



Law and Order and School: Daily Life in an Educational Program for Juvenile Delinquents. Shira Birnbaum. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 208 pp.

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Shira Birnbaum takes on a topic that, to my knowledge, has seldom been addressed by educational researchers--the way some children are brushed under the carpet by being shipped off to institutions that are ambiguously positioned somewhere between school and prison. Birnbaum takes us into a "private alternative school program for troubled teenagers in a midsize Southern city" (p. 2)--a program she calls "the Academy." It is "ostensibly one of the better facilities of its kind in the state" (p. 175), yet Birnbaum documents many problems.

The heart of Birnbaum's book is her description of what she calls the "market economy" of the Academy. It has become virtually a commonplace for critical studies of schooling to characterize what transpires in the classroom as a form of "exchange," but in the Academy this is quite literally the case. The entire institution--outside the classroom and in--is dominated by a token economy, a system of "point and consequence" in which students win or earn points in exchange for conduct in five categories: Supervision, Participation, Attitude/Respect, Leadership, and Appearance. These points are the basis in turn for promotion through five ranks, and ultimately are traded for graduation (or is it release?). The points trump other considerations in the classroom, not least in the context of academic instruction. They provide a system of management far more salient and rewarding to the students than the content of their lessons, which are generally dog-eared, recycled worksheets and dittos, divided into bite-sized units whose sequence goes unenforced.

The force of critique of any classroom as a site only of exchange comes, of course, from the Marxist analysis that, appearances to the contrary, no value is created in exchange--only in production does labor generate value. It makes sense to ask, then, where is the productive labor in the Academy? Is it in the informal cultural production of a small group, as Paul Willis described for "the lads"? Birnbaum documents students' resistance to the token economy, in the form of defiance, working to rule, and exaggerated compliance, but she doesn't interpret further. She remarks merely that it is "indigenous slapstick" (p. 114), a "discounting" of the formal order. This illustrates a persistent problem. Birnbaum has chosen to refer to other writing chiefly in footnotes, presumably to heighten her book's readability. The effect, however, is to decouple her analysis from other work, so that the phenomena she documents seem



merely to illustrate concepts or observations made by other people, rather than contributing directly to an ongoing intellectual debate about schooling.

Is the Academy a prison or a school? No one seems to know. Recounting a 19-century "convergence of educational and penal management" (p. 63), Birnbaum contrasts two models of the prison that developed after the War of Independence. The Philadelphia state penitentiary was based on Quaker views; prisoners were housed individually, in solitude, and were to find "personal reform through religious meditation" (p. 64). New York State's penitentiary, in contrast, housed its prisoners as a group, with a Puritanical focus on "discipline and continual surveillance" (p. 64), its aim to break and habituate the inmates. Emphasis here was on external conduct and obedience, not inner transformation. A ranks-and-points system was used first in New York's Elmira prison for young offenders, designed to institute a meritocracy in which assessment of an inmate's readiness to return to society would be the basis for their release from indeterminate sentences. Ironically, this system was influenced by educator Joseph Lancaster, who employed this sort of merit system in his schools, with merit badges and competitive exams. To add to the confusion, such schools were self-consciously equated with the factory system, in which "hard work, systematically measured, earned ostensibly just and predictable rewards" (p. 67).

It becomes clear that the extent to which the Academy's token economy can truly reform its students' conduct is limited. The exchange system doesn't produce compliance--it generates the *appearance* of compliance. As one student advises another: "What you have to do is what they want to see you do" (p. 102). The students have their own disciplinary apparatus that swings into action "when they perceived school discipline to have failed, or to have delivered unacceptable outcomes" (p. 106). Birnbaum describes students as "tethered to the rank-and-point economy" (p. 113), their conduct an "embrace, essentially, [of] the technical-rational orientation" (p. 114) of the formal economy. But her observations suggest that the students are actually very savvy about the institution's system, playing the game only to the extent necessary to gain their freedom. One student notes, of the academic classes, "You don't need those [department of education] credits to get out of here" (p. 82).

The Academy is positioned unstably between the two types of institution, half school, half prison. Birnbaum emphasizes that its students have already suffered the blows of a dysfunctional public school system and a capricious and brutal juvenile justice system. Yet at times she writes as though she holds a straightforward correspondence view: the Academy is "like a workplace," with a "social economy" that has its students "like workers in the formal economy," and its teachers are "like managers." It would be equally apt to draw a parallel with prisoners and guards. Birnbaum's book



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offers a rare glimpse of a neglected but important institution, and raises interesting questions about the similarities and differences between schools and prisons, our largest institutions of compulsory attendance.

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