

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A gendered perspective on *Learning to Labour*

Heather Höpfl

With an introduction by Lindsay Hamilton* and Matthew Brannan

Hamilton and Brannan contact details:

Keele Management School

Keele University

Staffordshire ST5 5BG

l.hamilton@keele.ac.uk/ 01782 733091

m.brannan@keele.ac.uk/ 01782 733610

* Corresponding author. Email: l.hamilton@keele.ac.uk

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Introduction

In September 2010, Paul Willis, Heather Höpfl, Peter Armstrong and Paul Thompson participated in a roundtable discussion convened by Matthew Brannan and Frank Worthington at *The 5th Annual Symposium on Current Developments in Ethnographic Research* at Queen Mary University of London. The panel considered the continued relevance of Willis's ([1977] 1981) book *Learning to Labour*. The following paper (written by Heather in 2012) came out of that discussion but as far as we know was never published. In it, Heather discusses a broad range of topics but specifically the issues of social mobility, reflexivity and the aspirations and expectations of working and middle class lives; their 'time horizons'. She does this with reference to her own distinctive biography and her desire to escape the fixity of class, geography, gender and symbolic location.

As Heather describes in the article, *Learning to Labour* was a central influence upon her own empirical work with grammar school boys and apprentices, acting as a counterpoint to her observations of their social aspirations (or the lack of them). She notes that the apprentices tended to project their plans and hopes only two weeks into the future and, for her, this

confirmed a great deal of the theoretical contribution of *Learning to Labour*: the symbolic structure of working class culture as a lived form which worked against and within a variety of social forces. This was a group that appeared to be fatally limited by their self-defeating lack of ambition. Forged by oppositional culture, they became tethered to the routines of mundane work by the disciplining powers of capital and state, global economics, urbanisation, industrialisation (and the aftermath of its decline). In conducting empirical work with the boys of the grammar school, by contrast, Heather noted that they could confidently project for themselves an aspirational life plan that took them well into their thirties; to postgraduate study and beyond. She was struck by the contrast between their sense of confidence in their ability to adapt and change and the sedimentary immobility of the apprentices' lives.

In seeking to theorise this, and while acknowledging the historical placement and context provided by *Learning to Labour*, Heather reflected upon her own biography and specifically, her early life at school in the 'dirty chemical town of Runcorn' - a place permanently lit by the glare of the local ICI tower. Motivated by a desire to 'escape' what she termed the paralysing 'hegemony of common sense', Heather came to see the unreflexive contentedness of her fellow classmates as an arresting force which fostered the uncritical acceptance of a fixed place in the social order. It was a situation that she chose not to accept for herself and while mindful that this made her, in some ways, an 'exotic specimen' to those with whom she had grown up, she continued to beat a different path for her own life. By carving out educational opportunities for herself, she was able to choose (what she termed) a 'nice job' away from Runcorn, a job which would allow her a degree of financial and intellectual independence and the capacity to 'make a living' far away from the perma-bright lights of the ICI tower and all the predictability it illuminated. It is to these biographical and 'vernacular' contextual factors that Heather returns in

this article. We present it here in memory of her; a wonderful colleague, writer, thinker and escapee.

Lindsay Hamilton and Matthew Brannan

Abstract

This paper presents an auto-ethnographic study of the personal experience of learning to labour. Drawing on Paul Willis's ([1977] 1981) excellent ethnographic study of working class 'lads' and their prospects, it reflects on the prospects and opportunities presented to the author as part of her life and experiences of learning to labour during the same period as Willis's study: which, of course, is specific to young men. Consequently, the paper reflects on the implications of class location and life chances, on the social engineering experimentation of the 1950s and 60s, on the options presented by a grammar school education and on the impossibility of return occasioned by such opportunities. It discusses the escape routes open to some but closed to many.

Keywords: Paul Willis, learning to labour, class expectations, grammar school education, education and social engineering

Non est sine labore palma – nothing is accomplished without hard work, my school motto

In the *Afterword* to the Morningside edition of Paul Willis's book, *Learning to Labour*, Willis says 'social reproduction and contradiction must be shown not as abstract entities, but as

embedded dynamically within the real lives of real people in a way that is not simple “correspondence” or “reflection” of unchanged, somehow “deeper’ structures’ (Willis [1977] 1981, 201). Yet, leaving aside for a moment the book’s highly significant contribution to the development of the field, what you do not find in *Learning to Labour* is a sense of the standpoint from which it is written. It was not common practice at that time to offer the reader a context for a book of this kind and yet there is so much here which would provide some insights into its origins. It is Stanley Aronowitz who, in the preface to the 1981 edition, points to Willis’s own working class origins, and describes him as ‘a working class kid who chose mobility (Aronowitz in Willis 1981, xii). Of course the use of the word ‘chose’ is perhaps open to question. It is Aronowitz who makes the point that ‘workers reproduce themselves as political and social subjects, in the process of defining themselves as the *others* [emphasis added] of bourgeois culture’ (xiii). Certainly, this statement, which owes much to its context and time, rang true for me and my personal struggle against such definition: my attempt to challenge what I then saw as the bourgeois culture which determined how I was defined and by whom. The notion of patriarchy had not yet entered my vocabulary. I saw the power that was wielded over my life and that of my schoolfriends as decidedly one of class.

Runcorn, circa 1962

Arguably, it is to Bourdieu ([1972] 2010a) that I should turn first for some support for these reflections on my personal history since it is Bourdieu, in his well-known observation, who points out that social order tends to produce ‘the naturalisation of its own arbitrariness’ and speaks of ‘systems of classification which reproduce in their own specific logic, the objective classes... in the relations of production... [that in turn] make their specific contribution to the

power relations of which they are a product' (164). Undoubtedly, I had experienced the ponderous weight of common sense which had given me location in the social order and secured for me a position which was not of my liking or choosing. Yet as Bourdieu argues, such power relations produce a '*quasi perfect* [emphasis added] correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization [so that] the natural and social world appears self evident' (164). If I am honest about this, I think it was the school careers visit to a brassière factory which first made me question the world that was laid out before me. I remember at fourteen feeling far more drawn to the life of young medical students as portrayed in the many 'Doctor' films which were popular at the time than to life as a machinist and marriage by the time I was eighteen. Bourdieu has argued that 'because the subjective necessity and self evidence of the common sense world are validated by the objective consensus on the sense of the world' (167), there is no dissent because 'the legitimacy of the dominant classification' (164) means that submission to that legitimacy occurs even when it is contrary to one's interests. Indeed, such is the power of the *habitus*. It is the relentlessness of common sense which bears down on the individual such that they are held in place by the overwhelming power of common sense. Bourdieu expresses this in terms of 'the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of class conditions) [which] produce *habitus*, systems of durable transposable *dispositions* which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular"' (72) apparently without visible direction: that is to say, by the very fact that these structures are taken-for-granted and sedimented by common sense, tacitly reproducing structures and dispositions.

So, taking together Willis's impressive argument about social reproduction and Bourdieu's powerful analysis of the power of common sense, I would like to offer, in the style of auto-

ethnographic comment, some reflections on my own attempts to break away from the power of definition. Of course, it must be said that in analytical terms, this argument does not attempt to do justice to either of these texts. However, its intention is to throw light on the lived experiences which accompany such analysis.

Lancaster University 1978

For me, *Learning to Labour* was particularly relevant because it was first published the year that I started my PhD in the heady and idealistic early days of the Department of Behaviour and Organizations at Lancaster University in 1977. I had been granted a fully funded SSRC Award and arrived to start my research with a great desire to study the pervasive effects of work. *Learning to Labour* (Willis [1977] 1981) and *Working for Ford* (Beynon 1973), each in their own ways, had a significant influence on my thinking. Studs Terkel's ([1972] 1997) comparatively recently published *Working; People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* was one of the first books which I had read which gave voice to the experiences of people in work. In particular, I recall the young woman who had already got her Master's degree but was working as a receptionist in order to support her partner through his doctorate. She was in despair that she was treated differently as a receptionist than she had been as a Master's student. I started my empirical work in 1978 with a comparative study of boarding school boys at Lancaster Royal Grammar School and craft apprentices at Automotive Products in Speke, Liverpool, just a stone's throw away from the huge Ford plant at Halewood. My study was concerned with time horizons and the results confirmed, perhaps not surprisingly, a very different pattern of expectations. Typically, a boarder at seventeen could indicate a life-plan with some confidence to the age of about thirty five. For the apprentice, time horizons were

much shorter, often as short as two weeks, rarely more than a month. I will relate some typical responses in full because of the marked difference in the career plans and intentions which is immediately apparent. For example, one boarder, John, said to me

‘I’m now in the Lower Sixth Form, next year I will carry on as usual with my same hobbies. I won’t give any of them up, I shall just continue as usual next term, complete my A levels, then I’m going to take a year off and I hope to do something which is absolutely different from anything that I’ve experienced before. I might help disabled children or do something like that... I may well come back to do Oxbridge, I don’t know. Then I’ll go to university and I’m going to do a Maths-based course with statistics and computing... So I expect that I’ll be at school, so to speak, until I’m 24; then after that I want to get straight into a job. I’m going to go into a company and I’m going to devote four years of my life, until I’m about 28, to getting as far up the ladder as possible, in promotion and things like that... Then when I’m about 28, I hope to get married and settle down... I want quite a bit of free time and holidays... I don’t expect for one moment that I’ll do that but I like knowing what I’m going to do... If I know what I want to do that’s fine, but I get quite upset if I don’t know what I’ll be doing in the next year.’

For the apprentice, time horizons were short. There was no elaborate structure of a life plan, more a general philosophy of ‘Let’s get on with it and live life. It’s not very long’, as Stephen explained or, as Peter put it, ‘I’d like a nice house, a nice car, a nice wife. Well, I’ve nearly got the wife. No house, no car’. There was no projection into the future beyond a few weeks, a friend’s wedding or an upcoming holiday; that is to say, there was little anticipation of the future beyond the immediate. Of course, this very much confirmed the conclusions drawn in Willis’s

book. There were obvious differences in the accounts presented by the boarders and the craft apprentices despite their similarity in age. Like the boarders, the apprentices had a sense of security because they were in a fortunate and prized position in an area of high unemployment. They were also secure in valuing what they gained from learning a trade. This gave them a market value and contributed to their sense of identity. Attainment and an understanding of their positions in life did similar things for the boarders, but over a much longer time horizon and with higher material returns. Both boarders and apprentices shared an almost dogged resignation to their ‘place’ – the circumstances in which they found themselves. Similarly, both boarders and apprentices held a regulatory view of time. For the boarders, their days were measured in discrete events, the timetables of school life; for the apprentices, by the factory clock. Having said this, both groups were strikingly different in their orientations to the future. It is these differences which most accord with Willis’s view on social reproduction ([1977] 1981, 176). Willis concludes that ‘working class kids were *supposed* to fail’ (204). Bourdieu describes education as ‘a whole symbolically structured environment, without specialised agents or specific moments, which exerts an anonymous, pervasive pedagogic action ... is transmitted in practice... without attaining the level of discourse’ ([1972] 2010a, 72). It was precisely the lived experiences and day-to-day practices which Willis sought to explore: to present the concreteness of the lads’ lived experiences. In my own studies, each day brought new insights into the actualities of class division and experience.

But, let me go back a little further in time and trace some personal resonances with *Learning to Labour*, to offer some lived experiences of my own.

Runcorn, circa 1963

I grew up in Runcorn, a chemical town in the North West of England: dirty, always light because the ICI works in Weston Point had, at that time, the largest fractionating tower outside of Texas. A Company town before the advent of ‘new town’ status in the mid-1960s: when we turned out to play hockey at school we were all wearing ICI socks; if you visited friends’ homes every bathroom had soap marked *ICI* on one side and *Buttermilk* on the other. I failed my 11+ examination and I went to a secondary modern school where expectations were low. Brighter girls did shorthand typing and the rest did domestic science. I can still amaze students by the speed of my typing but shorthand is not much in demand these days. Careers visits were to local factories – a cotton mill in Warrington, a trip to the BICC wire works at Helsby, an outing to Gorgeous Bras where we learned about our prospects as machinists or clerical workers. At that time the school-leaving age was 14 and if your birthday fell in the term before Christmas, you could leave, in effect, at 13 - at the end of the third year plus one term. Of course, since most of my school-fellows wanted to leave as soon as possible, many took this route without regard for the consequences. Those of my contemporaries who were more ambitious went to Skerry’s College in Rodney Street in Liverpool where they undertook office skills training or else they went to Felt and Tarrant’s where they trained to become comptometer operators¹. Many went to work for ICI. Some went to work at Gorgeous Bras.

I took and passed the 15+ transfer to the grammar school and my grandparents, who had raised me, were devastated. Their hopes for me had been for ‘a nice job in the ICI offices’. In the 1950s and 60s, the grammar schools were expected to provide and service an expanded middle and professional class and so my education consisted of the conventional academic curriculum

but also an assortment of subjects designed to bestow social skills: flower arranging, table setting, etiquette and elocution. I still squirm when a fellow diner uses their knife like a dissecting instrument. There were on-the-spot inspections to ensure that we had clean nails, a clean handkerchief, and that we had cleaned and polished the instep of our shoes. So, I might go from a Latin lesson in the morning to a session on how to set a table for dinner, on to a recreational afternoon of creative dance.

Helsby, 1966, Bristol, 1967-1971, Liverpool, 1971-1977

One day, while I was in the Lower Sixth Form, that is about seventeen years of age, I went to visit an old friend from the secondary modern school who I had heard was living nearby. She was seven months pregnant, married, and living on a caravan park quite near to my school. I sat on a narrow bench, my school boater on the seat beside me as she knitted booties for her baby: two years out of school for her and a whole cosmology of difference between us. A difference in expectations was becoming a gulf and I was moving now at a different speed.

When, as a student, I returned to Runcorn to work as a bus conductress with Crosville buses, my driver looked at me with some pity and said 'How old you now? 19? You should be married with two kids by now. You're on the shelf'. These sedimentary expectations pervaded all my experiences of returning home. I was a stranger: in Bristol, where I studied for a Higher National Diploma and then a Postgraduate Certificate in Education and where my northern accent was the subject of much amusement, and in Runcorn which was no longer a home. Later, when I worked as a teacher at a convent grammar school in Liverpool, I asked a particularly bright girl who had a natural talent for Economics which universities she was thinking of applying to. She replied 'Me Miss, go to university? My dad's a fork-lift truck driver'. She left school to take up a job in

the ICI offices. My grandparents would have been delighted. Her choice was one that accorded with the logic of many decisions I saw being made all around me: an unreflexive, sedimentary common sense with all the melancholic inevitability of Beckett's *Happy Days*. It was just as Bourdieu ([1980] 2010b, 122-135) had predicted.

Willis's book talks about 'class background, geographical location, local opportunity structure and educational attainment' ([1977] 1981: 172) as predictors of final employment for the unqualified working class and it is relatively easy to see how these factors played out in locating, in every sense of the term, those girls I left behind when I transferred to the grammar school. The appendix to the Morningside edition of Willis's book says 'At best, daily life, like art is revolutionary. At best it creates plans for escape' (194). And it was escape that I sought. I wanted to get out of Runcorn. I wanted to escape before I too was pulled down into the sedimentary layers of common sense, before I resigned myself to the power of the *habitus*.

Runcorn, circa 1983

In the early 1980s, a couple of years after I finished my PhD, I was in a pub in Runcorn with my brother; ironically, as things turned out, the pub was called The Traveller's Rest. It was New Year's Eve and the pub was packed. There was barely room to move. Suddenly, I became aware that a man was tugging at my skirt. 'Sit here love', he said offering me a place beside him. He was clearly a chemical worker, his face prematurely aged by his work. 'I know you' he said. 'Ah, I'm not from here' I said. The town had changed a good deal in the fifteen or more years I had been away and I thought he must have mistaken me for someone else. He was convinced and carefully scrutinised my face trying to place where he had seen me before. Then triumphantly he exclaimed 'I know where I've seen you. We've got a picture of you on our

fridge'. My response was sceptical: 'Really?'. I thought this extremely unlikely but he was flush with conviction. 'Yes, I put it there and I said to my daughter "that's what you've got to do – you've got to get away from here". It's too late for me now", he said, "I'm 38. I'm finished. But I told my daughter she had to do what you did. Escape"'. Well, of course, whether or not I did escape is a different matter but it is true to say that I did manage to see something other than the chemical industry and bingo at La Scala ballroom.

When I first read *Learning to Labour*, I was struck by the irreversibility of the power of the researcher. Willis's lads could not, for example, walk into a university and ask staff about *their* roles, *their* work, *their* expectations. It is inconceivable to imagine any such event taking place unless at the invitation of university staff and with specific motives. The lads are always at the mercy of the researcher who has the power to define the context, the questions and the interpretation of the outcomes. Of course, Willis is well aware of this and explains that in his study 'the role of ethnography is to show the cultural viewpoint of the oppressed, their "hidden" knowledges and resistances as well as the entrapping "decisions" which are taken with some sense of liberty, but which nevertheless produce "structure"' ([1977] 1981, 203).

So, what can be inferred from these observations, first, from my study of craft apprentices and boarding school boys but also from my personal experiences? In the case of the craft apprentices and boarders, I tried to do a follow up study of the participants fifteen years on, i.e. in 1993. Of the boarding school boys, despite the helpful co-operation of the school, I was only able to contact one of the original ten boys I had interviewed in 1978 and this only through his father who rang me to say 'I'm terribly sorry. I am sure he would be interested to help but Giles is climbing in the Himalayas with the army at the moment'. Of the apprentices, I was able to locate

all of them but one, who had, according to one of his friends, 'moved away'. 'Steve's living in Warrington now' he told me - about twelve miles away.

I too have moved away: moved on. I am no longer in touch with my friends from the grammar school. They are far flung and when I occasionally make contact with them through social network websites they write from Australia, South Africa, Italy, France, South America, Hong Kong. More often than not, they are dispersed across the world because of their husbands' jobs rather than their own. We fulfilled our destinies and became the wives of lawyers, accountants, doctors, army officers, engineers and senior managers. Most of the girls who were my contemporaries at school, and there were only twelve of us by the time we reached the Upper Sixth, did marry. The only one who didn't studied Medicine at Birmingham and had a successful career as a GP. This group of former schoolfriends, the grammar school girls, do not have reunions although our husbands do. However, the story of my friends from the secondary modern school is rather different. Most of these girls never left home. Few moved very far from where we lived fifty years ago when we started at secondary school. The vast majority remained within a five mile radius of the old school and of the thirty or so who started out only three live just beyond five miles within, say, a thirty mile radius and only four, including myself, live over a hundred miles away. Ironically, I discovered that my best friend from those days lives about a mile from my home in Stockton on Tees. I now live in a large former rectory with panoramic views over the Cleveland Hills but it is not without some irony and, moreover, some pleasure that it also looks out over the chemical works of Middlesbrough, over the ICI works and the industrial landscape of the Tees estuary and I am comfortable with that echo of my childhood.

Runcorn, circa 2007

I hesitate to say this in case it might be thought that I am suffering from a personal delusion about my own ageing but I will clarify my meaning in due course. My former schoolfriends from the secondary modern meet regularly and are clearly still friends. I have been invited to several of their formal reunions but only attended one because of work commitments and, if I am honest, a reluctance to return to a world I left long ago. What struck me when I attended the last one about five years ago was how old most of them had become. I do not necessarily mean that physically they were older than me. We share a chronological age. However, the relentless power of common sense had told them that now, as grandparents and mainly either retired or having never worked since their first child was born, they were old and that they should behave accordingly. Consequently, the conversation at the reunion was principally concerned with obituarial announcements and cognoscenti gossip. It was interesting to meet up with this group of women after a distance in time of over forty years and to hear about their lives. One had transferred to the grammar school with me at fifteen, then left at seventeen to undertake teacher training². She had returned to Runcorn after completing her course and had become a primary school headmistress. Another was a pillar of the local non-conformist church community. Two had married farmers and were living in rural Cheshire but the majority had married and, in the main, remained married, to men from the boys' secondary modern school adjacent to our own. These were fitters, welders, mechanics, a cook, car salesmen. Husbands didn't come up much in the conversations at the reunion so it is not possible to say if I am doing an injustice to the range of occupations they held. However, there was another noticeable dimension to the social hierarchy at the event. Those girls who had moved away, for example, to undertake training in nursing or teaching, when they returned had become part of the local elite but more particularly

where their husbands had done the same. Local men who had gone away but returned were regarded as social leaders and belonged to a variety of local charitable institutions and clubs: the Masons, the Buffs³, the Rotary Club, the Lions Club and so forth. This came up obliquely in conversation when attendees were talking about events, holidays or meeting other Rotarians, for example, while on holiday.

Here I found myself to be an exotic specimen. Not seen in forty years, my return was a subject of fascination. I am a traveller returned. I find myself the subject of much questioning and scrutiny. A few of the girls I was close to at school come and peer into my eyes or hold my face for their inspection. I feel like an anthropologist in an encounter with a lost tribe. ‘And where have you been?’ I am asked as if I had just gone out of the room and not returned for forty years. ‘What is it that you do?’. I am almost ashamed to say. I am almost afraid to tell them because I fear that they will think that I have ‘got above myself’ or as they say ‘think I am IT’. So, I don’t respond. I tell them where I am living but that too is a problem. I live in Stockton on Tees but I live and work in Essex. ‘What do you mean, you work in Essex and live in the North East?’. I feel as if everything I say takes me deeper into the complication of explaining myself. So, I talk about my children and we are on safer ground but we are a generation out. I had my children in my late thirties. They had their children while I was still a student. They tell me with pride about their grandchildren. I am overwhelmed. I simply do not know what to say that will establish some contact with my old self. The willingness is there on both sides but I have nothing to say and they have nothing to tell me. At least that is how we feel and so we are lost in trivialities. After the reunion there is a flurry of invitations that continue for the next two years and, indeed, resumed over Christmas 2010 which say ‘Come and meet us for dinner. Come and tell us about

the places you've been and what you've been doing'; but I am now sedimented in my own hegemony of common sense and I cannot go.

In the days before every household had a television, that is, up until the mid 1960s, my grandfather was very much in demand in the pub as a teller of travellers' tales. He had been in the Royal Navy in the First World War and been badly injured; first in German East Africa in 1915 when he was shot during a beach landing, and again at the Battle of Jutland in 1916 when he fell from the rigging of a sailing ship. In both cases, he had been operated on in field hospitals and in 1916 had a metal plate put into his knee. In the Second World War he had been in the merchant navy and sailed with the Atlantic convoys. He had travelled to all parts of the world and had stories about all his experiences. In The Railway Hotel, his local, the young lads would buy him a pint and say, 'Come on, tell the one about how you got injured in German East Africa', or 'Tell us about the time they tried to recruit you into the Black and Tans'. Of course, what I am saying is that I felt much the same with the invitations to 'Come and tell us'. Except that unlike my grandfather, I couldn't bring myself to create that external world for them: a world which to me seems so slight. Yet, I feel that at heart, all they were asking was for me to show them that there *was* some other possibility. That escape was possible.

University of Essex, 2011

In his foreword to *Learning to Labor in New Times* (2004), Stanley Aronowitz reviews *Learning to Labour* some twenty seven years on and concludes that 'the historicity of Willis's great ethnography consists in its location in time and space' (x). The world has changed, and global capitalism has altered all conditions of life. The growth of the service sector, the advent of computers, the relocation of industries to make use of cheap labour in other parts of the world,

each of these have had an impact on the structures which maintain the power relations of which they are a product. Willis had shown that working class boys in one sense or another consciously rejected the ‘cultural and political implications of buying into the curriculum and accepting school authority’ (Aronowitz in Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004: ix). In other words, they had chosen to fail. In effect, their only option lay in the ability to fulfil the expectations of the powerful definitions which were laid on them. However, some thirty odd years on, the difference might be that working class kids have been encouraged to buy into a different form of arbitrariness. In the North East of England, working class kids turn their backs on education as an escape route in great numbers. Participation in higher education is extremely low and working class kids show a marked resistance to being converted by the logic of an apparent meritocracy because they know, almost in the blood, that it does not make sense and they suspect that opportunities for them do not really exist. As Warhurst and Thompson observe, ‘Qualification is perhaps the widest used proxy for both skills and knowledge, and the most specious’ (2006, 791). Working class youth retains the same scepticism. It is still the case that the hegemony of common sense holds them in thrall. To a great extent this is the case. The expansion of higher education, itself a product of conflicting educational and economic objectives, has destined many for a more highly qualified unemployment or for a bureaucratic job that could have been acquired with A levels some short years ago. Few working class labour market entrants find their way into the professions and certainly fewer than thirty years ago. Successive attempts to legislate to promote equality of opportunity have done little to promote any real equality. As Willis says, ‘There is a world of difference between real equality in life, of expression and potential in all human beings, and mere equality of *opportunity*’ ([1977] 1981, 204). Later he comments ‘A lot of kids won’t be in permanent work now. They’ll be in a mosaic of study-

schemes and very low-paid part-time work, sometimes scrounging off parents then back into another state scheme' (215). Such fragmentation and dislocation well suit the 'flexibility' agenda of corporate rhetoric which makes a virtue out of a lack of responsibility for a workforce, for a lack of reciprocity in the labour process, for appropriations and psychological colonisation - all of which should be regarded as entirely sensible and self-evident.

However, some working class kids will never find work. In the North East we are now nearly two generations away from the pit closures of the 1980s and some families have never experienced work since. With no hope of an alternative and no means to try for something else, no knowledge or social skills or connections, no family networks, no aspirations, the picture is far more bleak than it was when I left school in 1967. Like Paul Willis, I found an escape route. Actually, his was rather better than mine but it arose from the same impetus and while we might comfort ourselves with the delusion that it was about choice, like the lads in Willis's study, we were products of a perceived need, conceived in a bed of power relations over which we had no control, produced and reproduced in order to become productive members of the middle class: a supreme tribute to the defining power of the grammar school system.

Notes

1. A comptometer was an adding machine rather like a supermarket checkout till but with a range of additional arithmetic functions.
2. At that time it was possible to enter teacher training college with five 'O' levels in English, Maths and three other subjects if you had attained the age of 17.

3. The Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes

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