

~~not all that accessible for people who are over-pressed and with insufficient time for reflection themselves.~~

~~Norman Evans~~

~~Learning From Experience Trust~~

Louts and Legends, J.C. Walker, London: Unwin Hyman, 1988. 192 pages, £10.95 (paperback) ISBN 0 04 330392 0

There is little doubt that the current paradigm regulating educational research is ethnography, i.e. the study of school and classroom life utilising anthropological tools such as observation, participant observation, diary entries, and interviewing in order to document and understand the life forms and cultural and meaning production of groups of people in their situation. A number of such school ethnographies carried out in the UK, USA and Australia have been especially influential in developing our understanding of the cultural dynamics of educational sites, which up to the early seventies had been little more than mysterious 'black boxes' that somehow reproduced the class, gender and race divisions prevailing in the wider social order. While statistical and 'political arithmetic' methods did tell us about the reproductive function of schools, they told us very little about how such reproduction took place, and did little to illuminate the contestual nature of schools where contradictory cultural and ideological processes could be mobilised for transformative ends. A number of ethnographies were inspired mainly by symbolic interactionism, where the focus was principally placed on the micro-dimension of schools. Leftist ethnographers, on the other hand, argued for the need to place such micro accounts squarely in the nexus of the power structure of the larger society, and hence to link phenomenon to form, and details of human agency to the structural constraints within which such activity was shaped.

'Louts and Legends' falls within this second, leftist tradition, and has in common with ethnographies like those written by Paul Willis and Christine Griffin not only the attempt to understand young people on their own terms, but also the focus on the process of growing up and moving out of school into further education, employment and/or unemployment. Like Willis, Walker focuses on males in a single-sex inner-city school. However, this Australian ethnography has a wider scope in that it follows those researched over a period of five years. It also looks at four groups of students — the 'footballer', the 'Greeks' the 'handballers' and the 'three friends'. Although Walker is obviously more influenced by the cultural interaction and production of the first group, he avoids Willis's sole focus on 'the Lads' — as representatives of those who resist schooling — to present a more dynamic and complete picture of the processes of acceptance, resistance, contestation and accommodation that go on in schools. While the focus is not, as in most transition-to-work ethnographies, on school and classroom processes themselves — this, we are told, is to follow in Walker's next book drawing from the same ethnographic base, and to be entitled *Learning Culture*.

Teachers and Students in an Inner City School — it is the school which serves as the main setting for most of the central themes developed by Walker, namely culture, cultural production, and the transition process itself. The last chapter of his book also

makes it clear that the documentation and analysis of these themes are addressed mainly towards teacher and educational policy makers.

'Louts and Legends' is another instance of the post-structuralist emphasis on culture and the processes of meaning production, where the individual is rediscovered as an active worker and a constitutor of the social world. Walker develops a materialist understanding of 'culture' as a set of human dispositions to behave in certain ways, whereby individuals have a repertoire of possible responses. He distinguishes his approach from other culturalist traditions in making the term 'culture' embrace the economic, ideological, kinship and recreational spheres. Walker therefore avoids the *dualism* of agency and structure and reconceptualises it as a *duality* where individual is structure, and where behaviour and superstructures are material. In common with Pierre Bourdieu and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Walker identifies communication — or the lack of it — as the key theoretical construct to explain students' experience of schooling and other institutional spaces they inhabit. Walker is keen to show that co-operative engagement in activities, framed by social relations which respect the rights and dignities of individuals and which enhance the freedom and power of these individuals to make personally fulfilling and socially beneficial choices, can lead in places like schools to the development of an empowering education that helps persons take charge of their lives.

Walker therefore seems to me to have taken a cue from Habermas and to consider power relations as being regulated by the communicative procedures that prevail in a given social formation. A procedural principle which Walker identifies and which, in Habermasian terms, would lead to the 'ideal speech situation' where real dialogue in favour of democratic social arrangements is possible, is the search for a 'touchstone'. This refers to the common ground, including standards and commitments, on which participants in a social site such as the school could build good communication. Walker argues that in specific sites some groups' such as the 'footballers' and the teachers at Stokeham High, have much more 'touchstone discourse'. In other words, these groups are the ones who have the power to enforce their culture on others, and to make its acceptance the prerequisite for any form of social interaction. Walker argues in favour of a 'progressively developed touchstone' which has 'multiple articulations across social groups' (p.158). Addressed to teachers, this would be an invitation to give up on the difficult, self-defeating and ultimately undemocratic task of persuading pupils to learn the discourse of the formal curriculum and to become articulate in areas of teacher culture in favour of learning the discourse of pupil cultures. This would require finding whatever 'touchstones' are possible in order first to engage with the students and then to build and enlarge on the common ground established.

This is not a new theme, of course, and is often associated with 'dialogic education', Freire's antidote to 'banking education'. However, Walker's account of the youth cultures as developed in Stokeham (in discos, pubs, work placements, etc.) and Stokeham High goes a long way in helping us learn what the author refers to as the process of 'intercultural articulation' — i.e. the finding of common-ground cultural 'touchstones' so that communication, dialogue and real contact with the 'otherness' of others does actually come about. In order to help us along this path, Walker organises his account of inter- and intracultural articulation around four main categories: competition, the construction of nationality, the construction of malehood, and the transition to post-school life. In doing so, Walker not only reveals the meaning-construction process of the four Australian youth groups he interacts with

in four key areas of their lives, but he actively points out the possibilities that exist for progressive teachers who would wish to embark on meaningful dialogic education with young people.

In tackling this task, Walker avoids falling into some of the main methodological, epistemological, political and ethical pitfalls that I associate with ethnographic work. He makes transparent the process of research, the problems encountered, and the difficulties of gaining access to youth cultures, admitting that despite his relative success, 'it would be ludicrous to claim that I became in anything approaching a complete sense, an 'insider' '. He admits his theoretical premises, and that because of the complex nature of a research method which requires the researcher to interact closely with the researched, some views were given more weight than other. It is quite obvious, for instance that 'Fr Jim' — as Walker is nicknamed by the groups he studies — has a soft spot for Mosey, the leader of the 'footballers' and the critic of teacher culture and of Stokeham culture generally, to whom he accords the first and last word of the book. Walker therefore immediately does away with the illusion of himself as 'neutral observer', acknowledging that his gender, age and persona could not but influence the data collection and analysis processes. He successfully avoids presenting us with accounts which fall into a political limbo, revelling in ethnographic detail without linking these to the structural dynamics of the macro political and ideological world in which they are acted out. *Louts and Legends* is politically articulate in another way too: it avoids 'idealist-utopian' solutions by working at a 'materialist pragmatist' level, i.e. he strives to imagine more democratic schooling alternatives — for example, in the construction of a relevant curriculum which speaks to the concerns and needs of the students and which would find 'touchstone ground' whatever the regional, class, ethnic and gender composition of their pupil population — by starting from the situation *as it is* and identifying the possibilities inherent in it. Teachers will certainly warm to an approach which differs from 'teacher-bashing' ethnographic accounts which tend to romanticise students and resistance, and present teachers as the villains of the piece. In this and many other ways, Walker-the-researcher acts ethically, never succumbing to the obvious temptations of reporting only the sensational or the colourful, and taking every precaution to remain sensitive to the rights and confidentiality of the researched, treating the latter not as mere 'objects' of research but as subjects who had prerogative to comment on the 'findings' and analysis.

Walker is therefore to be congratulated for presenting a lively, complex and dynamic picture of young people as they negotiate their lives at school and away from it, an account which while being theoretically sophisticated, adopt a 'common language' approach that renders the multiple insights of his text accessible not only to sociologists, but also to practising teachers.

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