The dangerousness of youth-at-risk: the possibilities of surveillance and intervention in uncertain times

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This paper will explore the dangerous possibilities provoked by the popular and promiscuous construction of the category of “youth-at-risk”. In an age of large-scale and profound social changes, narratives of uncertainty and risk dominate popular, political and theoretical discourses about youth. Under these social conditions, the discourse of youth-at-risk is mobilized from a variety of intellectual and political positions in various attempts to regulate the behaviors and dispositions of youth. The paper will argue that these discourses provoke dangerous possibilities for the increased surveillance of, and intervention into, young people’s lives by regulatory authorities (schools, police, health services, and juvenile justice systems) and the forms of expertise recruited by these agencies.

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Introduction

If it is true that young people are the nation’s most precious resource, then the nation needs better means of measuring the overall effectiveness of the socialization process. Systematic efforts are needed to assess the adolescent population over time. Such efforts will require multifaceted measures that examine a range of adolescent attributes, including perceptions, behaviors and accomplishments... The need to adequately monitor adolescents from low-income families is especially urgent. Relatively little is known about the exposure of the adolescent population to high-risk settings on a national and regional basis. In addition, studies do not adequately sample by race or ethnicity, and hence little is known about some of the most vulnerable populations (Panel on High-Risk Youth, 1993, pp. 255–256).

The question of youth, of what to do with them, of how to school them, or police them, or regulate them, or house them, or employ them, or prevent them from becoming involved in any number of risky (sexual, eating, drug (ab)using or peer cultural) practices are questions which have a substantial historical aspect.* In the liberal democracies at the start of the millennium, the crisis of youth-at-risk is a key marker in debates about youth among intellectuals, social commentators, politicians, bureaucrats and experts in various domains of expertise. Swadener and Lubeck (1995) have argued that the truth of youth-at-risk rehearses, in part, the historical truths of youth as delinquent, deviant and disadvantaged. However, a historically novel aspect of the truth of youth-at-risk is that, potentially, every behavior, every practice, every group of young people can be constructed in terms of risk (Tait, 1995).

At a quite fundamental level this paper is not about the risky practices, behaviors and dispositions of young people. Nor is it my concern to identify or argue for appropriate

*For an Australian perspective on these histories, and the ways in which class, gender and race have been significant in conceiving youth as deviant, delinquent and/or disadvantaged, see Beasley (1991), Bessant (1991), Carrington (1991), Collard and Palmer (1991), Irving (1991), Maunders (1991), Sherington (1991) and Wyn (1991).
practices of intervention and treatment for youth-at-risk. Rather, my interest is with the ways in which institutionally structured processes of expert knowledge production construct the truths of youth-at-risk. I am concerned with the processes by which these largely autonomous systems of expertise mobilize categories of risk in diverse attempts to regulate the behaviors and dispositions of certain populations of young people under the conditions of “reflexive modernization” (Beck et al., 1994).

In this analysis I will argue for the possibilities of a productive convergence between theories of “reflexive modernization” (Beck et al., 1994) and “governmentality” (Foucault, 1991). This convergence enables youth-at-risk to be examined at two interconnected levels. In the first instance, risk will be understood as constituting a metanarrative in an age of “manufactured uncertainty” (Giddens, 1994). Secondly, the identification of risk factors and populations-at-risk will be understood as techniques mobilized in diverse attempts to “make up” rational, choice-making, autonomous, responsible citizens within various projects of government (Rose, 1996a).

My purpose is to highlight the dangerousness of risk discourses; a dangerousness which can be understood in the context of intellectual, political and popular concerns about the uncertainty of our times, and in the intellectual projects of various forms of expertise which construct youth-at-risk in relation to certain preferred futures. Risk discourses are dangerous in the sense that these discourses promise that the risks, the uncertainties and the contingencies of human behaviors, dispositions and interactions in complex settings can be objectively, scientifically or critically identified. Once identified, various programs and interventions can then be mobilized to regulate the dangers, the uncertainties and the contingencies of an age of “manufactured uncertainty” (Giddens, 1994). Youth-at-risk discourses are, in this sense, an instance of modern technologies of “prevention”, technologies which are “overarched by a grandiose technocratic rationalizing dream of absolute control of the accidental, understood as the irruption of the unpredictable” (Castel, 1991, p. 289).

**Constructing youth-at-risk**

The youth-at-risk literature is extensive.† Swadener and Lubeck (1995), for instance, claim that in the U.S.A. since 1989 over 2500 articles and conference papers have focused on the issue of children, families and youth-at-risk. Withers and Batten (1995, pp. 5–6) provide one avenue for entering the vast discursive terrain of youth-at-risk. Their review of the at-risk literature identifies two central and often “competing” concerns within at-risk discourses. They identify, in the first instance, a “humanistic intention” which structures the identification and intervention processes enabled by constructing youth-at-risk. This intention is grounded in concerns about harm, danger, care and support for those young people who might be at risk. In the second instance, an “economic intention” legitimates these attempts to regulate youthful identities. This intention foregrounds the costs and the benefits—to young people and families, but primarily to communities and the nation—of identifying risk factors and populations-at-risk, and of mobilizing certain interventions on the basis of these identifications. Withers and Batten (1995, pp. 5–6) suggest that these two

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intentions are not necessarily “conflicting or contra-distinctive”. Rather, their review of the at-risk literature suggests a “competition for primacy” between these humanistic and economic concerns; a competition which can be identified in any number of interventionist programs which take as their object youth-at-risk.

One example of where these concerns coexist and compete in at-risk discourses can be found in English’s (1988) foreword to Ogden and Germinario’s (1988) The at-risk student. Here, English suggests that occasionally it is necessary to “explain why a book has been written. This one requires no such justification” (p. xiii, original emphasis). The problems that at-risk students present for “parents, teachers and school administrators” are self-evident in statistics which English cites “from news articles and editorials in the nation’s press”. These U.S. statistics suggest that: “Student suicide has increased 140 percent. Teenage homicide increased 232 percent. Juvenile delinquency rates rose by 131 percent. The illegitimate birth rate increased by 141 percent” (p. xiii).‡ Against this backdrop of youth in crisis, English highlights nationwide calls “for dealing with at-risk students”, as a matter of urgency lest this “most compelling agenda” threatens “America’s position as a world economic power” (p. xiii, original emphasis).

A report from the Panel on High-Risk Youth for the U.S. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (National Research Council) (1993, p. 1) also argues that Americans are “alarmed” by the increases in the “numbers of adolescents who engage in high risk behaviors” and/or who “adopt ‘risk lifestyles’, lifestyles characterized by drug use, unprotected sexual behavior, dropping out of school, delinquency and violence”. The commission argues that these behaviors of a population (adolescents) who “naturally” experiment and “take risks” “compromise their health, endanger their lives, and limit their chances to achieve successful adult lives”. Colthart (1996) canvasses similar themes when he cites a Western Australian government report which positions youth as being at risk “if their life circumstances threaten physical, psychological or emotional well-being and preclude or limit the normative developmental experiences necessary to achieve healthy adult functioning” (p. 31). A major concern for the legislators who authored this report is that population of young people “who have multiple risk factors”. These at-risk young people are often “seriously troubled” and “alienated from mainstream society” (p. 32).

As a construction of diverse forms of expertise, the discourses of youth-at-risk are potentially encompassing of all youthful behaviors and dispositions. Indeed, the expert literature is unselfconsciously explicit on this very point. Ogden and Germinario (1988, p. xvii), for instance, in their attempt to identify “high risk” student populations argue that “All children are at times students-at-risk”. Withers and Batten (1995) and Batten and Russell (1995), in extensive reviews of this literature, also point to this “central” theme in at-risk discourses. Mobilizing a developmental psychology understanding of adolescence, Withers and Batten (1995, p. 1) argue that the psychological, physiological and “social stresses and tensions” experienced during adolescence mean that “all youths are in some sense at risk”. The view that all young people are potentially at-risk signals a historically novel development in attempts to regulate youthful identities. At-risk discourses constitute, in part, a historical continuity in the construction of certain youthful populations in terms of

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‡English does not reference the sources of these statistics, or indicate the time frame in which these increases occurred, or provide definitions of concepts such as “delinquency”. Further, there is no reference, in an academic text, to the possibilities of media sensationalism or manipulation in the reporting of these issues. They are self-evident. At the time of publication English was the chair of the Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, University of Cincinnati.
deviancy, delinquency and deficit. At-risk discourses, however, provide a technique and a narrative for attempts to regulate the behaviors and dispositions of young people which is potentially “endless” (Tait, 1995, p. 128). In this paper, risk is conceived as a metanarrative of a more fully “reflexive modernity” (Beck et al., 1994) and as a technique of government which promises the possibility of regulating youthful identities under these conditions. Understood in this manner, the historically novel character of at-risk discourses becomes evident in that no youthful relations, practices, behaviors and/or dispositions remain outside of the domain of these discourses. As Tait (1995) argues, “nothing” in at-risk discourses “remains beyond governmental intervention. Since ‘risk’ can be legitimately found anywhere, there is therefore no one who is not at risk of something” (p. 128, original emphasis).

It is important here to avoid any sense of total government by an all-powerful state which through its activities represses the possibility of full human potential in the name of social control. Rather, theories of governmentality construct government and regulation in terms of historically contingent attempts to “make up” particular (ideal) types of person (Foucault, 1991; Rose and Miller, 1992). Moreover, these attempts at regulation are not the sole province of a monologic state. Rather, government is structured by the diverse attempts of various experts and centres of expertise to regulate the behaviors and dispositions of expertly identified populations (Rose, 1996a). What is important in terms of the present discussion is the ways in which power relations, conceived in terms of actions upon actions, have, in the space of the modern nation state, become “governmentalized”. Foucault (1983, p. 224) argues that the forms of the “government of men by one another in any society are multiple”. These actions upon actions can be “superimposed, they cross, impose their own limits, sometimes cancel one another out, sometimes reinforce one another”. However, what is of concern with understanding the nature of government in the liberal democracies is that “the state is not simply one of the forms or specific situations of the exercise of power—even if it the most important—but that in a certain way all other forms of power relation must refer to it”. Here, Foucault’s argument rests not on the notion that these other specific relations of power are derived from the state. Instead there is a sense in which other forms of power relations—in schools, in the justice system, in families, in economic relations—are increasingly regulated, deregulated and re-regulated by the state. These diverse relations and settings, these various fields of actions upon actions, have become “governmentalized, that is to say, elaborated, rationalized and centralized in the form of, under the auspices of, state institutions”. As Rose and Miller (1992, p. 175) argue, government in this mode of analysis can be conceived as being:

intrinsically linked to the activities of expertise, whose role is not one of weaving an all-pervasive web of “social control”, but of enacting assorted attempts at the calculated administration of diverse aspects of conduct through countless, often competing, local tactics of education, persuasion, inducement, management, incitement, motivation and encouragement.

Regulating the uncertainty of modernity

Early 21st century identity, as embodied, as grounded in place-determined relations of co-presence, and in networks of increasingly globalized relations, is thoroughly penetrated by distant influences (Giddens, 1990) and by attempts to regulate identities “from a distance” (Rose and Miller, 1992). Giddens (1990) argues that expertise and “expert systems” are constitutive of the dynamism of modernity. Expert systems are “systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise”. As such they are substantially implicated in the
structuring and ordering of the “material and social environments” of modernity (Giddens, 1990, p. 27). The point which both Foucauldian genealogies of government and Giddens emphasize in relation to expert systems and expertise is that such systems are highly consequential in the ordering of “social relations themselves and the intimacies of the self”; the “doctor, counsellor and therapist are as central to the expert systems of modernity as the scientist, technician or engineer” (Giddens, 1991, p. 181). Beck et al. (1994) argue that the activities and practices of expertise assume novel levels of significance in a more reflexive modernity.

Theories of reflexive modernization emerge from intellectual debates about the nature of modernity and/or postmodernity (Beck et al., 1994). Processes of reflexive modernization are characterized by institutional and expert reflexivity in which claims to certainty in knowledge production become intensely problematic. The reflexivity of institutionalized expertise results in a “runaway world” of “dislocation” and “uncertainty” (Giddens, 1994). Human existence is not necessarily more risky in an age of “manufactured uncertainty”. Rather, the origins of risk and uncertainty have changed. Processes of intellectually grounded knowledge production about the social and the natural, and the various attempts to apply this knowledge in the quest for certainty in human interventions into, and interactions in, these domains, constitute the motive forces of this manufactured uncertainty. This “paradox of human knowledge” is central to understanding processes of reflexive modernization (Beck et al., 1994). These processes are marked by the emergence of a degree of collective awareness that our contemporary conditions of existence are characterized by the thoroughgoing penetration of the social and the natural by reflexive human knowledge. Such a situation leads, not to a position in “which collectively we are the masters [sic] of our destiny”, but rather to a series of settings in which we are confronted with the possibility that, as a “consequence of our own doings”, the future becomes “very threatening” (Beck et al., 1994, p. vii). At the start of the millennium, as Beck (1994) argues, “uncertainty returns”.

The impulse to construct and calculate risk scenarios becomes energized within those forms of expertise which appropriate the tasks of regulating this uncertainty via discourses of risk. Watts (1993–94) provides a means to link this discussion of the uncertainty of our times to the dangerousness of attempts to regulate this uncertainty. For Watts (1993–94, p. 108), thinking about the problem of government, and the problematics which structure attempts to regulate, in this instance, the behaviors and disposition of young people, means constructing the problem as a discursive phenomenon within the “transformative dynamics of the modernizing project”. Watts (1993–94, p. 126) is concerned with understanding what it is about the conditions of modernity that has called up new forms of governmentality. The “true pathos” of modernity can be found in the “response of the chief architects of modernity to what they have helped to make”. Governmentality, in its historically variable manifestations, is an ongoing process marked by “attempts to manage the fragmentation endemic to modernity” (p. 126). What is at issue here is that, over the past two hundred years in particular, “scientific and professional discourses about our bodies, our minds and our relationships to each other and society” (p. 120) have worked to produce “distinctive forms of governmentality” (p. 126). Doctors, health professionals, lawyers, social (youth) workers, teachers, statisticians, “psy” scientists and many other experts in various centres of expertise have, in these processes of “intellectually grounded” knowledge production, reflexively reformulated ideas about, among other things, “badness, madness, youth, health, education and sexuality”—all this in a manner determined by the “application of certain tenets and
procedures which claim reason or reality as their guide” (p. 120). Government is thus a process of meaning-making in which “the meaning of social power hinges on the power to mean” (p. 121). Under these conditions it is “hardly surprising” that “the distinctive ontology of modernity that is itself a product of the increasing authority of the intellectually trained is also the field of action in which the same group ‘discover’ the problem of social integration and order” (p. 126).

Modernity is dynamic, unsettling and disintegrative of traditional modes of social organization; including the modes of sociality distinctive of modernity. Yet it is so largely through the practices of abstraction and intellectuality where these practices penetrate and colonize all areas of life, natural and social. The problems of social order and integration, of the regulation of populations of young people in this instance, which are endemic as a consequence of modernity then become the field of action in which forms of abstraction and intellectuality are deployed as distinctive modes of government.

Regulating youth-at-risk in uncertain times

Youth, as a means of constructing, in particular ways, certain populations, is an artefact of a history of diverse ways of thinking about the behaviors and dispositions of those who are neither child nor adult. Indeed, as an artefact of expertise, youth is principally about becoming: becoming an adult, becoming a citizen, becoming independent, becoming autonomous, becoming mature, becoming responsible. There is some sense in which all constructions of youth defer to this narrative of becoming, of transition. Moreover, there is a sense in which becoming automatically invokes the future. Youth, as it is constructed in at-risk discourses, is at-risk of jeopardizing, through present behaviors and dispositions, desired futures. The discourse of youth-at-risk mobilizes a form of probabilistic thinking about certain preferred or ideal adult futures and the present behaviors and dispositions of youth. This sort of probabilistic thinking attempts to construct statistically valid, causal relationships between these different configurations of time and space, between these different constructions of adolescent and adult. These possible futures, as additional artefacts of the activities of expertise, are fundamentally normative. There is a strong sense here that there are preferred futures awaiting these populations in transition. The narrative of risk provokes this normative epistemology. These preferred futures, whatever they might be, are placed at-risk through the present behaviors and dispositions of certain populations of youth and, importantly, of their families.

As a technique which promises to render government operable, risk works to “responsibilize” (Burchell 1996) both youth and the family. Youthful subjects are constructed as responsible for future life chances, choices and options within institutionally structured risk environments. These processes of responsibilization, in which the subject is compelled to prudently manage the institutionally structured and dependent risks of her/his own do-it-yourself project of the self (Beck, 1992), produce a “field characterized by uncertainty, plurality and anxiety, thus continually open to the construction of new problems and the marketing of new solutions” (Rose, 1996c, p. 343). The choices and practices, behaviors and dispositions of young people are their responsibility. The future consequences of these choices—about schooling, diet, sexuality, substance (ab)use—are outcomes which young people are responsible for. However, they are not solely responsible. The family, as the setting of nurturance, care and child/adolescent development, is increasingly responsibilized for the care of the youthful self. This process of responsibilization of the family is of a different order to the narrative of traditional family values which structures the political rhetorics of the
New Right. New forms of prudentialism in uncertain times indicate deeper transformations in the ways in which subjects are conceived as autonomous, choice-making and responsible. These transformations are not solely the province of political rhetorics. They are structured by the activities of various experts who restlessly monitor and problematize the nature and truths of youth and families and the forms of regulation which promise to “make up” these subjects. The pedagogic family (Donzelot, 1979), with the assistance of the truths produced by various forms of expertise (about the raising of children and adolescents), is responsible for making the right choices for the sake of the children. Youth and families, by adopting freely and by choice the practices for the responsible self, can attempt to ward off the uncertainty and risks structured by processes of reflexive modernization. Those families and youth whose behaviors and dispositions fall outside of the regulatory boundaries rendered knowable via the practices of expertise are those at-risk in these settings. Tait (1995, p. 133) argues that “in effect, the character of the ‘at-risk youth’ is used as the pretext for modifying and expanding the boundaries and responsibilities of the pedagogic family”.

Within transformed practices and spaces of regulation there are moves to normalize youth as rational, choice-making citizens (to-be) who are responsible for their future life chances through the choices they make with regard to school, career, relationships, substance (ab)use. At the same time there are increasingly sophisticated attempts to differentiate among youthful populations via the identification of risky behaviors and dispositions (factors) which place at-risk those practices and capacities of the self which can effect a secure transition to these preferred futures. Risk, as the double of (social, private) insurance, is a technique which promises to make these new practices of prudentialism concrete (O'Malley, 1996). This is a powerful promise. The techniques of risk, its objective, scientific identification, measurement and calculation, and its competing humanistic and economic concerns, promise to render uncertain (future) realities thinkable in ways which provoke prudent, choice-making subjects to be responsible for the consequences of their own behaviors and dispositions.

Here, there is a sense that identification and intervention (via education, counselling, psy diagnosis), as techniques facilitated by narratives of risk and enabled by the activities of expertise, recode institutionally structured relations of class, gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability and geography as complex, but quantifiable, factors which place certain youth at-risk. Once identified, measured and quantified within probabilistic rationalities, modes of intervention can be designed and implemented to enable regulatory projects which promise to minimize the harm of these factors. In this context it becomes possible to argue that the narrative of risk, and the techniques which both facilitate and are facilitated by conceiving of youth-at-risk, signal a historically novel development in attempts to regulate youth. At-risk discourses rehearse historical truths which construct youth in terms of deviancy, delinquency and deficit. However, at-risk discourses and techniques also promise potentially endless justifications for the surveillance of populations of youth.

The dangerousness of youth-at-risk

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous then we always have something to do (Foucault, 1983, pp. 231–232).

In conceiving risk as a metanarrative of an age of “manufactured uncertainty” I am concerned with foregrounding the dangerousness of our times, a dangerousness indicated by
the widespread sense of unease, anxiety and uncertainty in Anglo-European liberal
democracies. Here uncertainty attaches to the future outcomes for/of the planet, the nation
state, national (mono/multi) cultural identity, the economy, relationships, diet, sexuality,
gender relations, the self. When the endless possibilities for government which risk
techniques promise are situated in the context of the transformations structured by processes
of reflexive modernization, the dangerousness of risk becomes more evident, particularly in
the regulation of youth as a population constructed in terms of transitions to preferred
futures. Here the enhanced capacities for electronic, computerized and audio-visual
surveillance of populations, developments in biogenetic (social) engineering and the
possibilities of/for cyborg futures (Haraway, 1985, 1991) structure new spaces and relations in
which regulation can occur.

In these settings, powerful narratives of risk, fear and uncertainty structure a variety of
emergent processes and practices aimed at regulating the behaviors and dispositions of
populations of young people. In Australia and other liberal democracies, these practices include:

- An increasingly widespread use of electronic surveillance technologies (video,
audio) in spaces such as shopping malls, streets and schools;
- The proposed and actual introduction of state and local government laws and by-
  laws allowing night curfews, zero tolerance policing and electronic tagging of young
  offenders; and
- By-laws which set limits on the number of young people who may gather in certain
  public spaces and which allow police (public and private) to move young people on if
  they cause others anxiety.

In association with these more direct policing practices, increased levels of anxiety and
uncertainty provoke new forms of adult interventions into young people’s lives on the basis of
professional concerns about their welfare. Again, these practices include:

- The involvement of youth, community and health workers in street work with young
  people on projects which attempt to regulate antisocial practices;
- Various education programs which target the risky sexual, eating and drug practices
  of young people, or the nature of their transitions to adulthood; and
- A general concern for any youth activity which gives the appearance of being
  beyond the management or surveillance capacities of various agencies. These
  concerns are evidenced in the countless research projects which seek to better
  understand all aspects of youth in a manner which promises to develop more
  sophisticated ways of identifying, differentiating and naming populations of young
  people with regard to diverse professional and lay concerns.

Bauman (1990b, p. 165) argues that the “history of modernity” is a history of attempts to
“exterminate ambivalence: to define precisely—and to suppress or eliminate everything that
could or would not be precisely defined”. The costs of attempting to exterminate
ambivalence have, indeed, been high. The historical legacy of past attempts to impose order
on disorder, to pursue, rationally and scientifically, the quest for order indicate that countless
millions of humans have paid these costs with their lives, their liberty and their diverse
potentialities. Throughout this discussion I have foregrounded the dangerousness of the
practices and activities of expertise (grounded in narratives of scholarship, science and
reason) which promise certainty in an age of “manufactured uncertainty”, an age where
widespread anxieties, uncertainties and tensions enable the articulation of youth-at-risk to function as a powerful truth.

Bauman (1990a), from a position better able to judge than many of us, is particularly wary of modernity’s attempts to “exterminate ambivalence” and the dangers (even horrors) of the means mobilized to achieve this end (of uncertainty, of history). A Polish Jew and a former Communist academician, Bauman was exiled from Poland in 1968. He experienced “actually existing” Communism as the “kingdom of reason”. For Bauman (1990a, p. 36) modern Communism, with its philosophical and political indebtedness to the late 19th century “eruption of social engineering hopes”, demonstrates the “genocidal potency that the grand vision of perfect and rationalized society reveals when conjoined with the awesome powers of the modern state”. Bauman’s (1990a) investigations of the Holocaust, and histories of the Holocaust, provoke, further, a sense of being “struck by the evidence that the theoretical consequences which would follow from the scrupulous investigation of the case are seldom followed to the end and hardly ever accepted without resistance: too drastic and far-reaching seems the revision which they force upon the self-consciousness of our civilization” (p. 18). What is resisted by these histories is the recognition that in modernity’s war on ambivalence (made so murderously real in the practices of National Socialism) there has been a profound convergence between the “practical tasks posited by the modern state” and the “legislative reason of modern philosophy and of the modern scientific mentality in general” (p. 26). As Bauman (1990a) argues: “Modern rulers and modern philosophers were first and foremost legislators; they found chaos and set out to tame it and replace it with order” (p. 24, original emphasis). The modern project of the Enlightenment was, argues Bauman (1990a), motivated “by the dream of a masterful humanity”, a humanity which was “collectively free from constraints” and thus able to “respect” and “preserve” human “dignity”. The realization of this dream was to be facilitated via the elevation of “[r]eason to the office of supreme legislator” (p. 26, original emphasis). Notwithstanding this attachment to the narrative of human sovereignty there was, Bauman (1990a, p. 26) suggests, a certain “elective affinity” between the “strategy of legislative reason and the practice of state power bent on imposition of designed order upon obstreperous reality”.

The lessons of history ought to force us to confront “the end of innocence” (Flax, 1993) with respect to the uncertain consequences (the dangerousness) associated with the production and appropriation of intellectually grounded knowledge, knowledge which secures legitimacy through its objective, scientific, reasoned characteristics. History ought also to alert us to the dangerousness of the mobilization of scholarly work in modernity’s attempts to “exterminate ambivalence”. Between 1907 and 1928, for instance, 20 states in the U.S. enacted sterilization laws grounded in the science (truth) of race and eugenics. These technologies of government targeted bodies (populations) rendered knowable as “criminals, rapists, idiots, feeble-minded, imbeciles, lunatics, drunkards, drug fiends, epileptics, syphilitics, moral and sexual perverts and diseased and degenerate persons” (cited in Bauman 1990a, p. 36) In Australia the indigenous population, constructed as Other, as less than White (as the measure of normality), as living “lives devoid of value” (Bauman 1990a), were systematically, rationally and on the basis of sound scientific, ethical and moral principles, subjected to governmental practices which removed them from their

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lands, isolated and restricted them (discursively and materially) to the margins of mainstream (White) society, and dismantled their family and cultural traditions via practices such as the forced removal of children from their parents, a practice of salvation grounded in the sciences of eugenics and social biology and the morality of Christian redemption. Historical, sociological and cultural studies of youth suggest that youth too, as a population, as a signifier of apparent ungovernability, has a history of emerging from, of indeed occupying, certain “wild zones” in the collective imagination of modernity (Kelly, 1999). In these spaces, the poor, the promiscuous, the violent, the abusive, the illiterate, the idle, the addicts, the binge drinkers, the joy-riders, the homeless, the dropouts, the unemployed, the at-risk have provoked anxiety and a warrant for intervention in expert discourses. Here, in the practices and activities, the dreams and ambitions of intellectuals and the “educated classes”, can be found traces of the promise of order to be delivered by interventionist and transformative logics and practices, logics which promise perfectibility in human interactions, behaviors and dispositions if only we could produce more and better knowledge of these processes.

Bauman’s critique is not unique. Postmodern and feminist critiques of modern “legislative reasons” rehearse similar arguments. These critiques have informed the structure of this paper and my engagement with theories of reflexive modernization and governmentality. The promise of legislated reason, a promise to be delivered via the activities and practices of expertise, is not the sole province of the police states of history. The same hopes and visions structure the identification of future research objects in countless reports, by various centres of expertise; reports such as the one prepared by the Panel of High-Risk Youth. In these sorts of reports can be found the “normative, engineering ambitions that are inherent in all scientific enterprise... and that may lend themselves easily and joyously to political uses— anytime and everywhere” (Bauman, 1990a, pp. 40–41, original emphasis).

Conclusion

The modern ideologies of prevention are overarched by a grandiose technocratic rationalizing dream of absolute control of the accidental, understood as the irruption of the unpredictable. In the name of this myth of absolute eradication of risk, they construct a mass of new risks which constitute so many new targets for preventive intervention. Not just those dangers that lie hidden away inside the subject, consequences of his or her weakness of will, irrational desires or unpredictable liberty, but also the exogenous dangers, the exterior hazards and temptations from which the subject has not learnt to defend himself or herself, alcohol, tobacco, bad eating habits, road accidents, various kinds of negligence and pollution, meteorological hazards, etc. Thus, a vast hygienist utopia plays on the alternate registers of fear and security, inducing a delirium of rationality, an absolute reign of calculative reason and a no less absolute happiness for a life to which nothing happens. This hyper-rationalism is at the same time a thoroughgoing pragmatism, in that it pretends to eradicate risk as though one were pulling up weeds. Yet throughout the multiple current expressions of this tranquil preventive conscience (so hypertrophied at the moment in France, if one looks at all the massive national preventive campaigns), one finds not a trace of any reflection on the social and human cost of this new witch-hunt (Castel, 1991, p. 289).

Castel (1991) captures the dangerous possibilities provoked when, as Rose (1996b, p. 20) argues, “we allow all cultural practices to be ‘vivisected at the micro-level’ and give our

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†See for instance Cohen (1972), Hall et al. (1978), Gilroy (1987), McRobbie (1994) and the tradition of the “moral panic” in British cultural studies of youth.
experts the duty of defining and managing them in order to eliminate or minimize any possible features that might prove dangerous”. In this paper my purpose has been to reflect on the dangerous possibilities provoked by the mobilization of risk discourses in attempts to regulate youthful identities and to problematize the practices of intervention and surveillance which emerge from conceiving youth as being at-risk. At the close of the 20th century, the liberal democracies are characterized by profound social, economic and cultural transformations. In these settings, adult anxieties about the public and private behaviors and dispositions of young people mean that youth looms large and threateningly in community perceptions and in various policy areas and academic disciplines.

Cultural and policy contexts which are framed by uncertainty, fear and anxiety provoke dangerous possibilities in the regulation and surveillance of young people. In such contexts, the promise of safety, security, order and certainty which frames many of these surveillance and management practices can only be delivered via more sophisticated and powerful techniques of regulation and intervention. It is not possible to conceive of unregulated spaces. It is possible, however, that some forms of regulation, even those framed by concerns for the safety and wellbeing of young people, require school, local and national communities to give up more than is promised in the name of certainty, order and safety. In contemporary settings of uncertainty and fear, there is a strong warrant for popular, political and intellectual practices which foreground the dangerous possibilities provoked by a widespread concern to regulate the behaviors and dispositions of young people via the mobilization of more sophisticated techniques of intervention and surveillance.

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