



## American Youth in the 21st Century: Pathologized, Criminalized and Disposable

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*Editor's note: the following is an excerpt from Henry Giroux' new book, Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability? (Palgrave MacMillan).*

Punishment and fear have replaced compassion and social responsibility as the most important modalities mediating the relationship of youth to the larger social order. Youth within the last two decades have come to be seen as a source of trouble rather than as a resource for investing in the future, and in the case of poor black and Hispanic youth are increasingly treated as either a disposable population, cannon fodder for barbaric wars abroad, or the source of most of society's problems. Hence, young people now constitute a crisis that has less to do with improving the future than with denying it. As Larry Grossberg points out, "It has become common to think of kids as a threat to the existing social order and for kids to be blamed for the problems they experience. We slide from kids in trouble, kids have problems, and kids are threatened, to kids as trouble, kids as problems, and kids as threatening." This was exemplified when the columnist Bob Herbert reported in the *New York Times* that "parts of New York City are like a police state for young men, women, and children who happen to be black or Hispanic. They are routinely stopped, searched, harassed, intimidated, humiliated and, in many cases, arrested for no good reason." No longer "viewed as a privileged sign and embodiment of the future," youth are now increasingly demonized by the popular media and derided by politicians looking for quick-fix solutions to crime and other social ills. While youth have always had to bear the misplaced fear and distrust of adults, how youth are represented, talked about, and treated has changed dramatically in the last two decades.

Under the reign of neoliberal politics with its hyped-up social Darwinism and theater of cruelty, the popular demonization and "dangerousation" of the young now justifies responses to youth that were unthinkable 20 years ago, including criminalization and imprisonment, the prescription of psychotropic drugs, psychiatric confinement, and zero tolerance policies that model schools after prisons. School has become a model for a punishing society in which children who commit a rule violation as minor as a dress code infraction or slightly act out in class can be handcuffed, booked, and put in a jail cell. Racism, inequality, and poverty are on full display in the growing resegregation of public schools in the United States. Now more than ever, many schools either simply warehouse young black males or put them on the fast track to prison incarceration or a future of control under the criminal justice system. All across America, black and brown youth are being suspended or expelled at rates much higher than their white counterparts who commit similar behavioral infractions. For example, as Howard Witt writes in the

*Chicago Tribune*, “In the average New Jersey public school, African-American students are almost 60 times as likely as white students to be expelled for serious disciplinary infractions. In Minnesota, black students are suspended 6 times as often as whites [and ] in Iowa, blacks make up just 5 percent of the statewide public school enrollment but account for 22 percent of the students who get suspended. . . . And on average across the nation, black students are suspended and expelled at nearly three times the rate of white students.” As schools become increasingly militarized, drug-sniffing dogs, metal detectors, and cameras have become common features in schools, and administrators appear more willing if not eager “to criminalize many school infractions, saddling tens of thousands of students with misdemeanor criminal records for offenses such as swearing[,] disrupting class,” or pushing another student. Trust and respect now give way to fear, disdain, and suspicion, creating an environment in which critical pedagogical practices wither, while pedagogies of surveillance and testing flourish. If young people were once defined as part of the vocabulary of innocence and compassion, they are now largely understood through the discourse of fear, guilt, and punishment.

Clearly, there is more at stake under the current regime of neoliberal politics than an attack on children largely characterized by “negative labels and characterizations of youth [that] are falsely totalizing” and punitive laws and public policies. Youth have also become collateral damage for conservatives and neoliberal advocates who want to dismantle the social state and in doing so justify themselves by pointing to an alleged rise of a generation of disorderly and dangerous youth dependent upon government entitlements. Within this discourse, government support for young people is both undermined and inappropriately blamed for creating a generation of kids labeled as psychologically damaged, narcissistic, violent, and out of control. Scapegoating youth as both a generation of suspects and a threat to the social order allows conservatives and neoliberals to further privatize those public spheres that youth need, such as education and health care, while developing policies that move away from social investment to matters of punishment and containment. In this instance, the punishing state combines with the logic of the market to produce priorities and policies that disinvest in the future of children and assert a ruthlessness that largely treats them as reified commodities or disposable populations. Both childhood and the state are now being reimagined in ways that reveal the priorities of a society that has fully embraced the reckless abandon of casino capitalism, where the only rules that matter are made to order by powerful corporations and rich investors. How else to interpret neoliberal-inspired government programs that in the midst of deepening inequality, rising levels of poverty, catastrophic increases in failed mortgages, and growing unemployment invest more in prisons than in public and higher education?

It is more necessary than ever to register youth as a theoretical, moral, and political center of concern, even as it is increasingly evident that youth are one of our lowest national priorities. It is crucial to connect the current crisis in democracy to the war against young people. Doing so will remind adults of their ethical and political responsibility to invest in youth as a symbol for not only securing a democratic future but also keeping alive those elements of civic imagination, culture, and education that subordinate economic principles to democratic values. The category of youth may be one of the most important referents for beginning a critical examination about the pernicious consequences of a society driven by market values, one that not only abstracts young people from the future but shapes the

present in a theater of war in which youth become the most innocent victims. Youth provide a powerful touchstone for a critical discussion about the long-term consequences of neoliberal policies, which undermine any viable notion of justice, equality, and freedom, while also gesturing toward those conditions that make a democratic future possible. Many young people are part of social movements that not only address these crucial issues but also provide a politics, modes of resistance, and connective relations that adults should take seriously as part of their own civic and political formation at the beginning of the new millennium.

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