



A RISK SOCIETY OF MORAL PANIC

The US in the Twenty-First Century

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ABSTRACT This essay examines risk society and moral panic as tools for analyzing the irrationality of the contemporary US, and applies them to the construction of young people as a social problem. Although today's risk society and moral panic are closely tied to the current economic crisis, I argue that youth has long been a key site for understanding US anxieties.

[H]airy-backed swamp developers and corporate shills, faith-based economists, fundamentalist bullies with Bibles, Christians of convenience, freelance racists, misanthropic frat boys, shrieking midgets of AM radio, tax cheats, nihilists in golf pants, brownshirts in pinstripes, sweatshop tycoons, hacks, fakirs, aggressive dorks, Lamborghini libertarians, people who believe Neil Armstrong's moonwalk was filmed in Roswell, New Mexico, little honkers out to diminish the rest of us...



Is this the irritated rant of an urban hipster, mercilessly mocking those beyond the world of downtown lofts and polymorphous pleasure? Did these words drop from a laptop as it hurtled across the fly-over states? Far from it. The quotation comes from a true son of the Midwest, Garrison Keillor of *Prairie Home Companion* (2004). He was onto something. One must ponder hard a nation where the vast majority attests to the existence of a devil and individuated angels; 45 percent of residents claim aliens have visited Earth; three times more people think there are ghosts than was the case a quarter of a century ago; and 84 percent say there is posthumous survival of the soul, up 24 percent on 1972. Ninety-six percent of citizens believe in a higher power, 83 percent subscribe to the virgin birth's reality, and 59 percent state that religion is crucial to their life. This is more than twice the proportion for Japan, South Korea, Western Europe, and the former Soviet bloc. Seventy-nine percent of the US population identifies as Christian, with 41 percent converts to fundamentalist evangelism, and 18 percent aligned with the religious right. Only a quarter of the population subscribes to evolution and almost two-thirds anticipate millennial doom and rebirth. Evangelicals speak of an almost physical transformation, from a faith based in ideas to something that resembles transubstantiation – a trancelike condition of intimacy. The embrace of such beliefs places us alone amongst nations with advanced economies and educational systems (Gallup 2002–2003; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2002; Hutton 2003a; Mann 2003: 103; Newport and Carroll 2003; Luhrmann 2004: 520; Pew Internet & American Life Project 2004; Grossberg 2005: 140-41; O'Connor 2005: 8).

Conversely, some public-opinion statistics reveal very sensible attitudes – among young people. Whereas three-quarters of school-leavers thought the United States was the best country in the world in 1977, only half were sufficiently narcissistic and deluded to believe this in 2000, or to proclaim US culture superior to all others, or to oppose immigration. People aged between eighteen and twenty-five participated in sizeable numbers in the 2004 Presidential contest, and were the only age group that favored progressive candidates (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement 2004; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2004). These signs of a critical, skeptical attitude are interpreted by their elders and betters with shock and awe, in keeping with the latter's belief in severe moral decline among the young. A 1997 Public Agenda report disclosed that two-thirds of US adults regarded children as out of control, irresponsible people who “will make the world a worse place or no different when they grow up.” And whereas half the adult population in 1952 was convinced that young people knew the difference between good and evil, only 19 percent believed so fifty years later (Giroux 2000: 15; Galston 2002: 280–81; Grossberg 2005: 5).

At the same time as US adults experience a nationalistic divine intervention and calling, Garrison Keillor finds that “the rest of the world thinks we’re deaf, dumb and dangerous” (2004); Kurt Vonnegut (2004) considers himself “a man without a country, except the librarians”; and Howard Zinn wakes each morning convinced that “some alien group has taken over” (2004: 89). It’s a sizeable takeover – the pod people seem to be everywhere. How was this achieved, beyond the banal explanation, routinely handed out, that the US was founded as a religious site? How did we become reenchanting? Like cultural politics in general in the US, it’s about the economy, and the way it is embodied in risk society and symbolized in moral panics. In this essay, I examine the aptness of risk society and moral panic as tools for analyzing the US, and apply them to the historical construction of young people as a social problem. Although the current formation of risk society and moral panic relates to contemporary economic crises, I argue that youth has always been a key site for understanding US anxieties of the kind that are metaphorized in its many superstitions.

By contrast with European welfare systems, the capacity to exit poverty in the US has diminished over the last three decades of neoliberalism and suburbanization, thanks to a gigantic clumping of wealth at the apex of the nation, atop a poor, unskilled, and unhealthy base. Even those bastions of bourgeois comfort and onanism, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, run repeated, sizeable stories on the new Gilded Age of the twenty-first century and its reorganized class relations (Lexington 2005). Frankly, this is not a First World country for a fifth of its inhabitants. Forty-six million residents are indigent, 52 million are functionally analphabetic, and 44 million lack health insurance. Access to money and net worth is massively stratified by race and gender. In 2003, black men earned 73 percent of the hourly wage rate for white people, and women 56 cents on the male dollar. And the gaps are widening. In the two decades from 1979, the highest-paid 1 percent of the population doubled their share of national pretax income, to 18 percent. *Their* incomes increased by 194 percent; the top 20 percent by 70 percent – and the bottom 20 percent by just 6.4 percent. In 1967, chief executive officers of corporations were paid twenty-four times the average wage of employees. Thirty years later, they received 300 times that amount. The Congressional Budget Office reports that across the late 1990s, the wealthiest 1 percent of US households had a greater combined income than the poorest 40 percent. Over George Bush Minor’s first term, profits rose by 60 percent, but wages by just 10 percent. In 2004, after-tax profits for corporations grew to their highest proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) since the Depression (Thelen 2000: 552; Hutton 2003b: 133, 148; Taibo 2003: 24; Freeman 2004; Skocpol 2004; *Economist* 2005a; *Economist* 2005b; Yates 2005).

This bizarre reconcentration of wealth in the hands of the bourgeoisie is unprecedented in world history since the advent of working-class electoral franchises. No wonder the *Economist* captioned a photo of the Queen of England greeting Bush Minor and his “Desperate Housewife,” Laura, as “Liz, meet the royals” (*Economist* 2005b). Those with the highest levels of income and education are *most* likely to participate in lobby groups and vote in Presidential elections, while those with the lowest are *least* likely to do so. This is in accordance with the positive salience of the state in their lives. The domestic role of government has been redefined, at least rhetorically, from a sometimes feisty agent stabilizing labor and capital via redistribution, to a mendicant servant of business with residual duties of care to the citizenry (American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy 2004: 3–5; Crouch 2004: 23, 40; Jencks 2004: A2). Meanwhile, the right follows a bizarrely old-style hyperleftist miserabilism (of the kind that thought economic disaster would provoke radicalism amongst the working class). The *Wall Street Journal* favors decreased income-tax liability for the wealthy and increased income-tax liability for wage earners to convince them that government is inimical to their interests, and the *Financial Times* avows that many US neoliberals hope for fiscal crisis as a means of dislocating all social programs (Grossberg 2005: 134).

With economic welfare disowned as a responsibility of the sovereign-state and pushed onto individuals and communities, onto civil society, governing at a distance has become a US norm. Traditional means of direct state control, such as violence and education, have been added to by doctrines of self-management through a project of neoliberal government that seeks to manage subjectivity through culture: Bush Minor’s “ownership society” (2005). The paradox of such policies is that they necessitate not so much unleashing native qualities of self-reliance and possessive individualism that are incarnate in the population, but rather creating them. This dogma is readily picked up and made sensible through community organizations, especially religious ones, which rationalize success and failure under neoliberalism by valuing self-absorbed accumulation and identifying malefactors supposedly responsible for social dislocation – in other words, embodying risk society and initiating moral panic. The market becomes “an agent of morality, rewarding good and punishing evil” (Grossberg 2005: 117), for all the world a secular fate divinely decreed by a truly invisible hand.

RISK SOCIETY AND MORAL PANIC

Risk society and moral panic are two powerful methods for comprehending how this works. One references prudence, the other scapegoating – with the media a hinge between them. These are not just externally imposed scholarly categories. Unusually for sociological and cultural theories, they are freely used by, for

example, the mainstream UK, Australasian, and Filipino press, and the British National Council for Civil Liberties, while even the US media recently caught on.¹ The *New Yorker's* venerable "Talk of the Town" column and the *New York Times' Women's Fashion Magazine* have deployed the concept of risk society, and "risk" appeared in the title of several new magazines in the 1990s; while numerous professional associations advertise risky elements of their occupations, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have utilized the rather ominously named "Youth Risk Surveillance System" since 1990, and we are all too familiar with the cliché "at-risk youth." The libertarians over at *Reason* magazine also favor the term. Academically, risk society is mobilized from sociology and media studies through to anesthesiology and philanthropy, and moral-panic discourse is prominent in critical criminology and media and cultural studies. The former is manifested almost as a technical specification from beyond ideology, while the latter is mostly used by progressive critics. *The Lancet* has run a column called "Doctoring the Risk Society," but the *British Medical Journal* has attacked use of the moral-panic framework to evaluate science (Daniels 1998; Barker 1999; Tan 2001; *Independent* 2002; Wichtel 2002; Critcher 2003: 2, 53; Fitzpatrick 2003; Gillespie 2003; Power 2004: 12; Žižek 2005).

According to Ulrich Beck (1999, 2001, 2002), society is characterized by "institutions of monitoring and protection" that seek to protect people from "social, political, economic and individual risks," servicing the time-discipline required by capitalism. Risk societies must come to terms with the "unintended consequences" of modernity, not only via technocrats seeking solutions to problems created by themselves or other technocrats, but also via transparent decision-making systems that encourage public debate, rather than operating in secret or deriding public perceptions as *ipso facto* erroneous (Beck 1999: 3, 5). If early modernity was organized around producing and distributing goods in a struggle for the most effective and efficient forms of industrialization, with devil take the hindmost and no thought for the environment, risk society is about enumerating and managing those dangers (for example, establishing markets for pollution that send murky industries offshore). It "organizes what cannot be organized," embodying and propelling the desires of capital and state to make sense of and respond to problems, whether of their own making or not. Risk is sold, pooled, and redistributed (Power 2004: 10, 17).

Put another way, whereas early modernization was primarily concerned with the establishment of national power and the accumulation and distribution of wealth, developed modernity produces new risks for its members beyond collective security and affluence, and provides them with incentives and systems for a carefully calibrated self-management. But such practices often appear of limited value in the face of iatrogenic crises brought on

by deliberate policy, for example, nuclear energy, genocidal weaponry, biotechnology, and industrial pollution – “professional miscalculations and scientific discoveries hurtling out of control” (Kitzinger and Reilly 1997: 320). These can lead to a raft of governmental responses. In Western Europe, the last twenty years have seen new consumer-protection legislation to increase safety. In the US, the response has been more a matter of litigation (*Economist* 2004).

There is a venerable prehistory to the risk society of today. The appearance of stock exchanges in Western Europe from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, often articulated to shipping fortunes, represented new class formations and financial and governmental risks, which were understood as actuarial rather than accidental or deliberate. During the Industrial Revolution, working people were advised to be prudent and secure their future through insurance (Briggs and Burke 2003: 30). Eighteenth-century European Enlightenment knowledges theorized social collectives as well as liberal individuals. The “emergence of the health and physical well-being of the population in general as one of the essential objectives of political power” saw nations *understood* through biostatistics, then *remodeled* through policy interventions. The entire “social body” was assayed and treated for its insufficiencies. Since that time, governing people has meant, most critically, obeying the “imperative of health: at once the duty of each and the objective of all” (Foucault 1991a: 98–99, 103 and 1991b: 4, 277). Across the nineteenth century, science and government combined in new environmental-legal relations, under the signs of civic management and economic productivity. In 1855, Achille Guillard invented “demography,” merging “political arithmetic” with “political and natural observations,” which had been on the rise since the first population inquiries in seventeenth-century Britain. The new knowledge codified reproduction, aging, migration, public health, and ecology to calculate hazards as part of an emergent risk society by the twentieth century. We can see these tendencies played out by Edward G. Robinson’s insurance investigator in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder 1944), a febrile Durkheimian who maniacally recites the ways that people top themselves:

Suicide by race, by color, by occupation, by sex, by seasons of the year, by time of day. Suicide, how committed: by poisons, by firearms, by drowning, by leaps. Suicide by poison, subdivided by types of poison, such as corrosive, irritant, systemic, gaseous, narcotic, alkaloid, protein, and so forth. Suicide by leaps, subdivided by leaps from high places, under the wheels of trains, under the wheels of trucks, under the feet of horses, from steamboats.

With the subsequent emergence of the mature welfare state, governments came to provide superannuation for the retired, with contributions and benefits assumed by all. But half a century on, we

find publicly subsidized schemes criticized as drains on individual initiative, and citizens encouraged to assume risk once more via the market. So whereas the state once underwrote export-credit insurance (in the US via OPIC and the ExIm Bank) nowadays that service is privatized, sending risk out into the community (Fogel 1993: 312–13; Beck 1999: 57; Rose 1999: 158–59; Strange 2000: 126; Lawrence and Herbert-Cheshire 2003). The economics editor of *Business Week* bluntly referred to the “New Economy” of the 1990s as “the rise of risk capital” (quoted in Hutton 2003b: 122). New forms of technology quantify that risk, from earthquake modeling to actuarial estimates and share-price responses (Smutniak 2004).

Rather than being occasional, risk is now a constitutive component of being and social organization. Globalization has coincided with natural and human-made disasters beyond the norm. Risk society therefore references the psychological impact of structural economic changes and other shocks that (sometimes) accidentally accompany them. Through governmental knowledges that offer aggregated and variegated statistics to define, measure, and model populations in the interests of social control, advanced industrial/postindustrial societies induce massively increased feelings of risk in people (Beck *et al.* 1994: 5; Beck 1999: 135; Rikagos and Hadden 2001; O’Malley 2004; Smutniak 2004). They admit and even promote the irrationality of the economy – as a means, paradoxically, of governing populations. Routine environmental despoliation, global labor competition, cyclical recession, declining lifelong employment, massive international migration, developments in communication technology, and the rolling back of the welfare state, alongside income redistribution toward the wealthy, have left denizens of postindustrial societies factoring costs and benefits into everyday life as never before, even as their sense of being able to determine their future through choice is diminished.

The United States is *the* risk society, with 50 percent of the population participating in stock-market investments. Far from residing in the hands of professionals, risk is brought into the home as an everyday ritual or an almost blind faith (sometimes disappointed) in mutual funds patrolling retirement income. In 1999, US residents spent US\$800 billion on insurance – more than they paid for food, and equivalent to 35 percent of the world’s total insurance expenditure. The insurance costs alone of September 11, 2001 have been calculated at US\$21 billion, and the industry’s global revenues exceed the GDP of all countries bar the top three. At one level, this represents a careful calculation of risk, its incorporation into lifelong and posthumous planning – prudence as a way of life. At another, it is a wager on hopelessness and fear that has since emerged in politics, because so many risks that Yanquis worry about are *uninsurable*. As dangers mount, safeguards diminish. So whether we are discussing nuclear-power plants or genetically modified foods, the respective captains of industry argue that they pose no risks, but

insurance companies decline to write policies on them for citizens, precisely because they are so risky. It is significant that Paul Bremer, Bush Minor's *patrón* of Iraq after the invasion, quickly established a crisis consulting practice after September 11, 2001. He is part of the emergent category of "risk managers," who quantify danger and the costs of meeting it – for a fee (Beck 1999: 53, 105; Strange 2000: 127; Martin 2002: 6, 12; Klein 2003; World Trade Organization 2003: 2; Zorach 2003; *Foreign Policy* 2004).

Today's "political site of the world risk society is not the street[,] but *television*" (Beck 1999: 44). The contemporary "cultural-political agenda" is characterized by an "*actuarial gaze*," a visual management of threats and responses, with the media simultaneously a mirror and a site of creation, reflection, policy, and action that binds the everyday to the spectacle, and the private to the public (Feldman 2005: 206–7). The epithet once used to deride local news television in the US – "if it bleeds, it leads" – today applies to network news, where the correlation between national crime statistics and coverage of crimes shows no rational linkage. The drive to create "human-interest" stories from blood has become a key means of generating belief in a risk society, occupying 16 percent of network news in 1997, up from 8 percent in 1977. When ratings are measured – each February, May, July, and November – US television news allocates massive space to supposed risks to viewers. The idea is to turn anxiety and sensation into spectatorship and money. Local news in particular is remorselessly dedicated to youth violence (*New Yorker* 2001; Lowry et al. 2003; Hickey 2004; Grossberg 2005: 43; Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005).

Risk society is abetted and indexed by incidents like the media hysteria over anthrax in October 2001 – responses that were out of all proportion to reality, given the underreported plenitude of dangerous industrial chemicals and organisms confronted by US workers every day, and the extraordinary hazards posed by chemical plants to literally millions should there be an accidental or deliberate release of their deadly product. Bush Minor's Presidential addresses enunciate this helplessness and risk. Ever ready with a phrase describing or predicting catastrophic, apocalyptic terror, the ratio of negative, pessimistic words to positive, optimistic ones is vastly greater in Minor's lexicon than those of Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, George Bush the Elder, or Bill Clinton. In his first term, the word "evil" appeared over 350 times in formal speeches. The 2004 Presidential election testified to the efficacy of this approach: risk of attack was the key issue determining older voters' choices. Clearly, risk is crucial to panic and governance, and the media provide staging grounds for its symbolic work (Brooks 2003; Kellner 2003: 82–83; *OMB Watcher* 2005; Feldman 2005; Pew Research Center 2005: 4).

Media reactions to limit cases of riskiness, played out in highly exaggerated ways, and frequently projected onto scapegoats or "folk

devils,” amount to moral panics. This term was coined within critical British criminology in the early 1970s to describe media messages that announced an increase in the crime rate, and the subsequent establishment of specialist police units to deal with the alleged problem. Moral panics are usually short-lived spasms that speak of ideological contradictions about economic inequality – eruptions within risk society. They exaggerate a social problem, symbolize it in certain groups, predict its future, then conclude, or change. So we might say that moral panics are sudden, frequently brief, but seemingly thoroughgoing anxieties about particular human subjects or practices. Generated by the state or the media, then picked up by interest groups and social movements (or vice versa) the impact of these moral panics is generally disproportionate to the “problems” they bring into being (Thompson 1998: 7; Barker 1999; Jenkins 1999: 4–5; Goode 2000). Panics are often sustained by activists (known as “moral entrepreneurs”) who seek to protect a majority they see as feckless and vulnerable. A “turncoat,” a rejected or dissident former insider to “deviancy,” can be a crucial witness, but the perfect deconstructionist is the professional “expert” (Shaps 1994; Thompson 1998: 3, 12, 91). The dual role of experts and media critics in the constitution of moral panics sees the former testifying to their existence, and the latter sensationalizing and diurnalizing them – making the risks attributed to a particular panic seem like a new, terrifying part of everyday life. The cumulative impact of this alliance between specialist and popular knowledge is a heightened, yet curiously normalized, sense of risk about and amongst the citizenry (Wagner 1997: 46).

Moral panics tend to function synecdochally: part of society is used to represent (or perhaps distort) a wider problem – youth violence is a suitable case for panic about citizenship, whereas systemic class inequality is not; adolescent behavior and cultural style are questionable, but capitalist degeneracy is not; rap is a problem, the situation of urban youth is not. Particular kinds of individuals are labeled as dangerous to social well-being because of their “deviance” from agreed-upon norms of the general good. Once identified, their life practices are then interpreted from membership of a group and vice versa (Cohen 1973: 9–13; Yúdice 1990; Cohen 1999: 192–93; Wichtel 2002).

Critics of the moral-panic process propose that we ask not “Why do people behave like this?,” but “Why is this conduct deemed ‘deviant,’ and whose interest does that serve?” (Cohen 1973: 12–13). Endeavoring to retrieve folk devils for progressive politics, historical and contemporary analyses of slaves, crowds, pirates, bandits, audiences, minorities, women, and the working class has utilized archival, ethnographic, and textual methods to emphasize day-to-day noncompliance with authority, via practices of consumption that frequently turn into practices of production. For example, British research has lit upon Teddy Boys, Mods, bikers, skinheads, punks,

school students, teen girls, Rastas, truants, dropouts, and magazine readers as its magical agents of history – groups who deviated from the norms of schooling and the transition to work. Scholar-activists examine the structural underpinnings to collective style, investigating how *bricolage* subverts the achievement-oriented, materialistic, educationally driven values and appearance of the middle class. The working assumption has often been that subordinate groups adopt and adapt signs and objects of the dominant culture, reorganizing them to manufacture new meanings. Consumption is thought to be the epicenter of such subcultures.

But for the right, these are not magical agents of social transformation. Rather, they represent the threat of those who, failing to abide by the imprecations of risk society, are imprudent and impudent subjects of moral panic. The US today is a risk society *laden* with such moral panics. For example, when school drug use diminishes, people believe it increases. The basis for such misconceptions is media reportage – so when the number of murders declines, the coverage of murders soars. The classic case is young African American men in the US over the past decade. As rates of violence, homicide, and drug use fall dramatically amongst black men under thirty, the press panic about their conduct heads in the opposite direction. The disparity between the imaginary and the symbolic in the public circulation of these men is central, even as they suffer massive material discrimination (Glassner 1999: xi, xxi, 29; Males 2004). While the specifics of this assault on blackness are clearly articulated to slavery and racism, they also derive from a historical discourse of risk and panic aimed at young people in general, as indexed in popular culture.

YOUTH

US popular culture has long been a risky locale for the combustion of moral panics about the young. In the early twentieth century, opera, Shakespeare, and romance fiction were censored for their immodest impact on the young (Heins 2002: 23). Such tendencies moved into high gear with the Payne Fund Studies of the 1930s, which inaugurated mass social-science panic about young people at the cinema (Mitchell 1929; Blumer 1933; Blumer and Hauser 1933; Dale 1933; Forman 1933; May and Shuttlesworth 1933). These pioneering scholars boldly set out to gauge youthful emotional reactions to the popular by assessing “galvanic skin response” (Wartella 1996: 173). That example has led to seven more decades of obsessive attempts to correlate youthful consumption of popular culture with antisocial conduct. The pattern is that whenever new communications technologies emerge, children are immediately identified as both pioneers and victims, simultaneously endowed by manufacturers and critics with immense power and immense vulnerability. This was true of 1920s “Radio Boys,” seeking out

signals from afar, and 1990s “Girl-Power” avatars, seeking out subjectivities from afar. They are held to be the first to know and the last to understand the media – the grand paradox of youth, latterly on display in the “digital sublime” of technological determinism, but as always with the superadded valence of a future citizenship in peril (Mosco 2004: 80).

Complex relations of commodification, governmentality, and conservatism fueled these tendencies. *Popular Science* magazine coined the word “teenager” in 1941, *Seventeen* magazine appeared on newsstands three years later, and by the 1950s the white-picket family and home seemed under threat from a newly enfranchised shopper and worker, whose physiological changes were supposedly exacerbated by the temptations of consumer culture and irresponsibility. In 1957, *Cosmopolitan* gloomily predicted “teenagers taking over” via “a vast determined band of blue-jeaned storm troopers” (soon to be among its valued readers, of course) (Griffin 1993: 22; Steinberg and Kincheloe 1997: 1–2; Mazarrella 2003: 230; Grossberg 2005: 3). Congressional hearings and trade publishers promoted psychiatric denunciations of comic books, for example, as causes of nightmares, juvenile delinquency, and even murder. To elude regulation, publishers developed codes of conduct that embodied “respect for parents” and “honorable behavior” in their precepts of self-governance (Heins 2002: 52–54; Park 2004: 114). A decade later, young people lost free-speech protection, because the Supreme Court differentiated youthful from adult citizens in permitting state governments to legislate in ways that would be unconstitutional if applied to adults (*Ginsberg v. New York* 390 US 629). Youth’s grand paradox had fully emerged, its fate to be simultaneously “the most silenced population in society” and “the noisiest” (Grossberg 1994: 25). Both “mass movement and mass market,” the right was horrified by this “commercial child” (Liljeström 1983: 144–46; Lewis 1992: 3).

Why? The “privatized nuclear household with its male breadwinner, female homemaker, and dependent children” had shifted from an “insurgent ideal” of the white middle class in the nineteenth century, to a tentatively achieved, but ideologically naturalized, norm. In the 1950s, 80 percent of children grew up with their married, biological parents. But that was true of just 12 percent of children by the end of the 1980s, and only 7 percent of them lived with an employed father and “home-duties” mother, while the 2000 Census disclosed that married couples with children were just 25 percent of the population (Reeves and Campbell 1994: 186–89; Coltrane 2001: 390). To the horror of evangelical Christianity, these numbers reveal the family to be “a contingent form of association with unstable boundaries and varying structures” (Shapiro 2001: 2). At the same time, conservatives adopted a moral-panic argument to the effect that state intervention and progressive ideas had melded to create lost generations. A new risk-society prudence and prudery, allied to

economic deregulation, would rescue them for sanctity and capital (Grossberg 2005: 37).

These familial crises, understood as failures of ethical principle, have displaced attention from the horrific impact on the young of the cessation of vital social services during the disastrous presidencies of Reagan, Bush the Elder, and Clinton. The data on youth welfare demonstrate the centrality of big government to the family solidity that these hegemony rhetorically pined for, but programmatically undermined. Bush Minor continued this cruel regime, with massive erosions in expenditure on health care, nutrition programs, foster care, and a whole raft of services for young people. A succession of judicial decisions further disenfranchised them. Conservative justices were contemptuous of privacy rights for children, and the US repeatedly established new records amongst developed countries for the execution of people under eighteen, with the long-standing support of the Supreme Court, half of whose judges favored killing those aged under fifteen until a 2005 decision. And Bush Minor displaced the American Medical Association as the government's UN adviser on children's issues with the antifeminist Concerned Women of America, and ordered investigations of organizations that questioned abstinence as a policy against sexual transmission of diseases by youth (Males 1996: 7, 35; Kaplan 2004: 21). The bizarre 4parents.gov web site suggested condoms were ineffective, stigmatized HIV patients as risky for young people, ignored queer children – and was the product of a pet Administration nongovernmental organization, the National Physicians Center for Family Resources.

The outcome of these policies is that US citizens over forty are the wealthiest group in world history and have the lowest tax payments in the First World; whereas very few teenaged children in the US worked for money in the first half of the twentieth century, almost half had to do so by its end; and one in eight children has no health coverage. In 1999, at the peak of the "New Economy," child poverty was up 17 percent on 1979, 50 percent higher than the national average across all age groups, while the twenty-first-century recession was accompanied by reductions in youth-employment programs (Ruddick 2003: 337, 348; Children's Defense Fund 2004; Foundation for Child Development 2004; Liebel 2004: 151; Grossberg 2005: 59, 64; Ivins 2005).

Despite this disenfranchisement, the little beasts are prevailed upon to love their country, as per Bush Minor introducing a "Lessons of Liberty" schools program to ideologize them into militarism. In 2004, 83 percent of US high schools ran community-service programs, up from 27 percent two decades earlier, and some required antileftism (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). For all the world a throwback to Soviet-era Yanqui drills that involved scurrying under school desks to elude radiation, Minor's "Ready for Kids" initiative hailed children in emergency responses to terrorism (*USA Today* 2004). He announced policies to "improve students' knowledge of

American history, increase their civic involvement, and deepen their love for our great country,” requiring that children learn “America is a force for good in the world, bringing hope and freedom to other people.” And Senator Lamar Alexander, a previous head of education, and university bureaucrat, sponsored the American History and Civics Education Act “so our children can grow up learning what it means to be an American” (Bush and Alexander quoted in Westheimer 2004: 231). Meanwhile, progressive political activism by young people led to immediate sanction. In West Virginia, a high-school pupil was suspended for inviting her colleagues to join an antiwar club, as were a ninth-grader in Maryland for marching against the invasion of Iraq, and a high-schooler in Colorado for posting peace flyers (Westheimer 2004: 232). Wrong knowledge of “American history”; wrong type of “civic involvement.”

Meanwhile, social statistics were indexing youth trauma. Thirty thousand people kill themselves in the United States each year, making suicide the eleventh largest cause of death; but it is third amongst the young (Romer and Jamieson 2003). Suicide levels fell across the population between 1950 and 1995, but the rate for fifteen to nineteen year olds quadrupled. Key social measures of unhappiness correlate with youth today in a way that they did not up to the mid-1970s, and young people report greater distress than before, beyond even the concerns of the elderly (Putnam 2000: 261–63). The psy-complexes argue that adolescents are ten times more likely to suffer depression than 100 years ago (Gillham and Reivich 2004: 152). Perhaps to cope with their feelings of helplessness, 135,000 teenagers packed a gun with their sandwiches and schoolbooks each day in 1990, while by 2004, eight children and teenagers died by gunshot per day (Lewis 1992: 41; Children’s Defense Fund 2004). This in turn relates to marketing. With the white-male market for firearms saturated, and attempts to sell to women falling short of the desired numbers, manufacturers turned to young people in the 1990s (Glassner 1999: xxi, 55).

CONCLUSION

Young people clearly incarnate adult terror in the face of the popular. They provide a tabula rasa, onto which can be placed every manner of anxiety (Hartley 1998: 15). Hence Clinton announcing in 1997 that “we’ve got about six years to turn this juvenile crime thing around or our country is going to be living in chaos” and the Senate Judiciary Committee declaring that “the facade of our material comfort” secrets “a national tragedy” where “children are killing and harming each other” – even as youth crime had just dropped by almost 10 percent in a year. In 2000, 70 percent of adults expected a neighborhood school shooting, even though pupils were much more likely to be hit by lightning than gunfire on campus. When Bush Minor joined the chorus to proclaim “a plague of school violence,” he went against statistics that clearly show schools to be some of the safest

places for children to be. Youth violence is dropping, even as rates of incarceration soar. A child is arrested every twenty seconds, many through violations of municipally imposed curfews. Conversely, while child abuse increases, rates of imprisonment for offending adults remain low (Glassner 1999: xiv; Grossberg 2005: 4, 41–42, 44). The economic deregulation Clinton and Minor presided over, with all its attendant risks, was twinned with a moral reregulation, with all its attendant panics.

Risk and morality have merged, with mutual impact. Moral panics become means of dealing with risk society via appeals to “values,” a displacement from socioeconomic crises and fissures. They both contribute to, and are symptomatic of, risk society. But rather than being mechanisms of functional control that necessarily displace systemic social critique onto particular scapegoats, moral panics have themselves been transformed by the discourse of risk society. Because certain dangers seem ineradicable, moral panics are mobilized to highlight issues in keeping with the tenets of conservative and neoliberal cultural politics (Thompson 1998; Ungar 2001; Critcher 2003: 164; Hier 2003). Religion is a key form of mobilization, with evangelical Protestantism legitimizing neoliberal risk at the same time as it promotes righteous indignation against groups that provide an alternative (leftists, feminists, queers, and foreigners), groups whose very existence brings into question foundational myths of the nation (African Americans), or groups whose fragility indexes the future of the nation (young people).

Latrogenic risk produces moral panic. Ignorant citizens are ill equipped to understand what is happening around them. The void is filled by religiosity and other forms of superstition and ahistorical politics. The process exemplifies the governance of everyday life at arms length via a stress on national, personal risk rather than global, collective solidarity. It starts with young people, fetishized as unreliable custodians of a future that may not arrive, due to their amorality. Risk society and moral panic are crucial tools if we are to comprehend, and mend, this juggernaut of a nation.

NOTES

1. Contemporary media references include Berry (2000), Dewan (2000), *Management Today* (2000), Lloyd (2002), Wilgoren (2002), Hendershott (2003), McLemee (2003), Shea (2003), Wright and Rosenfeld (2003), Barlow (2004), Muschamp (2004), Surowiecki (2004), Ortiz (2005).

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