Naming Youth

the construction of the youth category

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

...........................................
Abstract

The youth category, in its modern form, has emerged under particular social and economic conditions, under the influence of particular social institutions, shaped by particular discourses. This thesis is an inquiry into the constitution of youth as a social category through an examination of these factors.

Through a review of the historical and sociological literature, the thesis establishes the conditions for the emergence of the modern concept of youth in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The evidence suggests that the youth category came into being as a result of changes in the industrial family, the industrial reforms which progressively excluded children and young people from the workforce, and the establishment of compulsory schooling - especially secondary schooling. Parallel with these developments, a variety of discourses about youth (or "adolescence") were generated, establishing the emergent category in scientific terms. G. Stanley Hall's theories of adolescence, developed around the turn of the century, were perhaps the most influential of these, casting adolescence as a universal stage in life characterised by social and psychological turmoil. In sociology, this theoretical frame has been the subject of longstanding debate. The thesis explores this debate, and attempts to establish a sociological view of the youth category in the light of the historical and sociological evidence. In these explorations, "youth" is established as a product of historical processes, a product of political economy and of scientific discourse.

The analysis is brought into the present through a study of how youth are represented in a high-circulation daily newspaper, The West Australian. Using standard media analysis techniques, the study examines the construction of language around youth, and the kinds of stories in which they appear in the newspaper, and finds a detailed discursive apparatus through which young people are classified as good or bad, passive (victim, child) or active (perpetrator, adult). These constructions vary with the institutional location of the news source, and with such factors as the gender and ethnicity of the subject, while continuing to be underwritten by orthodox discourses of adolescence. For its part, the newspaper overwhelmingly casts youth in a law and order frame, driven by the appetites of audiences and the economies of news production.

The study explores the differences as well as the continuities in the concept of youth employed in the patchwork of discourse that constitutes newspaper text. In these explorations, "youth" is established in the present as a contested category, the subject of competing discourses. Competing institutions and professions, in their interventions in the newspaper, try to secure a reading of the youth phenomenon which is consistent with their professional and political objectives.

The thesis is about the constitution of youth. Through the analysis of historical and contemporary discourse about youth, the thesis reveals how the subjection of this section of the adult population is achieved and maintained, how they are established as a pliable, coercible and economically dispensable population, and how the instruments of their governance are legitimated.
Contents

Declaration ................................................................................................................. 3
Abstract .................................................................................................................... 4
Contents .................................................................................................................. 5
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................... 8

Part One: Approaches .............................................................................................. 9

1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 10

2 The news .............................................................................................................. 22
   The newspaper and its community .................................................................. 22
   The West Australian newspaper ...................................................................... 33
   Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 36

3 Method ............................................................................................................... 38
   Content analysis ............................................................................................. 38
   Other hermeneutic approaches ....................................................................... 42
   The research vehicle ....................................................................................... 44
   Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 47

Part Two: the constitution of the youthful subject ............................................. 48

4 Dividing practices: a brief history of youth ...................................................... 55

5 Practices of self-formation ................................................................................. 73
   Self-formation and the "boys work" movement ............................................. 73
   Self-formation, consumption and the teenage marketplace ....................... 75

6 Scientific classification: the discourse of adolescence .................................. 81
   Stanley Hall and the foundation of discourses of adolescence ................... 82
   Adolescence in psychological discourse ....................................................... 86

7 Sociology and the discourse of adolescence .................................................. 92
   The critique of the founding axioms .............................................................. 95
   Sociological approaches to theorising youth ............................................... 104
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Constructing youth theory</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What youth is not: benchmarks for a sociologically adequate concept of</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;youth&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards a theory of youth</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion and summary</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Three: <em>The West Australian</em> and the representation of youth</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 The youth vocabulary</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lexicon</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An annotated glossary</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-lexicality: the proliferation of terms</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The youth lexicon and the ideological landscape</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The construction of youth as Other</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the fine brush</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Youth issues</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The construction of a social issue</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues in <em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth and crime</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graffiti</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curfews</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condoms</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 &quot;Girls&quot; and &quot;youths&quot; and the discourses of gender</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and the constitution of youth</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender in the news</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and language</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and the roles in which young people appear</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Discourses of the Aboriginal</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The frequency of Aboriginal reference</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The over-specification of crime................................................................. 226
A racist newspaper? ..................................................................................... 233
The sources of news ..................................................................................... 236
Consequences .............................................................................................. 240
The newspaper, desire and the construction of the "Other": reflections......... 242

Part Four: problems, professions, and the representation of youth in
*The West Australian* ..................................................................................... 246

13 Crime and the "juvenile" ............................................................................. 249
   Police ........................................................................................................ 250
   The courts ................................................................................................ 258
   The contest for the construction of the juvenile offender ....................... 261
   The public ................................................................................................ 267
   Victims ..................................................................................................... 269

14 The "student" and the school ..................................................................... 278
   Under control ............................................................................................ 279
   The school uniforms debate ...................................................................... 284

15 Unemployment and the "young jobseeker" ............................................ 288

16 The youth sector and the "young person" ............................................... 297

Part Five: Concluding .................................................................................. 305

17 Reconstructing the youth category ......................................................... 309
   Review: the vertical dimension .............................................................. 312
   The horizontal dimension ...................................................................... 319
   Conclusion ................................................................................................ 321

Appendix ...................................................................................................... 325
   The data base ......................................................................................... 326

Bibliography ................................................................................................. 333
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