CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH by LEE HARVEY

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PART 2 CLASS

2.6 Paul Willis—Learning to Labour

2.6.1 Introduction—schooling for working-class jobs

In *Learning to Labour*, a study of how working class kids get working class jobs, Willis (1977) grounds his critical analysis in ethnographic evidence analysed from a Marxist cultural perspective. He attempts to dig beneath the surface of what was seen at the time as a developing crisis in education evident in pupil misbehaviour in schools. Willis was not so much concerned with the 'misbehaviour' as such but rather set out to look at the transition from school to work of non-academic working class boys. The primary aim of his research was to cast light upon the 'surprising' process whereby, in a liberal democratic society, where there is no obvious physical coercion, some people are self-directed towards socially undesirable, poorly rewarded, intrinsically meaningless, manual work.

As such Willis' critical analysis is structural rather than historical in the first instance. He sets out not by asking what occurs in the classroom, but by asking what happens at school that leads some boys into low status manual jobs? His ethnographic work reveals that there is a counter culture among some working class 'lads' that denies the expectations, values and social control incipient in the 'educational paradigm'. The lads are suspicious and distrustful of schooling; see it as failing their own aspirations; as irrelevant; and actively ridicule the schooling process.

2.6.2 The participant study

cultural values.

An ethnographic approach was chosen as its 'sensitivity to meanings and values' and its 'ability to represent and interpret symbolic articulations, practices and forms of cultural production' provided a way for Willis to access the collective praxis that he saw as constituting culture. Willis' ethnographic work is organised around a main case-study group and a number of comparative groups. The latter suggest that the characteristics of the main group of 'lads' are by no means unique, and that they, as a type, can be distinguished from more academically oriented working- and middle-class groups who hold different

The main case-study was of twelve non-academic, white, working-class males, in their penultimate year of schooling, aged around 15 (at the start of the study) from an industrial town in the Midlands ('Hammertown'). The subjects formed a friendship network, and were in the same year at a single-sex, working-class, secondary modern school in the heart of a working class estate in Hammertown. Willis saw them as all

members of some kind of oppositional culture. They were intensively studied during their last two years of schooling, via participant and non-participant observation in classrooms; around other parts of the school; and in leisure activities. Willis attended, as a class member not teacher, some of all the different classes that the group went to, including careers classes. This direct observation was supported by 'regular recorded group discussion; informal interviews and diaries'. (Willis, 1977, p. 5). In addition Willis taped long conversations with all parents and teachers of the main group, as well as all other senior teachers and careers officers. After they left school, Willis undertook short periods of participant observation of each of the twelve in their workplace by actually working alongside them. This was augmented by taped interviews with the individuals and with selected foremen, managers and shop stewards.

The main study was supported by less intensive studies of five comparison groups of working class lads in the same school year. These were of two 'conformist' groups taken from the same year of Hammertown Boys and from a nearby Hammertown mixed secondary modern and three 'non-conformist' groups from a single sex Hammertown grammar school; from a mixed comprehensive in the centre of the nearby larger conurbation; and from a high-status grammar school in the 'exclusive residential area of the larger nearby conurbation'. These comparison groups were all friendship groups who intended to leave school at 16. Three subjects from these comparison groups were selected for participant observation at work, the same approach being used as for the main study group.

The research is reported in two parts. The first part presents the empirical data and main findings of the research. It is basically an ethnography of the school, focusing on the 'oppositional working class cultural forms within it'. Large numbers of excerpts from the ethnographic material are quoted verbatim as Willis outlines the elements of the oppositional culture. On the basis of interviews with parents and the research in the factories, this elaborated oppositional culture is then contextualised, as part of a more general working-class culture, and specifically shown to have profound similarities with shop-floor culture. This is further developed in terms of local institutional manifestations of working-class culture. Finally, Willis examines the way the culture subjectively prepares labour power. He illustrates how manual work is seen in oppositional culture as a sociable practice that substantiates a view of life that, in an elusive way, generates self-esteem while demeaning others. It is the sense of their own labour power, learnt within the counter-school culture, that sustains the positive image.

The second part of *Learning to Labour* is more theoretical and it is this analytic framework that develops the study from an ethnographic account into a piece of critical social research. His avowed aim is to 'plunge beneath the surface of ethnography' in what he calls 'a more interpretative mode'. (This should not be confused with an interpretive or *Verstehen* approach, however). Willis offers an analysis of the inner meaning, rationality and dynamic of the cultural process revealed in the ethnographic study and considers how these processes contribute both to working-class culture in general and to the maintenance and reproduction of social order. The ethnographic study cannot reproduce the 'logic of living', which must be traced back to the 'heart of its conceptual relationship' if the creative aspect of the culture is to be understood.

Willis thus adopts a 'critical ethnographic' approach. His material is based on extensive ethnographic enquiry but, rather than simply report his observations as the sets

of meanings that operate within the group, he is concerned only with the ethnographic detail in as much as it provides indicators at the local level of the more general structural questions that frame his enquiry. Willis retains, throughout, the question, framed at the holistic level, of why working-class kids get working-class jobs? In order to link the particular to the general he asks a number of intermediary questions that provide a framework for shuttling between the wider social-cultural and the specific manifestations. These questions provide the basis for the interrogation of his ethnographic material in order to discover how the structural features relate to the particular: what unspoken assumptions lie behind and make the cultural attitude sensible? The intermediate questions he asks are: why do some working class lads differentiate themselves from the institution? What is the basis of the conviction with which the 'lads' hold their views, insights and feelings? How does one explain the 'lads' reversal of the conventional occupational hierarchy? How, in the end, are the 'lads' entrapped rather than liberated by their work situation? What, at root, determines the cultural forms?

2.6.3 Penetration and limitation

To go beyond the ethnographic study, which he sees as describing 'the field of play', and thus answer some of these structurally oriented questions, Willis suggests two key organising concepts that interact to provide a basis for understanding how the 'self-damnation' to manual work is seen so positively. These concepts are *penetration* and *limitation*.

Willis' analysis is widely regarded as somewhat dense at this stage and this is reflected in his definition of these core concepts:

Penetration' is meant to designate impulses within a cultural form towards the penetration of the conditions of existence of its members and their position within the social whole but in a way which is not centred, essentialist or individualist. 'Limitation' is meant to designate those blocks, diversions and ideological effects which confuse and impede the full development and expression of these impulses. (Willis, 1977, p. 119)

This means that the counter-school culture is able to cut through the (middle-class or dominant) ideological notions embodied in schooling and reveal them for what they are. Essentially, the educational paradigm espouses individualism (the free action and self-interest of individuals) and the counter-school culture voices its opposition to individualism, although, of course, not in such abstract terms. The illusory promise of qualifications, the irrelevance of the curriculum, the meritocratic values, are all seen, by the counter culture, as at variance with immediate gratification, group solidarity and the primacy of labour power. This is rooted in a clear conception of the working class as at the bottom of the status hierarchy, irrespective of any movement by individuals.

The wisdom of movement up the gradient as an individual is replaced by the stupidity of movement as a member of a class. By penetrating the contradiction at the heart of the working class school the counter-school culture helps to liberate its members from the burden of conformism and conventional achievement. (Willis, 1977, pp. 129–130)

However, the counter-culture is only partial in its penetrations, and faces limitations that are generated within the working-class culture upon which it draws.

The idea of labour power is central. Willis suggests that the positive affirmation of labour power might have precipitated a radical, alternative, liberating culture. However, it is blocked out by distorted impulses and ends up simply inserted into an exploitative and oppressive class structure. He thus addresses the impulses towards penetration in the oppositional culture and then considers the internal and external limitations that prevent and distort their impacting on the cultural form.

Willis' analysis of labour power is a direct re-presentation of Marx's surplus value analysis (see section 2.3). Labour power is a unique commodity upon which profit is based as the result of the appropriation of surplus labour by the accumulating capitalist. An infinite *capacity* has been purchased for a finite sum and this is socially legitimated through the apparent equivalence of wages and human power that permits the continuation of this purchase and use of labour power.

Capitalist ideology hides this exploitative relationship, yet, argues Willis, the counter-school culture reacts to it 'as if by instinct' and limits labour power. At the immediate level, in the school, this limitation is in order to devote more energies to the activities of the counter-school culture. The ethnographic material indicated that the 'lads' saw their own labour power as 'a barrier against unreasonable demands from the world of work'. This feeds directly into shopfloor culture 'whose object is at least in part to limit production' and as such is a 'creative response to the world of capitalism', although one devoid of a clear analytic appreciation of the special nature of labour power as a commodity.

Capitalism is concerned with the profit derived from labour power rather than the use to which it is put. The *concrete* form of labour power is underpinned by the idea of labour power in the *abstract*, as the exploitative mechanism. Abstract labour is measured in units of time (which is its exchange value) not its use value. This is reflected in the indifference expressed by the 'lads' in their choice of manual labour. The indifference derives from the continued de-skilling of labour and the meaninglessness of manual labour; the narrowing of the gap between concrete and abstract labour. The counterschool culture 'recognises' the principle of abstract labour and the commodity form of labour power. The reaction to abstract labour by the counter-school culture digs away at the core of the capitalist reproductive process. However, it operates not to expose exploitation but to *enable* it by creating a subjective acceptance of the abstractive labour process and by promoting the celebration, by the 'lads', of their labour power which can be applied to their own ends and purposes.

However deeply critical of the educational paradigm and the capitalist mode of production this is, Willis notes that it does not lead to a fundamental (working class) critique of the capitalist mode of production. He asks, why is the potential for a total social transformation not fulfilled?

2.6.4 Contradictory divisions: labour sexism and racism

The counter-school culture (reflecting the wider working class culture) has internal divisions; these are based on a division on the lines of mental and manual labour, of gender, and of race. These divisions serve to override any potential analytic recognition of the uniqueness of labour power as a capitalist commodity.

The first division, Willis argues, arises as a result of a partial penetration of individualism. The school represents individualistic values and the group solidarity of the 'lads' is opposed to this. However, this opposition is inextricably linked to an expressed opposition to all that the school embodies by way of practice, namely mental work with the associated qualifications whose promise is illusory. Thus within the working class a mental—manual division is rehearsed at school (the lads versus the 'ear-'oles') which produces division. This is further accentuated by a linking of mental work with unjustified authority, as manifested in the school hierarchy (the 'lads' resented the authority of the teachers which, for the 'lads', was based solely on the teachers knowing marginally more than the kids). Thus, as 'one kind of solidarity is won, a deeper structural unity is lost.... Individualism is penetrated by the counter-school culture but it actually produces division' (Willis, 1977, p. 146).

Capitalism benefits from this mental-manual division, indeed, this positive affirmation of manual labour is essential for the stability of capitalism as without this inversion of the ideological order there would be a constant clamouring away from the giving of labour power, which could only be opposed by coercion. However, just because capitalism needs the shift does not explain why that need is satisfied. Why do the 'lads' not aspire to the rewards and satisfactions of mental labour? The ethnographic data indicated that the lads preferred manual labour and affirmed themselves through it? However, capitalism does not directly generate this inversion, it is actually generated from within patriarchal working-class culture.

Thus, the second division is gender based, with the male counter-school culture promoting and celebrating its own sexism. This is manifested by the lads' exploitative and hypocritical expectations of, attitudes towards, and treatment of young females. Once again the sexual division is emphasised at the point at which individualism is penetrated. The sexism of the wider working class culture, evident in the division of labour at work and home and its associated power relations, provides the model for the counter-school culture. It is this, Willis argues, rather than the institutionalised sexism of the schools that is the dominant force in the reproduction of sexism.¹⁹

It is the gender superiority enshrined in working-class culture that enables the 'lads' to accept their disadvantage as manual rather than mental labourers. The ethnographic material makes it clear that the two divisions do not operate separately but are conflated in lived experience. Patriarchy buttresses the (mental/manual) division of labour but in doing so reproduces gender oppression. It operates in the counter-school culture through the lads regard of mental work as effeminate 'pen pushing' and not as 'real' work. Mental work lacks 'robust masculinity', a conception grounded in the restricted role of women. Manual labour takes on a grandeur from this macho perspective, which works both to generate a self-esteem among the 'lads' and to entrap them into the giving of their labour power.

Thus patriarchy is a pivot of the complex process of capitalism in its preparation of labour power and reproduction of social order. The counter-school culture raises consciousness about the 'commonality of the giving of labour' only to undermine this awareness by concentrating only on manual labour and sliding into a distorted affirmation of it by disengaging it from its role in capitalism and using it to establish the nature of self. As the affirmation of manual labour provides a sense of self so the acceptance of unfavourable status reflects patriarchal dominance. The unfavourable status the lads have

at school simply reflects the unfavourable status they are aware of for women in workingclass culture in general.

The third division is racial division. Willis does not develop this aspect and tacks it on rather than integrates it with his earlier labour type/gender analysis. Racial division serves to further divide the working class both materially and ideologically. It provides a heavily exploited underclass that is itself partially or indirectly exploited by the working class and that provides a basis for simplistic assertions about the superiority of self among the white working class.

Willis argues that racism enables the 'lads' to develop a 'more carefully judged' cultural categorisation of masculinity. Rather than link masculinity directly to tough labour, the unwillingness to concede ground to black labour (who at the time tended to take the harder and rougher jobs) resulted in a specification of some forms of labour as 'dirty' and therefore unacceptable. Such work fell off 'the cultural scale of masculinity'. The reaction to the 'upward mobility' of some ethnic minority groups, particularly those perceived as 'Asian shopkeepers' reflected the 'lads' feeling that such groups should be doing 'dirty work', although at the same time they could be despised as 'pen pushers'.

2.6.5 Culture, ideology and collusion

Willis suggests that the idea of academic achievement being reflected in job opportunities is an inadequate middle-class notions of success and failure. Working-class culture has a radically different perception which is grounded in lived experience. This culture delimits and structures the sets of choices and decisions that its members can make.

And this class culture is not a neutral pattern, a *mental* category, a set of variables impinging on the school from outside. It comprises experiences, relationships and ensembles of systematic types of relationship which set not only particular 'choices' and 'decisions' at particular times, but also structure, really and experientially, how these 'choices' come about and are defined in the first place. (Willis, 1977, p. 1)

Thus, Willis argues, it is their own culture that most effectively prepares some working-class lads for manual labour. Paradoxically, the culture projects itself, and is articulated, as 'true learning', affirmation, appropriation and resistance. However, this cultural articulation is distorted and turned back on itself. Complex ideological processes meshed with the actions of the guidance agencies and the school, in addition to the influence of patriarchal, sexist, male domination of working class culture, are all involved in the self-damning impact of school counter culture.

Working class culture with its resultant self-induction into the labour process is related in complex ways to regulative state institutions that have an important function in the reproduction of the social totality. Culture and ideology are dialectically related. Dominant ideology is not simply imposed from above but may (and does) emerge from within a potentially antithetical (working class) culture. It may be, Willis suggests, that elements useful to the state such as racism and sexism are passed up from the working-class culture and are grasped opportunistically. Thus, Willis argues that dominant ideology is that which is ostentatiously handed down through the media and the education system. This dominant ideology appears 'natural' and the result is that the giving and exploitation of labour power also emerges as a natural outcome, as the

ethnographic material reveals. There is a contradiction between the penetration of counter-school culture and the tendency to 'conventional morality'. The partiality of the oppositional cultural processes are overpowered by dominant ideology. The dominant ideological conceptualisations (control, order, private ownership, etc.) remain reference points of the last resort for those involved in the counter-school culture.

Culture is, thus, praxiological. It is not just socialisation nor is it the determination resulting from the action of dominant culture. Working class culture is the result of collective consciousness derived from the active struggle of each new generation. However, working class counter culture operates within a determinate social structure and, in ways Willis has revealed through his critical analysis of ethnographic material, serves to reproduce the dominant culture through its opposition. It is important, however, to avoid a reductionist view of culture. Industry's labour requirements do not simply determine the formation of working class culture. Schools alone do not produce candidates for manual labour, working-class culture in general and the counter-school culture in particular act to affirm the labouring ethos. In short, cultural reproduction contributes towards social reproduction in general.

In contradictory and unintended ways the counter-school culture actually achieves for education one of its main, though misrecognised objectives—the direction of a proportion of working class kids 'voluntarily' to skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual work. Indeed far from helping to cause the present 'crisis' in education, the counter-school culture and the processes it sponsors has helped to prevent a real crisis. (Willis, 1977, p. 178)

Willis's detailed first-hand analysis of the counter-school culture is related to a broader analysis of working class culture with its intrinsic racism and sexism and its celebration of manual labour. This is seen in the context of the wider dominant culture and the need of capital to ensure the reproduction of labour power. In his ethnographic analysis Willis used the concepts of penetration and limitation to unlock the interrelationship between counter-school culture and working-class culture and it is this that makes *Learning To Labour* is a paradigm case of critical ethnographic work.

¹⁹ Willis suggests that although the school plays a vital and systematic role in the reproduction of class society, it is 'no product of the school's manifest intentions that sexism and profoundly naturalised divisions arise in more virulent forms at the moment when its own authority is broken' (Willis, 1977, p. 147). For the working class, 'female domestic work is simply subsumed under *being* 'mum' or 'housewife'. 'Mum' will always do it, and should always be expected to do it. It is part of the definition of what she *is* as the wage packet and the productive world of work is of what 'dad' is (Willis, 1977, p. 151).

^{19A} Willis (1977, p. 151) summarises the attitude to masculinity embodied in labour power. Its labour power is considered as an ontological state of being, not a teleological process of becoming. Housework is not completion, it is maintenance of status. Cooking,

washing and cleaning reproduce what was there before. Certainly in a sense housework is never completed—but neither is it as difficult or productive as masculine work is held to be.