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Bullying in U.S. Public Culture:
Or, Gothic Terror in the Full Light of Day

ABSTRACT

This article expands the conventional analysis of bullying and intimidation in U.S. daily life beyond family, household and school dynamics to the workplace, the media, and the world of politics. Although a universal problem, bullying enjoys a virulence and prevalence in contemporary U.S. culture virtually unmatched anywhere else in terms of its reach, depth, and legitimacy. Unlike in many European nations and Canada it is not illegal, and although a subject of endless commentary in the U.S. press it is little studied and consequently little understood as a politics of abject subjecthood consisting in the practice of humiliating others, primarily in terms of stigmatizing gender and sexual stereotypes. What is singular in the current reign of the bully is that the multiple contexts of the return of violent sovereignty in daily life and politics, neoliberal economic policies, and the War on Terror can convert the temporary experience of unwanted acts of aggression into a one of a permanent sense of weakness, self-loathing, and a perpetual fear of potential psychological or physical assaults resulting in political paralysis.

The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also inside, the "we" lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which separated each of us.
Primo Levi, "The Gray Zone" (1988: 38)

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We think we know who they are: they cut you off on the highway, they taunt you to your face, mock you behind your back and smirk at you from the TV screen, standing always beyond reach. They are everywhere and anywhere, from the schoolyard to the boardroom, the office cubical to your local bar. They come unbidden visiting violence upon the unsuspecting and the fearful alike. Even at home you can't get away from the pervasive climate of intimidation and disrespect: you turn on the TV and there they are shouting down any guest who dares to break with the media's conservative consensus. Requiring little or no provocation, they are poised to strike at the first sign of weakness—or courage. For they tolerate no one, no one but their own kind—belligerent bullies ready to declare who is fit to speak, to listen, and to submit.

Few are called but even fewer are chosen to join the violent circle of sovereign subjects. That can be figured out only in the assault, the shout, the smear. Even so, the game of intimidation never seems to stop and nothing is ever guaranteed: from one day to the next, those within may fall out, and those without may work themselves within as circumstance and events warrant.

However, the inevitable question constantly arises: *When did this all start?*

They Meant It

We Americans should have seen it coming. It's not like there wasn't ample warning. But few of us wanted to believe them—that they meant what they said. So much macho bluster. Strutting around, talking tough. But following close behind came the actions: fire-bombings of abortion clinics, serial capital executions, gay bashings—not to mention "three-strikes" laws and mandatory sentencing that send citizens off to long prison terms for petty drug offenses, tripling the U.S. prison population within twenty years. Next to come in for brutal treatment were the schools and workplaces: from the presence of police in hallways and zero-tolerance drug tests to factory closings and the downsizing of middle-management, to the cutting and privatization of public services and government programs. Even the Post Office became a "profit centre of excellence" meant to compete with private sector enterprises; it also became a centre of workplace violence and shootings (Neuman and Baron 1998; Wacquant 1999; Windle and Bader 2001).

Our wilful disbelief persisted during the impeachment of Bill Clinton, which was followed the next year by the stolen presidential elections of 2000: political thuggery in full view of TV cameras. As the Florida vote recount proceeded and reports of physical assaults of poll workers by Republican operatives came in, the air became thick with the threat of political violence. Al Gore and old guard Democrats hesitated and relented as if haunted and paralyzed by the unspoken traumatic memory of multiple political assassinations in the 1960s—from civil rights workers in the South and John F. and Robert Kennedy to Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and gay rights politician Harvey Milk. Gothic terror in the full light of day. When the Supreme Court put a stop to the recount, Democratic politicians woke up to find themselves ejected from the political arena by a *coup d'état* and did not muster the courage to say so to the nation (Kellner 2001).

Meanwhile, Washington, DC, political insiders—what the French call *la classe politique*—told everyone to go back to work and get on with their lives. But of course what had happened was that the "CEO President"-elect and his party had just fired the U.S. electorate as so many redundant employees whose functions were now reassigned once-and-for-all to the business sector, its media outlets and the well-funded political action committees. Within a few years, the U.N. and its fact-based reality inspection teams would receive their pink slips as well, as the U.S. staged its shock-and-awe invasion of Iraq to cow the Iraqis and recalcitrant allies into submission. There was no stopping them then and—so we are led to believe—there is no stopping them now.[1]

The Event, or Strange Intimacy

The violence, the intimidation, you think you're ready—perhaps you've experienced it before—still, when it happens, especially to you, your person, your body, the body politic, then its sheer power, speed and intensity bypass whatever defences you have. From the edges of consciousness, the bullies rush up attacking and screaming in your face, "You're nothing but..." scum, a bitch, a faggot, a liberal, a feminist, a Muslim, an immigrant, a veteran, a Democrat, a traitor, an anti-Semite, a Naderite, a loser. Bewildered, we're thrown off-balance; we can't believe it is happening, be it again or for the first time, it seems to make no difference. The hormonal response wells up: fight or flight—but it's already too late; something has slipped under our skin, wormed its way to the core of our being and taken over. Disoriented and at a loss for words, we have the creeping realization that we can never retrieve again whatever we were *before*. We are beyond our own reach. Something else is there—intimately there—and we sense it is now forever also who we are. A power, and a weakness, that we can't control. From now on we lead a compromised existence.

The unthinkable has happened, and we feel *betrayed* by both the bullies and ourselves: "*How did they dare?*" "*How did I let it happen?*" and there begins the

search for answers and the cycle of grievance and redress addressed at once to the aggressor and to ourselves, but to no end and to no use. We are prisoners of that new, injured, transformed self and of the agents of that transformation upon whom we are forever dependent; they have declared with violence, "This is who you are, nothing more, nothing less," and we want to and have to say "no" back to them and no one else. Now, however, we need those bullies, for the conversation so brutally commenced can no longer stop, at least until the question, "How did this happen to us?" is answered. And there is the haunting fear—and fascinated horror—that the bullies were *right*: that they saw something in us which we had disavowed; or at least they saw the potential—the target of their vehemence. They have made us what they say we are: a lesser being. We have become Other at the end of a gun. From now on "every possibility is a fact" (Taussig 1989: 20). Captive of our potential weakness and their potential violence we have entered into the infinite, fearful regress and fact of future threat.[2]

Knowing that from now on they have you, you belong to them, they now whisper the parent's or the lover's threat, "Without me you're nothing." They have made you and they can unmake you. With or without them, we are indeed nothing. Present or absent they possess us. If there wasn't a relationship before, there is one now, unbreakable even as it breaks us. Thanks to bullying we end up resigning ourselves to a life divided between what we are—or rather, what we have become—and a former sovereign self that the bullies have persuaded us we've lost. Thus, the enemy is now within us; as a result we find ourselves in Primo Levi's gray zone of endless regression and violence. And, like a vampire's newly bitten victims, ravenous for fresh blood and anxious to recover our former (fantasized) selves, we begin our new careers—bullying others. Or in the case of the extreme distress of isolated young U.S. males, taking a gun and shooting down teachers and students in classrooms and hallways before dispatching their abject selves to oblivion (Goldstein 1999; Herbert 2007; Human Rights Watch 2001a; 2001b).

During the last fifteen years there has emerged in the U.S. an identity politics of degraded subjecthood in which fear of deviating from gender and sexual norms has become the very "ground of all existence" in individual and collective life, a veritable "way of life" (Massumi 2005: 41; 44-47) to the point that it now dominates the way the U.S. media frame politicians and their policies (see below). The contemporary culture of bullying in the U.S. exceeds traditional practices of aggression. For what is singular in the current reign of the bully is that people's contemporary diminished ability to respond to episodes of intimidation in the context of the return of violent sovereignty to daily life and politics, can convert the experience of unwanted acts of aggression into one of a permanent sense of abject subjecthood coded as feminine, and a downward spiral of fear of future episodes of bullying that in other contexts and times would have been countered and even dispelled by successful acts of defiance and resistance.[3]

Beyond the Schoolyard

Bullying is hardly new and scarcely restricted to the United States. Most accounts place its origins in family household dynamics and in the rough and tumble play of the schoolyard. It goes into remission only to return with a vengeance in the workplace, where as adults we spend the majority of our waking hours (Smith et al. 2003). Of universal origin, it goes by many names: *ijime* in Japan, mobbing in Scandinavia, bullying in the U.K. and Commonwealth countries, psychological intimidation and harassment in French and Spanish-speaking countries (*le harcèlement moral*, *el acoso moral*), psychological terror (*psychoterror*) in Germany and harassment, emotional abuse and bullying in the U.S.[4] Yet, there's a virulence and prevalence of bullying in the U.S. virtually unmatched anywhere else in terms of its reach, depth and legitimacy.[5] Foreign observers note this and commonly refer to it as the American culture of bullying. Telltale symptoms: in the U.S. it is not illegal[6] and it is little studied.[7] Still, the practice of verbal and physical intimidation is a common topic in public and private discussions; indeed, it is frequently in the news (Barry 2008; Carey 2004; Parker-Pope 2008). With the exception of educational institutions, however, little or nothing is being done to stop it; even as bullying is decried in the political world and the workplace, an undercurrent of awe toward the bully persists. Meanwhile, observers note that new communications technologies—email, anonymous listservs and blogs—have multiplied the opportunities for verbal bullying and have become the means of choice for intimidating others (Baruch 2004; Tedeschi 2008).

Perhaps it is time to ask collectively the same question we ask ourselves when we are bullied: "How did this happen?" and "Why us?" In an age dominated by the gospel of the free market, let us turn to the private sector for answers.[8]

The year was 1980. It was the end of the Carter Administration and for some time the U.S. had been convulsed by a wave of hyperinflation, which prompted the Federal Reserve to increase brutally the lending rate to 21.5 per cent. U.S. banks began to offer well-to-do clients certificates of deposit (minimum: $10,000) that exceeded the inflation rate of 14 per cent. Finance capital got a taste of something new: unheard of returns on fixed income investments. As cash poured in from overseas, the dollar rocketed to new highs against foreign currencies in the years that followed. Powerful shareholders (mutual funds) and Wall Street, desperate to maintain stock prices, put pressure on companies to equal the performance. The 20 per cent return was born and with it the go-go 1980s of junk bonds, corporate raiders, leveraged-buy-outs and merger mania (Bing 1992: 59-70), as well as the selling off of newly acquired companies' profitable divisions, factory closings, massive layoffs of workers and the downsizing of middle management to pay off leveraged debt in a climate of relentless international competition driven by a strong dollar and by Japanese steel and automobile industries. With all this came short-term management and a new creature: the bullying boss.

This latest avatar in CEO personae was announced with great fanfare on April 21, 1980, in *Fortune Magazine*'s cover story, "America's Toughest Bosses." Half-critical, half-admiring, the article started a tradition of surveys repeated in the 1980s and 1990s in *Fortune*'s pages every four or five years. They chronicled the ascendancy of this new American corporate figure that radicalized the older militarized corporate management model of autocratic command-and-control inherited from the Second World War (Wajcman 1996: 345). The older model was embodied by the cool, rational Cold War bureaucratic style of Robert McNamara, CEO of Ford Motor Co. and Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. During the self-doubting 1970s, it was briefly discredited in the business world by Theory Y Management techniques and sensitivity training, and no sooner were they gone than the older model returned in the form of the aloof yet mercurial CEO, manipulative, abusive, arbitrary and vindictive. The original *Fortune* article quoted one chief executive's management philosophy thus: "Leadership is demonstrated when the ability to inflict pain is confirmed" (Menzies 1980: 63). A later survey would characterize these men as "outstanding taskmasters" who were "demanding and hard to please" and with a "penchant for psychological oppression" in whose presences an atmosphere of fear abounds (Nulty and Nickel 1989).

The Bullying Boss

By the early 1990s the U.S. business press had christened this new figure the "bullying boss" and followed with admiring nicknames such as "Chainsaw" (Byrne 1999; Nulty and Nickel 1989). Employees and executive staff added a few of their own: "loose canon," "old blood and guts," "Rambo in pinstripes," "Jack the Ripper" and "Prince of Darkness" (Nulty and Nickel 1989). Perhaps the most colourful epithet for this male personality type was BSD or "Big Swinging Dick," which, when mouthed ironically by female workers, possessed an unexpected double edge. Many of the earliest names that surfaced are still with us: Donald Rumsfeld (CEO of G. D. Searle Pharmaceuticals), Steve Jobs (NEXT Computing), Andrew Grove (Intel) and Harvey and Robert Weinstein (Miramax Films). As the U.S. business columnist and gadfly Stanley Bing wrote in the early 1990s:

> So it is today, where bullying behavior is encouraged and rewarded in a range of business enterprises. The style itself is applauded in boardrooms and in house organs like *Business Week* as "tough," "no nonsense," "hard as nails." When you see these code words, you know you're dealing with the bully boss ... thanks to the admiration in which bully management is held in the American business establishment, the fledgling who studies under the heads of the successful bully masters the techniques and becomes one, too. (1992: 103)

In the business press and workplace, stories and anecdotes of public humiliations and even physical fear proliferated, as if the mythically high-handed, intimidating methods of the noisy factory floor had been transferred to the quieter cubicles and offices of middle and upper management, where twelve- to fourteen-hour days in some companies became the norm. Even private life wasn't safe from the depredations of bosses: one female CEO reportedly called a senior manager thirty-one times over one Thanksgiving weekend; another chief executive insisted on speaking to a female manager for twenty minutes as she underwent labour; and the owner/manager of a large family business physically threatened his wife and daughter before terminating them (Dumaine 1993). The introduction of performance-related pay and the promise of stock options in the 1980s and 1990s intensified further the focus on the bottom line and helped recruit upper-management to the task of downsizing their less senior colleagues by whetting their greed and buying executive tolerance of CEOs' abusive methods (Vega and Comer 2005). Office workers found themselves caught between the drive for short-term profits and the much vaunted discipline of the marketplace; as a result, accusations of poor work performance became a smokescreen for deflecting employees' radical response to unacceptable behaviours and to the unfair firing of employees.[9] In a climate of fear, and for executives short on ideas about how to run their businesses, bullying had the advantage of passing as an effective management method (Larkin 2005; Lee 2000).

In the U.S. the public theater of firing employees quickly became a well-rehearsed one in offices, especially as security concerns mounted with the spread of computers to all employees. After receiving the pink slip, hapless workers are relieved of their company IDs, their passwords cancelled, and are escorted to their desk where, under the watchful eye of armed security guards, they are ordered to clear out their personal effects before being marched out of the building in front of astonished co-workers.[10] Firing became even the stuff of TV melodrama as in *The Apprentice*, starring finance and real estate mogul Donald Trump who plays the role of a boss much feared and admired by his young staffers who compete to be retained by him. The climax of every narrative cycle is sealed by the CEO informing one unhappy assistant: "You're fired!" (Rich 2004).

By the 1990s a system of "short-term greed and long-term insecurity" (Bing 1992: 72) was well in place and it represented the latest avatar in the corporate workplace of what U.S. sociologist C. Wright Mills termed long ago "the American system of organized irresponsibility" (qtd. in Bing 1992: 85). As Bing puts it, the workplace is "the only kind of family that pays you to be a member and can terminate you without cause" (54). There are even companies that regularly fire 10 to 15 per cent of their workforce every nine to twelve months in order to create a climate of uncertainty and fear deemed by management to be effective in enforcing employee submissiveness and discipline. This violent extension of a management method invented by Jack Welch, Jr., the very aggressive former

CEO of General Electric, goes by the name "forced ranking" (Grote 2005). The pressures—and excuses—for bullying in the workplace were even worse in the public sector, as Republican and Democratic politicians in the U.S. slashed budgets for public services and imposed "marketplace philosophies in an under-resourced" environment (Lee 2000: 599-600). In the end, the word bullying both names the problem and obscures it: the bullying personality of the abusive boss turns the event of unwanted aggression—and its interpretation—into a clash of personalities in which structural and material factors tend to vanish in favour of purely personal and psychological ones. This is replicated by the grievance system—if one exists at all in the workplace—that reduces everything to the level of individual complaint. In such an environment, targets of bullying are often perceived to be the problem and deemed scapegoats whose removal by human resources departments is the most expedient response by management (Vanderkerckhove and Commers 2003: 43-45; Wajcman 1996).

Little is said in the U.S. media or public discussion about how the continuing obsession with short-term profits and the awarding of exorbitant executive pay lay the foundation for a surge in abusive behaviour in the workplace to begin with, let alone how the introduction of best-practices of flexible employment, outsourcing of traditional company tasks, and the recourse to workers reclassified as "independent contractors" have opened the door to "management by terror" (Bing 1992: 100-101). These changes compounded worker vulnerability in those workplaces already left to the tender mercies of "at-will employment," a workplace regime dating from the 19th century and unique to the U.S. in which from one day to the next employees never know who could lose their livelihood and access to medical insurance. This regime has undergone several changes at the state level in which some protection has been granted against unchecked firings (Muhl 2001).

The Public Media Sphere, or Grandma Was Right

Meanwhile, outside the workplace and the schoolyard, a new culture of intimidation began to emerge in U.S. mass culture. In the 1970s, macho populism arose in the figures of Clint Eastwood, Charles Bronson, Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris (and followed by Michael Douglas in the 1980s), creatures of male injury and *ressentiment*, who in action and sexual avenger films reclaimed American male honour and prerogative lost in the aftermath of the women's movement, defeat in Vietnam and early globalization's massive deindustrialization of the U.S. economy (Faludi 1999; Goldstein 2003; Jeffords 1989, 1994). This marked the beginning of the instrumentalization of a troubled masculinity by the media and politicians. Then, in the following decade a new tone and style of public discourse broke through over the airwaves. Radio and TV talk shows hosted by Howard Stern, Morton Downey Jr. (1986-1992) and later Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Chris Matthews and Bill Maher (in the 1900s) provoked and channelled audiences'

pent-up (male) rage against women, people of colour, liberals, leftists, gays and immigrants, thereby smashing the last remnants of decorum and respectful speech in the old broadcast public media sphere. Speaking over and shouting down liberal guests were commonplace and even physical assault in the case of Downey and O'Reilly was not to be ruled out (Alterman 1999).

The pleasures of the spectacle of bullying could not be denied.[11] So whoever thought that our grandmothers' futile protests against the violent excesses of the media, to which we turned a deaf ear, would come back to haunt us?

The long "remasculinization" (Jeffords 1989) of the public media sphere had begun and the strident backlash against feminism, the civil rights and Chicano movements, and their progressive supporters led straight to the so-called culture wars that roiled U.S. educational and cultural institutions (1985-1999) in struggles over definitions of national culture, U.S. history, civil and sexual rights, artistic freedom and censorship, HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns, affirmative action, laws targeting discrimination and harassment in the workplace, and the material protections afforded by the welfare state (Reid 1997). A new televised male spectacle emerged in political talk shows such as *The Capitol Gang* and *The McClaughlin Report* followed later by *Hannity and Colmes* and *Hard Ball*, featuring political personalities such as Newt Gingrich (former Republican Speaker of the House), James Carville (former advisor to Bill Clinton), Pat Buchanan (former aide to Richard Nixon) and David Horowitz (ex-Marxist neoconservative writer and activist) (cf. "The Arrival of Shouting Heads" 2001). At this juncture aging or former New Leftists, liberals and feminists such as Todd Gitlin, Paul Berman, Christopher Hitchens, Katha Politt, Michael Ignatieff and Maureen Dowd joined the fray to denounce multiculturalism, anti-foundational French philosophy (Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze), "political correctness" and, in some cases after 9/11, to announce their fervent support of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They more than matched the casual disrespect and destructive aggressiveness of their neoconservative sisters like Lynne Cheney, Camille Paglia and Ann Coulter, and in so doing reminded us that bullying had no strict ideological or gender allegiance and that its roots extended back to the 1960s, the very period reviled by so many talking heads.

It didn't take long for the methods and tactics perfected during the culture wars to be applied to leading politicians and their families. Bill Clinton had scarcely occupied the White House in January 1993 when Republican leaders launched personal attacks on First Lady Hilary Clinton, with violence which had never been seen in Washington political life. Five years later, Bill had a turn at the hands of rogue prosecutor Kenneth Starr, who abandoned his charge of investigating political corruption to launch a persecutory inquest into Bill Clinton's sexual life, provoking a constitutional crisis. Astonished citizens watched as political life seemed to spin slowly out of control. This unsettling spectacle was fuelled by the

spectre of unchecked government and citizen-sponsored armed violence in Waco, Texas. There a drama unfolded that would result in the largest terrorist bombing on American soil in the 20th century: in April 1993, the FBI attacked the Branch Davidian cult's compound with gas grenades and armored personnel carriers, and the ensuing fires wiped out all the residents. In 1995 white supremacists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols retaliated by blowing up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, killing 168 people.

So bullying as a style of political discourse had been brewing for some time. Begun most famously in the U.K. in the 1970s by then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher—the Iron Lady—against old guard Tories and the Labour Party, and continued by Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, it has its most recent devotee in the new mercurial President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy. Bullying had its homegrown U.S. versions in the figure of Ronald Reagan, as when, in an unprecedented act, he summarily fired the entire workforce of eleven thousand striking U.S. air-traffic controllers in 1981; more recently, Rudolph Giuliani brought the bare-knuckled tactics he was known for as U.S. Attorney for New York, to the mayor's office during the 1990s (1993-2001). Through spectacular arrests of criminals and innocent civilians alike, and the brutal removal of the homeless from the streets of New York, Giuliani installed a climate of fear and intimidation. Perfecting the art of punitive threats and retaliation, he cowed dissident city administrators into silence by smearing reputations of his critics and sending the police to rough up citizens. He even went so far as to declare all citizens to be so many "law-breakers in waiting," thereby edging a climate of fear towards one of terror: no one, high or low, was safe from the long arm of the mayor's office or the NYPD (Herbert 1999, 2000; Tomasky 1999).

However, even New Yorkers, whose developed instinct for pushing back they like to see reflected in their politicians, grew weary of Giuliani's thuggish behavior during his second term, especially when it extended to his wife during nasty divorce proceedings. Nationally, a tolerance for political thuggery seemed to be on the wane in the aftermath of documented Republican physical intimidation of poll workers in Florida during the recount of ballots of the 2000 Presidential elections. The success of the Republicans' tactics provoked, in January 2001, the turnout of thousands of protestors who greeted George W. Bush's inauguration motorcade with rotten eggs and signs reading "Hail to the Thief!" (largely unreported by media outlets). The thralldom of political bullying in which public opinion was held seemed to be poised to lift. Then came the terrorist attacks in September 2001.

The Return of Manly Men

That day countless reports of (white) male heroism and sacrifice spawned, in the words of a *New York Times* headline, "the return of manly men" in the popular imagination, those "new John Waynes"—6 feet, 200 lbs—whose physical prowess elbowed aside the masculinity embodied by Leonardo DiCaprio-types, "the vaguely feminized natural child-man of the 1990s" (P. Brown 2001: 4). In one stroke, despite the fact that the unpopular mayor's negligence to replace flawed police and firemen's radios cost hundreds of lives, Giuliani's stirring news conference after the attacks transformed him into "America's mayor" in the eyes of grateful New Yorkers and the national press.

Superimposed upon the widely broadcast video clip of George Bush's paralyzed reaction to the news of the attacks were new images of the President ordering Special Operations forces to Afghanistan to bring Bin Laden back dead-or-alive, which sent his fragile approval ratings to dizzying heights. This heralded what was to come: a presidential masculinity not in the traditional sense of effective competence and protection, but rather as a hyperbolic contrived image. We have been served up many photo-ops of a fearless President confronting fundamentalist Islam's alleged primitive masculinity, its will to death and its tyranny through terror. An image it was indeed: we later learned from the retired President of Mexico Vicente Fox that the cowboy crusader against the infidels is afraid of horses (Fox Quesada 2007: 139). Not to be left out, U.S. politicians and media commentators welcomed the prospect of national renewal through war and called for strong interrogation tactics of those taken prisoner in the "War on Terror" that the White House had just launched (Robin 2004: 155-58). TV studios rushed to start new TV series like Fox Television's *24* whose chief protagonist leads a police anti-terrorist unit that in each episode employs torture and extrajudicial killings as regular tools of the trade. The series has been both a critical and popular success (Purdum 2003) and, according to investigative journalist Jane Mayer, the Pentagon in turn drew inspiration from the TV series for pursuing its techniques of torture which always seemed to work on the small screen (Mayer 2008: 196). It was as if viewers and the media arrogated for themselves the right over life and death of the old punitive sovereignty (as Michel Foucault would say) which, according to Hobbes, had been mythically left to the absolute sovereign in exchange for civil peace and protection; in the U.S. this reassertion of the old right arguably began in the 1970s with the reinstatement of the death penalty (now commonly viewed as barbaric by the international community) in which the State served as the instrument of personal vengeance for grieving families and afflicted communities (Agamben 1998: 106; Butler 2004: 50-100; Thurschwell 2008).[12]

In destroying the World Trade Center, Al Q'aida's Saudi sympathizers exceeded neoconservatives' long wished-for dream of a national crisis to unite the U.S. behind the common purpose of restoring U.S. military and economic hegemony abroad and completing the neoliberal revolution at home (Klein 2007; Project 2000). September 11 delivered into the hands of the Republican Party a traumatized nation, and our new masters put Americans through the political equivalent of a collective military boot camp; torn from the familiar surroundings

of safety and home, we found ourselves stripped of our old identity. Allegiance to the old public virtues—respect of the *Bill of Rights*, the Geneva Conventions and the rule of domestic and international law—was mocked and dismissed as quaint and soft by our new drill sergeants. From then on a state of emergency replaced the rule of law and set itself up as the norm (Agamben 1998, 2005; Butler 2004; Dayan 2008).[13] We were pressured to submit by leaders who claimed to protect us through politically expedient Code Orange terrorist attack warnings, and harassed and threatened us if we so much as voiced doubts concerning their new policies (Jehl and Johnson 2004). It would appear that the hope was to induce in the U.S. population "an infantile dread, an uncanny awe—and great expectations," an attitude of surrender followed by transfiguration (Shatan 1977: 600). Even military chiefs-of-staff and long-standing allies weren't spared: in the rush to invade Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld and his civilian deputies humiliated and removed reluctant generals who questioned the wisdom of going to war unprepared[14] while Colin Powell bullied hesitant allies.[15] As Richard Goldstein, reprising the slang of gansta rap, put it in his essay titled, "Neo-Macho Man," Bush, Rumsfeld and Powell were "the men," and the military and we civilians alike were their "bitches" (Goldstein 2003).

Political machismo was once again the order of the day, and campaigns were launched against enemies on all sides whose manliness was relentlessly questioned (Goldstein 2004). For example, Arnold Schwarzenegger, governor of California, denounced Democratic politicians as "girlie men" before the assembled delegates of the 2004 Republican national convention in New York. Later that fall Karl Rove organized an unprecedented media smear of decorated veterans such as John Kerry and Max Cleland (a triple amputee no less) whose sacrifices and actions his henchmen belittled and mocked and whose patriotism they questioned. This should have not surprised us, for the Bush campaign targeted rival Republican John McCain during the 2000 presidential primaries by launching a rumour suggesting that he had a bi-racial love-child and that his Vietnam War experience of imprisonment and torture unmanned him and rendered him mentally unstable. The attacks left voters stunned; however, with U.S. public opinion and the media obsessively focused on issues of "character," the virus of doubt spread quickly, infecting large numbers of mass viewers (Zernike 2008).

In order to work, campaigns of fear and intimidation must constantly surpass their existing limits to keep potential victims off-balance, and thus they forever seek out new targets to feminize and degrade. For example, at the time of this writing (September 2008) these types of attacks have been replicated *ad nauseam* in the current U.S. presidential campaign and even within the Democratic party: during much of the primary season Hillary Clinton underscored her qualifications to be commander-in-chief and to deal with the threat of Islamic terrorism at the expense of her rival Barack Obama, whom she characterized as being indecisive and soft.[16] Later that fall, it was Republican presidential candidate John McCain's

turn to discredit Obama as a mere celebrity in ads comparing him to Paris Hilton and Brtiney Spears. And things have reached such a pass that political bullies switched targets from military heroes to the handicapped and the injured *tout court*, as when Rush Limbaugh mocked Michael J. Fox, suffering from Parkinson's disease, as faking the symptoms of his illness, or when Bill O'Reilly claimed that an adolescent kidnap victim, who had been sequestered and sexually abused for a year, actually enjoyed it. They seemed to express radical hatred of weakness and infirmity that was bent on cleansing them from the public media sphere (CBS News 2006).[17] This gratuitous verbal violence echoes the vastly more programmed and violent versions practiced in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, where it would appear that in the words of critic Kathy Philips, "manliness no longer means protecting the weak but torturing the randomly rounded up, a 'harder', more manly position" (2006: 200).

Bullying Language

As in the workplace, so it is in politics and the media: under a regime of fear and terror, the fact or evidence of injury or hurt invalidates the speech of those who have suffered assaults and silences them. In the current return of violent sovereignty in national life the rule of terror is quite deliberately extended to words themselves: not only are the instruments of intimidation and fear in the hands of political and media bullies who rule out of order the speech of everyone else, but also time and again we witness that our very words are the targets of their aggression. In the current juncture we have the jarring realization that words—spoken or unspoken—simply do not matter any more than facts, truth or ballots. Language and facts are bullied and terrorized along with the rest of us. It's not so much that language has been debased, emptied of content, and stolen (as George Orwell or Roland Barthes would have it) or simply suppressed (as under authoritarian regimes), but rather that speech does not matter. It carries no weight. It is made to look irrelevant and as powerless as those who speak it. The presumably normative world of words and facts is reduced to nothing. What little mental and physical protections it used to afford us have been stripped away. This is driven home by Bush's unwavering policies in the face of military, political and economic disasters they have provoked and the mind-numbing repetition of his claim that Saddam Hussein and Al Q'aida were allies. In his over-the-top macho world, he and his cabinet are never wrong. Failure is written out of the bully script as fact or speech. There is no empirical or linguistic accountability. Those in power aren't held to their words or deeds.

Of course facts were never simply facts any more than ballots simply ballots or words simply words. Protocols of empirical testing, deliberation and interpretation have always been a matter of conventions that emerge in fields of force and discourse. Yet what Cheney, Rumsfeld and Bush have tried to do with their War on Terror is

install a new regime of factuality and truth as instruments of government through fear in which, according to Brian Massumi (forthcoming), "assumptions about character and intent that cannot be empirically grounded with any certainty," but are based on "the felt reality of threat," trump everything else.[18] He captures the new counterfactual logic of truth in the following way: "Bush did what he did because Saddam could have done what he did not do [if he had had the means]." Like the bullying of persons, the bullying of language creates an open-ended field of pre-emptive aggression and terror based on a logic "not subject to the same rules of non-contradiction as normative logic" (Massumi, forthcoming; cf. 2007). Under this regime, there's no talking back and no going back either. It's perhaps within this context that the meteoric rise of Obama's candidacy is best grasped: his speeches preaching political reconciliation have both set off an enthusiastic response among young voters and baffled established political commentators. One of the reasons for his success surely lies in his explicit rejection of divisive, fear-based politics (even as he lends his political prestige to repressive legislation authorizing the expansive surveillance of citizens, the individual right to own handguns and the death penalty for rapists of children). Whether Obama's election can bring to a close this cycle of public bullying without first modifying the legal and administrative structures in the workplace, schools, media, military and government that underwrite it, is open to doubt. Still, a sea change in public sensibility may indeed be in the offing.

Notes

1. For the related longer history of neoliberalism and its exploitation of natural and social catastrophes in order to impose its radical restructuralization, see Klein (2007).

2. In this way, bullying in daily life would appear to follow what Brian Massumi calls in the context of military operations the logic of pre-emption as "positively contributing to provoking the condition for its own exercise" (Massumi, forthcoming). For an extended political analysis of linguistic vulnerability, the performative force of language and the sovereign power attributed to hate speech in particular, see Butler (1997: 1-41, 72-82).

3. In other words, I'd argue that much current bullying in the U.S. operates on one hand, through the humiliating reduction of the targeted victim to a simple question of a gendered identity defined in the most crude fashion (this reduction often underlies even racial, ethnic and national slurs). On the other hand is the belittling of that same assigned identity as less than masculine or as merely feminine and as one that is permanent and irredeemable. In this fashion bullying seeks to induce in subjects a nostalgia for a very gendered but mythical sovereign self that they may never have embodied in the first place but that now stands as the very measure of their diminished sense of self.

Bullying seeks to dominate by creating weak, abject subjects who are forced into a state of self-loathing—or at least self-doubt—and who remain in perpetual fear of potential psychological or physical assaults.

4. There is a growing scholarly and legal literature on the topic. For Europe see Einarsen, et al. (2003: 3-30) and Council of Europe (1996: 15). For France, consult Hirigoyen (2000), Dejours (1998); Gaulejac (2005), Loi no. 2002-73 (2002) and Le Goff (2003). For Germany see Leyman and Tallgren (1993) and for Spain, José Edreira (2003). For Japan, consult Meek (2004). Finally, for a comparative analysis of U.S. and European laws see Friedman and Whitman (2003).

5. Doubtless, proper understanding of this phenomenon would begin by placing it in the context of the United States' long tradition of violence going back to its origins as a European settler colony, the subsequent genocide of Native Americans and the slave trade, the more recent history of Jim Crow in former slave states that witnessed more than 4,700 lynchings of blacks between 1882 and 1968, and the waves of political repression in the 1920s, 1950s and 1970s. See Graham and Gurr (1979). To this must be added two other related factors: first, the longstanding conservative political tradition which, according to Cory Robin, often frames the democratic promise of America as that of the possibility of being not only one's own master, but also that of others (beginning with the opportunity to own slaves in the case of white men); see Robin (2008). Second, Wendy Brown has argued that the slow desacralization of the law and the replacement of democratic proceduralism with the norms of management by contemporary practices of neoliberal political rationality in the U.S. have helped produce a new illiberal political culture, which in turn has paved the way for neoconservatism's successful advocacy of a return to the practices of violent sovereignty in daily and political life (Brown 2003; 2006). Finally, for an analysis of current U.S. society as one which has forgotten the horrors of war due to its lack of historical experience of combat on its own soil, and whose government remains the sole major power to claim war as a reasonable and legitimate option in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives, consult Judt (2008). His article appeared in late spring 2008 when the White House, the Washington political establishment and the Likud Party in Israel began to call for a military strike against Iran in order to destroy its small nuclear power program. In June 2008, rumours circulated that U.S. President George W. Bush would order an attack on Tehran to foil Barack Obama's chances for victory in the presidential elections in the fall.

6. One reason may be the fact that protections extended in the U.S. workplace follow civil rights law based on classes of persons (going back to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act) and less on specific actions, in contrast with Europe where workplace relations are governed by labour law. Sexual harassment follows the same logic as other legislation banning discrimination, but not so bullying, which is not covered by existing law unless the victim is targeted in terms of his or her belonging to a protected class of persons (national origin, sex, religion, age, physical infirmity, political opinion and marital status); see Yamada (2000). The absence of workplace protections against bullying is also connected to the American tradition of freedom of expression. It enjoys exceptional status in the arena of international law by virtue of its great tolerance of racist and fascist public discourse, either oral or printed, which would incur the full penalty of the law in the European Union, Australia, Canada, India, Israel and South Africa. In the wake of the interpretive tradition of the First Amendment that goes back to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's opinions in the early 20th century, all speech, however hateful and injurious it may be, is protected by U.S. law unless it leads immediately to acts of physical violence; see Schauer (2005). That said, it must be noted that educational institutions are beginning to adopt anti-bullying policies directed at teachers, students and parents.

7. See Keashly and Jagatic (2003) and Glendinning (2001). It so happens that the first studies were conducted in the U.S. in 1976 by Caroll M. Brodsky in *The Harassed Worker*,

but were followed up by no other studies until 1990. See, for example: Hornstein (1996); Baron and Neuman (1998); Namie and Namie (2003); Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot (2002); and Sutton (2007).

8. Cory Robin is one of the few U.S.-based scholars to see a direct tie between the current political culture of fear and the U.S. workplace. See Robin (2004: 115-19; 227-48).

9. Workers also find themselves caught in the jarring contradiction between human resources' rhetoric of teamwork that promises informal, cooperative relationships (underscored by the insistence on first-name modes of address) and promotes the value of interpersonal skills, and the day-to-day experience of bullying that either reinforces hierarchies of authority and status or seeks to introduce them in settings where they are not visibly acknowledged (Wajcman 1996: 344).

10. This practice has spread in the U.S. to even non-profit organizations such as the San Diego Heritage Society, where, when it let several employees go in March 2008, a physically intimidating guard showed up at their desks and forced them to exit the building immediately.

11. This phenomenon should be understood in the context of the rise of shock television in the U.S., whose shows stage a veritable theatre of humiliation at the expense of participants and invited guests, sometimes with quite violent consequences. See for example Cohen (2008).

12. As of August 15, 2008 there have been 1,119 capital executions in the U.S. since 1977, and currently 3,262 prisoners sit on "death row" awaiting execution (Death Penalty 2008). On the distinct concepts of revenge in traditional and modern societies see Hénaff (2008).

13. It must be noted, however, that the suspension of the constitutional protections of due process, probable cause and safeguards against cruel and unusual punishment in the current state of exception was long in the making, not only through the gradual de-democratization of U.S. society by neoliberal policies, as Wendy Brown has shown (2003; 2006), but also by the quite legal state disciplinary measures in immigration and domestic incarceration such as indefinite detention in solitary confinement of prisoners in "supermax" prisons. The inhumane treatment and designation of prisoners as gang members—like that of Guantánamo Bay prisoners as "unlawful enemy combatants"— has been exempt of judicial review and resulted in what Colin Dayan has called the "radical substitution of penal for civil life" (Dayan 2008: 495-501). See also Butler (2004: 50-100), Matlin (2007) and Hussain (2007). The domestic supermax prisons were one of the models for Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay.

14. Disrespectful treatment of senior officers had already been a part of the culture wars in the 1990s, as when former Marine captain and Assistant Secretary of the Navy under Reagan and now U.S. Senator James Webb (D-Virginia), publicly humiliated Admiral Jerry "Mike" Boorda at the U.S. Naval Academy in terms that could be read as tacitly homophobic and anti-Semitic (Burke 2004: 125-46). Shortly afterwards, in the wake of further public attacks, Boorda committed suicide.

15. All this is repeated today as political leaders prepare to lead the U.S. into a war with Iran.

16. In May 2008 Clinton went so far as to evoke the possibility of Obama's political assassination, a scenario that was repeated by Fox News journalist Liz Trotta, who then joked about the advantage of having both Clinton and Obama assassinated. She received no reprimand from her employers and still works at Fox News (Feldman 2008).

17. It is interesting to note that the two rival discourses—those of victimization and bullying—tend to share a common assumption that the identity of bullies and victims

always remains legible and stable, and thus also tend to reinforce each other's positions. This goes somewhat against the grain of commonly observed practice: that bullies, when they are criticized or stymied, are quick to portray themselves as innocent victims (for example, Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin) or that victims have often become bullies in their own right. In fact, Cory Robin (2008) argues that conservatives have long trafficked in the claims of victimhood as part of their sense of entitlement and that the latter may even be understood as one of the hallmarks of modern conservatism and the justification for its very aggressive political programs. Finally, as historian Dagmar Herzog reminded me (personal communication), the current struggle between the discourses of victimization and bullying as rival forms of private and public authority entails a history that goes back to the 1960s and even to the Second World War, but that would be the subject of another essay.

18. On the hostile, declarative mode characteristic of verbal statements in neoconservative discourse based on inner conviction that preempts questions of veracity or facticity, see W. Brown (2006: 707-708).

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