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social justice and peace - Providing commentary,  
analysis and investigations on issues affecting  
African Americans and the African world.

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## **Youth and the Politics of Prison Culture Politics and the Subversive Imagination**

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Introduction by Tolu Olorunda:

Last week, video surfaced of a 15-year-old Black boy, Marshawn Pitts, recounting an experience that left him scars, bruises, fractures, and a broken nose. Pitts, a special needs student, was walking to his locker when a police officer began verbally abusing him, then flung him across the hall, smashed his face into the floor, and made punching bags of his cheeks. His crime? An untucked shirt. It would sound unbelievable to some and made up to others, but, luckily for Pitts, the attack was [caught on tape](#).

Pitts' story, regrettably, is [but a mere reflection](#) of the reality most poor Youth of color currently live under the shadow of.

Being smashed into walls, cussed out, teased, mocked, and attacked at school is, in many ways, for a number of students, an inextricable part of the educational experience. The only difference, now, is that unlike the days of old when one's classmates were the ones exhibiting such demented displays of moral ineptitude, police officers, increasingly, have begun adopting similar measures to contain the threat factor they believe students - no matter how young or unintimidating - pose to their wellbeing (and ego).

Of course, the parallel hardly exists. Unlike your classmate who could be reported to the principal's office and, soon after, corrected, reprimanded, or, as last resort, suspended, the men in blue are inordinately unaccountable in school settings. And the litany of reports detailing hostile confrontations between teachers, parents, administrators and the paid security personnel - due to allegations of misconduct - show just why any State-sponsored apparatus to monitor or manage kids' conducts often leads to even more deleterious consequences - for all party involved.

In that sense, the Prison culture, the inescapable future for many Youth - of all stripes, color, and creed - must be understood for what it is - an opportunistic arrangement to dispose of those members of society we have no use for anymore.

\* \* \*

As the punishing state gains in power and the prison-industrial complex is nurtured and supported by broader economic, political, and social conditions, its deeply structured racist principles, politics of disposability, and modes of authoritarian governance become part of the fabric of common sense, an unquestioned element of effective governance. As a disciplinary model, the prison reinforces modes of violence and control that are now central to the efforts of the punishing state to align its values and practices with a number of other important commanding social institutions.

The reach of prison culture and its punitive disciplinary practices now extends into the home, workplace, juvenile criminal services, the school, and the entertainment industry. Along with growing incarceration rates for youth of color, young people now have to endure drug tests, surveillance cameras, invasive monitoring, home visits by probation officers, security forces in schools, and a host of other militarizing and monitoring practices used to target potential criminals, terrorists, and other groups represented as a threat to the state.

Of course, under the Bush administration those who disagreed with the administration's domestic and foreign policy goals or whose skin color was dark were with a few exceptions regarded as a high security risk and as potential terrorists.

Unfortunately, as the arm of prison culture continues to spread throughout the society, it increasingly reinforces and provides a model for other institutions that deeply influence the lives of young people, especially in terms of the terrible toll such policies have taken on the lives and futures of poor black and brown youth.

As traditional supports and social safety nets provided by the liberal social contract disappear, the condition of American youth deteriorates most visibly in the way in which they are stereotyped, demonized, and removed from the register of social concerns. With the rise of a mode of governance mediated through an emphasis on crime and the politics of disposability, youth become the new targets of a suspect society.

As the ideologies and disciplinary practices of prison culture are incorporated into the pedagogies of the school and the criminal justice system - celebrated in various modes of mainstream entertainment - youth are increasingly subject to policies and practices suggesting they are worthy of no other treatment than that accorded to criminals - and this judgment is rendered without the benefit of trial, or the presumption of innocence.

Social violence evokes a special kind of cruelty when applied to children, and yet it has gained widespread support both in the public mind and in the deeply rooted rituals of popular culture that thrive on an ideology of masculine hardness, humiliation, and violence, rendering its participants indifferent to the suffering of others. Zygmunt Bauman has argued that "[e]very [society] produces its own visions of the dangers that threaten its identity, visions made to the measure of the kind of social order it struggles to achieve or to retain. . . [T]hreats are projections of a society's own inner ambivalence, and anxieties born of that ambivalence, about its own ways and means, about the fashion in which that society lives and intends to live."

As a symbol of ambivalence, rather than a social investment or a population in need of protection and support, youth are now perceived as a threat to the crumbling social order. One response to this perceived danger is the emergence of a neoliberal state that seeks to bolster its weakened sovereignty by recasting youth as a threat to society and to gain its legitimacy by dealing with that threat - or being seen to deal with it accordingly (typically through media spectacles). As Lawrence Grossberg puts it,

Over the past twenty-five years, there has been a significant transformation in the ways we talk and think about kids and, consequently, in the ways we treat them. We live, for at least part of the time, in a rhetorically constructed picture of kids out of control, an enemy hiding within our most intimate spaces. The responses - zero tolerance, criminalization and imprisonment, psychotropic drugs and psychiatric confinement - suggest not only that we have abandoned the current generation of kids but that we think of them as a threat that has to be contained, punished, and only in some instances, recruited to our side. . . [E]very second, a public high school student is suspended; every ten seconds, a public school student is corporally punished; every twenty seconds, a kid is arrested. Criminalization and medicalization are cheap (financially and emotionally) and expedient ways to deal with our fears and frustrations.

When youth occupy the larger screen culture they are represented mostly through images that are degrading and demonizing. It is difficult to find in the dominant media any sympathetic representations of young people who experience difficult times as a result of the economic downturn, the simultaneous erosion of security (around health care, work, education), and the militarization of everyday life.

Youth are no longer categorized as Generation X, Y, and Z. On the contrary, they are now defined rhetorically in mainstream corporate media as "Generation Kill" or "Killer Children." In the aftermath of the shooting rampages at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech, kids are largely defined through the world of frenzied media spectacles driven by sensationalist narratives and youth panics.

Rather than being portrayed as victims of a "crisis of masculinity and male rage, an out-of-control gun culture, and a media that projects normative images of violent masculinity and make celebrities out of murderers," youth are represented as psychologically unhinged, potentially indiscriminate killers (especially young returning veterans), gang rapists (falsely accused Duke University lacrosse players), school shooters, and desensitized domestic terrorists. Newspapers and other popular media offer an endless stream of alarming images and dehumanizing stories from the

domestic war zone, allegedly created by rampaging young people. One typical newspaper account described how a group of third graders in South Georgia brought a knife, duct tape, and handcuffs to school as part of a plan to attack their teacher.

CNN's Anderson Cooper hosted a special report on school shootings on April 27, 2007, with the title "Killers in Our Midst," which not only capitalized on shocking and sensational imagery that swelled the network's bottom line but also added fuel to a youth panic that insidiously portrays young people as pint-size nihilists, an ever-present threat to public order.

Scapegoated youth thus provide the means for turning public attention away from alarming instances of *state violence* against thousands of detainees held in various secret prisons around the world, the outsourcing of torture by the CIA to Syria and other authoritarian regimes, the illegal legalities of an imperial presidency including the world-record-shattering incarceration rates of people of color in jails or prisons, and the endless abuses that young people suffer at the hands of adults in a geography of heightened poverty, racism, unemployment, and inequality. And yet, while the public is flooded with reports of feral teenage boys poised to commit brutal, remorseless crimes, reinforcing the new common sense that the categories of "youth" and "super-predator" are synonymous, we hear little from the dominant media about either shocking rates of youth poverty and homelessness, or the 4 million youth "who are not in school and basically have no hope of finding work."

Nor is there the slightest public concern about the sharp rise over the last decade in the use of potent antipsychotic prescription drugs, stimulants, and antidepressants to medicate children and adolescents for a multitude of heretofore normal "teen" behavior, ranging from mood swings to "oppositional defiant disorder." Nor does the public hear much about the fate of young people in unregulated so-called "therapeutic schools" whose 'tough love' treatments include having a bag placed over their head and a noose around their neck."

As Alex Koroknay-Palicz argues, "Powerful national forces such as the media, politicians and the medical community perpetuate the idea of youth as an inferior class of people responsible for society's ills and deserving of harsh penalties." While such negative and demeaning views have had disastrous consequences for young people, under the reign of a punishing society and the deep structural racism of the criminal justice system, the situation for a growing number of young people and youth of color is getting much worse.

The suffering and deprivation experienced by millions of children in the United States in 2009 - bound to become worse in the midst of the current economic meltdown - not only testifies to a state of emergency and a burgeoning crisis regarding the health and welfare of many children, but also bears witness to - and indeed indicts - a model of market sovereignty and a mode of punitive governance that have failed both children and the promise of a substantive democracy. The Children's Defense Fund in its 2008 annual report offers a range of statistics that provide a despairing glimpse of the current crisis facing too many children in America. What is one to make of a society marked by the following conditions:

- Almost 1 in 13 children in the United States live in poverty - 5.8 million in extreme

poverty.

- One in Six children in America is poor. Black and Latin children are about 3 times as likely to be poor as White children
- 4.2 million children under the age of five live in poverty.
- 35.3 percent of black children, 28.0 percent of Latino children, and 10.8 percent of white, non-Latino children live in poverty.
- There are 8.9 million uninsured children in America.
- One in 5 Latino children and 1 in 8 Black children are uninsured, compared to 1 in 13 White children.
- Only 11 percent of black, 15 percent of Latino, and 41 percent of white eighth graders perform at grade level in math.
- Each year 800,000 children spend time in foster care.
- On any given night, 200,000 children are homeless, one out of every four of the homeless population.
- Every 36 seconds a child is abused or neglected, almost 900,000 children each year.
- Black males ages 15 to 19 are about eight times more likely to be gun homicide victims than white males.
- Although they represent 39 percent of the U.S. juvenile population, minority youth represent 60 percent of committed juveniles.
- A black boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime; a Latino boy has a one in six chance.
- Black juveniles are about four times as likely as their white peers to be incarcerated. Black youths are almost five times as likely and Latino youths about twice as likely to be incarcerated as white youths for drug offenses.

These figures suggest that young people in the United States are increasingly being constructed in relation to a future devoid of any hope. The notion that children should be treated as a crucial social resource and represent for any healthy society important ethical and political considerations about the quality of public life, the allocation of social provisions, and the role of the state as a guardian of public interests appears to be lost. The visual geographies and ever-expanding landscapes of violence young people inhabit provoke neither action nor ethical discrimination on the part of adult society, which might serve to prevent children from being relegated to our lowest national priority in the richest country in the world

If prison is the ultimate expression of social exclusion for adults in the United States, managing and regulating youth through the lens of crime and repression represents its symbiotic underside. One consequence is that the most crucial institutions affecting the

lives of young people are now under the influence of disciplinary apparatuses of control and repression that have become the most visible indicator of the degree to which the protected space of childhood, if not democracy itself, is being destroyed.

As minority youth are removed from the inventory of ethical and political concerns, they are treated as surplus populations, assigned to a form of social death. In a suspect society that governs through a ruthless economic Darwinism, a sensationalized culture of fear, and the topology of crime, youth become collateral damage, while democratic governance disappears along with the moral and political responsibilities necessary for creating a better and more just future for succeeding generations in a viable democracy.

Under the reign of a punishing mode of sovereignty, a racialized criminal justice system, and a financial meltdown that is crippling the nation, the economic, political, and educational situation for a growing number of young people and youth of color has gone from bad to worse. As families are being forced out of their homes because of record-high mortgage foreclosures and many businesses declare bankruptcy, tax revenues are declining and effecting cutbacks in state budgets, further weakening public schools and social services. The results in human suffering are tragic and can be measured in the growing ranks of poor and homeless students, the gutting of state social services, and the sharp drop in employment opportunities for teens and young people in their twenties. Within these grave economic conditions, children disappear, often into bad schools, prisons, foster care, and even into their graves.

Under the biopolitics of neoliberalism, the punishing state has no vocabulary or stake in the future of poor minority youth, and increasingly in youth in general. Instead of being viewed as impoverished, minority youth are seen as lazy and shiftless; instead of being recognized as badly served by failing schools, they are labeled uneducable and pushed out of schools; instead of being provided with decent work skills and jobs, they are either sent to prison or conscripted to fight in wars abroad; instead of being given decent health care and a place to live, they are placed in foster care or pushed into the swelling ranks of the homeless.

Instead of addressing the very real dangers that young people face, the punishing society treats them as suspects and disposable populations, subjecting them to disciplinary practices that close down any hope they might have for a decent future. Perhaps the most powerful site in which these disciplinary practices are at work and bear down daily on the lives of many young people, but especially on the lives of minority youth, is in the changing nature of U.S. public schools, which now prepare many students for entry not into universities or colleges but into the juvenile criminal justice system.

*[This excerpt is from Giroux's latest work, [Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?](#)]*

**BlackCommentator.com** Guest Commentator, Henry A. Giroux holds the Global TV Network chair in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Canada. Related work: Henry A. Giroux, "[The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence](#)" (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). His most recent books include "[Take Back Higher Education](#)" (co-authored with Susan Searls Giroux, 2006), "[The](#)

[\*University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex\*](#)" (2007) and "[\*Against the Terror of Neoliberalism: Politics Beyond the Age of Greed\*](#)" (2008). His newest book is, "[\*Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?\*](#)," Palgrave Mcmillan (2009). Click [here](#) to contact Dr. Giroux.



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