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HOW WORKING CLASS KIDS GET WORKING CLASS JOBS

by

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The aim to the research project entitled, 'The Transition from School to Work', supported by the Social Science Research Council from April 1973 to June 1975, was to plot and uncover the subjective meanings and definitions of the situation of white working class kids without paper qualifications as they proceeded through their last eighteen months at school and in to their first months at work. We were particularly concerned with how they chose their jobs and came to view their working future.

In our case study work we indentified two main groups in school - the conformists and the non-conformists. It was the latter group which interested us and on which we based our 'main' case study. It was this group which was likely to include those lads of average to low ability (in terms of achievement at any rate), who were not going to get leaving paper qualifications, and who were destined for basic unskilled or semi-skilled working class jobs. In the terminology of such lads the two groups were the 'boys' and the 'ear 'oles'.

These two groups formed the poles for the internal landscape of the year, if not of the school. The 'boys' largely either rejected the overt aims of schooling and the legitimacy of teachers to guide them or were deeply ambiguous about what they thought the school was trying to do - mainly it boiled down to 'pushing us about'.

The 'ear 'oles' largely took the school in its own terms and accepted the legitimacy of the teachers. For the 'boys' they were 'creeps', 'arse creepers', 'teacher's pets' and generally despicable for their conformism to school norms, for their lack of assertiveness, for their inability to show any autonomy, and most of all for their inability to create 'fun' for themselves to 'have a laff'.

PW (...) why not be like the ear'oles, why not try and get CSEs?

Derek They don't get any fun do they?

Derek 'Cos they'm prats like, one kid he's got on his report now, he's got five As and one B

-Who's that?

Derek Birchall

Spanksey I mean what will they remember of their school life? What will they have to look back on. Sitting in a classroom, sweating their bollocks off, you know, while we've been ..., I mean look at the things we can look back on, fighting on the Pakis, fighting on the JAs. Some of the things we've done on teachers, it'll be a laff when we look back on it.

In terms of their structural location, the most crucial feature of the 'boys' and their culture was entrenched and personalised opposition to the school and its agents.

(In a discussion on teachers and vandalism.)

Joey (...) they're able to punish us. They're able to punish us, they're bigger than us, they stand for a bigger establishment than we do, like, we're just little and they stand for bigger things, and you try to get your own back. It's er'm resenting authority I suppose.

Eddie The teachers think they're high and mighty 'cos they're teachers, but they're nobody really, they're just ordinary people ain't they?

The 'boys' opposition to the school and its agents, and their scornful rejection of the 'ear'oles - not least because of their acceptance of the legitimacy

of the school - were very powerful determinants of what amounted to an anti-school, alternative, or counter culture within the school. Membership of this culture, or the manner of your relationship to it, was very much more important to the non-academic working class lads that was the achievement of any formal aims of education, or the satisfaction of any other independent or 'free' form of social connection. It was the spine around which their day and thoughts were organised: the dichotomy 'boys'/earholes' was the most basic organising structure of school life.

One of the interesting things the research brought to light was that in terms of individual biographies at least, the split between the two groups and the development of the 'boy's' culture could be easily traced. By and large it seemed that all children entered the first year as 'ear'oles', even if they had been in some form of non-conformist group in the Junior school (and there was evidence that these did exist). In the second or more commonly the third year, and sometimes the fourth year, a process occurred amongst some of the lads which might be termed differentiation. This was where mental and social support of the teacher, and the acceptance of the legitimacy of his proclaimed aims, were decisively withdrawn. The essence of this scepticism was a refusal to accept the teacher as automatically better than the children in all modes. The institutionally prescribed aims of gaining self esteem were - sometimes quite suddenly - seen as not only the only grounds for gaining self esteem - 'that doesn't rank them above us, just because they are slightly more intelligent'. For parallel with the disaffection from the teacher - sometimes seen as a cause of it - was an affiliation with a group of peers marked out precisely by the attempt to develop modes of activity and schemes of values which gave alternative grounds for self respect and a viable identity. Diligence, deference, respect - these became things which could be read in quite another way.

PW Evans (the Careers Master) said you were all being very rude, (...) you didn't have the politeness to listen to the speaker (during a Career's session). He said why didn't you realise that you were just making the world very rude for when you grow up and god help you when you have kids, 'cos they're going to be worse. What did you think of that?

Joey They would'nt. They'll be outspoken. They wouldn't be submissive fucking twits. They'll be outspoken, upstanding sort of people. If any of my kids are like this, here, I'll be pleased.

It is during the stage of differentiation when the individual joining the 'boys' first develops an analysis of his social position viz a viz the school and the people in it. The teachers are trying to enforce patterns of behaviour and standards which are seen essentially as impositions. The other kids of his own age - the 'ear'oles' - accept these standards, collude in their maintenance, and judge their own worth and progress with these official measures.

A value laden social map of the school year emerges on which virtually everyone can be placed.

Many things which were confused and uncertain before - whether to speak to so and so, why somebody has always attracted you, why someone else has always been faintly boring - become clear in this stage of 'coming out'. This social mapping was very much more a product of the self-elected 'boys' group than it was of the indicated 'ear'ole group. Members of the conformist group had a less developed sense of what divided people, and reacted more on the individual basis: dislike of being called 'dozy'; resentment when 'troublemakers' stopped the class working smoothly; jealousy of the social and sexual accomplishments of certain individuals. The very nature of the title, 'ear'ole' with its connotations of passivity, absurdity and inexpressivity - to the 'boys' it seemed that the

'earholes' were always listening never doing - indicates quite clearly which group was doing the signifying of the social landscape. The conformist group did not generate any counter terms to either identify, or evaluate differently, the major social groupings. Argot generally, and specific usages of conventional words were the product of the 'boys' and decisively not of the 'ear'oles'.

The research was focussed upon working class schools, so, at least in this context, there were no systematic differences in the class background of our two groups. There was certainly, however, a difference in the kind of aspirations the two groups had. The 'ear'oles' were likely to be academically motivated, interested in going on to do CSEs at the end of the fifth and very careful about their choice of subjects. The 'boys' were not academically motivated, were much less interested in taking CSEs, chose particular subjects on the basis of the "easy option", and regarded their final year at school, if not all those years beyond the point at which they had learned to read and write, as a waste of time. There was some evidence that the parents of the conformist group were themselves more conformist and that they took more interest in the progress of their children, were less fatalistic, protected them more and were more likely to have plans for their son's futures than the parents of the non-conformist group.

What was the nature of this lively, creative culture for which we are claiming some autonomy - an autonomy which is usually denied or ascribed only pathological importance.

Most essentially this counter culture was organised around the colonization of symbolic spaces within the school spaces left unpatrolled by the school or polyvalent in themselves. The nature of this colonization was an introduction of meanings and a social ambience which subverted the school and its objectives on the one hand, and established a living and practical ascendancy over the 'ear'oles' on the other. This involved the development of a system of practices, and a set of evaluative criteria, opposed to those sanctioned by the staff and aimed at the maximum distancing from, and ridiculing of, the 'ear'oles'. There were many elements within this cultural programme.

As the most visible, personalised and instantly understood element of opposition and ascendancy clothes had great importance to the 'boys'. The first sign of a lad 'coming out' was a fairly rapid change in the appearance of his clothes and hair. The particular form of this alternative dress is determined by outside influences, and in particular by fashions current in the wider symbolic system of youth culture. At the moment, and for the schools we worked in, the 'boys' look would include longish well groomed hair, platform-type shoes, wide collared shirt turned over waisted coat or denim jerkin plus still obligatory flared trousers. Whatever the particular form of dress, it was most certainly not school uniform, rarely included a tie (the second best for many Heads if uniform can't be enforced), and exploited colours calculated to give the maximum distinction from institutional drabness and conformity.

We should also understand from this discussion of dress that it is no accident that much of the conflict between staff and students should take place on the grounds of school uniform/casual dress. To the outsider it might seem a fatuous argument about differences in taste. Concerned staff, and involved kids, however, know that it is a continuing tussle about authority, a fight between cultures, and ultimately a question about the legitimacy of school as an institution.

If manner of dress is the main apparent cause of argument between staff and kids, smoking is the next most apparent cause of discontent. Again we find another absolutely distinguishing characteristic of the 'boys' against the 'ear'oles'. The majority of them smoke, and perhaps more important are seen to smoke. There is great pride taken in having the courage to walk right up to the school gate smoking, stub the cigarette out and then walk in. A great deal of time is typically

spent amongst the 'boys' planning their next smoke and 'hopping off' lessons 'for a quick drag'. And if the 'boys' delighted in smoking and flaunting their impertinence with a little white stick, it drove staff absolutely crazy. There were usually strict and frequently publicised rules about smoking. If, for this reason, the 'boys' were spurred, almost as a matter of honour, to continue public smoking, the staff were incensed by the brazen challenge to their authority.

Of course in a very typical conjunction of school based and outside meanings, cigarette smoking for the 'boys' was, as well as being an act of insurrection before the school, also an attempt to associate themselves with adult values and practises. In the attempt to build an autonomous system of values and rewards within the school, the adult world, specifically the adult male working class world, was turned to as a source of materials. This was obviously the case with drinking. Manifest drinking was an even more decisive signal to staff, than public smoking, that the individual was separate from the school and had a presence in a completely alternative, even superior and more mature, mode of social being. If a lad was going to smoke and, in particular, drink this did anyway put certain adult type responsibilities on his shoulders because he had to pay for his indulgences. This led to part-time work as well as other practises we shall come to later and the whole experience of confronting the working world - which was itself maturing - from the need for money. Again a distinguishing feature of the 'boys' from the 'ear'oles' was their much greater likelihood to have a part-time job or to be seeking one, and to recognise that there was a logic in their cultural choices which extended to quite firm adultlike commitments to a high income flow.

These were the physical items around which social practises and rituals accrued. Forms of interaction and social interchanges were developing all the time, however, to fill spaces left by the teachers or won from the teachers. This was a moving feast, in which staff could win temporary reverses, and in which the 'boys' were always on the look out for new chances.

(In a discussion on staff)

- Joey Oh, we was loyal in the first few days, but when we got in to all the things we knew we could do like, all the little cracks we could get up to, then we started playing up a bit, and they started getting, e'm..
- Fuzz That's it. We was used to an easy life.
- Joey The first day in science he got, he says, 'if any of you want to come back till five o'clock lads, do some experiments ... We all fucking pissed ourselves day'n we ... He thought it was going to be, like the year before, we was all going to be, like, wanting to do it.

The central problem for the 'boys' whether during activity that was enforced by teachers, or during periods of inactivity won run from the teachers, was to defeat boredom and thread a vital human involvement through the dry institutional text. Even in the most controlled situations they would find some subversive, potentially amusing activity.

The really central thing about the 'boy's' culture, however, and the major way of overcoming boredom, was 'to be within your mates' unsupervised by staff. When the group was together there were always things to do.

- Joey We're getting to know it now, like we're getting to know all the cracks, like, how to get out of lessons and things, and we know where to have a crafty smoke. You can come over here (The Youth Wing) and do summat, and er'm .. all your friends are here, you know, it's sort of what's there, what's always going to be there for the next year, like, and, you know you have to come

to school today, if you're feeling bad, your mate'll soon cheer you up like, 'cos you couldn't go without ten minutes in this school without having a laff at something or other.

PW Are your mates a really big important thing at school now?

-- Yeah

-- Yeah

-- Yeah

Joey They're about the best thing actually.

Spanksey You like to come to school, just to skive, 'cos you get bored at home. You'd rather come here and sit in the Youth Wing or summat.

Joey (...) You'm always looking out on somebody (when skiving) and you've always got something to talk about, .. something

PW So what stops you being bored.

Joey Talking, we could talk forever, when we get together, it's talk, talk, talk.

An important and striking element of their interaction centred on a particular form of joking, kidding language turning on rough practical or physical humour. It was quite common for one individual to be picked on, ribbed, have 'the piss taken out of him', 'kidded' or sometimes viciously needed for long periods. Often it was the same individual who was picked on repeatedly for the same kinds of things: his supposed stupidity, or alleged sexual practices, or some eccentricity of clothing or appearance. Language generally was much 'coarser' than was common amongst the 'ear'oles' and seemed to make much more muscular use of local dialect and specifically generated argot.

All of these practices whether apparently cruel, or obviously supportive, went to make the group in to a cohesive social whole with a frisson which made the 'boys' special. They had real cultural skills - conversation, repartee, quick wits, style, confidence - which were lacking from the 'ear'oles' and decisively marked them out as a force on the cultural landscape.

The particular excitement and 'kuodos' of belonging to the 'boys' came from more anti-social practices, than these. It was these more extreme activities which marked them off most completely, both from the 'ear'oles' and from the school. There was a positive joy in fighting and in talking about fighting and about the tactics of the whole fight situation. It's interesting that many of their important cultural values were expressed through fighting. The solidarity of the group becomes perfectly obvious in the fight situation, the importance of quick, clear and not over-moral thought comes out time and again. Most of all - and there was a kind of bravery in this - the fight puts you at risk and tests your conviction to betray conventional morality and uphold with a curious kind of honour, an alternative convention. It was in fighting with its own politics, dangers, scares, strange codes and illicit joys, that one was furthest from the reach of the school, most joyous in your celebration of truly independent and hard-won skills, and most sure of mastery over the 'ear'oles' and those of similar tendencies.

PW What do you feel when you're fighting? (...)

Joey (...) It's exhilarating, it's like being scared .. it's the feeling you get afterwards. I know what I feel when I'm fighting.. It's that I've got to kill him, do your utmost best to kill him.

PW Do you actually feel frightened when you're fighting though?

Joey Yeah, I shake before I start fighting, I'm really scared, but

once you'm actually in there, then you start to co-ordinate your thoughts like, it gets better and better and then, if you're good enough you beat the geezer. You get him down on the floor and just jump all over his head

(...)

PW (...) After you've had a fight ... How do you feel then?

Spanksey Shaky

Bill Funny feeling, don't you, sort of shaking.

Joey - It's all according, if you beat him, forty feet tall

- Yeah

- You always do

- They might get the police or summat, or a big mob.

- No it ain't that

- Can't explain it, you're just shaking, naturally, you know.

The other main activity amongst the 'boys' which was quite beyond the conventional register, was stealing. Theft was exceptionally widespread both inside and outside school. Again what comes through most strongly is the 'boy's' secret and delicious joy in defying authority, celebrating their own values, and most important and confirming both, getting away with it. Theft is clearly aimed directly against authority - especially if the theft, or what is very closely allied in this sense, vandalism, is against the school - and also an action quite beyond what the 'ear'ole' would even believe possible. That theft also brought extra money was an added, real and concrete advantage - sometimes the apparent initiating cause - which fitted in especially with the peculiar needs of the 'boys' for extra cash for smoking and drinking. The 'ear'ole' neither had the need for extra cash, nor the imagination to overcome the conventional morality, nor the quickness and smartness to carry through the deed. Altogether, though in a risky fashion, theft summed up many of the 'boys' values, attitudes and most admired skills.

PW What interests me is why you do it (theft), what's enjoyable about it?

Bill It's just hopeless round here, there's nothing to do. When you've got money, you know, you can go to a pub and have a drink, but, you know, when you ain't got money, you've either got to stop in or just walk round the streets and none of them are any good really. So you walk around and have a laff.

Joey It ain' only that it's enjoyable, it's that it's there and you think you can get away with it.., you never think of the risks You just do it. If there's an opportunity, if the door's open to the warehouse, you'm in there, seeing what you can thieve and, then when you come out like, if you don't get caught immediately, when you come out you'm really happy like.

Bill 'Cos you've showed the others you can do it, that's one reason.
Joey 'Cos you're defying the law again. The law's a big tough authority like and we're just little individuals, yet we're getting away with it like.

(....)

Joey You do anything you can here to, you know, go against them
-Well, I mean, you vandalize books.

Spike Yeah, you smash chairs up, take the screws out of..

Joey Really afterwards, you think 'Well, stuff me, our old lady payed for that lot out of taxes', but at the time you're doing it, you don't think and you don't really care.

PW But do you think of it in the same way as smashing bottles or thieving?

Joey It's opportunity, getting your own back on the teachers when you're caned or something. If you think, if you can get your own back on him you'll do anything you can (...), Revenge, sort of thing, getting revenge.

Spike Paper, you nick a lot of paper.

Bill Exercise books. Yeah, we had about twelve packets of them.

Eddie Pair of earphones, the other week.

Spanksey From school?

Eddie Yeah

(....)

Essentially we can see the 'boy's' culture as a separate and informed domain set over against the school and its formalised, distant logic. This domain was specifically and immediately responsive to their feelings and attitudes. The rationality and importance of living out your meanings within this domain with its distinctive ways of evaluating and acting was just assumed by the 'boys'. It needed no justification or explanation, though to many teachers and 'ear'oles' even its existence was not all that clear. For the 'boys' there was what amounted to a genuine confusion about how it was possible to survive school without its help.

Having understood the central importance of the 'boys' culture, its relation to school and to other groups, for the working class non-academic boy, it becomes possible to make much more sense both of how official communications were received and how the non-academic individual made his actual job choice. All official communications about careers and work were importantly filtered through the group. By and large what might be termed as the denoted message from teachers and careers officers was most heavily filtered. This was the manifest content of particular communications concerning either the practical details of specific jobs, or general principles about the best form of approach to work. Unless an individual had already decided to do a certain specific job, information about it was simply not taken in. It was certainly not true that new information was fed in to rational grid system which matched job profile with ability profile, or life style/job/ambition profile. If things were remembered, they were picked up by some highly selective living principle of the counter cultural school group. What is remembered after career's films and careers talks is certainly not what the producers hope to imprint on, what they seem so often to assume are eager, young minds.

(on Careers films)

Perc I wonder why there's never kids like us in films, see what their attitude is to it? What they'm like and what we'm like.

PW Well, what sort of kids are they in the films?

Fuzz All ear'oles

Perc All goody goodies

Will No, you can tell they've been told what to say. They'm probably at some acting school or summat y'know and the opportunity to do this job - Film Careers for other kids, and you've gotta say this, wait for your cue, wait till he's finished his lines.

PW I mean how can you tell that?
Will Well, they're just standing there, seem to be just waiting for 'Im to say it, then ..

(....)

Spanksey Another thing I think they try to con you into. They were saying to be a toolmaker they were saying 'Now here's a lucky one, he's going into toolmaking without no qualifications'. The next minute 'Now here's another lucky 'un, he's another whose gone into toolmaking without no qualifications', I think they're all trying to get you in there.

Information that was given to the kids concerning what might be thought of as an ideology of getting a job, and of getting on in a job, was either blocked, interpreted in to unrecognizable forms, or simply inverted.

(in a discussion on Career's sessions)

Spanksey After a bit you tek no notice of him, he sez the same thing over and over again, you know what I mean?

Joey We're always too busy fucking picking your nose, or flicking paper, we just don't listen to him.

(....)

Spanksey He makes the same points all the time.

Fuzz He's always on about if you go for a job, you've got to do this, you've got to do that, I've done it. You don't have to do none of that. Just go to a place, ask for the man in charge, nothing like what he says.

Joey Its ridiculous.

PW What do you mean, in terms of what qualifications you may need?

Fuzz Qualifications and everything, you don't you just ask for a job and they give you the job.

(...)

PW (...) They were on about how good it was to work hard and try to get on (...)

Will 'Tis when you're older, y'know, if you can't cope with the job, but... like, too hard for yer, and wanna sit down and just tell other blokes .. when you're younger ... 'cos the pay gus down once you go up with some jobs.

Some meanings concerning work did get through these cultural processes and these were what might be called the connoted messages, or latent information. Often it was not intended to transmit this information. It concerned such things as the general ambience of working life; a fascination with processes and machines; the apparent timelessness and inevitability of industrial organisation; the atomised competitive nature of the world of work around the corner; the hardness and givenness of industrial work which just seems to be in the nature of things, the inevitability of having to get an unrewarding job. These meanings did penetrate over the long term, and re-inforced certain perspectives which were already forming in the group about the world of work. It was not meant to be part, and was not received as part, of the general model which was presented for a rational career's choice. It came from the sheer exposure to a vast number of films where working class people were seen working, from the apparently bewildering variety of specific forms of jobs available,

from film of machinery moving with a cameraman's instinct for the compulsive, from the teacher's impatience, from his implied or real flashes of departure from the impartial professional consultant's line - 'it's a hard world that doesn't owe you a living and you'll soon be on your own in it, so wake up and find a job!'

Actual job choice for such individuals was only rarely based on the materials supplied by the agencies, although they did act, sometimes, as useful intermediaries. Indeed the most important finding of the research in relation to job choice is that it may well be confusing and mystifying to pose the entry of unqualified working class kids in to industry as a question of particular job choices. Considered just in one quantum of time - the last months of school - individual job choice does indeed seem random and unenlightened by any rational techniques or means/ends schemes. This is the main finding of previous work on the school/work transition, a finding which we accept and have replicated ourselves. However, if one takes a longer time span, and looks not so much at individual job choice but more at basic ground shifts in the whole pattern of what is expected from a working life, and what sort of work fits in with a whole constellation of attitudes, practices, activities and values which are developing in the much broader sweep of the social group and its culture, then one finds a more intelligible pattern. To start with, a simple but profoundly important point, the division between the 'boys'/'ear'oles' cultures is also a division between different kinds of future, different kinds of gratification, and different kinds of job that are relevant to these things. These differences, moreover, are not random or unconnected. On the one hand they arise systematically from the intra school group oppositions, and on the other hand, they relate to quite distinct job groupings in the post school situation. The 'ear'oles'/'boys' division becomes the skilled/unskilled and white collar/blue collar division. This continuity between specifically school based informal social groupings, and occupational groupings outside the school is of profound significance for us. The 'boys' themselves could transpose the divisions of the internal cultural landscape of the school onto the future, and onto the world of work outside, with considerable clarity.

(in a discussion on 'ear'oles')

Joey

(...) We wanna live for now, wanna live while we're young, want money to go out with, wanna go with women now, wanna have cars now, and er'm think about five, ten, fifteen years time when it comes, but other people, say people like the 'ear'oles', they'm getting their exams, they'm working, having no social life, having no fun, and they're waiting for fifteen years time when they're people, when they've got married and things like that. I think that's the difference. We are thinking about now, and having a laff now, and they're thinking about the future and the time that'll be best for 'em.

(....)

Joey

I think they're (the 'ear'oles') the ones that have got the proper view of life, they're the ones that abide by the rules. They're the civil servant types, they'll have 'ouses and everything before us (...) They'll be the toffs, I'll say they'll be the civil servants, toffs, and we'll be the brickies and things like that.

Spanksey

I think that we..., more or less, we're the ones that do the hard grafting but not them, they'll be the office workers. (...) I ain't got no ambitions, I doe wanna have ... I just want to have a nice wage, that 'ud just see me through.

(....)

Joey

I don't say it's wise, I say its better for us, people the likes of us, we've tasted, we've tasted, not the good life, we've tasted, you know, say, the social life what you'd have when you're older. I think we just like it too much, I know I do anyway, I don't think you can cut yourself off from it now and do an apprenticeship and all that ... and not have much bread.

Not only the opposition between these two main groups, but the internal development of the 'boy's' culture provides located and deeply influential guides for the choice of final job. For the individual's affiliation with the non-conformist group carries with it a whole range of changes in his attitudes and perspectives, and these changes also supply over time a more or less consistent view of what sort of people he wants to end up working with, and what sort of situation is going to allow the fullest expression for his developing cultural skills. The located 'boys' culture supplies a set of 'unofficial' criteria by which to judge, not individual jobs or the intrinsic joys of particular kinds of work - indeed it is already assumed that all work is more or less hard and unrewarding - but generally what kind of working situation is going to be most relevant to the individual. It will have to be work where he can be open about his desires, his sexual feelings, his liking for 'booze' and his aim to 'skive off' as much as is reasonably possible. It will have to be a place where people can be trusted and will not 'creep off' to tell the boss about 'foreigners' or 'knicking stuff' - precisely where there were the fewest 'ear'oles'. Indeed it would have to be work where there was a boss, a 'them and us', which always carried with it the danger of treacherous intermediaries - the landscape would need to be familiar in this sense. It would need to be work where the self could be separated from the work task, and value given to people for things other than their work performance - the celebration of those independant qualities which precisely the 'ear'oles' did not have. It would have to be a work situation where people were not 'cissies' and could handle themselves, where 'pen-pushing' is looked down on in favour of really 'doing things'. It would have to be a job where you could speak up for yourself, and where you would not be expected to be subserviant. It would have to be a job that could pay good money fairly quickly and offer the possibility of 'fiddles' to support already acquired smoking and drinking habits. It would have to be a job, most basically, where people were 'alright' and with whom a general cultural identity could be shared. It is this human face of work, much more than its intrinsic or technical nature, which confronts the lad as the crucial dimension of his future. In the end it was recognised that it was specifically the cultural diversion that made any job bearable.

(on the imminent prospect of work)

Will

I'm just dreading the first day like. Y'know, who to pal up with, an er'm, whose the ear'oles, who'll tell the gaffer.

(...)

Joey

(..) you can always mek it enjoyable. It's only you what makes a job unpleasant, .. I mean if you're cleaning sewers out, you can have your moments like. Not every job's enjoyable, I should think. Nobody's got a job they like unless they're a comedian or something, but er'm... no job's enjoyable 'cos of the fact that you've got to get up of a morning and go out when you could stop in bed. I think every job's got, has a degree of unpleasantness, but it's up to you to mek, .. to push that unpleasantness aside and mek it as good and as pleasant as possible.

In all these ways then, the 'boy's' culture provided criteria for the kind of work the lad is destined for - basically manual and semi-skilled work. Because these criteria arise from a culture, and because that school based culture also has profound similarities and continuities with the culture of the work place, there is also the further result that once the kids get on to the factory floor, they

recognize a great deal: they feel at home. They've had experience of work anyway very often through part-time jobs, and they are immediately familiar with many of the shop floor practices - defeating boredom, time wasting, heavy and physical humour.

What are the implications of all this for the so-called 'transition from school to work' of working class unqualified school leavers. Firstly, the most profound transition these lads make is not the period around leaving school and entry into work, it is his entry into the distinctive non-conformist group and its culture within the school, and this transition may occur anywhere between the second and fifth years. Secondly, with respect to their long term development of a sense identity viz a viz the work situation this kind of adaption has more relevance than the official rationality of individual job choice and means/ends schemes. Thirdly in relation to the basic cultural ground shift and the development of a wholesale and comprehensive view of what is expected from life which they are experiencing, particular job choice does not matter too much. Indeed we may see that with respect to the criteria this located culture throws up, most manual and semi-skilled jobs are the same and it would be a waste of time to use the provided, middle class grids across them to find material differences. As far as their actual work content is concerned all these jobs may all be expected to be monotonous and arduous, so what matters every time is money and the possibilities of a cultural involvement and diversion. Although the career's programme imbues the 'boys' with something of the sense of the range of jobs and the importance of choosing between them, it's clear that beneath the surface the power of the cultural process I am pointing to, takes hold. Even if it's not explicitly verbalized, from the way many of the kids actually get jobs, and their calm expectation that their jobs will change a lot, they do not basically make much differentiation between jobs - its all labour.

(In a discussion on the jobs they had arranged for when they left)

Perc I was with my mate, John's brother, I went with 'im to er, .. he wanted a job. Well John's sister's boyfriend got a job at this place, and he sez to Allan, he sez, 'Go down there, and they might give you a job there', and he went down, and they sez, 'You're too old for training, ' cos he's twenty now, he sez to Allan, he sez, 'Who's that out there', and he sez 'one of my mates', he sez, 'does he wanna job' and he sez 'I duano'. He sez er'm 'Ask him'. He comes out, I went back in and he told me about it and he sez, 'Come back before you leave if you want it'.

What you doing?

Perc Carpentry, Joining. And a month ago I went back and, well, not a month ago, a few weeks ago, and I seen him.

PW Well, that was a complete accident really. I mean had you been thinking of joinery?

Perc Well, you've only got to go and see me woodwork, I've had it, I ain't done woodwork for years.

(in a discussion of their future)

Eddie I don't think any of us'll have one job and then stick to it, none of us. We'll swop around.

Spike It just shows in your part-time jobs don't it, don't stick to a part-time job.

Fourthly it is clear that these lads voluntarily choose to enter the factory etc, at this age anyway, especially as they are aided by their dislike, and tumble out, of school. Just as the 'boy's' school culture was not a reflex of

defeat, so the entry into the lower grades of factory work is by no means perceived as defeat, failure or second best. This fact is of the fullest significance for us if we wish to study and understand forms of social stability, and strategies for changing society.

Perhaps suprisingly, then, this suggests that there is no particular problem, at this age anyway, in the transition of the majority of working class kids without paper qualifications into work. That is providing the jobs are available which is much more questionable now. Where jobs are available, it is much more likely to be the conformist working class lads with some, though not particularly high, paper qualifications who experience grave doubts and problems. They may be asked to face the rigours of the factory floor and relatively unskilled work without the compensations of a cultural involvement. It is here that we may find the 'problems' of the 'transition from school to work'.

Fifthly, and more speculatively, we may understand from all this something of the nature of the wider working class culture.

The option of affiliation with a cultural group, and a processing of opportunities through the criteria thrown up by this culture, is a more sensible, richer and saner form of adaption to an unpleasant, unrewarding and finally oppressed working situation, than a more considered task-orientated form of adaption which would have exposed in the bleakest possible manner the real bankruptcy of the actual jobs available. For the working class as a whole still does face harsh conditions, and the performance of work which by no stretch of the imagination could be thought of as rewarding. To face such work unrelieved by a cultural involvement or diversion, and armed only with middle class criteria which merely confirm the awfulness of the situation, would certainly not be a strategy for survival.

In this sense it is possible to see the development of non-conformist groups, and counter cultures in the school, as a recognition - sometimes clearer than the teachers - that the real conditions of work faced by working people are still fairly grim and - for themselves - unrewarding. The beginnings of experimentation with accomodative and adaptive cultural practices in the school - themes which emerge much more fully and are the clearest characteristic markings of the wider working class culture - show us the inter-connectedness of working class themes and the way in which they are articulated, often invisibly in the particular case, around questions of rescuing self respect in an oppressive situation, and generating alternative and oppositional modes of being from sparse materials.

What we can draw out of these general conclusions for the specific work of careers teachers and officers. Well, in one sense we have to be pessimistic. The profound nature of the involvement of basic cultural processes with the structure of society, and its class formations, make any simple panacea impossible. These things will not be changed by small numbers of well meaning people.

On the other hand, we can make some suggestions. We can recognize that there are real and identifiable processes at work, when working class kids make sense of their future and choose a job. At least it might be possible to see and recognise these processes without obscuring them by an inappropriate middle class grid of ends/means and functional rationality. It might also be possible to intervene and aid these real processes at certain points. Certainly from the personal counselling point of view, it is very useful to understand something of the real cultural processes you are seeing the result of. If direct action is frequently impossible, at least it is an advance to understand and sympathize. Furthermore, the cultural perspective might allow the counsellor to identify potential problem cases before they are actually suffering at work. The two obvious cases here are social isolates, and the more conformist lads, who might be heading, through lack of qualifications, or lack of space, to the factory floor. These lads are most truly in the worst of all worlds.

At the end of the day, however, you might feel that sympathy, and the cooling

out of problem cases, is not enough. In the reflex moment of your awareness of the responsibility of being an intermediary, it may be that you recognize a duty to the kids, as well as to the employers, which goes beyond simple advice. The cultural adaptation to work which we've been looking at is partly a response to the poverty of the kind of work which is awaiting these kids. Thus it may be that you think an acceptance of the status quo - one possible reading of this research: 'They're doing alright by themselves', - does not go far enough. What should perhaps concern us is an attempt to improve the objective conditions of many working jobs. As well as the question of guidance, we might also be concerned with questions about the quality of the jobs facing these kids: the degree of control they enjoy in them, and the possibilities of materially improving working conditions and prospects. And this is not simply a question of rewards. Many of the kids we have been considering will earn reasonably high wages - higher than teachers' wages in many cases. It is also a question of control and power - what scope workers have to control their own destiny in any worthwhile sense. Ultimately, of course, this is a political question, and if all the courses seem arduous this is not, a reason for shirking an answer.

If that seems grand and beyond the scope of teachers, it is possible to locate some of the questions in the school. If, as we've argued, the counter school and shop floor culture lie parallel it is possible to argue that they must share some of the same determinants. The common impulse is to develop strategies for dealing with boredom, alienation and lack of control. Part of the argument of this paper has been that kids see - often better than the teachers - the poverty and inequality of the roles which await them. It may also be that - reading from their culture and behaviour if not from their words - that they see aspects of the nature of the school more clearly than teachers. That, on apparently immovable issues of authority and syllabus, the school is more geared to its own hierarchies, and to its own professionalist, than it is to their own real condition as they experience it. Even the progressive rubric of equal development, child centred teaching, free expression, may be seen as a professional flirtation with utopia, rather than a real commitment to the kids which recognises both the inequality of their origin, and the inequality of their destination. It is utopian indeed to play with idealistic concepts between these two points. A real commitment to an improvement of the life chances of these kids might start by taking a cold, clear, look at the school, its organisation and objectives. In what way might the kids be given more control here, so that they may expect more, and fight for more later? Do they see an inequality of roles here between staff themselves and between staff and pupils, which teaches them only too well what to expect later? How might their real needs be responded to, rather than merely those which are left after the anodyne processing of institution and professionalism? What would serve these kids best in their future, and their struggle to fight for more control and learning - good basic literacy, a clear understanding of their own history and of their class, a sense of the achievement and basic power of the working class, or often ill-fitting notions of individual development and expressivity? Is the permissive school regime - still concealing ancient authority structures - best fitted to approach the real needs of the kids?

These questions are posed here only, and this is not to suggest that there are facile or acceptable-to-all solutions. But it is to suggest that if the problems of society and industry 'out there' seem too large to cope with, the school may be seen as a microcosm of that society, and a vital preparation ground for that society. The school is neither too large to understand, nor too reified to change - at least in small stages. Certainly it may be part of your responsibility to decide in which ways you would like to change it, and what avenues are open to you in order to bring this about.

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