

Authority on the Dark Continent of Childhood

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To be a child in the 21st Century is increasingly synonymous with facing some form of jeopardy. In the context of the United States, Jonathan Zimmerman recently claimed that adults' nostalgia for their own childhoods has led to outmoded or even draconian school policies in the present.¹ Steven Mintz has argued that a close examination of public policy in the U.S. reveals that the country is much less child-friendly than its rhetoric suggests.² In a broader context, Aparna Mishra Tarc says that:

[children] are shielded from worldly affairs; they are deemed a problem for adults and are dismissed; or, they are used as agents of adult interests and policies. Furthermore, education that supposedly facilitates the child's democratic participation can devolve collapse into tautological lessons that pervert knowledge for adult ends, as do other adult-invested forms of teaching.³

The use of concern for children as a smoke screen for less laudable motivations is apparent in contemporary institutions that deal with young people, especially schools. Adults making decisions about the creation or implementation of school policies that bear directly on young people often claim that their decisions are entirely informed by "what's best for the children," when political or professional expediency is actually more determinant of the choices. In short, much of the way children are treated in contemporary society is the result of adults working out their own fears and fantasies, often to the detriment of the young.

It is in this lamentable context that Mishra Tarc argues for a Derridian relational response to "address the child's dire need of pre-political authority in a xrapidly changing world." In her timely article, she eloquently argues for a conception of childhood that extends beyond the polar notions of "child as sovereign political actor" and "child as entirely heteronomous and apolitical." She goes on to posit a form of teacher authority that mines Derrida's "authorial authority" – the kind that "highlights authority's fictional sway, one that is summoned, or 'made up' in facing others" – as a means of delivering to the child a healthy form of soft politics in which the child can engage in "preliminary modes of political participation." Teachers who summon this kind of authority, Mishra Tarc says, can prevent young people from seeking trust elsewhere and at great peril. Ultimately, she turns to the character of M. Lahzar as a filmic rendition of authorial authority that avoids "abuse, toxic dependence, preservation, protection, perdition, punishment, indulgence, or neglect," and promotes the authoring in children of "an internal and public capacity to survive, to play, to judge, to be responsible."

Mishra Tarc's vision for a more just form of teacher authority is important and indeed necessary given the current state of childhood previously mentioned. Here, I seek to extend her arguments through an exploration of Jean Baudrillard's short essay, "The Dark Continent of Childhood,"⁴ which might put pressure on the efficacy of the Arendtian conception of pre-political authority. Additionally, although the film Tarc employs for its depiction of loving, authorial authority is beautifully written

and acted, I raise questions regarding the potential problems of using contemporary movie characters as models.

“Like so many other areas, childhood and adolescence are today becoming spaces doomed by abandonment to marginality and delinquency,” Baudrillard said in 1995.⁵ While Mishra Tarc’s arguments start with Arendt’s concerns about teachers and the loss of pre-political authority, Baudrillard’s description of the landscape of childhood is dire and one that Arendt might not have been able to anticipate. His argument was that childhood had reached a state of obsolescence due to the speed of the contemporary world, which is in direct conflict with the “generation, gestation, the time of bearing and raising, the long haul in general, which is the duration of human childhood. The child is, then, logically condemned to disappear.”⁶ No longer is there time for the symbolic, transgenerational practices, which gave childhood and adolescence their meaning, to take place. And, we might surmise, there is no time or space for children to receive a form of pre-political authority, as there are rapidly decreasing opportunities to lovingly deliver soft politics to them. Baudrillard suggested that we had reached a point in which the different forms of artificial insemination and the genetic manipulation of offspring had contributed to the rendering of the child as “a technical performance, a mini-extension of the parents, rather than a genuine ‘other’.”⁷ In this milieu, the symbolic and psychical conditions of childhood are erased in favor of the perfected outcome of scientific processes that renders the ideal of the parent’s own image. About this kind of *ne plus ultra* cloning, Baudrillard said: “As a technical operation this is as yet some way off, but it is already present in the scientific and collective imaginary – and even in the relationship between parents and their children.”⁸ One thinks here of the ways in which a contemporary parent uses any means necessary to perfect in the child the pursuits of his or her own childhood and adolescence. Or perhaps Baudrillard’s idea has some kind of relationship with the contemporary phenomenon of “helicopter parenting,” in which children are continually hovered over by parents who seem unwilling to allow their children to have experiences that do not include parental proximity. This kind of relationship between child and parent is arguably the reason children are now at risk of not being able to find “their distance and their strangeness.”⁹

It might be tempting to read this bleak vision of contemporary childhood as hyperbole, but the signs of the disappearance of childhood are at the very least imaginable, and these signs have a relationship with the conditions that Mishra Tarc describes as revealing the need for a just form of pre-political authority. And if both Mishra Tarc’s conditions and Baudrillard’s descriptive arguments are taken together, we might wonder whether or not the exercise of pre-political authority is possible without at least pushing against, if not flipping, those conditions first.

At any event, a just form of authorial authority, as Mishra Tarc articulates, is a necessary condition for ultimately reversing trends that have contributed to problems of 21st Century childhood, if not a sufficient one. M. Lazhar, for Tarc, is an apt filmic version of this kind of authority. He steps in, she claims, “in the glaring absence of adult authority:” “Where no other teacher dares, M. Lazhar goes to the heart of the children’s grief.” This is certainly the case on one reading of the film.

But *M. Lazhar* has enough in common with other “teacher-hero” movies that another reading might be useful.

Mishra Tarc understands M. Lazhar to stand in stark contrast to the other teachers in the film in that he artfully attends to the grief of the children. The other teachers, she claims, are “mostly supporting each other.” She writes: “In the midst of this penultimate scene of missing adult authority, Alice smartly informs M. Lazhar: ‘everyone thinks we are traumatized, it’s the adults who are.’” And, in fact, the adults *are* traumatized – and it is easy to imagine the difficulty they face in processing their own grief while simultaneously bearing some responsibility for the children and their grief. Only M. Lazhar escapes this difficulty since he has no prior relationship with the dead teacher. In my view, this goes a long way toward his achievement of teacher-hero status.

Mishra Tarc mentions a speech by M. Lazhar to his students in which she claims that he both “absolves Simon of his real and imagined part in their teacher’s death” and “offers the children another version of the tragedy, one of failed adult authority befalling them all:” “Do not try to find meaning to Martine’s death,” M. Lazhar says. “There isn’t one. A classroom is a home. It’s a place of friendship, of work and courtesy. Yes courtesy. A place full of life. Where you devote your life. A place where you give of your life. Not infect a whole school with your despair.” This is a moving speech and can easily be taken by the audience as a definitive statement about the nature of classrooms and schools. But in another context such a statement might be dismissed, because M. Lazhar has no background in education and he lied his way into the job in the first place. Yet, the documentary feel and the hyperreality of the film make it easy to be moved by M. Lazhar’s efforts with the children.

That said, none of the possible shortcomings of the “teacher-hero” film dilute Mishra Tarc’s central argument for a more just form of teacher authority. Such an authority, inspired by Derrida and Stiegler, is an indispensable part of reconstituting the Dark Continent of Childhood.

1. Jonathan Zimmerman, *Small Wonder: The Little Red Schoolhouse in History and Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

2. Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

3. Aparna Mishra Tarc, this volume.

4. Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out* (New York: Verso Books, 2014), 110-115.

5. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 110.

6. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 112.

7. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 111.

8. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*.

9. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*.