

**PUBLIC PEDAGOGY AND THE POLITICS OF HUMILIATION
NEOLIBERAL GENEROSITY AND THE ATTACK ON PUBLIC
EDUCATION**

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The term 'cruelty' is chosen by convention to indicate those forms of extreme violence, whether intentional or systemic, physical or moral...that seem to be, as is said 'worse than death'... the actual or virtual menace of cruelty represents for politics, and particularly for politics today...a crucial experiment in which the very possibility of politics is at stake.

Etienne Balibar¹

Under the regime of neoliberalism, a legacy of bad faith, culture of cruelty, and politics of humiliation has not only gained momentum in American society, it has been normalized. The recent tragic violence and mass killing committed by Jared Lee Loughner in Tucson, Arizona cannot be reduced to the mental instability of a young man out of touch with reality. Nor can such a horrendous act be reduced to a breakdown in civil discourse. Such rationales are too easy, and emulate what might be called a classic case of American denial. There is a deeper order of politics behind this murderous act, one that the American public is inclined to ignore. More specifically, the general responses to this violent act are symptomatic of a society that separates private injuries from public considerations, refusing to connect individual acts to broader social considerations. I want to suggest that underlying the Arizona shootings is a culture of cruelty that has become so widespread in American society that the violence it produces is largely taken for granted and often dismissed in terms that cut it off from any larger systemic forces at work in the society. The culture of cruelty is important for thinking through how entertainment and politics now converge in ways that fundamentally transform how we understand and imagine politics in the current historical moment—a moment when the central issue of getting by is no longer about working to get ahead but struggling

1. Etienne Balibar, *We, The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 6.

simply to survive. And many groups, who are considered marginal because they are poor, unemployed, people of color, elderly, or young, have not just been excluded from “the American dream,” but have become utterly redundant and disposable, waste products of a society that no longer considers them of any value. How else to explain the zealousness in which social safety nets have been dismantled, the transition from welfare to workfare (offering little job training programs and no child care), and recent acrimony over health care reform’s public option? What accounts for the passage of laws that criminalize the behavior of the 1.2 million homeless in the United States, often defining sleeping, sitting, soliciting, lying down, or loitering in public places as a criminal offence rather than a behavior in need of compassionate good-will, and public assistance? Or for that matter, the expulsions, suspensions, segregation, class discrimination, and racism in the public schools as well as the more severe beatings, broken bones, and damaged lives endured by young people in the juvenile justice system? Within this politics, there is a ruthless and hidden dimension of cruelty, one in which the powers of life and death are largely determined by punishing apparatuses, such as the criminal justice system for poor people of color and/or a market forces that more and more decide who may live and who may die. But there is more. There is also the growing dominance of a right-wing media forged in a pedagogy of hate that has become a crucial element providing numerous platforms for a culture of cruelty. This form of cultural pedagogy is primarily characterized by more than a breach of civility. It also registers without apology and legitimates a hostility towards immigrants, a barely disguised racism, a disdain for the poor, and almost anyone supportive of the social contract and the welfare state. Citizens are all too often constructed through a language of contempt for all non-commercial public spheres and a chilling indifference to the plight of others that is expressed in vicious tirades against big government and health care reform. There is a growing element of scorn on the part of the American public for those human beings caught in the web of misfortune, human suffering, dependency, and deprivation.

When I refer to a culture of cruelty and a discourse of humiliation, I am talking about the institutionalization and widespread adoption of a set of values, policies, and symbolic practices that legitimate forms of organized violence against human beings considered disposable and which lead inexorably to unnecessary hardship, suffering, and despair. Such practices are increasingly accompanied by forms of humiliation in which the character, dignity, and bodies of targeted individuals and groups are under attack. Its extreme form is evident in state-sanctioned torture practices such as those promoted by the Bush administration in Iraq and in the images of

humiliation that emerged from the torture chambers of Abu Ghraib prison. The politics of humiliation also works through symbolic systems, diverse modes of address, and varied framing mechanisms in which the targeted subjects are represented in terms that demonize them, strip them of their humanity, and position them in ways that invite ridicule and sometimes violence. This is what the late Pierre Bourdieu called the symbolic dimension of power—that is the capacity of systems of meaning, signification, and diverse modes of communication to shield, strengthen, and normalize relations of domination through distortion, misrepresentation, and the use of totalizing narratives². The hidden order of such politics lies not just in its absences, but its appeal to common sense and its claim to being objective and apolitical. Culture in this sense becomes the site of the most powerful and persuasive forms of pedagogy precisely because it often denies its pedagogical function.

Such practices and the cultural politics that legitimize them are apparent in zero tolerance policies in schools which mindlessly punish poor white and students of color by criminalizing behavior as trivial as violating a dress code. Such students have been assaulted by the police, handcuffed and taken away in police cars, and in some cases imprisoned.³ The discourse of humiliation abounds in the public sphere of hate radio and Fox News, which provides a forum for a host of pundits who trade in insults against feminists, environmentalists, African-Americans, immigrants, progressive critics, liberal media, President Barack Obama, and anyone else who rejects the militant orthodox views of the new media extremists and religious fundamentalists. Policies that humiliate and punish are also visible in the growing expansion of the criminal justice system used regularly to deal with problems that would be better addressed through social reforms rather than punishment. Homeless people are now arrested for staying too long in public libraries, sleeping in public parks, and soliciting money on the streets of many urban centers. People who receive welfare benefits are increasingly harassed by government agencies. Debtors' prisons are making a comeback as millions of people are left with no recourse but to default on the myriad of bills that they cannot pay.⁴ The growing numbers of people who are jobless, homeless, and living beneath the poverty line

2. Loic Wacquant, "Symbolic Power in the Rule of the 'State Nobility,'" in Loic Wacquant, ed. *Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics* (London: Polity, 2005), 134.

3. See Henry A. Giroux, "Schools and the Pedagogy of Punishment," *Truthout.org* 20 October 2009, <http://www.truth-out.org/10200910>.

4. Editorial, "The New Debtors' Prisons," *New York Times* 5 April 2009 : A24.

are treated by the government and dominant media merely as statistical fodder for determining the health of the GNP while their lived experience of hardship is rarely mentioned. Millions of people are denied health care, regardless of how ill they might be, because they cannot afford it. Rather than enact social protections such as adequate health care for everyone, the advocates of free-market capitalism enact social policies that leave millions of people uninsured and treated largely as simply disposable populations who should fend for themselves.

Echoes of such cruelty can be heard in the discourses and voices of right-wing and conservative politicians who want to abolish Medicare, Medicaid, and social security as government sponsored programs. We hear it in the words of anti-government libertarians who insist that all problems are self-made and claim that those who suffer from a variety of misfortunes whose causes are outside of their control are undeserving of government help and protections. In this neoliberal cutthroat scenario, one's fate becomes exclusively a matter of individual choice and hence "interpreted as another confirmation of the individuals' sole and inalienable responsibility for their individual plight."⁵ The arrogance of power, cruelty, and discourse of humiliation that frame this notion of hyper-individualism have become viral in a society that has learned to hate any vestige of the social contract. We hear it in the words of the "super-rich" such as Bill Gates who insists that pension payments should be reduced for retired teachers, a hypocritical and heartless demand coming from one of the world's richest people and, ironically, one of the world's best-known philanthropists.⁶ We see the politics of humiliation and cruelty at work in the efforts of politicians to slash food stamp benefits, openly deriding the poor while doing so. Within this discourse of neoliberal fundamentalism and adherence to free-market values, social protections and spending entitlements are viewed as forms of big government corruption that need to be abolished, giving credence to a notion of market freedom in which everyone is expendable or potentially disposable. In reality, the culture of cruelty and the politics of humiliation make it easier for people to turn away from the misfortunes of others and express indifference to the policies and practices of truly corrupt individuals and institutions of power that produce huge profits at the cost of massive suffering and social hardship.

Even more disturbing is that this growing culture of humiliation

5. Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life* (London: Polity Press, 2008), 89-90.

6. John Fund, "Getting Schooled in Aspen," *Wall Street Journal* 13 July 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704288204575363100367240836.html>

works in tandem with a formative politics of dislocation and misrepresentation. One example can be seen in the efforts of Bill Gates (Microsoft), Philip Anshultz (Denver Oil), Jeff Skoll (Ebay), and other members of the corporate elite to use their power and money-soaked foundations to pour millions into a massive public pedagogy campaign that paints America's system of public education, teacher unions, and public school teachers in terms that are polarizing and demonizing.⁷ Humiliation in this case masquerading as generosity couples with an attempt to divert attention from the real problems and solutions needed to improve American public education.⁸ Real problems affecting schools such as rising poverty, homelessness, vanishing public services for the disadvantaged, widespread unemployment, massive inequality in wealth and income, overcrowded classrooms, and a bankrupt and iniquitous system of school financing disappear in the educational discourse of the "super-rich". Moreover, the policies promoted by such anti-public reformers are endlessly legitimated through a massive public relations campaign that is one-sided, politically reactionary, and sectarian in its attempts to disparage and drown out more critical and progressive voices. The foundation for this mode of soft domination can be seen in the ways in which the rich and elite institutions use the popular media to promote their ideologies, especially those that advance the impoverishment of public values, public spheres, and democratic public "life" Movies such as *Waiting for Superman*, *The Cartel*, and *The Lottery* function as huge propaganda machines parading as truth-telling art, produced and circulated within a cultural apparatus that takes its cues from the Disney empire's slick and powerful marketing

7. Amy Goodman, "Leading Education Scholar Diane Ravitch: No Child Left Behind Has Left US Schools with Legacy of 'Institutionalized Fraud,'" *Democracy Now!* 5 March 2010, <http://www.democracynow.org/2010/3/5/protests>

8. For a thoughtless and shameless celebration of the billionaires' club, see Diane Francis, "Waiting for Superman and Justice," *Financial Post* 26 September 2010, <http://opinion.financialpost.com/2010/09/26/waiting-for-superman-and-justice/>. For a rebuttal to this kind of nonsense, see Editors, "The Real Facts About Waiting for Superman," *FairTest.org* 30 September 2010, <http://www.fairtest.org/real-facts-about-waiting-superman>. See also Rich Ayers, "'Waiting for Superman': A Missed Opportunity for Education—What 'Superman' Got Wrong, Point by Point," *CommonDreams.org* 27 September 2010, <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2010/09/27-10>. For an excellent analysis of the impact of philanthropy on education, see Kenneth Saltman, *The Gift of Education: Public Education and Venture Philanthropy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). See also Kenneth Saltman, *Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2007).

machine.⁹ Sprinkled with the pixie dust of urgency, a desperate call for reform, and alleged good will, the new market-driven cultural apparatus and public pedagogy of the educational anti-reformers bombard the American public with films and other media that denigrate public education while promoting the values of casino capitalism. And, yet, the American people largely endorse the “culture of philanthropy,” unlike the British who as Terry Eagleton points out “[N]o more want their children’s education to depend on billionaires than they want Prince Charles to hand out food parcels in Trafalgar Square to the deserving poor. Most British students believe that higher education should be a public responsibility and should come free.”¹⁰ This is precisely the position that the anti-public reformers want to eliminate from any discourse about public and higher education.

The discourse of these so-called educational reformers is simplistic and polarizing. It lacks any understanding of the real problems and strengths of public education and it trades in authoritarian tactics and a discourse of demonization and humiliation. For example, rather than educate the public, *Waiting for Superman* carpet bombs them with misrepresentations fueled by dubious assertions and denigrating images of public schools and teachers. Beneath its discourse of urgency, altruism, and political purity parading in a messianic language of educational reform and a politics of generosity are the same old and discredited neoliberal policies that cheerfully serve corporate interests: privatization; union busting; competition as the only mode of motivation; an obsession with measurement; a relentless attack on teacher autonomy; the weakening of tenure; stripping educational goals of public values; defining teacher quality in purely instrumental terms; an emphasis on authoritative modes of management; and a mindless obsession with notions of pedagogy that celebrate memorization and teaching to the test. High stakes accountability and punishing modes of leadership, regardless of the damage they wreak on students and teachers, are now the only game in town when it comes to educational reform—so much so that it is called revolutionary. At the same time, Gates and his billionaire friends gain huge tax write-offs from the money they invest in schools while at the same time reaping the rewards of controlling institutions funded by public tax revenues. Gates and his cronies use these tax deductions

9. The reactionary nature of the neoliberal and corporate ideologies driving this film and its view of educational reform is on full display in promotional book that accompanied its release, see Karl Weber, ed. *Waiting for ‘Superman’: How We Can Save America’s Failing Public Schools* (Philadelphia: Public Affairs, 2010).

10. Terry Eagleton, “What is the Worth of Social Democracy,” *Harper’s Magazine* (October 2010): 80.

to control public schools while the taxpaying public in this case loses valuable tax revenue and cedes control of publicly funded schools to the rich and powerful corporate moguls. This isn't philanthropic, it is morally and politically irresponsible because it represents a form of hostile generosity that serves to expand the power of the corporate rich over public schools while offering the illusion of enriching public life.¹¹ It gets worse. Many hedge fund operatives and banks invest in charter schools because they get windfall profits by "using a little-know federal tax break" called the New Markets Tax Credit "to finance new charter-school construction."¹² Once the buildings are finished, they are rented out to public school districts at exorbitant prices. For instance, one Albany "school's rent jumped from \$170,000 in 2008 to \$560,000 in" 2010.

Democratic goals and public values no longer have any merit in a reform movement in love with the logic of measurement, profit, and privatization. This is not a reform movement but an anti-reform movement that can only imagine schooling within what my colleague David L. Clark calls "an eternal present of consumption and subjection." It is a movement that appears to kill critical thought, the ability to think imaginatively, and any notion of pedagogy that takes matters of individual autonomy and social empowerment seriously. In the name of reform, we now face increasing numbers of schools that either bear a close resemblance to the old Ford factory production lines or are modeled after prisons. These are the new dead zones of education, increasingly inhabited by demoralized teachers and bored students and largely supported by the new educational reformers. Manufactured contempt for public schooling breeds more than misrepresentation and a politics of humiliation. It also covers up the real problems public schools face when locked into the ideology and practices of the anti-public reform movement. There is no mention of the cheating and corruption of school administrators, dumping of under performing students, deskilling of teachers, refusals to accept students for whom English is not their first language or who have learning disabilities, and other forms of violence that accompany such reforms now being undertaken with the blessing of the super-rich and corporate power brokers of casino capitalism. Charter schools have become the dressed-up symbols of the

11. This issue is take up in great detail by Ibid., Saltman, *The Gift of Education*.

12. Juan Gonzalez, "Albany Charter Cash Cow: Big Banks Making a Bundle On New Construction as Schools Bear the Cost," *New York Daily News* 7 May 2010, http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/education/2010/05/07/2010-05-07_albany_charter_cash_cow_big_banks_making_a_bundle_on_new_construction_as_schools.html

new politics of disposability—presenting well-scrubbed uniformed children as symbols of order and middle-class values. In actuality, the anti-public reformers who embrace charter schools have little to say or do with the millions of children who are arguably the most disposable of all—kids with various learning and physical disabilities along with poor white, black, and brown kids who will never be counted as relevant in a system in which conformity and high test scores are the tickets to success. These kids are shunned by the army of privateers and pushed into schools that warehouse, punish, and use disciplinary methods rooted in the culture of prisons. At the same time, these reformers demonize public schools and public school teachers but are silent about the fact that some of the most extensive studies of charter schools have found that fewer than 17 percent of charter schools outperform traditional public schools.¹³

Excessive wealth and power do more than direct high-level educational policy in the United States, although their influence in that realm should not be underestimated;¹⁴ they also circulate and promote their ideologies and market-driven values almost completely free of a sustained critique across the dominant cultural and media landscapes of America. The educational force of the wider culture has now become the weapon of choice in promoting market-driven educational reforms and denigrating American public education and its struggling, hard-working teachers. This marketing machine explains the well-publicized and orchestrated hype over the movie *Waiting for Superman*, a bought-and-sold product that offers no critiques and lets the right-wing talking heads and hedge fund advocates provide most of the commentary. For example, not only are there endless numbers of newspaper editorials, television series, media advertisements, YouTube clips, and every other imaginable element of the new and old media promoting *Waiting for Superman*, but it is also being highlighted by NBC as part of its series “Education Nation,” sponsored no less by the for-profit University of Phoenix. What is incredible about this series is its claim to offer a balanced commentary on the state of education when in fact it is an unabashed advertisement for various versions of corporate educational reform. The enemies it targets are the system, teacher unions, tenure, and teachers whose students do not do well on high stakes assessment

13. See Trip Gabriel, “Despite Push, Success at Charter Schools is Mixed,” *New York Times* 1 May 2010): A1. See also the recent study put out by Stanford University.

14. See Henry A. Giroux, “Chartering Disaster: Why Duncan’s Corporate-Based Schools Can’t Deliver an Education That Matters,” *Truthout.org* 21 June 2010, <http://www.truth-out.org/chartering-disaster-why-duncans-corporate-based-schools-cant-deliver-education-that-matters60553>

tests. The film's misrepresentation breeds more than uniformed citizens; it also collaborates with the dominant media to promote a form of public pedagogy in which the school reform policies of the anti-public school advocates become the only game in town.

Examples of this massive form of corporate-sponsored pedagogy—of which *Waiting for Superman* is only one example—become almost omnipresent, moving in relay-like fashion through a corporate cultural apparatus that promotes an anti-public ideology with its denigration of public education and other institutions of the welfare state as if it were just a matter of common sense unworthy of debate, critical interrogation, or opposing arguments. How else to explain, for instance, the overwhelmingly positive reviews this deeply biased and conservative film has generated from the dominant liberal and corporate media? In part, this can be explained by the propaganda blitz engineered by the corporate backers of the film. We get a glimpse of the hermetic and sutured nature of this campaign from Dana Goldstein in her catalogue of the venues that have promoted the film. She writes:

‘Can One Little Movie Save America’s Schools?’ asked the cover of *New York* magazine. On September 20 *The Oprah Winfrey Show* featured the film’s director, Davis Guggenheim, of *An Inconvenient Truth*. Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* devoted a column to praising the film. *Time* published an education issue coinciding with the documentary’s release and is planning a conference built in part around the school reform strategies the film endorses. NBC, too, will host an education reform conference in late September, *Waiting for Superman* will be screened and debated there, and many of the reformers involved in its production will be there. Katie Couric of *CBS Evening News* has promised a series of segments based on the movie.¹⁵

In this case, the dominant media is providing the broader cultural landscape and mechanism through which such a film receives endless praise as one

15. Dana Goldstein, “‘Waiting for Superman’ Film Champions Charter Schools, but Hides that 80% of Them are No Better Than Public Education,” *AlterNet* 30 September 2010, <http://www.alternet.org/story/148353>. Ironically, this review says almost nothing about neoliberalism and the impact it has had on public schools and the anti-public education movement.

of the most significant commentaries on educational reform to come along in years. And yet the film is nothing more than an advertisement for charter schools, corporate values, market-driven reforms, a slash-and-burn mode of leadership that glorifies tough love policies which bear an eerie resemblance to the way boot camps are run in the military, and a polarizing piece of propaganda aimed at undermining public education while also demonizing and humiliating teachers. Exhibiting an unquestioned faith in market values and charter schools, it is in denial about both the public schools that work and the need to improve public schooling rather than turn it over to the advocates of free-market fundamentalism and a discredited casino capitalism. The success of this film ultimately speaks less to the persuasiveness of its arguments than it does to the way it is being bankrolled and promoted aggressively by hedge fund operatives looking for a quick profit. Diane Ravitch has aptly called this group—made up of the Gates, Broad, and Walton foundations and others who “are committed to charter schools and to evaluating teachers by test scores”—the “Billionaire Boys’ Club.”¹⁶

Within this pedagogical apparatus and marketing spectacle, high quality schooling for all students is now replaced by the closed and demeaning logic of the lottery, cloaked in the sanctimonious language and magical aura of “individual choice.” Life and its various facets such as schooling become within this panacea of choice a perpetual search for bargains and consumer goods rather than a search for justice. As morality is rendered painless and stripped of any social responsibility, the new anti-public reformers render poverty and inequality invisible as important factors in promoting school failure. At the same time, they argue with no irony intended that the absence of choice is the most profound cause of educational failure. Under such circumstances, equity is divorced from excellence just as the public good is replaced by individual choice and the private good.

It gets worse. There is no talk in this film or among these so-called billionaire educational reformers about the connection between democracy and schooling, learning and civic responsibility, the dignity of teacher labor, or the violence that is done to education when the only way we can talk about it is by using industrial metaphors. The repeated emphasis on education producing a product, as if it were designed simply to produce durable goods, does nothing more than justify its treatment as a machine to be repaired rather than a complex social institution made up of living,

16. Roger Bybee, “It’s the Poverty, Stupid,” *In These Times* 25 August 2010, http://www.inthesetimes.org/article/6326/its_the_poverty_stupid

breathing human beings. Schools in this stripped down discourse exist free of the relations of iniquitous funding systems, class and racial discrimination, poverty, massive joblessness, overcrowded classrooms, lack of classroom resources, rotting school buildings, lack of basic services for children in need, and so on. This absence is not a minor issue because without a larger understanding of the political, economic, and social forces that impinge on schools in different contexts it is impossible to understand why and how some schools fail and some children are underserved. Successful schools cannot function without public services that help children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds just as they cannot function adequately when a society refuses to pay teachers decent salaries, provide them with high-quality teacher education, and make financial and ideological investments in order to validate teaching as one of the most dignified and civically cherished professions in the country.

Moreover, there is little or no attempt on the part of the wealthy class of educational misinformers to analyze schooling as a place where students learn about the operations of power and what it means to take risks, engage in critical dialogue, embrace the important lessons that come with shared responsibilities, or learn the knowledge, skills, and values needed to be imaginative and critically responsible citizens. Instead, we are told—not surprisingly by the hedge fund reformers and billionaire gurus—that schooling is about the production of trained workers, memorization is more important than critical thinking, standardized testing is better than teaching students to be self-reflective, and learning how to read texts critically is not as important as memorizing discrete bodies of allegedly factual knowledge. Having their desires and skills shaped in such a way, students and teachers are reduced to a permanent underclass, denied the opportunities to develop a capacity and motivation to challenge the power and authority of a rich elite. Pedagogical practice in this neoliberal framework is cleansed of any emancipatory possibilities, divested of its capacity to teach students how to engage in thoughtful dialogue and exchange and use their imagination in the service of understanding the lives and experiences of individuals and groups different from themselves. In addition, all of this educational nonsense is reinforced daily with the silly, if not destructive, notion that wealth guarantees wisdom and that wealthy hedge fund types and the culture of finance offer both a good model for ethical behavior and airtight insights in how to organize schools. Under such circumstances, the corporate controlled media slavishly repeat and sanctify almost anything that is said by the rich and the famous, suggesting that what they have to say not only has merit but provides a valuable resource for guiding policy, especially educational policy. I was reminded of this recently when Bill

Gates appeared on NBC *Nightly News* and stated that any form of teaching and knowledge that cannot be measured is useless. And there was not a shred of criticism from TV host Brian Williams to indicate the reactionary implications of such a statement.

Within this anti-public educational discourse, with its relentless claim to political innocence, its celebration of individual choice and excessive competition, allegiance to corporate values, unflappable sense of certainty, and Wild West manner of governance, there is a mode of engagement and politics of representation that not only mimic an arrogant corporate-based world view but increasingly deploy a strategy of humiliation as a way to wage war against anything that promotes public values and the public good. What does it mean when NBC *News* presents a video clip without adding any of its own critical framework or commentary of Republican Governor Chris Christie hurling insults at members of the New Jersey Teachers' Union in this case about his plan to strip teachers of tenure and reduce them to the status of clerks with no job security and dismal working conditions, and then adding to his explanation the following insult: "Your performance was awful, you didn't do what we asked you to do, you didn't produce the product we wanted you to produce, but we don't look at that, all we look at is are you still breathing."¹⁷ Disregarding the foolish suggestion that the purpose of education is to produce is something akin to an industrial product; Christie's commentary is beyond demeaning and ignorant. It is symptomatic of a type of public bullying that has become a prominent feature in American society and takes its cue from a shift in the larger culture away from a discourse of social investment and compassion toward one of insults, disdain, unchecked individualism, and scorn for both public values and the institutions and people who work as public servants in them.

Unsurprisingly, Christie is a governor who not only wants to balance the New Jersey state budget on the backs of teachers but is also, as Les Leopold reports, "resolutely opposed to reinstating the 'millionaires' tax'—even though the state's fiscal crisis is a direct consequence of what millionaires and billionaires did on Wall Street."¹⁸ Economic Darwinism with its ruthless survival-of-the-fittest ethic is more and more legitimated through an outright attack on teachers, public servants, and unions, and

17. Cited in Mike Spina, *Teachers Under Attack* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2011), 38.

18. Les Leopold, "Hey Dad, Why Does This Country Protect Billionaires, and Not Teachers?" *AlterNet* (May 5, 2010), <http://www.alternet.org/module/printversion/146738>

legitimated by a mode of public pedagogy in which humiliation is used to wage war on one's opponents, preventing any attempt to create the conditions for thoughtful dialogue, exchange, and debate. Anger rather than understanding and thoughtful reflection is now the most celebrated feature of a society that scorns the connection between reason and freedom. The unmediated and evidence-free outburst now rules, and the more stupid and insulting it is, the more attention it gets as it circulates through a screen culture addicted to spectacular displays of indiscriminate ranting that can be packaged to improve viewer ratings.

Outrageous spectacles of cruelty and humiliation have become the weapon of choice among those elites and corporate moguls now waging war on the social state and vital public institutions and services.¹⁹ This is particularly true for the increasing assaults on public education by a diverse group of anti-public educational reformers, armed with their hedge fund connections and limitless trust funds. These corporate power brokers often couch the discourse of humiliation in terms less harsh than what we hear from right-wing politicians and hate-talk shock jocks. Their anti-public discourse with its polarizing enemy/friend divide and demonization of teachers and teacher unions reproduces among the general public a culture of silence and complicity. Under such circumstances debate, dialogue, and thoughtful exchange are largely absent while media spectacles substitute for the genuine public spheres that make such reasoned practices possible. The educational reformers claim to uphold important educational principles and yet behind their cocoon of privilege, wealth, and power is a pedagogical machine and cultural apparatus that shut down the very public spheres in which such principles become operative.

What has become increasingly clear is that teachers are the new scapegoats for the market-driven juggernaut that is sucking the blood out of democracy in the United States. The call for charter schools and vouchers and the appeal to individual choice emulate the language of the bankers who were responsible for the economic crisis of 2008 and the suffering and destruction that followed. The blatant ideological effects of this ethically sterile discourse have now taken on a more militant tone by flooding the media and other commercial spheres with a politics of humiliation that, to

19. I have taken up this issue in great detail in *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2008) and also in *Youth in a Suspect Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). See also Anthony DiMaggio, "Gutting Public Education: Neoliberalism and the Politics of Opportunity," *TruthOut.org* 25 June 25 2010, <http://www.truth-out.org/gutting-public-education-neoliberalism-and-politics-opportunism/60754>

paraphrase Michel Foucault, mimics war, annihilation, unconditional surrender, and full-fledged battles. Public schools and teachers are now the object of a sustained and aggressive attack against all things public in which they are put in the same disparaged league as advocates of health care reform. And what should be obvious is that they now occupy such a position not because they have failed to do their jobs well but because they work in the public sphere. Public schools, teachers, and unions have become objects of enormous scorn and targets of punishing policies. So-called reformers such as Michelle Rhee, who took over the District of Columbia public schools three years ago, have become iconic symbols for enacting educational policies based on a mix of market incentives such as paying students for good grades, merit pay for teachers, and firing teachers en masse who do not measure up to narrow and often discredited empirically based performance measures.²⁰ Reform in this case is driven by a slash-and-burn management system that relies more on punishment than critical analysis, teacher and student support, and social development. The hedge fund managers, billionaire industrialists, and corporate vultures backing such policies appear to view teachers, unions, and public schools as an unfortunate if not threatening remnant of the social state and days long past when social investments in the public good and young people actually mattered and public values were the defining feature of the educational system, however flawed. This hatred of public values, public services, public schools, and teachers is only intensified by a wider culture of cruelty that has gripped American society.

The growing culture of humiliation and cruelty in the United States suggests that anyone who does not believe in the pursuit of material self-interest, unbridled competition, and market-driven values is a proper candidate to be humiliated. If one makes even the slightest gesture of protest toward the dissociation of economics from ethics, the stripping from social relations, any vestige of public values, the undermining of important modes of solidarity, or the promotion of a market fundamentalism that views social responsibility as a weakness, they are fair game to be publically denigrated and insulted, or at least dismissed as irresponsible. Next to the ethos of a society now driven by the metaphors of war and survival-of-the-fittest, any critical reference by individuals or groups to the social problems affecting American society or concerns voiced about the need to reclaim civic courage and defend the institutions that deepen democratic public life invite scurrilous comments intended to

20. Tamar Lewin, "School Chief Dismisses 241 Teachers in Washington," *New York Times* 23 July 2010): A1.

embarrass and humiliate. When the disadvantaged make reference to their plight, they are viewed and labeled as human beings who lack dignity and are subject to insulting remarks, just as the social programs designed to alleviate such suffering become the objects of a discourse that both humiliates and punishes. Consider, for example, presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee referring to people with pre-existing health conditions as houses that have already burned down—a cruel and crude attempt to place himself in good stead with the health insurance industries. There is also the all-too-common example of Sharron Angle—former Republican candidate for the US Senate who claimed that insurance companies should abolish insurance coverage for autism, mocking the term as if it were some kind of reference for a joke told on Comedy Central.

When the 2010 Republican candidate for governor of New York Carl Paladino shamelessly stated “that space in prisons should be turned into work camps in which poor people would get ... classes in personal hygiene,” the dominant media ignored the underlying hatred for the poor such a statement expressed.²¹ When it was revealed in the press that Paladino had emailed his friends images and photos of “a group of black men trying to get out of the way of an airplane that is apparently moving across a field [with] the caption: ‘Run niggers, run,’” the American public barely blinked. In fact, Paladino’s poll ratings increased, furthering his quest to become the governor of New York.²² When Rush Limbaugh speaks to millions in terms that are racist, demeaning, and thoroughly uncivil, the media responds compliantly by treating such views as just another opinion among many. Humiliation as a mode of discourse and public intervention—enacted upon others with no apologies—has become so commonplace in American cultural politics that the only time we notice it is when it literally results in young people committing suicide, as in the recent tragic deaths of Seth Walsh and Tyler Clementi.²³

The politics of humiliation is fluid, mobile, and capacious as it increasingly spreads and infects almost every public and commercial sphere

21. Bob Herbert, “What Is Paladino About?” *New York Times* 27 September 2010: A29.

22. *Ibid.*, A29.

23. See Lisa W. Foderaro, “Private Moment Made Public, and a Fatal Jump,” *New York Times* 29 September 2010: A1; Stacy Teicher Khadaroo, “Death of California Youth Puts Focus on Rise in Antigay Bullying,” *Truthout.org* 29 September 2010, <http://www.truth-out.org/death-california-youth-puts-focus-rise-antigay-bullying63697?print>

where ideas are produced and circulated. As an ideology, it is politically reactionary and morally despicable. As a strategy, it seeks to denigrate and silence others, often targeting those already disadvantaged, while promoting unthinking self-interest, arrogance, and certitude at the expense of critical thought, dialogue, and exchange. Unfortunately, America is now being shaped by an anti-educational reform movement that uses the politics of humiliation for creating stereotypes about public schooling, teachers, and marginalized youth. At the same time, the movement wins supporters from the dominant media and corporate elite by celebrating the very market-driven values that plunged America into a financial catastrophe. And yet, despite these grave circumstances, we seem to lack the critical language, civic courage, and public values to recognize that when a country institutionalizes a culture of cruelty that increasingly takes aim at public schools and their hard-working teachers, it is embarking on a form of self-sabotage and collective suicide whose victim will be not merely education, but democracy itself.