THE 'LOST GENERATION': SOUTH AFRICA'S 'YOUTH PROBLEM' IN THE EARLY-1990s

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This paper examines the social construction of a 'youth problem' in the early-1990s. It argues that the 'problem' was born in the minds of political leaders, developed into the generally racist concept of a 'lost generation' by the media, and fuelled and perhaps legitimated by the policy studies industry.

Introduction: the origins of a moral panic

Between 1989 and mid-1993 South Africa was gripped by episodes of 'moral panic' focused on the political and social threat supposedly posed by young black South Africans. Broken homes, boycotted schools, violent streets and a depressed economy were deemed to have bred a 'lost generation' of 'marginalised youth', living outside of the social structures and devoid of the values deemed essential for 'civilised' society. Media reports conjured up 'images of unemployed black youth with no future, no home, busy destroying everything in their way: homes, shops, schools, infrastructures and traditions' (Sitas, 1991:6):

> The images are archetypal, primal - the stuff of thousand-year-old myths and sweaty nightmares. Of beasts baying outside the city gates, shadows that swing along the edge of the bonfire, figures watching from a distance, moving in their own peculiar rhythm, ready to violate the zones of order and reason (Marais, 1993:9).

The 'youth' were imagined as 'latter-day savages: demented, destructive, demonised', as Marais observed; they were even compared to the Khmer Rouge of Kampuchea (*Daily Despatch, Nov 6, 1990*).

This moral panic comprised a period of intense anxiety among particular sections of South African society. It was focused on a particular category of people - young, black men, stereotyped as the 'youth'. The 'youth' were seen as posing a threat to 'civilised' institutions and values. The cause of the anxiety was uncertainty about the overall political transition and its outcome, and the anxiety was out of proportion to the actual behaviour or attitudes of young black South Africans (Seekings, 1995). Both the 'youth' and the supposed 'youth problem'

were socially constructed (as I try to emphasise through the use of inverted commas in this article).

This supposed 'youth problem' in the early-1990s was generally traced to the turbulence of the revolt in South Africa's townships and rural areas in the mid-1980s. Young black South Africans were the so-called 'shock troops' or 'foot soldiers' in the struggle for political change. They boycotted school classes, demonstrated, built barricades and fought street battles against the state's security forces, and took action against alleged collaborators. The 'comrades' rendered whole areas 'ungovernable' and helped to build structures of 'people's power'. For this, they were celebrated by opponents of apartheid. The president of the banned African National Congress (ANC), the late Oliver Tambo, declared in January 1985 that the 'youth' had 'earned for themselves the honour of being called the Young Lions'. The power of the township revolt and the struggle for liberation was in large part a reflection of the Young Lions' commitment and efforts, as well as their sheer number - the ANC-aligned South African Youth Congress (SAYCO) claimed over one thousand affiliates, with a signed-up membership of over half-a-million and a support base of two million (Seekings, 1993:49-85).

On the ground, however, many anti-apartheid activists (as well as other black South Africans) were alarmed by some of the behaviour of young people as well as being exhilarated by their successes in the 1980s. Many worried about the brutal ways in which young protesters enforced consumer boycotts or stayaways and rendered townships and rural areas 'ungovernable'. Activists typically blamed brutality on 'hooligans' abusing 'the name of the struggle', or 'criminal elements who were trying to take advantage of the situation'. But it was often difficult to distinguish between self-serving 'tsotsis' (or young gangsters) and over-zealous 'comrades', hence the appearance of the term 'comtsotsi' (ie 'comrade-tsotsi'). Activists also worried about continuing school boycotts, and sought, unsuccessfully, to persuade students to return to school in return for educational concessions from the state. They felt that the 'militancy of unorganised youth' needed to be channeled 'into disciplined action, responsible and accountable to the whole community', as Zwelakhe Sisulu put it in 1986 - lest the 'youth' prey on society rather than the state (Sisulu, 1986; Seekings, 1993).

Whilst anti-apartheid activists viewed young people in a mix of positive and negative ways, the mainstream media offered its readers a wholly negative image of the 'youth'. The media expressed outrage over the brutality and destructiveness of the 'youth'. The perceived savagery of the 'youth', socialised on violent streets rather than in the classroom or the home, was epitomised by

'necklacing', that is the killing of a person by placing a tyre filled with petrol around his or her neck, and setting it alight. The South African state, too, expressed its concern over what it described as the corruption and manipulation of impressionable young people by revolutionary agitators. An official inquiry into the 'youth' urged that they be taught the value of 'sustained, honest, hard work, self-discipline, study and regular exercise and the promotion not only of one's own interests but also of the interests of one's family, one's community and one's country and all its people' (RSA, 1987:1-2, 87-88).

But in the 1980s the 'youth problem' was always overshadowed by the titanic struggles for liberation, democracy and power. Images of young people were subsumed by broader perceptions of the struggle in general. Anti-apartheid activists were reluctant to rein in the Young Lions, whilst their capacity to do so was in any case sharply curtailed through state repression under the State of Emergency. The government supported ineffective, counter-revolutionary youth clubs in some black townships (Phillips, 1993), but relied overwhelmingly on the security services to contain dissent. Furthermore, the focus of ruling-class fears was more often the age-less 'crowd' rather than 'youth' in particular.

Concern over the 'youth' only grew into a moral panic during the changing political conditions of 1989-90. Hostile imagery triumphed over more sympathetic imagery across public fora. In 1989 both the South African government and its opponents in the democratic movement recognised that political changes would be effected through direct negotiation rather than military confrontation. This deflated lingering 'liberatory' views of the Young Lions within the democratic movement, whilst adding fresh impetus to the more 'apocalyptic' view of the 'youth' as a social and political problem. The 'youth' were seen by a variety of people across the entire political spectrum as posing a threat to this negotiated process of transition. The 'youth' therefore needed to be demobilised. If not, this 'lost generation' of 'angry youth' would disrupt and perhaps forestall any orderly process of negotiated transition. The moral panic of this period centered on the perceived fragility and vulnerability of the transition in the face of the supposed 'lost generation'.

Political leaders played a major role in developing the notion of a 'youth problem'. ANC leaders were worried that their organisation was still too weak on the ground, and the 'youth' might restrict the ANC's space to negotiate constitutional changes. Even before the ANC was unbanned in February 1990, recently released ANC leader Walter Sisulu admitted that:

> It's not easy for us to sit down to negotiate. The problem is many
> of the youngsters are not really interested in the negotiations. In

fact they've become a little bit angry. That is why I say that this chap De Klerk is moving too fast and can create problems for us.

This view was elaborated on by United Democratic Front leader Murphy Morobe:

> For many of the youth, the struggle has meant simply to shoot your way to Pretoria. ... We acknowledge that the degree of political education has not been commensurate with the degree and extent of political mobilisation that we have been able to generate. And that brings to the fore an important and serious contradiction. You draw in to the movement battalions and battalions of young lions, hearts in the right place, determined to become part of the struggle, but often they don't understand the basic political positions of the movement (*Weekly Mail*, Jan 26, 1990).

Nelson Mandela, at the time of his release in February 1990, seems to have thought the 'problem' easily solved. If the National Party government created the necessary conditions, he said, the ANC and allied organisations would 'appeal to the youth to discipline themselves, go back to school and concentrate on their studies' (*Sunday Star*, Feb 18, 1990). But many of Mandela's own colleagues in the democratic movement regarded the problem as more difficult, and perhaps intractable. The view of the 'youth' as posing a threat to negotiated and stable transition was later restated in the ANC magazine *Mayibuye*. The 'youth' were said to be suspicious of negotiations: 'Simply put, young lions were steeped in the politics of opposition that excluded debate with their enemy'. The ANC's Youth League - into which SAYCO was incorporated in 1990 - was charged with the difficult task of balancing a tradition of militancy with support for the ANC's chosen tactic of negotiations (*Mayibuye*, Sept, Dec 1990). A back-to-school campaign spearheaded by the democratic movement and churches was largely unsuccessful. It was clear that many 'youth' were not going to be lured back into the school system (SAIRR, 1991:836-7). Overall, 'large numbers of young people' seem to have 'slipped through the cracks in the transition period' (Sisulu, 1992).

The causes of widespread anxiety within the leadership of the democratic movement seem to have included a concern to maintain complete control of mass protest so as to maximise its utility in negotiations, a concern with stability, and a recognition of the multiple challenges which the movement would face after it won state power in a democratic dispensation.

The National Party, too, was concerned that 'its' initiative would be derailed by militant 'youth'. In the second half of 1990, the government commissioned research from the parastatal Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) into two

questions: 'What is the possibility that the black youth will be able to wreck the negotiation and reconciliation process?', and 'To what extent will it be possible to integrate the black youth into the new South Africa?' (De Cock & Schutte, 1991:xxxviii). The NP's fear, it seems, was that negotiations with the ANC would prove insufficient to deter some kind of violent revolution.

The media picked up and developed the supposed threat posed by the 'lost generation' of township 'youth'. State-owned television ran documentaries on the 'lost generation', and newspapers used headlines such as 'Youth to Remain Destabilising Factor' and 'Young Comrades are Rocking the Boat' (*Business Day*, Oct 16, 1990; *Daily Despatch*, Nov 6, 1990). Particular incidents caught the public imagination - such as the mass rape of teenaged girls in a Salvation Army Girls Home by a Soweto gang on Christmas Day 1990 (Mokwena, 1991). By 1992, the *Weekly Mail (WM)* - a strong supporter of the struggle against apartheid - was comparing 'youth' militancy with the student-led protests of 1976:

> While an uprising like that of 1976 seems unlikely, aimless revolts by gun-toting 1990s youths, unemployed and hardened by the factional violence of the past two years, may be a lot worse. Already anarchic, misplaced violence is part of township life.

> The revolt of township youths in the Vaal [south of Johannesburg] is already uglier than the uprisings of June 1976. Today's youths are armed, their violence anarchic and random, their targets innocent passers-by (*WM*, May 29, 1992).

The editor of Johannesburg's *Sunday Times*, Ken Owen, warned that 'the immediate threat' to South Africa 'lies in the social disintegration of the townships, which has produced marauding cohorts of youngsters'. Their 'behaviour is so savage as to arouse the impulse towards counter-violence'; 'they are truly lost ... , ineducable ... There is nothing anybody can do about it' (quoted in Marais, 1993:10). For white newspaper editors and journalists, young black urban men symbolised disorder and barbarism. The concept of the 'lost generation' was generally invested with deeply racist imagery.

Elsewhere I have examined in detail representations of black 'youth' in the *Sunday Times*, showing how the intensity of concern over the 'youth' rose and fell in inverse relation to the perceived success of inter-party negotiations over constitutional change (Seekings, 1995). Successive episodes of moral panic corresponded to periods of crisis in the negotiations. The moral panic was most intense in April 1990, at the start of 1991, and following the Boipatong massacre and the breakdown of the CODESA multi-party talks in mid-1991. In the pages

of the *Sunday Times*, the 'youth' symbolised the apocalypse which negotiations were supposed to avert but which loomed large whenever negotiations broke down. Concern with the 'youth' abated in mid-1993 with the ANC leadership's successful handling of the crisis around Chris Hani's assassination, and soon afterwards inter-party agreement on democratic elections.

In the current paper I am more concerned with the ways in which politicians, media, and researchers together produced the concept of a 'youth problem'. In 1991-92 this 'youth problem' was widely packaged in the specific form of the so-called 'lost generation', implying at least three things: first, that the 'problem' affected an entire racially-defined generation or age cohort (ie of young black people); secondly, that the different political, economic, educational, social and psychological components of the 'problem' were all part of an integrated whole; and, thirdly, that the overall 'problem', and perhaps its different components, were specific to one generation. This notion of an integrated 'youth problem', involving the 'lost generation', seems to have been born in the minds of worried political leaders, developed into the generally racist concept of a 'lost generation' by an anxious white media, and fuelled and perhaps legitimated by the policy studies industries of the left and right (perhaps even, paradoxically, when they sought to debunk the concept of a 'lost generation' itself!).

The Media History of the 'Lost Generation'

The concept of a 'lost generation' of black South African youth seems to have been specific to the period of transition. The term does not seem to have been used during the 1980s, although some psychologists did refer to a generation of young people brutalised and traumatised by exposure to high levels of political violence. And it seems to have almost vanished in the 'new', post-election South Africa.

The first references to the 'lost generation' occur in articles written by foreign journalists in early-1990. In April 1990, soon after the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela, and on the eve of the first inter-party negotiations, the London *Times'* Gavin Bell linked violence inside South Africa to 'a lost generation of youths, whose crude political views were forged by political strife in the mid-1980s'. Bell wrote that: 'Their allegiance to the mainstream of the ANC is doubtful, and the slogan "liberation before education" is gaining popularity'. A summary of Bell's article was published in the Cape Town *Argus* (Apr 3, 1990). Later the same month, the South African *Sunday Times* American-based columnist, Simon Barber, discussed black teachers in South Africa whose 'physical security is regularly threatened by the lost generation of "liberation first, education later" (*Sunday Times, (ST)* April 29,

1990). In neither article was the concept discussed any further; neither its origins nor its meaning were explained.

The origins of the 'lost generation' in foreign media coverage is not accidental. For conservative writers abroad, South Africa's 'lost generation' was just part of a global phenomenon. All over the (third) world, young people were at the forefront of televised violence. Perhaps they were the product of economic changes that destablised 'traditional' societies as part of 'modernisation'. They were certainly a reminder that the passing of the Cold War did not mean an end to war.

The term 'lost generation' itself had been used elsewhere in the world prior to 1990. A study of children in Northern Ireland, published in 1987, examined the evidence for assertions that they constituted a 'lost generation', 'lost' in terms of moral depravation through exposure to violence (Cairns, 1987). The initial use of the term in the South African context similarly emphasised 'loss' in terms of norms (or supposed normlessness), especially hostility to education and support for violence. But the South African usage, from the start, involved a second crucial feature: the generation was also 'lost' in that it was 'out of control', ie beyond the control of the state and, most immediately, the ANC.

Later in 1990 the SABC's flagship news magazine programme, 'Network', ran a report on the 'lost generation', presented by Barbara Folscher. At about the same time the government's Constitutional Development Service formally requested the HSRC to investigate the position of black 'youth' in Soweto, and in particular whether the 'youth' posed a threat to orderly constutitional change. But it does not seem that the term 'lost generation' was actually used in the HSRC's brief. This was typical of the period: whilst the 'Network' programme was widely discussed, I have found no other uses of the term in academic writing, government documentation, or newspaper reports through the remainder of 1990.

The very slow take-up of the actual term, 'lost generation', in South Africa's white media reflected their preoccupation through most of 1990 with the threat posed by the 'masses' in general rather than the 'youth' in particular. Only in mid- and late-1990 did the media narrow their gaze from all black people to a specific section of the black population - the 'youth' - in a retreat to a less overt expression of racism (Seekings, 1995:28-30).

The first reference to the 'lost generation' in the South African *Sunday Times* by a South African-based journalist was in January 1991. In his newly regular column, *ST* editor Ken Owen focused on what he viewed as the country's tumble towards anarchy. Owen complained that 'authority in the townships' had come 'to be wielded by young thugs, ignorant and undisciplined'; 'Soweto's "lost

generation"', he judged, 'is irretrievably lost'. Owen enclosed the term within inverted commas, suggesting that it was not widespread at the time (*ST*, Jan 20, 1991).

But whilst the 'youth' emerged at the centre of fears for political stability (Seekings, 1995:30-32), the term 'lost generation' was still only used rarely in the press. In the *ST*, for example, it was not used again until September - by Owen, and within inverted commas (*ST*, Sep 22, 1991).

It was a foreign magazine which provided the first, detailed account of South Africa's 'lost generation' - using the term without inverted commas in both headline and text. According to an illustrated, three-page article in the February 1991 issue of the US-based *Time* magazine, the 'lost generation' comprised:

... as many as five million young people, from their early-30s down to perhaps 10, mostly school dropouts who are unable to get jobs and unprepared to make constructive contributions to society. They are the deprived, activists, layabouts or thieves ...

... Many of them are capable of killing at the drop of a match. They have developed a youth culture of alienation and intolerance that may be more destructive, in its sheer scale, than anything seen in Beirut, Belfast or the Gaza Strip.

The article accorded this 'lost generation' great current political importance, implicitly crediting it with the violence in Natal and the Transvaal. It also predicted that the 'lost generation' would remain important because their expectations would not be satisfied by a change of government. The overall message was clear: the 'lost generation' of black 'youth' were a danger and threat that could only get worse. The international dimension was also evident: there were alienated and violent 'youth' in South Africa just as there were in 'Beirut, Belfast or the Gaza Strip' (Macleod, 1991).

The idea that there was a 'lost generation' of black 'youth' in South Africa seems to have put down deeper roots abroad than at home. In April 1991, the South African ambassador to the US, Harry Swartz, reportedly asked for American assistance 'to deal with the four-million-strong "lost generation" of black youths who had not been properly educated so that they could be absorbed back into society and earn their living' (*Argus*, 19 April 1991). In the South African press report, the 'lost generation' was still enclosed within inverted commas. It is unclear whether Swartz's appeal met with success (although readers of *Time* magazine might have been comforted that the 'lost generation' had lost one million members since February!).

The term 'lost generation' may have been rarely used in the South African press but was becoming widespread in political and policy-related circles. Lawrence Schlemmer wrote in May 1991 that 'one hears frequent mention of the so-called "lost generation"' (Schlemmer, 1991a:16). A growing number of academic commentators picked up the term, generally to criticise it. An educationalist criticised the term, insisting that the 'youth' concerned could be given skills (*Sowetan*, 3 Jan 1991). Schlemmer himself presented evidence that young black South Africans generally shared their elders' views on violence and other issues, leading him to conclude that:

> 'The image of a "lost generation" of youth is quite clearly based on a minority in the age group. ... It is not typical of the mass of rank-and-file youth' (Schlemmer, 1991a:16-18)

At a seminar run by the HSRC in August, to set up a research programme on the 'youth', Schlemmer again debunked the concept of a 'lost generation' (Schlemmer, 1991b).

Just as the National Party government sought the 'expertise' of the HSRC in addressing the 'youth problem', so ANC-aligned church leaders set up a research project under the auspices of the Joint Enrichment Project (JEP). The JEP itself had been set up in 1986 by the South African Council of Churches and the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference. In mid-1991, under the direction of Sheila Sisulu (whose father-in-law was Walter Sisulu), the JEP convened a conference on the 'marginalised youth'. Speakers emphasised the scale of the problems facing young people, and the importance of these to society as a whole. The conference report remarked that it was 'small wonder that they [ie the 'youth'] had been dubbed a "lost generation"', but the report itself and speakers at the conference refrained from using the term (JEP, 1991; see further below). The same month, another conference was reportedly held on the provision of education for the 'lost generations' of school drop-outs. The conference put the number of people left out in the cold by the education system at four to five million (*WM*, May 30, 1991).

Although scholars were already debunking the concept of the 'lost generation', the press began to use it more and more. In mid-1992 the term 'lost generation' was widely used to refer to supposedly destructive, ill-socialised young people. The 'lost generation' had 'abandoned education, from 1976 to 1990, in order to make the state ungovernable'. They were 'desperate', 'schooled only in street battles and callow rhetoric', 'uneducated and undisciplined', and 'angry'. They were threatened by peace, and 'obsolete in their own struggle'. Their 'natural leader' was Winnie Mandela (*ST*, Apr 19, 1992; see also Jun 14 and Aug 2, 1992).

The *Sowetan* also repeatedly referred to the 'lost generation', which reportedly comprised about six million 'marginalised' black youth by July 1992 (*Sow*, July 24; Aug 7, 1992). The *ST* and *Sowetan* used the term somewhat differently. For the former, the 'lost generation' was bound up with violence, disorder and anarchy. For the latter, it was the product of an inadequate, and now politically disrupted, schooling system, combined with unemployment. For the *ST*, the 'lost generation' was a political problem; for the *Sowetan*, it was more of a social problem. The *ST* worried about the 'lost generation' ransacking through middle-class life; the *Sowetan* worried about the uneducated but cash-flush drug-dealer becoming a role-model for its readers' children.[1]

After 1992 the frequency of media references to the 'lost generation' declined. Most of the references in the *ST* were reports of political groups or researchers examining the issue, and usually rejecting it. The ANC Youth League co-organised a conference on the Lost Generation, and criticised the concept (*ST*, Dec 12, 1993). But a crude use of the term persisted. One story, in November 1993, suggested that the 'lost generation' comprised poor black youth and middle-class white youth (*ST*, Nov 28, 1993) - stretching previous uses of the term. Another, in November 1994, stated that the 'lost generation' comprised mostly youngsters from poor or broken families, who had left school early (such as in standard 4) and turned to crime (especially house- and car-breaking). The report gave one example, eighteen year-old Siphiso, who had subsequently become a hawker (*ST*, Nov 6, 1994).

Other criticisms of the term 'lost generation' went largely unreported. In February 1993 Franklin Sonn (later, ironically, Swartz's successor as South African ambassador in Washington) angrily denounced the term in a speech (Sonn, 1993). The following month the church-based JEP project held a second conference on the 'youth'. By this time the term 'lost generation' seems to have been widely discredited in progressive research and policy-making circles. On the one hand it was regarded as offensively pejorative; on the other, it labelled an entire generation on the basis of the position or views of just a section thereof. Research for the conference suggested that about half a million young people were 'lost' in the sense of having 'slipped through, or been shoved through, the social net entirely' (CASE, 1993). Another survey debunked 'white suburbia's image of most black teenagers as a "violent, lost generation" as a myth'. Black teenagers' attitudes were shown to resemble closely those of white teenagers (*Argus*, Mar 6, 1993).

Between 1990 and 1993 the media were intermittently preoccupied with the threat supposedly posed by black 'youth', but their use of the term 'lost generation' was concentrated in 1991-92. The media played a key role in

representing young black people in apocalyptic ways, but the particular packaging of the 'lost generation' was sustained elsewhere. The 'lost generation' concept was initially (ie around 1991) given credibility by the policy studies industry, for whom it was useful both as an impetus for massive research programmes and as a foil for new research findings.

Policy Studies and Research on the 'Lost Generation'

Two major, big budget, research programmes into the 'youth' were initiated during 1991. The first, prompted by the fears of the National Party government and shaped by preliminary research by the HSRC (De Cock & Schutte, 1991), was the HSRC's so-called 'Cooperative Research Programme' on 'South African Youth'. This HSRC programme commissioned forty-five research reports, as well as a nationwide survey of young people between the ages of 15 and 30. Most of the research reports were completed by mid-1992, but no overall report was published until the end of 1994 (Slabbert et al, 1994). The second research programme was commissioned by the JEP, and organised by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE), a research consultancy specialising in research for the democratic movement. CASE commissioned, or undertook itself, a range of research projects, including a nationwide survey of young people between the ages of 16 and 30.

These research projects, set up in 1991, fuelled the moral panic over the 'youth' and gave it respectability. By their very existence and by the ways in which they framed their task, they nourished the representation of young people in terms of a 'youth problem'. The actual findings of these research projects later undermined many of the core elements of the supposed 'problem', but this took place some time later - in 1993-94, after the moral panic had already subsided for a completely separate set of reasons.

The HSRC research programme was designed as a programme for the 'new' South Africa. In the 1980s the HSRC had served as a research arm for the National Party state. From 1990, it faced the challenge of ensuring that it survived democratisation and a change of government. Its research programme on 'youth' was 'cooperative' in the sense that it was run by the HSRC together with academics and political leaders with non-NP backgrounds. The steering committee was chaired by van Zyl Slabbert, former parliamentary leader of the liberal Progressive Federal Party and founder of the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa (IDASA). But the HSRC programme was not 'cooperative' enough to accommodate the JEP/CASE researchers. The explanation why depends on who you ask, but it seems likely that the rival policy

entrepreneurs - the HSRC and CASE - each wanted to maintain control to boost their positions in the fast-growing 'progressive' policy market.

Although the HSRC and JEP/CASE research programmes overlapped extensively - they even conducted separate national surveys at much the same time - there were a few telling differences. The HSRC, for example, used its national survey to address questions around the so-called 'culture of violence' among black 'youth'. Survey respondents were asked whether they would accept the outcome of negotiations even if they disagreed with it, whether they approved of the use of violence for political purposes, and so on (Slabbert et al, 1994:399-405).

The JEP/CASE research was focused on the 'youth problem' more as a colossal waste of human potential than as a threat to ordered processes of change. According to the JEP's report on its three-day conference on 'marginalised youth' in May 1991:

> South Africa is on the threshold of a new era. But the vision of a democratic and non-racial social order is clouded by a looming social crisis - a crisis involving millions of young black South Africans who live, increasingly, at society's outer margins. Educated (or rather 'miseducated') in a defective and collapsing education system, raised in an environment of criminal and political violence, and menaced by large-scale structural unemployment, these black youth face a bleak future. Small wonder that they have been dubbed a 'lost generation'. A major test of the future non-racial society and democratic government will be whether members of this generation can be given the opportunity to realise their full human potential (JEP, 1991:1).

The JEP emphasised the wasted potential of the 'marginalised youth', but found it difficult to get away from the discourse of a dangerous and delinquent 'lost generation'. One of the stated objectives of the 1991 conference was 'to highlight the socio-political and economic implications if the problem [of marginalised youth] is not tackled' (JEP, 1991:2). In her keynote address to the conference, Dr Mamphela Ramphele - a highly-regarded activist, scholar, and deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town - pointed to the threat posed by 'alienated youth', warning of their potential 'to destabilise the country, regardless of the nature of the political settlement achieved'. Another paper at the conference warned that the 'youth' could develop into a force 'which, because of its anarchic, sporadic and unorganised ways, could sabotage the process of building a new society' (Ramphele, 1992:10; Mokwena, 1992:49).

The JEP sought to redefine the debate about the 'youth', turning it away from the threatening implications of the 'youth problem' to the causes of the 'problem' - ie unemployment, schooling, social dislocation, and so on. But it was difficult to represent the 'youth' as a necessary focus for policy attention without adding fuel to the fire of moral panic. This was again illustrated at the JEP's follow-up conference in March 1993. Although the conference was dedicated to promoting policies and structures to address the development problems faced by young people, public attention was in fact caught by the preliminary results of a national survey of young South Africans, which were reported at the conference. The survey, conducted for the JEP by CASE, showed that five percent of young people were 'lost', and a further 27 percent were 'marginalised' - corresponding to 2.5 million people in all (CASE, 1993). The JEP/CASE survey punctured the myth of a 'lost generation' and identified specific issues that needed to be addressed, but reinforced panic over the still large numbers of young people who were supposedly 'marginalised' or 'lost'.

Both the HSRC and JEP/CASE research programmes included research on a wide range of dimensions of the 'youth problem'. Studies examined the impact on young people of violence, poor schooling, unemployment, HIV/Aids, and the politics of the 1980s. The JEP also commissioned research on responses to the problems of young people in other parts of Africa.[2]

The conclusion reached by both the HSRC and JEP/CASE research programmes was that there was no 'lost generation'. As the HSRC loudly proclaimed when advertising their results in the press: 'Youth is not lost in the new South Africa'. But by then concern with the 'lost generation' had already largely abated. Both research programmes had been initiated at the height of moral panic in 1991, amidst fear that the 'normalisation' of politics and the stability of the transition process would be sabotaged by militant 'youth' beyond the control of the leaders of the liberation movements. As soon as it became clear that the transition was going to be effected relatively smoothly and imminently, then that fear and the consequent panic began to evaporate. The symbolic turning-point may have been the funeral of assassinated South African Communist Party leader Chris Hani in April 1993. Commentators warned that the 'youth' would 'go on the rampage'. Instead, the ANC's leaders assumed the role of the country's government, and violence was contained (although only just, some say). The announcement of nationwide, non-racial elections, soon afterwards, put to rest most fears that the constitutional transition would be subverted by the country's dangerous 'youth' (Seekings, 1995).

After the 1994 elections the 'threat' of the 'youth' vanished. Little attention was paid to the 'youth' in South Africa's new parliament. When Nelson Mandela,

as the newly-elected president, presented his first 'state of the nation' address in May, he referred to the youth only briefly and towards the end of his speech:

> The youth of our country are the valued possession of the nation. Without them there can be no future. Their needs are immense and urgent.[3]

The Government, Mandela promised, would join together with representives of the 'youth' and others to 'ensure that the nurturing of our youth stands at the centre of our reconstruction and development'.

Young people were identified as needing development (or, perhaps, needing to *be* developed); the 'youth' no longer constituted a social or political problem. In the first months of the new, post-apartheid parliament, young people or the 'youth' received hardly a mention in parliament. One ANC senator spoke of the need to engage with the 2.5 million young people 'who have been marginalised or entirely ejected by our society', but who could be 'reclaimed' as 'active voters, workers, taxpayers and citizens'. And a former SAYCO and ANC Youth League leader called on the new government to pay due attention to the 'youth', and to 'take extra care in dealing with this volatile sector'.[4] But, otherwise, the 'youth' had vanished: their threat had apparently passed.

The rise and fall of the 'lost generation' illustrates a paradox of policy studies research. The policy studies industry survives (and often prospers) by defining 'problems' to be researched. Sometimes the 'problems' need no selling, but often policy entrepreneurs need to emphasise the scale of the 'problem' in order to attract generous funding. They thereby contribute to, and perhaps legitimate, panic around the 'problem': the 'problem', after all, was now so serious that it had to be researched, and urgently. The JEP/CASE research sought to counter the notion of the 'lost generation' from the outset, and the HSRC research proramme's findings were also dismissive. But both initially - in 1991 - reinforced the idea that there was a 'youth problem' before they showed - in 1993-94 - how the notion of such a 'problem' was itself, so as to say, problematic.

Putting the Panic in Perspective

The 'youth' are often the focus of moral panics. In Britain, for example, there have been intermittent moral panics over the supposed threat posed by delinquent and dangerous young, urban, working-class men since the mid-nineteenth century. In successive decades, public commentators have bemoaned the 'breakdown' of law and order, with the 'emergence' of a 'new' generation of young people inadequately socialised or integrated into the values and structures of 'civilised' society (Pearson, 1983). In South Africa, black 'youth' have been characterised as a 'social problem' whenever privileged observers have worried

that violence and disorder would sweep out of the working-class townships into white, middle-class areas, or onto the national political stage. Not all moral panics in South Africa have been generational, but there seems to have been a growing tendency among white South Africans towards framing racial anxieties in generational terms (Seekings, 1995:25).

The South African moral panic of 1989-1993 had many precedents: the 'amalaita' gangs of rural-born teenaged 'houseboys' (or domestic servants) in the early twentieth century (la Hausse, 1991); 'tsotsi' gangs of urban-born young men between the 1940s and the 1960s (Glaser, 1990, 1994; Ntsebeza, 1994); and student protesters in 1976-77 (see Molteno, 1979). In each panic, the threat is attributed to 'youth' living on the margins of society - or, as one account (published in 1961) put it, 'born into disease, squalor and inadequate homes' and 'rejected alike by the society which spawned them and by the economy in which they had no place'.

> The tsotsis, unlike the majority of adults present at the time, were able to strike in an ecstasy of abandon, with no property, no future, no employment, nothing to lose save their seemingly worthless lives (Reader, 1961:28).

South African townships have generally been violent places, as black South Africans have known very well for a long time. Urbanisation, industrialisation, expanding education, state repression, and the context of political struggle, have combined to generate chronic problems of authority and cohesion within the 'community'. There have been good reasons for alarm at levels of violence, as well as for concern over the waste of human potential through unemployment and poor schooling. But South Africa's moral panics have packaged these issues into the particular construct of an overarching 'youth problem'. In its most vicious form, in the media, this 'youth problem' combined the imagery of rebellious youth and urban male criminality, with racist images of black savages threatening dispossession.

The images and discourses of 'youth' generated in such moral panics are precisely that: images and discourses. They often have deep roots in media 'reporting' and popular culture. They are also often sustained by 'research'. Too much of this research is *on* young people, and too little allows the voices of young people themselves to be heard. It focuses on the social and economic conditions facing young people, rather than their actual experiences, behaviour or views. It often draws on detailed research, but repackages the findings to construct particular images.

The concept of a 'youth problem' was thus sustained by 'facts' - 'facts' about demographic and economic conditions, about social dislocation, about exposure

to violence, and so on. Half of South Africa's population is under the age of 21, and the population is growing significantly faster than the economy. The parlous state of schooling pushes many young people onto the labour market with neither skills nor educational qualifications. Unemployment is very high among young people. Few young black South Africans grow up in stable families or a stable network of social relationships within the 'community'. Their relationships with their elders are strained by factors such as their relatively better schooling, their aspirations for better jobs, and their more explicit political consciousness and activism. Many have also been exposed to considerable violence, whether political, criminal or domestic.

Researchers have often emphasised these social conditions in order to expose the failings of society - and not to pin the blame on the youth themselves. As Marais (1993) puts it, the 'youth' were not 'lost', but were 'pushed'. But most researchers have also been concerned to highlight the needs of young people, and have done so through emphasising the scale of the 'problem' and of the threat to society.

Crucially, research on different issues concerning young people has even been run together to construct an apparently integral, overall 'problem'. 'Facts' on unemployment, mis-education, exposure to violence, or social dislocation become the building-blocks of the 'youth problem' through the generally unexamined assumption that there is a direct and close relationship between adverse structural conditions, moral degradation, and anti-social behaviour. The widespread assumption that exposure to violence leads to a 'culture of violence' was central to the concept of a 'lost generation'. Raised amidst political violence, it was alleged, township 'youth' would learn to see violence as morally acceptable, and would then readily employ violence in other contexts. A former leader of the democratic movement warned in 1990:

> Once these youngsters become adults, there will be a sharp
> increase in domestic violence, child abuse, homicide, suicide, and
> a general decline in morale and respect for authority (Dr Jerry
> Coovadia, quoted in *Star*, Mar 22, 1990).

Similarly, unemployment is widely assumed to be play an important role in violence and anti-social behaviour. A report by CASE for the JEP suggests that unemployment leads to lower self-esteem, 'a feeling of uselessness and a sense that life may be meaningless', and alienation and estrangement 'from a society which fails to find a useful role for them at work'. The unemployed are therefore 'more likely to commit criminal acts' (Hirschowitz et al, 1994:76).

Such close and causal relationships between conditions and behaviour may indeed exist. But they are rarely, if ever, demonstrated. Policy entrepreneurs

package different issues into an overarching 'problem' so as to generate research funding, only to show subsequently in their research findings that the package is less cohesive than imagined. The crudity of the initial packaging can even become a foil for researchers to show how path-breaking their research is.

Young People in Contemporary South Africa

A growing body of research has challenged the assumptions and characterisations that underpinned the moral panic over the 'lost generation'. Crucially, research showed that young people, and even young black people, are heterogeneous, and most young people do not correspond to the stereotyped 'marginalised youth' (however defined). In 1991 Schlemmer reported on preliminary research on 16 to 24 year-old urban black 'youth', which showed 'exactly the opposite of what we expected':

> The conclusion we reached was that typical young people in the townships are not over-politicised or hyper-radicalised, deviant, amoral or anti-social. They have huge problems; huge disadvantages in terms of psychological, social and physical access to the economic system, but they are certainly not as alienated in terms of their own commitments as most stereotypes would suggest (Schlemmer, 1991b).

The survey conducted the following year by CASE for the JEP also suggested that two out of three young people - in this case of all races, and aged between 16 and 30 - did not fall into their broadly-defined categories of 'marginalised' or 'lost' (CASE, 1993).

Surveys show that a high proportion of young people participate in religious, sporting, and other organised activities. The CASE/JEP survey reported that more than two out of three young people attend church at least twice a month; only eight percent did not identify with any religion. Many - especially young women - are active in church choirs. Almost 50 percent of young men are active in sports clubs. Another survey of young black people found that one-third were active in youth clubs (CASE, 1993:7-8; Møller, 1991).

Surveys also indicate attitudes on the part of young people which suggest low levels of alienation. In the CASE/JEP survey, young people were asked to choose adjectives to describe themselves. The most frequently given response was 'ambitious', followed by 'happy', 'caring', 'confident' and 'honest'. 'The result is a picture of the youth as highly positive in outlook', CASE assessed, 'notwithstanding the majority feeling that they will not be able to fulfill their potential' (CASE, 1993:25). Young people retained a deep concern for

respectability, or being a 'decent citizen', and stressed the importance of self-improvement (Campbell, 1992:chapter 7).

Overall, young people's attitudes, and even young black people's attitudes, do not differ much from their elders' attitudes on a range of important issues. Schlemmer reported that young people's views on violence were similar to those of older people. When asked about the problems facing South Africa today, young people were just as likely as older people to reply 'political violence' or 'increased crime'. Young people seem to be as opposed to crime and delinquency as their parents. When asked 'what is the worst thing about being a young person in South Africa today?', young black people in Natal prioritised 'crime and delinquency'. A similar concern with crime was evident in a series of depth interviews with young black people, also in Natal. Young men were actively involved in crime prevention and punishment, and young women were supportive (Schlemmer, 1991; Møller, 1991:8; Campbell, 1992:chapter 6).

Opinion polls in the early-1990s consistently suggested that young black South Africans were *not* especially alienated from the political process. Age seemed to make little difference to black South Africans' intention to vote in 1994, their expectations of the election, their reasons for voting, their trust in political leaders, or their preferred political party. Prior to the elections, many commentators had suggested that 'marginalised youth' would flock to support the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), which had denounced the ANC's compromises in the negotiations and espoused a more militant programme (eg Battersby, 1993). But in the elections the PAC won a paltry 1.2 percent of the vote, whilst pre-election opinion polls consistently showed that PAC support among young people in particular was only slightly higher (about three to four percent). Nor (according to opinion polls) did young people show significantly higher support than their elders for 'radicals' within the ANC, such as Winnie Mandela and Peter Mokaba. Overall, young people were not especially radical in party political terms.

These points were emphasised in the report of the HSRC research programme. 'South African youth can range from a white thirty-year-old stockbroker with a top class education, to a black fifteen year-old shack dweller trying to pass Standard 4 in an embattled township school' (Slabbert et al, 1994:26). Most young people 'share their communities' values and are basically conservative in their views' (as the HSRC put it in public notices - eg in *WM*, Dec 9, 1994).

Very large numbers of young people, especially young black people, have grown up amidst considerable adversity, including poverty, poor and disrupted schooling, family instability, chronic political and other violence, and high levels of post-school unemployment. But most of these young people did *not* develop

attitudes at odds with their elders'. Few young people embraced violence, or became especially alienated from the political transition. A significant proportion of young people may have been 'marginalised' in one or other respect - as the CASE/JEP survey suggested, and the HSRC research echoed - but few of these fell into the category of dangerous or threatening 'youth'. They faced severe social and economic problems, but did not comprise a 'lost generation'.

Young black South Africans have shown astonishing resilience in the face of adversity. This is particularly evident in research conducted by psychologist Gill Straker. In 1986 Straker provided psychological counselling to a group of young political activists who had fled from an impoverished township for fear of being killed by conservative vigilantes. Three years later, in 1989, she traced these activists to assess the long-term impact of their exposure to violence and other adversity. A few of the former activists had become tsotsis, but the overwhelming majority had maintained and acted on a finely-tuned sense of morality, renouncing violence outside of the struggle for political change. Most young political activists negotiated relationships which supported them through hard and brutal experiences (Straker, 1992).

Other psychologists examined in detail the effects of exposure to violence on the development of morality in South African adolescents. Dawes and others showed that the context for and nature of violence is crucially important in shaping its effects on adolescents. Exposure to political violence did not predispose children to use violence themselves (Dawes, 1994). This South African research is consistent with research in comparably violent contexts. In Northern Ireland, for example, the term 'lost generation' has also been applied to the 'children of violence'. But research suggests that:

> Despite the fears of educators, clergymen and others there appears
> to be little evidence that the moral standards of Northern Irish
> children have declined because of the political conflict and
> violence generated by the 'troubles' (Cairns, 1987:93).

We should not rely on the representations of 'youth' elsewhere in the world that are offered in *Time* or *Newsweek*.

The resilience of young black South Africans has been based in part on the strength of familial ties. The family might have become very unstable, but particular relationships have continued to be particularly important (Straker, 1992; Campbell, 1992). Resilience was also sustained by the importance of morality in the self-identity of many young people. The identity of a 'comrade' in the struggle against apartheid widely involved a particular sense of morality, of a selfless commitment to the empowerment and improvement of the 'community'. Much of this political morality dissipated after the onset of

negotiations in 1989-90 (Marks, 1993; Campbell, 1992). As young people became less involved in explicitly political organisation and activity, growing numbers seem to have been attracted to small and localised youth clubs. According to Møller:

> Young people were attracted to youth groups which might restore order and a measure of normality to their lives. Driven by the need for a new morality, many of the new youth clubs regard themselves as 'community' groups and combine community service and social awareness with their recreational pursuits (Møller, 1991).

The resilience of young black South Africans may have been sustained also by individual experiences of life getting better, however slowly. The rate of unemployment is very high among young black South Africans; very few black school-leavers find a job quickly. A study in Natal found that young people faced, on average, a three year waiting period between leaving school and finding their first job (Møller, 1991). But most young people do, eventually, find employment. One study of Soweto students who left school in 1984 found that fewer than one in five were unemployed seven years later, although almost all had experienced at least one spell of unemployment. Among students who had left school in 1988, almost half were still unemployed (Bennell with Monyekolo, 1992).

Conclusion

The rise and fall of the 'lost generation' is reflected in its elasticity as its size was re-estimated in the early-1990s. In 1991 the 'lost generation' was said to include four to five million people. At one point the figure of six million was given. But in 1993, CASE reported that less than half-a-million young people were 'lost' - just five percent of the age group. The waning of the moral panic reflected its contingency; whilst intense for a time, it had little lasting impact.[5]

> Does South Africa have a "youth crisis"?', asked the report of the HSRC research programme in 1994.
>
> The short answer to this question is: No. ... There is no 'youth crisis' as such, but a range of intractable problems within which young people find themselves and that should be addressed in policy (Slabbert, 1994:15, 26).

Indeed. Young people were - and are - 'marginalised' in a variety of different respects; the CASE survey suggested that as many as two and a half million young people can be considered 'marginalised'. But these cannot be combined into the undifferentiated package of a 'youth problem', involving a 'lost generation', that is a supposed 'problem' because of the threat it is seen as posing

to the key institutions and values of society. Unemployment, poor education, crime and gangsterism, unwanted pregnancies, and so on are largely separate issues that affect many young people - and many older people too. These issues are no less important because of their diversity than if they were facets of some threatening 'lost generation'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

1. In mid-1992, a returned exile in Soweto apparently wrote a play entitled 'The Lost Generation' (*Sowetan*, July 24, 1992). I have, unfortunately, been unable to find out anything more about this play.

2. Most of the JEP/CASE research was published in Everatt (ed, 1994); a report on politics in the 1980s was published as Seekings (1993). The HSRC research reports are summarised in Slabbert et al (eds, 1994).

3. Mandela, State of the Nation address, Parliament, 24 May 1994.

4. *Hansard*, Senate debate, 25 May 1994, columns 12 to 15, and House of Assembly debate, 3 August 1994, columns 728 to 731. See also Peter Mokaba's speech, 27 May 1994, columns 208 to 210.

5. There is a need for further research on the changing character and intensity of stereotypical imagery - or 'othering' - within popular culture and discourse, ie going beyond the commerical press, political leadership and the policy studies industry.

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