No Child Left Behind and the Spectacle of Failing Schools: The Mythology of Contemporary School Reform

David A. Granger
SUNY Geneseo

This article discusses what David Berliner (2005) has called the perverse “spectacle of fear” (208) surrounding issues of teacher quality and accountability in contemporary school reform. Drawing principally on the critical semiotics of Roland Barthes’ essay, “The World of Wrestling” (1957), it examines the way that this spectacle works to undermine public education and explicates the powerful mythology behind it. The article then concludes with some suggestions on how this destructive “spectacle of fear” might potentially be disrupted using the agencies of Deweyan “strong democracy”.

In the summer of 2005, the Journal of Teacher Education included a brief but incisive article by David Berliner entitled, “The Near Impossibility of Testing for Teacher Quality.” As signaled by the article title, Berliner’s main thesis was that existing tests of teacher quality are conceptually flawed and deeply deficient for licensure and accountability purposes. Worse yet, he argued, the simplistic curriculum-delivery models of teaching underlying many of these tests ultimately serve to demean and cheapen the teaching profession. As a result, they tend to work against more broad-minded efforts to foster greater understanding and appreciation for the demands and complexities of teaching, as well as the myriad ways in which teachers effectively enhance the lives of students, their families, and the society as a whole.

Berliner’s (2005) starting point in introducing his thesis, and the immediate provocation for the article, was the provision of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) mandating that there be a highly qualified teacher in every U.S.

Correspondence should be addressed to David A. Granger, School of Education, SUNY Geneseo, 1 College Circle, Geneseo, NY 14454. E-mail: granger@geneseo.edu
classroom by the 2005–2006 academic year. (Predictably enough, that mandate—later extended by a year—although certainly reflecting a laudable goal, has since gone unmet in many schools across the country, particularly, following the normal pattern, those serving lower socioeconomic populations.) Berliner first noted that states are given considerable leeway in defining what it means to be a "highly qualified" teacher, allowing some to adopt less (or more) rigorous standards than others, but with the same high stakes for everyone. He also pointed out that NCLB permits the use of teacher licensure tests, which are relatively cheap and efficient, to demonstrate quality in teaching (Berliner 2005, 205). With that much established, Berliner then looked to dismantle, one by one, many of the presumptions behind NCLB and similarly-conceived school reform and accountability measures, challenging the popular notions that (a) high quality teaching, as defined by licensure tests, will effectively ensure student success and, by extension, decrease social problems and secure the position of the United States in the global economy; (b) that, as a group, America's teachers are at present unqualified for their jobs—about which the powers that be exhort society to "be very afraid;" (c) that teacher quality can be readily defined (although very elusive, Berliner says, teacher quality can be defined for specific purposes, although discernment of quality in teaching is deeply normative and ultimately requires the "keen insight and good judgment" of "multiple discerning observers on multiple occasions"2); and (d) that current licensure tests (mostly of the paper-and-pencil variety) can adequately assess teacher quality and, thus, improve the quality of education that the nation's children are receiving (205–212).

Throughout his tightly written argument, Berliner (2005) asserted that these false presumptions are, in reality, the fictitious elements of a perverse "political spectacle"—"pure theater," as he put it, "with no other purpose than to look like something positive is happening [with respect to quality schooling], whereas it is not" (205). Berliner appealed to the notion of spectacle in the following instances:

1. He noted that the "way to recognize spectacle is through analysis of the slogans and policies promulgated by politicians," these seemingly designed "to scare ordinary citizens" (205).
2. He observed that "political spectacle is also evident when serious problems are ignored and lesser [often derivative] ones addressed" (206).
3. He claimed that teacher licensure tests "may be used only to calm the public's fears while serving no genuine purposes," and that, if this is the case, "political spectacle is being substituted for a sincere response to public concerns about teacher quality" (208). Moreover, "this leads, paradoxically, to the possibility that inadequate and inappropriate testing for teacher quality may lower the quality of those who choose to enter the profession" (212).
4. He pointed out that rhetoric at the federal and state levels has moved "from concern with mere quality teaching to ensuring excellence in teaching, another
word that suggests spectacle and not substance.” For anyone with even a modicum of understanding of public education knows that genuine excellence on the part of either teachers or students must be carefully and thoughtfully nurtured. It cannot simply be imposed, mandated, or legislated (210).

By and large, research on the overall impact of NCLB to date substantiates Berliner’s (2005) stout critique. The high-stakes accountability of teachers and students appears to be having mostly negative consequences for teachers’ relationships with students, their classroom practices, and their sense of professional well-being. Nor are the consequences for student learning very promising. According to the latest data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and state data spanning 1992–2006, modest gains in student achievement have been reported at some grade levels in some states on standardized tests in reading and math. However, the rate of increase has, in many cases, actually slowed from that seen during the more targeted state-level reforms of the 1990s, often with the distressing effect of arresting progress made in narrowing achievement gaps. Moreover, dropout rates for Limited English Proficient students, students of color, and those living in poverty—often misleadingly reclassified (or in the guise of spectacle, masked) as transfers, Government Equivalency Diploma seekers, or some other such benign designation—have increased markedly in the wake of NCLB. This increase has doubtless contributed to the purported achievement gains. In certain parts of the country, this is true as well for students with disabilities, who sometimes must take the same high-stakes tests as their nondisabled peers. Similarly, although evidence suggests that teachers of poor and minority students might be compelled to work harder under NCLB, preexisting problems with teacher recruitment and retention in high-needs schools are, in many instances, worsening. Researchers also suggest that a significant portion of the increase in students’ test scores is the result of teaching-to-the-test, with its concomitant narrowing of students’ experiences via the simplifying and narrowing of curriculum (including culturally relevant curriculum) and school activities. What is more, there is evidence that, in some states, the tests themselves have been made significantly less rigorous since the passage of NCLB, while cut-off scores have been lowered considerably and incidents of cheating are reported almost daily. Grade retention has additionally become much more common, greatly increasing the likelihood that students will drop out of school (as reported above). All of these strategies serve to inflate test-passing rates by artificial and in some cases arguably deceitful, means. Finally, there is, thus far, no evidence indicating that NCLB has contributed positively to students’ performance on nationally administered tests, including stalwarts like the Scholastic Aptitude Test and ACT (Fuller et al. 2007). This broad profile of the impact of NCLB surely does not reflect anything that might reasonably be called “genuine excellence” on the part of either teachers or students. On the contrary, it strongly suggests that, where quality teaching and
meaningful student learning are concerned, NCLB is more style than substance. Indeed, it seems that the substance of NCLB is largely confined to the significant "collateral damage" that it has both directly and indirectly precipitated (Nichols and Berliner 2007).

On the surface, then, Berliner's (2005) use of the term "spectacle" in his critique of the reform agenda of NCLB is readily comprehensible and arguably appropriate. I presume that everyone has at least some general sense of what constitutes (or counts as) a "spectacle"—or at leasts claim to know one if they see it. In making his claim that NCLB, the latest reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), is largely spectacle, Berliner appealed briefly to Mary Lee Smith's notable book Political Spectacle and the Fate of American Schools (2003). Yet he did not (presumably for reasons of space) examine systematically the nature of the NCLB spectacle in the context of recent policies and pronouncements concerning teacher quality or their principle objective, student performance. Nor did he say much about how this spectacle is staged and choreographed (the "politics of representation"), how it functions to generate fear and condition public opinion, and most important, how, to the extent that it is educationally or otherwise harmful, it might be effectively disrupted.

In this article, I examine the issues deferred by Berliner (2005) using the pertinent literature on spectacle (a much theorized concept), including, along with Smith's (2003) Political Spectacle and the Fate of American Schools, Elias Canetti's (1962) Crowds and Power, Guy Debord's (1967) Society of the Spectacle, Jean Baudrillard's (1994) Simulacra and Simulation, Fredric Jameson's (1991) Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, and Murry Edelman's (1988) Constructing the Political Spectacle. Throughout, I place particular emphasis on the inducement of fear through spectacle and its baleful consequences for public education in a democracy. To explain the general staging and choreography of spectacle and to provide the basic structure for the article, I offer a gradually apportioned reading of Roland Barthes' (1957) essay, "The World of Wrestling." This inventive essay is the opening piece in an eclectic collection entitled Mythologies (Barthes 1972), in which Barthes uses a critical semiotics of popular culture to expose the hidden politics of myth-as-language, especially within the popular media. Using this modus operandi, Barthes' essay powerfully reveals the mythological nature of the spectacle, its deep and destructive ironies, and also shows convincingly why spectacle—such as that staged by No Child Left Behind—is, nonetheless, so enticing. Yet I ultimately show that the rather narrow formalism of Barthes' analysis also has critical limitations, especially from the standpoint of the kind of inclusive democratic practices and values promoted by someone like John Dewey. These limitations, I argue, serve effectively to stigmatize the public and make it necessary to place Barthes' analysis within the larger framework of a Deweyan pragmatic liberalism. Contesting the Barthesian stigma, this Deweyan framework yields a robust vision of social praxis and a commitment
to strong democracy (in opposition to the now-prevailing economistic democracy) in creating and implementing social policy.

WRESTLING WITH SCHOOL REFORM

Setting the Stage: or Situating the Spectacle

I should first point out that Barthes' (1957) discussion of wrestling is not directed at the classical form of the sport found in the Olympics, but rather at the spurious entertainment variety that has recently produced such transitory cultural icons as Andre the Giant and Hulk Hogan. (Jesse Ventura is a telling anomaly here, having moved successfully from the world of wrestling to a major political office.) These no-holds-barred matches take place in a kind of in-the-round spectator arena that seemingly “shows all.” As Elias Canetti (1962) explained in Crowds and Power, “The arena is well demarcated from the outside world” (27). Providing an atmosphere of excess for caricatured epic theater, it becomes a kind of world-to-itself:

Outside, facing the city, the arena displays a lifeless wall; inside is a wall of people. The spectators turn their backs to the city. They have been lifted out of its structure of walls and streets and, for the duration of their time in the arena, they do not care about anything which happens there; they have left behind all their associations, rules and habits. Their remaining together in large numbers for a stated period of time is secure and their excitement has been promised them. . . . The seats are arranged in tiers around the arena, so that everyone can see what is happening below. The consequence of this is that the crowd is seated opposite itself. Every spectator has a thousand in front of him, a thousand heads. As long as he is there, all the others are there too; whatever excites him, excites them; and he sees it. They are seated some distance away from him, so that the differing details which make individuals of them are blurred; they all look alike and they all behave in a similar manner and he notices in them only the things which he himself is full of. Their visible excitement increases his own. There is no break in the crowd which sits like this, exhibiting itself to itself. It forms a closed ring from which nothing can escape. (27–28)

This crowd of spectators, in Canetti’s description, is ineluctably homogenized through a process of normalization trained on immediately identifiable, overt behaviors. A spectacle conscience is thereby created, promoting a pervasive “group think” posture, and priming the onlookers to make quick, easy judgments based solely on the surface text. The crowd’s expectant gaze on the stage below, meanwhile, virtually ensures an entertaining performance.

Jean Baudrillard (1994) contended that an analogous spectacle conscience is routinely fostered by the modern media. The popular news media, for instance,
regularly package current events, such as the annual release (with great fanfare) of students’ scores on norm-referenced standardized tests, in the guise of spectacle in search of higher ratings and sales. Moreover, with the recent increase in media consolidation occasioned by changes in Federal Communications Commission laws and corporate mergers, and enhanced by the upsurge of new media technologies, this promotion of the surface text through spectacle becomes that much more focused, pervasive, and difficult to evade. The apparent explosion of information through the various media consequently leads, paradoxically, to what Baudrillard called “an implosion of meaning” (79). As he put it, “Everywhere information is thought to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus value of meaning homologous to the economic one that results from the accelerated rotation of capital” (80). But, in fact, this explosion of information “exhausts itself in the act of staging communication,” which promptly becomes “a gigantic process of simulation” (80). Such spectacle, argued Baudrillard, “stages the desire of the audience” and feeds on its “faith in information” not to create communication, but to secure the surface text (79–81; see also Harvey 1990, 59). Similarly, the spectators of Barthes’ wrestling match are not deterred in their participation by the fact that they are watching a rigged, stage-managed sport—a simulacrum—within this world-to-itself. The crowd, he said, “abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees” (Barthes 1957, 15). Here, in a nutshell, is the constricting and homogenizing staging of the spectacle.

Profiling the Contest(ants)

Barthes (1957) observed that there is typically an unmistakable “good guy” and “bad guy” within the spectacle of wrestling, reflecting the essentialist either/or language and logic of a dualistic world. These logocentric presumptions hold that the inherent structures of language and the mind mirror the structures of the cosmos. Either/or language and logic both allow for and encourage something like the simple thumbs-up/thumbs-down crowd response of Roman gladiator matches. As Barthes (1957) explained, “As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed with the obviousness of the roles. As in the theater, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has been assigned to the contestant” (17). The stark and simplistic dichotomy of “good guy” versus “bad guy,” as a carefully wrought construction, immediately frames and determines the choreography of the entire spectacle. As Richard Bernstein (2005) observed, it is not just a clear distinction void of ambiguity and nuance, where “good guys” are innately incapable of doing bad things and “bad guys” the opposite, but, what is more, one that has been effectively absolutized, reified and rigidified (14). Spectacle is not a mere fleeting visual phenomenon, then, but rather a powerful and pervasive worldview.
In the deeply political spectacle of NCLB, the “good guy” and “bad guy” are likewise conceived and portrayed through the logic of either/or. The consumers of spectacle, wrote theorist Murray Edelman (1988), are encouraged “to support good causes and leaders and oppose enemies, to sacrifice for the common welfare and to acquiesce in the inevitable,” to what simply must be if the adversary is to be defeated (35). Furthermore, “Leaders and enemies reinforce each other as the components of the political spectacle that lend it emotional depth as well as the intellectual satisfaction that springs from the transformation of uncertainty, ambivalence, and complexity into an understandable phenomenon” (40). In short, within spectacle messy, intractable realities incontestably give way to simple, consoling myths.

In the either/or realm of NCLB, the role of the “good guy” is unambiguously played by those politicians and policy makers demanding more rigorous standards in teacher and student performance. The purveyors of public education and its sustainer, on the other hand, in not wanting to be held accountable for their allegedly dismal performance, are cast in the role of the “bad guy.” (The public itself, as I show shortly, is ineluctably pulled into the spectacle and is compelled to choose sides, although the presumed offenses of the “bad guy” seemingly make the choice an easy one.) Public schools, people are unceremoniously told, are rife with unqualified teachers, and administrators knowingly conceal teacher incompetence by hiding the test scores of minority, disabled, and economically disadvantaged students, inviting the “soft bigotry” of low expectations. Here, the fair and accurate criticism that people too often have lower expectations for poor, minority, and disabled students as a result of stereotypes instantly becomes, in the spectacle of NCLB, the presumption that society should have exactly the same expectations for all students lest it abets the evils of intellectual, moral, and economic decay. In a talk for the Heritage Foundation, former Secretary of Education Rodney Paige thus tagged those who resist NCLB “the real enemies of public schools” (just as the “bad guy” wrestlers were once tagged as “Reds”), subsequently vilifying the National Education Association as “a terrorist organization” (Meier and Wood 2004, 127). Where such contrivances of spectacle reign, as Smith (2003) observed,

aspects of theater such as characters, scripts, and plots, work their way into politics. In the production that is No Child Left Behind legislation one can see all these elements: heroes and villains, oft-repeated slogans, and the narrative, which suggests to the popular mind that this policy can readily correct deeply embedded social problems by making kids pass tests. (20)

Through the apparatus of spectacle, the flaws and failures of public education, be they real or mythical, are carefully and systematically represented, as Berliner (2005) says, “to scare ordinary citizens” (205). Education becomes the equivalent
of national security and America appears to be in a deep, ongoing state of crisis. *A Nation at Risk* (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983) charged America with “committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament” (5); *America 2000* (later *Goals 2000*) was touted as a “national crusade” and proffered allusions to Desert Storm. And NCLB, which is aggressively punitive (masking as tough love), is frequently linked to the “war on terror” and, once more in the name of national security, incorporates legislation facilitating military recruitment in public schools (Smith 2003, 253).

The names of these recent reform initiatives also reflect the alluring choreography and ideological allegiances of spectacle. They suggest both ongoing threats and heroic reassurances. Yet they also “portray accomplishment, masking hesitations in action and counterproductive strategies that minimize, cancel, or reverse claims of success” (Edelman 1988, 17). As the official NCLB tour song goes (yes, there is such a thing),

We're here to thank our president,
For signing this great bill.
That's right! Yeah, Research shows we know the way,
It's time we showed the will!

(quoted in the *New York Times*, June 23, 2002)

Only a lack of willpower, the song proclaims, stands in the way of a great new era in education—for “research shows we know the way.” And, thankfully, the president and his cohorts, who reassuringly do not lack the willpower, have arrived to call out the “bad guy” and save Americans from themselves, from the needless acceptance of low-quality teachers and underperforming schools. And what true democratic citizen, after all, could reasonably (i.e., ethically) reject a policy that aims to “leave no child behind,” especially when this moniker was appropriated from the benevolent auspices of the Children’s Defense Fund? Like the spectacle of wrestling, the public face of NCLB simulates a costumed pageant, wherein all moves are carefully scripted and rehearsed for optimum effect. Here, occupying the main stage of contemporary school reform, is Barthes’ (1957) mythic world-to-itself.

Round 1 Up Against the Ropes

Barthes (1957) observed that in the mythic world of wrestling, each match offers up one perfectly legible tableau after another. All meanings are instantly accessible, self-confirming, and self-sufficient, requiring only an immediate reading on the part of the viewer. Everything is understood on the spot, as unmediated presence, such that “each moment is intelligible, not the passage of time” (16).
Consequently, as David Harvey (1990) explained, quoting Fredric Jameson, the viewer's "experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and 'material'"—transformed into real being: "The image, the appearance, the spectacle can all be experienced with an intensity (joy or terror) made possible only by their appreciation as pure and unrelated presents in time" (54).\(^6\) This is because every dramatic signifier is given an unambiguous sense. Each functions as an affirmation of appearances (or what Jameson 1991 appropriately called "stereotypical idealities," 19) and the expectations they beget: Things are exactly as they seem to be in a ready-made, preordained understanding—the "good guy" is truly good and the "bad guy" is truly bad—virtually guaranteeing that the viewers' response will be unanimous: thumbs-up or thumbs-down. In the representational politics of wrestling-as-spectacle, Barthes (1957) explained,

A wrestler... always accomplishes completely, by a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of him. In wrestling, nothing exists except in the absolute; there is no symbol, no allusion, everything is presented exhaustively. Leaving nothing in the shade, each action discards all parasitic meanings and ceremonially offers to the public a pure and full signification, rounded like Nature. This grandiloquence is nothing but the popular and age-old image of the perfect intelligibility of reality. What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction....the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil. (24-25)

In the mythic, ahistorical world of spectacle, observed Harvey (1990), this is "the stuff of which consciousness is forged" (54).

The spectacle of NCLB and the mythic expectations that it creates, are, as with other top-down, deeply-politicized reforms, disseminated via the media through a medley of public relations campaigns, glib slogans, and apodictic promises. What is more, these expedients are choreographed in a manner that immediately puts public education up against the ropes. An ardently defensive, at times even apologetic, posture often automatically results. The products of such spectacle and its monopoly of appearances are no mere decorative veneer; they are capable of permeating and transforming the public consciousness. Indeed, spectacle often becomes an integral part of this consciousness, making its mythical significations a kind of unreal reality, a shaper of people's thoughts and actions. In a very real way, life becomes art and art becomes life. The desires and expectations of the public are systematically funneled along predetermined paths that constrict the possibilities for critique and admissible alternatives to the surface text: Americans are in crisis mode—the problem (failing schools) is simple and the solution (doing away with failing schools) is obvious. As in the spectacle of wrestling, then, the complexity
and ambiguity of everyday situations gives way to the selective media logic and
drama of sound bites, constructed images, and "univocal Nature" as defined by the
surface text. There is, consequently, nothing left to be interpreted by the public, no
additional or alternative meanings to be deciphered. The evidence is right before
one's eyes and unequivocal: Teachers in public schools are inadequate and must
be held to more rigorous standards or everyone will suffer for it. And people
know this, as the conventional story goes, because the "official" news media and
professional journalists seek to reflect reality, but don't actively mediate it. Their
public trust compels them to exist above the fray of politics and partisanship. They
see and report things as they truly are.

Within NCLB, this powerful mythology is promulgated by a host of account-
ability mechanisms (part of our expanding audit culture) that claim to offer the
public perfectly intelligible and transparent meanings that tell the whole story
of public education and require only an immediate, noncritical reading. These
much publicized "quality indicators" consist of self-evident truths affirmed by
rigorous, scientific tests and certifications, test scores published in local newspa-
ers (the publicizing of once "private" test scores in the name of full disclosure;
Barthes 1972, 18), regularly updated lists of identified "failing" schools, and statistics
revealing children's dismal showing in international comparisons of student
achievement. Such reductionist choreography is built on simplistic curriculum-
delivery models of teaching. It plays on and reinforces the presumptions that (a)
teachers are only teaching if students are learning in accordance with prescribed
standards; (b) student learning is accurately reflected in scores on standardized
tests that assess these standards; and (c) if students' test scores are not meeting
these standards, then teachers are, in fact, not teaching, that is to say, they are not
doing their jobs.

Within the choreography of the spectacle, all of this seems to expose public
education as both morally and intellectually deficient. Casual diagnoses of its
many failures feature daily in the popular media, setting the stage for token
consent on the necessary reforms. This is univocal Nature declaring itself in the
pure and full signification of positivistic science. It is, in short, the myth of value-
free objectivity through unmediated presence, or what Dewey (1988b) vigorously
critiqued as the "spectator theory of knowing" (19). On this theory, the relationship
between knower and known is not engaged and contextual, as Dewey would have
it, but rather detached and decontextualized, while the process of knowing is
interpreted more or less on the model of vision—as immediate presence. With the
establishment of this passive spectator posture, the basic conditions of spectacle
are solidly in place.

As an instrument of salvation in the prevailing ethos of fear, this positivist
staging holds out the promise of a scientifically-validated certainty. Alleging an
essentially fixed and finished universe, it maintains that science alone can be
trusted to provide people with knowledge about the world, and that what is truly
real is solely a function of the known or knowable. Whatever cannot be answered by rigorous scientific means, following the model of the physical sciences, must remain unanswered, and matters of quality (e.g., teacher quality) are summarily reduced to quantity. Moreover, this positivistic knowledge consists in certain discrete facts or atomistic truths that commonly privilege simple cause and effect relationships, effects that can be readily observed, measured, and statistically analyzed according to fixed algorithms (Granger 2006, 75–76). And with the concomitant fetishism of tests and test scores this invites, reducing selves to ciphers and corrupting the complex processes tests purportedly measure and monitor, the imitation becomes the real, while the real eventually takes on the qualities of the imitation. As Dubord (1967) candidly put it, “the fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relations conceals their true character as relations between people and between classes: a second Nature, with its own inescapable laws, seems to dominate our environment” (13). Thus, teaching-to-the-test becomes, simply, “common-sense” and teachers are compelled to deny their firsthand knowledge of their students’ abilities when confronted with conflicting evidence from, say, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or some other official measurement tool. In the spectacle world of NCLB, accordingly, the moral craft of teaching is effectively superseded and evidence-based (or science-based) practice—such as that required by the federal Reading First legislation—appears as the golden key of educational reform. As the song triumphantly proclaims, “Research shows we know the way.”

Consider, as a prime example, the well-publicized dispute between New York State Education Commissioner Richard Mills and a coalition of 28 alternative schools over a new requirement that all students take and pass state Regents exams if they are to graduate. In stating their position, the coalition sensibly argued, and with considerable scholarly support, that these exams were incompatible with their constructivist teaching methods, curricula, and assessments, which included various kinds of student projects, action research, and portfolios. They also pointed to empirical evidence that students in these schools had both lower dropout rates and higher college attendance rates than comparable schools using Regents exams. That did not seem to matter to Commissioner Mills, however. In ruling against the coalition, he dismissed such evidence out-of-hand and then played his peremptory trump card: to wit, the public has made it clear that it wants tougher school standards, but a select panel of testing and assessment experts finds that the alternative assessments are not rigorous, objective, consistent, or precise measures of student performance. In a word, the coalition schools were accused of doing bad science, of being intellectually soft, even permissive. Their assessments did not follow the proper positivistic model required to ensure equal educational opportunity for all. Equality and excellence generally mean sameness of treatment in the ethos of positivism; and if one really knows something, the ruling suggested, the assessment format should not make a difference anyway.
Round 2 Down and Out

Finally, Barthes (1957) contended that the spectacle of wrestling amounts to what is ultimately a scapegoating or purification ritual. As the spectators are turned into Canetti’s (1962) normalized (and normalizing) crowd via the staging and choreography of the match, they watch events unfold with grim satisfaction as the “bad guy” is ignominiously punished for his transgressions. This simple cause and effect mechanism operates with the regularity and precision of the positivist’s logico-mathematical world. As Barthes (1957) explained, “Each moment in wrestling is... like an algebra which instantaneously unveils the relationship between a cause and its effect. Wrestling fans certainly experience a kind of intellectual pleasure in seeing the moral mechanism function so perfectly” (19). On Barthes’ reading, this scapegoating or purification ritual occurs in a succession of three vivid tableaus: suffering, defeat, and justice.

Suffering and defeat. “Wrestling presents man’s suffering with all the amplification of tragic masks,” Barthes (1957, 19) wrote. “The wrestler who suffers in a hold which is reputedly cruel (an arm-lock, a twisted leg) offers an excessive portrayal of Suffering: like a primitive Pietà, he exhibits for all to see his face, exaggeratedly contorted by an intolerable affliction.” Further, “everyone must not only see that the man suffers, but also and above all understand why he suffers” (19).

This ritual of suffering corresponds to some glaring, intolerable affliction—Berliner and Biddle’s (1985) “manufactured crisis” (2)—now occurring in public education. The fact that NCLB is so heavily top-down, invasive, and aggressively punitive, yet was endorsed by both conservatives and free-market liberals, makes the reputed crisis seem that much more severe, as does the broad bipartisan support the legislation received (and which President Bush actively sought). Moreover, NCLB was initially supported by the public at a ratio of three-to-one.

The suffering public and its embattled political leaders presume to hold the moral and intellectual high ground in the spectacle of failing schools. Their direct adversary is the slipshod and unaccountable “business-as-usual” of public education—the stranglehold of self-serving teachers unions, unqualified teachers (the embodiment of unions; McGuinn 2006, 142), indulgent administrators, and unproven (read unscientific) teaching methods. As elements of spectacle, Edelman (1988) explained, these dire problems “construct an exploding set of scenes and signs that move in unpredictable directions and that radiate endlessly, actions and the language that defines their meaning evoking still other acts and terms that are supplementary, contradictory, or logically irrelevant” (36). Consider, for example, the popular myth of a direct linkage between student performance and the nation’s economic health (Ramirez et al. 2006). This myth, routinely fomented by politicians and corporate leaders and again following the simple logic of cause and
effect, bespeaks of a looming economic crisis. As such, it plays on the almost tribal fear among Americans of no longer being the world’s number one power—a fear enhanced by the spectacle surrounding the growth of stigmatized minority groups (including recent immigrants, breeding the new xenophobia) and the rhetoric of globalization. It also reinforces the corollary myth, enunciated in all major educational reforms since *A Nation at Risk* (National Committee on Excellence in Education 1983), that education is an effective antidote to larger social problems like poverty and unemployment (Lafer 2002).

In the spectacle world of educational reform, it indeed appears that the public is suffering gravely at the hands of public education. The oft-repeated grounds for blaming teachers—and by extension students—for a host of social and economic problems are deeply rooted, both historically and sociologically. (For example, the scapegoating of teachers is likely aided by the fact that K–12 teaching has, since the common-school era, been seen as a women’s profession.) It likewise serves as an effective means of coalition building among the “good guys.” By personifying these problems and identifying them with an adversary, they garner political support and also mask the partisan advantages that such scapegoating affords. And anything that might be called defeat of the “good guys” (e.g., a poor showing on international comparisons of student achievement), must be temporary and incomplete, and inevitably signals the need for some noble sacrifice for the good of the nation (e.g., the cutting of “nonessential” arts programs or children’s recess time). Regardless, an emphatic reversal of the current state of affairs is in order, entailing a necessary gesture of punishment against offenders, who, people are unceremoniously told, “brought it on themselves” (Barthes 1957, 20).

**Justice.** In the spectacle of wrestling, Barthes (1957) observed, justice is choreographed around a very visible and enduring form of punishment. The agent of (unjust) suffering must be made to suffer (justly) himself. And the more offensive and destructive the behavior of the “bad guy,” the more severe the punishment, especially if the basic rules of decency have been transgressed. The shameless coward, one who tries to take refuge behind the ropes as if not liable (or accountable) for his obvious misdeeds, is seen as particularly base and suffers the harshest fate (21).

In this justice phase of the scapegoating ritual, accordingly, public education is disciplined and sanctioned by NCLB through the principled accountability structures and intellectual and moral indignation of the public and political leaders, who exercise their right to redress through the benevolent instruments of scientific rationality (e.g., by legislating evidence-based practice and yearly standardized-testing). No longer will public education be able to hide behind the negligent policies and practices of “business-as-usual,” to the detriment of the American people. For its offences are now public knowledge, fully exposed for all to see. As Nichols and Berliner (2007) pointedly observed, “Under NCLB, variables like
mobility, poverty, crime rates in the neighborhood, percent unemployment, percent single-parent households, and so forth are considered to be excuses that schools use to hide their laziness and inefficiency" (190).

In pursuit of justice, as envisioned within NCLB, "failing" schools (those not making Adequate Yearly Progress, AYP) are put on "the list," must allow students to transfer to other schools in the district (a school "choice" option) while defraying the transportation costs, and must give students the option to use their portion of Title I (ESEA) funds to pay for tutoring or other supplemental educational services (which can be provided by private companies). And if these schools are still "failing" after five years, they will likely be permanently closed or, perhaps, reopened as charter schools (McGuinn 2006, 178–179). Consequently, schools that remain on the list for more than a year are met with federal funding cuts or have funds siphoned off, must teach-to-the-test or use rigidly scripted lessons, and face staffing changes to replace purportedly "incompetent" teachers. (A distressing irony has often been noted here in that many potentially high-quality teachers are doubtless being driven away by this scapegoating climate.) In New York State alone, according to 2006 figures, there are a total of 506 schools and 56 districts identified as "In Need of Improvement," with a disproportionate number (83%) of these being poorer urban and rural schools and districts that serve students of color. Nationwide, moreover, around 8,000 public schools—distributed very unequally due largely to state policy differences in how NCLB is implemented—are now labeled as "In Need of Improvement" and face stiff sanctions unless test scores meet AYP (WABC-TV Education News, January 10, 2007). The more student subgroups schools have, research shows, the less likely they are to meet AYP, resulting in what has been dubbed a "diversity penalty" and giving schools a powerful disincentive for diversifying their student populations (see Balfanz et al. 2007; Meier and Wood 2004, 12). Add to this that all schools must achieve 100% student proficiency by 2014, and NCLB has essentially created a "no-win" situation—something that legislators were made aware of by government researchers well before NCLB was formally approved (McGuinn 2006, 176).

Along with these ill-conceived mechanisms of punitive justice, Edelman (1988) pointed out that, in the end, spectacle "encourages acceptance of the stable social structures and the inequalities that shape [people's] experiences" (35). And it does so mainly "by creating another world of symbols and fetishes" (e.g., of standards, tests and test scores) whose meanings appear self-evident (apolitical and ahistorical) while seemingly addressing the needs of the disenfranchised (e.g., by closing the achievement gap between white students and students of color) (35). The collective illusion of this world-to-itself "diverts attention from historical knowledge, social and economic analysis, and unequal benefits and sufferings that might raise questions about the prevailing ideology" (i.e., the conditions that lie "behind" the achievement gap) (125). In this way, "a problem constructed to justify a course
of action... gives rise to an explanation that rationalizes still other policies" (36). The prevailing ideology is thereby strengthened and the processes and agencies of participatory democracy weakened. This illusory aspect of spectacle also explains, in part, how NCLB was initially able to muster strong bipartisan support. (Another factor was clearly the desire to show a united front after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.) In the mythical world of NCLB, it is as though passing tests magically brings with it a new, more equitable set of social conditions. Reality is spontaneously transformed for the benefit of all. But like other instruments of political spectacle, the punitive sanctions of NCLB function mostly to assuage the public’s fears about failing schools and unqualified teachers, yet ignore (or refiguring as private troubles) the more serious underlying social problems—increasing poverty and segregation, continuing inequitable school funding, and so on—instead fetishizing secondary, largely symptomatic problems—the reality of significantly lower levels of achievement in many schools serving poorer districts and students of color. The world-to-itself of spectacle is, after all, staged, theatrical, and there can only be one outcome—that which maintains the current balance (or imbalance) of powers.

As a final act of retributive justice, the enfeebled adversary is openly defeated: Mass public education is gradually dismantled, making way for the impeding, and ostensibly just, rise of the “better way” in the form of a more privatized, market-driven system. With these privatizing sanctions, public education becomes, in the end, a kind of commodity strategically masked as bureaucracy-free charter schools and, following the original provisions of NCLB, liberating voucher programs. (And there is surely much profit to be had through NCLB by savvy textbook publishers, the testing industry, tutoring and remediation services, and test-preparation programs for students, teachers, and administrators.) The agencies of this radical transformation greatly diminish the public trust and manifest a profound devaluing of public goods and services. They convey the simplistic message, enunciated in elements of both neo-liberal and neo-conservative politics, that public equals “bad” and private equals “good.” This message inevitably alienates parents, teachers, and students from the democratic purposes of public education, and the means and ends of privatization effectively remove them from participation in democratic decision-making. In other words, where private consumerist logic replaces public civic logic and questions of legality replace questions of public ethics, the inevitable effect is to privatize profit while socializing risk. School governance becomes the right and privilege of elites whose interests come to be directed more at the private sector and less at the common weal and the health of local communities. Thus, instead of a supportive, broad-minded response to the public’s genuine concern for the quality of public education, the fear and corrosive cynicism staged and choreographed by NCLB ironically move more in the direction of marginalizing the public and discrediting public education. Indeed, upon careful examination, it is hard to see how the accountability structures and
scapegoating punitive policies of NCLB could fail to cast public education in a negative light while recommending the supposed virtues of a more privatized system. And, in fact, movement towards privatization is an avowed goal of many influential organizations that backed NCLB, including the Manhattan Institute for Public Policy Research, The Heritage Foundation, The Fordham Foundation, The Hoover Institution, the Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation, the Foundation for Economic Education, The Center for Education Reform, and others (Hursh 2007, 501–502).

Before I move on, it is crucial to note here that this reading of NCLB does not mean that everyone associated with the reform wished to undermine or destroy public education, with the intent of promoting privatization and their own selfish interests. Indeed, it denotes something much more complex than a simple conspiracy theory. Within spectacle, as I showed earlier, things inevitably take on a life of their own and do so in very short order, becoming rapidly institutionalized. In effect, spectacle and its consoling myths turn into the status quo; they appear as common-sense—their logic a powerful and pervasive worldview. Edelman (1988) put it this way:

*Do officials and elites intentionally take advantage of the processes [of spectacle] to maintain and improve their privileges? They sometimes do so quite self-consciously, but conspiracies and scheming are not nearly as useful in maintaining inequalities as the more pervasive actions that flow from the logic of social situations in which people find themselves. Elites take advantage of the resources available to them, and most support the institutions that allocate resources unequally because their situations make those courses of action look rational. Intentions are likely to be confused and ambivalent. To define them is, itself, a political act that flows from the situation and the language forms available to observers. Explanation is more adequate when it deals in actions, structural conditions, and consequences than when it deals in the attributions of intentions.* (125)

It is here that I turn next.

Disrupting the Spectacle: Probing Beyond the Surface Text

In thinking about how one might work to disrupt this spectacle, one must first recognize that there is a significant danger—one might even say a myth—lurking within this rather formalist, antithermeneutical Barthsian analysis, with its seemingly exhaustive decoding of the world-to-itself of spectacle. That danger is to suppose the public—conceived as a monolithic crowd drawn helplessly to the surfaces of texts—mere passive dupes who (unlike, presumably, Barthes' highbrow readers) cannot, and do not, see through or have any way to elude this spectacle (see also de Man 1983, 1993; Edmundson 1995; Kellner 1995; Jameson 1991;
Lefebvre 1991). This is, no doubt, a dangerous presumption, and it encourages people to believe that those within the academy hold some authoritatively privileged position that allows them to see things with perfect clarity; naively suggesting that they are in no way complicit in this spectacle. Such a flawed outlook inevitably puts the stigmatized public at the mercy of their good graces and superior “knowingness.” Yet, as part of the carefully guarded detachment of traditional academic culture, many scholars and writers are arguably complicit in their own marginalization and irrelevance, and hence in the spectacle itself, putting them effectively beyond the reach of the public. The same could be said of the deep seductions of Barthes’ (1957) literary model, with its controlling authority and pronounced distancing effect. As Paul de Man (1993) aptly puts it,

The demystifying power of semiology is both a source of strength and a danger. It is impossible to be so consistently right at the expense of others without some danger to oneself. Barthes’s social criticism and the means used in accomplishing its highly laudable aim engender their own mystification. . . . The very power of the instrument creates an assurance that generates its own set of counterquestions. (170–171)

In this context, such counterquestions must, I think, lead one to question the wisdom of viewing the public as a monolithic crowd, capable only of quasi-fascist, “tribal” behavior in the face of spectacle. A view like this, symptomatic of Barthes’ (1957) formalist fantasy of transparent social meanings, seems very likely to promote dispositions of apathy, despair, cynicism, and even defeatism among those critical of the current course of contemporary school reform. Such debilitating dispositions are obviously very toxic to democratic habits and forms of life, and in the end they only exacerbate the political spectacle by capitulating to the status quo. As Dewey’s robust vision of social praxis and participatory democracy reminds us, one ultimately incurs liability through action, as well as inaction. Further, if society is to move beyond the binary logic and adversarial “us versus them” staging of NCLB, where educators voicing opposition are instantly branded “anti-accountability,” the public, including, especially, parents and caregivers, must play a critical role.

All the same, Dewey (1988a) would, I think, be the first person to declare the effective “eclipse of the public” in contemporary school reform (304–324). The public, he would argue, is now largely diffused, inchoate, unable to conceive and articulate forcefully an alternative, more genuinely democratic vision of educational reform. The attendant culture of apathy and cynicism has consequently rendered it susceptible to the crowd mentality fostered by spectacle and its consoling myths. The current “economistic” or consumer vision of democracy adheres to a top-down, expert guided institutional approach to decision-making and policy formation that, with its expanding commodity and markets mentality, has the effect of working on people rather than with them. (One might argue that the “experts,”
as people "in the know," ultimately act as "stand-ins" for, rather than representatives of, the public as, in effect, "private government.") In the words of Judith Green (2002), "economistic liberal and libertarian models of democracy simply aim to coordinate the unexamined preferences of differing, separate, fundamentally unchanging individuals in ways that avoid violent conflict while maximizing aggregate holdings of primary social goods, especially income and wealth" (263). From such a perspective, she continues, "individuals in their actual differences serve as the final measure and goal of the coordinating institutions of social life [among them public schools]" (263). This means that "there is and could be no shared public value in terms of which various actual individuals' values could be assessed... other than freedom from interference with and by other individuals in one's pursuit of whatever conception of the good one finds motivating" (263–264). Such logic fundamentally cripples the deliberative, participatory role of the public within a democratic social context. Moreover, its deep-seated atomistic undercurrents severely limit the full range of possibilities for substantive personal and social growth, the two necessarily going hand-in-hand.

Deweyan "strong democracy," in contrast, is actively participatory and innately pluralistic in outlook. It thus strives at all points for inclusiveness—in this case, for a broader, more balanced cross-section of the various constituencies impacted by the means and ends of public education and their consequences. As a form of developmental democracy, it also emphasizes mutual transformation through communication, collaboration, creative conflict-resolution and collective problem-solving (all hallmarks of "social intelligence") in developing and implementing social policy. This, for Dewey (1988a), is the process at the heart of an articulate public, or in more conventional terms, civic community (see also Barber 2003). Through this process, strong democracy links people's individual experiences and insights—for example, those of teachers, parents and caregivers, and local community members—with the larger social reality, providing a richly contextual way of contributing to a concrete but dynamic (i.e., experimental) social good in which all might share. As Dewey (1988a) succinctly put it, "the public has no hands except those of individual human beings" (286). It is important, too, that such plurality of perspectives helps one to recognize that deep structural changes (e.g., the establishment of a living wage and affordable health care) are required if society is to ease the political and economic isolation experienced by many families, schools, and communities, creating the necessary conditions for substantive and lasting educational reform. Deweyan strong democracy, unlike economistic democracy, does not, then, ground its notion of freedom in any abstract doctrine of natural rights: Such doctrines intimating that people somehow enter the world as freely choosing, self-sufficient, and self-realizing beings. Instead, it views freedom as an achievement, a concrete good requiring the mediation of democratic social agencies and conditions. Achieving such freedom in the face of pervasive spectacle and intransigent political, economic, and social forces is no small feat,
to be sure. But I believe that it must inevitably entail identifying, appropriating
and nurturing places and spaces for articulate counterpublics, countertexts, and,
most important in the end, counterpraxis.

And, indeed, there is growing evidence that segments of the public are, in fact,
becoming increasingly skeptical of the world-to-itself that is NCLB. Points of
dissent and resistance, often revolving around issues of testing and test-prep
pedagogy (too much) and funding (not enough), are being forcefully articulated
at the school, local community, and state levels (McGuinn 2006, 184–187).12
Overall public support for NCLB has also gradually reversed to a ratio of one-to-
three. It is here that counterpublics and countertexts might continue working to
undermine the mythical presuppositions of the spectacle, utilizing the emerging
skepticism to probe below the surface text and articulate alternative readings and
approaches to reform that put NCLB in a contrastive light. Rather than being
strictly oppositional and possibly binary—a tactic that, paradoxically, can justify
authority and be readily absorbed back into the surface text (e.g., the recalcitrant
antiaccountability educator)—such countertexts must be, to some degree, polyva-
lent (offering multiple perspectives) and polysemic (offering multiple meanings)
(Edelman 1988, 129).13 For there is not, nor can be, an ultimate, universal dis-
course for effective critique and reconstruction, and any viable discourse must to
some degree be responsive to the specifics of time and place. It must additionally
replace the binary “good guy” versus “bad guy” logic of the spectacle with a
both-and logic that acknowledges the reality of irony and paradox and the con-
tingency and fluidity of boundaries, thus problematizing the public’s relationship
to contemporary school reform as staged within NCLB (Granger 2006, 197). In
other words, it must somehow turn the simple, consoling myths of spectacle back
into the messy, intractable realities of schools and classrooms and the concrete
human lives behind the numbers. For only there, where some measure of risk and
fallibility is accepted, can education that treats students as something more than
mimetic subjects and ciphers genuinely exist. (It’s never as simple as “research
shows we know the way” where the particular needs of individual students are
concerned.)

Finally, this line of thinking urges that those in academe openly recognize
and acknowledge that they, too, are inextricably a part of the public. In the best
Deweyan tradition, this suggests that they must strive in their work to realize
the democratic commitments and engaged praxis of the public intellectual. More
specifically, they must be willing to participate as writers, thinkers, and actors
in diverse public forums—not just in scholarly journals and books—as active
agents of the public good. They must also strive to create places and spaces for
articulate counterpublics, countertexts, and counterpraxis, both within and beyond
the confines of the classrooms. And they must work to develop their prophetic
wisdom or vision to imagine and articulate compelling alternatives to present
conditions. Only in this way can they help to disrupt, and have any hopes of
finally overturning, the spectacle that is contemporary school reform. The mythical staging and choreography of NCLB seem destined to do more harm than good. All who are dedicated to the broad purposes of public education, as a moral craft that aspires to engage one’s full humanity, deserve better.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Jim Garrison, Christine McCarthy, Dennis Showers, Linda Ware, Melanie Blood and several anonymous reviewers from Educational Studies for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

NOTES

1. See also David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle (1995, 108), Richard Rothstein (1998), and Gerald W. Bracey (2004), all of whom argue that educators are not responsible for most of the (alleged) shortcomings of America’s public schools.


3. Patrick Brantlinger (1983) identifies this spectacle conscience in contemporary sports events: “Most watchers of the Super Bowl or of World Cup soccer do not realize that they are mimicking the spectators in Roman arenas, cheering madly and turning thumbs up or down for their favorite gladiators, but that comparison is nevertheless implicit in the very structure of televised sports ‘spectaculars’” (40). Observe also the parallels to tabloid television talk shows.

4. A major public poll by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in 2004 found that only 14% of respondents believed that public schools were performing well or pretty well (McGuinn 2006, 191).

5. For his own part, President George W. Bush’s post-9/11 rhetoric of fear and antiterrorist policy initiatives are built on an “us/them” binary that regularly denotes the “other” as an “unchosen” object of fear and contempt. When pressed on atrocities committed by Christians and evidence of peace-loving Muslims, the New Right agenda places “real” Christians and “real” Muslims on one side and “false” Christians and “false” Muslims on the other, maintaining the neat good/evil binary (no one could harbor elements of both) and occluding the reality that people of all races, sexes, cultures, and creeds are, when certain conditions prevail, capable of committing horrendous acts against humanity. For more on the destructiveness of the politics of fear, see Mark Edmundson (1997), Benjamin R. Barber (2004), Henry A. Giroux (2003), and Cory Robin (2006).

6. See also Jameson (1991) and Debord (1967) on the image as the final form of commodity reification.
7. For a potent critique along Deweyan lines of the call in education for evidence-based practice, see Gert Biesta (2007). It should also be noted that appeals to evidence-based practice within NCLB are highly selective in favor of more traditional forms of pedagogy.

8. Interestingly, given the recent influence on education policy of the religious right, the ritual of scapegoating has deep theological roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. See Friedrich Nietzsche (1967), Sylvia Brinton Perera (1986), René Girard (1986), and Tom Douglas (1995).

9. Some more traditional liberal stalwarts were involved in drafting the legislation as well. People like Senator Edward Kennedy also wanted enhanced equity for students of color and those living in poverty, including increased federal funding. But they were ultimately compelled to make compromises (e.g., on issues related to standards, testing, and accountability) or risk being left out of the process altogether. The same was true of conservatives who wanted to include vouchers, block grants, and other controversial items in the legislation, and who worried that the reform was too top-down. Still, the final form of NCLB, although reflecting considerable political compromise, shows clear evidence of the conservative/neoliberal political agenda and the increasing political power of business interests. See McGuinn (2006, 165–195) and Peterson and West (2003, 23–54).

10. Contrary to popular belief, AYP is determined not by whether a school’s test scores rise or fall, but by a minimum threshold for aggregated and disaggregated test scores that gradually increases every year.

11. As Rothstein (1998) observed, “Polls consistently show that, while the public believes (public) schools do a terrible job, respondents generally think the particular schools their own children attend are pretty good” (28–30).

12. Note, however, that the public still supports a strong national presence in school reform (McGuinn 2006, 191).

13. Despite not wanting to discount the value of empirical research, Edelman (1988, 126–128) and Smith (2003, 257–258), invoking writers like Suzanne Langer, Georg Lukács, and Maxine Greene, emphasize the complementary role of the arts in providing more intimate and nuanced perspectives. In Edelman’s words,

art is worth attention as an antidote to political mystification because works of art depend for their power upon properties that contrast revealingly with the characteristics of political language. Art helps counter banal political forms and so can be a liberating form of political expression. It becomes that when it estranges people from bemusement with facts, conventional assumptions, and conventional language so that they see their inherent contradictions and recognize alternative potentialities. (126)

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