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## Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups By Seeing Class Cultures

Betsy Leondar-Wright

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## Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups By Seeing Class Cultures

### Abstract

[Excerpt] At heart, this book is a comparison, not of twenty-five groups, but of the four major class categories I found among 362 meeting participants. Most of us frequently guess wrong about our acquaintances' class backgrounds and current class status. In doing this analysis, I had a special lens into social change groups, watching their conversations and their dynamics while holding members' class indicators in mind. In chapter 3 I introduce the commonalities within each class. I profile the movement traditions into which the twenty-five groups fall in chapter 4. For a surprisingly large number of attitudes and behaviors, I found that class *does* predict how an activist may think or act, more so than race, age, or gender. The subtle interplay between how things are done in each movement tradition and the effects of individual members' class predispositions paints a complex picture of why activists tend to think and act as they do.

The following five chapters each add a new layer to this understanding of intersecting class cultures and movement traditions. In interviews, activists repeatedly raised the same few concerns about problems within their groups. Since one goal of this book is to help social change groups grow and thrive, each of these five chapters about my research findings focuses on one of these common organizational problems: (1) low turnout, (2) inactive members, (3) disagreements over antiracism, (4) overtalking, and (5) offensive behavior by activists. Class dynamics are woven into each of these troubles, and resolving them requires understanding class-culture differences. These problem-solving implications apply to other kinds of organizations as well, such as workplaces, schools, and social services agencies.

### Keywords

class cultures, social movements, social change, class dynamics

### Disciplines

Inequality and Stratification | Political Theory | Politics and Social Change | Sociology of Culture

### Comments

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# MISSING CLASS

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL MOVEMENT  
GROUPS BY SEEING CLASS CULTURES

BETSY LEONDAR-WRIGHT

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# Introduction

## *Activist Class Cultures as a Key to Movement Building*

For its annual goal-setting meeting, the Tri-City Labor Alliance (TLA), an urban coalition of unions and their allies, brought in an outside facilitator, Zoe, a college-educated white woman from a professional-middle-class (PMC) background who was respected by many members.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the meeting, Zoe made a very long statement using many phrases that had no concrete referent (no action, person, organization, time, or place specified), such as *category of goals, proactive, review the process, participation in mobilization, leadership development opportunities, and strategic planning*. She mentioned only a very few potential concrete goals, such as making sure that the construction of a new mall used only union labor.

Then Zoe wrote three general questions on a big sheet of paper and instructed the sixty members to break into a dozen small groups and “put these recommendations into the context of these benchmarks.” The small group I joined, five older human services workers, chatted about electoral candidates, state budget cuts, grandchildren, and retirement parties, virtually ignoring Zoe’s questions. During the report-backs, only one of the small groups seemed to have stayed on topic and come to agreement on all three questions; not coincidentally, it was the only group composed entirely of teachers.

All the small groups with industrial and service workers did not cooperate with the process to some degree. No report-backs included Zoe’s general

terms “benchmark,” “process,” “mobilization,” or “strategy/strategic.” Instead, the members of working-class unions spoke more concretely, even when making broad political points: they mentioned candidates to support; they suggested incentives to activate inactive members; and they named adversaries such as the union-busting mall developer.

In the discussion that followed, whenever members spoke, Zoe restated their points in more general terms; for example, she categorized a proposed phone tree as “mobilization.” While most members spoke either at the macro level of political issues (such as “health care”) or at the micro operational level (such as a suggestion to call a member to see if he had a firefighter retirees’ phone list), only Zoe and two other white PMC labor leaders spoke at the intermediate level of organizational development.

At the end of the meeting, Zoe described the discussion as “unclear,” and two top TLA leaders said it hadn’t helped the executive committee prioritize ways to build the organization. Clearly, the dedicated labor activists at this meeting had two very different approaches to social change.

It was not that working-class union members felt animosity toward Zoe or other college-educated labor leaders. In fact, TLA members generally felt a strong sense of solidarity and enthusiasm for the group. One industrial worker, Slim, when asked about the annual goal-setting meeting, said admiringly of Zoe’s role, “Sometimes you need somebody that’s like, second chair, that’s thinking. You know, like for years we used to say the labor movement didn’t have enough intellectuals. . . . Today we got a lotta intellectuals in the labor movement, but you know, being a thinker wasn’t something encouraged in the labor movement, and strategizing and all that.”

This was not a story of cross-class conflict or hostility but of class subgroups operating from two different playbooks and thus accomplishing less. Nor did TLA members of different classes seem to literally misunderstand each other’s words, despite speaking in two such different ways. Members in each class used the style of expression that was habitual for them and persistently raised the topics they prioritized. It was as if two parallel conversations happened, with the result that the TLA did not get a clear agreement on goals.

The TLA story illustrates the purpose and focus of this book. Class-culture differences often hamper movement building in ways more subtle than outright interclass clashes or misunderstandings. Lack of class awareness prevents activists from noticing how class dynamics play out and so keeps them from effectively bridging class differences.

## Researching Class-Culture Differences in Social Change Groups

Why have there been so few cross-class, multiracial mass movements in US history? This perennial question has been answered in many ways. But gradually I have come to the conclusion that understanding activists' class-culture differences is one necessary precondition for mass movement building in the United States today.

Over and over again during my thirty years of progressive activism, I have experienced rifts along class lines. I'll mention just a few of many examples. Middle-class people who opposed nuclear power on environmental grounds missed many chances to work with working-class groups that were more focused on electricity prices or job loss. In the movement for pay equity, middle-class feminists sometimes framed the issue differently than did unions. In the struggle over the gutting of the welfare safety net, low-income women's groups did not get support from most middle-class feminists. The movement against corporate globalization came together for one glorious moment in Seattle in 1999; but afterward the unions went their way, and the student groups, faith-based groups, and environmentalists went theirs. Differences in self-interest only partially explain these failures of solidarity; in each case there seemed to be cultural differences as well.

I wrote a small section on activist class-culture differences in my book *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists* (2005) using anecdotal evidence; and when I brought up this topic on a book tour, I got very strong reactions. People questioned me heatedly, argued with my particulars, enthused, gave me their own culture-clash stories, reprinted and circulated the class-culture section of my website more than any other, and encouraged me to write more about activist class cultures. Only this topic made the temperature in the room rise.

The most common request was for hard evidence of exactly what *are* the cultural differences among activists of various classes. What proof did I have that class was related to any particular differences in activists' ways of operating? I realized that I couldn't answer that question without social science research, without a rigorous analysis of a big sample of activists.

So I went to graduate school at Boston College, and with help from some dynamite sociologists I did field research on varied activist groups in 2007 and 2008. I ended up with almost one hundred transcripts of meetings and interviews with members of twenty-five left-of-center groups in five states. This book describes the class-culture differences I discovered in analyzing those transcripts.

But before I get into specifics, I want to make the case that looking through a class lens at the internal workings of social change groups is worth the trouble. In the next chapter I tell five stories of groups' problems three ways: first focused on the group's movement tradition, then on members' race and gender, and finally on members' social class. This exercise reveals what is added when participants' class life stories are known.

"Class" is a concept shrouded in fog in our supposedly classless society. Think about the Occupy movement's slogan "We are the 99 percent": an admirable basis for class unity, but what vast differences in life experience it obscures between, say, the 10th and 80th income percentiles. Class is often regarded only as a feature of the macroeconomy; by contrast, race and gender have both macro *and* micro dimensions in the progressive lexicon: identities, stereotypes, cultures, and organizational dynamics, not only structural inequities. What does the microlevel of class entail? To shed more light on this confusing topic, in chapter 2, I look at ideas about class identities and class cultures that help explain the micropolitics of activist groups.

At heart, this book is a comparison, not of twenty-five groups, but of the four major class categories I found among 362 meeting participants. Most of us frequently guess wrong about our acquaintances' class backgrounds and current class status. In doing this analysis, I had a special lens into social change groups, watching their conversations and their dynamics while holding members' class indicators in mind. In chapter 3 I introduce the commonalities within each class. I profile the movement traditions into which the twenty-five groups fall in chapter 4. For a surprisingly large number of attitudes and behaviors, I found that class *does* predict how an activist may think or act, more so than race, age, or gender. The subtle interplay between how things are done in each movement tradition and the effects of individual members' class predispositions paints a complex picture of why activists tend to think and act as they do.

The following five chapters each add a new layer to this understanding of intersecting class cultures and movement traditions. In interviews, activists repeatedly raised the same few concerns about problems within their groups. Since one goal of this book is to help social change groups grow and thrive, each of these five chapters about my research findings focuses on one of these common organizational problems: (1) low turnout, (2) inactive members, (3) disagreements over antiracism, (4) overtalking, and (5) offensive behavior by activists. Class dynamics are woven into each of these troubles, and resolving them requires understanding class-culture differences. These problem-solving implications apply to other kinds of organizations as well, such as workplaces, schools, and social services agencies.

In addition to shedding more light on how group troubles operate, something else turned out to vary by activists' class: speech style. As soon as I used a class lens to review the recordings and transcripts, one thing became glaringly obvious: lifelong-working-class activists (that is, those who had not experienced upward mobility into the middle class since a childhood in the working class or in poverty) talked differently than college-educated activists. Humor, vocabulary, wordiness, and use of swear words and insults all varied significantly by class. The speech differences themselves were not usually problematic to groups, but knowing class speech codes could deepen understanding of class dynamics. Therefore, I have interspersed among the chapters six brief "class speech differences" interludes that illuminate the group troubles in adjacent chapters.

Every class culture brings strengths to the coalition table, and recognizing class differences can help activists tap into all available strengths. In particular, lifelong-working-class and impoverished activists' contributions may be slighted if class-privileged activists wear blinders that allow them to value only certain cultural capital. In a country with a working-class majority (Zweig 2011), a mass movement must be built with working-class cultural strengths in its bones. One of my goals with this book is to demonstrate to readers that more open discussion of class identities and class dynamics could be transformative for future social movements.

PART I

*Class Diversity  
among Activists*

## CHAPTER 1

# Why Look through a Class Lens?

### *Five Stories through Three Lenses*

Small voluntary groups run into trouble: there are internal conflicts, difficult decisions, and clashes with other groups. Where can members turn for ideas on how to set things right? They may turn to their movement traditions. They may frame problems in terms of race or gender, or turn to practices from their ethnic roots or their gender identities. Or they may draw from their class cultures—but usually much less consciously, without naming them as class.

Any story of small-group troubles can be told in these three ways: through the lens of movement traditions, through a race and/or gender lens, or through a class lens. The goal of this chapter is to persuade readers that it is worthwhile to look through a class-culture lens.

In this chapter I introduce five of the twenty-five groups included in this book by telling one brief story of an intragroup problem in three ways: framing the story in terms of movement traditions; looking through a race and gender lens; and revealing participants' class identities to see new patterns and hypothesize about class cultures. In each case, something new is learned by looking through the class lens—usually something not articulated by the participants themselves because of the scarcity of class discourse among activists in the United States today.

To begin to illustrate the value of adding the class lens, here's one very small incident.

## First Story: The Long-Underwear Dilemma

A core member of the Parecon Collective, Rupert, began wearing an unusual garment that left little to the imagination. Several members were disturbed to learn that he wore his colorful, slinky long underwear when representing the collective to the public, but they didn't say anything directly to him.

### 1. Movement Tradition Lens: Can Anarchists Put Social Pressure on Each Other?

The Parecon Collective defined itself as radical and antiauthoritarian, and many members identified themselves as anarchists. This antiauthoritarian political tendency was the fastest-growing subculture among young white activists in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century (Starr 2005; Kutz-Flamenbaum 2010).

To Parecon members, autonomy was a core value, which any kind of peer pressure threatened to violate. They didn't mind having procedures for their shared work, although they joked about how often they failed to follow them. But in an area as personal as clothing, where many prided themselves on being unconventional, it wasn't comfortable to try to influence someone to become more mainstream. What to do?

Two members spoke privately to Olivia, a member who was a personal friend of Rupert, asking her to intervene. In response, she teased him during a meeting, laughing as she said, "I can't believe you're wearing underwear!" Rupert replied, "They're pants! I don't know what you're talking about." To which Olivia said, "You'd wear those! You're pushing boundaries, dude! Amazing!" The next time I saw Rupert, he was wearing jeans.

Olivia bringing up the clothing problem so lightly allowed the group to avoid imposing its norms in a heavy way that might trigger concerns about hierarchy and authoritarian control. Other members' view on the long underwear was able to hold sway, without the majority dictating to the minority.

In their interviews, both Rupert and Olivia laughed about this incident and reiterated that they are close friends. As a nonhierarchical relationship, friendship was a more acceptable basis on which anarchists could apply pressure than a leader/follower relationship. In this case the friendship bond worked well to transmit some group feedback to a member who had violated an unspoken norm without requiring unacceptable levels of collective control.

### 2. Adding the Race and Gender Lens to the Long-Underwear Dilemma

Unusual clothing that flouts mainstream standards is a valued subcultural marker among anarchists and other young radicals, but women use it far

more often than men. While anarchist men might sport dreadlocks or tattoos, their clothing tends to differ from mainstream male styles only in being used and/or all black, not by dramatically different types of garments than most mainstream men wear. Rupert seemed to have been violating gender norms by being so revealing and eccentric.

Olivia stood out in the mostly male Parecon Collective for her flamboyant postmodern pastiche of retro garments, an art form practiced by many of her age, gender, and subculture. By wearing his colorful long johns, Rupert was dressing a little like her. Thus it's not surprising that she was the one asked by two plain-dressing men to speak with him. Did those two men also ask Olivia to carry their feedback to Rupert not only because of their friendship, and not only because of her bohemian clothing, but because of her gender as well? Women are sometimes expected to handle tricky interpersonal situations in mixed-gender groups (Tannen 1990 and 1994).

Everyone in this situation was white. Discomfort with directly expressing criticism or conflict has been described as more typical of whites than of some other ethnic groups, such as African Americans (Kochman 1981; Bailey 1997). While the Parecon Collective joked around a lot, the joking didn't usually involve rough teasing of anyone in the room. In a mixed-race or all-black group, might Rupert have heard people's reactions to his long-underwear pants the first moment he walked in wearing them, instead of a month later?

The race and gender lens suggests these interesting questions. What more could a class lens add?

### 3. Adding the Class Lens: Indirectness versus Bluntness

Olivia was not just Rupert's friend, and not just one of the few women in the Parecon Collective, but she was also a lifelong-poor person, one of only two people in the core group who wasn't raised by college-educated homeowner parents. Olivia had been recruited to the Parecon Collective by a working-class woman who explicitly said she wanted another woman from a working-class background to keep her company in the group but who had since quit. Olivia's willingness to be jokingly blunt about a touchy subject was a resource to the group—a resource that may have come from her low-income roots and her lack of socialization into professional norms. Teasing is a much more common form of humor among working-class and poor activists than among any other class.

Two studies of US white and black men's values found that upper-middle-class (UMC) men emphasized getting along with everyone and diplomacy (Lamont 1992), while working-class men valued blunt honesty (Lamont 2000).

During meetings, the Parecon Collective appeared to be a casual, friendly, youthful group, sprawled on worn couches, laughing together at Republicans, religious people, and consumers of corporate products. But interviews with members revealed a startling level of unspoken conflict. A founding member, Edrin, was messing up a core aspect of their work and never showed up to meetings to discuss the situation—and Olivia believed that no one had ever confronted him about it directly. She said, “We often talk about this behind his back [*laughs*] . . . he’s really hard to talk to. We’ve tried, we’ve tried like, we decided he should [do his role a certain way], and then he just doesn’t do it. . . . I think he should be required to come to a meeting every six months or something at least . . . he’s just like not even there.” But Edrin was often present in a far corner of the group’s space when she and other active members were there. He successfully avoided interacting with them.

Is such conflict avoidance fully explained by the other lenses? Is it sufficient to say that there’s a reticent cultural style in some US anarchist groups? Can we completely understand why Parecon members didn’t approach Rupert directly but asked Olivia to do it for them by noting that the conflict avoiders were white men? Perhaps—but below we will find that conflict avoidance is most common among people who grew up in the lower part of the professional-middle-class (PMC) range.

Today’s movement traditions have grown from distinct class roots, and one hypothesis explored in this book is that today’s anarchist subculture (as opposed to, say, the Spanish anarchists of the 1930s) has some strongly PMC class-cultural aspects. Most anarchist groups are prefigurative, intending to “be the change you want to see in the world” by manifesting the opposite of oppressive mainstream society in their practices. But could such conflict avoidance be one way that some anarchist groups don’t manage to escape the downside of their predominantly PMC backgrounds? This question is addressed in the book’s analysis of other antiauthoritarian groups.

Next I’ll look at two more small kerfuffles through the same three lenses, then move on to a major conflict that threatened a group’s effectiveness, and finally profile a huge fight that ended one group’s existence.

## **Second Story: Reacting to Criticism from Within**

This story took place in a very different setting, a grassroots community group in a low-income area of a big city. At one Women Safe from Violence (WomenSafe) meeting, a member who wasn’t part of the core group, Randall, raised a criticism of a recent public presentation by leaders Elaine and Bette. He said, “I don’t want to be hypercritical of the group, but we were half-assed! It went off on weird tangents. We should put it on a video or a DVD,

because the speaker gets into random stuff. We were not smooth, we were all over the frickin' place."

Several members reacted negatively as Randall spoke, both verbally and with body language. One interrupted him to say coldly, "I don't know how many of [those programs] you've done!" The chair said indignantly, "Do you think it was [WomenSafe's] fault?" Bette shouted, "I was there! We *have* a video! There was no TV to show it on that time! . . . You kept interrupting, that was the problem!" And then in a calmer voice but still vehement she added, "Sometimes we're not as perfect as we like, but your interpretation is *quite wrong!*"

After a pause, another member, Adaline, suggested scheduling an organizational evaluation session to go over the substance of Randall's critique. The members who had been so vehement a moment before calmly agreed with her. Why such a different reaction to Adaline than to Randall? Why could some members hear a suggestion for group self-evaluation from one person but not another?

### 1. Movement Tradition Lens: Family Mutual Aid and Pride in Being Nonprofessional

WomenSafe members prided themselves that their group was run by the very people who had needed the group's help, who then became empowered to find collective as well as individual solutions. The founder, Elaine, told me, "I call it constituent-led organizing—and it's frickin' magic. . . . Those who lead the group are those affected by the issue."

Randall's criticism offended the core members because it suggested that the do-it-ourselves ethic of the group wasn't effective. By talking about creating prepackaged technological tools such as a DVD, he was suggesting a slicker style, a mode more like a social service agency than an activist mutual-aid group.

As with many community groups, family ties seemed to be the model on which WomenSafe was based. Mutual self-defense of the family was the group's main mode, both in its program work and in its internal workings. Randall positioned himself as an outsider attacking the family, referring to "the speaker" in the third person and saying "half-assed." Adaline spoke more gently, from a "we" position within the family.

### 2. Race/Gender Lens: White Guys are Welcome If They Stay Low-Key

Randall as a white male was not welcome to critique a majority-female group. Adaline as a white woman was welcome to make the same points. Those reacting defensively to Randall's criticism were women of three races,

closing ranks in the face of a white man's attack. Another white man, Eugéné, was a respected core member who was repeatedly elected to the board—but unlike Randall, Eugene was very quiet, doing his share of the work but not speaking much at meetings. It seems that white men were welcome as long as they didn't dominate.

### 3. Adding a Class Lens: Closing Ranks or Introspective Processing?

There were just two people whose parents had graduate degrees at this meeting: Randall and Adaline. Their shared perspective that there might be something amateurish and ineffective about the group's public presentations may have come from their more elite class-cultural roots. Organizational development is often the turf of people from PMC backgrounds, so it's not surprising that they were the two who suggested an evaluation process. They may also have felt more entitled to be critical.

Most of the women who sprang to the presenters' defense were lifelong-working-class or lower-middle-class people. Loyal closing ranks around leaders seems to be part of working-class culture, in particularly within grass-roots community organizations. How widespread a class-cultural trait this is will be explored in chapter 6.

Adaline, a middle-aged Jewish woman, was the only member present who had a four-year college degree. Her reaction to Randall was different from the other women's, not only in that she agreed with him more but also in how she framed the disagreement differently, in terms of group process and organizational introspection: "There is room for [WomenSafe] to look at itself. We could look at our presentations, go over 'when you said that' or 'this is how to do that better.' This defensiveness about did we mess up is not helpful. I've seen very little processing and analyzing in this group, or talk about how to improve [WomenSafe]."

After a pause, the chair, Laci, responded, "Totally. It's good to criticize ourselves," and Kristal said, "Maybe at the next meeting." Adaline's culturally PMC perspective, oriented more toward group introspection by "processing and analyzing," influenced other group members to modify their usual mode of closing ranks around the leaders.

### **Third Story: Workers Argue Unsuccessfully with the Organizer's Idea**

Another small disagreement happened in a meeting of the Local 21 Organizing Committee. The chair, Lynette, a substitute staff organizer, insisted that the

members plan a party, but all the workers who had been elected to a coordinating group argued with her that a skill-training session would attract more potential members. One member, Alonzo, shouted at the organizer, put on his hat, and dramatically strode toward the door as if to walk out, before returning to the meeting.

### 1. Movement Tradition Lens: Top-Down Labor Tradition Collides with Democratic Expectations

Local 21 was part of a huge international union, which staffed this organizing committee to try to unionize certain low-paid service workers. The agendas for the organizing-committee meetings were set by Local 21 managers, not by organizers or workers. Democratic decision-making power by rank-and-file workers is not a universal union practice (Early 2009). Before unionization, an organizing campaign is even more likely to be centrally controlled by union management. Organizing staffers are caught between their mission of mobilizing workers and the directives they get from their supervisors. Lynette put the party on the agenda as a question, as if the members would be making the decision. But when they objected to the plan, she had to admit to them that it was a done deal, with only details of time and place left to be worked out.

The meeting I observed was during Lynette's last week as union staff, as she had just resigned. She told me that she hated her job. The next Local 21 Organizing Committee meeting I observed was led by a different organizer, Owen. He also expressed frustration with the constraints of his job, with his subordination to orders from above and with how little say workers had in the unionization campaign.

But from the union management's point of view, a streamlined, cost-effective process modeled on past unionization victories no doubt made sense. Their lean organizing system has been proven effective by successful unionization at many workplaces. Controversies about the best method for reviving the labor movement continue to rage on (Early 2011; Yates et al. 2008).

Alonzo's frustration was with how low turnout had been at recent meetings and events, down to one-tenth the number of a few months earlier. He urgently wanted the union drive to succeed and was angry that the union seemed to be making mistakes in recruiting workers. The staff and the rank-and-file members seemed to agree on the goal but not always on the methods. In his interview he affirmed the right of the Local 21 staff to tell him and other workers what to do, even while he expressed his disagreement with some of their decisions.

## 2. The Race and Gender Lens on the Party versus Skill-Training Argument

Lynette was white, and at this meeting she was chairing a virtually all-black group. A few months later, when an energetic black man, Owen, replaced the white organizer, member turnout picked up dramatically.

Demographically matching the organizer to the constituency is a time-honored practice in community and labor organizing. Perhaps black workers were more resistant to a white organizer and more inspired by a black organizer. When Lynette drew members out via questions, she did get some cooperation, but they resisted whenever she pushed or insisted, in a way that no one resisted Owen as chair.

There was a gender difference in how workers expressed their disagreement with Lynette's top-down party plan. The women resisted through passive noncooperation: one did a word-find puzzle on her lap; there were side conversations about astrology and food. Small, almost surreptitious signs of resistance included catching eyes and uttering a distinctive African American women's sound of disparagement, a soft high-to-low "MMp-mmp-mmp."

Alonzo, the one black man present, reacted differently. His body language was very active; he got up, paced, put on his hat, and walked almost to the door. When he was frustrated, he shouted "Lynette!" and repeated emphatically that workers would come "if it's related to their job! If it's related to their job!" When Lynette plowed on with party details, Alonzo teased her so exuberantly that she laughed for the first time that evening: "Lynette! I going to marry you, because you never give up! Jesus! She *never* gives up, man!" His participation in the meeting was full of bravado, sometimes performed for the researcher in the room, very different from the women staying quietly in their chairs. (See Heath 1983 for a sociolinguistic analysis of black male socialization encouraging more performative speech compared with quieter forms of verbal creativity for black women.)

## 3. Adding the Class Lens: Classism as the Elephant under the Carpet

Lynette was raised by college-educated parents and had a four-year college degree; the workers' education varied from dropping out in middle school to two-year degrees. The dynamic between this organizer and the members was not just that of race but class as well.

The reasons that Lynette met such resistance went beyond the substance of the party-planning disagreement. I cringed listening to how she spoke to the members in a condescending, kindergarten-teacher tone. She made the following comments while the party was under discussion: "I don't know

why you're against trying something new"; "They have the right attitude in [another city]—[shouting] *They* have the right attitude"; "You guys just can't seem to lighten up!" [while pointing her finger rhythmically at Alonzo]; and, worst of all, "Behave yourself! Why does Janelle *do* this every month? No wonder she told me to do this meeting!"

Given that the experienced members had solid evidence backing up their position that workers would turn out for training to improve their prospects for a pay raise (they pointed out that a prior skills workshop had drawn an overflow crowd), there was no reason for her to belittle their opinion, even though she wasn't authorized to approve it.

The moments when Alonzo shouted and walked away, and the moments when other members didn't cooperate with Lynette, were usually immediately after her most condescending comments. At one point Alonzo complained about workers not turning out despite his phone calls, and Lynette advised, "Alonzo, you have to be prepared for that, and not take it personally, not take it to heart, and just keep persisting with it . . . that's what you have to do." In his most direct response to her patronizing tone, he responded sarcastically, "Thank you, Lynette. Every time [when I make recruitment calls] I'm going to call Lynette. And every time I call Lynette and tell Lynette [about] who don't come to meetings, and Lynette, they still don't show up. Lynette, it's *for* them!" His two decades of greater age and more years of union organizing experience compared with Lynette's credentials added weight to his sarcasm.

Mocking laughter, consistent with a working-class culture of teasing and rough humor, greeted the details of Lynette's proposal, such as the low budget allotted for party expenses.

Lynette didn't succeed as a union organizer, not just because organizational policies limited her flexibility, not just because she was a white person organizing a mostly black constituency, but also because she had condescending attitudes expressed in verbal classism.

Now we move on to two broader and more divisive conflicts within groups.

#### **Fourth Story: Dealing with a Dominating Personality When No One Is Supposed to Dominate**

The Action Center (AC) was an ad hoc direct action group preparing for protest at one of the 2008 major-party political conventions. The core group of about twenty-five put a strong emphasis on shared leadership and strict consensus decision making. Thus several informants saw it as a problem that

one member, Dirk, talked frequently and aggressively in meetings, acted independently without consulting the group, kept key information secret, and in other ways dominated like an unaccountable leader.

One central member, Gail, said that something he did was a “power grab, hierarchy . . . don’t tell me that that man isn’t the leader of the group. . . . I don’t think anybody could look at that meeting and not say Dirk’s running this whole damn group.”

### 1. Movement Tradition Lens: Can Anarchists Tell Each Other What to Do?

What are the implications of having an antiauthoritarian ideology for how a group runs itself? I encountered two quite different perspectives among convention protestors and other anarchism-influenced groups, two subcultural strains whose historical roots are explored further in chapter 4.

First, a structured group-process tradition, rooted in prefigurative movements of the 1970s and 1980s and influenced by pagan spirituality, holds that in order to run a group without hierarchy, many agreements about procedures must be forged and observed with rigorous discipline (Epstein 1991: 271–72; Cornell 2011). Strictly rotating facilitation and consensus decision making are what keep informal hierarchies from developing in this view. Counter to the stereotype, anarchism in this tradition means more rules than most groups have, not fewer.

The second type of anarchist perspective, rooted in the punk subculture, puts the highest value on no one coercing anyone else. Consensus decision making is important in this view because the rights of an individual with a minority opinion cannot be violated by a majority decision. If individual autonomy is sacrosanct, then rules for decision making can’t be more than simply suggestions without creating an internal contradiction. Dirk’s behavior implied a more extreme version of this view, along the lines of “no one tells me what to do.”

Some Action Center members described being torn between these two interpretations of their values. One member, Dallas, put the tension in terms of “negotiating constraints and agreements on how do we balance personal autonomy versus our responsibility to a community.”

As the week of the political convention approached and out-of-town activists began to arrive, the challenges of planning with an ever-expanding open group threw more members into the structured-process faction. Rules about who had the right to make what decisions proliferated; so did conversations about how many rules were too many. Some reluctantly, some eagerly,

Action Center members discussed adding more delegation of authority and more conditions on decision-making roles.

Dirk's independent streak stood out more conspicuously as the group became more structured. A retreat was held to deal with internal dynamics, with Dirk's behavior as a major topic. At the retreat, the group did role playing and small group exercises designed to teach them how not to dominate each other. But the tools of the structured-process tradition couldn't solve the problem that some members had a fundamental disagreement with that tradition.

## 2. Race and Gender Lens: Calling Out Domination

Most Action Center core members shared a gender analysis, which most interviewees summarized in the word "patriarchy." Men who made sexist comments, talked a lot, or used power in unaccountable ways were described as patriarchal. There was controversy over how to deal with a patriarchal man, but the most common procedure seemed to be for a small group of men to meet with him privately and "call out" his unacceptable behavior. Interviewees told me of two such confrontations, one with a man named Canton who talked about wanting multiple wives, and one with Dirk, who became agitatedly defensive during this session of male-on-male criticism.

When Dallas was asked, "Has anyone driven you crazy at a meeting?" he answered in terms of the oppressive use of power:

Generally Dirk is the only one who drives me crazy. I'm one of the few people who will call him on it, take a bad-guy role. I enjoy working with him one-on-one, but in the group he's not that aware—no, he is aware, but he uses his power: "I'm autonomous and you can't infringe on my personal" . . . "I don't want to wait five seconds 'cause that's oppressive to me." We could do more to call out oppressive behaviors.

For Dallas, it was valid to object to being dominated on the basis of a social identity but invalid to object to being constrained by the group's agreements for sharing airspace (the opportunity to talk).

Dallas, Gail, and others seemed discouraged that nothing was working to improve Dirk's behavior, not the role-playing and discussions about sharing airspace at the retreat, not the confrontation by other white men, not rules about how information and decision making must be shared. Those were the methods they believed would work to reduce sexist or racist domination, yet in Dirk's case, they didn't seem to be working.

### 3. Adding a Class Lens: Invisible versus Imagined Working-Class Members

The assumption of several Action Center interviewees was that most members came from middle-class backgrounds and that their current low incomes (living on part-time jobs to free up time for protest planning, or in some cases squatting and dumpster-diving) were voluntary. For example, when Dallas was asked about the social class of Action Center members, he said, "I guess we all come from a similar class background. All went to college or plan to go—we all had the opportunity."

Of the white men who took Dirk aside, those for whom I have demographic data were from PMC or UMC backgrounds and had college degrees. Those I spoke with presumed that Dirk was just like them, formed by entirely dominant social identities, conditioned to be dominating and thus needing antioppression education to learn how not to dominate.

But unbeknownst to most Action Center interviewees, Dirk was almost the group's only working-class-background active member. While almost all of their parents had graduated from college and earned salaries, Dirk's parents had high school diplomas and earned hourly wages. Dirk had attended a nonresidential public college, but he had worked only at blue-collar jobs since.

Talking dominant to dominant wasn't working in part because, with regard to class, they were actually dominants scolding a subordinate. While Dirk's hyper, aggressive, and reportedly manipulative behavior was not typical of any demographic category, including working-class activists, it's possible that peers with working-class backgrounds similar to his could have been more successful in reining him in.

Gail, a very class-conscious middle-class white woman, was the only person I spoke with who suspected Dirk's working-class background, and she associated it with his outspokenness:

The strength of Dirk is . . . he is willing to blurb out what isn't very popular to say. . . . The little bit I know about Dirk and his background is he said at one point, "Well, I'm [part of a traditionally working-class white ethnic group]," and I think he is relatively working class and has an ethnic identity, and so I think his willingness to blurb out stuff is a strength actually. I like that about him, you know. But . . . he can get kind of brutal at times too.

When I asked Gail to tell me about the class makeup of the group, she said she thought working-class people were more likely to be suspected of being police infiltrators (agents paid to spy on direct action groups). She

guessed that those suspicions were due to classist stereotypes of people who didn't come from the same background as most of the group. She named one man, Canton, and one woman, Minnie, as two people with working-class styles who had been suspected of being infiltrators, probably unfairly in her opinion.

Two Action Center interviewees told me that when a delegation of other white men confronted Canton and one of them accused him of being an infiltrator because he was so quiet and always took notes, Canton began to cry and said that he was quiet because he was intimidated by the other members, who had so much more education and knew so much more political analysis. Some judged this display of internalized classism as sincere, and the group decided not to kick him out.

But when court documents later revealed who the paid infiltrators were, Canton and Minnie were on the list. They had been hired by law enforcement authorities to spy on the group and collect evidence for criminal charges. Far from being the politically unsophisticated person he portrayed himself as, Canton understood the antioppression values of the group well enough to successfully connect with members by winning their sympathy for being working class. Thus a class lens sheds light on a problem of utmost concern to groups like the Action Center: how to detect and protect themselves from infiltrators without poisoning the group with pervasive suspicion of all newcomers.

This bizarre drama epitomizes the state of confusion about class in the left today. The group's actual working-class member was invisible to them; as a problem person, he was dealt with by methods based on the presumption that he shared their privileged background, which didn't work. Meanwhile, a person presumed to be working class won an undeserved free pass from suspicion of treachery, thanks to manipulating the group's class sympathies.

In other groups, too, there were many misunderstandings of who came from which class background. Simply learning more about members' life stories would enable many groups to better understand their internal class dynamics.

### **Fifth Story: A Faith-Based Group Splits over Strategic Paths**

The Citywide Interfaith Coalition mobilized religious congregations on poverty issues in a major urban area. An executive board member, Jeremiah, came to a meeting of a subgroup, the Workforce Development Task Force, with the intention of chewing them out for straying from the strategic path the board had laid out. Conflict broke out, with raised voices and an

unresolved disagreement about next steps. This rift was so severe that some longtime members quit the coalition after this meeting, and the task force was disbanded.

### 1. Movement Tradition Lens: Community Organizing Clashes with Professional Advocacy

The Interfaith Coalition used a community-organizing methodology that was a faith-based variation on the Alinsky (1971) practices of the Industrial Areas Foundation (Bobo, Kendall, and Max 2001). The membership voted on issue priorities once a year; particular public officials were targeted, and mass accountability sessions were staged to confront them and to demand predecided reforms. This method had brought the coalition some notable successes in past years, but not in the current year. Member turnout had dwindled. The targeted official had failed to show up for the recent accountability session. The resulting demoralization was the context for the infighting.

Jeremiah, a fervent believer in the coalition's community-organizing methodology, had come to the meeting to scold the group for doing too little to punish the official for not showing up and to ask them to return to the preset strategy and to drop their alternative approach.

The Workforce Development Task Force had been formed to work on a technical policy issue prioritized by membership vote at the coalition's last annual convention.<sup>1</sup> While some task force members were clergy or members of religious congregations, most had a professional job related to the issue, such as staffing a social services agency. Two had specialized expertise in the technical aspects of development projects, including the chair, Brandon, who worked as a loan administrator at a for-profit lender. Thus the task force fit into the movement tradition of professional nonprofit advocacy, very dissimilar from the Alinsky organizing tradition of the Interfaith Coalition's umbrella group.

Task force members brought energetic excitement to this meeting because allies on the county commission had decided to set up a Community Benefits Advisory Board and had asked some of them to serve on it. Their assessment was that some of their long-stalled legislative priorities might have some hope of enactment at the county level.

But Jeremiah had a very negative reaction to the idea of working through an advisory board and shifting the focus to the county level. In his interview, he attributed the task force's autonomous action to their "ignorance" of how the Interfaith Coalition operated. He told the group they didn't have the authority to change their target or tactics.

Several task force members reacted angrily to Jeremiah's criticism. They saw him as blocking progress by rigidly adhering to the preset plan, even when it wasn't working. The clash of political approaches, professional advocacy versus community organizing, became explicit at times in the group's discussion at the meeting:

SHERMAN: The [advisory board] is intended to include people with expertise, and it should. . . . Now we have to . . . make sure that the people with expertise are community-minded people . . . and share our values and that there's room for community representatives, and this does not preclude that.

JEREMIAH: I think you might be confusing the term "influence" with power. You know our power comes from the people. We're people powered. We can go down and stand before the [county officials] every day and try to influence them, but that's not power. If we're going to stand before anybody, it needs to be our congregations, getting them worked up. . . . Just going down and trying to influence, that's the game that's being played in Washington. . . . It doesn't really bring about substantive changes.

The role of professional expertise was at the center of this disagreement. The "people power" approach to politics didn't get any philosophical disagreement from task force members, but they had a pragmatic both/and approach, and favored turning to other methods when mobilization and confrontation didn't get results.

One of the flash points of the meeting was when Jeremiah said that Brandon shouldn't serve on the Community Benefits Advisory Board because he worked in the for-profit sector, implying that he was too self-interested and profit motivated. Noah said of the incident that Brandon "got kicked in the teeth, and that's no way to treat somebody." While Jeremiah's language in disqualifying Brandon might not have seemed particularly harsh or disrespectful in another context, in this often soft-spoken and affirming faith-based group it was a shocking breach of decorum.

## 2. Race and Gender Lens: Black and White Men Argue, Women Smooth the Waters

This meeting was half black and half white. The most vehement arguments were among men, sometimes between two black men in the case of Brandon and Jeremiah, and sometimes between Jeremiah and the two most outspoken white men, Noah and Sherman.

Besides the substantive disagreements, there was a clash of male egos. Jeremiah was pulling rank; Noah and Sherman were blustering to get him to back down.

Two women played peacemaking roles. The task force's staff person, Jocelyn, a younger black woman, remained quiet through most of the meeting but spoke up at times to explain each side to the other. She successfully defused one argument by pointing out that a controversial proposal was moot because a date had passed. A white woman, Stacy, placated and praised individual combatants, assertively mediating at some tense moments and suggesting prayers at others.

Whenever conflict heated up, Jeremiah would begin talking in a more African American cadence, using black-preacher-style rhetorical eloquence. This may have been an identity move, code-switching to affiliate himself with people of color affected by the policies under discussion. Or he might have been using an oppressed identity as a form of movement cultural capital. If he was trying to be more persuasive, it was an unsuccessful attempt, since others were skeptical of the motives behind his rhetoric. The accent and cadence of the younger black participants weren't nearly as different from that of the white participants.

The thirty-year age difference between Brandon and Jeremiah put them in different eras of black politics. Jeremiah had roots in the civil rights movement and brought from it a more adversarial form of politics. Brandon took for granted the necessity of seeking all possible allies to the cause, including businesses, whites, and officials.

### 3. Adding a Class Lens: Class as a Smokescreen for Internal Power Dynamics

This meeting was unusual in how much and how openly participants talked about class. One argument was about how much priority to put on input from directly affected people. Was low-income people's input into policy an ideal to be reached when possible, a helpful accompaniment to sympathetic professionals' input, or the only acceptable form of public input, as Jeremiah asserted?

Immediately after Jeremiah said that Brandon shouldn't be eligible to be on the county's advisory board because of his for-profit job, they had this exchange:

BRANDON: As far as advisory is concerned, if you're building a space shuttle, you're going to need a rocket scientist to advise you.

JEREMIAH: Yeah, yeah, I agree with you. But if you're talking about taking money from the rich and giving it to the poor, you're going to need a poor person there.

BRANDON: Absolutely, and that's why we need to—

STACY: Or at least a Robin Hood. [*group laugh*]

JEREMIAH: And there's no poor people on that list [of slots on the Community Benefits Advisory Board].

BRANDON: There should be; there should be.

Can a professional Robin Hood advocate for the poor in good faith, or can only the poor represent the poor? This is a recurring debate within the Left.

But in this case, the difference between member pressure and professional advocacy was *not* a clear class contrast but was, in fact, an ideological difference covering up a power struggle. Directly affected people were not in the room—or even in the membership, for the most part. The Interfaith Coalition's grassroots membership was primarily middle-class congregation members, including those in Jeremiah's own church, who wouldn't be eligible for any job training the group won. People directly affected by the coalition's poverty issues were *not* the ones to take the annual vote on priorities. Jeremiah's proposal for the task force's next action was a workshop for clergy, who would then bring the issue to their congregations, hardly a bottom-up strategy.

Jeremiah's people-power purism in insisting on foregoing the advisory board opportunity was interpreted by some task force members as a disingenuous, top-down power play to squelch the task force's ability to take initiative while he hypocritically preached bottom-up empowerment.

Everyone at the meeting had at least a four-year college degree except for Brandon; only Jeremiah and Brandon didn't have college-educated homeowner parents. Among the lifelong-professional members, the degree of verbal aggression lined up with their parents' and their own education and occupation. Those with lower-professional (LP) parents mostly remained quiet and/or conciliatory. Sherman, a UMC lawyer, spoke very sharply to Jeremiah, accusing him of destroying the task force's chances for success: "This is the opportunity for the coalition to win an advance, and [*speaking directly to Jeremiah*] I think you're going to lose it for us. And that's frustrating to me." The only member besides Sherman whose parents had graduate degrees, Stacy, made the most assertive and directive attempts at mediation.

It casts a different light on Jeremiah's dig at Brandon's credibility to see them as coming from similar black working-class backgrounds but with Jeremiah having reached more educational and professional heights. When