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Rethinking Bullying

From the Individual to the Institution

A PERSONAL STORY FROM YALE MAGRASS

It is the 1960s, and I am sitting on a wall during outdoor gym at the middle school I attend. Completely lacking in athletic skills and knowing no one will want me on their team, I do not join the games. At times in the past when I did decide to play, each team would fight about which side would be stuck with me. On this day, somebody grabs my tie. (Students were required to wear ties in public school back then.) He pulls it really tight as he puts his other hand under my collar and places an ant down my back. The air passages are cut off. I soon find myself getting dizzy, and my head bops back and forth. Someone else asks me, "What are you doing?" For a moment, I regain awareness and answer, "Nothing." I get up and begin to walk across the field, but I soon collapse to the ground. Everyone who sees it starts laughing.

The next day, I am in the schoolyard. Someone says, "Knock, knock." Naively assuming this is a joke, I respond, "Who's there?" Wrapping a woman's stocking around my neck and squeezing it tighter and tighter, the boy replies, "The Boston strangler." I again fall to the ground. He lets go as I rise to my knees, waiting to regain full consciousness. Once again, everyone who sees it bursts out laughing.

Fast-forward to the high school cafeteria. Someone says my name. Kids next to him start shouting, "YALE, YALE." The people on the next bench join in: "YALE, YALE." Soon, all the students in the entire cafeteria are shouting my name in unison. This happens repeatedly over several days.

Another time, four boys surround me, each grabbing an arm or a leg. They carry me to an open window on a higher floor of the school, where they wave me around, counting one, two, three, and then hold me out the window. On the bus home from school on a different afternoon, a boy grabs my books from under my arm and tosses them to someone else who throws them to a third guy who then tosses them to another student. I run back and forth, unsuccessfully trying to get my books back.

The next day as I get on the bus, the driver warns me, “If you act up again, I’ll throw you off.”

Bullying has been around since time immemorial, yet only recently has it gotten serious attention. A decade or two ago, it was commonly dismissed or minimized, often being seen as cute, as a joke, or as something to “get over.” The victim needed to toughen up. If he couldn’t take it and fight back, then he deserved to be a target of ridicule and harassment. Being a bully could actually be a source of pride, marking the individual as someone triumphant and powerful who was likely to be popular and admired, often by the victims themselves.

Only now is it being recognized that chronic bullying can lead to a traumatic childhood, whose scars may be carried well into adulthood. More and more parents worry that their kids will be bullied at school or online, or perhaps they will witness bullying in the schoolyard. Some parents think their kids might have to become bullies themselves just to survive or to be part of the in-crowd. Other parents encourage their children to bully in order to get ahead or fit in. Yet others tell the kids bullying is a terrible thing to do, possibly thinking about the horrific mass killings in schools—from Columbine to Virginia Tech to Newtown—that have been described in popular books such as *Rampage*¹ and *The Bully Society*² as the tip of the iceberg of a long-standing bullying problem.

The current conversation about bullying depicts it as a personal, psychological trouble to be solved by counseling or therapy for both the victim and the bully.³ The victim needs better communication or adaptation skills. He may need to tell the bully how he feels, as if the bully does not know he is causing harm or does not intend to do just that. There is little discussion about larger social or cultural forces that may actually encourage bullying or about how bullying may indeed serve certain institutional interests. But as the renowned twentieth-century sociologist C. Wright Mills points out in *The Sociological Imagination*,⁴ personal troubles are often public issues. A purely psychological approach to bullying is deeply distorting. We need a larger picture showing how key institutions in society—the economy, military, culture, family, schools—all help create and perpetrate the bullying milieu. We need a paradigm shift, with the current microfocus on individual psychology tucked into a new and larger conversation about America’s corporate and militarized society.

The psychological paradigm masks the institutional bullying that encourages and reinforces individual bullying. Bullying is carried out by societies and is a characteristic of cultures, economies, and the military. Militarized capitalism is one way of describing the structure of American society. It's a system that gives rise to both institutional and personal bullying.

The idea that bullying has societal roots and reflects the dominant values and interests of powerful institutions may have some intuitive plausibility. After all, we speak of politicians such as Donald Trump or Chris Christie as bullies, of the National Football League (NFL) as encouraging bullying on the field to make big money, of large and powerful nations bullying smaller ones, of companies such as Walmart bullying their workers, and of agricultural corporate giants such as Tyson or Smithfield Farms even bullying animals and the environment. But these are seldom the focus in scholarly or popular books and articles about bullying. A few researchers, such as the sociologist Jessie Klein in her book *The Bully Society*,⁵ have begun to talk about widening the frame, honing in on gender relations, but we will show that psychologists and psychiatrists have captured bullying as a subject for analysis. They concentrate on personal bullying in schools and treat it as a psychological and individual problem, seldom considering how it reflects structural problems embedded in our society. Even Klein, despite having a chapter on the “bullying economy,” focuses overwhelmingly on kids and violence in schools.

In this book, we take a different path. We shall show how bully nations operate on the world stage, even as they bully their own citizens and, in the age of climate change, the environment itself. Our spotlight is on the United States, the most powerful bully nation in the world today—yet hardly the only one. Bully nations have operated throughout history, but we want to explain why bullying has such a significant part in American life, how it developed, and what can be done about it.

Since we need a paradigm shift, we will first look more carefully at the current psychological paradigm and show why it is deeply flawed. We will then turn to an alternative approach.

THE MICROPARADIGM: SHRINKING THE BULLY

Whom do you think of when you hear the word bully? Maybe a big guy in the schoolyard or cafeteria, like the tough jock with a buzz cut who tries to rough

up Michael J. Fox's short, small-framed character in the film *Back to the Future*?⁶ Or maybe a mean girl in a clique of popular girls who goes around attacking others as "fatties" or "sluts" or "geeks"?

And whom do you think of as the victim? Perhaps a gay boy who is taunted for being "girlie"? A girl who is chubby or looks "funny"? Or maybe a skinny boy who is uncoordinated and weak looking or "geeky," one who would never be captain of the football team?

These are certainly the images that are presented in most books, media articles, and movies on the topic, including comedies (among them *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid*)⁷ that treat bullying as something to laugh at. Carrie Goldman wrote a widely read book entitled *Bullied* that described the not-so-funny experiences of her daughter, Katie, a girl who had been taunted and teased mercilessly because of her looks and so-called geeky interests.⁸ Katie came home in tears after a first-grade classmate named Jake called her "Piggy." Jake got other boys in the class to call her by that name, and the constant teasing and taunting grew worse. Breaking down in sobs one day, Katie told her mother that she did not want to go back to school. She couldn't take it anymore.

Goldman wrote a blog about her daughter's experiences, and it went viral. Thousands of other parents wrote in to sympathize and tell stories about their own kids who were bullied in school and online. Some of the children's supposed crimes were looking funny, wearing the wrong clothes, being "nerdy," being gay or a minority, or having a disability. The bullied kids included the boy who was not tough enough to make the football team and the girl not pretty enough to be a cheerleader.

By "bullying," Goldman refers to the use of power by tough kids to repeatedly taunt, threaten, intimidate, humiliate, or hit her daughter. She says that all the kids whose parents wrote her—the parents of gays, geeks, nerds, and others who typically get bullied—are subject to this kind of traumatizing abuse. This is consistent with the psychological paradigm's general definition of bullying as a repeated emotional, verbal, or physical battering by a more powerful or tougher child of a weaker one. We will return to the definition of bullying soon.

Goldman's story shows that the popular images about fatties, geeks, gays, nerds, sissies, "uglies," or "weirdos" are not just stereotypes. They refer to hundreds of thousands of real kids who are players, usually victims, in the bullying drama. But they also reveal only a small slice of the world of bullying, and they highlight the serious limitations of the current way of thinking about bullying.

The psychological paradigm is centered on schoolyard bullies and traumatized kids. Its first premise, which most people take for granted, is that bullying is a matter of individual behavior. The bully is a person, and the bullied are also individuals.

Moreover, within the psychological paradigm, the bullies and the bullied are all a particular type of person: they are children or young people. Their bullying is usually seen as a nearly inevitable part of growing up, especially as students in grammar schools, high schools, or colleges and universities.

The focus on young people is a second and critically important dimension of the current bullying paradigm. The bullying world is populated by kids. Adults, especially parents and counselors and teachers, are affected, but they are not central players in the direct bullying drama. They are rarely highlighted as the bullies or the bullied.

As we will show shortly, both of these assumptions—that bullying is mainly behavior by individuals and that it specifically involves kids—are wrong. They take the spotlight off the world of adults, which is itself a vast arena of bullying and has a pivotal role in creating the bullying world of children.

If we conceive of bullying as personal behavior among children, we immediately move to a third unstated premise of the microparadigm: that the problem lies largely in individuals and their psychology. The scholarship on bullying is laden with analyses of personality, mental health, and psychological challenges related to being part of a group that is targeted by aggression.⁹ It also highlights child psychology rather than the psychology and behavior of adults, as if people might be expected to grow out of their roles in the bullying drama. In fact, the opposite may well be true, for reasons about adult society that we will explore throughout the book. And in any case, the emphasis on children is a convenient way to hide an inconvenient truth: that bullying in the schoolyard mirrors the larger adult social world that kids see every day. Within the psychological paradigm, there is little space for an institutional and political analysis that would uncover these grim realities of the adult social world and its leading institutions, except for some discussion of the way schools are operating and how they might intervene to reduce the problem.

Cutting to the chase, the psychological paradigm frames the conversation about bullying as a therapeutic discourse. In this way of thinking, adults—especially parents, trained counselors, and psychiatrists—learn to see bullying as a phenomenon having to do with the psyche, the psychology of cliques,

and the biology of the brain itself. The ruling conversation falls within the claimed professional expertise of psychologists and psychiatrists. Consequently, bullying analysis centers on categories of psychological disorder, and treatment relies heavily on psychiatrists and counselors, with teachers and parents as secondary supporters.

This is yet another reason why we need to move beyond the ruling paradigm. Psychiatry claims scientific expertise, but there is a growing challenge to the scientific validity of the profession itself, as well as its diagnoses and drugs.¹⁰ Psychiatry has succeeded in creating a medicalized world for children, with millions of youngsters on drugs or in therapy. But whether this is a solution to bullying—or good for children—is problematic at best, and such treatment can often do more harm than good. One obvious harm is that it moves attention away from the real causes of bullying, as we will discuss. A common social and political assumption in the psychological paradigm is that bullying is mainly caused by misunderstanding, by a lack of communication. If geeks, nerds, funny-looking kids, gays, or children from minority backgrounds were only brought together with jocks, popular children, and mean girls, they would learn to appreciate each other and bullying would cease. But what if there are underlying societal conflicts leading some individuals or groups to have an interest in tormenting others and reinforcing differences in power? Woody Allen offers an alternative perspective on what could happen when children of different or conflicting backgrounds are brought together: “I won two weeks at interfaith camp where I was sadistically beaten by boys of all races and creeds.”¹¹

The psychiatric paradigm blinds us to the role of the larger society. And this point is central to our argument that bullying, though it may reflect or cause psychological disturbances, grows out of the wider society’s mainstream institutions and cultural values. Clearly, individual bullying has psychological dimensions and can cause deep and lasting emotional scars. We in no way wish to minimize the trauma associated with almost all forms of bullying. Indeed, we know firsthand that the psychological curse of being bullied, which can damage a person for life, is often understated. But the current psychological paradigm is a deeply inadequate way of thinking because it does not offer the socioeconomic and political analysis necessary to understand—or even recognize—the massive amount of bullying that arises from and is fueled by the core values of the most powerful institutions of our society.

Our talk about social institutions such as corporations and the military will sound odd to many readers who pick up a book about bullying. Though

some of us do, as noted earlier, casually refer to politicians or corporations as bullies, almost all of us have learned to think of bullying as such a personal issue that we forget the institutional or societal context surrounding it. Say the word *bully* and you think of a tough boy or mean girl in school. We have unconsciously absorbed the idea that bullying has little to do with our economic, political, or military organizations. In fact, we had to do reality checks of our own as we developed our analysis. And we are certain that many readers will think that we have missed the point, that we are diverting attention from the kids and schools that need help, and that we probably have our own axes to grind.

But remember that we do *not* dismiss the importance of the bullying of children by children that is the main topic of the current conversation. Part of what we are saying is that if we really care about kids bullying each other, we need to widen our angle of vision and consider issues that are now outside the bullying conversation, taking us on new journeys into the heart of our corporate and militarized society.

In our society, a “structural bullying” is built into the DNA of leading institutions, such as huge corporations and the military. It is a different and larger scale of bullying, but as we will show, it has many of the same basic features of the school-aged bully’s abuse of power—and it is a core cause of the schoolyard jungle.

Yet the large-scale institutions helping to shape the adult and child worlds of bullying are not subjects of study for psychiatrists. Psychiatrists are not trained to analyze societal institutions and the economic organization of society. They usually try to help their patients “adjust,” seldom considering whether this a society to which anyone *should* adjust.¹² Society is usually treated as an unseen, automatic given or an inherent good. In their training, psychiatrists learn that societal forces are distractions from inner psychological dynamics and biological brain disorders. This professional training—emphasizing psychodynamics, mental illness, and the like—blinds them to the role played by the huge corporations and militaries that bully millions of adults here and abroad, as well as individual adults in workplaces and families in the home. These same institutions drive much of the bullying of kids on kids, while also perpetrating corporate, military, and other violence against animals and the environment.

Psychiatrists who dominate the academic discourse about bullying are involved not just in crimes of omission but also in crimes of commission, for they direct our attention away from larger social forces, denying that they

play a major role. Because the psychological paradigm is dominant, our argument that bullying is rooted in society's major institutions may seem surprising and confusing to some of you. But if you stay with us, you will begin to see how thoroughly the real problem has been mystified and shrouded.

Part of the trouble is that we live in a culture that "psychologizes" almost all social problems. We think of behavior and behavioral problems as being driven by individual rather than institutional or structural causes. This is true of everything from poverty to inequality to individual aggression and violence. And psychological reductionism is nowhere truer nor more misleading than in regard to bullying. It has led to a shrunken understanding—in fact, a nearly complete blindness—about the causes of bullying and about what bullying is, who or what the targets are, and who does it.

For all these reasons, understanding bullying requires a shift in virtually all our current assumptions and ways of thinking about bullying itself. C. Wright Mills highlighted the psychological reductionism of American thinking that separated personal problems from social and public issues.¹³ His idea of the sociological imagination was intended to remedy this intellectual warping. And for much the same reason, we argue the need to expand the discussion about bullying from the psychological paradigm to the paradigmatic thinking, following from Mills, that we call the sociological imagination.

THE MACROPARADIGM: THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION, INSTITUTIONAL BULLYING, AND DEFINITIONS THAT HELP US RETHINK AND REFINE THE BULLYING CONCEPT

The essence of the sociological imagination is to link private problems with public issues, the central theme of Mills's *Sociological Imagination*.¹⁴ In it, as well as in an earlier book entitled *Character and Social Structure*,¹⁵ he argues that we Americans are taught to believe that our personal problems are separate from our public institutions in the economy, political system, and international relations. The personal and public worlds are planets apart.

But Mills contends that personal problems are rooted in societal values; power hierarchies; and the values and interests of economic, political, and military systems. He believes that, contrary to American common sense, it is impossible to separate private troubles and public (and political) issues and that to attempt to do so would lead to nothing but myths and illusions, a form of cultivated ignorance.

In fact, Mills asserts that there is nothing accidental about this artificial segregation of personal problems and public power. His other great book is *The Power Elite*,¹⁶ published in 1957. In it, he argues that though America may look like a democracy, it is actually dominated by a trifecta of economic, political, and military elites. Each group sits on top of established and intertwined hierarchies of power, and together they control much of what happens in America and the rest of the world.

This includes control of the mind and of public discourse.¹⁷ The sociological imagination suggests that the psychological way of framing the bullying conversation serves the power and profit interests of dominant institutions; further, the elites work hard to ensure that any conversation about bullying does not become a critical analysis of our corporate, militarized society. That would become a threat to the system that they control, leading ordinary people concerned about the bullying that causes their kids pain and suffering to begin raising questions about the existing social order and power structure.

From the perspective of the sociological imagination, then, the psychological paradigm about bullying is predictable and merely part of a larger way in which American intellectual life is conducted. Societal problems are psychologized; social systems are viewed as simply aggregates of individuals; and both personal and social behaviors are seen to be caused by personal, psychological needs rather than by the institutional priorities of the ruling elites.¹⁸

The sociological imagination is a broad, critical approach that challenges the way almost all public discourse is conducted in America. In this book, we want to demonstrate how this approach applies to the conversation about bullying. It gives us an entirely different angle of vision, moving the narrow focus on the psychological needs of disturbed children tormenting each other in the school cafeteria or fighting in the schoolyard to the way in which our society is institutionally structured. It shows how our militarized corporate system drives the same kind of bullying in the adult world as in the child world. The corporation and the military are, in key ways, programmed to act like the schoolyard bully, and they actually end up doing much of the programming of the schoolyard bullier. They are responsible for the bullying of millions of adults and children, as well as animals and other species now facing extinction.

At the heart of the sociological imagination—and bullying itself—is the study of power. Power is one of the core realities of all societies, and it creates multiple overlapping economic, social, and political hierarchies. Where each of us is perched on these hierarchies largely determines our power and

our prospects for success and status. It also shapes who bullies and who gets bullied and tells us much of what we need to know about bullying that has been rendered invisible. Bullying is, in fact, all about power and the way it is exercised—from the halls of the Pentagon, Congress, and corporate suites to the playing fields of the schools.

But before moving to the bullying issue, let us briefly look at the broader perspective of the sociological imagination paradigm vis-à-vis power and American society. This perspective gives the context for understanding how and why our paradigm turns America's thinking about bullying in a new direction and why it sees bullying as an expression of the core values and power systems of our society.

America, according to Mills, is largely controlled by elites at the top of the economic, political, and military structures.¹⁹ These elites, though very powerful, are not free actors themselves. They must work largely in the service of the institutions they govern, including big global corporations, governments at all levels, and the military. If they don't maximize profits or extend the nation's military influence or sustain public faith in militarized capitalism, they will be thrown out. So, the sociological imagination considers not only powerful people but also the huge institutions seeking power and profit.²⁰

The sociological imagination goes one step further, arguing that the leading institutions are bound together in a more or less coherent system. In the United States, Mills has described a system that we call militarized capitalism.²¹ The idea that America is a capitalist system marked by unprecedented military power is not particularly controversial; analysts of all political views tend to agree with this assessment. But the sociological imagination does provoke argument by the way in which it analyzes and critiques the values, structure, and role of power within this system.

The conventional wisdom asserts the United States is a democracy that is ultimately accountable to the people. Everyone has one vote, and the society is organized around the founding documents, such as Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, that emphasize the equality and rights of all citizens. Many social scientists and economists view these ideals as a reasonable approximation of American realities and aspirations. The system is not perfect, but it is "exceptionalist," tilting, over the long run, toward more democracy and equality than any nation in history.²²

The sociological imagination bluntly challenges this exceptionalist thinking. It argues that although the United States is, like other Western societies,

organized around formal democratic procedures such as voting, it is governed by power elites—and the institutions they control—with enormous wealth and influence. Thus, what distinguishes the United States is *not* its degree of democracy or equality, which research shows is increasingly falling below that in many European nations; in fact, most Americans are losing power and wealth to their own national elites faster than is the case for their counterparts in most of Europe. In a book whose message has reverberated around the world, economist Thomas Piketty presents data documenting this startling rise in inequality.²³ He contends that this has led to a castelike stratification of power in which you inherit your place in a deeply divided American society for life and thereby inherit a serious vulnerability to economic and political bullying throughout adulthood—an assessment that is reinforced by many other important studies of growing inequality in the United States.²⁴ We shall return to Piketty's argument about inequality later. But we should note here that despite his analysis and the evidence produced by many others about the cancer of extreme inequality in this country, most Americans do not see that their own society has become more stratified by power and wealth than that of other developed nations. Nor do they realize this is jeopardizing their own well-being and leading to a political culture of increased repression and violence, with frightening implications for the bullying scourge that we will turn to shortly.

The sociological imagination hones in on the broad tendencies that are for the most part invisible to much of the American population because of the grip of exceptionalist ideology.²⁵ The sociological imagination sees social problems of all forms as linked to the concentration and abuse of power in the wider society. Power inequality, especially when extreme, creates a society of haves and have-nots. It disenfranchises large sectors of the population in the middle and bottom of major hierarchies, and then it bullies them into submission.

Of course, abuse, like bullying itself, is a subjective concept that exists to a large degree in the eye of the beholder. The victim may feel he is subject to the bully and his abuse of power, whereas the bully, who may deny the label, may feel entirely entitled and believe he is behaving in a perfectly moral manner. One's position in the power hierarchy will heavily shape such perceptions.

The sociological imagination sees bullying as a structural problem. By structural, we mean power inequalities that are built into the DNA of the corporation, the military, and the broader state. Such structural inequalities

are fundamental factors not just in the corrosion of democracy but also in repression or violent subjugation in all spheres of life, with bullying being one major illustration.

The emphasis on social and political power structures makes clear our difference with the psychological paradigm, for we essentially invert it or turn it on its head. Whereas the psychological paradigm argues that individuals, with troubled psyches, create social problems and their own personal difficulties, the sociological imagination argues that the society itself—in the American case, militarized capitalism, an organized system of power inequality—gives rise to both the social problems of the dispossessed and the psychological disturbances that follow from the loss of power.

But before turning directly to the sociological paradigm on bullying, let us look at two or three perspectives it shares with the psychological paradigm. Both paradigms see power—and specifically inequality of power—as a defining concern. Nearly every definition of bullying by microinvestigators that we have found (you can see them in online dictionaries) begins by saying that bullying involves aggressive, hurtful behavior arising in relations of unequal power. Here is a typical definition of bullying, found in the standard literature:

In order to be considered bullying, the behavior must be aggressive and include:

- An Imbalance of Power: Kids who bully use their power—such as physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or popularity—to control or harm others. Power imbalances can change over time and in different situations, even if they involve the same people.
- Repetition: Bullying behaviors happen more than once or have the potential to happen more than once.
- Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose.²⁶

Here is another commonly used definition in the standard microparadigm, again highlighting bullying as a form of aggressive and harmful behavior made possible by an inequality of power:

Bullying is the use of force, threat, or *coercion* to *abuse*, *intimidate*, or aggressively impose domination over others. The behavior is often repeated and habitual. One essential prerequisite is the perception, by the bully or

by others, of an imbalance of social or physical *power*. Behaviors used to assert such domination can include verbal *harassment* or *threat*, physical *assault* or coercion, and such acts may be directed repeatedly toward particular targets.²⁷

We think that these definitions, which focus on the way that power inequalities enable repetitive hostile and hurtful behavior, are apt and useful for our macrostructural paradigm. Our own definition of bullying behavior within our new paradigm is in line with the orthodox concepts defined in the current academic microliterature:

Bullying is behavior (1) reflecting an imbalance of power, and (2) involving threats, harassment, intimidation, or attacks—often repetitive—that are designed to secure domination or control and create fear, harm, or submission. The bully seeks to establish a sense of inferiority in the target and reinforce the sense of superiority of the bully, legitimating the power hierarchy on which the bully and the bullied are both perched.

Both paradigms agree that inequalities of power are key to domination and abuse of power. The two paradigms embrace the same basic idea that power inequality is a principal precondition and cause of bullying. The difference between them, though, which we expand on throughout the book, is that the psychological paradigm concentrates on inequalities of personal power, power in cliques and small groups, and the psychological forces that lead individual people, mainly kids, to seek power and abuse it,²⁸ whereas the sociological paradigm looks at the larger inequalities of power in the society that lead to institutional power abuse. It shows that children actually seek and abuse power in a way that mirrors and mimics larger institutionalized power relations, threats, and violence in the adult economy and society.

The second and closely related parallel between the two paradigms is that they both recognize the victims of bullying tend to be people at the bottom of power hierarchies.²⁹ These include gender hierarchies but also, especially in the sociological paradigm, race and class hierarchies and lifestyle caste hierarchies such as gay and straight or jock and nerd. The only strong “societal” aspect of the psychological paradigm is its focus on gender hierarchies and values, a concession to the societal emphasis that is pivotal in the sociological imagination.³⁰ And the psychological paradigm cannot help but observe that the bullied kids tend to be the kids on the bottom rungs of other social power hierarchies, including those involving physical strength, physical beauty, and sexual orientation, as well as the rich over the poor, the abled

over the disabled, and the jocks over the nerds.³¹ However, with the exception of gender, these factors do not lead psychologists to do serious analysis of the crucial role played by societal power structures in bullying, especially those endemic to a corporate and militarized system.

The third parallel is that both paradigms recognize that certain cultural values contribute to bullying, among them toughness, competitiveness, dominance, aggression, and violence. All these values are associated with holding and abusing power, as typified by President Teddy Roosevelt, who gloried in blood, guts, and violence and rejoiced as he rushed into what he called the “splendid little war” pitting the United States against Spain in Cuba and later in the Philippines.³² But in the psychological paradigm, these values are interpreted as personal norms and are considered to be psychological symptoms reflecting personality disorders, sometimes tied to masculine values in a traditionally male-dominated society. In the sociological imagination, we talk not just of values but also of a bullying culture, constructed by elites and leading institutions. The bullying culture is seen as related to gender but rooted as well in other crucial institutional systems of militarized capitalism.

A fourth parallel involves serious complexities in the definition of bullying itself. Although the macrostructural paradigm extends our definition of just who bullies are, it shares with the psychological paradigm some commonalities in the complex and tricky questions associated with the definition of bullying. In both paradigms, bullying is defined around unequal power and dominating or controlling behavior, and in both paradigms, the definitions can easily get muddled. In both, bullying is a broad concept and overlaps extensively with violence and competition, particularly in societies with significant power inequalities. It might seem so broad as to encompass all “bad behavior” or even almost all social behavior, especially in very hierarchical societies. In both paradigms, then, it is important to clarify what is and is not bullying behavior.

The issue of motivation helps distinguish bullying from nonbullying, but this has to be carefully qualified. The motive to control, coerce, harm, or dominate the target and create a sense of inferiority in the bullied person is central to the concept of bullying that most Americans hold, and it helps define what bullying is. If the controlling people or institutions say their motive is cooperative or intended to help others, therefore, this might suggest bullying is not involved. But that depends on another factor: does the controlling behavior have the free and true consent of the target?

The issue of consent is crucial in assessing motive and identifying bullying. Almost all bullies justify their own aggression as being for the good of the other. When George W. Bush and Dick Cheney invaded and occupied Iraq, they claimed to be helping that country become free and democratic. We would argue, as many critics do, that oil and US power were the real motives, but even if Bush and Cheney believed their own rhetoric, the war would have been bullying because the occupation did not have the consent of the Iraqi people. Motive matters—but so does consent, as the bullying in Iraq illustrates. The same is true of violence perpetrated by bullies in the schoolyard who attack other kids without their consent.

But when a person in power—whether a teacher, a manager, or a military officer—demands that a person lower in the hierarchy do something, is it automatically bullying? We have three answers to this question. One is that it depends, again, on motive. If a manager issues an order to a worker but is doing so not to humiliate her but simply because he is following the rules of the company—and the orders of the managers above him—then this is not full-blown bullying, but it has an element of it. The manager may be feeling bullied to bully those below him, even if he doesn't want to do so. This could apply, as well, to a teacher who demands something from his student. Both the manager and the teacher may be bullying in the sense of repeatedly ordering those below them on the pecking order, but they are not doing it to humiliate them or make them feel inferior. They are acting as agents of a bullying institution, even if they are not completely comfortable with the bullying role assigned to them. In this case, the use of power to coerce suggests a strong bullying element, but it may not be full-fledged bullying because the motive is not to humiliate or create a sense of inferiority.

All this suggests that bullying is not necessarily an all-or-nothing proposition. In power hierarchies, those on top may exercise power with different motives. There is always an element of bullying when a power hierarchy is involved, but it is only partial bullying if the person on or near the top feels compelled to exercise power but is not doing so to humiliate or foster a sense of permanent inferiority in the target. Again, we emphasize that bullying is not simply a psychological personality trait. In a bullying society, some “nice” people may bully when they themselves are bullied into carrying out the mandate of a bullying institution. Bullying is best understood as conduct falling along a spectrum, whereby the behavior may be full-scale bullying, have strong bullying dimensions, have fewer bullying dimensions, or have no bullying dimensions at all. This spectrum can be linked to the difference between “potential”

or “latent” and “actual” or “actuated” bullying that we refer to repeatedly in this book. The closer to the full-scale side of the spectrum, the more likely it is that the behavior is actuated rather than potential, with use of the word *potential* being another way of saying that the conduct has bullying elements but is not full-scale bullying. However, the steeper the institutional hierarchy is and the more its culture involves establishing feelings of superiority and inferiority, the more likely it will be that the person on top and all those situated on the hierarchy will find themselves enmeshed in full-scale bullying relations.

A third important consideration is that behavior can sometimes be seen as institutional bullying even if doesn't qualify as personal bullying by the individual who carries it out. Consider the presumably nice corporate manager who does not want to bully but feels compelled to outsource or reduce wages as part of his institutional responsibility. His threat to outsource may be full-scale institutional bullying, since it is a way that the institution is seeking to bully its workers into submission and create the sense of inferiority that the corporation requires. But because the manager does not personally want to humiliate the worker, his behavior may be institutional bullying but not full-scale personal bullying. He may feel guilt or remorse. The subtlety here is that he is acting in a dual capacity: he is a bully as an agent of the institution, but at the same time, he is not a personal bully if he has not adopted that institution's bullying culture and if he is acting against his own personal values and motives.

This leads to another knotty set of definitional issues involving the relation between bullying and violence. There is a great deal of overlap, but much bullying is not violent, and some violence is not bullying.

Often, the bullying in both paradigms is not physically violent; making verbal threats and issuing insults are examples. In fact, the preponderance of bullying in everyday life does not involve physical violence, as we will illustrate vividly in our chapter on bullying in the family. When bullying is nonviolent, it is frequently more effective, for it is disguised and harder to discern. The fact that most bullying is not expressed in violent acts is a key reason why bullying should not be defined simply as violence. For the same reason, we need to distinguish bullying from crime, since most bullying, whether by individuals or by institutions such as the corporation and the state, is legal. In fact, powerful bullying institutions usually write the laws and are in a position to define what crime is.

In both paradigms, there are also forms of violence that are not bullying. For example, self-defense that requires immediate violence to protect one's

own life is not necessarily bullying. This, again, must be qualified because bullies typically justify their violence in the name of self-defense, whether they are individuals—such as the self-appointed Florida community watch team leader George Zimmerman, when he killed Trayvon Martin, and the Ferguson, Missouri, cop Darren Wilson, when he killed Michael Brown—or whether they are American leaders who fight offensive wars in Vietnam or Iraq under the banner of self-defense. Claims of self-defense do not mean bullying has not occurred, for bullies almost always use such claims. But there are situations where a thief or murderer can be stopped only with immediate and violent self-defense, and in rare situations of this type, the violence may not be bullying. By contrast, revenge killing, which is also carried out in the name of self-defense but at a later time, typically *would* be a form of bullying. Some acts of violence are single, desperate moves made by people who feel they are bully victims, in order to assert themselves. This kind of act can literally be a one-shot attempt to feel the power of the bully. Examples include school shooters, who perceive themselves as tormented social rejects, or suicide bombers, who sacrifice themselves to offset their people's or their cause's lack of power.

Another important definitional question involves the relation between bullying and competition. In both paradigms, bullying is often a way to win competitions, whether over status, money, or power. But not all competitive behavior is bullying, even though most bullying involves competition in some form of hierarchy to establish power and dominance.

What kind of competitive behavior is *not* bullying? That depends on whether or not the competition is a zero-sum game and also on whether people have cooperated to establish the rules and entered the game voluntarily. In a zero-sum competition (which typifies most capitalist competition, as we will discuss in chapter 2), one competitor's gain is another's loss: to win, you must "conquer" and ultimately destroy your rival. But if I am working as a student or a writer to do the best job of writing that I can, my success may not necessarily harm or destroy other students or writers. In a classroom situation where grading is done on a curve, however, the student competition may become a form of bullying, since my winning typically will mean that other students lose out; if the grading is not on a curve, my good mark does not mean that others will get a bad grade, and thus, bullying is less likely.

Even if there is a zero-sum competition, it is not always a bullying game. If you go out to play a game of pickup basketball, there will be winners and losers. But if all players agree to the rules and all choose freely to play, the game

will not necessarily involve bullying. The issues of consent and consensus, again, prove to be crucial in establishing bullying. If all players truly consent to the game, then the competition may not lead to bullying—although, as before, we need to be careful in our assessment here, for not all consent is consensual. Sometimes, people are bullied into agreeing to terms they are not entitled to challenge. They may fear a social stigma, such as being labeled weak or cowardly. A famous example is when Aaron Burr, known to be an expert marksman, challenged Alexander Hamilton, who barely knew how to fire a gun, to a duel. Hamilton accepted, even though he knew that if they fought, he could be killed.

As we will explore in chapter 2, most capitalist market competition involves bullying, and many conventional economists describe participation in the market as a free choice. But since most workers and consumers did not establish the rules—and the same is true of many small business competitors—what appears to be cooperation and consent is something quite different, a form of market involvement dictated by survival. Here, competing to win often becomes indistinguishable from bullying.

HOW THE SOCIETAL PARADIGM IS DIFFERENT

The sociological imagination paradigm is not meant to minimize or distract from the psychological impacts of bullying on kids or adults, which can't be overstated. But it shows that the roots of those impacts lie in the competitive and violent adult world of militarized capitalism. Let us look at the main new and distinctive points arising out of the macroparadigm we are offering.

First, bullying is not a personal aberration or form of deviance. It is programmed into major institutions, endemic to our entire society, and it is useful (if not always necessary) for surviving and prospering in militarized capitalism. If you want to move up the ladder, you are going to have to bully, and you must ultimately embrace without too much questioning the big corporate institutions that bully large segments of the population into submission. The individual bully is a product of the bully nation.

Second, bullying is a core feature of power and arises out of social systems organized around steep power hierarchies. The greater the inequalities of power in a society, among nations, or even across species, the more likely it is that both institutional and personal bullying will become commonplace. Bullying is about the more powerful bending the less powerful to their will

and ensuring that things stay that way. In that sense, the militarized imperial state models bullying for the corporate manager, the military commander, and the schoolyard bully. It all follows a Machiavellian script: social life and international affairs are all about power, and bullying is simply one way in which inequalities of power are created and abused. If politics or political economy is about the study of power, then the sociological imagination tells us that to understand bullying, we need to move away from psychologists and toward political analysts and sociologically and environmentally oriented political economists.

Third, although power and power inequalities are the structural roots of bullying, setting the conditions for bullying to occur, they are *not* absolutely determining. The relation is *contingent*, as we will discuss more fully in the next section—dependent on cultural and political factors that vary across societies and personal relations.

This is not an academic point. One of the more surprising elements of our argument is that a strong antibullying movement is developing in parts of US society. Even as power and wealth inequalities grow larger, we are seeing a revulsion in significant sectors of society against personal bullying, especially among children. This is a largely unnoticed aspect of the “culture wars,” and we will examine it in chapter 9. Our point here is that this shows contingency is real. There is no simplistic formula that automatically translates all social inequality—or every form of corporate society—into bullying. And society can become even more unequal and yet, paradoxically, see the growth of new values as well as groups whose stated mission is to end bullying, especially in schools.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that bullying behavior is now less common in the larger society or among kids in school. A powerful bullying culture still exists in the nation, and the bullying problem has deep historical roots in American society—from the annihilation of Native Americans to the slavery that defined the Deep South before the Civil War. It continued after the war in the rise of the corporate robber barons, who bullied an immigrant population of powerless workers.³³ Today, it persists because bullying values and power inequalities remain deeply embedded in the nation. Despite our emphasis on contingency, it is difficult to imagine a society of deep power and wealth inequalities in which the rich do not bully the poor and humans do not abuse the environment. Likewise, it is hard to see historically militaristic societies that do not bully weaker nations or large sectors of their own populations. As long as there are serious power inequalities, elites will almost

certainly bully subordinate groups into submission, and stronger higher-status people, both adults and children, will bully weaker lower-status people whom they meet every day.

We have already introduced other framing arguments about bullying as seen from the perspective of the sociological imagination. For clarity, we will briefly recap them here:

1. Bullying is as much about the adult world as about the world of children. The current focus on kids is an orchestrated distraction from the role played by adults and adult institutions in creating bullying. It leads to a warped discussion that makes bullying appear to be something specific to child psychology and behavioral disorders that tend to fade as people mature—something that, once outgrown, leaves few permanent impacts. The sociological imagination challenges this view, asserting that bullying is created by the adult world and the institutions that structure adult behavior. The focus on kids and child psychology masks the reality that bullying reflects the institutional and cultural values and power hierarchies of our society. We therefore need a new conversation, centering on adults and how adult bullying has resulted in the bullying scourge among kids.
2. Institutions as well as people bully. In the United States, corporations, the military, the police, sports leagues, the family, and other organizations all commit institutionalized bullying; accordingly, the bullying will take place somewhat independently of the psychology or personality of any particular institutional leader, since it is embedded in the DNA and legal structure of the institution. This happens on a large scale. In the sociological imagination, institutionalized bullying is the leading cause of personal bullying. When the conversation about bullying is largely about individuals who bully (and their psychology), it essentially enables more bullying because it distracts attention from the true sources of the problem.
3. The national focus on personal and child bullying is shaped to a large degree by the elites who control the institutions that are themselves the biggest bullies of all, such as the corporations and the military. This reflects simple self-interest, since it diverts attention from institutional bullying and its horrific, rippling effects on the social lives and pervasive bullying among both adults and children. Such twisted control of the discourse gains popular acceptance because it allows

parents and teachers to believe that they can protect and support their children through their own psychological interventions, rather than by having to challenge the biggest and most powerful institutions in history, which, like air, are everywhere around us but actually unseen.

4. Institutional bullies are closely tied to the bullying system that we call a bully nation. In the United States, a system of intertwined corporations, governments, and military institutions constitutes militarized capitalism. The system itself carries out “systemic bullying,” to create profits and sustain its own power. This gives rise to the bullying endemic to both the US version of capitalism and the culture and practices of the US military, used against other nations and America’s own domestic population by militarized police forces. It also creates other repressive institutions of control, including schools, sports organizations, and the family.
5. The military, sports, schools, and the family are all “bridging” or “transmission” institutions. They help create and channel a bullying culture from institutions to individuals. They are, in a sense, the kitchen that churns out food for the bullies. They dish out the bullying values and conduct that nourish militarized capitalism, making them palatable and part of the daily routine of millions of Americans.
6. The targets of bullying include not only adults and children but also animals and possibly other nonhuman species. We call this environmental bullying, and in the age of climate change, it may prove to be the most dangerous variant of all. In militarized capitalism, corporate capitalism teaches us to treat animals and other species as resources to be used to produce profit and satisfy our own material needs. Corporations seek to dominate all of nature for profit. Environmental bullying—with humans as the hegemonic species and animals and natural resources as prime targets—could ultimately result in consequences that end the human experiment as we know it.

UNEQUAL POWER AND CONTINGENCY: WHEN DOES POWER INEQUALITY CREATE BULLYING?

Socioeconomic systems based on unequal power are the root cause or enabler of all kinds of bullying, both institutional and personal. But does this

mean that any power inequality in any institution, economic system, or social relation leads inevitably to bullying?

This is such a critical issue that we want to address it in more detail. If any system of unequal power always created bullying—and continuously so—all social life would be bullying all the time in all relations, since inequality is omnipresent in most societies. Now, the idea of omnipresent bullying is not absurd (just watch sitcoms such as *Everyone Loves Raymond*, where bullying in family interactions happens almost constantly). We believe that bullying takes place in all social, economic, and political systems and has done so in all historical eras; further, it always has strong roots in unequal power relations. In this sense, all social relations are vulnerable to bullying, and the social sciences are disciplines involving the study of bullying as a core issue.

Nonetheless, as highlighted earlier, we also believe in the idea of contingency. The notion of contingency is that there is no iron law dictating that unequal power in all cases leads to bullying. Potential or latent bullying, always present in relations of unequal power, leads to actual bullying only under certain conditions, mainly when the degree of inequality, political norms, social mores, and psychological dispositions encourages it. We do not argue that there is an iron law guaranteeing that power inequality will always lead to active bullying. But we see differences in power and inequality as enabling bullying—making it possible and probable but not guaranteeing that it will move from latent or potential bullying to active bullying.

So what are the contingencies that most strongly affect the likelihood that potential bullying will turn into actual bullying? Here are some of the most significant:

1. *The Power Gap*: We propose that the greater the power inequality, whether personal or institutional, the higher the likelihood of abuse and bullying. As power inequalities increase, so too do the chances for frequent and harmful bullying. In relations of systems marked by very high power inequality, the more powerful have more certainty they can get away with bullying, achieve their goals, and not harm themselves by bullying.
2. *Political Norms*: Capitalist societies, for example, may legally or politically encourage, tolerate, or even require, by law or custom, bullying behavior—behavior that we shall argue tends to be more prevalent in the United States than in many other capitalist societies. In northern Europe, by contrast, there are legal and political norms that discourage bullying (explaining the low bullying rate in Sweden, which

some investigations have shown has the lowest rate in all countries studied).³⁴ The political culture is shaped historically and will reflect national values that vary by country and from one capitalist nation to another. Of course, policies will not always work as planned, and antibullying state or school rhetoric will not always translate into a reduction in bullying behavior.

3. *Culture and Social Mores*: Every society has cultural norms that value or discourage different uses of power, including bullying. These differences may reflect family structure, religion, the culture of schools and sports, military values, ideas about domination, and other historical forces and views. Social approval or social mores about bullying behavior may be very different in societies with the same levels of structural power inequality. The potential for aggression and bullying may be part of human biology, but the key factor is whether the culture nurtures this potential or discourages it. Militaristic and competitive societies encourage bullying, whereas other societies discourage it: our concern is to identify the cultural forces that are crucial in making the difference.
4. *Psychological Patterns*: Dispositions toward aggression and domination may vary by society, and they may be quite different in societies with the same levels of structural inequality. Again, family patterns, school cultures, and biological temperaments may also vary by society, creating different rates of “bullying personalities.” Again, however, we propose that the greater the systemic inequalities of power, the more likely it is that we will find a higher percentage of such personalities. Nevertheless, in all cultures, biological, psychological, and other factors, combined with power inequalities, create latent bullying; differences pertain mainly to the frequency and extent of harm created by active bullying behavior, whether by institutions or individuals.

Why are these contingencies so important? The sociological imagination points to major institutions, such as corporations and the military, as causes and enablers of bullying. And as we will discuss shortly, it also points to whole systems, such as capitalism itself, as the roots of bullying. This immediately leads to the question of whether capitalism in all nations and all forms is a bullying system. In answering such a charged question, we argue that contingencies always play a large role. In capitalism, as in all socioeconomic systems, bullying will occur. But what forms of capitalism are most likely to create high and harmful levels of bullying? And how will those levels compare

to bullying in noncapitalist societies? The same questions can be asked about institutions such as corporations, the military, sports, or the family. Bullying will always take place—because there is always unequal power—but a crucial issue will be what forms of businesses or sports or families are most likely to create the high and harmful levels of bullying? These are the kinds of issues we will sort through in the rest of the book, and that effort will require understanding both the socioeconomic systems themselves and the cultural, social, and psychological contingencies translating potential into actual bullying.

MILITARIZED CAPITALISM

The sociological imagination ultimately turns our attention to society. Every society has a particular economic order, political structure, and culture that become part of what we mean by a “system.” In America, the system is militarized capitalism, and it extends its dominion throughout the United States, across the globe, and into the planetary environment. It is a system primed to create pervasive bullying that affects adults, children, and all species.³⁵

Militarized capitalism is most fully developed in the United States, which is one of the reasons why we focus on our own society. By looking both at America’s history and at its current function, we see how a bully nation can flourish, gaining enormous power and wealth as well as moral legitimacy.

But are we looking at a nation or a system as the cause of bullying? In our view, they are intertwined. Militarized capitalism is the commanding structural reality of the United States today, and thus, we cannot disentangle the United States from its own system.

Militarized capitalism is hardly the only system that can produce a bully nation. Although we highlight America as a bully nation—and concentrate on militarized capitalism—we must not ignore the diversity and savagery of many other bully nations around the world, most of which are not systems of militarized capitalism (even though they may have strong military and financial centers). These include other giant nations such as Russia and China and most Arab countries, among them Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria. They also include terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al Qaeda, which may or may not identify as states; both state and nonstate terrorism are horrific forms of bullying, whether carried out by brutal groups such as ISIS, which we discuss later in the book, or by

states that terrorize their own populations. Whether a state, a group, or a person, the bully always terrorizes, and terrorism is always bullying.

Militarized capitalism is just one system of unequal power that can create a bully nation, but since America is the most powerful country in the world and promotes its system as a model for the world, it deserves our attention. Yet as we see when we discuss the military and militarism, we cannot think of bullying at a purely national level, for bullying operates as a foundation of the American global order.³⁶

As will be shown in chapter 2, nonmilitarized capitalism is very much a bullying system in its own right. The fundamental power inequalities between owners and workers foster the structural conditions that give rise to institutionalized bullying. Both capitalism and militarism can, on their own, create bullying societies. But as in America, where we have a deeply militarized capitalist system, the effects are amplified: the scope and harshness of institutionalized bullying become overwhelmingly powerful.

If we were looking at societies such as Germany or Sweden today, which both have forms of nonmilitarized capitalism, we would still analyze bullying as a product of capitalist forces, even though European capitalism differs significantly from the American variant; for example, it is far less militarized, and because it is a “social welfare” model, its bullying social effects are less intense.

In the United States, it is simply impossible to disentangle capitalism and militarism, leading to our analytical focus on militarized capitalism. Yet this does not mean we ignore the purely capitalist structural roots of bullying. In chapter 2, we will begin with a close examination of how a capitalist system produces a bullying society, an analysis that does not center on militarism and could be applied to other capitalist societies that are not militaristic. Later, in chapters 4, 5, and 6, we will turn to militarism and its own contributions to a bullying American society. These are partially autonomous but, in the United States, deeply intertwined with capitalism.

We believe that capitalism and militarism are the two fundamental institutional systems of political economy that give rise to a bullying society. We consider them to be parts of a unified structure in the United States. However, we need to make clear that if we extend our macroparadigm of bullying societies to other nations, the conceptual unit of analysis might be capitalism itself (in nonmilitarized capitalist societies) or militarism itself (in militarized noncapitalist societies).

The basic elements of a bully nation are a bully economy, a bully political/military order, and a bully culture. In the United States, these are the defining foundations of militarized capitalism. Note that these are the three interrelated power hierarchies identified by Mills in *The Power Elite* and *The Sociological Imagination*.³⁷ These hierarchies are fundamental to every bully nation, but they take different forms in different countries: what unites them across all nations is the way they divide a society into controlling elites and relatively powerless masses; in each, the powerful are small groups seeking to sustain control over the rest of the population and the natural environment.

A bully economy is one with significant wealth and power inequality, where the economy is structured to maximize profit or wealth for the rich and force submission by the rest, while at the same time subordinating animals and all of nature to the will of the wealthy. Inequality is endemic to the bully economic system; if you eliminate the inequality, the economy cannot long endure, as we will address in chapter 2.³⁸ Corporate capitalism is the American version of the bully economy. It is founded on the basic division between a small ownership class and everyone else; all of the latter are dependent on those owning productive property or the “means of production.” This can also be described as the difference between those who own capital and those who don’t.³⁹ If you eliminate this division, you no longer have capitalism as a system; it is the system’s defining quality, and it ensures a great inequality of power in which the rich bully the rest into submission. This was the basic insight raised in recent times by the Occupy movement, which targeted Wall Street as the headquarters of the capital ownership class and dubbed the chief executive officers (CEOs) there as “the 1%.” In the process, the movement clearly signaled that wealth concentration and power inequality were burgeoning to unbearable proportions.⁴⁰ *The Wolf of Wall Street*,⁴¹ a popular film in 2013, dramatized the growing inequality and the bullying elements of our capitalist economy, as did Oliver Stone’s classic film *Wall Street*,⁴² which became famous for its motto of the bully economy, “Greed is good,” as voiced by Michael Douglas’s character, Gordon Gekko. Gekko symbolized the new financial tycoons who were running the economy, innovative mainly in their strategies to bully the world and the domestic workforce to ensure their own massive wealth.

In the real world, the bullying is not fully seen because of the ideology and morality promoted by the wealthy and by the economists who wittingly or unwittingly serve their interests. By arguing that the rich are worthy “makers” who have earned their money through hard work and talent while also

creating jobs for the “takers,” they turn bullying into a moral meritocracy that builds prosperity and rewards virtue.⁴³ It is hard to see a virtuous elite as a bully.

A bully politics is one based on a political ruling elite controlling both global and domestic populations, ultimately through military threats or even invasions. Such bullying may be promoted as a high moral cause and pursued under the guise of maintaining democracy, civil order, and virtue.⁴⁴ The United States is by far the most dramatic example of such a militarized political order, both externally and internally. Its military has appointed itself as the world’s police, committed to using force to secure American and corporate power. Both the Bush and Obama doctrines, which argue that the United States has the right and the duty to attack countries where it feels threatened or sees a breakdown of “civilized order,” are classic statements of the principles of a bully military and politics, as historically exemplified by, among others, the British, French, and Spanish Empires.⁴⁵ The United States has built its own form of empire, and it has routinely resorted to force to ensure “friendly” client states and bully them into submission.⁴⁶ The bullying is again carried out in the name of high moral principles, whether that is pursuing “manifest destiny”; saving democracy; or fighting communism, fascism, or terrorism.

Militarization in the United States has also redefined the relation of the police and the state to the American population, demonstrating how militarism can also be a source of bullying at home. Today, America has the largest population of jailed persons in the world. The 2014 case of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager who was shot to death while running away from a Ferguson, Missouri, policeman, illustrates the terrifying form of bullying that confronts many in the most powerless segments of the population. If you are black, brown, or white and poor, just walking on the street or sidewalk in many neighborhoods is to risk being bullied by police, and even many in the middle classes have had their own less frequent experiences of being bullied by cops during traffic incidents or political protests.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, immigrant populations, especially those crossing the border, are subject to intense levels of increasingly militarized bullying. As the police become loaded down with surplus military gear from the Department of Homeland Security, militaristic bullying is becoming more and more a part of daily life in thousands of US cities and towns, as we will show in chapter 6 when we discuss militarism at home as well as abroad.

A bullying culture is the third pillar of the bully nation. As noted previously, this culture’s central values and norms of conduct are competition;

self-interest and self-defense; material acquisition; power seeking; toughness; dominance; security; the right to guns; and violence. Many nations incorporate *some* of these values, but every one of them has had a key historical place in American culture; they were enshrined during slavery and the frontier days, followed by the Industrial Revolution and the application of these values after the Civil War to promote military expansion and maximize corporate profits. The moral justification for these values initially grew out of the social Darwinism of the nineteenth-century's Gilded Age, leading to today's "greed is good" culture and the view that the virtuous rich have the moral obligation to force the "moochers," as Ayn Rand named them,⁴⁸ into submission and a "disciplined" life.⁴⁹

Bully culture in the United States is associated with religious ideologies, such as Puritanism, that are related to repressing external and internal evil or hedonism; economic ideologies inherent in market competition and expansion; and military ideologies involving the spread of American values and defending both domestic and foreign populations against external threats. Again, the bullying elements are redefined in public discourse as moral virtues sanctioned by God or nature to ensure the flowering of civilization and prosperity in a world of evil. The bullying culture moralizes violence but hides its bullying dimensions in the language of controlling evil and the unworthy.⁵⁰

A bully culture can coexist with other "countercultures" in a bully nation. In the United States, we have had "culture wars" almost since the beginning, where different groups or regions assert different value systems. Since the 1960s at least, culture wars have pitted the bully culture against another culture that emphasizes values of compassion, equality, nonviolence, simple living associated with a rejection of consumerism and materialism, peace, and harmony with nature. This counterculture, though hardly free of its own violence and bullying, has helped nourish a strong "antibullying" sensibility in parts of the population, as will be discussed in chapter 9. It has roots in major changes in the economy, demography, and education. And it proves that none of the features of bully nations are uncontested or necessarily permanent: there is always the possibility of change.

All three of the key elements in America's militarized capitalism—bully economics, politics, and culture—combine to produce the most invisible but perhaps ultimately most consequential bullying of all: the bullying of other species and nature itself. Corporate capitalism treats animals and other species, indeed nature itself, as property owned by corporations or individuals

who can use all of it for their own profit.⁵¹ This is a more extreme form of inequality than the kind dividing capitalists and workers; it more closely resembles a slavery system in which the workers were owned. So too are animals and natural resources “owned,” and thus, they have virtually no rights and no voice at all. This extreme inequality of power creates a structural bullying relation between people (particularly the wealthy) on one side and animals and nature on the other. The situation is most obvious in industrialized agriculture, where huge corporations own and control vast numbers of animals that they raise and slaughter for profit. The same violent treatment is perpetrated by other corporations that use other species or natural resources as nothing but “inputs”—with no rights or voice—in production and profit making.⁵²

Thousands of nonhuman species are going extinct as we extend militarized capitalism to all parts of the planet and all of its resources. We have fought our wars mainly for oil and other resources necessary to fuel the capitalist engine, and in the process, we have subjected all species and natural resources to control for profit. The environmental movement may, ironically, become one of the leading forces of cultural change and help create an antibullying sensibility.

We shall argue that anyone concerned with the bullying scourge needs to understand and seek to change key aspects of our culture and society. This is a tall order, and it is easy to fall back on personal strategies for saving oneself or one’s kids, a problem facing all movements for social change. But societies are historically complex and are never entirely homogenous in their economic, political, and cultural legacies, a point made especially clear in the very recent rise of an antibullying culture in the United States. The country has been surprisingly receptive to social movements historically, as identified by Howard Zinn in his classic *People’s History of the United States*.⁵³ That historical legacy is of vital importance for anyone who is alarmed by our bully nation and seeking a new way forward that can nurture the antibullying forces already rising into a broader movement for social change—a movement that can expose the horrors of bullying and move us as a society beyond it.