**Paul Willis ‘Learning to Labour, how working class kids get working class jobs’ (1977)**

Paul Willis developed a neo-Marxist approach to studying education and class. Willis focuses on how education prepares children for the workplace, but rejects ideas that the education system is a good agent of socialization. His aim was to see how effectively education prepared students for the workplace and whether students were being manipulated into accepting the capitalist values of society.

As well as drawing on Marxist sociology Willis adopted the techniques of a qualitative researcher (known as Symbolic Interactionists) using an ethnographic approach, studying the boys for a couple of years.

The main study was of a group of twelve non-academic working class lads from a town we shall call Hammertown and attending a school we shall call Hammertown Boys. They were selected on the basis of friendship links and membership of some kind of an oppositional culture in a working class school… As far as possible, the group studied were in the same school year, were friendship groups, and were selected for their likelihood of leaving school at the statutory minimum leaving age of sixteen. (Willis)

He used a wide range of methods including observation in class, participant observation, group discussions, diaries and informal interviews. Willis attended lessons as a member of the class rather than a teacher. He also went on school trips and attended careers sessions. In addition to studying the boys during year 10 and 11 he observed them when they first went into work:

I followed all twelve boys from the main group, as well as three selected boys from the comparative groups, into work. Fifteen short periods of participant observation were devoted to actually working alongside each lad in his job, and were concluded with taped interviews with the individual

The 12 ‘lads’ Willis focused on in his study had a distinctive anti school attitude. Their counter school culture had the following features. The lads felt superior to both teachers and the conformist boys they called ‘ear ‘oles’. They attached little or no value to their academic work and had no interest in gaining qualifications. During their time at school, their main objective was to avoid going to lessons or when they had to go, to do as little work as possible. The lads saw the adult world offering more excitement, particularly going out at night. The lads’ counter culture was extremely sexist toward women and derogatory to boys who were more academic. According to Willis, the boys looked forward to leaving school as soon as possible and getting a full time job. They were content to go into any job so long as it was a male manual job. Manual labour was seen as more worthy than mental labour.

In his conclusions Willis argued the education system does not successfully socialize children into a false consciousness where young people accept their place in the capitalist system. He does believe the education system creates a labour force suitable for capitalism but it does so unintentionally. The lads were not persuaded or forced into manual jobs; they actively chose them as part of their masculine working class identity. They learn about the culture of manual work from their father’s, brother’s, friend’s and community, choosing it as their future. [[1]](#footnote-1)

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| Q1. What was the aim of the research |
| Q.2 What is neo-Marxism? |
| Q.3 What was the context (background) of the research? Why? |
| Q.4 What were the main methods used? Why were they used? |
| Q.5 Who was in the sample (the group selected to be studied) and how were they selected? |
| Q.6 What were the main results of the study? |
| Q.7 What would functionalists say about Willis’ findings? |
| Q.8 Why do you think Willis was critical of Bowles and Gintis? |

1. Sources- Paul Willis (1977) ‘Learning to Labour’, Haralambos and Holborn ‘Sociology 7th ed.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)