

John Devine

The School Massacres in the United States

The day after the tragic killings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado last April, an African cab driver in New York asked me, "Why cannot the most powerful nation on earth even control its own schools and schoolchildren?" In his direct manner, he formulated a question that was puzzling the entire globe.

Firearm murders of children in the United States have been commonplace for a long time. Each year about 3,000 American children die from gunfire. The firearms-related homicide rate for children less than 15 years of age in the United States is nearly 16 times higher than that of the other 25 leading industrialized countries of the world combined (Centers for Disease Control, 1998). Figures such as these lost their shock value many years ago. What is relatively new on the U. S. cultural scene is the murder of children in schools (about 50 children and youth are killed by firearms in schools each year). But what is brand new are the school-associated mass murders of children that have been occurring the past two years. This is a phenomenon of the late 1990s so well captured by the taxi driver's question.

The fact that it has become a topic of passionate conversation and the subject of endless cable TV discussions allows us U. S. citizens to deceive ourselves that we are doing something about the problem. The topic of school violence has become a staple for cable TV, talk radio, and the tabloids.

With 15 dead and 23 injured at Columbine High School, the central question is indeed "Why?" but even when we think we have the answers we should not confuse that with getting the job done. "The Job" is getting rid of gun violence in schools, but also in communities. "The Job" is ultimately getting rid of every form of bullying behavior. Clearly, this is a human rights task of enormous proportions. The school-associated shootings are only the tip of an enormous iceberg, however. The exportation and globalization of the firearm is a very real human rights problem that does not bode well for the coming millennium.

But everyone, it seems, has her or his own explanation for these atrocities. In the media, the debate has focused on immediate causality, raging back and forth between those who seek to blame guns, Hollywood, the Internet, the family, the school, and so forth. These violent events have become interpreted as expressions of a non-

political brutality. The underlying ideological and political patterns are rarely identified or only hinted at, or worse, distorted by conservatives who seize the opportunity to advance their pro-gun, pro-prayer, or pro-family agendas.

In the present paper, I intend to explore briefly the framework for what might become a fuller conversation that would not divorce these episodes of physical violence from their deeper meanings at the level of a political and economic infrastructure. Critical intellectuals, in their very legitimate efforts to combat right-wing attempts to privatize every aspect of the economy and to dismantle the public school system, have failed to appreciate the extent to which the entire culture—capital and labor, upper class and working class—have colluded to produce violent identities that are now almost beyond the control of any legitimate agency. Obsessed with the need to struggle against conservatives' insistence on authority, control, and discipline, these scholars persist in insisting that promotion of order in schools equates to a subservient allegiance to the state (see, e. g., Giroux 1999). As I have argued elsewhere, such fanciful views of the current educational scene can only stem from a failure of ethnography, from a lack of acquaintance with the public schools of today (Devine 1996).

My own ethnographic research into the issue of school-related violence in some of New York's largest, most overcrowded high schools has led me to conclude not only that the poor get poor education but also that they get unsupervised and unsafe schools. The typical response of the NYC Board of Education to real or imagined school violence has been to introduce metal detectors, to increase the size of the security force, and, in general, to create a lock-down, technology-driven, police-state atmosphere, with a few conflict resolution programs thrown in as a kind of humanistic afterthought. The most hazardous aspect of this type of research is the danger of reinforcing the standard dominant notion that all inner-city schools are plagued with violence. Clearly, the rural and suburban mass killings of the past two years have created problems for such received wisdom. It has become rare to hear commentators refer to inner-city school violence. When the topic of school violence and its causes is addressed nowadays it is inevitably in the context of the country as a whole. Any serious effort by educational theorists to address this issue today must take into account all of these complexities and their global implications.

Let us begin, as was suggested to the two Watergate journalists, by following the "money-trail" of school violence. In 1994–95, the cost of

purchasing the full security "package" for a single NYC high school was about \$750,000. This included hand-held and walk-through metal detectors, identity card machines, X-Ray machines for inspecting knapsacks, walkie-talkies as well as a contingent of four to six security guards stationed in the school lobby and trained to operate all this hardware. Not included in this figure were the 20–30 regular security guards on corridor/stairwell duty, the security paraprofessionals, the police (plain clothes or uniformed), and such items as the highly sophisticated fire alarm system with magnetic door locks (designed to keep intruders out and students in).

The early 1990s also were a boom time for programs designed to teach children peaceful alternatives to conflicts or the use of violence. The theory was that the propensity towards using violence as a way of dealing with life's frustrations was a learned behavior and that such tendencies could be reversed by teaching children how to handle their emotions more positively. Extra State and local funds suddenly became available for innovative conflict resolution programs and peer mediation classes. For several years now, the New York City Board of Education has been funding hundreds of community-based organizations to implement their own unique approaches to violence prevention for schools at the cost of about \$100,000 to \$200,000 per year.

But such local expenditures pale in comparison with the outlays of the federal government in this area. The largest (but by no means the only) provider of funds for school violence prevention is the Safe and Drug Free Schools program of the U. S. Department of Education which will spend \$566 million in fiscal year 1999 alone, an increase of \$65 million over 1998, thanks to the publicity over the recent school mass murders. Virtually every school district and community in the Nation will receive funding from this source to support all sorts of drug and violence prevention programs and hardware.

Two decades ago it was taken for granted that every school in the country was more or less free of violence. Today there is a vast half-billion dollar federal program which awards grants designed to address every violence-related problem from preschoolers' angry feelings to binge drinking by college students. There are special grants for those schools which can provide "objective data" demonstrating that they have "severe safety problems." The irony is that all the recent incidents have happened in school districts with no record of violence. Each year new buzz words develop or "flavor-of-the-month" programs are

added. In 1999, for example, \$35 million was added to hire "school safety coordinators" in middle schools.

The mass murder at Columbine High School raised this marketing of "school violence prevention services" to a whole new level. Most of these commodities and programs will be reimbursed through either the federal outlays mentioned above or through similar programs operating out of the Department of Justice or other federal agencies. Others will be purchased by parents directly as part of their normal "back-to-school" routine.

The Wall Street Journal recently itemized several of the school security products which have come onto the market since the Littleton tragedy in April, 1999. Many high schools are requiring students to purchase see-through transparent vinyl backpacks because the two killers brought concealed guns into the school. The Columbine High killings have also influenced companies to begin marketing crisis-intervention services to help school districts deal with future school-associated tragedies. Two companies planning on selling "crisis-planning" software to schools foresee annual profits of up to \$300 million. One safety consultant, who charges \$1,350 a lecture, was quoted in the article as saying that he had about 50 engagements lined up and that "business doubles whenever there's an incident." Sales of one handbook on violence prevention (at \$29.95 each) have quadrupled. Some school districts have instituted a policy that will no doubt be popular with the school book publishing companies: they are issuing duplicate sets of textbooks (one for the home, one for school) thus obviating the need for knapsacks altogether.

Not all of these efforts were a direct result of the school murders. After some recent killing sprees on workplace premises in Georgia, "crisis-planning" firms geared up to help businesses face the threat of potentially violent workers. Since these incidents, like the school-related ones, are on the increase, these companies have been training companies how to identify their most potentially violent employees. Now, these same "crisis-planning" firms are expanding their operations for a whole new clientele: schools concerned about potential violent encounters. Even rural school districts which once thought of themselves as safely isolated from urban mayhem have begun to prepare themselves for the eventual schoolyard armed intruder. In passing, let us note how the locus of violence becomes predicated of the individual adolescent in all of this rather than in the institutional structures.

The same Wall Street Journal article goes on to itemize the boom in business development which Littleton and the other school massacres have generated. A Midwest publishing house sells books and videos targeting "at risk" youth and employs a stable of 25 speakers on school safety who can be booked for \$3,000 a lecture. A teacher-training company has doubled the number of safety seminars it provides for school districts. A maker of surveillance cameras to be used on school buses reports that it has orders to install its cameras in 5,000 buses at the cost of \$1,000 each. One company is selling a set of CD-ROMs on school safety for \$4,799 each. Another computer company is selling software to monitor violent Internet sites.

But it is the metal detector companies and the CCTV (closed circuit television) companies who, more than any other, crown the security culture. Many companies are adapting products originally designed for airports and large commercial buildings (like the World Trade Center) in order to occupy the newest profitable niche: school security. Hand-held metal detectors sell for about \$200 each and the walk-through airport-style models range from \$1,995 to about \$3,200. Schools are now beginning to include these items in their budgets as routinely as they have textbooks and computers in the past. One university just put the finishing touches on a brand-new football field with 55 walk-through metal detectors at the various entrance gates. All of these companies exhibit their latest cutting-edge hardware and software at giant trade shows and expositions several times a year.

The unstated assumption of the security culture is that violence has now become a permanent fixture in American life, that we can expect regular doses of it in the future, and that American society is powerless to do anything other than "cope" with it. No one believes that the "security measures" will really eliminate violence. The metal detectors, especially in the context of the schools, send a double message: this school will be safer, but we expect more violence. More generally, it is this expectation of violence that has come to dominate every aspect of school construction, administration, and pedagogy.

There was a time when American schools, like the European models on which they were founded, contained only two sets of actors: teachers and students. The earlier holistic role of the teacher began to become fragmented in the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of guidance counselors and special education professionals to whom some of their duties were delegated. The 1980s witnessed the introduction of school security guards and police into the educational establishment, further

shattering the old "in loco parentis" role. Now, in the late 1990s we see the entrance of a new set of "professionals": various assortments of school security consultants, not to mention the SWAT teams, bomb-detection units, and the out-stationed local police forces. Add the members of the legal and insurance professions whose job it is to ratify all of these security procedures and to avoid lawsuits and one can begin to understand how control of the schoolhouse has slipped away from the educators who were once thought all-powerful.

It is now considered imperative that every school have a "safety plan." As part of this plan, more and more school administrators in school districts throughout the United States are introducing personnel dedicated exclusively to school security. Defining the role of these new "security employees" (guards, paraprofessionals, hall monitors, police, supervisory personnel) has become the top priority for many urban, rural and suburban schools. Yet rarely is there any meaningful dialogue between the security staff who assume ownership of the school and the teaching staff who may now be likened to their tenants.

Faced with the threat of serious danger, most school districts are still groping around trying to answer basic questions regarding the presence of this new component within the four square walls of the schoolhouse. How should security personnel and teachers divide up the disciplinary function? Should security play a proactive or a purely reactive role? How can the guards/police be most effectively used? Who has the power to report school crime to the superintendent, the principal or the chief security guard? What should be included in a school security plan? Should the emphasis be on early prevention or rule enforcement? How does the internal security force relate to the local community police? What are the legal and insurance limits of school liability? How can security serve as a public relations tool for the school? What is the relationship between the amount of school disruption and school attendance? Should metal detectors be part of the plan? When schools become absorbed with such issues, it is easy to see how student achievement and the creation of a community of learners begins to take a back burner.

Enter the "security consultant" to help the school begin to cope with these issues. Security consultants generally begin with the presupposition that these days there is a small percentage of students who are highly disruptive and who therefore require a "professional security presence" within the school. This presence may take the form of an internal school security department whose employees have limited

arrest powers and may even be authorized to carry weapons. Many areas of the country have created a full-fledged school police department. New York, the largest school district in the country, recently allowed the NYC police department to absorb its former school safety officers. Still other jurisdictions assign one or more police officers to work with the schools. The security consultant helps the school district decide which of these options best suits its needs. The first task of the consultant is to assist the school to perform a thorough security "needs assessment" together with its current security staff. A whole new discipline and profession has grown up around these security needs—one to which educational theory has paid no attention whatsoever. The radical intellectual still acts and writes as if educators in the U. S. were still in charge of their educational establishments.

The most crucial issue schools face is whether or not their "security personnel" should be armed or not. More and more school districts are considering arming their school security staff as a deterrent to students bringing weapons into the school. Professor John Lott of the University of Chicago Law School has been widely quoted as saying that allowing teachers and other law-abiding adults to carry concealed handguns in schools would make it easier to stop shootings in progress and to deter shootings from ever occurring. He argues that expanded concealed-handgun use by Israeli citizens has greatly reduced the terrorist attacks which occurred twenty-five years ago. Lott's argument is an almost perfect example of a practice against which every first-year anthropology student is warned: pulling a trait out of the context of one culture and applying it indiscriminately to another.

Since the spate of school massacres began two years ago there have been numerous calls from state legislators to place metal detectors in every school. Such measures and calls for arming school administrators would have been unthinkable just ten years ago but today such proposals are not considered extremist. These views are now given currency on CNN and other cable networks in the aftermath of incidents like Littleton as if they were quite reasonable ideas. When TV talk shows want to find out what is going on in the schools, the security team, not the teachers, are interviewed. Thus the normalization of violence comes full cycle.

Time limitations do not allow for me to do more than mention the complexity of the extremely powerful economic forces that prevent the United States from disarming itself of firearms, even of handguns. For many years now, the U. S. Congress has been in the strong grip of

Southern and Western Senators and Representatives, mostly Republicans, whose campaigns are backed financially by the National Rifle Association (NRA). The vast majority of citizens, especially women, desire stronger gun control legislation. Without strong—very strong—federal legislation, the myriad state laws are meaningless. But the nature of the political equation is such that only very timid federal laws are possible due to the powerful lobbying efforts of the gun lobby. So, to this extent, the current American political scene is no longer democratic but is dominated by the capitalist class for whom government regulation is anathema. Despite the fact that random gun violence has now become potentially ubiquitous and is no longer confined to marginalized neighborhoods, the gun industry refuses to examine any of its presuppositions. It foists its own peculiar interpretation of the Second Amendment on the body politic. The more historically accurate interpretation of the Second Amendment, in fact, holds just the opposite view: that the Constitution does not, in fact, grant Americans a private right to bear arms (Wills 1995). In a word, technology, global capitalism, and, more specifically, the economics and logic of the gun industry, now dominate U. S. culture in general and education in particular.

Just as the shrill rhetoric of the NRA has drowned out reasonable discussion about gun regulation, so too, the rhetoric of Hollywood about First Amendment rights of freedom of expression has drowned out any reasonable discussion about the harmful effects the constant viewing of violence through television and movies produces. Thousands of studies and the common sense of parents suggest a strong connection between television watching and aggression. But, again, the laissez-faire mentality that government should not regulate any aspect of life combined with fears of censorship allow the entire society, children and adults alike, to remain at high risk for violence through hard-core computer games, movies and the daily television fare. Several commentators have remarked how such media violence equates to the disappearance of spontaneous children's play as more and more children learn to emulate and re-enact the performances they constantly watch on TV. Not only have TV shows learned how to penetrate the youth culture, they now boast that their entire networks are set up to appeal exclusively to adolescents. They even have the hubris to suggest to parents that if they want to understand how to relate to their kids, they should watch TV "to find out how to do it!"

Lamentable as this view may be, it happens to be correct. The video game industry, the entertainment industry, the music industry and the

Internet have all figured out how to approach the youth culture—to attract it, to commodify it, to penetrate it, and to dominate it. Meanwhile, adults for several decades now have withdrawn from close interactions with youth as the peer culture has grown stronger. We grown-ups have stood passively by while allowing a growing permissiveness to permeate our relations with youth (Damon 1995). Teachers and parents alike have delegated our teenagers' rites de passage to those who market violence targeted at youngsters' imaginations. Meanwhile, the video game industry complain loudly that they are being scapegoated, that there is no link between fantasy and reality, and that it is "no big deal" that adolescents like the Littleton killers were fond of playing the "killer" videogame "Doom". Yet this same game, which was marketed specifically for the adolescent audience, was simultaneously being used as a training device by the U. S. Marine Corps just before sending their troops into battle in order to heighten the killer instinct. Last year I attended an international conference on youth in Germany at which delegates from Africa, Asia, and Latin America pleaded with those present from the U. S. to find a way to stop exporting such junk and violence to their countries. We Americans had no answers.

A decade ago, it was easy for right-wing ideology to focus on inner-city school violence and to predicate aggression of marginalized neighborhoods and their inhabitants. A decade ago, it was easy for radical theorists to blame violence on urban poverty or to see it as a form of resistance against the oppressions of the dominant society. Now that violence has become generalized throughout American society, such explanations seem woefully inadequate. The wealthy classes are indeed busier than ever constructing their gated communities and their elitist schools. Privatization is still in full swing and public services for the poor and the working classes continue to deteriorate. But the rationale behind this way of life has begun to grow fuzzy. Why move to an upscale suburb of Denver or to exclusive areas on the North Shore of Chicago to escape urban chaos when school violence erupts there as easily—perhaps more easily—than on Chicago's South Side?

Both left-wing and right-wing discourse are attempting to address ubiquitous violence—what is essentially a problem of the postmodern world—with modernist explanations. But it becomes increasingly apparent that the verities of a bygone "modernist" era—whether those of the left or the right—have become not only irrelevant but less and less pragmatic. The overall conservative strategy of the past two decades

which consisted basically in cordoning off urban poverty neighborhoods and allowing them to deteriorate while retreating with „our kind of people“ farther and farther into the countryside is clearly no longer working. The suburban U. S. has become as violent as the urban. Liberal theory, at least as articulated by educational theorists, seems to be able to do little more than deplore the conservative calls for more discipline, order, control, and authority since all such concepts have connoted oppression and domination of the lower classes. Liberals fail to see that it is the entire culture which is in jeopardy and that attributing urban violence to unjust social and economic causes without also discussing the failings of teachers' unions, progressive pedagogy, and critical educational theory itself will make them more irrelevant than they already are.

In a global postmodern culture, the logic of laissez-faire seems to trump every possible move, even those aimed at the self-preservation of the marketplace. Postmodern culture is imbued with intrinsic contradiction. Ronald Reagan is nearly assassinated but still refuses to confront the gun lobby and call for gun control. The culture of postmodern violence, rooted as it is in the capitalist economic order, constructs violent adolescent identities and then provides these same adolescents with the physical means (the firearm) to carry out the violence. The only rationality it recognizes as a prevention to violence is the techno-security response to the weapon, which, like the weapon itself, is meaningful only in a totally capitalized culture in which nothing has meaning except commodities.

If we attempt to employ the tenets of postmodernism itself in our response to these problems of the postmodern world, however, we are checkmated at every turn. Postmodernism eschews any kind of theory building, social activism or participation in the political process. If we are to find effective and democratic, if limited, responses to the ritualized violence, we must begin by recognizing the postmodern culture for what it really is. Right-wing descriptions tend to glamorize it as “fragmented”, “feisty”, “irreverent”, “eclectic”, and, above all, “hip”. In doing so, they fail to include the most important adjective which defines postmodern culture: violent. Any meaningful conversation aimed at cultural betterment must begin with the frank admission that this is the central feature of the culture we have constructed.

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