What's the Problem? Precarious Youth: Marginalisation, Criminalisation and Racialisation.

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Since the nineteenth century invention of adolescence, young people have been consistently identified as social problems in western societies. Their contemporary status as a focus of fear and anxiety is, in that sense, nothing new. In this paper, I try to combine this sense of historical recurrence about the youth problem with some questions about what is different about the present – asking what is distinctive about the shape of the youth problem now? This is a difficult balance to strike, and what I have to say will probably lean more towards an emphasis on the historical conditions and routes of the youth problem. That balance reflects my own orientations and knowledge (I am not expert on the contemporary conditions of being young). But it also arises from my belief that much contemporary social science is profoundly forgetful. An enthusiasm for stressing the newness, or novelty, of the present connects many varieties of contemporary scholarship. One result is the construction of what Janet Fink and I have referred to as 'sociological time' in which

"distinctions between past and present persistently offer over-unified accounts of a stable and settled past against which can be set a view of the present as dynamic, mobile, and fluid. Instead, we think there may be some merit in 'historicising the present'. Rather than stressing the difference of the present, we might look for continuities in the conditions, relations and processes that underlie the construction, destabilisation and reconstruction of [social political and cultural] formations" (Clarke and Fink 2008: 228).

In that vein, this paper begins by recovering some aspects of the history of the youth problem as it has been defined in western industrial-urban capitalist settings since the middle of the nineteenth century.

Youth: always/already a problem

The late nineteenth invention or discovery of adolescence as a distinctive 'stage of life' underpins the recent history of the youth problem. There are, of course, earlier references to the dangerous and disorderly conduct of young people from Greek and Roman civilisations, but adolescence marks the construction of youth in scientific and governmental terms. Naming the problem, as Foucauldian approaches remind us, forms the precondition for elaborating descriptions and diagnoses and for the development of policies and practices intended to contain or cure the problem. The invention of adolescence brings with a particular set of constructions of youth and the youth problem based in a physiology and psychology of instability (Muncie 2004, chapter 2).

Before saying more about the intricate relationship between the invention of adolescence and the formation of the youth problem, it is worth noting that nineteenth century capitalist

societies were overflowing with focal points of social anxiety: from the state of the family to the health of the proletariat; from urban sanitation to socialism; from the dangerous classes to the improvement of the 'race'. The youth problem took its place within this cornucopia of fear, anxiety and dread. It was both a distinctive focus – and was interwoven with aspects of all the other anxieties that combined to form 'the social question'.

Nevertheless, the scientific naming of adolescence created some of the core elements of the discourse of the youth problem. It announced the problem as rooted in the physiological and psychological dynamics of a distinctive stage of life that fell between childhood and adulthood. The onset of puberty (the turbulent body) was associated with psychological turbulence – the struggle to create and establish a settled identity. Adolescence was thus a distinctive period characterised by 'sturm und drang' – storm and stress. Several key features follow from this description. First, young people are normally 'abnormal' – their turbulence is a knowable and predictable effect of their stage of life. It is, as the English phrase captured it, 'just a phase they are going through'. Second, the idea of the stage or phase pointed to the possibility of progress – that young people would stop being young (and turbulent) and become adults. Third, knowledge of the phase might provide the basis for interventions that would ensure progress – here lies the foundation of many varieties of expertise that subsequently lay claim to youth and the youth problem. Fourth, the period requires adult scrutiny and supervision – young people are best not left alone. Unsupervised young people mark the possibility of the next problem – being abnormally abnormal or pathological. A variety of pathologies flow from being out of sight: delinquency, sexual deviancy, excessive sociability (gangs) or excessive solitude.

The youth problem and problem youth
It is in this space – the relationship between normal abnormality and the abnormal abnormalities – that the youth problem is constructed. Young people are unstable and potentially dangerous, especially when unsupervised. Institutions of containment and supervision are elaborated – with the school as the primary site. But beyond the school (or between the school and the good family) opportunities for dangerous, disorderly or deviant behaviour abounded – especially in the streets. Delinquency (of various kinds) becomes a focus of special attention from the police and other criminal justice institutions.

Some young people then become the focus of selective attention – problem youth who stand out from the youth problem. These were predominantly young working class males in public spaces, although other sorts of young people, other types of delinquency and other sites were also subject to surveillance and possible criminalization (May 1973; Clarke 1975; see also the readings collected in Muncie et al. 2002). Youth continually appears in this difficult double aspect – both a generational phenomenon (the stage of life) and in specific troubling formations of social relations (in which gender, race and class are articulated with the dimensions of age). These troubling young people are never 'just' young people: they have a particular social character. This changes from period to period, and from place to place, but it is never merely a question of age.

The construction of this double dynamic – the youth problem and problem youth – provided the conditions for the proliferation of forms of expertise, some addressed generically to the youth problem (the phase) and some directed more specifically to the pathologies of problem youth. On the one side we have schools and the elaboration of pedagogical professions and the rise of youth workers and youth clubs. On the other, we encounter policing, the interventions of what Nikolas Rose calls the psy-complex (1990) in the form of psychologists,

social workers, and the 'detached' youth worker, on the streets to engage the 'unclubbable'. As with all such regimes of truth, the claim to knowledge and the claim to power are combined – knowing young people is the foundation for claiming the authority to intervene.

As a result, the youth problem and problem youth are always/already framed by these intersecting fields of expertise (and the institutionalised sites of their interventions). We can never come to these issues 'fresh' because they have been colonised by psychological, pedagogical and criminological knowledges (assembled and mobilised in different professions, practices and settings). This field of multiple knowledges is sometimes, and too crudely, grasped in terms of different 'principles' – such as the welfare versus justice debate around juvenile justice systems. Discovering such principles aims to simplify and clarify governmental policy and practices, but tends to conceal the ways in which multiple knowledges and their logics are assembled in specific compound formations, and to disguise the large and small politics that underpin such assemblages (Newman and Clarke 2009). One result of such processes of assembling and re-assembling is the reworking for forms of power and authority – who 'owns' the youth problem and problem youth?

What's the problem now?
Taking a historical view of the youth problem helps to overcome the issue of 'sociological time', but poses a different difficulty. The youth problem can instead be seen as a matter of endless recurrence – an approach exemplified in Pearson's 'history of respectable fears' (1983) in which 'hooliganism' emerges as the focus of popular and political anxieties that reappear from generation to generation. While it is certainly true that the youth problem is a recurrent object of concern, it seems to me to be important to examine its distinctive mixtures of change and continuity, rather than emphasising one aspect or the other. Instead, I want to argue for a view of the youth problem that is attentive to a double dynamic – a long history of its formation, and shorter or more conjunctural moments in which the elements of the youth problem become reworked into new, and newly alarming, configurations. For me, this double movement offers the best hope of avoiding the risks of sociological presentism on the one hand, and an eternalised history on the other.

It is certainly beyond the scope of this paper to trace out the full series of historical movements since the mid 19th century construction of the youth problem described above and the present anxieties. We might, however, note some of the elements that are put to work in different configurations of the youth problem. The issue of social and psychological instability is clearly one of the core features, but it is regularly mapped in relation to a series of other key themes: the problem of autonomy (unsupervised youth); the relationships between youth, education, work and family formation; the shifting gendered forms of criminal and sexual delinquency (dangerous youth); the exploitation of youth; and the relationships between youth, the nation and issues of race/ethnicity. In relation to this last point, while the youth problem has often been identified as part of the larger question of the future of the nation – the contemporary anxieties of postcolonial and globalised nationalism have brought this set of connections into the foreground.

Across the last 150 years, these different elements have been revised and reworked in the shifting kaleidoscope of the youth problem. At times, the dominant focus has been on questions of delinquent youth; at others the transitions from school of work and adulthood have been increasingly pressing. In the 1950s and 1960s, questions of moral delinquency and the exploitation of youth for commercial ends tended to dominate in the discovery of 'youth culture'. By the 1970s and 1980s, questions of the 'transition' had once again come to the

forefront in the great waves of North Atlantic deindustrialization and the break-up of Fordist political, social and cultural settlements.

How then are these elements being re-assembled as the youth problem in the present? What is at stake in debates about 'marginalised youth'? I want to suggest that we are seeing a combined and overdetermined crisis of youth that is connected with, but not identical to, a range of other social, political, economic and institutional crises. The contemporary youth problem stands in a double relationship to the question of crisis: the marginalised (though it might be more accurate to say precarious) position of young people is an effect of these multiple crises. The youth problem is also one of the ways in which these crises are being represented in social and political discourse. That is, we are invited to understand the present not as a multiple and overdetermined series of crises, but as a crisis of youth.

In a vital book, Larry Grossberg (2005) has argued that young people exist in a distinctive and distinctively vulnerable relationship to the multiple crises of 'Euro modernity'. He begins from an argument that the USA has declared war on its young – a war that links how the society imagines and talks about the young; how it approaches issues of their treatment, discipline and regulation; and finally, their economic impoverishment. He claims that

"Over the past twenty five years, there has been a significant transformation in the ways we talk and think about kids and, consequently, in the ways we treat them. We live, for at least part of the time, in a rhetorically constructed picture of kids out of control, an enemy hiding within our most intimate spaces. The responses – zero tolerance, criminalization and imprisonment, psychotropic drugs and psychiatric confinement – suggest not only that we have abandoned the current generation of kids but that we think of them as a threat that has to be contained, punished and only in some cases, recruited to our side. According to the Children's Defense Fund, every second, a public high schools student is suspended; every ten seconds, a public high school student is corporally punished; every twenty seconds, a kid is arrested. Criminalization and medicalization are cheap (financially and emotionally) and expedient ways to deal with out fears and frustrations" (Grossberg 2005: 36).

As with all borrowings from the USA, it is important to insist on questions of political and cultural specificity (the US is not simply the exemplary modern society). But even if the intensity of these reactions are not common to European societies, enough of their features can be discerned in contemporary versions of the youth problem to suggest that, in the present, youth occupies a distinctive place in the multiple crises of 'Euro modernity'- and the attempts to resolve them.

In these crises, young people are distinctively exposed, or made precarious because of the way that what might be separated out as economic crises, social crises, political crises and institutional crises come together or coalesce in ways that bear particularly on young people. For example, the problems of public order and public space (and the demands for new kinds of regulation and policing) are not the same as the crises of continued deindustrialization, the rise of fractured and contingent work and the decline of employment as a stable institutional arrangement (Sennett 2006). Nor are the crises of social-institutional authority and the so-called 'decline of deference' directly related to the dislocations of the nation-state form in a period in which post-colonial dislocations have encountered new global flows of capital, commodities and people. Nevertheless, we might note how they come together to press on young people in distinctive ways. The economic and institutional shattering of 'work' is not only a disruption of 'the transition from school to work', nor is it just an absence of

employment – it involves the remaking of established ideas of time, age and generation that have ordered the relationship between work, identity and social life since the Industrial revolution.

Equally, the implications of the crises of 'traditional authority' are complex, but the most visible and audible aspects are addressed to young people. In the UK the Blair governments made a major feature of the 'Respect' agenda and the need to confront and contain 'anti-social behaviour' (Burney 2002). Both of these concerns were addressed directly to the 'incivilities' of young people – especially in public space. It has long been evident that for most young people, access to 'private space' is relatively restricted – a condition that makes them more dependent on public spaces. In the present, that makes them more vulnerable to new forms of surveillance, regulation and policing.. Emerging patterns of temporal, social and spatial segregation (e.g., around the night time economy) have intensified the visibility of young people.

Each of the contemporary crises has an aspect that renders young people more vulnerable and more precarious in material terms and simultaneously makes them more visible as the embodiment of crisis. It is, I think, important to hold onto this double process – otherwise we may only catch the 'marginalisation' of youth without their 'demonisation', or vice versa. But it is the combination of material precariousness and symbolic vulnerability that makes the present youth problem so dangerous.

In this current youth problem, there are three different versions or varieties of young people that are made visible in the dominant representations: marginal youth, criminal youth and 'youth of migrant origin'. Marginal youth – sometimes marginalised youth – are the focus of what we might call new 'welfarist' discourses (perhaps mnore so than in the USA). Despite the supposed dominance of individualising/privatising neo-liberalism and the accompanying subordination of the social (Clarke 2007), new varieties of welfarism have been constructed – and conceptions of exclusion and marginalisation have been central to them. The idea of marginalisation announces a central sort of public concern (and not just anxiety about anti-social behaviour). It looks to institutional, social and cultural sources of marginality – failures of the school system, social-spatial concentrations of deprivation and lowered aspirations, and sub-cultural deviance against mainstream norms and social integration, for example. But it is rarely about the structural dislocations and material inequalities that produce precarity for many young people. It tends towards the particularised social, spatial and cultural processes that prevent social inclusion or integration (Levitas 2005; Lister 2004).

In conceptions of the current youth problem, discourses of marginalisation also tend to be subordinate to those of criminality and anti-social-ness. Here the youth problem takes on its conventional character – delinquent, deviant, depraved and dangerous young people as a threat to social order, to civility and 'our way of life'. The 'social', as it is imagined in these discourses of dangerousness, appears peculiarly anachronistic, even allowing for the persistence of what Pearson called 'golden age' mythologies. It exists outside of, or in no discernible relationship to, any of those processes of economic, social, cultural and political dislocation that are involved in the multiple crises of the present. There is, however, one exception to this anachronistic quality: the presence of 'young people of migrant origin'.

As with many other nostalgic discourses of social life, social order and community, one contemporary process has come to be identified as the force of disruption – as the author of our present troubles. The presence of migrant Others is seen to mark the shift from an

integrated and stable community to a disintegrated, contentious and disorderly one (Clarke, 2009). In such conceptions, we can see homologies between different sorts of spaces – the region (Europe), the nation (Britain), the city (London), the neighbourhood (Spitalifields). Each of these can be imagined as a once coherent community that has been dis-integrated, and such imaginings underpin nostalgic fantasies of restoration: the purification of the relationship between people and place. I will return to this in the final section, but it is important to note here how marginalisation, criminalisation and the marking of some young people as Other come together in defining the contemporary youth problem.

Policing the crisis of youth
In 1978, I was one of the authors of a book called *Policing the Crisis* that examined how the multiple crises of liberal/social democratic rule in Britain came together to be represented in the symbolism of a distinctive type of youth crime: mugging (Hall et al. 1978). On the occasion of the book's 30th anniversary, I think it may be helpful to consider how its analysis and argument might illuminate the present youth problem. The book pointed to a simultaneous criminalization and racialization of the youth problem through the figure of the mugger. Street crime ('mugging') came to stand for a society that had slipped 'out of control'. The mugger was (imagined as) young male and black (African-Caribbean). He was thus out of place (an enemy within…) and threatening in multiple ways.

No amount of economic, social and political analysis of why street crime might be a plausible strategy for young black men in 1970s Britain was, by itself, enough to explain how 'mugging' came to be a way of both defining and responding to crisis. 'Mugging' stood for a set of fears and anxieties about multiple dynamics of dislocation, decline and disorder – it crystallised these heterogeneous processes in a single compelling image that spoke to the 'state of the nation', and, of course, how it might be improved. Mugging was what Foucault, writing about madness, homosexuality and other phenomena, has called a 'transactional reality' (Foucault 2008: 297) – that is it was assembled as the object of a particular articulation of knowledge and power, and as the focus of particular strategies of governing. For *Policing the Crisis*, mugging crystallised multiple fears, it condensed multiple crises, and it provided the condition for an authoritarian politics: a politics of law and order. The *criminalization* of the crisis created the terrain for the proposed solutions: the restoration of order through policing; the *racialization* of crime identified the causes and the targets (Webster 2006).

I want to suggest two ways in which the book continues to speak to the present - and the present youth problem in particular. The first concerns the way in which it identified the potency of mapping the crisis through the articulations of race and nation. The processes of youth criminalization have continued to run in tandem with anxieties about the state of the nation: the discovery and abandonment of a grudging 'multi-culturalism'; the shift from community relations to community cohesion; the segues between race, ethnicity, culture and faith; the shifting figure of the enemy within (from disaffected black youth to radicalised Muslim youth); and the continuing problematization of 'immigration' as THE index of national crisis. Such tropes have whirled around the question of what it means to be British/English (and that distinction became increasingly unstable too) and how such Britishness/Englishness is to be both identified and inculcated. National membership has become more conditional and more subject to demanders that 'newcomers' should 'earn citizenship'. Reporting on popular attitudes to British citizenship, the Home Office reported how tolerance and respect were to be balanced:

"In sum, the prevalent point of view was a genuine desire to be welcoming, tempered by a belief that the welcome should not be unconditional. The views we received were unambiguous on three points in particular: it is important to speak the common language, make an economic contribution *to the country and* obey the law"(Home Office 2008: 14-15; emphasis in original).

Young people of 'migrant origin' (even if that point of origin lies many generations in the past) are constantly rendered visible and vulnerable by these renewed anxieties about the nation (across the whole of Europe, not just in Britain). They are permanently 'suspect' – seen as bearing the wrong values or 'traditional' cultural norms and practices (as opposed to the modernity of Europe, Brown 2006). They have the wrong sorts of masculinity and feminity: too hard or too soft; too edgy or too traditional (Alexander 2000). Finally, they may suffer from divided loyalties when the 'national question' is asked: having attachments to geo-political or religious elsewheres that interrupt their identification with the nation.

I want to conclude with a reflection on what it means to be 'policing the crisis' now. Viewed from 2008, the crisis looks deeper, more durable and more complex than we allowed in 1978. We have seen several attempts at 'modernising' Britain since the end of the 1970s, each of which has certainly wrought substantial changes on the economic, social and cultural landscapes, but none of which has succeeded in establishing a new stabilised solution to the antagonisms and contradictions of British modernity (or the British version of Euro Modernity). Some of those modernising strategies have changed balances of power and reconstructed large parts of the state apparatus. But they appear locked within what we called the 'exhaustion of consent', trying to combine managing the grudging, sceptical, demanding and divided publics while simultaneously remaking the formations of power, wealth and inequality. They also appear locked into the problematic of the 'law and order' solution to those problems – in the form and action of state power (as well as its privatised supplements), in the response to deviance and dissidence, and in the voicing of populist politics.

But what strikes me most in 2007 is how much the spatial character of the crisis has changed – or at least how many of its dimensions and dynamics work both on and across a larger scale than the uncomfortable assemblage of England/Britain/the United Kingdom. Some of this concerns the ways in which at least elements of the crisis are paralleled or echoed in other places. This is perhaps most obvious in terms of the crisis of the nation: where in Europe has not been undergoing its version of this crisis? And where in Europe has not figured that crisis precisely through the terms of race/ethnicity? But the question of scale is also about the greater visibility of the multiple flows and trajectories that connect these 'national' crises – whether it be the demonised flows of people deemed to threaten national social solidarity or the flows of political strategies, policies and devices that travel global circuits, offering themselves as solutions to the problems of economic development, social disorder and political disaffection – from empowerment to policing policies and practices. But the spread across time and space makes conjunctural analysis more, not less, important since this is precisely the grand scale that invites 'epochal analysis'. This is where the grand narratives return to offer themselves – the roll-out of corporate globalisation; the surrender to the culture of control; the neo-liberalization of everything. The problem needs to be restated – how can we recognise the multiplicity of currents that make up a conjuncture? How can we address their simultaneity and interconnectedness without collapsing their specificity as forces shaping the present and as possible routes to the future. The current version of the youth problem – its articulation of marginalised youth, criminalised youth and 'young people of

migrant origin' – takes its shape from this conjuncture. The youth problem is rarely a problem of young people.

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