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ARTICLE

The Play of Punishment in the “Culture of Cruelty”^[1]

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A marquis product in a high-end, U.S.-based electronics store’s holiday catalog has as its description:

Anyone can give a video game. Yours can *fly*. Give them the power of military-grade flight technology that creates an augmented reality gaming environment complete with virtual air-to-air missiles, interactive targeting systems and fiery explosions. Now, how cool is that? (Brookstone, 2011a, p. 3)

The advertisement shows the Parrot Ar.Drone, what looks very much like a concept model of a drone bomber and a clean-cut young white man controlling it via his iPad while two young women adoringly rest their heads on his shoulders and watch him “play.” As the company’s website claims, the drone’s “augmented reality turns the world around you into a game” (Brookstone, 2011b). Despite its popular appeal, the Parrot Ar.Drone has some drawbacks. According to the review page on the company’s website, a self-described “high-end shopper” does not like the expensive shipping for drone repairs. Another self-described shopper, this time a “budget shopper,” does not appreciate the short battery life and would like the company to produce a convenient tote bag to take the drone on family car trips. To this criticism, a “parent” shopper, concerned as any parent would be about his/her child’s peace of mind and developmental needs, suggests to simply purchase a “gaggle of extra batteries” to “enjoy this thing for hours.” And, yet, another drone user does not like the “sometimes quirky behavior” of this military-grade toy. Serious problems, indeed—especially the “sometimes quirky behavior” of military-grade technologies (Brookstone, 2011b).

For a moment, one could easily be distracted from the fact that U.S. drone planes, especially from the perspective of those of us who get periodic reports of the use of “man-less” planes in the U.S. war on terror, also seem to operate by virtual means and thusly seem to produce virtual effects. Undoubtedly, they produce effects that most U.S. citizens virtually could barely comprehend. Unlike their play counterparts waiting, at \$299.99, for deployment in family leisure during and after the holidays in gated communities and whatever is left of suburbia in the U.S., the people commanding drones in the U.S. war on terror, at an approximate cost of \$218 million per plane (Drew, 2011), *do* produce fiery explosions. While inhabiting a position in the world that would seem very much like it had been turned into a game for them, drone plane controllers produce an all-too-violently abbreviated, not augmented, reality for others, elsewhere. People who command U.S. drone planes, for instance, over the same weekend the above-mentioned glossy catalog was mailed (Thanksgiving weekend, 2011), killed 26 Pakistani soldiers who functioned putatively as allies in the U.S. global war on terror (Robinson, 2011). While it is difficult to find U.S. media sources reporting widely on the deaths related to the multi-arena U.S.-led drone war and the U.S. government only casually approximates the amount of so-called collateral casualties it produces. An independent report released in August 2011 claims that “175 children are among at least 2,347 people reported killed in US attacks since 2004,” with “392 civilians among the dead” as a consequence of the U.S. drone war in only its Pakistan theater (Woods, 2011). Approximately one in four people killed by drone bombing in Pakistan, then, was not defined as an enemy target.

As peculiar as this juxtaposition might seem, it reflects key dimensions of what Henry Giroux (2011) calls “the culture of cruelty” (p. 13). Widespread suffering and destruction—symbolic, material, physical, social, cultural, or political—alongside invitations to spectate or engage in forms of leisure that appropriate or replicate the values involved in the inflicting of suffering constitute a considerable portion of the culture of cruelty’s national and international politics, relationships, and practices. Having emerged attendant to neoliberalism’s rabid social Darwinism, with its organized attacks on the social state and all things public, the culture of cruelty provides a formidable set of ways of making meaning in everyday life, along with rationalizing, and inviting people to rationalize, the many brutal excesses of a market fundamentalism that casts all human affairs in the image of the market transaction. These ways of making meaning and their attendant social relationships have become commonplace in a variety of sites ranging from the workplace to reality television (Couldry, 2010), from children and youth’s gaming cultures to the family (Barrett, 2006; Hochschild, 2003). It is also clear, with the revision (really intensification) of No Child Left Behind (2002) (NCLB) in Obama’s Race to the Top Fund (RTTT, 2009), that the unfettered market relationship also provides the mostly “beyond-left-and-right” template on which public schooling has been reimagined. This reimagining can be seen in a range of public school issues from policy to practice and organization of schools to classroom management schemes, inclusive of ardently behavioristic disciplinarian regimes (e.g., positive behavior intervention and support) that not only rely on an unhealthy fascination with numbers, data, and heteronomously defined performance outcomes, but also couple classroom pedagogy and student behavior to public stigmatization and individualistic consumerist codes. In a not-so-subtle way, a discourse and set of relationships reflective of games and, thus, of play, shrouds neoliberalism and the culture of cruelty’s various practices, rituals, and relationships—seen obviously, for instance, in the name *Race to the Top*. These various practices, rituals, and relationships have, it is hard to believe, provided a soft veneer to the longer-standing rituals, practices, and forms of play involved in the hyper-punishment and criminalization of children and youth in schools.

George Herbert Mead (1934) discussed in a classic collection of his talks, *Mind, Self, and Society*, the pedagogical power of play in the formation of self and, in his view, the reproduction of society: *the game*. For Mead, play acted for children and youth as practice in and preparation for the game. It was in play that children and youth performed roles and, as part of playing the game, they developed an understanding of the attitudes of the others involved in the game had towards them. This “organization of the attitudes of those involved in the same process” served as the referent against which children and youth developed their sense of self (p. 154). This organization of attitudes represented the *generalized other*, the community as whole. Since the group or community or society was involved in a common activity with a set of tendencies, if not agreed-upon purposes, Mead argued that the child develops the fullest sense of self not merely when s/he has taken on the attitudes of others toward themselves and to her/himself, but when s/he has internalized the attitudes of others toward the common activity in which the group/community was involved and the purposes and values toward which that activity was directed. It was in being able to identify the collective attitudes toward the common activity that the individual then had control over her/himself as a member of a wider community. The generalized other had to, and could not but, *influence* the behavior of individuals, their constructions of self, and the roles they performed in the relationships constituting their common activity.

For one to remain part of a group, community, or society, Mead said, the “individual, then, takes or assumes the organized social attitudes of the given social group or community...toward the social problems of various kinds which confront that group . . . at any given time” (p. 156). Then as now, to both gain eventual entrance to and remain in the game, children and youth thus had to play and, in the process, be open to a considerable degree of influence. Mead again, said: “The importance of the game is that it lies entirely inside of the child’s own experience” (p. 159), and goes so far as to say “modern education” (one assumes schooling) made it possible for the game to penetrate so effectively and efficiently into the constitution of the self (p.159). The game, including its logic and supporting values, must come to be seen as the child’s by the child, as his/her interests and values. Otherwise, the child would neither see her/himself as a member of the community. Nor would s/he develop a modern self, not one, anyhow, that others would recognize and not one her/himself could think about or talk about, the self having been constructed, in part, from the responses, attitudes, and the languages of the generalized other, and the game would have no players. Hence the power of play: Play contains the subtle and not-so-subtle traces of wider ideologies at the same time that it is presented, or presents itself, as something related to but structurally differentiated from the game, *per se*. As opposed to drudgery or imposition, play also allows for some sense of autonomy and choice, despite the influence of the group. Play also invites a form of pleasure distinct from the pleasure one gets from doing a job or performing a given role. Further, there is some play, or sliding of role definition, allowed, even expected, in the performance of roles as one developed the repertoire, both linguistic and behavioral, required by the role.

Mead had good reason, as did other thinkers of his time, like his fond colleague John Dewey, to invest so much thought and promise into the concept of the game. The game had a mostly visible logic: to build, sometimes with a quite literal emphasis, the social, cultural, and material conditions for a richer, more extensive, more embodied democracy alongside a rapidly developing industrial order. Children and youth, and the forms of play organized for them, thusly were seen as key pieces to this logic for they would be the ones to perpetuate and transmit the rules of the game and participate in the re-creation of the conditions in which the desired outcomes of the game could be pursued. The game seemed to have a future, and a past, play being seen as a critical developmental or mediating link between the present and the future. Now as then, children and youth still matter to the game, just in a different way because the game itself has obviously changed. For today’s children and youth in public schools, the notions of play and the game raise interesting, if not troubling, questions. Who frames and defines the social problems to which society expects children and youth to orient their play—and thus their formations of self? Who produces the materials with which children and youth conduct their play, and in whose interests? In what conditions does the play take shape? What happens when children and youth, or the institutions on which youth depend and with which they are associated, are defined as the social problems, and the attitudes of the community/society are organized accordingly? What roles are offered to children and youth to play, by what rules, according to what logic, and toward what end(s)?

These and other questions come to my mind when asked, by the editors of *The Journal of Educational Controversy*, to consider *what are these policies [and practices of criminalization] teaching our children?* To the list of questions above, one might subsequently add the following two questions: How might criminalization and punishment in schools be plays as in specific practices of, rather than play as in preparation or rehearsal for, the current game? And while criminalization and punishment and plays of punishment in schools do provide forms of play, have they thus blurred the lines between play and the game in the ways by which the play of punishment in schools, as much as in society, supports and invests meaning in the organizing relationships of the game, like suffering alongside spectatorship?^[2]

Grotesque displays of privilege/power and egregious forms of punishment, seen in the invitation to play with drones and the risk associated with being an unintended target of (military, symbolic-political, or economic) drone bombing, do more than animate our contemporary game bounded by and played in the interests of “the culture of cruelty” (Giroux, 2011). Privilege and punishment help organize it and act as modalities through which people, including children and youth, make meaning about themselves, others, and the many webs of interdependencies that still link individuals, groups, and institutions. These links exist, no matter how relentlessly neoliberals continue to claim that the *unattached individual* provides the explanatory frame and acts as the primary unit of analysis for nearly the entirety of all social and political phenomena. For privilege to be celebrated, for it to

achieve the symbolic and political authority by which it circulates in the U.S., something or someone, some group, whether the individuals who constitute the group share any characteristic in common or not, must be scorned. Likely, those who find themselves lumped into the scorned share only the following characteristics in common: denial of the opportunities, and lack of credible symbolic and material resources, to influence the representations by which others come to know, respond to and interact with them. As Zygmunt Bauman (2007) notes, they also typically get charged for bringing, as individuals, the scorn upon themselves as individuals. How else can it be suggested that the privileged found their lot by anything other than private initiative, if the scorned, too, did not find their place by way of private initiative? The scorned, as much as any other group, have been given an ascribed social role in the language of achieved identities, only they had less choice, and fewer resources, to make the achievement the outcome of making, and having the requisite means to make, choices from qualitatively different courses of action. And, what more effective way to punish individuals or groups than to refer to the fact that they were scorned, that they were deserving targets of punishment? For reasons needed to justify the scorn, look to the fact they have been punished or, in the event we need a target on which to unload ambient and, in some cases, otherwise inexplicable fears, could be punishable.

Henry A. Giroux (2011) defines the culture of cruelty in which punishment plays a central role as

the institutionalization and widespread adoption of a set of values, policies, and symbolic practices that legitimate forms of organized violence against human beings and inexorably lead to hardship, suffering, and despair. (p.14)

The culture of cruelty would be little without the scorn/punishment complex and its present absence, privilege/power. Scorn shares semantic territory with humiliation. Perhaps this is why Giroux (2011) speaks of a "politics of humiliation" as an essential component in the culture of cruelty (p. 13). Politics, most generally, means the forms, processes, and practices by which a group, community, or society allocates resources (both symbolic and material), goods, services, and opportunities. Thus, to speak of a politics of humiliation is to refer to the allocation of resources, goods, services, and opportunities along the axis of those who can degrade and those who can be degraded, scorned, subjected to the "denial of dignity" (Bauman, 2008, p. 22).

Whether symbolic degradation precedes the materialization of degradation in perverted interpersonal and social relationships, social harm, foreclosed opportunities and aborted life chances, or whether it enters on the backside of material degradation as its justification, the "system of universally significant symbols" must be seen as a central institution involved in the culturing of cruelty (Mead, 1934, pp. 157-158). Language not only orients a variety of individuals and highly differentiated groups into "some sort of social relation" (Mead, 1934, p.158) but also provides them the means and medium through which to narrate both the self and social the relationships of which they are a part (Couldry, 2010). Yet, language does such with a rub: Especially in the culture of cruelty and a society such as ours with its organized asymmetries of power and authority, only some have more control over the relations into which they enter or are cast, the meanings ascribed to those relationships, and the ways and means of circulating narratives of those relationships.

Consider an example of language in the culture of cruelty too illustrative to ignore at the time of this writing. Republican Newt Gingrich proposed in a talk at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, as part of his campaign's economic platform (and repeatedly, it was not a slip of the private tongue in a public setting), that poor, inner-city youth should be employed as janitors in their schools, replacing adults from their community employed as janitors. As Gingrich put it in November of 2011, "It is tragic what we do in the poorest neighborhoods, entrapping children in, first of all, in child laws, which are truly stupid" (as cited in Geiger, 2011). Terribly stupid, indeed, to offer protections to youth in a society that desires to offer socio-legal protections to no one, except those who write and write away the protections. His rationale for the proposal was that such a plan, if it were implemented, would surprisingly correct for the "crippling" effect of the "core principles of protecting unionization and bureaucratization" on children (as cited in Geiger, 2011). Somehow, with now 30 years of job losses, stagnating or declining wages, and deeply engrained poverty that resulted from neoliberal policies of which Gingrich has long been a supporter, children will redefine the face of contemporary labor, at the same time that they will resolve what Gingrich and others apparently think are patterns of racially-bounded behaviors and attitudes like not showing up to work on Monday and leaving work early because of a tiff with a girlfriend (Geiger, 2011). Gingrich seems to be partly right: Such a plan would radically redefine the face of labor. Yet, the accuracy of his assumptions stops here. Strategically, one assumes, he fails to identify the many social, cultural, and economic effects historically associated with organized labor like job security, living wages, health plans, stable tax bases on which schools could be funded, and community and family stability—the bases on which youth could develop the relationships and values Gingrich and others think such youth are sorely lacking. Thus, the point remains: How else could Gingrich's plan—and the cruel caricature he made of the children to whom the proposal would be directed—be seen than as a symbolic-political drone bombing of poor youth and youth of color for nothing other than being poor and of color and of being indirectly associated, by the political and economic elites and in the public imagination, with the adults (specifically, poor people of color), communities (largely Black and Brown U.S. cities), and institutions (public schools) that the U.S. political class by and large scorns and has scorned in these particular ways for nearly 30 years—that is, for being collateral casualties of the symbolic blasting of despised populations that are perceived to be disposable?

No matter how insensitive Gingrich's view might seem to some observers (although not to all: it has drawn cheers from attendees at his talks), it reflects or relates to a number of now deeply embedded attributes of neoliberalism that its culture of cruelty

attempts to justify. Gingrich seems to hit three of the central ones with a vacuous clarity that has become a staple of neoliberal discourses across alleged party lines. First, the individual and hyper-individualism rule, even for children and youth, perhaps even more so for children and youth. For if children and youth can be disentangled symbolically from shared interests across classes of adults as “affective investments” in the future (Grossberg, 2001, p. 133), then it is much easier to make appeals that adults, too, should be left to find “biographical solutions to systemic contradictions” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. xxii). Such symbolic work has gone a long way in informing policies that continue to create material conditions and relationships in which we all have to be individuals—some individuals just being more equal than others. And, we are instructed to see such an outcome of the game as a fact of life, not as a historical fact that was produced and continues to be reproduced each time we hail the exemplar individual, demean the flawed individual, heed the call when we ourselves are hailed to be the individual, and craft policies that invite (coerce?) individuals to assume private responsibility for public issues. Second, continued privatization of whatever remains of public goods (and individualization of the risks of social relationships, such as those associated with labor, must be seen as the only alternative to economic crises that the deregulated neoliberal market itself created in public goods and services via the private investment-punishment state. After three years of a deep recession, what some have begun to call a depression, the best we can imagine for public schools, for example, are privatization and charter schemes, market-based competitive grants, and continued means-testing of school funding when we do not outright defund them. Why invest in jobs or job retraining programs for adults in deindustrialized cities, and why invest in public school infrastructure in poor urban and rural areas, when we could simply put the youth to work, while cutting costs and removing any pretenses that the U.S. has any interests other than to substitute humiliation for the possibility of a meaningful and engaging public education for poor youth and poor youth of color? Third, the state has no positive role to play in *social reproduction*. Rather, it should intervene only insofar as it participates in the sanctification of the market and market relationships as the template on which social relationships should be modeled, while engaging in perpetual processes of the *social production* of the neoliberal individual. And, children draw from, and are encouraged to engage with, a range of social sources of knowing that have play with these three primary and many other facets of the game.

None of these transformations have boded well for members of existing *classes* of people, like the poor, the working poor, people of color, the elderly and infirm, immigrants, and children and youth—now identified as unrealized neoliberal individuals who have been lumped into *the underclass* (Bauman, 2004; Bauman, 2007; Giroux, 2009; Goldberg, 2009; Wacquant, 2009). As the state has simultaneously shed its social functions and, in the process, redistributed wealth upwards (Domhoff, [2005] 2011), the state’s legitimacy in exercising a positive role in society, even if it saw a return on investment in doing such, has been shattered. Accordingly, the state functions as a private investment-punishment state. Threats, internal and external, have become its lifeblood and, as such, need to be actively constructed if the state is to even have this role. Safety and fear of threats to private safety become the animating themes of life politics and organizing categories for a range of social interactions (Bauman, 2011). And, the state has demonstrated it will go to heretofore unimaginable ends to protect its role as a private investment-punishment state, seen only all too vividly in U.S. cities and towns throughout the fall of 2011 in the police brutality that responded to overwhelmingly peaceful protests that emerged as the Occupy Movement, responding to a variety of things, including the state’s role in redistributing wealth upwards. Yet, behind this naked power had been the development, almost apace, with the initially gradual shedding of the social state from the late 1980s and 1990s to today, of an extensive prison-industrial complex coupled with the increasing intermeshing of local police departments and the Department of Defense (Kraska, 1999; Parenti, 1999). In 1990, for instance, the U.S. had approximately 720,000 prisoners (King, Mauer, and Young, 2005); as of 2011, the U.S. jailed 2.3 million prisoners, without proportionate increases in crime (King, Mauer, & Young, 2005; The Sentencing Project, 2011; see also, Giroux, 2009).

Such has been the logic, such are the rules, and such are merely some of the outcomes of the game.

Toy drones, and playing with drones, do not cause military drone controllers to “accidentally” kill civilians and other non-enemy targets—at least not any more than playing with toy tasers causes police officers and school resource officers (SROs) to often indiscriminately taser unsuspecting citizens and, increasingly, students. Toy drones are only one type of many artifacts, the play associated with them practices, that materialize and locate at the level of the body the wider relationships that support and reflect the culture of cruelty’s *system of universally significant symbols*, of which drone bombers are part and parcel. These forms of play/practice, however, prepare some groups of children for a game in which they are expected to have no concern for collateral casualties. Having been drawn from and continuing to draw from the same reservoir of meanings that feeds the culture of cruelty’s system of universally significant symbols, much the same could be said of the artifacts associated with, and the forms of play and plays of punishment in, the criminalization of students. While obviously differing in scale and scope of destruction, drone bombing in the war on terror and the criminalization/hyper-punishment of children and youth in schools share similar logics: They reflect external and internal dimensions of the game so central to the culture of cruelty.

The ways we talk about public schools in public discourse provide considerable insight to the game for which public schools provide both practice and play. Over the last 20 years, public schools have been cast in two primary ways: as businesses and safe havens of consumer choice/private interest for some communities of students—and as disciplinary centers for other students (see NCLB and RTTT). For some communities, we talk of school as a now not-so-peculiar hybrid of business, prison, and bootcamp (see, for instance, Chicago Public Schools) (Brown, 2011; Giroux, 2009, 2011; Robbins, 2008; Saltman, 2007). In retrospect, this

discourse that emerged in the early 1990s obviously produced material consequences for schools, students, and their wider communities (Molnar, 1996, 2005). And, it makes sense: businesses and prisons as much as the military have particular relationships that require specific positions to be played. Otherwise, the game, without players, no longer exists as such. Businesses, prisons, and the military also have particular technologies—tools and social techniques—germane to the playing of games in each of those domains. And their primary symbols—money/power, police, and soldiers—are some of the most significant symbols in U.S. culture. Why would it be any different for schools when business, criminal justice, and military forms of play are imported to and imposed on them?

Just as we have produced valued and flawed consumers/criminals as contrasting players in the wider game (Bauman, [1998] 2001), similar roles have been created for students in schools. While zero tolerance as part of the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) (Public Law 103-227, 1994) drew its surface appeal from the symbolic fodder of discourses of fear of urban violence and youth violence, states and schools implemented zero tolerance at the same time that the commercialization and marketization of education intensified. As Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, and Murillo (2002) demonstrated in their study of the impacts of marketization on public schools, school administrators caved to wealthier community stakeholders, whether violence was a problem in their schools or not, and took a get-tough stance toward certain groups of students as the demographics of their schools and communities changed in the late 1990s. In this way, zero tolerance can be seen to have provided the legal framework in which valued and flawed players of the consumer game of public schooling were to be groomed and the rules by which they were expected to play. According to a 2009 report done by the National Center for Education Statistics (in Planty, et al., 2009), 7% of all public school students were suspended for each of the 2002, 2004, and 2006 school years, the increases in actual suspensions from 3.1 to 3.3 million by 2006 evidently reflecting growth in the student population. While 5% of all White students were suspended in 2006, 15% of all African American students were suspended (Planty, et al., p. 70). These numbers reflect consistent national patterns since the legislation of GFSA in 1994. In 2000, for example, African Americans constituted 32% of those students suspended nationally but, by 2006, constituted 37% of suspensions (Planty, et al., p. 206), while being approximately 17% of the student population, a disproportionality index greater than 2.0. While zero tolerance was intended to address weapons infractions and violence, more than 60% of zero-tolerance exclusions on a national level have been meted out for non-violent disruptions, and while school-based violence itself has consistently dropped since 1992 (DeVoe, Noonan, Snyder & Baum, 2005, p. 11), two years before zero tolerance was legislated. Perhaps the flawed consumers of schooling are expected to act as the analog to the young adults cast as flawed consumers in the game, as the racialized patterns of exclusion of students mirrors the racialized patterns of imprisonment. According to The Sentencing Project (2011), 60% of 2.3 million prisoners in 2009 were Black or Brown, while “[o]ne in nine [B]lack males ages 25-29 was in prison or jail in 2009 as were 1 in 27 Hispanic males and 1 in 60 [W]hite males in the same age group” (p.1).

One thusly cannot consider the play (the play that is expected?) of flawed consumers of schooling without considering the roles of other players and how their play redefines the roles and responsibilities of other players, including teachers and administrators. Since the 1990s, and particularly since the passage of GFSA (1994), school resource officers (SROs) have gained an increasing visibility and developed a more formative role in schools—from 9446 active SROs in 1997 to 14,337 by 2003 (Petteruti, 2011, p. 6), a number that has continued to grow since 2003 and does not include police officers assigned to and working in schools. The National Association for School Resource Officers (NASRO, 2012), a leading trainer of SROs, has as its stated mission to “educate, counsel and protect” school communities (NASRO, 2012). This adds a particularly new twist to the function of police officers in schools, as it seems that a teacher’s historic role was to “educate, counsel and protect.” NASRO’s foundational concept is what it calls the *TRIAD*, which is the hybridization of “Teacher, Counselor, and Law Enforcement Officer” (NASRO, 2012). According to one of the most recent reports of SROs activity in schools, SROs dedicate, on average, close to 50% of their time on law enforcement activities (Finn & McDevitt, 2005). While one would assume, with periodic exceptions, that if the SRO model was a bona fide triad, the allocation of SRO time to the tasks of each facet of the triad would be roughly equal. Yet a snag exists: Most of them have not received training as teachers or counselors (Finn & McDevitt, 2005; Petteruti, 2011).

Coupled with the already wide visibility and deployment of police officers in schools, though this presence, along with their supporting technologies like metal detectors and surveillance cameras varies by town/city size and demographics (Robbins, 2008), the relationships and related roles produced by police presence in schools seems to suggest that flawed consumers of schooling are seen as criminal or potentially criminal. And, as Victor Rios (2006) explains, this play associated with being cast as criminal, that is, the “experience of being watched, managed, and treated as criminal beg[ins] at a young age” (p. 45), seen, for instance, in the fact that preschoolers’ are now expelled at a rate three times the rate of K-12 students, with Black and male preschoolers bearing the disproportionate brunt of these early exercises in being cast as criminal (Gilliam, 2008, p.2). This early marking—casting—of children as potentially criminal seems to inform the play of SROs and police officers and flawed consumers of schooling in reference to students in later grades. Numerous reports, most notably one by Elora Mukharjee and Marvin Karpatkin (2007), have documented in disturbing detail the regular interactions between high school students and school police officers and SROs that register as nothing short of abusive. Girls in New York City Public Schools, for example, have not only often frisked by male police officers, a violation of the law, but also wanded by police officers for unnecessary periods of time (Mukharjee and Karpatkin, 2007)—this, apparently, for committing the crime of arriving at and entering school. Some days, according to Mukharjee and Karpatkin, students, mostly Black and Brown, lose upwards of three hours of class time due to these

plays of symbolic-physical demeaning, where “police interventions create flashpoints for confrontations and divert students and teachers from invaluable classroom time” (p. 7). To add injury to insult, when students play or, more accurately, are perceived to be playing the very role expected of them in these situations, with evidently no room accommodated for the fact youth—all youth—have capacities to engage in play with all kinds of roles, they open themselves to outward brutality, as seen in the increasing use of tasers on students by police officers (see Robbins, 2011). It is unsurprising, then, that the U.S. has not yet ratified the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), given its condemnation of any violence perpetrated on children and youth—something that gives further insight to the logic and values toward which the game is oriented.

Beyond being treated as if they were criminal, flawed consumers of schooling are now processed as such, directly linking schools with the criminal justice system. With the increasing presence of and responsibilities allocated to police officers and SROs in public schools to deal, seemingly, with traditional discipline problems, school-based arrest of students has become a common practice. In his study of SROs and school-based arrests, Theoriot (2009) shows that 11.5% of students were arrested in schools with SROs versus a rate of 3.9% in schools without SROs. Given that SROs dedicate approximately 50% of their time to law enforcement activities, one would think that they have had to respond to criminal incidents. Theoriot shows not only that SROs mete out 8.5 of every 100 arrests for disorderly conduct (in legal terms, a broadly subjective category), while only 2.7 of every 100 arrests is for alcohol, drugs and assault combined. When controlling for student poverty (or strain), schools without SROs had an arrest rate of 1.8 of 100 arrests for disorderly conduct, and 1.8 of 100 arrests for alcohol, drugs, and assault combined (p.282). Similarly compelling evidence has been found by others in this regard. The Advancement Project (2005) found that, between 2000-2004, Denver Public Schools (DPS) produced a 71% increase in student referrals to law enforcement (p.23), many of which landed students in juvenile court, with some leading to detention. Particularly illustrative in this case, 66% of referrals to law enforcement were for non-criminal violations and violations unaccounted for in the GFSA (1994). As the Advancement Project (2005) notes, the racial, ethnic, and class dimensions of these referrals also can be clearly seen, where “in the 2003–2004 school year, Black students in DPS were given tickets at twice the rate of White students, while Latino students were given tickets at seven times the rate of their White peers” (p.24). Fowler (2010) found, in an extensive study of criminalization in Texas schools, similar rates of referrals to the criminal justice system with the combination of increased police presence and draconian definitions and applications of zero-tolerance policies and other disciplinary measures.

Teachers thusly play—have been positioned to play—a different role, one that is intensified in particular schools. With the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), standardization of curriculum and punitive accountability schemes tied to federal funding through mandated high-stakes tests significantly altered teachers’ roles and have played a significant role in the work of the school-to-prison pipeline (Advancement Project, et al., 2011). In part, this redefinition of teachers’ roles hinges upon the redefinition of students in general as schools are remodeled on the image of the corporation. Seen more as test preparation/testing clerks and data-cops than as engaged intellectuals attentive to student and community needs (Giroux, 2011), teachers have been revalued for their capacities to “deliver product” and produce high test scores among their students, a perception simply reinforced, and a supporting role undergirded and nurtured, by what Giroux (2011) calls the “Obama-Duncan Doctrine” with its emphasis on accountability, data collection, and support of school restructuring that supports “a mindless logic of quantification and measurement that now grips the culture of schooling” (Giroux, 2011, p. 4). Testing, in other words, has become one of the primary mechanisms to define the value of consumers of corporate-deformed schools. As greater weight has been given to this measure, without the requisite investment in resources, schools have found it difficult competing for ever smaller shares of government support at the same time that their communities face the myriad effects of a current recession laid over a decade or more of already declining school revenue streams. This is especially the case when school funding is not only contingent upon satisfactory test scores, but also on the attraction and retention of valued consumers of schooling so as to increase head count and per pupil allotments and maintain market share. Teachers have been positioned to police data sets for data-threats, when they are not instructed to hawk some new test preparation or achievement-diagnostic program for which they often lack the resources, including time, to apply the findings in meaningful ways to their work with students. Since much authority over discipline in these schools has been outsourced to the criminal justice system via zero tolerance and the increased presence of police officers, teachers’ primary disciplinary authority then has to revolve around identifying data-threats—students needing extra time, resources, and perhaps support staff: things sacrificed by market models of schools. These students get redefined as defiant, disorderly, disruptive, disrespectful, and insubordinate, terms that appear and get codified in various ways in state and local zero tolerance policies.

Whereas the National Association of School Resource Officers has as its motto *Educate, Counsel, and Protect*, it seems that policy makers have applied *follow orders, produce high test scores, and punish or be punished* as the motto for teachers.

Zero tolerance and other hyper-punitive disciplinary measures like random searches, surprise police sweeps, and surveillance function for communities of U.S. youth much like drone bombers do in the war on terror for others abroad. Similar to the juxtaposition of play drones and drone bombings earlier, punishment in schools and the criminalization of students operate along similar lines of asymmetry, spectatorship, and unpredictability and uncertainty. And here is another notion of play at work in the culture of cruelty’s school-based incarnation: While some youth can watch—seem to be expected to watch—the spectacle of organized harm, other students get subjected to rationalized displays of irrational demeaning and punishment—be it the tasing of a 14-year old girl in the groin (Chang, 2011), the tasing of another girl for doing the ignoble thing of breaking up a fight

(Ward, 2006), or the so called Goose Creek Ambush, in which a school's almost entire Black student body was subjected to a school police sweep as the White students, who arrived at a later time, watched (Mabrey, 2004). More important than these abuses of authority being common enough practices is the role uncertainty and unpredictability play in the allocation of punishment when students, mostly of the same color (Brown or Black), get subjected to intensive forms of punishment—whether they did something wrong or not, or even, periodically, when they did the right thing. So while the performance targets seem to move or, at least, be open to subjective redefinition, the punishment targets largely remain the same. Only in this instance, zero tolerance-droning does not produce physical death and destruction for its victims. Rather, it produces social destruction and sets into motion a series of processes that lead to civic death for particular groups of students: referral to the criminal justice system, higher likelihood of being detained in over-crowded under-staffed public facilities, recidivism, real jail, social isolation, fragmentation of communities, and on and on. Damning performance indicators of the system, for sure, in a society that likes to hold up democracy against its system of universally significant symbols associated with the military, the police, and the market.

The uncertainty of and risk associated with this play between stated performance outcomes of consumers of schooling and the disproportionate allocation of punishment and consequences can prove to be particularly troubling. Ulrich Beck (2009) discusses global issues of uncertainty in the context of his "world risk society" thesis. For Beck, the modern state created effects, through scientific and technological progress, that both the state and the technologies of so-called progress cannot contain nor adequately respond to in the event of crisis or disaster. Here, as he does, one can point to nuclear disaster, global warming, terrorism, new or increasing/intensifying health disorders and public health concerns, and a host of other issues that not only emanate from the so-called state and industry, but also transcend the state. One could add to his list unintended risks of progress the creation of categories of people, children and youth included, that the state no longer needs in any productive way; that is, a society that no longer has room for some people. It is in the context of these issues that Beck argues convincingly that the allocation of risk and the requisite politics to deal with the allocation of risk on a global level figure as among the most pressing political challenges today. The unequal and often unjustifiable allocation of punishment and criminalization of children and youth in schools creates a set of risks of another type.

Punishment does not reduce violence. Punishment relocates the source of violence and, in the process, redefines it. As Slavoj Žižek (2008) argues, contemporary violence is constituted by three types of violence. Subjective violence can be seen as the "violence performed by an identifiable agent" (p. 1), whether the agent is an individual or state or terrorist group. Žižek then identifies the "symbolic violence embodied in language and its forms" (p. 1) and "systemic violence" as the "catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (p.2). While Žižek argues that systemic violence provides the terrain on which the other forms of violence take shape, he also recognizes that an inter/play can exist among the three. Somehow, the criminalization and hyper-punishment of students, and the disproportionate criminalization and hyper-punishment of certain categories of students, combines all three forms of violence in one go. One problem in this fusion of forms of violence is, due to its legal-rational foundation: It is both difficult to contest and for some difficult to identify because of its normalization in laws, representation in legal and popular discourses, and appearance in everyday practices. This central problem associated with the legal-normal violence done to youth in schools is that it creates, or sets up conditions for, a host of other risks.

At a time when public trust in schools is eroding or outwardly attacked, and when public schools themselves are assaulted by corporate school reform drones (e.g., accountability, competition, charterization, privatization, takeovers), criminalization and hyper-punishment of youth runs the risk of intensifying the erosion of public trust in schools. If teachers cannot control students and educate them, seen by the always increasing safety measures including police, then why should we put our students in public schools or pay taxes for other people's children to go to schools? So this is how part of one argument goes, codified as it is in NCLB with its *identifiably dangerous students* as recourse for parents/caregivers to remove their children and jettison their neighborhood/community schools. The other argument, a little less damning on the surface, goes to this effect: Teachers need to be trained better. What comes into this argument under the surface of its goodwill by way of corporate-led school reform is a perverse fascination with numbers, measurement, and top-to-bottom management of the practices of teaching and learning. As teachers are trained to be competitive, and therefore individualistic, laborers in a competitive and individualized field, they are also trained to focus on individualized and surface-level indicators of learning, achievement, growth and the like—and violence. The conditions—temporal, spatial, symbolic, and material—in which teachers could attend to pressing student, school, and public needs as part of the educational process have been eroded. They need to spend their time creating and rounding up as much data as they can, in the hopes of developing positive indicators in reference to outcomes that neither they nor their students nor wider communities had any say in setting, to guard against any data-threats that might be lurking inside any of their data sets.

The criminalization and hyper-punishment of students point, ultimately, to a redefinition of our political culture and likely our future. When Mead talked of modern education as being the institution having the greatest power in providing organized forms of play, school/play provided relatively low-stakes opportunities to develop the skill sets associated with different role performances. Even in the 1970s, Bowles and Gintis (1976) spoke of the "correspondence principle" (p. x) in which they argued that schools in structure and in the underlying values of school relationships and skills corresponded to the capitalist labor relationship found in the late industrial factory and corporation. Correspondence did not have to imply inevitability. Just because schools were generally and historically organized in ways quite similar to the factory did not mean that students,

teachers, and their wider communities failed to make innovations on and engage in opposition toward those structures (Giroux, 1983). The point is this: Schools did not simply feed the machine because there was greater structural play between schools, the state, the market, the military, and the criminal justice system. With schools now conjoined by law with the criminal justice system, the market, and increasingly the military, it appears that schooling is no longer play oriented to the game, but the game itself, and it is oriented to the multiple problems the organizers of the game believe to be confronting the community. Youth, since the 1990s, provide one set of problems confronting the game, which means, according to Mead's theory, that youth have to reconcile their attempts at being the ideal consumers of schooling with being oriented, in part, against themselves. This, by definition, illustrates a pernicious sort of symbolic-systemic violence that perhaps undergirds the episodic and tragic acts of violent crime in schools. This symbolic violence inheres another, related violence: the throwing of players, young ones at that, into a game for which they have had no practice.

Yet a more historical risk presents itself. The emergence of childhood and youth as social categories in the 20th century signaled a belief that they were developmental periods distinct from adulthood (Archard, 2004; Giroux, 2001; Grossberg, 2004). It also signaled to adults a different set of commitments and responsibilities to youth and the future. This means, then, that childhood and youth, and their relationship to schooling and other public goods, were ethico-political concerns and, as such, referenced a particular notion of politics and the future. If childhood and youth are no longer a space of play with roles and relationships in society like citizen or governance, and schools no longer are charged with providing organized forms of play with citizenship and civic life, then we have put at risk the basic conditions for democracy to form, reproduce, and recreate itself.

The combined effects of these three related sets of risks raise another concern. The grotesque celebration of power/privilege coupled with the denigration of the needy (children and youth being a unique historical category in this regard) can rebound in two ways. First, idolization of wealth/privilege entails the rituals, practices, relationships, and institutional arrangements that make such idolization possible. Only so much room exists at the top of such a social structure. Being told repeatedly that one can join everyone else at the top, while being consistently and predictably put through the humiliating exercise of being shown otherwise, can lead to outright resentment of both those people at the top and the signs and symbols associated with them, with property being the most obvious of those signs and symbols. (Interestingly, Horace Mann [1848] in his *Report No. 12*, argued for the common school as a safeguard against such mutually defining principles of a radically unequal society: misunderstanding, denigration, resentment). Second, a hatred of the institutions associated with the wealthy and powerful could be fostered. If it were only banks with which the wealthy/privileged were perceived to be associated, a different set of questions would emerge. Yet, since the wealthy/privileged are associated with government, and one that has been called democratic (their wealth allegedly being produced on the democratic promise made to all), perhaps what is risked is the possibility of democracy in another regard: the systemic nurturing of an all too democratic hatred of democracy.

Schools reflect, as their explicit charge or as a result of their structural enmeshing with other institutions and domains in society, the general states of mind, strains, and values of their wider communities and society in which they exist. Schools obviously encompass a variety of communities that have variegated interests, cultures, and histories. Yet, everyone who attends or works in schools and the schools as institutions draw from the reservoir of common, if often distorted or contested, meanings (i.e., the system of universally significant symbols), values, and relationships animating society at any one point in time. No matter how impervious the walls of the school were imagined and often constructed to be, the wider society, merely by the fact that students and teachers enter them, finds its way into schools in ways that reflect and from time to time intentionally or unintentionally refute policymakers' best efforts otherwise. It is for this reason that Paul Willis (2003) reminds educationists and social scientists to be attentive to the meaning that children and youth attempt to make of their experiences in schools and society. It is for this reason that concerned educators and citizens should be attentive as much to the symbolic fodder provided by the wider culture(s) in which schools exist as they do to that which is provided by the schools themselves.

Appropriating Mead's notion of play and the game helps us see that children and youth get positioned by schools and the wider culture—and are expected to play particular positions—in peculiarly pernicious ways. On the one hand, for instance, many forms of play—from traditional action figures and dolls to gaming—invite children and youth to engage, and find pleasure in engaging, with symbols of the most powerful institutions in our society. On the other hand, schools subject students, with obviously deleterious social and political effects, to the values of these same institutions—the market, the criminal justice system, the military. Granted, considerable space, much more than some concerned adults like to admit, exists for children and youth to improvise upon and redirect the meanings embedded in their play and related artifacts. Yet when children and youth find pleasure in forms of play—be it with drones or tasers, playing *Grand Theft Auto* or *America's Army*, or dressing up as police officers—at the same time they experience the abuses or watch others experience the abuses of these technologies and institutions in the everyday life of schools, what types of convoluted affective investments and meanings can we expect them to make? What sense is it that they are to make of themselves when in play they can be the heroic police officer or soldier and then in the game they are the target or collateral damage of other targets (e.g., schools, the social state, other groups of children and youth)? When children and youth fail to see representations of either democratic public life or the human suffering produced by the game across a number of popular culture sites beyond toy and gaming cultures, from what other reservoir are they to draw in constructing meaning—and meaningful relationships—patterned on something other than the logic of the culture of cruelty?

In this regard, pedagogy, broadly speaking, must become a central consideration. The practices and relationships to which youth are subjected in the plays of hyper-punishment and other forms of organized violence in schools operate not only pedagogically in their situated contexts, but also as part of broader pedagogies and modes of address across a range of sites in everyday life. It is the pedagogical underbelly of play and the game that has to be taken seriously, for play and the game provide one of the most powerful settings for learning: experience coupled with pleasure, no matter how perverse, distorted, or confused it may seem. Public schools and public educators have a potentially powerful role to play in this regard, pointing possibly to one of the underlying reasons they themselves continue to get subjected to ever-intensifying attacks by corporate school reform. Public educators, working critically, still can offer moments and spaces, albeit limited ones, in which students can act democratically—in which they are not subjected to the persistent abuses and excesses of zero-sum games being played with their education, and our collective futures.

Such a view entails two primary considerations of the many that schools and educators *can* address in light of the broader game. First, educators must see their work as an intervention in the world, which means that it “implies both the reproduction of the dominant ideology and its unmasking” (Freire, 1998, p. 91). Put even more pointedly by Freire (1970), education cannot be “neutral,” since it “either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system...or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality” (p.34) as active participants in the reconstruction of it. As an intervention into the world, one organized by obvious inequalities of power of which teacher-student relationships are often reflective, the intervention must itself be democratic. The students themselves have something to say about the game over which they have had no say in the setting of the rules, and this game and what students have to say about it should be seen as a productive set of texts itself.

Second, following from this first broad consideration, voice must be revalued, especially student and teacher voice, in school cultures. Gert Biesta (2007), borrowing from Hannah Arendt, discusses a view of education in which action—the dialogic engagement with others in a public space, in this case schools—is coupled with the right, and the respect given to the right, to begin. Beginning can take many forms, but one of the primary forms of beginning is the act of narrating one’s experience of how the world unfolds for them. For this reason, voice, rather than the drone of business-speak in accountability and testing and policing, must come to be seen as a site of play, pleasure, and pedagogy. In order for voice to be seen and materialize in classroom and school relationships in this way, careful and critical attention has to be given to those practices and relationships internal and external to classrooms that interfere with students’ and teachers’ opportunities to begin (see also, Couldry, 2010). Having students play valued and flawed consumers (criminals) in schools, due to the intensive ascription of roles to be played, clearly forecloses students’ and teachers’ rights to begin, at least in part, on their own terms. Organizing classroom play around a value of voice could also provide insight to the meaning students are making of the game, while providing conditions in which a set of relationships could allow students to construct collective meanings about the game—and therein lies one of the perceived threats of a win-win game to the stakeholders of zero-sum schooling. This is what Henry Giroux and Roger Simon (1992) mean, in part, when they say, “This is what the pedagogical struggle is all about—opening up the material and discursive basis of particular ways of producing meaning and representing ourselves, our relations to others, and our relation to the environment so as to consider the possibilities not yet realized” (p. 202).

As much as the metaphor of the game of school relationships illuminates unsettling dynamics involved in the hyper-punishment and criminalization of students, one must be careful to remember that the stakes of it are far greater than simply winning and losing. The stakes include the civic/social life and death for groups of students, and it is time we stopped playing with their—our—collective futures and the possibility of democracy.

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Notes

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^[2] For readers familiar with Mead, I am aware of the slippage in my usage of the concept of *the game* that I introduced in this section. The underlying reasons for this slippage will become clearer later in the article.