Refusing Schooling in the U.K. and the U.S.

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I recently reread Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor: How Working-Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs,* first published in England in 1977. (The U.S. edition, with a shrewd introduction by Stanley Aronowitz, is available from Columbia University Press.) Using ethnography to fashion a critical intervention in cultural theory, Willis produced a classic analysis of how working-class English schoolboys' rebellion against an education system preparing them for meaningless jobs results in choosing their fathers' world of hard manual labor. Willis dramatizes and explicates how the group of countercultural teens he calls "the lads" in Hammertown, "a Midlands nuts and bolts city and one of the cradles of the industrial revolution," voluntarily affirm the terms of their economic subjugation.

Willis studied the lads because they reflexively oppose, resist and subvert the routines of their Hammertown school. They "take the piss out of" teachers and administrators, act out in class, ritually avoid schoolwork and bully the conformist students they call 'ear'oles'. ('Ear'oles may be Willis's substitution for assholes. After spending ten years in England, I had never heard the term ear'oles.) Out of school the lads drink, carouse, pick fights, seduce young women, indulge in petty thievery and vandalism, and attack West Indians and Pakistanis. Through all these oppositional actions, the lads attempt to maintain the core of their individuality. Willis quotes one of the lads articulating the group's importance:

> We've developed certain ways of talking, certain ways of acting, and we've developed disregards for Pakis, Jamaicans and all different … for all the scrubs and the fucking 'ear'oles' and all that (….) 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 … 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 yer up like, cos you couldn't go ten minutes in this school without having a laff at something or other.

At the core of the lads' opposition is a rejection of the school's definition of work and the pathways into it. The lads' school offers them the classic education bargain–in exchange for their conformity, the school will share its funds of knowledge which will enable the lads to get good jobs once they graduate. The lads reject the school's bargain because they perceive the world of work as undifferentiated drudgery and don't believe there are any good jobs available to them. Moreover, the school incarnates mental labor and defines good jobs as those using mental capacities rather than physical strength and toughness. Because the lads perceive mental labor as essentially femininesoft, easy and unchallenging compared to the physical labor of their fathers' work-worlds–they reject the culture of the school and its proffered futures. The lads assume they'll cope with the world of manual labor through their "ability to generate extrinsic group-based satisfactions to support the self and give it value." In Willis's view the lads assume "an essential separation of the vital self from the hope of intrinsic satisfaction in work." But the manual work they expect to take on does not diminish their "sense of superiority, insight and true personal learning. Nor does it dampen their optimistic expectations." In an individual interview, Willis asks one of the lads what he has that the 'ear'oles' do not.

> Guts determination, not guts, cheek as well (…) we know more about life than they do. They might know a bit more about maths and science which isn't important. It's important to fucking nobody. That they've got to try and find out what is …by the time they're twenty they might know as much about life as me now. 'Cos they gotta go through

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> it. Well I mean I've been through stages of life now, I've had ups and downs, you know disappointments. I've accepted them, I've took 'em as they've cum. That's it you know, but ear'oles when they get work, they'm, how can I put it … just going to abide by the rules and do their fucking best (…) They'm clever in some ways, they're clever with the maths and the science and the English, but they ain't clever in life. They'm underdogs to me.

In Willis's view, the lads have "penetrated, learned and understood through experience something that others, and in particular the 'ear'oles have not. That is, of course, the experiential hook the precise, unintended, unexpected reversal of the conventional logic—which actually binds these kids into a future of manual work." Rejection of the school's ideology of the superiority of feminized mental work turns the lads back to the hard labor of the factory floor and the oppressive work-worlds of their fathers.

I have often wondered about the relevance of Willis's work to American high schools and to young male students. In my work in U.S. schools, I have not encountered countercultural opposition groups like those that Willis's lads developed in Hammertown. But I have encountered numerous instances of individual resistance to the reign of the school. Here's an example of one such resistor, who I will call Neil Dennis (not his real name).

I first met Neil in the city high school I attended. He was big for his age–tall, muscular, and beefy; he seemed older and more developed than the rest of us. His characteristic mode was anger, particularly directed against the school's authorities. He hated his teachers and the school's principal, and he was vocal, profane and obscene in his hatred's articulation. He refused to participate in any class activities, did no homework and, as far as I could tell, was failing all his courses. When I first encountered him, I was puzzled about how he'd managed to advance to the 11th grade in a college-prep track. He was, as he mockingly claimed, "a denizen of detention," where he celebrated the teachers' failures to compel him to engage in any form of schoolwork. He cursed and belittled not only his teachers, but any students he perceived as do-gooders, brown-nosers and assholes (no 'ear'oles for him) committed to serving the world of the school.

Students feared Neil and what he might do, but we were also astounded by his ferocity. When he disappeared towards the end of 11th grade, our teachers hinted that he had been sent to what they called reform school, a dreaded site whose privations we could barely imagine. But across the years I have encountered other Neils. As far as I could tell, they were individual resistors who had not

formed countercultural opposition groups like Willis's Hammertown lads. I've always wondered what forces shaped their resistance.

The Neil Dennises I've encountered were white. Herb Kohl's I Won't Learn from You, published in 1993 and available from The New Press, identifies a range of resistors to classroom learning and school cultures who Kohl encountered across his teaching and alternative school career. (Kohl introduces the notion of learning refusal through a nuanced examination of his own resistance to learning Yiddish, though he grew up immersed in that language from his childhood through his high school years.) But the learning refusers Kohl encountered were predominantly Black and Latino students in segregated schools, who were reacting to individual teacher bias and the institutionally structured racism embedded in the curriculum and teaching of their schools and classrooms.

Like the lads in Willis's Hammertown school, Kohl's students refused to learn or participate in schooling rituals, to affirm and protect their personhood and their values from the demeaning and reductive demands of their schools. Kohl defines what he calls "willed not learning" as "a conscious and chosen refusal to assent to learn."

> Many youngsters who ask impertinent questions, listen to their teachers [only] to contradict them, and do not take homework or test scores seriously, are practiced not-learners. The quieter not-learners sit sullenly in class, daydreaming and shutting out the sound of their teacher's voice. They sometimes fall off their chairs or throw things across the room or resort to other strategies of disruption. Some push things so far that they get put in special classes or get thrown out of school. (….) these youngsters' minds are never engaged in what the teacher is trying to teach. On that level no failure is possible since there has been no attempt to learn. It is common to consider such students dumb or psychologically disturbed. Conscious, willed refusal of schooling for political or cultural reasons is not acknowledged as an appropriate response to oppressive education. Since students have no way to legitimately criticize the schooling they are subjected to or the people they are required to learn from, resistance and rebellion is stigmatized. The system's problem becomes the victim's problem. However, not-learning is a healthy, though frequently dysfunctional, response to racism, sexism and other forms of bias. In times of social movements for justice such refusal is often turned to more positive mass protest and demonstration and to the development of alternative learning situations.

Kohl's lifework has alternated between articulating how "racism, sexism and other forms of bias" stunt, distort or limit the schooling opportunities of low-income children of color in the U.S., and developing more effective learning settings and experiences for students facing various forms of oppressive education.

Because Kohl's chosen métier is memoir and reflection, his examples focus on individual student refusers rather than the oppositional subgroup that Willis's cultural ethnography analyzes. But some commonalities are clear. Willis's lads and Kohl's learning refusers oppose their schooling's bureaucratic rules and measures (Kohl's term is institutional stupidity) to protect their individuality, dignity and identity. Both the lads and the learning refusers pay a price for acting out their opposition. The learning refusers are labeled and stigmatized as emotionally disturbed and intellectually disabled in U.S. special education settings. The lads are defined as troublemakers, malcontents and deviants in English contexts, and often sanctioned, caned or otherwise physically punished, sent home or permanently expelled from school.

Finally, both the English lads and the U.S. resistors reject the cultures and values of their country's traditional public education. Both groups oppose schooling that offers them very limited opportunity for intellectual growth, mobility, self-realization, success and eventual happiness. Both groups instinctively understand that their schooling is structured and functions to keep them fixed in place forever.

There are some clear differences. The English lads reject a schooling culture and curriculum that promises upward class mobility, while the U.S. schooling refusers oppose the segregated instruction and racist curricula that shrivel their opportunities to learn and thrive educationally. The English lads' counterculture is grounded in patriarchal norms and sexist behavior, as well as racist attitudes towards immigrants of color, while the learning refusers are opposing the deep structures of U.S. institutional racism.

Finally, as Willis's ethnography demonstrates, his English lads form a sustained countercultural group which generates solidarity, friendship and mutual support in opposition to conventional schooling. But the U.S. learning refusers seem to act more individually; they generate no obvious forms of solidarity and mutual support, until, as Kohl indicates, student opposition erupts into mass protest, as happened memorably in New York City in 1964, when some half-million students boycotted their classrooms to protest the city's failure to integrate the public schools.

While Willis perceives the lads' rebellion as rooted in oppositional English working-class culture, the Black and Latino schooling resistors Kohl writes about are solitary actors and their group uprisings are sporadic. Yet groups of Black and Latino students were at the core of the Civil Rights movement, and southern Black Freedom Schools were a prefigurative example of that movement's demands for root and branch educational change. Perhaps we will yet see the development of a universal student movement, led by Black and Brown schooling refusers, that integrates culturally responsive education with a comprehensive rejection of segregation, and demands a public education system that offers genuine opportunity to all students regardless of their race, class, gender or disability.

What can we learn from the "English Lad's" rejection of schooling in the U.K. during the 1970's to better understand the rebellion of today's high school resistors in the United States? The article offers pertinent views and analysis of the rationale of resistors to classroom learning and school cultures.