

Punishing Schools, Fear and Citizenship in American Public Education. By William Lyons and Julie Drew. Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 2006. Pp. 264. \$65.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

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Lyons and Drew explore what has arguably been the dominant trend of American public schooling over the past several years: the increasing likeness of public schools to prisons and the criminalization of youth culture. As conveyed in their subtitle, Lyons and Drew examine how a culture of fear, aggravated by the shootings at Columbine, but accelerated by 9/11, has so deeply permeated the daily routines of public schools. The sweep of this change is their topic, for it is American education in general that has been altered, and altered in ways that reach beyond police searches and lockdowns. Of far greater consequence is a transformation of the understood social contract that is public education. This is a deeply thoughtful work that integrates a variety of perspectives into a compelling interpretation of what has happened to American education. It is superbly written and is, as such, accessible to a diverse audience.

The title implies a double entendre. By *punishing* schools the authors certainly mean an environment that has surveillance and control as an ever-present focus. The object of this preoccupation is the defiance that emanates from youthful sexuality and its racial overtones. The school as panopticon exaggerates the menacing potential of the youthful body and its private demeanors, promoting in consequence a “slow hemorrhage of freedoms” (p. 89). With a reference to Foucault, the authors suggest how the microtechnologies of backpack searches and lockdowns facilitate this punishing gaze, yet have their counterpart in the continuous flow of boyfriend-girlfriend conflicts that blunt the demeaning character of searches and lockdowns.

But it is a second meaning that is the authors’ primary intention. This meaning is framed by a strategy that compares two schools that differ markedly in racial and socioeconomic composition: one suburban (SHS) and one urban (UHS). As the authors reveal the differences between the two schools, they develop a theoretical interpretation that is multilayered, empirically convincing, and deeply nuanced. Their comparison reveals how schools are *differentially* punished by the wake of deindustrialization; *differentially* abused by the false prophets of charter schools, redirected lottery funds, and urban renewal; and *differentially* neglected by local and state politics unrestrained by the racial coalitions that once upheld the social contract of a public education.

With great insight, the authors pinpoint a difference between the schools that illustrates these larger changes. For the suburban

school, the punishing routines of daily life emanate from within. They derive from a “logic of absence,” for the ravaging effects of deinstitutionalization are distant and obscure; they are what afflict the urban school and its different populations. For SHS, student conformity is “privileged,” but the larger intent is insidious and harmful. The insidiousness is how it directs attention away from real social forces and power relations; the harmful is how it renders students passive by diluting the need to acquire the skills that make possible a comprehension of forces of difference, their origins, and their resolution. For the urban school, in contrast, its punishing routines come from without. UHS is a “problem school without a neighborhood” (p. 139). The path “from neighborhood to bus to hallway to classroom” (p. 147) is fractured, and by the time conflicts arrive at the hallways and classrooms their scale and causes are reduced to problems of communication. Like their SHS counterparts, students at UHS are distracted from a broader and empirical comprehension of conflicts. Yet unlike their SHS counterparts, they have no “other” against which they construct their identities. The fractured sequence that leads from community conflict to hallway arguments to physical fights produces the culture of punishment that routinizes violence.

Whether it is privileging student conformity or normalizing interpersonal disputes, the legally enforced procedural remedy is the policy of zero tolerance. As the authors make clear, such a policy requires a “right-utopian” climate that defines zero-tolerant practices as reasonable and benign. Zero tolerance is much more than a policy; it is a culture that distracts attention from real causes, harms the learning of real democratic participation, and threatens the legal and social underpinnings of public education. The implications of this are disturbing, as Lyons and Drew forcefully express. Much like Hunt’s brilliant dissection of the French Revolution (1992), where *transparency* “was the perfect fit between public and private [and] was a body that told no lies and kept no secrets” (Hunt 1992:96–7), a modern replication is zero tolerance. Just as attendance at neighborhood meetings was a required conformity to sustain the revolution, locker searches are legally upheld as the necessary means to ensure a safe environment. More important, they are symbolic attempts to make transparent the boundary of public education. Yet as the authors argue, the costs are severe.

Reference

- Hunt, Lynn (1992) *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press.