and noisy segment of the populace—that the market, rather than politics, gives people what they want. President Obama does not talk about a much needed job creation program to address the massive hardships and suffering many people are experiencing. Instead, he gets his cues from Wall Street and now focuses on taming the budget deficit (Krugman, 2009: A27). Nor does he talk about the crippling poverty, collapsing urban infrastructures, or the general despair that now grips the country. This state of affairs suggests not only a perilous future for the social state and a government willing to intervene on behalf of its citizens, but also a dangerous view of governance in which economic priorities dominate and suppress important social needs, rather than being carefully adjusted toward the goal of fostering a more just, more democratic society.

It appears ever more unlikely that the Obama administration will undo the havoc wrought by the Bush administration (itself the culmination of a decades-long trend toward market deregulation) or reverse the effects of a rampant free-market fundamentalism now unleashed across the globe. As the financial crisis looms large in the lives of the majority of Americans, government funds are used to bail out Wall Street bankers rather than being used to address either the growing impoverishment of the many people who have lost homes, jobs and hope of a better future, or the structural conditions that created such problems. In this scenario, a privileged minority retains the freedom to purchase time, goods, services, and security, while the vast majority of people are relegated to a life without protections, benefits, and safety supports. For those populations considered expendable, redundant, and invisible by virtue of their race, class, and age, life becomes increasingly precarious.

Youth, in particular, are assaulted by market forces that commodify almost every aspect of their lives, though different groups of young people bear unequally the burden of this market-driven assault. Those who are marginalized by class and power suffer more than the indignity of being endlessly commodified and commercially carpet bombed. They are also objects of a low-intensity war that now criminalizes their behavior, subjects increasing aspects of their lives to harsh disciplinary practices, and treats them as both dangerous and disposable. In a society in which the social state that has been hollowed out, largely stripped of its welfare functions, youth are no longer provided with the economic, social, and cultural supports that offer them dignity, prosperity and the promise of a better future.

Instead, they are now largely governed by a corporate state that 'secures power through the imposition of law, discipline and uncompromising modes of punishment and imprisonment' (Butler, 2009: 5).

As the mechanisms of power, containment, and policing merge, the spaces that young people inhabit become increasingly militarized. At the same time such hyper-militarized spaces, extending from the street to the school, are abetted by a cultural apparatus and public pedagogy that jumps at every opportunity to demean and demonize young people, especially poor minority youth, by representing them as an ever present threat to society. In this instance, it becomes all too easy for the American public to move from the notion of young people being troubled to viewing them as trouble, as a threat to be contained. Newspapers and other popular media treat their audiences to an endless stream of alarming images and dehumanizing stories about rampaging young people who allegedly occupy a domestic war zone. Youth are no longer categorized as Generation X, Y, and Z. On the contrary, they are now defined rhetorically in mainstream media as 'Generation Kill', 'Killer Children', or, as one CNN TV special labeled them, 'Killers in Our Midst'.² Capitalizing on shocking and sensational imagery not only swells the media's bottom line; it also adds fuel to a youth panic that insidiously portrays young people as pint-size nihilists and an ever-present threat to public order. Such negative and demeaning views have had disastrous consequences for young people as their lives are increasingly subjected to policies and modes of governance defined through the logic of punishment, surveillance, and carceral control. Moreover, under the reign of an expanding punishing state coupled with the persistent structural racism of the criminal justice system, the situation for a growing number of impoverished young people and youth of color is getting much worse.

These are young people whose labor is unneeded, who are locked out of the commodity market, and who often inhabit the impoverished and soul crushing margins of society. Too often they fall prey to the dictates of a youth-crime-governing complex that increasingly subjects them to harsh disciplinary controls while criminalizing more and more aspects of their behavior. How else to explain that on any given day 'one in every 10 young male high school dropouts is in jail or juvenile detention' (Sum *et al.*, 2009). What kind of sense does it make to pass truancy laws in which a student, even when he has a school pass that allows him to be out of classes early, is stopped by the police and issued a \$570 ticket for

truancy (Hing, 2009)? How can we reconcile the rise of zero tolerance laws in schools with the presumption that schools should be places where young people can feel safe and receive an education that prepares them to be thoughtful, critical and socially responsible citizens when such laws impose harsh penalties for often trivial infractions, increase rates of suspension and expulsion, disproportionately target African American youth, push poor young people out of school and often into the criminal justice system. According to the Advancement Project:

Zero tolerance has engendered a number of problems: denial of education through increased suspension and expulsion rates, referrals to inadequate alternative schools, lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and racial profiling of students..... Once many of these youths are in 'the system', they never get back on the academic track. Sometimes, schools refuse to readmit them; and even if these students do return to school, they are often labeled and targeted for close monitoring by school staff and police. Consequently, many become demoralized, drop out, and fall deeper and deeper into the juvenile or criminal justice systems. Those who do not drop out may find that their discipline and juvenile or criminal records haunt them when they apply to college or for a scholarship or government grant, or try to enlist in the military or find employment. In some places, a criminal record may prevent them or their families from residing in publicly subsidized housing. In this era of zero tolerance, the consequences of child or adolescent behaviors may long outlive students' teenage years. (NAACP, 2009)

Where is the collective anger over the use of disciplinary policies that share a shameful and close affinity to the legacy of segregated education, slavery, racial targeting, the harsh and ruthless criminalization of poor white and minority youth, and pedagogies of punishment, all of which push young people out of school and into the criminal justice system. In this instance, schools neither educate nor provide even minimal training for the workplace. Instead, they simply mimic traditional lockdown institutions such as the prison and display a disdain for youth that offers no apologies because

politicians, school boards, administrators, and some teachers have become too arrogant and ruthless to imagine any resistance. Wedded to the bloodless values of a market driven society deeply implicated in reproducing the structures of racism, inequality, and exclusion, schools now inhabit a 'dead zone' that banishes civic pedagogy, the arts, and different critical modes of intelligibility. Schools now do everything they can to deaden the imagination by defining and framing classroom experiences through a lethal mix of instrumental values, cost-benefit analyses, test-based accountability schemes, and high stakes testing regimes. These instrumentally and market-based values and practices drown out, if not repress, those spaces and pedagogical practices which provide the conditions for students to think critically, value their own voices, mobilize their curiosity, engage in shared learning, and, most of all, learn the knowledge, habits, public values, and social relations necessary for the practice of empowerment necessary for fostering a real democracy and taking responsibility for sustaining it. More and more, it appears that as schools become more militarized and subject to the latest technologies of regulation, surveillance, and control, they are transformed into laboratories in which the limits of new authoritarian tendencies endemic to a corporate/punishing society are tamed, attenuated, and tested (Bauman, 2002: 67-68).

Where is the moral outrage over a nation that incarcerates one in one-hundred adults in its local, state, and federal prisons and jails, fragmenting families, desolating communities, and ruining the lives of millions of children (see Pew Center, 2008)? Where are the intellectuals, parents, teachers, and social movements expressing political indignation over a country that has the onerous and dubious distinction of being the world's leading jailer of young people? Where is the moral wrath over the racist practices that lead to the increasing criminalization of African American youth, particularly those who drop out of schools with 'nearly one in four young black male dropouts incarcerated or otherwise institutionalized on an average day' (Pew Center, 2008). As one politician noted, 'Dropping out of high school [has become] an apprenticeship for prison' (Pew Center, 2008).

The devastation wreaked by free market policies have been largely financed in the hard currency of human suffering that such policies have imposed on children, readily evident in some astounding statistics that suggest a profound moral and political contradiction at the heart of one of the richest democracies in the world. The notion that children should be treated as a crucial social resource and

represent 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. Children, for example, make up a disproportionate share of the poor in the United States in that 'they are 26 per cent of the total population, but constitute 39 per cent of the poor' (Chelala, 2006). Just as alarmingly, over 8 million children lack health insurance (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2009), and millions lack affordable child care and decent early childhood education. One of the most damaging statistics revealing how low a priority children are in America can be seen in the fact that among the industrialized nations in the world the United States ranks first in billionaires and in defense expenditures and yet ranks an appalling twenty-ninth in infant mortality (MacDorman & Mathews, 2008). As we might expect, behind these grave statistics lies a series of decisions to favor those already advantaged economically at the expense of the poor and socially vulnerable. Moreover, for the last three decades we have witnessed, especially under the second Bush administration, savage cuts to education, scientific research, and social services such as nutritional assistance for impoverished mothers and veterans' medical care—all of which helped fund tax breaks for the inordinately rich. Sadly, it now seems reasonable to assume that under the current financial crisis non-privileged youth will experience even greater economic and educational hardships, while becoming even more invisible to the larger society.

The toll in human suffering that results from these policies of punishment and neglect becomes clear in shocking stories about poor white and minority youth who literally die because they lack health insurance, often have to fend for themselves in the face of life's tragedies, and increasingly are excommunicated from the sphere of human concern. Too many youth are now rendered invisible and disposable in a world in which short-term investments yield quick profits while long-term social investments in young people are viewed as a drag on the economy. It gets worse. In what amounts to a national disgrace, one out every five children currently lives in poverty. Moreover, while 10 percent of white children live in poverty, 34 percent of all black children live in poor families (Land, 2009a; Fass & Cauthen, 2008). With home foreclosures still on the rise, school districts across the nation have identified and enrolled almost a million homeless children (Land, 2009b). There are 1.7 million more children living in poverty today than in 2000. Unfortunately, their numbers are growing at an exponential rate, as 1 in 50 children and teens are now living in crowded rooms in seedy

welfare hotels, in emergency shelters, or with relatives, or they simply live on the streets (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). What is unique about these children and young people is not just the severity of deprivations they experience daily, but how they have been forced to view the world and redefine the nature of their own childhood between the borders of hopelessness and despair. There is little sense of a bright future lying just beyond the shadows of highly policed and increasingly abandoned urban spaces. An entire generation of youth will not have access to the jobs, material comforts, or social securities available to previous generations. These children are a new generation of youth forced to grow up fast—they think, act, and talk like adults. They worry about their families, which may be headed by a single parent or two out of work and searching for a job; they wonder how their parents are going to get the money to buy food and what it will take to pay for a doctor. And these children are no longer confined to so-called ghettos. As the burgeoning landscape of poverty and despair spreads across our cities, suburbs, and rural areas, these children make their presence felt everywhere—there are just too many to ignore or hide away in the usually contained and invisible spaces of disposability. These young people constitute a new and more unsettling scene of suffering, one that reveals not only vast inequalities in our economic landscape but also portends a future that has no purchase on the hope that should characterize an aspiring democracy.

We are treated endlessly to stories in which young people are robbed of their innocence as they are forced to worry about problems that ordinarily are the responsibility of adults. Too many children find themselves living in cars or seedy motels, or even worse, living on the streets. They think about getting jobs to help their parents buy food, put down money for an apartment, or simply get a motel room. Childhood concerns about dating, sports, and hanging out with friends are now replaced with more crucial, if not time-consuming and health-draining, concerns about surviving on a daily basis.

These narratives just scratch the surface of a new social and economic reality, as millions of children now find themselves suffering physical, psychological, and developmental problems that thus far go unacknowledged by the Obama administration, as it bails out the automotive industries, banks, and other financial institutions. What kind of country have we become that we cannot protect our children or offer them even the most basic requirements

to survive? Where is the public indignation over an administration that provides a multi-billion gift to Wall Street but cannot develop a jobs creation program to put poor white and minority youth to work? How can the American people put up with a government that is willing to subsidize and rescue the insurance giant American International Group but do virtually nothing to provide assistance for the nearly half of all U.S. children and 90 percent of black youth who will be on food stamps at some point in their childhood? Everywhere we turn, we see untold amounts of hardship and human suffering among young and old alike. Millions of hard-working people have lost their jobs, homes, hopes, and in some cases their sanity while Wall Street zombies flourish financially and reward their incompetence, failure, and moral indifference with lavish bonuses, punctuated with renewed efforts to prevent any of the reforms that would put a check on the corrupt practices that produced a global financial meltdown. What does it mean to witness this type of suffering among so many children and not do anything about it—our attentions quickly diverted to view the spectacles and moral indifference that characterize so much of the cut-throat world of reality TV, zombie politics, and a consumer culture that shapes the sensibilities and inner lives of adults and children alike? Obama's attraction for the cultural capital of the rich, his unwillingness to take risks, his Harvard taught propensity for seeking middle ground, his increasing unwillingness to fight for the people who elected him, his willingness to and his disconnect from his own pre-election ideals make him increasingly look not just weak but like a mere puppet of corporate power, an innocent who has been practically eaten alive by the rich and powerful who now treat him with a sense of scorn and derision only matched by their own moral vacuity and arrogance. Of course, this might suggest that I and others initially expected too much from Obama, but that is not the case. I realize that reforming the current problems facing the United States do not lie in the hands of one man but reside in changing the deeply structured economic and social relations of power and interests that inform a mode of casino capitalism that for all intent and purposes is out of control. At the same time, Obama must be held responsible for the decisions he has made—and, for the most part, those decisions that have shaped everything from financial regulation to educational reform are not on the side of working and middle-class people but on the side of the rich and powerful.

At this moment in history, it is more necessary than ever to enter this debate over the fate of American democracy by registering youth as a central theoretical, moral, and political concern. Doing so

reminds adults of their ethical and political responsibility to future generations and will further legitimate what it means to invest in youth as a symbol for nurturing civic imagination and collective resistance in response to the suffering of others. Youth provide a powerful referent for a critical discussion about the long-term consequences of casino capitalism and its hyper market-driven policies, while also gesturing towards the need for putting into place those conditions that make a democratic future possible. We have been punishing children for a long time in the United States. Removed from the inventory of social concerns and the list of cherished public assets, young people have been either disparaged as a symbol of danger or simply rendered invisible. Viewed as another casualty of the recession, youth are no longer included in a discourse about the promise of a better future. Instead they are now considered part of a disposable population whose presence threatens to recall repressed collective memories of adult responsibility in the service of a social contract and democratic ideals. Injustice and inequality have a long legacy in the United States, and their most punishing modes and lethal effects have been largely directed against poor white and minority children. The shameful condition of America's youth exposes not only their unbearable victimization but also those larger social and political forces that speak to the callous hardening of a society that actively produces the needless suffering and death of its children. The moral nihilism of a market society, the move from a welfare to a warfare state, the persistent racism of the alleged 'raceless' society, the collapse of education into training, the deskilling of teachers and the militarizing of schools, the continued violations of civil liberties, the commodification of knowledge, and the rise of a pernicious corporate state work together to numb us to the suffering of others, especially children.

The crisis of youth is symptomatic of the crisis of democracy and it calls us to account as much for the threat that it poses as for the challenges and possibilities it invokes. One way of addressing our collapsing intellectual and moral visions regarding young people is to imagine those 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 issue at stake here is not a one-off bailout or temporary fix but concrete structural economic, educational, and political reforms that provide everyone with real social, political, and individual rights and

freedoms.

None of the problems facing this generation will be solved unless the institutions, social relations, and values that legitimate and reproduce current levels of inequality, power, and human suffering are dismantled, along with the formative culture that supports it. The very ideal of democracy has been hijacked by casino capitalism and its rampant structures of inequality and power. We catch a glimpse of what this means in Peter Dreier's observation that 'Today, the richest one percent of Americans has 22 percent of all income and about 40 percent of all wealth. This is the biggest concentration of income and wealth since 1928' (Dreier, 2007; Editors, 2007). This type of economic inequality is not merely incompatible with a functioning democracy, it makes democracy dysfunctional and corrupt. Just as government can no longer outsource its responsibilities, the American public can no longer allow its political system to be governed by the rich and powerful. Political culture has been emptied of its democratic values and is in free fall, as it is now largely shaped by the most powerful, politically corrupt, socially irresponsible, and morally tainted elements of the society. The widening gap between the rich and the poor has to be addressed if young people are to have a viable future. And that requires pervasive structural reforms that constitute a real shift in both power and politics away from a market-driven system that views too many children as disposable. We need to reimagine what liberty, equality, and freedom might mean as truly democratic values and practices.

Any society that endorses market principles as a template for shaping all aspects of social life and cares more about the accumulation of capital than it does about the fate of young people is in trouble. Next to the needs of the market place, life has become cheap, if not irrelevant. We have lived too long with governments and institutions that use power to promote violent acts, conveniently hiding their guilt behind a notion of state secrecy or lofty claims to democracy, while selectively punishing those considered expendable—in prisons, collapsing public schools, foster care institutions, and urban slums. Under the current regime of free-market casino capitalism, children lack power and agency, and are increasingly viewed as either commodities or simply rendered disposable. If Barack Obama's call to address the crucial problems facing young people is to be taken seriously, then the political, economic, and institutional conditions that both legitimate and sustain a shameful attack on youth have to be made visible, open to

challenge, and transformed. This can only happen by refusing the somnambulism and social amnesia that coincide with the pretense of a post-racial politics and the all-too-easy equation of free-market fundamentalism and democracy, especially given the effects such illusions have on those marginalized by class and color. The road to recovery must align itself with new social movements willing to take risks and who embrace a vision of a democracy that is on the side of children, particularly young children in need. It must enable the conditions for youth to learn—to ‘grow’, as John Dewey once insisted, as engaged social actors more alive to their responsibilities to future generations than contemporary adult society has proven itself willing to be for them.

Notes

¹ For an extensive study of anti-intellectualism in America, see Hoftstadter (1963); Jacoby (2008).

² ‘Generation Kill’ is the name of a seven-part HBO mini television series about what the *New York Times* calls ‘a group of shamelessly and engagingly profane, coarse and irreverent marines ... that spearhead[ed] the invasion’ in the second Iraq war. See Stanley (2008: B1). The term ‘Killer Children’ appears as the title of a *New York Times* book review (Harrison, 2008: 1, 8).

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