

CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

by LEE HARVEY

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PART 2 CLASS

2.10 Conclusion

A wide variety of methods have been used in these studies. Marx and Mills primarily used secondary sources ranging from newspapers through books and articles to enacted legislation. Mills additionally made use of key informants and they both augmented their library and archive research with direct observation. Goldthorpe and Lockwood focused their research, specifying a restricted sample, and used of a schedule of directed questions backed up by library research and direct observation. In as far as it was possible, Willis was a participant observer of the small sample of school leavers in his study. Grimshaw & Jefferson undertook detailed non-participant observation, augmenting their research with document analysis in order to uncover policing policy. In her study of advertising, Williamson adopted a semiotic approach that involved close scrutiny and analysis of a large number of magazine advertisements, a hundred of which were used in her presentation. Wright's analysis of the Western involved him in analysing character types, plot and narrative of over fifty popular Western films.

This diversity of method is characteristic of critical social research. It is not the data collection techniques but the way the data are utilised to answer substantive questions about the nature of oppressive social structures that characterises these studies as critical. Grimshaw and Jefferson, for example, did not just undertake an observation study of police activity but assessed how the conflicting demands of work, legal and democratic structures were resolved in practice. Willis was not just interested in the disruptive strategies adopted by the 'lads' for their own sake but looked at them in the light of the partial penetration of working-class culture. Mills was not interested in just naming the power elite but in analysing the extent to which the possibility of an 'invisible' power bloc was related to the evolution of mass society. Williamson was not interested in a content analysis of the innumerable magazine advertisements she looked at but was concerned to reveal the various ways in which advertisers transmitted their connoted messages.

In each of these studies the authors have attempted to get beneath the surface of appearances to show how class oppression operates and is legitimated. A substantial question is raised and the taken-for-granted are examined. Mills, for example, does this by asking a series of questions that try to unravel not only who has the power in America but how they are able to wield it. Marx asks what is the exploitative process that underlies capital accumulation. Willis wants to know how working-class culture, although critical of bourgeois individualism, ends up colluding in the oppression of the working class. Wright asks what is the essential nature of the Western myth, its underlying structure and its relation to social practices.

What is characteristic of all these studies is that, in one way or another, they dissect taken-for-granted concepts and reconstruct them as concrete entities. In so doing they lay bare the essential concepts of the research and use these as a basis for revealing what is really going on. Abstraction, essence, totality, ideology, history, structure and praxis are key elements of critical social research. The studies have been analysed to show how they deconstruct taken-for-granted abstractions, determine core

concepts, relate particular practices to historically specific structural wholes, analyse the mediating role of ideology and address praxiological issues. What the examination has shown is the interrelatedness of these elements. Willis's notions of penetration and limitation make sense only if the activities of the lads are seen in the light of the relationship between working-class culture and hegemonic ideology. Capital accumulation, for Marx, is only possible if labour power is commodified, which itself can only occur in a class-based society legitimated by bourgeois ideology; and so on.

So critical social research is not methodic, but it is clearly dialectical. The dialectical process cannot be summed up in a procedural recipe, it is an imaginative and creative process that involves the interrelationship of the seven elements in order to provide the basis for an insight into a substantive question. We have seen some examples of how this is done in relation to class; and the next part looks at how gender oppression has been engaged by critical researchers.