The publication of *Bully Nation* in 2016 could not have been more timely. Its release came as the United States witnessed acts of domestic terrorism and mass shootings, a rash of video-recorded police killings of unarmed African American men, and the successful presidential bid of a candidate whose campaign engaged in unprecedented acts of intimidation and personal abuse of political rivals, including threats of incarceration and political assassination of his opponent in the general election. These events constitute a challenge not only to the very political fabric of the United States but perhaps also to ingrained habits of analysis and thought of social scientists. In this respect, *Bully Nation* is an ambitious book that attempts to widen the contours of current public discussions of the forms of coercion and intimidation popularly called “bullying” in the United States that the authors contend are limited all too often to childhood, the institutional settings of primary and secondary schools, and the narrow parameters of the psychological sciences.

Invoking C. Wright Mills’ “sociological imagination” (p. 8), public sociologists Charles Derber and Yale Magrass call for a “paradigm shift” by enlarging the psychological and psychiatric lens through which bullying is commonly viewed today by educators, experts, and journalists alike to the wider determinants of “militarized capitalism” and its social structures and institutions that the authors claim distinguish the United States from most other nations (p. 3). They are not the first scholars to offer such a general overview (some date back to 2008)—the authors acknowledge an earlier book by sociologist Jessie Klein, *Bully Society* (2012), whose title their book echoes; Klein’s book even includes a chapter titled “Bully Economy.”

The authors trace the peculiar origins of the United States as a “bully nation” back to its beginnings as a violent, conquering settlement colony based on slavery and a relentlessly expanding capitalist economy. In a sense the authors take the opportunity of bullying as a public problem to make a field argument for the value of sociology as a discipline and to renew the longstanding dispute with the rival field of psychology and its individualizing paradigm focused on personality traits that ignore social relations of power. For them, people aren’t born bullies but rather are most often made so by a society that recruits them as agents of the “structural bullying” (p. 7) practiced by institutions.

There is little to quarrel with here regarding the authors’ broad methodological perspective and general observations and much to be said in favor of bringing to the general public a powerful synthesis of the manifold ways bullying as a form of aggression and power pervades and shapes contemporary U.S. society. Accordingly, Derber and Magrass, who are new to the research topic of bullying, devote separate chapters to detecting bullying across society from the nuclear family, extremities of wealth, and the free market and corporate workplace...
to educational institutions and the military to relations between nations to, finally, interactions between humans and nature that result in environmental degradation and global warming. Most of these are topics on which Derber has published prolifically (including his books *Corporate Nation* [1998], *From Greed to Green* [2010], and *Sociopathic Society* [2013]).

*Bully Nation* comes vetted by well-known progressive writers (such as Noam Chomsky and Henry Giroux), a historian, a political scientist, and even an Oscar-winning filmmaker (Oliver Stone). By the final page the term “bully” seems to have achieved the goal set by its authors to connect the dots in an accessible style for a popular audience between intertwining institutional sites in a stirring portrait of systematic injustice and inequality in the United States in the thrall of militarized capitalism. The authors’ ambition seems to make “bully” a rallying cry of social protest much like the “1 percent” made famous by Occupy Wall Street.

The sweeping scope of their analysis is based on a definition of bullying as driven primarily by power hierarchies in economic, organizational, gender, racial, ethnic, religious, national, and cultural domains. The steeper the hierarchy, the greater the bullying. As such, in this analysis bullying is virtually always top-down: “Bullying is about the more powerful bending the less powerful to their will and ensuring that things stay that way” (pp. 17–18). Strong nations bully weak nations, colonizers bully the colonized, parents bully their offspring, teachers and administrators bully students, executives bully employees, men bully women, whites bully people of color, and humans bully domestic and wild animals. And in an appendix we learn that the god of the Old Testament bullied the Israelites.

To be sure, any grand synthesis or overview, however valuable, will leave itself open to the charge of omitting this or that topic; nonetheless, it remains puzzling that in light of the current social and political juncture certain U.S. institutions and developments are left unexamined in this account. For example, readers’ grasp of the specificity of American bullying as a national phenomenon beyond “militarized capitalism” would have been enriched by consideration of the peculiar U.S. legal traditions of privacy and the “absolutist” doctrine of freedom of expression that leaves verbal bullying unchecked and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that ignores non-discriminatory acts of harassment and intimidation. Moreover, an analysis of the rise of aggressive radio and cable TV talk shows followed by reality TV that revolutionized the limits of acceptable public speech both inside and outside the public media sphere would have contributed to understanding the processes by which personal and “structural bullying” have been legitimized in the wider culture. Finally, greater focus on specifically political forms of bullying would have left readers better prepared to deal with the current crisis in U.S. politics and how it came about. I am thinking particularly of the wave of fear and intimidation unleashed by federal and local governments against their own citizens in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and increasingly bold acts of political intimidation and violence: everything from the impeachment of Bill Clinton and the 2000 presidential elections to the rise of the Tea Party and its public display of weapons at its rallies to the public threats of physical violence issued against newly elected President Obama and the mass political shooting targeting Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Arizona that killed six people in 2011.

Moreover, Derber and Magrass’s broad definition of bullying as the direct expression of power hierarchies comes at the price of perhaps some rhetorical and conceptual overreach: these hierarchies have already been amply researched and analyzed by many scholars, including themselves. In the end it is not always clear what additional conceptual or analytical work “bullying” performs added to that of other terms that come to mind, such as “domination,” “coercion,” or even “mistreatment.” Their all-encompassing definition of bullying that relies heavily on the analogy of the schoolyard bully leads them to stumble at times, as when they variously claim that biological warfare or any command by a workplace superior constitutes bullying. Or when they
argue that most bullying does not involve threats or acts of physical violence, although a number of examples they cite actually do. Or again when they assert that bullying doesn’t take place when perpetrators have no demonstrable aggressive “motive” or when their targets have given their “consent.” This conceptual uncertainty appears to betray unfamiliarity with current learned and popular literature on bullying, which they rarely cite, perhaps because most of these publications do not fit neatly in the authors’ sociological polemic against the individualizing paradigms of U.S. psychology and psychiatry and include a focus on the subjective experience of bullying that the authors’ methodological choices tend to discount.

To be fair, defining “bullying” is no easy task, but the term has a recent history (itself worth investigating) that is deeply related to a whole array of concepts that researchers have developed over the last twenty-five years in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Scandinavian countries, Germany, and France in the fields of sociology, political philosophy, constitutional and labor law, the history of medicine, European psychiatry and behavioral psychology, academic management literature, and even the business press. These terms include “harassment,” “mobbing,” “emotional abuse,” “psychological intimidation,” and, more broadly, ordinary or social “disrespect” and “suffering.” The new literature conjoins the social and the psychological through an expansive investigation of the subjective experience of forms of suffering in daily life that have tended to remain largely invisible in standard learned and popular accounts of physical and non-physical violence. Some of the new studies belong to what has come to be called the “affective turn” in the social sciences and humanities.

Briefly, there is the foundational research on workplace bullying by Ståle Einarsen and Heinrich Leymann, legal scholars David Yamada and James Q. Whitman, and contributors to academic management journals such as Public Personnel Management or the Journal of Business Ethics. Business writer Stanley Bing/Gil Schwartz, psychologist Harvey Hornstein, and independent investigative journalist Barbara Ehrenreich helped launch public discussion in the United States of the new oppressive management styles. Some of the most effective work belongs to French psychiatrist Marie-France Hirigoyen, whose books on psychological intimidation in couples, families, and the workplace led to groundbreaking legislation outlawing bullying in both private life and the workplace in France. The work of sociologists, political scientists, and social philosophers Pierre Bourdieu, Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, and Richard Sennett on recognition and social suffering highlights the interplay of economic and non-economic humiliations and indignities encountered in daily life under market economies. Finally, there are the important studies by anthropologists/physicians Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman on the history of psychic trauma and victimhood, feminist folklorist Carol Burke on military boot camp culture, and political philosophers Corey Robin on fear in western political thought and Judith Butler and Brian Massumi on indefinite detention, violent sovereignty, the practice of preemptive aggression, and everyday fear in the context of the War on Terror.

In the new scholarly and expert publications, something of a consensus has emerged defining bullying as mainly the disabling experience of psychic trauma in different spheres of daily life that does not disappear once the cause or agent of the physical or non-physical aggression has been removed. In these studies, the particular power of bullying lies in personal and institutional dynamics that plunge its targets into an infinite cycle of fear of actual or future threat that precisely links the most subjective, individual experience to forms of collective life itself. In this world, no holds are barred and nothing is sacred. Bullying by individuals, groups, or institutions strives to impress upon both actual and potential individual or collective victims its literally boundless character that exceeds all possible imaginings and logic. In this way bullying conjures up a dreaded fate and ungraspable future and works as a form of coercion that can transform the subjectivity of its targets. It works powerfully at the level of affect, felt threat, and allegations concerning individual
or collective character that are difficult to refute and thus bypass the accountability of factual discourse.

Bullying not only reinforces existing hierarchies of authority and status (as in Derber and Magrass’s definition) but also seeks to introduce them in settings where they are perhaps not present or visibly acknowledged. It creates a world in which a Donald Trump—tyrannical boss and capitalist folk hero—can operate freely. The new literature details how repeated bullying, intimidation, and emotional abuse can undermine victims’ sense of personhood and identity, causing them to lose not only control over their self-representation but even their capacity to enjoy relationships, pursue their studies or training, work productively, have an effective voice in public discourse, or participate in political life. This is what has captured the attention of both scholars and the general public in the United States and other countries and helped make bullying such a mobilizing social problem.

As it stands, readers of Bully Nation are left with an alarming but incomplete picture of bullying that seems to require by the final page more in the way of a personal conversion to anti-capitalist outrage than an effective understanding of bullying’s power, how it has come to dominate U.S. national life, and what is to be done—something sorely needed as we face the legitimization of white nationalist politics and an authoritarian culture of public intimidation by the new occupant of the White House.

References

Making Money Matter

Author of The Sociology of Money (1994), Nigel Dodd advances the current fascination with “media of exchange,” from his position at the London School of Economics, by wisely entering sustained dialogue with Marx and Simmel, as well as with many lesser lights from more recent times. This finely produced volume sports all the appurtenances nowadays expected of the serious monograph: comprehensive scope in digestible prose, plentiful footnotes, endless citations to, and dialogue with, other scholars’ works, and a splendid bibliography in reduced font (pp. 395–420). It also features endorsements by a half-dozen of the best-known specialists in these matters, from the United States and abroad, voicing sentiments like these: “a landmark in the sociology of money,” “a veritable feast of theories of money. . . a fantastic cornucopia of ideas of a type rarely seen in social science.” Even allowing for blurb hyperbole, The Social Life of Money has “major book” written all over and about and in it. Dodd himself is not modest about his goals: “My aim in this book is to . . . reconsider the nature of money, particularly its social nature, not just in light of . . . specific events
