Growing Up: Risky Business?

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Abstract

Young people today increasingly cause adults anxiety. This anxiety translates into a raft of interventions and strategies and programs that target young people. These imaginings reflect and constitute a range of anxieties about the dangers posed by some young people, or to some young people, and how these risks might be economically and prudently managed. These processes can have a range of often negative consequences (intended or otherwise) for individuals and populations of young people. I argue that Foucault's work on disciplinary, sovereign and governmental forms of power provides a generative framework for analysing why growing up is often seen to be a risky business for contemporary populations of young people.

Introduction: Growing Up as Risky Business?

In this paper I want to highlight an increasingly generalised and institutionalised sense of anxiety and mistrust in relation to the capacities of today's young people to make the transition to adulthood. In later sections I will argue that Michel Foucault's (1977, 1983, 1991) work on disciplinary, sovereign and governmental forms of power provides a generative framework for analysing why growing up is often seen to be a risky business for contemporary populations of young people.

Adult anxieties about young people are not new phenomena. Youth has historically occupied the 'wild zones' as imagined within the institutional spaces characteristic of modernity (Kelly 1999). In these 'zones' certain groups of young people have been viewed as being 'ungovernable' and lacking in 'self regulation'. These representations of 'deviancy', 'delinquency' and 'ungovernability' have always been fundamentally shaped by race, class and gender and situated in relation to particular ideas about 'normal' youth (Bessant and Watts...
1998; Kelly 1999; Tait 1995; Watts 1993/94; White and Wilson 1991). However, a major problem for young people today is that they increasingly cause adults anxiety. This anxiety translates into a raft of interventions and programs that have young people as their targets. At the same time these systems of thought reflexively constitute our understanding of youth - as a population/historical figure. These imaginings reflect and constitute a range of anxieties about the dangers posed by some young people, or to some young people, and how these risks might be economically and prudently managed.

A more generalised sense of risk in relation to the capacities of today's young people to grow up – to make the transition to a normalised space of adult autonomy, responsibility and self regulation - is evident in the increasing variety of adult interventions into young people's lives on the basis of professional concerns about young people's welfare. For instance, we see the increased involvement of youth, community and health workers in street work with young people on projects which attempt to regulate anti social practices, or to prevent crime. In Australia, as with many other Anglo European settings, a range of Federal, State and Local government agencies and departments, and a large number of NGOs are involved in processes of inter agency collaboration on the design, development, delivery and evaluation of so-called Youth programs of a type not thinkable even thirty years ago (White 1998). In addition a multitude of education programs target the apparently risky sexual, eating and drug practices of young people, or the nature of their transitions to the adult world of work. These programs can occur in schools and/or in times and spaces out-of-school (DETYA 2000). Schools emerge in the last three decades as institutionalised risk environments in which increasing percentages of the youth population spend longer periods of the lifecourse (Beck 1992) as targeted populations of a diverse range of governmental strategies (Dean 1999b). There exists also a general concern for any youth activity that gives the appearance of being beyond the management or surveillance capacities of various agencies. These concerns are evidenced in the countless research projects and reports that have as their aim better understandings of all aspects of young people's lives. This constantly growing research literature promises to develop more 'sophisticated' ways of identifying populations of young people with regard to various community and policy concerns (White 1993). Rob White (1993) argues, for example, that the emergence of a more 'sophisticated' and 'distinct field of inquiry' of Youth Studies has accompanied the 'changing economic, social and cultural
circumstances of young people' in the last decades of the twentieth century (see also, McLeod and Malone 2000).

In its more extreme manifestations the contemporary, institutionalised mistrust of Youth appears as a concern that particular populations of young people pose a certain dangerousness – to themselves and others. In this sense ideas about risks, fear and uncertainty are powerful influences on community and policy responses to dangerous youth. These responses include an increasingly widespread use of electronic surveillance technologies in spaces such as shopping malls, streets and schools. Indeed there is a sense that in a so-called 'surveillance society' few spaces remain outside the gaze of small electronic eyes (Lyon 1994; Norris and Armstrong 1999; Norris et al. 1998a, 1998b). This apparent dangerousness also witnesses the proposed and actual introduction of state and local government laws and by-laws allowing night curfews, zero tolerance policing, and the electronic tagging and mandatory sentencing of juvenile offenders. In addition in a number of jurisdictions by-laws have been introduced which set limits on the number of young people who may gather in certain public spaces, and which allow police – both public and private – to move young people on if they cause others anxiety. The anxieties and mistrust that structure these and other practices in response to the youth problem also have some basis in the commodification and privatisation of 'public' spaces where shopping emerges as both 'entertainment' and the only 'legitimate activity'. In these spaces certain groups of young people are positioned as causing others anxiety, and as posing potential dangers (Guilliat 1997; White 1998).

Youth: Risks, Surveillance and Economic Government

Economy: careful management of resources to avoid unnecessary expenditure or waste; sparing, restrained, or efficient use, esp. to achieve maximum effect for the minimum effort (The Collins English Dictionary)

Elsewhere I have argued that youth is an 'artefact of expertise' (Kelly 2001a, 2001b, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; see also Tait 1992, 1993). In this sense we can argue that anxieties and mistrust about youth have become increasingly governmentalised – rationalised, institutionalised and abstracted under the auspices of a constellation of State agencies, quasi autonomous non-government organizations and non government organisations (QUANGOs
and NGOs) (Foucault 1991; Gordon 1991; Rose 1999). This governmentalisation energises processes of surveillance - surveillance that is targeted and focussed, in the interests of economy, at those populations that pose, or face, the greatest dangers and risks.

Foucault’s (1991) concept of governmentality provides a useful means to think about certain aspects of contemporary concerns with the risky business of growing up. Governmentality studies take modern Liberal arts of government as their object. This literature points to the centrality of alliances and partnerships between a range of individuals, groups, agencies and institutions that are pivotal to the practice of Liberal government. A principal concern in Foucault's (1991) investigations of the forms and effects of modern 'governmentality' was to analyse the nature of the relations between the State and the management of its populations (a concern with the art of government). In thinking of government in this manner, Foucault imagined government as the 'conduct of conduct'. Government, in this sense, 'is a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons' (Gordon 1991: 2). For Rose early modern Liberal problematics of rule can be 'characterised by the hopes that they invest in the subjects of government' (1996a: 45). Philosophical, moral, legal and political conceptions of the citizen imagine the Citizen Subject as possessing, and needing to practise, certain freedoms, rights and responsibilities which fall outside of the legitimate realm of political and/or legal governance. This construction of a realm of the social beyond the direct reach of laws and decrees, the space of freedom, requires that Liberal practices of government come to rely on a range of institutions, experts and systems of thought that promise to 'create individuals who do not need to be governed by others, but will govern themselves, master themselves, care for themselves' (Rose 1996a: 45). This government of the Self is conceived and practised in domains that mark the normal via the construction of the abnormal; a process enabled via the reflexive circulation of discipline based, intellectually grounded knowledge. Youth has, historically, been understood and governed in a manner that explicitly positions them as lacking in these capacities of/for self regulation.

These concerns are well illustrated in the reflexive generation of knowledges about Youth, about risk, and about economic forms of government that results in a range of strategies that aim to guide young people at-risk in more effective and efficient ways. Ideas about risk
structure a number of problematisations of Youth – as a life course stage, and as a population divided from an ideal adult Other, and against the normal child. These discourses of youth at-risk have been pervasive and powerful features of the governmental imagining of youth in the Anglo European democracies of the past three decades – and are indicative of the institutionalised mistrust of youth that I am discussing here.

The concerns I have discussed thus far can be thought about by exploring distinctions between the different forms of power that Foucault identified as sovereignty, discipline and governmentality. In his investigations of modern Liberal governmentalities Foucault (1991) stressed the importance of not seeing the emergence of these mentalities, and associated forms of pastoral power, as signalling the disappearance of other forms of power - namely discipline and sovereignty. Indeed a concern with arts of government makes the problems of sovereignty and discipline 'more acute than ever' (1991: 101). The issue of how to manage the conduct of diverse individuals and populations across a heterogenous field of problems and possibilities 'renders more acute the problem of the foundation of sovereignty…and all the more acute equally the necessity for the development of discipline' (1991: 102).

Kevin Stenson (1996, 1999) has situated youth work related practices in a ‘complex of interrelated strategies of government: sovereignty, discipline and government’ (1996: 12). In doing so he argues that ‘the struggle to establish and maintain a legitimated sovereignty is functionally central to Liberal rule’ (1999: 68). Further, this struggle is a ‘struggle to control geographical territory in the face of internal and external threats, through a monopolisation both of the threat and use of force and attempts to establish the legitimacy of that force’ (Stenson 1996: 5). Sovereignty is exercised by, and through, a range of institutions and strategies – including the armed forces, public and private police organisations, and a range of laws, regulations and by-laws. Sovereignty is, in this sense, both territorial and metaphorical. As Stenson (1996) argues, a great deal of the historical and ongoing - actual and imagined - challenges to the legitimacy and exercise of sovereign power – ‘from behaviour construed as ‘anti-social’ to public order, disturbances or major demonstrations such as the anti-poll tax riots’ – have emerged from, or been centred on, diverse populations if young people’ (1996: 5; see also Garland 1996).
Disciplinary power attempts to produce relationships of regulation and forms of subjection that promise a certain docility in subjects and populations (Foucault 1977, 1983, 1991). David Kirk and Barbara Spiller (1993) suggest, in their historical analysis of the disciplinary role of gymnastics in the primary school curriculum at the turn of the twentieth century, that Foucault's use of the concept of discipline provides a 'means of locating educational practices as one set of micro-technologies which, together with other sets of "little practices" within domains like the military, medicine and so on, make up the infrastructures of disciplinary society' (1993: 111). Moreover, the consequence of discipline is/was not 'mere subjection (as in slavery), but controlled production' of subjects and populations characterised by a 'docility-utility' (1993: 110-111). For Foucault (1977), 'discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, docile bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes the same forces (in political terms of obedience)' (1977: 138).

Historically, the promise of much Youth focussed regulation has been to produce, ‘through surveillance and education’ - as disciplinary practices - the ‘productive skills and capacities’ that will ‘enable young people to adapt to a modern industrial society’ (Stenson 1996: 5-6). In this respect much of the Youth Studies work that White (1993) refers to as emerging out of the 'changing economic, social and cultural circumstances of young people' in the last decades of the twentieth century is energised by concerns about how it is possible to produce, from the raw material of today’s youth, subjects who are capable of exercising a well regulated autonomy.

**Young people and 'illiberal' governmentality: Intersections of sovereignty, discipline and government**

Given these concerns how might we problematise the relationships between risk, surveillance, insurance and the mistrust of youth - so that a range of negative consequences, intended or otherwise, might continue to be the object of discussion? One possibility is to return to an earlier suggestion that youth has long been constructed in terms of apparent ungovernability. This apparent ungovernability has a tendency to produce a range of tensions within and for Liberal governmentalities. This is so because the ideal subject of Liberal governmentalities is the person who has developed the capacities of self-reflection, self-
regulation and self-government (Dean 1999b; Hunter 1993, 1994; Rose 1999). As Rose (1999) suggests this ideal does not have its origins in a generalisable philosophical discourse about the nature of Man. Rather this view of a subject capable of bearing a kind of 'regulated freedom' (Rose and Miller 1992) has, in Liberal problematisations of the art of government, been 'articulated in a whole variety of mundane texts of social reformers, campaigners for domestic hygiene, for urban planning and the like, each of which embodied certain presuppositions' about the nature and capacities of persons to be governed in relation to these programs (Rose 1999: 42). There is, thus, a fundamentally technical dimension to these practices of subjectification - these technologies of the self (Foucault 1988).

Importantly for this discussion this capacity for the exercise of a well regulated autonomy was, and still is in many instances, used to divide and differentiate 'the child from the adult, the man from the women [sic], the normal person from the lunatic, the civilized man from the primitive (Rose 1999: 44). The fact that young people (Children and Youth) have not developed those capacities necessary for conducting their freedom in a well regulated way continues to be an important element of the rationalities that structure the practices and processes of surveillance, discipline and regulation that take young people as their object - in playgrounds and classrooms in schools, in families, in shopping centres, parks and malls.

These ways that we have produced for making young people knowable as ungovernable subjects illuminate the 'illiberal' and 'authoritarian' governmentalities that continue to frame much of the practise of the government of Youth (Dean 1999b, see also Rose 1999). Authoritarian and illiberal governmentalities embrace those 'practices and rationalities immanent to liberal government itself, which are applied to certain populations held to be without the attributes of responsible freedom' (Dean 1999b: 100). Dean (1999b) argues that the 'dividing practices' (Foucault 1983) that differentiate among the population (generally) on the basis of a capacity for well regulated autonomy result in those groups (such as young people) deemed not to have developed these faculties to be subjected 'to a range of disciplinary, sovereign and other interventions' (Dean 1999b: 135).

A principal concern in this discussion is not so much that diverse surveillance and intervention strategies target young people for their own good, or for the greater good.
Rather, it is that such strategies emerge at the intersection of institutionalised imaginings of danger, risk and economy. At this intersection institutionally appropriate practices of intervention for young people’s own good (and the good of others) emerge as hybridized constructions in which concerns about risk, economy and normative imaginings of the capacity for certain young people to live a well regulated life are both indicative and constitutive of an institutionalised mistrust of young people. Importantly this institutionalised mistrust of youth is further structured along class, gender and ethnic lines. So the consequences, intended or otherwise, of this mistrust are differently experienced by different populations of young people.

Some Closing Thoughts on the Risky Business of Growing Up

The politics of mistrust are always discursive – questions of sovereignty, of threats to sovereignty, are always metaphorical as well as territorial. Yet the exercise of sovereignty, and how we imagine risks, dangers and threats are not just the stuff of metaphor and discourse. The exercise of power, as often overwhelming force, but also in the form of pervasive and near total surveillance with the aim of economically, and prudently, managing risk and danger can have a range of problematic, and often unintended, consequences.

In many respects the politics that attempt to problematise the institutionalised mistrust of Youth must be discursive. In this sense there is a need to analyse the systems of thought, and the techniques by which the government of Youth is made known, made possible and practised. In doing so we ought highlight the sovereign and disciplinary aspects of the illiberal governmentalities that seek to provoke the emergence of the well-regulated, self fashioning autonomy of normal adulthood. The tensions within these rationalities of rule - between 'the ideals of a liberal order and the mechanisms of security that are set in place to secure it' (Osborne 1996: 117) - are points that both illuminate those rationalities that frame the mistrust of Youth, and points of departure for problematising these rationalities.
References


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