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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.
Confusion about class pervades American society, and that confusion distorts progressive movement building. The popular myth that the United States is a classless society is scorned by most on the left, but paradoxically the myth of a classless movement lives on. Some activists believe that the very act of sacrificing time and/or money for social change actually removes them from the class system (Carlsson 2008). Class dynamics in the movement are difficult to discuss with people who believe they are nonexistent.

Why does class diversity have such a low profile on the left today? One reason is that it's hard to talk about something without shared vocabulary. In the United States today there are no agreed-on terms for social classes (Metzgar 2003). Both ordinary Americans and academics use widely varied terminology for a varied number of class categories. (See review in Wright 2005.) Authors have broken the class spectrum into two (Fiske and Markus 2012), three (Zweig 2011), four (Breen 2005), seven (Goldthorpe 1980), or twelve (Wright 1985) categories. Any way of slicing the class spectrum is, of course, arbitrary.

To sociologists, "class" usually refers to a cluster of social indicators (such as income, assets, education, occupation, status, etc.), any one of which can be emphasized or deemphasized. A case can be made for giving the most weight to income (Bartels 2006), assets (Conley 1999), power (Aronowitz
CHAPTER 3

Four Class Categories of Activists and Their Typical Group Troubles

If I introduced the surveyed activists as 362 unique personalities, or if I clumped them by race or gender, in each case readers would see different aspects of the same people. Instead, I introduce them according to their commonalities within four class categories: lifelong-working-class, lifelong-professional-range, upwardly mobile, and voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM). This four-way comparison enables me to explore my hypothesis that there are unseen class cultures operating in US movements for social change. In this chapter I create composite class-cultural profiles of these four main class trajectories, describing their typical demographics, cultural tastes, and most common activist troubles.

Categorizing Activists by Class

To compare activist class cultures, first I had to categorize each group member by class. The survey filled out by 362 meeting participants (available online as appendix 1) included questions about their own and their parents' education and housing, how they spend their time, and their parents' main income source. Based on these data I categorized the group members by class background and current class. (Online appendix 2 summarizes the method of assigning activists to class categories.) Table 3.1 breaks out the typical
Going into various activist groups can feel like entering different worlds. How people talk and dress is different; how meetings are run and decisions are made is different; what people laugh at is different; how they wage conflicts is different.

Social movement organizations have classed and raced roots in the earlier generations of activists who created their movement tradition and in the past political and economic environments that shaped those earlier generations. These roots formed the group styles inherited by today’s social movement organizations.

In the last chapter I introduced the 362 survey respondents by their class trajectories; now I introduce the groups’ movement traditions. The twenty-five groups I looked at fell into four broad traditions: grassroots community organizing; professional antipoverty advocacy; the labor movement; and social change groups working on both global and local causes (further divided into three ideological tendencies: progressive/nonprofit, anarchist, and militant anti-imperialist).

Both class background and current class were strongly associated with movement tradition. However, every group was class diverse to some extent. Thus, movement tradition can’t be used as a stand-in for class cultures, except in the case of voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) anarchists. (For details, see table 4.1 below and online table 4.3 and online figures 4.1–4.7.)
Chapter 5

Where Is Everybody?

Approaches to Recruitment and Group Cohesion

"Is Marc coming?" "Isadora told me she'd be late." "I know Eddie is coming." The early arrivals at some meetings started out chatting cheerfully, but as the minutes passed and most chairs remained empty such comments about who was missing gradually took over the conversation.

The first challenge in building any social movement organization is to get people in the door, literally and figuratively. Too few new people joining and too few members showing up to meetings: these are the most common and most basic of activist group troubles. This chapter looks at how group members approached turnout problems and finds that their attempted solutions lined up with their class trajectory.

Activists talked about two components of improving turnout. First, the need for new people and the best ways to recruit them were perennial topics in meetings and interviews. Beliefs about what worked to recruit varied by class. Second, a voluntary group must also have at least a rudimentary sense of collective identity, a sense of "we." Collective identity is a dynamic work in progress, not a settled fact—a verb, not a noun (Melucci 1995). To continue to exist, a voluntary group must have enough camaraderie to keep people coming back to meetings and events. Understandings of what bonds people together also varied by class.

Why would recruitment and group-building approaches differ by class? In this chapter I argue that activists' distinct classed paths into activism explain their
Chapter 6

Activating the Inactive

Leadership and Group-Process Solutions That Backfire

A dozen people sat in a circle without speaking. They were having a meeting, but long silences dragged on as they all waited for someone to say something. What was going on? Action Against Empire (AAE) had a big problem with unequal participation, and at this meeting the group’s informal leaders were holding back their own participation in hopes that someone else would step up.

Usually the same three members not only did most of the talking at AAE meetings but they also did most of the tasks between meetings. Two of them, Alton and Ira, found themselves in the uncomfortable position of holding antihierarchy values and yet being treated as the informal leaders of their group. These two men, one a white lower professional (LP), the other an Asian American college student from a mixed-class background, returned time and again to this dilemma in their interviews, criticizing themselves for failing to put their ideals into practice. They had two approaches to equalizing participation: holding themselves back from overparticipation, and introducing group processes designed to draw out the less-active people. At the AAE meeting I observed, neither approach worked: more than half the members were silent except for initial introductions and saying yes or no to proposed dates.

Many voluntary groups face this problem of too many passive members and too few active ones. And as we will see, many college-educated activists tried the same two strategies that Alton and Ira tried in AAE, only to find
City Power members were frustrated. They depended on progressive foundations to pay their staff, but one of their regular funders had returned their grant proposal with an additional set of questions about race and racism that they had to answer before the proposal would be considered.

Their meeting about this funder demand was a rare instance of open class-based resentment discussed at length by lifelong-working-class activists. It revealed class differences in approaches to identity politics, in particular to race and antiracism, which turned out to apply to many groups in the study.

In this racially diverse group, it was interesting how few racial differences there were in talking about race. Both black and white members seemed to think the funders’ questions reflected misunderstandings of City Power’s work. One question in particular was met with gales of whole-group laughter and cries of “Oh, my God!” City Power had recently won a major victory that gave low-income people of color more influence over local policies. The foundation asked them to explain how that campaign was “linked to institutionalized racism.” The incredulous response implied that if the foundation had to ask, they just didn’t get it.

In the following exchange, note that members presumed that counting members of color and going to a workshop would be the kinds of antiracist activity that a funder would like:
Chapter 8

Overtalkers

Coping with the Universal Pet Peeve

Activism brings many pleasures, but the downside is rubbing elbows with fellow activists whose behavior is annoying or offensive. In this chapter I explore class differences in how activists responded to problematic behavior, first analyzing the most common of all annoyances, overtalking. In chapter 9 I look at more extreme violations of group norms.

When fifty-five interviewees from twenty groups answered the questions "Do you have any pet peeves about how people act in meetings?" and/or "Does anyone in this group drive you crazy?", the great majority, forty-one of them, mentioned people talking too much. In addition, eight group members were heard during a meeting objecting to someone's overtalking. Overtalking dwarfed all other complaints put together.

Analyzing overtalking—who overtalked in meetings and in what ways; how other members reacted; how chairs and other members intervened or didn't—revealed some subtle class-culture patterns. Few contrasts between the two broad class categories, the working-class and the professional range, appear in this chapter. Instead, the class-culture traits of smaller subgroups, such as outlaw working-class women leaders, self-confident upper-middle-class (UMC) men, and soft-spoken lower professionals (LPs), pop out. It turned out to matter whether activists were class congruous or class incongruous in their groups. Some of these class-culture patterns persisted in the
CHAPTER 9

Activists Behaving Badly

*Responses to Extreme Behavior Violations*

The most eccentric person I met while researching the 2008 convention protests was Anthony, the full-time bicycle billboard. For several weeks before the Democratic National Convention, he spent all his daylight hours riding around Denver wearing sandwich boards that read “Tye Lies,” referring to a founder of the militant convention protest group Stand Up Fight Back (SUFB).

Anthony was a surprisingly normal looking middle-aged white man, very buff from all that bicycling; his way of talking sounded sane. But his explanation for his total dedication to harassing a protest leader made no sense. During two SUFB meetings, Anthony told me, he stood outside the building holding a sign that said “Beware, sheeple; SUFB spreads fear” and blowing an extremely loud air horn. If esteemed scholar Jasper (1997) can use “crank” as an academic term for a stubborn lone-wolf activist, I can add my own term to the social movement lexicon: Anthony was not just a common crank but a full-fledged whack-job.

Such obnoxious harassment would grate on the nerves of the most easy-going activist, and SUFB members Tye and Brenda, both uprooted, un-assimilated straddlers, were not easy-going. According to Anthony, Tye and Brenda came out of their meeting and shoved him across the street, threw flyers at him, threatened to “kick his ass,” and then called the cops to get him removed. This last accusation surprised me: Stand Up Fight Back was