



Peter McLaren. Photographed by Barb Wilde

# "Bein' Tough": Rituals of Resistance in the Culture of Working-Class Schoolgirls

Peter McLaren

*L'auteur de Cries from the Corridor (1981) qui traite en grande partie des élèves qui viennent de la classe ouvrière, parle des conflits de genre et de classe dans le système éducatif. Il pense que les rituels auxquels s'astreignent ces élèves pour réagir contre l'oppression contredisent le stéréotype de l'élève canadienne docile des faubourgs ouvriers. En acceptant leur statut inférieur, ces jeunes filles rejettent avec hostilité l'idéal de féminité de la classe bourgeoise. Elles deviennent des "dures". De tels rituels réfutent le mythe qui veut que l'éducation de base aide les élèves désavantagées à avoir plus de possibilités de réussite et à améliorer leur statut.*

Possessed by an anthropological zeal and filled with the spirit of participant observation, an increasing number of social scientists have been applying their research skills to the study of working-class school culture where incidents of violence, racism, sexism, and class conflict are often intense.

As the female working-class population represents one of the largest segments of any stratified society, it is truly surprising that sociologists have generally turned a myopic eye to their culture. It is as if only males inhabit the working-class cultural terrain. The female element in contemporary working-class school culture is often overlooked — fenced off from the mainstream of

sociological writing on youth. While it is difficult to react dispassionately to the neglect and sanctified close-mindedness of these researchers, their oversights are perhaps understandable because classroom field study has traditionally been male-dominated. Although the recognition by educational sociologists of a distinct working-class female culture has been inexcusably fleeting and sporadic, there has recently emerged promising work on disaffected youth.

Limitations of space preclude an extended cultural exegesis of working-class schoolgirls which would attempt to redress this gap in the literature. Therefore, the classroom descriptions and analyses pre-

sented here are exploratory and fragmentary. Many of the portrayals need little commentary; indeed, some of them speak entirely for themselves:

► Thursday, April 14

During art, Donnie drew a picture of Sharon squeezing her breasts and squirting great jets of milk into the air, and then left the drawing on Sharon's desk, waiting for her reaction.

She reddened, gritting her teeth. Crouching low, she charged and split open Donnie's cheek with a head-butt. Her eyes widened when she saw the sight of blood.

Donnie stemmed the flow with his shirt tail and retreated to his desk. I sent him down to the nurse.

"Stupid prick!" Sharon hollered. "The dummy don't even know ya gotta be pregnant before you squirt milk!"

(Peter McLaren, *Cries from the Corridor, Paperjacks*, 1981, p. 38)

► Thursday, January 20

Ruth is exceptionally tall and good-looking, her skin sepia-coloured, her lips thick and sensuous. Her expression reminds me of a thin Elvis Presley. She's always raising her hand to be excused. When I asked her why she had to go to the bathroom so often, she told me it was due to 'personal problems.'

When I asked her if she had seen a doctor about the problem, she said no, it was a 'women's problem,' and to 'mind my own bizness!' I replied that doctors knew all about 'women's problems,' that many doctors are women.

I sent her down to see the school nurse. It appeared that Ruth was pregnant.  
(McLaren, p. 8)

Sharon and Ruth were among the grade-six students I taught between 1975-79 in an area of Toronto called the Jane-Finch Corridor. The Corridor has been characterized as one of

the most notorious of Toronto's "invisible" suburban ghettos: six square blocks of high-density, low-income apartments and row upon row of government-subsidized townhouse developments. By 1975, there were fifty-nine high-rises, with more under construction, and a population of sixty thousand. Almost half the inhabitants of the Corridor are under nineteen.

Although the Jane-Finch Corridor is technically a suburb, it gives the impression of an inner-city area because of the large numbers of single-parent families, the low incomes, the high rate of juvenile delinquency, and the constant turnover in population. It is an area that has a reputation for crime and racial tension because of abysmally poor suburban planning, unemployment, and a lack of social and recreational services to meet the needs of its many Italian, West Indian, and Spanish-speaking immigrants.

The short extracts presented throughout this paper tend to overturn the stereotypes that many Canadians hold of the thrifty, industrious, docile, and well-mannered suburban schoolgirl. However, for the purposes of analysis, it is necessary to situate the behaviour of these girls within the contours of their *class position* and the way in which *class and gender distinctions* are treated in the public-school milieu. The working-class subculture does not exist in a social vacuum; it is not independent of the multiplicity of events which constitute the larger society — which, in certain respects, labels human beings as superior or inferior to one another.

The rituals and slang of working-class schoolgirls are largely symbolic responses to basic societal constraints and structural inequalities; they are reactions on the part of an oppressed group. The social lives of these girls have been developed as a distinctive subcultural style — a "lived sense of difference" from their middle-class teachers and peers, of "us" against "them."

Through the ritual construction of social relations in the classroom, schooling transmits and reinforces those ideologies which reflect the prevailing values and ethos of a

male-dominated, hierarchical, middle-class social structure. Conflict breaks out when the girls deliberately resist the role expectations and concomitant patriarchal codes which the schools try to impose on them. Much of their abrasive behaviour is a direct rejection of middle-class modes of propriety and decorum embedded in school practices. While a few teachers, myself included, attempted to provide more flexible classroom procedures, most of the girls remained in passionate opposition to the intentions of the school as a vehicle for upward mobility — for eventually attaining monetary benefits and improved social status through the Protestant ethic of hard work and good deportment. Their ingrained hostility to institutionalized forms of domination and authority could not be permanently dissolved by sympathetic teachers. *To Sir with Love* is, after all, a Hollywood fantasy. According to the girls, school has seldom made a difference to the lives of their parents; who could say that the educational system would be any kinder to them? The girls develop a consciousness that accepts fatalistically their subordinate class and gender location.

Classroom violence, sexism, and racism are socially mediated reactions to economic and cultural dislocation and to what is perceived as the oppressive experience of schooling. Paul Willis points out in *Learning to Labour* (1980) that the resistance of British working-class boys to the dominant ideology of the school ultimately supports the modes of oppression it attacks. Physical labour and masculinity are celebrated at the price of defining and rejecting mental labour as effeminate and therefore socially inferior. Such adulation of masculinity is fuelled by a deep-rooted sexism and racism which tends to implicate the working-class "lads" in their own domination by enhancing the possibilities that, like their fathers, they will one day end up in the shop floor. Subordinate roles are more easily adopted when they are enhanced by the appeal of regressive machismo. Patriarchy, Willis points out, serves less as a relic of the social past, as some his-

torians maintain, and more as an Archimedian fulcrum for capitalism.

Popularity and physical attractiveness were the prime concerns of the girls — areas of interest that far superseded academic aspirations. Girls were constantly experimenting with generous applications of make-up, meticulously applied, and improvising clothing styles. Subcultural dress codes (tightly fitting denims, taut T-shirts covered with sexual slogans, bright red nail polish, Afros, dreadlocks, Kodiak boots) established by the disadvantaged denizens were not only symbolic challenges to the conservative sartorial codes of teachers and more affluent peers but a way of fostering group solidarity.

In a lucid and penetrating article on the culture of working-class girls in Birmingham, England, Angela McRobbie (main article in *Women Take Issue*, London, 1978) points out that one way in which girls combat class-bound and oppressive features of the school is to assert their "femaleness" to replace the officially sanctioned code of neatness, diligence, application, femininity, passivity, and so on, with one that is more feminine, even *sexual* in nature. It is significant that dress codes and make-up were presented by the girls I was working with as a direct inversion of the authorized ideological codes of the school.

The Corridor girls started to "go with" boys as early as twelve. However, if in the process of "making out" they happened to respond to the boys' advances too readily or indiscriminately, they were frequently labelled as "sluts" or "sleaze bags." These names were also bestowed upon physically unappealing girls and employed viciously at random. Girls often found themselves in the double-bind of losing their group status if they engaged in sexual activity or of being rejected for appearing "too cold." However, in similar incidents of increased sexual engagement, the status of the boys was fundamentally enhanced. This double standard has existed historically; and while feminists have consistently attacked these invidious hypocrisies for years, their criticism has rarely

effected change in the working-class cultural milieu.

Marriage was often rejected by the girls as a desirable option for the future. Yet, at the same time, some felt that to be married would be preferable to working in a meaningless job. It at least provided the status of "wife" — undoubtedly worth more than having no status at all. For many, however, the prospect of marriage appeared to be an inevitable trap from which they saw few avenues of escape.

While I was teaching, it was not uncommon to witness numerous daily incidents in which girls were involved in violent physical clashes with boys or other girls. In fact, some of the girls were among the school's most menacing and gifted pugilists. It was important for the girls to assert very early their capacity physically to defend themselves. For girls, as well as for boys, "bein' tough" was a way to win respect and a large coterie of followers:



*Monday, January 31*

Everybody called Francine 'Muscle Lady.' When she flexed her eleven-year-old biceps, eyeballs popped. The boys were extremely jealous.

Muscle Lady loved to fight — especially boys. But boys didn't love to fight her. It was not only painful but humiliating when Muscle Lady has you pinned by the neck with her boot, and then bragged to the onlookers, 'Should I cut off his balls?' If the crowd gave a 'thumbs down' (which it often did), Muscle Lady had been known to grind down her heel.

The word was out. If Muscle Lady has you in her sights, wear your steel hockey cup to school. (McLaren, p. 10)

Many of the girls had home lives that were turbulent and difficult. A large percentage lived in single-parent families with a number of brothers and sisters. Some parents were frequently out of work and on "pogey." Others could only get by on welfare. Even if they were fortunate enough to be working, many held menial, dead-end jobs in which their pride was constantly

perforated like a sieve. Girls with younger siblings took on parental roles very early, especially when mothers or fathers were working. Consequently, a number of girls would routinely miss part of the school day in order to look after brothers and sisters. Some parents were frequently out of work and on could seldom afford a babysitter and daycare facilities were either inadequate or non-existent. Whether the student was male or female, the most stinging insult was to be stamped as "welfare," a symbolic defilement.

Family violence frequently erupted as a result of the pressures of daily life. The theme of violence in the home often came up in discussions with girls and their parents. I recall one interview with the mother of one of my students:

'Doesn't it bother you that your husband beats you, though? Wouldn't it help to work on that end of things?' I asked gently.

'Of course he beats me!' she snapped. 'Wouldn't you be upset if you couldn't find work and had to sit at home all day doing nothin?'

Although the girls found life to be full of antagonistic relationships and domestic dilemmas, home represented, at the very least, a place where common-sense knowledge and practice were appreciated and where a lack of mastery over middle-class discourse and rhetoric did not make the girls feel "deficient" or "deprived."

My observations of disaffected girls in a public-school setting confirm many of the findings of the educational critics who describe the latent function or "hidden agenda" of schooling as reproducing the values, attitudes, and behaviours necessary to maintain our society's present class-based division of labour and male-dominated gender relations.

Although many of the Jane-Finch girls suffered the indignities of poverty, racism, sexism, physical abuse, and, in some cases, the culture shock of recent immigration, they managed to create and maintain a distinct subcultural resistance to the consensually validated norms

of the school — norms which attempted to make girls into passive, pliable, docile, tidy, neat, and diligent workers. In order to resist this "conventionalized" version of femininity, which is designed to nurture their "*domestic instincts*," the girls developed attributes which were drawn from working-class culture in general: toughness, aggressive sexuality, distrust of authority, rebelliousness. Therefore, the girls were able to resist the contradictory myth that schools function as agencies of equality, that educational institutions possess the power to help disadvantaged students bridge the chasm of opportunity that separates them from their more affluent peers.

Because the school system is structured tacitly to reinforce and reward the middle-class values, attitudes, and behaviour of those girls who already possess them (and thereby penalize the "deprived" by omission), educators and the public alike often assume that the failure of the schools to educate disadvantaged girls is really the failure of the girls themselves. Failure is assumed to occur either because the girls are mindless, shiftless, worthless, pathological, burdened by dubious hereditary traits, or are the products of deviant home backgrounds. This supports the conventional ideology of "blaming the victim" — instead of examining ways in which the class and educational systems militate against the success of those who are economically powerless and who are disadvantaged by gender and race.

So pervading and intransigent is this myth of equal educational opportunity that many working-class girls adopt a mode of self-abasement as they come to believe that their school failure is their own fault, that they must be "stupid or something."

In their day-to-day behaviour, the Jane-Finch girls resisted what they unconsciously felt "in their guts" to be an oppressive situation; yet because they were unable to articulate the experience of this oppression in the socially sanctioned rhetoric of the school — they blamed themselves.

The liberal myth that success comes to anyone who is prepared to work and sacrifice blinded the girls to the fact that they were being structured into a pre-ordained future by the patriarchal, economic, and cultural forces of consumer capitalism. Paralysed by the belief that they lacked the intelligence of the more affluent girls, the working-class girls gave up. (Naturally, there were some exceptions. But since intelligence was equated with middle-class status, most girls soon abandoned any attempts to please teachers or achieve academic excellence. Instead their attention was soon diverted to the enhancement of their subcultural status.) For the

*Photo: Barb Wilde*

most part, their class/cultural identity became defined for them by dirt-stained high-rises, unemployment, sexism, the strip-plaza splendour, and the general failure of educators and politicians to redress their plight. This led to strong emotional bonding, as networks of "girlfriends" were created collectively to resist the world of the dominant class. The girls knew that the cards were stacked against them from the very beginning. After all, did the legacy left by our forefathers not emphasize the superiority of one class of people over another? And one sex over another? And what more natural reaction to this predicament than to jettison the



official ideology of the school through rituals of resistance?

To embrace the derisory ideology that conceives of disadvantaged girls as under-socialized, as "unfinished products" on the conveyor belt of social success, is to place a veneer on the basic class structure of society and obscure the ways in which the structure of the system determines, to a great extent, which class and gender will be successful and which will fail. In this way the educational system censures the hereditary transmission of the status quo — by appearing neutral, by concealing its social function of reproducing class and gender relations, by perpetrating the myth of equality of opportunity based on scholastic merit.

Until the educational system from kindergarten to high school begins to re-evaluate the working-class culture of femininity, schools will continue to underwrite the restricted and inferior role of women and function as sorting and processing stations through which girls are prepared for a lifetime of routine labour: the spirit-breaking and mind-deadening norms of the factory floor or the oppressive limbo of domestic labour. Unless schools can be more seriously considered as sites of class and gender conflict, they will remain bootcamps for bureaucracy, emphasizing the need for passive rule-compliance, co-operation, and meagre skill development that will prepare disadvantaged students to accept unquestioningly the sexist and exploitative aspects of the world of work.

It is imperative that schools begin to develop programs which question the class and value assumptions underlying our cultural terrain and render problematic the social structures and gender discrimination through which working-class girls (and boys) are forced to make their way. In order that youth studies overcome their sociological bankruptcy, more studies of working-class females are needed. Until such studies penetrate the heartland of mainstream sociology, they will continue to lack the impact needed to make necessary changes in the lives of disaffected schoolgirls.

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