

Learning to Labor?
Reconsider Schooling and Capitalism in the 21st Century From a Post-marxist Perspective

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Abstract

This article develops a theoretical framework to understand the relationship between schooling and capitalism in the present from a Post-Marxist perspective, critically reconsidering how students engage with schooling and labor in the context of 21st-century capitalism. Drawing on Paul Willis's classical Marxist ethnographic study, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, this article uses key theoretical elements proposed by Willis as a foundation for debate and further development from a Post-Marxist perspective. Willis's work demonstrates how working-class students ultimately reconcile their roles as workers, despite initial resistance to schooling and awareness of capitalist ideology. His study highlights students' experiences as active subjects engaged in cultural processes that shape their relationship with education and labor. However, changes in the contemporary capitalist landscape require fresh analysis. In response, this article integrates key concepts from the theories of Hardt, Negri, and Žižek to extend Willis's ideas. The first section proposes new ways to understand how schooling functions within emerging modes of production and temporal structures, drawing on the concept of the "social factory." This is followed by a discussion of penetration, half-rejection, and counter-school culture. Using the notion of "fantasies," the article rethinks these concepts to explore the relationship between subjects and consciousness.

Keywords: Learning to Labor, Schooling, Capitalism

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Learning to Labor in 1970s

During this period, the influential wave of liberalism dominated educational narratives, promoting the idea that every child could achieve upward mobility through education. Education was portrayed as a golden ticket to fulfilling dreams and attaining a better life. This perspective aligned with functionalist theories, which viewed education as a mechanism for allocating individuals to roles suitable for society. Those deemed proficient and fitting were positioned for higher societal roles. However, reality diverged from these promises. Leftist scholars argued that schools perpetuate and reinforce class structures within capitalism. Bowles and Gintis (1976) asserted that schools operate as microcosms of the broader societal structure, training students to become compliant and obedient workers. Consequently, school curricula and pedagogies were seen as tools for transmitting ideologies aligned with capitalism.

Yet, the leftist critique often reduces person as subject, particularly students, to passive objects shaped entirely by the system, portraying schools as being wholly dominated by capitalist ideologies. This perspective overlooks the creativity and agency of a person in their daily lives, ignoring how they construct meaning and make choices. Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor* addresses this gap, raising critical questions about the cultural processes occurring in everyday interactions between individuals and structures. How do these interactions unfold in daily life, and what do they reveal about the relationship between human agency and systemic forces?

In his study, Willis sought to understand why and how working-class students often end up in working-class jobs. Conducted in 1970s, his ethnographic fieldwork focused on 12 working-class boys, or "lads," in a secondary school located in an industrial district in England. Over six months, Willis employed interviews, informal diaries, and observations to uncover the cultural forms and resistance strategies of these students. He identified a "counter-school culture" among the lads, characterized by opposition to school authority and the formal educational system. This culture manifested in behaviors such as mocking conformist students, neglecting schoolwork, playing cards during class, and openly drinking in public. Such actions defied the structured and regulated environment of the school, which the lads viewed as a restrictive and oppressive space. Willis observed parallels between this resistance and the "shop-floor culture" of working-class workers responding to exploitative capitalist conditions. Importantly, the lads were aware of the limits of social mobility through individual qualifications, recognizing its unattainability within their social reality. In response, they rejected the meritocratic promises of the education system and sought alternative paths. This demonstrated their ability to penetrate the illusions of their social position within capitalism, analyzing risks and opportunities within their constrained circumstances.

However, counter-school cultures are transient and rarely develop into broader collective movements. Willis argued that their understanding was only partial, preventing them from articulating a comprehensive critique of the system. Moreover, these cultural interactions often reinforced gendered and racialized divisions rooted in dominant forms of masculinity, leading the lads to perceive themselves as superior to other groups. This phenomenon exemplifies what Willis termed "half-rejection".

From Learning to Labor to Learning to Self-Entrepreneur

While Willis's seminal work elucidates the cultural processes shaping students' transitions into the workforce under Fordist systems—characterized by regimented production lines and fixed schedules—it is vital to address the transformation of production methods in the post-Fordist era. Contemporary capitalism has fundamentally altered the dynamics of work, introducing flexible schedules, decentralized production, and new modes of labor control. This shift prompts a crucial question: how can *Learning to Labor* be reimagined within the context of 21st-century capitalism?

At the core of Willis's analytical framework lies a traditional Marxist perspective, which examines the modes of production, exchange, and exploitation inherent to capitalist systems. Central to this framework is the concept of capital accumulation, achieved by extracting *surplus value* from the labor power of workers during production. Marxist theory argues a foundational exchange relationship between capital and labor: while the capitalist class controls the means of production, the working class is compelled to sell its labor power in a supposedly free market. While the labor force inherently possesses the potential for unbounded creativity and agency, the capitalist system imposes structures to quantify and regulate labor. This commodification aims to maximize profit by controlling labor and extracting surplus value. Within this framework, the value of a commodity is not merely the sum of its costs and profits; it also embodies the surplus value created by labor. A portion of this value is retained by the capitalist class as capital, while wages represent the fraction returned to the laboring class. The utilization of wages, therefore, become mechanisms through which societal relationships are defined. These wages shape individuals' roles and positions within the broader capitalist structure, perpetuating the hierarchies and inequalities central to the system.

Wages serve as an innovation in transforming labor power as abstract value into concrete value, quantified by the time spent working each day. Willis explicates this transformation through the concepts of “abstract labor” and “concrete labor,” illustrating how the capitalist system endeavors to convert labor from an abstract form into concrete labor—standardized and nominally represented. In this process, the “standard minute” emerges as a pivotal tool for measuring labor value, operationalized through timetables and segmented work schedules.

In this notion, factory workers' lives are regimented by a “rhythm” established through rigid work schedules. Such time patterns, however, are not exclusive to factories; they are mirrored in schools. Children are embedded within timetables that structure learning into blocks, with teachers acting as quasi-factory supervisors mediating the exchange relationship between students and knowledge. Willis characterizes counter-school culture as a form of resistance, challenging the fairness of these relationships and rejecting the mechanisms of standardization and control that limit alternative expressions of labor power.

Willis further delineates the capitalist system's constructed divisions between “mental work” and “manual work.” These distinctions, far from natural, are ideologically shaped to perpetuate capitalist hegemony by determining who is deemed deserving of rewards or compensation, ostensibly based on merit. Mental work is positioned as superior to manual work, legitimizing claims to higher wages and status. This process, shrouded in the guise of meritocracy, is normalized as the natural order of reality. Working-class boys, as Willis observes, possess an acute awareness of these relationships. They recognize that while their jobs may involve manual labor, they derive satisfaction from earning higher wages than

women and marginalized racial groups, interpreting this as a symbol of male superiority. Wages thus become more than economic compensation; they serve as markers of hierarchical positioning within class structures.

In summation, *Learning to Labor* involves pedagogy to exist within the exchange relationships of a market under the paradigm of “standard minute”, which dictates the conditions of the value of production. Labor is controlled and its value transformed based on measurable work hours. This learning extends to vertical relationships within society through “wages” and “job characteristics,” indicating class symbols in the social hierarchy. It constructs an understanding of societal positions, revealing who occupies which class. Despite the possibility of resistance or rejection in the learning process, it is not inherently dangerous or alarming within the capitalist system. It ultimately culminates in the option of “half-rejection”.

Willis's analytical perspective looks at the learning experiences of children both during and after their school years in same page with the industrial factory production, where the relationships are tied to standardized time, wage, and job characteristics. As evident, the school schedule is sometimes resisted by working-class children as it does not lead to meaningful returns for them. Additionally, recognizing themselves as different from the general student in terms of engaging in manual labor helps them perceive the reward as satisfactory and gratifying. Children's lives are shaped by the conditions and contexts associated with the three elements that guide their actions and decisions as students. However, in contemporary production, time is no longer strictly defined within an 8-hour standard schedule. Work hours have become more flexible and less rigid, while wage or reward and job characteristics have also undergone changes. In this context, what then is Learning to Labor?

Post-Marxist scholars have turned their attention to understanding production within the contemporary capitalist system. In their 2001 book *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri propose a new understanding of this changing landscape, particularly the concept of the *detrterritorialization of production* (p. 296). This refers to the shift away from traditional factory settings, where labor is no longer confined to specific workplaces but has permeated every aspect of our daily life and relationships. The boundaries between work and life have become increasingly blurred, as evidenced by the rise of freelancing and various online social platforms.

This is what Hardt and Negri describe as the “social factory,” where labor, production, and consumption continuously occur in everyday life. In this paradigm, labor is no longer confined to a workplace or factory; it can take place anywhere. Hardt and Negri introduce the concept of “biopolitical production” to explain these transformations in the capitalist system during the post-industrial era. A clear example of this new mode of production can be found in online food delivery platforms, where delivery riders are turning the “streets” into a “factory”. In an interview from Tularak and Bunyasiriyanon’s research on platform-delivery workers in Thailand, published in Prachatai News in 2022, one rider, a university student, described the flexibility of the work system. He had to plan his schedule independently to maximize earnings, often choosing to deliver long distances (sometimes up to 50 kilometers). He spent over 10 hours on the road during weekends and an additional 4-5 hours after classes, all while managing the risks of accidents on his own. Another rider, “Note,” explained that working for over 10 hours a day left little time for rest, as breaks depended on where he happened to be along his route.

This example highlights a shift in the nature of labor: workers are no longer tied to standard schedules or factory machinery. Instead, they can set their own work hours within the framework of a flexible, often precarious system. This new model of production is characteristic of the post-Fordist era, which emphasizes temporary employment, flexible hiring practices, and increasingly unstable contracts. Alongside these structural shifts, a new consciousness has emerged—the “entrepreneurial self.” In this context, individuals are encouraged to see themselves as the masters of their own labor. The ownership of production means has shifted from traditional capitalists to individuals who must create and control their own productive factors. However, this shift also means that individuals now bear the risks and costs of their work. Meanwhile, capitalists are no longer responsible for directly managing production but instead facilitate flexible work arrangements and determine the value of labor based on factors such as distance and number of deliveries. This new framework characterizes contemporary capitalism, where flexibility, uncertainty, temporariness, and self-regulation are paramount. Workers, now more than ever, must navigate a system that values flexibility and autonomy but places the responsibility for managing risk and maintaining productivity squarely on their own shoulders.

Although traditional factory production still exists, the transformation of the capitalist system has given rise to the concept of “social factories,” blurring the boundary between work and life. Even in conventional jobs with clear schedules, individuals are increasingly connected as both producers and consumers of labor, extending beyond formal working hours. Willis’s perspective suggests that the temporal structure of schooling plays a critical role in shaping students’ perception. However, in today’s capitalist landscape, schools may no longer hold the central place they once did. During the school day, students can escape the rigidity of formal time and evade classes, particularly through online spaces, as long as they are not under strict surveillance. In this context, the distinction between standardized time and flexible time becomes increasingly blurred. Students can learn to navigate between these time structures, gaining autonomy and agency over their decisions and actions. They become “active users” in digital spaces while also remaining “passive learners” within traditional educational systems. But does this represent a form of counter-school culture, or is it simply a response to the capitalist system that seeks to limit or control labor power, as Willis suggests?

In this sense, this behavior may not necessarily challenge the capitalist system directly. Instead, it reflects a response to traditional work structures where individuals have little control over their own labor power. The movement between standardized and virtual time is, in fact, a learning process that aligns with the development of flexible labor. In traditional Marxism, media and entertainment industries were seen as platforms where audiences passively consumed content. Today, however, individuals are active participants in the production of their own identity, becoming commodities in the broader market. Through posting, sharing, and uploading, people cultivate a sense of self-ownership, crafting and projecting their identities. This shift is emblematic of cognitive capitalism, where we are continually engaged in the production and exchange of symbols and meanings. In this new economy, students, like workers, learn to manage their labor power flexibly, blending emotional self-management with entrepreneurial practices.

The flexibility of time in this new era has led to the emergence of continuous and ubiquitous production. During study sessions, time after work, and other intervals are now opportunities for biopolitical production—an ongoing process of labor and value creation that spans all aspects of life. This transformation also signifies the dissolution of traditional metrics of value, no longer bound by standard time. From Willis’s perspective, work and wages are

symbols that define our place within the capitalist hierarchy. The rigid distinction between “manual work” and “mental work” is increasingly irrelevant in this context. Instead, the primary divide may be between the “entrepreneur” and the “laborer.” This divide represents the degree of autonomy one has in their work, which correlates with greater life independence. Social class today seems to be measured by the extent to which individuals can exercise this independence. The contemporary capitalist system seeks to erase overt class consciousness, instead fostering the illusion that everyone has the potential to be an entrepreneur.

Penetration and Entrepreneur's Fantasies

Willis's analysis offers an explanation for why working-class children often end up in working-class jobs, despite their resistance to the school system. Willis argues that these students do not merely resist; they learn to understand the system and recognize its illusions. For example, they come to see that the meritocratic ideal promoted in schools—where anyone can rise to the top of society—is a false narrative. They realize that school attendance does not translate into real-world rewards for them. As a result, they often view any job as an opportunity to earn money and achieve tangible results. This paradox reveals that, despite their resistance to school as a symbol of the capitalist system, they eventually accept and enter the labor market.

“Penetration” becomes thus a main concept that Willis uses to explain the phenomenon. For this concept, it is the ability of a person to understand their “positions” and “patterns of relationships” with others in society. It is what they learn to penetrate and articulate, infiltrating the fog of the capitalist system and understanding how it operates in their positioning with others.

This is what Willis is conveying, that while the capitalist system is at work, persons are also learning how the system operates in relation to themselves. They are not passive objective within the capitalist system. The ability of human to make sense of the world they inhabit through penetration is not accidental; it is because humans have the creativity to generate and produce culture based on their positions, with culture serving as a guiding principle.

However, the problem is that person cannot fully understand the system they are in. The existence of limitations serves as an obstacle and diverts learning from reaching its full potential. This results in our inability to achieve “political articulation by deep” (Willis, 1981, p. 145). One example is the distinction between “mental work” and “manual work,” where even though working-class students may penetrate the school's illusion of providing opportunities, the prevailing male-dominated culture imposes limitations on working-class children. They are unable to see the division; instead, they perceive themselves as superior to women and other ethnicities. Therefore, Willis refers to this situation as “half-rejection,” meaning that, ultimately, even though they may break through, they still cannot fully comprehend the entire system. This ultimately results in temporary resistance, concluding with acceptance of the existing relationship. In this sense, the survival of the capitalist system is also because we are all “social agents are not passive” (Willis, 1981, p. 175).

Penetration and the development of consciousness in understanding the capitalist system present challenges for people. Willis argues that the capitalist system intentionally creates limitations, making it difficult for people to fully comprehend its structures and dynamics. These limitations are not just external, but also internalized by subjects themselves. This

aligns with traditional Marxist theory, which distinguishes between “consciousness” and “unconsciousness”. According to this view, workers are initially unaware of their exploitation, but once they gain a full understanding, they are positioned for liberation.

However, through the lens of Žižek (Myers, 2003; Žižek, 2009; Jayanama, 2022), we might argue that the notion of self-entrepreneurship has emerged as a crucial fantasy that conceals the Real—the actual social conditions that lie beneath the surface. Unlike Willis's view, which suggests that capitalism attempts to hide its flaws, Žižek posits that capitalism does not hide its contradictions or ideological failures. Instead, it openly exposes these flaws but presents them as an inherent part of reality. In this sense, self-entrepreneurship functions as a compelling fantasy, convincing individuals that success is possible within the capitalist system, provided they exert enough effort. This illusion sustains their desire and encourages them to accept their current circumstances, ultimately transforming them into active participants in the capitalist ideology.

Capitalism, then, does not operate by concealing its truths. On the contrary, it allows people to see the system in all its rawness. People are aware of how the system functions and its inherent flaws, but even so, they accept it as the way things are. As Fisher (2009) observes, “they know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it” (p. 21). This recognition of the system’s failings, paired with a sense of powerlessness, exemplifies how the ideological structure of capitalism operates not by hiding the truth, but by making it appear unavoidable and inescapable.

When people can see the capitalist system clearly, there must still be an enjoyment element that encourages them to remain engaged. This enjoyment stems from fantasies, which shape desires and tell us who we are and what others expect from us. These fantasies construct desires that make us believe we must want certain things, even though these desires are not truly our own. They lead us to believe we are heading toward achievable goals, with success framed as a matter of self-discipline and personal choice. The ideology suggests that with proper planning and efficient work, success is attainable. For example, in an interview from the research project mentioned earlier, delivery riders expressed the belief that they had the freedom to work on their own schedules. Their ultimate goal was to earn more money. When asked for feedback on the platform company they worked for, one rider, after mentioning an accident, replied, “Nothing, they are already good,” before adding, “Increasing the pay a bit would be nice.” This response exemplifies how fantasies embedded in capitalist ideology allow us to find enjoyment, even when the system’s flaws are evident.

Fantasies also allow people to chase the reward of success or fulfillment. A poignant example of this is found in the documentary *School Town King*, which follows two boys, “Nont” and “Book”, from a slum in Thailand who dream of becoming rappers. Both clearly see that the education system under capitalism fails to meet their needs and attempts to mold individuals into uniform products, much like in a factory. The boys resist this by spending their after-school hours rehearsing songs instead of doing homework or attending additional tutoring, as many of their peers do. However, their paths diverge. “Nont” eventually decides to return to his studies, reflecting that “Dreams can be pursued anytime, but education must come first.” Meanwhile, “Book” drops out of school despite opposition from both his teachers and family, determined to carve out his own path as an entrepreneur. He believes that with hard work, success will eventually come. This belief is grounded in a fantasy that, despite the harsh realities they both understand, paints a picture of success within their reach. Unfortunately, Book’s fantasy is eventually shattered. He realizes that without engaging in political struggle,

his dream of a better life is unattainable. In 2021, Book joined the youth-led protests demanding democracy and a future free from the military regime (see The Standard, 2021, October 6, *Din Daeng protest: Why does it have to be violent? | UNCOVER #1*). Despite being labeled a violent troublemaker by some, his actions were a direct response to an oppressive system. After the protests lost momentum, Book was arrested and imprisoned in 2023. His story illustrates how the fantasy of self-entrepreneurship and individual success can only sustain individuals for so long. Eventually, the harsh reality of systemic oppression forces them to confront the broader socio-political structure, challenging the belief that personal effort can overcome deep-rooted societal inequalities.

Following Žižek's analysis, we might argue that working-class children (and even middle-class individuals) are not inherently limited in their understanding of the capitalist system. Rather, it is fantasy that shapes their engagement with the system, providing enjoyment and pleasure in their experiences. While they are aware that the existing system is flawed, it is fantasy that enables them to engage with it. This fantasy does not mask their awareness of the system's shortcomings; instead, it constructs desires that make their participation in the system pleasurable. In this sense, the issue is not their ability to comprehend the capitalist system, but the desires that society instills in them. They know the system is problematic, yet fantasy makes it enjoyable and tolerable.

Fantasy plays a crucial role here: it does not restrict what people know but rather influences what they desire. The capitalist system allows them to see its workings openly, including its flaws, yet they are encouraged to participate within it. The act of resisting, then, does not signal an effort to break free from the system but rather occurs within the parameters set by fantasy. Resistance, in this context, is not an act of dangerous rebellion but an action carried out within the limits of the fantasy that capitalism has constructed for them. Thus, capitalist schooling does not obscure ideology through a false consciousness, as traditional Marxist theory might suggest. Instead, it invites critique and dissent, allowing people to openly voice their complaints. This paradoxically makes capitalism even more powerful, as it markets products—such as ready-made courses, online programs, skill-building workshops, and alternative schools—that encourage individuals to invest in self-improvement. These products sell the idea that by enhancing one's skills, individuals can fully realize their potential as self-entrepreneurs, thus reinforcing capitalist ideology while making the system seem more accessible and rewarding.

Conclusion

Reconsidering *Learning to Labor* through a post-Marxist lens aims to critically reevaluate and offer alternative understandings of the relationship between schools and capitalism in the 21st century. First, the evolving nature of working culture within the capitalist system has blurred the boundaries between work and life, making it difficult to solely view the reproduction of cultural norms through standardized time. Instead, it becomes essential to examine both official and flexible time to understand how student as subject construct their consciousness around life within the work world. In the second aspect, what they learn and desire to become amidst the divide of increasingly characteristics of new jobs is flexible and immaterial. This marks a departure from an era characterized by a division of labor based on mental and manual work. Third, as capitalism increasingly centers on the production of symbols and meaning in all aspects of life, it leads to new social relationships that reconfigure class positioning. A critical question arises: what symbols are subjects producing and exchanging among themselves? This question helps illuminate how people self-

entrepreneur and position themselves within the capitalist structure. To what extent do schools contribute to this process? Finally, we must consider how fantasies and forms of enjoyment are constructed and mediated within the society. How have students engaged with, contributed to, and been shaped by capitalism? Understanding how subjects participate in and are influenced by these structures offers important insights into the dynamics of power, resistance, and acceptance within the modern capitalist framework.

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