

# CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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## PART 4 RACE

### 4.4 Lois Weiss—Between Two Worlds

#### 4.4.1 Introduction

Lois Weiss' (1985) *Between Two Worlds* is an ethnographic study of the black student culture at a community college 'on the edge of the urban ghetto' in a large north-eastern city in the United States. Seventy per cent of the students were black and eighty per cent were under thirty years old. Weiss builds on the work of McRobbie (1978), Everhart (1983) and, in particular, Willis (1977). Reflecting Willis' study of the 'lads', Weiss situates the lived experiences of the black students in a wider socio-historic structure by focussing on the production and reproduction of culture. She focuses on contradictions, linking contradictions in student attitudes towards education and their practices within the institution to wider social structural contradictions. The college culture is grounded in black ghetto culture and, like Willis' counter-school culture, in the long run renders impotent the avowed intention of most student returners to escape the ghetto streets.

Weiss argues that despite legal and ethical changes the economic and social situation of the majority of blacks in the United States has not advanced as rapidly as the upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s might have suggested and substantial inequalities by race persist in the United States (Reich, 1981). Most blacks are trapped in the 'urban underclass' (Glasgow, 1971), which is characterised by heavy involvement in the predominantly casual secondary labour market that is closely linked to various illicit activities as a means to supplement a non-living wage. The working class is fractionalised and blacks are predominantly located in the economically lower fractions. In addition, racism operates in ways that disadvantage blacks in other working-class fractions (Edwards, 1979; Reich, 1981).

Weiss argues that the self-formative process of cultural production is linked in contradictory ways to this unequal social structure and it is this that underpins her critical ethnographic analysis of the community college which she refers to as 'Urban College'.

#### 4.4.2 Method

Weiss wanted a method that would permit the analysis of the interplay of culture and economy. Like Willis (1977), she sees qualitative methods as sensitive to meanings and as allowing interpretations of symbolic articulations, practices and forms of cultural production. She thus undertook a direct ethnographic study that involved attending classes three days a week for the duration of the 1979–80 academic year, conducting in-depth interviews with both staff [faculty] and students, and in general 'immersed' herself in Urban College. She kept a daily record of interactions with students or staff, inside or outside the institution, which included experiences and comments of students and

teachers 'in classrooms, corridors' stairwells, offices, cafeteria and local coffee shop and bar'. She recorded field notes as soon as practically possible after the interaction and argued that while data recollection seems difficult, in practice it is not. All that is required is 'extreme concentration on the researcher's part'. This participant observation approach, she argued, allowed a direct exploration of experiences of education and also of the cultural discourse that reworked these experiences (Weis, 1985, p. 171).

Gaining access to Urban College took six months and involved a considerable amount of bureaucracy. This was tied closely to educational politics and concerns over future funding. 'Since the press had been unfriendly to Urban College in the past, suspicions surrounding my initial presence were understandable' (Weis, 1985, p. 172). Weis constantly reassured all involved that her study was not in any way intended to prejudice the future development of the college and that, indeed, she was not interested in Urban College *per se* but in life in *an* urban institution. In the end she got co-operation from the college administration and all but two of the college academic staff. As a favour to the college Weis administered 'several survey questionnaires to present students, former students, and alumni' the data from which were incorporated into the Middle States Accreditation Report; and this also provided some demographic data for her study but in the main this material seems to have been little used by Weis.

Weis argued that, in general, participant observation work involves gaining and retaining the trust of subjects in order to facilitate a free exchange of information. Thus the researcher should operate so as to become an unobtrusive, non-threatening, part of the scene, taken-for-granted by the participants. This was initially difficult for her given that she was white in a predominately black college and that she was interested, in the first instance, in black culture. However, she adopted the role of a student, taking classes and examinations and like other students 'suffered through the crowded elevator, limited number of telephones, cafeteria food and generally poor physical facilities'. Other students, she claimed, began to see her everywhere and increasingly black students interacted with her as she was not part of a white clique. Weis spent four months taking classes before conducting any in-depth interviews. Over time she became trusted, as the detailed information given her reveals, and once students became aware of her 'intentions as a researcher' they were 'more than happy to "tell their story"'. The systematic collection of in-depth interview material took six months. The interviews were openly tape-recorded, often in the local bar, and were structured around a set of 'open-ended probe questions' that encouraged the student to express their own views. The schedule of eleven probe questions included: 'If you could change anything at Urban College, what kinds of things would you like to see changed'; 'What kind of job would you like to obtain'; 'Do you think that you studies here will prepare you to get this job?'. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to three hours. Similar interviews were conducted with staff and alumni, although with different sets of probe questions.<sup>14</sup>

The analysis of her vast amount of data was clearly a problem and one she managed by 'systematically constructing themes' in the post-fieldwork stage. This was dependent on the extremely time-consuming transcription of taped material and the assembling of field notes. Following Bogdan & Taylor (1975) she duplicated and cross-coded chunks of transcripts and field notes and 'placed them into manila folders according to topic', in a similar way to the 'pile-building' style described above in section 1.4.2. This process enabled her to 'systematically identify salient cultural categories for both students and

faculty. The virtue of this form of analysis is that such categories were suggested by the data themselves'. This enabled the identification of core cultural elements in Urban College 'as well as to identify factors both within and outside the institution that contribute to the rise of located cultural form' (Weis, 1985, p. 174).

After reporting the ethnographic study in detail Weis, like Willis, develops a more theoretical analysis of the rationality and dynamic of the observed cultural processes, which are thereby linked to the social structure. These lead on to a praxiological concern and consequent consideration of political action.

#### **4.4.3 Black student culture**

Weis (1985, p. 7) adopts a hegemonic view of culture, which sees culture as semi-autonomous (Gramsci, 1971). Thus she sees educational establishments as sites 'where cultures and ideologies are produced in ongoing interactions rather than places where ideologies are imposed upon students'. Schools and colleges do not directly reproduce dominant ideology but embody a process characterised by contradictions. Weis concentrates on race in the production of culture and ideologies. Although people like Willis have noted race as important and others have undertaken studies of 'raced persons' in schools, there have been, she argues, no detailed analyses of race as a factor in the production of culture.

Urban College students, like their parents exhibit characteristics that destine them to become part of a permanently trapped population of poor people; the industrial underclass. The students are aware of this and see the college as between two worlds; the ghetto and the cultural mainstream. Urban College is designed to promote equal educational opportunity. Its main aims are to provide institutional programmes that parallel the first two years of a four-year programme, providing vocationally oriented teaching aimed at preparing students for employment as graduates with an associate degree. In many senses, the college is seen as a 'second-chance' institution by both staff and students. Attendance at the college is, in part, a rejection of street life and an attempt to embrace 'legitimate society'.

Weis notes gender differences in her study, in particular that women tend to have primary responsibility for children and frequently see giving their children enhanced opportunities as their escape route from the ghetto. However, it is this black culture that concerns Weis rather than its gender tensions, which she refers to only when the cultural process works differently by gender. She argues that both black men and women share the lived reality of urban poverty.

They share entrapment in the urban ghetto and racist America. *These shared experiences lead students to forge* a collective culture within Urban College that is not strictly bound by gender. The culture produced in the college ensures that the vast majority of the students will return to the ghetto streets. It is these shared aspects of existence that give rise to this culture—a culture that helps to ensure the continued structural bases of their own "superexploitation" as blacks. (Weis, 1985, p. 26)

With the use of substantial testaments taken from the in-depth interviews, field notes and student essays, Weis outlines the elements of black student culture that are created at Urban College.<sup>15</sup> Blacks drop in and out of class, arrive late, use drugs and generally

engage in activities that slow the pace of learning. All of this results in low success rates in conventional academic terms. This is not, as with Willis' counter-school culture, a function of the dismissal of the relevance of knowledge nor a direct attack on teachers. Indeed, the college, in principle, is seen positively as providing a second chance. Elements of the students' lived culture are contradictory and 'students embrace and reject schooling at one and the same time' (Weis, 1985, p. 48). The economic pressures of day-to-day survival in a racist society and the impact of the non-college cultural milieu in which students daily engage are in conflict with the requirements of full academic involvement.

This is most clearly seen in the very different perceptions of black and white students at the college. The black Urban College culture is hard for the minority white students to grasp and they feel disadvantaged by it. Although there is no overt hostility, black and white students do not mix much and deeply rooted antagonisms, Weis claims, are re-created in the institution. In short, existing antagonisms in the wider society are reproduced in the college. The ethnographic study aims to explore the interrelationship between institutional structures, student culture and the wider social milieu.

A key example is the question of time. Students at Urban College are constantly reminded about the appropriate use of time and the institution has a fairly rigid attendance policy and an associated but less rigid policy on lateness (which Weis refers to as part of the hidden curriculum). Students are 'bombarded with dominant time' (Weis, 1985, p. 78), that is, standard industrial chronological time. This differs radically from the 'street time' predominant in the urban ghetto. Clock time is seen as 'white man's time' (Horton, 1979) and as irrelevant to street values and activities. Street time is personal time, there is no synchronisation, and being 'on time' is meaningless. This use of time is not deficient but oppositional and a positive affirmation of black street culture.

Street time is, without question, embedded within the broader class/race subculture from which students at urban College come. They are part and parcel of the community which created and re-created it since black Americans were first enslaved. (Weis, 1985, p. 78)

In the main students resent control over their time and the imposition of an attendance policy that has direct effect on their chances of graduation despite their positive affirmation of the content of school knowledge. They 'waste time' and contradict regulations that demand attendance and prompt arrival and departure. The college policy on time 'emerged dialectically in relation to both student culture and demands from the state, as well as the way in which these demands are mediated by institutional personnel' as a means of control of students. The contradiction between affirmation of knowledge and disregard for the dominant time structure in which it is located is partly accounted for by the view that college knowledge is 'white not black' and therefore 'not ours'. This is reinforced by the fact that 'faculty in the academic areas are overwhelmingly white' (Weis, 1985, p. 79). Thus student culture and the 'hidden curriculum' interact to constantly produce and reproduce one another. 'In the final analysis, student lived culture at Urban College strengthens the collectivity and reinforces aspects of black collective experience, ultimately reproducing and deepening class/race antagonisms that lie at the very heart of American society' (Weis, 1985, p. 82).

#### ***4.4.4 Penetration—unmasking the ideology of equal opportunity***

The shape and form of student culture differs, Weis argues, by class race and gender. The basic cultural processes of penetration and limitation described by Willis (1977) operate in Urban College but the lived cultural forms differ from that of the 'lads'. This is not surprising 'given that race has its *own* dynamic in the United States' which results in different positions for white and black workers, with the latter forming a 'caste-like' minority (Ogbu, 1982).

Basically, the Urban College students have an understanding that although college knowledge is legitimate the community college system is not designed to help them as a class or group.

*Gloria:* I figure that what they did was put the school right in our community—they said 'we'll give them this and this may satisfy them'. ... This was...convenient, but we were shortchanged as far as the education itself was concerned.

I think they teach Optics out there at [the suburban campus].... We're definitely cheated. I think what they're doing is 'let's give the blacks a place in their own neighborhood, then we can give them as little as possible and maybe they'll be satisfied with it.... We'll give them as much as we can and they'll keep their mouths shut. (Student quoted in Weis, 1985, p. 139)

Not all students are as articulate or overtly aware of the nature and role of community colleges but all at least unconsciously understand that the type of education offered them is second best and thus penetrate the ideology of the community college. Student culture 'unmasks an ideology which offers everyone an opportunity to attain elite status while simultaneously justifying an unequal distribution of rewards' (Weis, 1985, p. 136). The college operates to deflect attention from 'questions of distributive justice', which are central to the black struggle in the United States. The students are aware of this and know the college does not herald the destruction of class society but, at best, offers a way out of the underclass for the individual.

This escape requires that students alter their own culture and adopt the dominant culture. Ghetto culture is of necessity a collective culture. Day-to-day survival in the urban ghetto is dependent on an obligation and exchange network of which kin relationships are a major part. Urban College students are part of the ghetto and are enmeshed within similar co-operative arrangements (notably in relation to child care). Such students do not enter college 'embodying a spirit of possessive individualism'. This is a characteristic of the staff and the white students. Teachers define good students as those who operate within faculty categories, that is, ones who operate outside the 'group logic'. Those who do not accept the 'teacher's definition of the situation' (Keddie, 1971) simply fail. Those who succeed make a break with the underclass collective community, but this means a break with the only form of security most students have.

Success is thus a function of the relationship of individual to the student culture and the risk run by an individual in breaking with the collective. This risk is not an intellectual or psychological one but is materially based. The exception is older women returners who have raised their families and who opt for traditional female occupations such as childcare or secretarial. A woman who chooses one of these low-paid options can

remain a part of the collective and succeed at Urban College; she is not confronted by the contradiction of trying to escape the ghetto.

Breaking out thus involves not only putting their security at risk but also engaging in the risky process of educational attainment. Given that most black ghetto-based students possess the wrong educational ‘decoders’ to begin with they are disadvantaged *vis-à-vis* the student who already possesses the ‘correct’ cultural capital.<sup>15A</sup> Thus legitimate (college) knowledge acts to maintain those who are already on top, rather than to ‘push people up’ as the official rhetoric suggests.

In the end, given the racist nature of American society and the segmented market process, the community college degree, if attained, will be of little benefit for black students. Student cultural forms recognise that education at this level does nothing for the group and even at the individual level is less advantageous for blacks than whites. The insights, communicated through the culture, thus clearly link the education system to American economic structures. The residual question is why, given that the collectivity is reaffirmed at the cultural level, is this awareness not manifested in overt political action?

#### ***4.4.5 Limitation—political inactivity***

The answer is, for Weis, the partiality of the penetration and the limitations within student culture. Insights are prevented from going further by contradictions within the lived cultural form itself. Ironically, the partiality is linked to a collective faith in education. Education is seen both as a potentially liberating force yet acknowledged as essentially individualistic in practice. On the other hand, the affirmation of education reproduces a group oppositional culture that goes back to the prohibition of education for slaves. Thus student culture which understands how individual and group logics are confounded in the educational process reproduces the wider structural contradiction of blacks in seeking education/knowledge in order to raise them above slavery while at the same time acknowledging the legitimacy of white/capitalist knowledge, which reproduces the unequal and oppressive social structure.

The partiality of the insights leads students to blame themselves despite a raised consciousness among blacks of structural inequalities. Students hold their own circumstances responsible. Dominant ideology (Wright, 1975; Apple & Weis, 1983) reinforces this self-blame given that most formal barriers to equality have been removed. Dominant ideology takes for granted the intrinsic value of education and relentlessly and noisily proclaims education as the key to ‘success’ available to all. This contrasts sharply with the silence of the disorganised cultural form and thus student culture reaffirms the value of education. ‘While the collective culture produced in the institution sees through ideology, ideology “confidently strides” (Willis, 1977, p. 166) into the space between the disorganized cultural level and political action’. It is this ‘*combination* of blocks and ideological effects that limits cultural insights and prevents the development of a collective consciousness geared towards transformative potential’ (Weis, 1985, pp. 151–2).

In addition, there is a feeling of despair in student culture given the economic recession in the north-east United States and the massive loss of jobs in the city in which Urban College is located. An estimated 50 per cent of black youth were unemployed and the problem was getting worse. Students want to escape but feel the situation is hopeless. Unlike the 1960s, the hopelessness and frustration is not linked to a broader political

movement. Rather, students inculcate a well-developed sense of structural subordination, which the dominant ideology relating to educational opportunity reinforces.

The existence of a distinct black culture has impeded rather than enabled blacks to engage their structural 'superexploitation' as part of an underclass (Omi & Winant, 1983). 'In spite of its richness and strength, the existence of a distinct black culture contributes to the fractionalized nature of the working class—a fractionalization which ultimately benefits the capitalist class.' Such fractionalisation is not simply attributable to culture: racism is fundamentally based on colour. However, it is furthered by class and cultural tensions within the black community and these are also reproduced within the Urban College setting (Weis, 1985, pp. 156–7).

Students enter Urban College with a desire to escape poverty but within the college they create a collective culture that ensures the majority will remain on the streets. The collective college culture reflects the necessary collectivity of the ghetto. However, Weis has shown that 'failure' at Urban College is not simply the importation of successful street practices into the college environment where they are inappropriate. The failure of students to make the leap from street culture to mainstream culture is much more complex and revolves round a number of contradictions within student culture, which reflect wider structural contradictions.

In conclusion, Weis suggests possibilities for action for those who want students to 'succeed' and are opposed to the unequal and oppressive social structure. The suggestions relate to policies on staffing, time, and standard English, as well as the development of a radical pedagogy and a critical appreciation of their own position by students. She admits that changing institutional policies and practices will not be adequate because of the structural factors. However, given the semi-autonomous nature of culture it is possible that student cultural forms might come to develop the transformative potential currently lacking.

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<sup>14</sup> Weis makes reference, in a footnote, to her 'two research assistants' and in the acknowledgements lists five people who 'acted as my research assistants, spending countless hours collecting data without which this book could not have been written'. It is not clear, however, what role these people played nor exactly what they did. The only clue offered is that the interviews with graduates of the college appear to have been 'conducted by a person other than LW' according to Weis' system of extract annotation (although the interviewers' interjections are still labelled as 'LW').

<sup>15</sup> Weis' approach is to introduce approximately quarter page long blocks of verbatim material from four or five sources one after the other and then summarise it by reference to key phrases. This approach while contextualising comments does lead to repetition. However, this is a stylistic concern rather than a substantive concern about the nature of her critical ethnography.

<sup>15A</sup> Note the use of the concept of cultural capital way before its vogue in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.