

# History, Myth Making and Young People in a Time of Change

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Young people are frequently targets of public expressions of concern that they are either 'victims of change' or 'sources of misrule'. This article argues that when we consider issues affecting some young people, such as youth unemployment or youth suicide, we would do well to remember and understand our history.

It is now obvious that ours is a time of social, economic and cultural change. Many of these changes relate to new ways of designing work, distributing it, or making a living from it. Processes like 'downsizing', 'rightsizing', and 'globalisation', and the continuing commodification of activities and culture compound the feeling that things are becoming increasingly ambiguous, unstable and risky.

Indeed, many things are changing. This includes the form and feel of family life, the authority and credibility of the old 'moral economy' of work, and the taken-for-granted approach to a life-cycle which once centered around the male as breadwinner working full-time between 16 and 65 years of age.

Given the pace and degree of change, it is not surprising that we see expressions of anxiety as reactions to a prospective future which cannot be imagined in terms of 'more of the same'. This context indicates why pessimistic commentators are inclined to treat young people as one of the 'casualties of change' (Eckersley 1988).

*'We learn from history that we never learn anything from history.'*

– G.F.W. Hegel

## Young People as Victim, Young People as Threat

Representations of young people as victims and/or agents of social disorder are now routine. Journalistic generalisations about Generation X are bad enough. What is worse is the way sections of the media regularly report and amplify official, popular and academic concerns about the undeniably high levels of unemployment. A decade after an equivalent 'discovery' in America, Australian newspapers 'discovered' a 'new juvenile underclass' of juvenile offenders, drug users and anti-social vandals (*Sunday Age*, 29 December 1992; *The Age*, 7 August 1997, A6; *The Age*, 8 August 1997, C1). Their rise has been linked with economic recession, global economic integration, youth unemployment and the breakdown of the 'welfare state' (White 1990; Eckersley 1993; White 1994).

How valid are these generalisations and the concerns they express? In this article, we begin by outlining the kinds of propositions from both progressive and pessimistic commentators that young people are 'at risk'.



Picture: Andrew Chapman



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(McDonald 1994)

We show how such contemporary dirges are part of a long tradition of repeated 'discovery' that our young are either threats to civilisation or victims of change.

Such representations indicate that these 'discoveries' are not empirical discoveries. Contemporary representations of youthful disorder, lawlessness and misrule as novel responses to change, newness and discontinuity, we argue, are better understood as part of a tradition of myth-making that is central to what writers like Giddens (1991) called the history of modernity.

In the final part of the article we cast doubt about the empirical basis of contemporary claims made about the 'societal' causation of youth crime and youth suicide.

Cultural pessimists now regularly explain the 'problems of youth' in terms that have been long favoured by conservatives – namely, the breakdown of the family and the loss of respect for traditional values and social hierarchy. The loss of faith in transcendent belief systems, the 'death of the family' and, in some cases, the erosion of the traditional patriarchal role of the father where 'everyone knew their place and everyone had a place', are deployed as explanations of today's 'problem youth' (McDonald 1994).

For psychologist Ron Frey (*Courier Mail*, 10 January 1998: 25), the problem is the 'loss of community': 'The breakdown of community means that there aren't many people to go to when things do go wrong. That's the great threat to children now.'

In contrast, according to Eckersley (*The Age*, 1992), the 'good old days' helped children 'construct a world view, a cultural context, to define who they are . . . a context that would give them a positive, confident, optimistic outlook on life or at least the fortitude to endure what life held in store. Our children are not hearing these stories. I believe we are witnessing the cultural abuse of an entire generation of young people.'

For some 'progressive' critics who like their explanations economic or structural, youth unemployment, or the breakdown of the welfare state, explain unprecedented levels of youth suicide, youth homelessness, illicit drug and criminal and generally anti-social and delinquent activity. One report (National Youth Foundation 1993) argued that 'we have a million young Australians aged between 15 and 24 who are angry, alienated and poverty-stricken'.

Progressive criminologists like White (1990: 109) likewise maintain that: 'A general deterioration in the lifestyles

and life chances of working class young people has created the conditions for greater social unrest and, at a personal level, identity crisis. The working through of contradictions generated by economic and social forces at the personal level is bound to produce a variety of responses in young people.' One of these 'consequences' is the expansion of young people's involvement in a 'criminal economy'.

Although their explanations are clearly different, together these claims reinforce the dominant representation of 'problem youth'. And the public seems to be highly receptive to such 'news'. One study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies described the widespread parental fear for their children's security in our cities (Brownlee and McDonald 1992; *The Age*, 31 January 1994). According to the Institute's research, popular anxiety about assaults and abductions make the streets, parks, and even a trip to the local milk-bar dangerous ventures. A 1994 survey conducted by the New South Wales Police Service, showed that nearly one in two respondents believed their families to be at risk of murder! (Mukherjee 1994).

It is not surprising that politicians and government policy leap on to the 'law and order' bandwagon. In 1991–92, public 'Rallies for Justice' saw 20,000 people march through the centre of Perth, as Howard Sattler (a drive-time radio host) mobilised protest about 'Aboriginal gangs terrorising suburbs' and teenagers running wild in the west. Premier Lawrence dutifully designed legislation that abrogated key elements of the Covenant on the Rights of the Child. In the New South Wales 1995 elections, Premier Fahey and Opposition Leader Carr competed to see who could 'out tough' the other on 'lawless teen colour gangs'. The winner (Carr), subsequently introduced legislation requiring 'groups' of more than three young people assembled in public to disperse. The intensification of policing via 'zero tolerance' and night curfews for teenagers, the detention of 12-year-olds in gaols in two jurisdictions, and legislative change designed to promote parental restitution (that is, holding parents financially responsible for the offences their children commit) have been some of the other consequences of this preoccupation with 'problem teenagers'.

Is this 'discovery' and contemporary representation of young people as victims of change and/or agents of disorder well founded? We think not. The historical and persistent nature of these representations of young people suggests why not.

### Tradition of Discovering 'Problem Youth'

In the 1970s Jacoby (1973) argued that those who cannot remember the past are unable to think in the present. Historians like Pearson (1983) remind us that the representation of young people has a long history that goes back at least to the late eighteenth century. We should not understand contemporary representations of youthful disorder, lawlessness and misrule as genuinely new discoveries or as an unequivocal indicator that young people are 'victims of change'. While not denying that some young people are unemployed, use drugs, or sleep on the streets, we should be far more critical of the sweeping generalisations which are part of a tradition of myth-making central to what Giddens's (1991) calls 'history of modernity'.

'White' Australia (like many comparable societies) has a long history of public anxiety about young people. In our case it goes back to the first decades of settlement at Sydney Cove (Avril 1992). By the 1870s the generation of 'moral panics' about young people had become routine.

The discovery of larrikins, and the activities of street gangs (or pushes) from the 1870s is just one precursor to the contemporary discovery of problem youth (Murray 1974).

Arising out of the constitution of the 'juvenile delinquency' category (Margarey 1978), larrikins in the 1880s typified troublesome and fearsome youth and were routinely tied to serious criminal activity (Bavin-Mizzi 1995). One writer described how he had seen 'gangs clustering around the corner of Swan and Burnley Streets . . . treating every passer-by to abuse or worse' (*Richmond Guardian*, 28 January 1888).

Another official observer noted in 1893, 'the sad condition of a very large number of houseless and homeless Boys, now commencing a life of nomadic and erratic wanderings . . . these boys . . . will soon burst their pupa shells and . . . be drawn into the Vortex of Crime and Misery (Bury 1893 in Jaggs 1986).

In the late nineteenth century the press used medical metaphors like 'contamination' and 'contagion' when describing the larrikin. Young larrikins 'infested' the streets, causing bother to 'rate-paying shop-keepers and innocent pedestrians' (*Richmond Guardian*, 28 January 1888). Seventy years later, in 1955, the same images were used at the height of another 'moral panic' about bodgies and widgees. The *Australian Women's Weekly* (21 September 1955) warned that: 'Bad behaviour is as contagious as measles. And the wise mother will watch for signs of it, just as anxiously as she watches for signs of a measles rash.'

In terms that anticipate popular calls today for more policing of young people, a century ago the solution to larrikinism was more police protection and increased police powers. Inner city local Melbourne newspapers such as the *Mercury* (26 February 1882), reported that: 'larrikinism . . . has been steadily gaining ground in all large centres of population . . . those charged with the preservation of peace and order, in despair of keeping the evil within reasonable bounds by the exercise of the ordinary means, propose . . . the use of the lash . . . (see also *Richmond Guardian*, 28 January 1888).

Arguments that link unemployment and poverty to lawlessness have also been tirelessly reiterated over the past century and a half. 'Youth' unrestrained and unregulated by waged work were identified as a problem in both the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s. Respectable people worried about the moral temptations placed before jobless young women made 'idle' and 'walking the streets' during the Great Depression of the 1930s (Victorian Parliamentary Debates (VPD 1931).

High levels of unemployment in the 1930s caused some to wonder 'that our gaols are not full . . . when they [youth] are not given the opportunity of getting a single day's work' (*The Age*, 29 November 1932). Young unemployed people in the 1930s were routinely referred to as 'the legion of the lost' (Johnson 1993).

It is not antiquarianism on our part that motivates this brief rehearsal of a long-standing discursive tradition. Rather than assuming that the contemporary 'discovery' of juvenile crime, youth suicide or drug abuse is a simple empirical issue, the fact of the persistence of these representations, always treated as perpetually fresh and shocking 'discoveries', calls for interpretation.

## History and Myth

What should we think of this relentless history that tells of an apparent decline while being part of a tradition that continuously discovers young people as key agents/victims of disorder? How should we understand a tradition that represses previous discoveries of 'youth problems'?

Pearson (1983: 208) suggests that: 'If we reinstate the facts of the past, it becomes clear that the preoccupation with [juvenile] lawlessness belongs more properly to a

remarkably stable tradition rather than being cast in the historical idiom of change – that is, the facts of crime and disorder must be re-allocated within the idiom of continuity.' As Pearson goes on to observe, there are considerable difficulties involved in making sense of a history or repetitive concern about young people where there is a 'stability . . . which repetitiously identifies some aspect of "social change" as the cause of the loosening of tradition, but which is itself paradoxically immune to change.'

According to Pearson (1983: 211), this kind of myth making is a complex issue because we confront 'a repetitious and rigidly immovable vocabulary of complaints and fears while at the same time this ages-old tapestry is held up as something entirely new and unprecedented'. In the confusion 'between what changes and what is constant, the basis of myth is laid – myth granted numerical certainty by the criminal statistics, which, obeying their own grammar of continuity, spiral relentlessly upwards and obligingly confirm our own worst fears of social ruin'.

The word 'myth' here is apposite. In using the term we follow Durkheim's account of religion where he pointed out that a belief system does not necessarily have to be 'true' to be 'real'. The repetitive nature of these representations casts doubts on both the commonly accepted assumption that these discoveries are simply empirical discoveries, or that their ascribed novelty is 'a sign' (or evidence) of the 'real' and unprecedented changes that produce the problem. Narratives about ever increasing juvenile crime and violence are part of a larger myth about a 'world we have lost'.

For cultural pessimists a prime cause of the so-called crisis facing society, and particularly our young people, is the decadent state of our culture. This is a story about the erosion of traditional standards, the decline of high culture and the disintegration of a social consensus that once, it is argued, bound us together as a community providing us with faith in our leading institutions and offering hope for the future. 'Western civilisation is [now] in social and cultural turmoil', says Eckersley (1993). Mounting juvenile crime rates, increasing drug problems, rampant violence, and widespread depressive illness are said to be signs of Western culture's deepening crisis.

In a clue to the social amnesia he actually embodies, Eckersley appropriates an eighteenth century print by William Hogarth to illustrate his sense of contemporary misrule and despair. This imaginary streetscape of misery – replete with drunkenness, poverty, social distress, madness and death – may be seductive to those not willing to think too hard about the message being portrayed. Eckersley seems oblivious to the problem that his rhetorical ploy involves. The recycling of an eighteenth century image to make a point about the perceived contemporary decline of Western civilisation and the effect this is having on young people, tells us we are in the presence of superficial critique that is reliant on a perpetual recycling of myth. (If the eighteenth century was not the world we have lost, then how far back do we go before we find that golden age?)

Sennett offers one clue to the longevity and appeal of the 'myth of loss':

'The destruction of the order [feudalism] did not mean it was forgotten. Quite the opposite. It was idealised, tarted up, made the subject for regret. The idiocy and harshness of rural life were put out of mind, and the countryside became the place of pastoral ease in which deep and open human relationships seemed to have once existed.

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(Pearson 1983)

'Everywhere in the nineteenth century the fragments of the old life, which capitalism was shattering, were being picked up and treasured as objects all the more precious because they were so vulnerable, too delicate and sensitive to survive the onslaught of material progress. Just as the village was idealised as a community, the stable family, with the younger generations taking their places in the order custom dictated, was idealised as the seat of virtue . . .

'The citizen was offered a pastiche as a landscape of authority. Images of a broken world were pasted upon a canvas, tinted, and then presented as what trust, security protection, safety ought to be. Forming a community; belonging to one another – this social need was met with "It once existed; we used to". To retain a sense of reality, the citizen had to penetrate the haze of regret, to decompose that landscape, like a painter dissatisfied with collage who removes step by step what has been pasted together.' (Sennett 1989: 50–51)

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(Sennett 1989)

### How 'Youth Problems' are Represented

The repetitive nature of certain representations of young people places doubt on both the assumption that these discoveries are empirical discoveries, or that their 'novelty' points us in the direction of 'real' and unprecedented changes that have produced the problems. Contemporary accounts of a youth underclass or a rampant delinquent sub-culture rely heavily on assumptions found at work among some social scientists which are resistant to critical thought or careful research.

#### **The mythic figure of agonistic adolescence**

Accounts of delinquent and criminal young people frequently rely on a larger story about teenagers who are angry, hard to control, or just plain difficult. This is the well known model of agonistic adolescence (Sercombe 1997).

From the eighteenth century on, 'childhood' was constituted in the West as a period of innocence, dependence and vulnerability (Aries 1969). The figure of the 'adolescent' as agonistic, indeterminate and struggling to leap from childhood to adult status was invented in the twentieth century (Bessant, Sercombe and Watts 1998). It was very much the product of the nineteenth century 'child studies' movement that merged, via eugenics, into 'scientific' disciplines like psychology, sociology and criminology. Its exemplar was Stanley-Hall's two-volume *Adolescence* (1904) which shaped the dominant mythic figure of the adolescent embarking at puberty on a precarious road to adult status and successful social and psychological adjustment. The defining features of the adolescent include being crisis-ridden, sexually troubled, psychologically uncertain, socially irresponsible and defiant. This adolescent stumbles through the twentieth century, constantly 'at risk' of being diverted by the attractions of deviant, delinquent and criminal status. By 1942 the sociologist Talcott Parsons would define 'youth culture' in terms of its 'irresponsibility'.

We need to be cautious about endlessly recycling these stories. This is because most adolescents are not inherently agonistic or more prone to psychiatric distress than other sections of the population.

Daniel and Judith Offer stood 'against the current' when they researched young people. In their work (1968, 1969, 1970, 1988) the Offers argued that young people are no more traumatised or troublesome than any other sectors of the population. They acknowledge that

there are a number of challenges to be met during this time, but argue that most young people are capable of meeting the challenges (Offer et al. 1988, cited in Bessant, Sercombe and Watts 1998).

In terms that will elicit no eager response from journalists hungry only for 'bad news', the researchers conclude:

'Research on this group of normal adolescents does not validate psychological conceptualisations of extreme turmoil characterising adolescent development . . . we challenge the concept of great inner turmoil, swift mood swings, or other seemingly pathologic symptomatology as being a necessary part of adolescence . . . Investigators who, like us, have studied normal adolescent populations, find a minimal amount of turmoil displayed . . . We believe that the development of many adolescents can be better characterised by a concept of gradual shifts than by volcanic eruptions . . .

'Data on non-patient populations suggest that adolescents can meet the requirements of emotional disengagement from internalised parental images and of pubertal growth spurts without displaying gross behavioural aberrations.' (Offer and Offer 1972: 62–63)

In Australia the evidence supports this conclusion; the incidence of depressive or other serious mental health problems is no greater among young people than other age cohorts. As the research of Sawyer et al. (1990) indicates, between 10–15 per cent of young people to the age of 18 years have some recognisable mental health problem, of whom 1–5 per cent might require some specialist treatment. Regrettably, there are still too many professionals and experts who are in thrall to the 'commonsense view' of agonistic adolescence. By casting their diagnostic net wide enough via an all-inclusive definition of mental health, some would even render most young people subject to some diagnosis or other of 'mental illness' (Brennan and Waters in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1993).

#### **The mythic figure of youth as potential criminal**

What of the widespread anxieties about a juvenile crime wave, and claims that this problem reflects the increase in youth unemployment? Again, young people as a group are no more predisposed to commit serious crime than any other age cohort, nor are young people more inclined to offend now than they have been in the past.

While acknowledging the problems involved in using any longitudinal data sets on 'crime' (Mukherjee 1994), it is worth pointing out that as far as that data will allow us to generalise, contrary to popular opinion, there has been a long-term *diminution* in crime and violence, a diminution that includes juvenile offences (Grabosky 1977). Focusing on Sydney, Grabosky (1977: 32) maintained that: 'The rate of crimes against the person ("aggressive crime") appears to have fallen sharply following the cessation of transportation in 1840 . . . then to have diminished gradually throughout the twentieth century despite slight upturns in the late 1910s, 1940s, and 1960s.'

Nor does the evidence support the claim that young people are now more violent and more frequently engaged in criminal activities (Wundersitz 1993; Bessant 1995). In the early 1990s approximately 4 per cent of the juvenile population was formally involved annually with the juvenile justice system (involving police cautions, panel hearings or court appearances (Wundersitz 1993).

As Tait (1993 in White and Alder) shows, we need to be cautious about using juvenile justice system statistics when they appear to show evidence of increases in

juvenile offending. Popularly used as evidence of a disproportionate inclination to criminality by young people, they more often reflect changes in the law, new policing practices, or changed methods of gathering statistics or categorising offences. And given the intensity with which young people are policed and the ease with which they can be identified, we are not entitled to make claims that they are more disposed to crime than other sections of the population.

In terms of serious crimes like rape, assault and homicide, young people are more law-abiding than the adult population. To the extent that young people do offend, those activities usually involve a range of relatively minor offences such as transport system offences, public order offences like drunkenness, or property offences like illegal car use and shoplifting. For one small sector of young people, the intensity with which they are policed and the ease with which they can be identified means real trouble. Young Aboriginal people are policed and incarcerated in ways that are vastly disproportionate to their numbers in the population. Some might say this means they are inherently more criminal; others might reply that this suggests only that the criminal justice systems in some states operate on a racially discriminatory basis.

More worrying but less well reported is the fact that young people are more likely than any other age cohorts to be victims of serious crime, especially crime involving physical and sexual assault (Angus et al. 1994). Moreover, the numbers of young victims of serious crime far outweighs the offence rate. Given the disposition to treat young people as perpetrators of violence and crime, this fact is not likely to be better reported.

Finally, there is the repeated attempt to link economic problems like unemployment and poverty to the figure of the juvenile criminal/delinquent or to the problem of youth suicide. One standard argument is that 'the social costs of marginality are inevitably translated into the economic costs of crime' (Cunneen and White 1995). Given the dimensions of youth unemployment, it is not surprising that the media often take seriously claims that shoplifting represents one means to consume when a young person does not have the resources to pay. However, given the dimensions of youth unemployment, it is curious that shoplifting only accounted for 7.8 per cent of offences heard before the New South Wales Children's Court during 1992-93 (Cunneen and White 1995). It seems that economic determinism dies a hard death, but like other prejudices is resistant to disconfirmation.

### ***The mythic figure of youth as victims***

Nothing encapsulates contemporary anxieties about young people as victims of unprecedented social change so much as the issue of youth suicide. From the outset we want to be very clear about one point. Suicide by a young person can never be trivialised or seen simply as a statistic artefact. Suicide is always a tragic and deeply distressing event. The suffering, pain and sense of loss that follows such deaths is intense.

On the other hand, there is no excuse for sensationalising the issue of youth suicide or explaining it in misleading terms. This is nevertheless what happens

Picture: Andrew Chapman



when commentators like Eckersley talk about it in terms such as 'a suicide a day' – an approach that cannot help but attract wide media interest. (To be fair, Eckersley also attributes the youth suicide rate to the 'decline of Western civilisation' and 'the loss of hope').

It has also become an article of faith among many people that the high rates of youth unemployment 'explain' increases in Australia's youth suicide rate. Statistically there has been an increase in the youth suicide rate measured as the number per 100,000 of the relevant population who kill themselves. Yet a number of considerations should indicate why drawing this link is not warranted (Watts 1997).

First, we cannot assume that an increase in the youth suicide rate is an unequivocal empirical description of any actual increase. Changes in the suicide rate can easily reflect slight changes in police and coronial practices and/or changing community attitudes to suicide.

Second, the undoubted increase in the youth suicide rate began in the 1960s, well before there was any increase in Australia's youth unemployment rate.

Third, youth suicide is statistically too rare an event to draw the kinds of causal connections some commentators and the media want to draw. If in 1960 ten young people out of every 100,000 took their own lives, and then in 1990 twenty young people out of every 100,000 did so, it is true that the rate has doubled, but it does not indicate an instance of social causation; in each case there is a large balance of young people who do not commit suicide. Further, the current rate per 100,000 is equivalent to the incidence of quite rare genetic diseases. It is not wise to draw 'causal' connections between a problem that is widespread (like youth unemployment) and the small but tragic numbers of young people who kill themselves.

Finally, and again acknowledging the problems of posthumous research, careful studies using coronial records suggest that many factors are at work in the lives of young people who eventually commit suicide, and that in many cases it is a spur of the moment decision, with unemployment not being an obvious factor.

Given the scale of the youth unemployment problem, it is not helpful to add to the burden of anxiety that must haunt many parents that their unemployed child is now also at risk of suicide.

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## Conclusion

In this article we have argued against some of the widespread generalisations made about young people as problems or victims. This is not to argue against efforts to construct useful generalisations about young people – there may be specific experiences and developmental issues that many, perhaps all, young people face. (However, given that in childhood and adolescence our identity also includes factors like gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity, the possibility that all young people can be characterised by virtue of one specific feature – like their age – is not likely.)

Our concern has been with the way certain stories about young people are constantly recycled as if they are new. The contemporary figure of the 'juvenile delinquent' and panics about juvenile crime-waves depend heavily on long-standing discursive traditions constructed by adults, usually professionals and the intellectually-trained.

The figure of 'the adolescent' is a social identity that has been constituted not by young people themselves, but by adults who are frequently far removed from the life-worlds of young people. The repetitive nature of these accounts is the first clue to their mythic status. Careful and critical examination of the empirical basis of many of these stories confirms this assessment.

There are many things about young people's lives that we should be concerned about. Having realistic understandings of young people in all their variety is a necessary prelude to offering well informed and effective support. As a community we should be concerned about the dramatic changes to the youth labour market. However, our ethical and political concern about this problem does not justify reaching for simplistic explanations of what we have always known to be complex patterns of social existence.

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