Missing Class: How Understanding Class Cultures Can Strengthen Social Movement Groups

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**ABSTRACT**

What are the class culture differences among US progressive social movement groups? This mixed-methods study finds that activists speak and act differently depending on their class background, current class and upward, downward or steady class trajectory, confirming previous research on cultural capital and conditioned class predispositions.

In 2007-8, 34 meetings of 25 groups in four movement traditions were observed in five states; 364 demographic surveys were collected; and 61 interviews were conducted. I compared activists’ approaches to six frequently mentioned group problems.

Lifelong working-class activists, usually drawn in through preexisting affiliations, relied on recruitment incentives such as food and one-on-one relationships. Both disempowered neophytes and experienced powerhouses believed in strength in numbers, had positive attitudes towards trustworthy leaders, and stressed loyalty and unity.

Lifelong-professional-middle-class (PMC) activists, usually individually committed to a cause prior to joining, relied on shared ideas to recruit. They focused more on internal organizational development and had negative attitudes towards leadership. Subsets of PMC activists behaved differently: lower professionals communicated tentatively and avoided conflict, while upper-middle-class people were more assertive and polished.

Upwardly mobile straddlers tended to promote their moral certainties within groups. A subset, uprooted from their working-class backgrounds but not assimilated into professional circles, sometimes pushed self-righteously and brought discord into groups.

Voluntarily downwardly mobile activists, mostly young white anarchists, drew the strongest ideological boundaries and had the most distinct movement culture. Mistrustful of new
people and sometimes seeing persuasion as coercive, they had the weakest recruitment and group cohesion methods.

Analysis of class speech differences found that working-class activists spoke more often but more briefly in meetings, preferred more concrete speech, and used more teasing and self-deprecating humor. The professional-middle-class (in background and/or current class) spoke longer but less often, preferred more abstract vocabulary, and used less negative humor.

Group styles were formed by the interplay of members’ predominant class trajectories and groups’ movement traditions. Better understanding these class culture differences would enable activists to strengthen cross-class alliances to build more powerful social movements.
Missing Class

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Dedicated to the legacy of Felice Yeskel

4/6/1954 – 1/9/11

My inspiration to explore class,
My longest-running cross-class dialogue partner,
My colleague in fighting classism,
And my beloved friend
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 background, respected by many members.

At the beginning of the meeting, I heard Zoe make 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, building a smart organization, leadership development opportunities, and strategic planning. She mentioned just 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 big paper and instructed the 60 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 service workers in public sector unions, 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.

The small groups with industrial and service workers all non-cooperated 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 the small group report-backs, 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 certain member to see if he had a firefighter retirees’ phone list), only Zoe and two other white professional-middle-class 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 towards Zoe or other college-educated labor professionals. 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._
Thus this was not a story of cross-class conflict or hostility, but of class sub-
groups 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
subgroup 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 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 subtly than outright inter-
class clashes or misunderstandings. Lack of class cultural 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, over 30
years of progressive activism and several years studying the sociology of social
movements, I have come to the conclusion that understanding activists’ class culture
differences is one necessary precondition for mass-movement building in the US today.

I wrote a small section on class culture differences in my book *Class Matters:*
*Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists* (2005), using anecdotal
evidence; and when I brought this topic up during book tour workshops, 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 back to graduate school at Boston College, and with help from some dynamite sociologists and other researchers, did field research on varied activist groups in 2007 and 2008. I ended up with almost 100 transcripts of meetings and interviews with members of 25 left-of-center groups in five states. This book describes the class culture differences I discovered by analyzing those transcripts.

But before I get into specifics, I’d like to persuade you 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%”: 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 seen as a feature of the macro economy only; 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 micro level 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 micro-politics of activist groups.

At heart this study is a comparison not of 25 groups, but of the four major class categories found among the 362 meeting participants who filled out a demographic survey. I introduce you to the commonalities I found among activists of each class in Chapter 3; and then I profile the movement traditions into which these 25 groups fall in Chapter 4.

For a surprisingly large number of the attitudes and behaviors I investigated, I found that class does predict how an activist will 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 think and act as they do.

Six chapters each add a new layer to this understanding of intersecting class cultures and movement traditions. In interviews activists raised the same few concerns about problems within their groups over and over again. Since one goal of this book is to help social change groups grow and thrive, each of these six chapters about my research findings focuses on one of these common organizational problems: 1) low turn-out; 2) inactive members; 3) disagreements over anti-racism; 4) class pretense; 5) overtalking; and 6) objectionable behavior by problematic individuals. Class dynamics are woven into each of these troubles, and to resolve them requires understanding class culture.
differences. These organizational problem-solving implications can apply to other kinds of organizations as well, such as workplaces, schools and social service agencies.

In addition to approaches to group troubles, 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 talked differently than college-educated activists. Humor, vocabulary, wordiness, and use of swearing and insults all varied significantly by class. The speech differences themselves were not usually problematic, but knowing the class speech codes can deepen understanding of class differences in approaching group troubles. Interspersed among the chapters are 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), the mass movement we need must be built with working-class cultural strengths in its bones.

Most of us often guess wrong about others’ class backgrounds and current class. 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. This book lets you see through that lens too. I hope to convince you that more open discussion of class identities and class dynamics could be transformative for future social movements.
Chapter 1 - Why look through a class lens? Five stories through three lenses

Small voluntary groups run into trouble: 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 solutions offered by their movement traditions and ideologies. 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 those three ways: through the lens of ideologies and movement traditions; through a race and/or gender lens; or through a class lens. The weakness of the class lens among progressive activists in the US today hampers movements for social change in many ways. The goal of this chapter is to convince readers that it is worthwhile to look through a class-culture lens, because if activists recognize class culture differences, they can draw on the strengths of all class cultures in coping with their groups’ troubles, and ultimately build more effective cross-class movements.

In this chapter I introduce five of the 25 groups in the study by telling one brief story of a group problem in three ways: first framing the story in terms of political ideologies and movement traditions; then looking through a race and gender lens; and finally revealing participants’ class identities to see new patterns and to make hypotheses about class differences. In every 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 US 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 too 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 anti-authoritarian, and many members identified themselves as anarchists. This anti-authoritarian political tendency was the fastest-growing subculture among young white activists in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century (Shepard and Hayduk 2002; Yuen et al. 2004; 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 with something as personal as clothing, an area 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 personal friends with 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.
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. The majority 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 non-hierarchical relationship, friendship bonds were more acceptable to anarchists than teacher/student or leader/follower. In this case the friendship bond worked well to transmit some group feedback to a member who violated an unspoken rule, without requiring unacceptable levels of collective control. But because other members held back from raising their concerns, leaving the confrontation to Rupert’s personal friend, the incident demonstrated a weakness in this anarchist group’s conflict resolution practices.

2. Adding the race and gender lens to the long underwear dilemma

Unusual clothing that violates mainstream standards is a 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 tended 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 wore. Rupert seems 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 colorful retro garments, an art form practiced by many of her age, gender and subculture, at which she excelled. By wearing his colorful long johns, Rupert
was dressing a little more like her than like anyone else in the group. 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 may sometimes be expected to handle tricky interpersonal
situations in mixed-gender groups (Lakoff 1975; Tannen 1990 and 1994).

Being sexually revealing has a different significance for a man than for a woman.
Group members who talked about his long underwear didn’t express fears for Rupert’s
safety, or presume he had seductive intentions, as they might have if a woman had made
her genitals as visible as he did.

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/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. Below we’ll see that teasing is a much more common form of humor among lifelong working-class activists than among any other class.

Two class-culture studies of US white and black men’s values found that upper-middle-class men emphasized getting along with everyone and diplomacy (Lamont 1992), while working-class men valued blunt honesty (Lamont 2000). How much this class culture difference applies to activists and across gender is a question to be explored throughout this study.

During meetings, the Parecon Collective appeared to be a very 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, but 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 like a meeting like every six months or something at least… he’s just like not even there...
But she acknowledged that Edrin was often present in a far corner of the group’s space when she and other active members were there, successfully avoiding 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 see that conflict avoidance is most common among people who grew up in the lower part of the professional-middle-class (PMC) range.

Movement traditions grew 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 professional-middle-class backgrounds? Analysis of other anti-authoritarian groups in this study will revisit this question.

Next I’ll look at two more small kerfuffles using these three views; 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 (WSfV) 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!,” and the chair said indignantly, “Do you think it was [WSfV]’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, “Sometimes we’re not as perfect as we like, but your interpretation is quite wrong!”

After a pause, another member, Adaline, suggested scheduling another meeting 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 non-professional**

   Women Safe from Violence (WSfV) members prided themselves on the group being run by the very people who needed help from the group, 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… What is unique about this is it's constituency-led, 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 pre-packaged technological tools like 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 analogous relationship on which WSfV 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 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 male was not welcome to critique a majority-female group. Those reacting defensively to Randall’s criticism were women of three races, women closing ranks in the face of a white man’s attack. Although WSfV was a mixed-gender and mixed-race group, white men were scarce. Another one, Eugene, was a respected core member repeatedly elected to the board – but unlike Randall, Eugene was very quiet, doing his share of the work but not speaking much at meetings. Some members were beloved despite talking and interrupting a lot, but all of these were women, such as the founder Elaine. It seems that white men were welcomed as long as they didn’t dominate. Given Randall’s race and gender, his frequent interrupting and off-topic overtalking was interpreted as domination; he had already gotten on some people’s last nerve before his burst of criticism. Adaline as a white woman and a soft-spoken team player was welcome to make the same points.
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 amateur or ineffective about the group’s public presentations may have grown 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. Loyally closing ranks around leaders seems to be part of some working-class cultures (Lamont 2000), in particularly within grassroots community organizations. How widespread a class cultural trait this is will be investigated in this study.

Adaline, a middle-aged Jewish woman, was the only member present with 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; she also framed the disagreement very differently, in terms of group process and organizational introspection:

“There is room for [WSfV] 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 [WSfV].”

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 professional-middle-class (PMC) perspective, oriented more towards group introspection by “processing and analyzing,” influenced other group members to modify their usual mode of closing ranks around the leader.
Third story: Workers argue unsuccessfully with the organizer’s idea

Another small disagreement happened in a meeting of the Local 21 Organizing Committee. At this meeting, a substitute organizer on the union’s staff, Lynette, 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 towards 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 Organizing Committee meetings were set by Local 21 management staff, not by organizers or workers.

Democratic decision-making power by rank-and-file workers is not a universal union practice (Early 2009). Before unionization, control of an organizing campaign is even more likely to be centralized in 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 had hated her job organizing another workplace. The next Local 21 Organizing Committee meeting I observed was led by a different paid
organizer, Owen. He also expressed frustration with the constraints of his job, with his subordination to orders that came down 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 at getting results by successful unionization at many workplaces. Controversies about the best method for reviving the labor movement continue to rage on (Early 2009; Yates et al. 2008).

Alonzo’s frustration was with how low turnout had been at recent meetings and events, down from ten times as many 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, more likely to argue and resist, 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 members resisted through passive non-cooperation: one did a word-find puzzle on her lap; two had 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 “MM-p-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 conditioning in 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 4-year degree; the workers’ education varied from dropping out in middle school to 2-year degrees. The dynamic between this organizer and these members was not just 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 all the following comments in the 30-minute stretch when 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 non-cooperated, were usually immediately after Lynette’s most condescending comments. At one point Alonzo complained about workers not turning out despite his phone calls to recruit them, 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 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 several more years of union-organizing experience compared with Lynette added weight to his sarcasm.
Mocking laughter, consistent with the working-class culture of teasing and rough humor, greeted details of Lynette’s proposal, such as the low budget allotted for the 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 was an ad hoc direct action group preparing for protest at one of the 2008 major-party political conventions. The core group of about 25 people put a strong emphasis on shared leadership and strict consensus decision-making. So 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, I mean Dirk's decision, I mean 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 anti-authoritarian ideology for how a group runs itself? I encountered two quite different perspectives among the convention protestors and other anarchism-influenced groups in the study.

First, a structured group process tradition, rooted in prefigurative movements of the 1970s and ‘80s 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 (Breines 1989; Butler 1981; Epstein 1991; 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, 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 in the minority 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 an even 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 and more core 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 power.

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-plays and small group exercises designed to teach them how not to dominate each other. But the tools of the structured-process anarchist 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. My biggest pet peeve is people who in their minds want to open the space but just take*
it; I'm guilty [of this myself.] As good little anarchists, they don't want to take power – ‘I'm autonomous and you can't infringe on my personal’ … ‘I don't want to wait 5 seconds ‘cause that's oppressive to me’. We could do more to call out oppressive behaviors.

To Dallas, it is 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 the airspace (the opportunities to talk).

Dallas, Gail and others seemed discouraged that nothing was working to improve Dirk’s behavior, not the role plays and discussions about sharing airspace at the retreat, not the confrontation by the 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 vs. 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, had it assumed that it would be part of [our lives].”

Of the white men who took Dirk aside, those for whom I have demographic data were from professional middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds and had college degrees. The ones I spoke with presumed that Dirk was just like them, formed by entirely dominant social identities, conditioned to be dominating and thus needing anti-oppression 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 college and earned salaries, Dirk’s parents had high-school diplomas and earned hourly wages. Dirk had gone to non-residential public college, but had done only blue-collar jobs since.

Talking dominant-to-dominant wasn’t working in part because on one social identity, class, they were actually dominants scolding someone in a subordinate identity. While Dirk’s hyper, aggressive and reportedly manipulative behavior was not typical of any demographic category, and certainly not typical of 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, 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 more about the class make-up of the group, she told me that she thought working-class people were more likely to be suspected of being
police infiltrators (meaning the agents often 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 AC 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 anti-oppression values of the group well enough to successfully con 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 epitomized 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 more 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.

Later we will see more such misunderstandings of who comes from which class background. Simply learning more about each other’s 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 Coalition sub-group, 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 long-time members quit the coalition after this meeting, and the Task Force was disbanded soon thereafter.

**1. Movement tradition lens: Community organizing clashes with professional advocacy**

The Coalition used a community organizing methodology that was a faith-based variation on the practices of the Midwest Academy and the Industrial Areas Foundation, rooted in Saul Alinsky’s ideas (Alinsky 1971; Bobo et al. 2001; Shaw 1996; Atlas 2010). The membership voted on issue priorities once a year; particular public officials were targeted, and mass “**accountability sessions**” (Bobo et al. 2001: Chapter 8) were staged to confront them and to demand pre-decided reforms. This method had brought the Coalition some notable successes in past years, but not in the current year. The target
official, the mayor, had failed to show up for the recent accountability session. The resulting demoralization was the context for the in-fighting.

Another problem was that member participation had dropped, so that mass pressure tactics weren’t as easy to use as in past years. Jeremiah, a fervent believer in this community organizing methodology, had come to the meeting to scold the group for doing too little to punish the mayor for not showing up, and to ask them to return to the pre-set strategy and to drop their alternative approach.

The Workforce Development Task Force was the committee designated to work on one of the priority issues approved by membership vote at the Coalition’s last annual convention. While some of the Task Force members were clergy or members of religious congregations, most of the core group had a professional job related to the issue, such as staffing a non-profit advocacy or social service agency. Two had specialized expertise in the technical aspects of development projects, including the chair, Brandon, who worked for a for-profit lender. Thus the Task Force fit into the movement tradition of professional non-profit advocacy, very dissimilar from the Alinsky-organizing tradition of the Coalition umbrella group.

The Task Force members brought some energetic excitement to this meeting because allies on the County Commission had decided to set up a new 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 Coalition operated. He told the group they didn’t have the authority to change the target or the goal.

Several Task Force members reacted angrily to Jeremiah’s criticism. They saw him as blocking progress on the issue by rigidly adhering to the pre-set plan even when it wasn’t working. The clash of political approaches, professional advocacy versus community organizing, became explicit at times:

*Sherman:* The [Advisory Board] is intended to include people with expertise and it should, and this is an attempt to ensure that it will. 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, you know, we can go down and stand before the [commission] every day and try to influence them, but that's not power, you know, if we're going to stand before anybody, it needs to be our congregations, you know, getting them worked up ...in terms of issues of justice... Just going down and trying to influence, that's, 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, in particular between Brandon and Jeremiah. 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.

As an outsider to the situation, I’m not in a position to have an informed opinion on which strategy, if either, would have won results from those particular elected officials. But it did seem clear that the organization’s inability to make mid-year course corrections was limiting its effectiveness. Officials refusing to show up for mass
accountability sessions with confrontational grassroots groups have become a recurring problem with that method (Atlas 2010; Bobo 2001:87, 92).

The Coalition was a faith-based organization, which added another movement tradition layer. Some Christian and Jewish Task Force members turned to their shared religious values to help resolve this disagreement. Just before they ended the meeting with a prayer, Brandon and Stacy both attributed the cause of the earlier conflict to their unusual omission of an opening prayer:

Brandon: That's where we had the problem. If we had started out with prayers
<group laughter>...
Stacy: There it is. We didn't ask divine guidance.

One of the flash points of the meeting was when Jeremiah said that Brandon shouldn’t serve on the 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. It seemed like the familiar situation that women sometimes call ‘two dogs, one fire hydrant’.

Two women played peace-making 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 one controversial proposal was impossible because a date had passed. Stacy, a middle-aged white woman, humbly placated and praised individual combatants, smoothing the waters at tense moments and suggesting prayers.

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, affiliating himself with people of color affected by the policies under discussion and with a more populist political tradition. Or it 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 all other interviewees 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 30-year age difference between Brandon and Jeremiah put them into 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. Part of the controversy was about how much priority to put on input from low-income people directly affected by the issue. 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 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 required slots on the 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 a difference of ideological rhetoric covering up a power struggle. Directly affected people were not in the room – or even in the membership, for the most part. The Coalition’s grassroots membership was primarily middle-class congregation members, including those in Jeremiah’s own church, who wouldn’t be eligible for any workforce development assistance 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 disingenuous, a hypocritical top-down power play to squelch the Task Force’s ability to take initiative while he preached bottom-up empowerment.

Everyone at the meeting had a 4-year college degree or a graduate degree except for Brandon; everyone except for Brandon and Jeremiah had college-educated homeowner parents as well. 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 reaching more educational and professional heights. When their conflict is cast as one between a straddler high-professional with a Ph.D. and a less-upwardly-mobile person with a vocational associate’s degree, then the difference between Jeremiah’s adherence to a pure political ideal and Brandon’s willingness to compromise to get the job done can be seen as a class culture difference between more ideological and more pragmatic.

In talking about his reaction to Jeremiah disqualifying him as too private-sector, Brandon described his working-class background and referred defensively to the African American tradition of giving back to the community and ‘lifting as you climb’, a tradition that validates an activist role for those with greater educational and professional attainment.

Every Task Force interviewee focused on Jeremiah’s class identity. Noah and Brandon suspected him of being a poser, someone who played poor to score political
points. For example, Noah said, “We're not seeing a multi-class type of coalition. And Jeremiah uses his earthiness, and he is not, he's also an expert... I think Jeremiah truly believes that he knows best because he is closer to the class. You know, it's taken at face value.”

But Jeremiah did not hide his education or occupational status from the interviewer. He said with self-aware humility, “My father was a working man, you know a union man... But my life has been a life of privilege... when I agree to look at myself honestly and compare myself to the way the world is, yes, I do live off privilege.” In the vehement positions he took, he seemed to have been trying to stay true to the working-class people he came from, without pretending to still be working-class himself.

Giving low-income people a voice in decisions that affect their lives is an ideal much more honored in activist talk than in activist action. While it was an ostensible topic at this meeting, in fact none of the alternatives they argued over would have actually meant more low-income involvement. A power struggle among professionals and an ideological disagreement over movement traditions masqueraded as a class conflict.

**Two common lenses and one uncommon lens**

Each group carried forward ways of doing things from past movement traditions: from the heyday of the labor movement in the 1930s and ‘40s; from the Civil Rights and student movements of the 1960s; from so-called “new social movements” of the 1970s and ‘80s; from previous community organizing efforts; or from other traditions that have made up the history of the US left (Flacks 1988; Lofland 1993). Some interviewees brought up political ideologies and well-known innovators, such as Saul Alinsky or Paolo
Freire, to explain how their group was run and how their ideal group would operate. Knowing which part of movement history they held as an ideal or as a cautionary tale gives context to their debates over how to operate.

Activists also frequently used the race and gender lens. Decades of hard work on identity politics, while failing to eradicate sexism or racism from the left, have nevertheless paid off in activists’ fluency using a race and/or gender lens. The work by feminists of color that began with *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981) in applying a race and gender critique to social change efforts has continued in recent years by works such as Martinez’s article (2000) about the 1999 World Trade Organization protests, “Where was the color in Seattle?,” and the dialogue it sparked. Intense online dialogue about race and racism began early in the Occupy movement (ColorLines 2011; Sen 2011).

While those targeted by racism and/or sexism, in particular women of color, have long taken the lead on challenging social movements (hooks 1981 and 2000; Anzaldúa 1987; Collins 1991; Reed 1999), more recently people in the dominant social roles have joined in (Dyson 1997, Chapters 5 and 6; Kivel 1998 and 2002; Thompson 2001; Wise 2008; Piatelli 2009; Warren 2010).

As progressive activists, the informants in this study tended to be comfortable using the race and/or gender lenses informed by this academic and activist work. Interview questions about the race and gender of group members were usually answered easily, though the typical ethnic terms for people of color varied by the speaker’s class. Concepts of racism were sometimes discussed and occasionally debated.
However, a class lens was used much less often. As we will see, interview questions about the class makeup of the group sometimes evoked confusion. Many group members guessed wrong about each other’s backgrounds. Vocabulary for class identities was sparse and varied wildly. Virtually nothing was said about what members’ class differences might mean for organizational attitudes or behaviors.

This vacuum is not surprising, given the paucity of attention to class dynamics within social movements. The few books on class culture differences in social movements are mostly not well known (Stout 1996; Croteau 1995; hooks 2000; Rose 2000; Cummings 2003; Leondar-Wright 2005; Ward 2008). The few widely cited exceptions, include Fantasia (1988) and Lichterman (1996), are less explicit in contrasting class cultures. To draw on the literature about class culture differences in the wider society (Willis 1981; Heath 1983; Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1997; Lamont 1992 and 2000; Lareau 2003; Jensen 2012) requires translation into the realm of social movement organizations, in which class status markers, valued forms of cultural capital, and expressions of class culture can be very different than in other settings.

What is seen by looking through a class lens? If members’ class life stories were known and discussed, what mysteries in activist groups would be cleared up? If class culture differences were named and understood, what new solutions to voluntary group troubles would be possible?

It’s not that adding a class lens engenders a neat formula for how class culture differences play out. Note how dissimilar are the class revelations in the above five stories. Any simple generalization such as ‘all working-class people are more X, and all
Professional-middle-class people are more Y’ is probably untrue. The class culture
dynamics in social movement organizations are more complex and subtle than that.

To see activist class culture differences requires comparing many groups. The
patterns that appear in the five stories – how people with similar or different class life
stories acted similarly or differently – could be idiosyncratic to that group or those
personalities, and thus of little interest for either sociological theory or coalition-building.
Or they could be class culture factors that only hold true for such a particular
combination of race, gender, age, region and movement tradition. But do some of them
perhaps hold true across many social change groups? This book attempts to answer that
question.

Looking through the class lens can add context and complexity to the movement
tradition and ideology lens. The three lenses are not three alternatives, three competing
interpretations of a given situation, but three interwoven strands.
Chapter 2 - Applying class concepts to US activists

Confusion about class pervades American society, and that confusion distorts progressive movement building.

The popular myth that the US is a classless society (McNamee and Miller 2004) 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 US 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.)

Some authors have broken the class spectrum into two (Fiske and Markus 2012; Jensen 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 and more), any one of which can be emphasized or deemphasized. A case can be made for giving the most weight to income (Bartels 2006; George 2006), assets (Conley 1999), power (Dahrendorf 1959; Aronowitz 2003), workplace autonomy (Wright 1985; Zweig 2000), social status (Breen 2005), or education and other cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Lareau 1988). The
choice of which indicators to emphasize depends on the purpose of the analysis (Wright 2005: 19).

**Prioritizing education and occupation to spotlight cultural capital**

This study builds on the ideas of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Like Weber before him, he was trying to explain differences in individuals’ life-chances, why class inequalities are reproduced from generation to generation. His answer spotlighted cultural capital, a broad term encompassing formal education, degrees and other credentials, informal knowledge gained from an advantaged background, and manner of speaking and acting (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau and Lamont 1988). He also stressed another factor in class reproduction, social capital: social status and who you know. He termed both of them “capital” because they can be used to gain financial capital (Bourdieu 1984: 125; Swartz 1995: 80-81).

By studying the lifestyles and attitudes of thousands of French people of varied classes, Bourdieu was able to show how each class position generates a certain disposition, a set of attitudes and habitual practices that are carried into every area of life. This study investigates whether activists bring such predictable class predispositions into their social change groups.

Unlike deterministic theories that make individuals sound like robots programmed by society, Bourdieu stressed human agency; as we move through our lifetimes, we innovate, we make strategic choices and we change, but always from the starting place of our class origins, and always influenced by the predispositions inculcated by our childhood social position, of which we are largely unconscious (Bourdieu 1980; Swartz 1997).
Because he put cultural capital and social capital on a par with financial capital, Bourdieu’s ideas are especially relevant to mixed-class activist groups, where there is often a narrow range of financial resources, but vast inequality in education and social networks.

Bourdieu’s map of social space (simplified in Figure 2.1 below) distinguishes among types of class privilege. Those above the horizontal axis have more total capital than those below it, but the left-right axis denotes the composition of that capital, whether more financial (in the top right quadrant) or more cultural (in the top left quadrant). Bourdieu’s message to his fellow elite French intellectuals and artists was similar to what I’m saying to my fellow professional-middle-class activists: the vertical distances between those with less and more total capital are class differences; but the horizontal distances between ourselves and business managers are not class differences; instead they are distinctions between different types of capital.

The groundbreaking insight of Bourdieu’s most famous book, *Distinction* (1984), is that the class status hierarchy is perpetuated, among other ways, by differences in tastes. People feel most comfortable with those who share their tastes in food, humor, media, and clothing. Like congregates with like. Those who make the decisions in any field, whether educational, occupational, intellectual or artistic, resonate with and reward those whose cultural capital is similar to their own. Conscious intention to discriminate by favoring one’s own class is not necessary for privilege to be perpetuated. Bourdieu applied this insight to the distribution of intellectual, artistic and scientific honors, but it is just as relevant to who gains influence and leadership positions within voluntary activist groups.

*Figure 2.1 Diagram of social space; the volume and composition of capital*
Ever since *Distinction* was translated into English, there has been a debate over how much his concepts apply to the United States (see review in Holt 1997). Bourdieu has been accused of overlooking the contexts of time and place, overgeneralizing from a uniquely French cultural milieu (Gartman 1991; Aronowitz 2003:51; Lamont 2000: 181-187; Reed-Danahay 2005). These critics make good points about the vast cultural diversity of the United States, and about Americans’ widespread lack of reverence, and even disdain, for classical high culture. But Holt (1997) looks empirically at US class cultural differences and asserts that while the particulars are different, Bourdieu’s fundamental concepts do apply to the United States.

Any generalization about class and taste will be an over-generalization. Clearly, working-class Americans don’t all have the same tastes; college-educated professionals don’t all behave the same; small business owners don’t all share the same political
opinions; and so on. To make the theory reflect the complicated social reality we see around us, two elements must be added. One is intersectionality with other identities; we are conditioned to have socially constructed race and gender predispositions as well as class.

The second essential concept to add is Bourdieu’s theory of fields, arenas in which people compete for rewards, using the metaphor of a sports playing field (Bourdieu 1984: Chapter 4; Swartz 1997: Chapter 6). A movement tradition such as community organizing is an example of a field. He conveyed the importance of such contexts with a faux formula which makes no literal mathematical sense (Swartz 1997:141n), but which neatly ties together the elements that he believed explain human actions: “(Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice” (Bourdieu 1984: 101). In other words, our habitual behavior comes from our childhood conditioning, the resources available to us, and the conventions of the arenas in which we find ourselves.

Humans create and perpetuate the structures of society, including class cultures, by putting our predispositions into practice, as we deploy our various kinds of capital in whatever field we enter (Bourdieu 1980). It’s very hard to see these processes as they unfold; in particular, it’s hard for individuals to see their own predispositions, cultural capital or habitual practices.7

I share Bourdieu’s assumptions that every class life story leaves people with distinct predispositions, which play out differently in various social contexts in varied but nevertheless class-influenced ways. For example, a 4-year residential college education has different effects on the worldview of a first-generation student than on the child of two college graduates.
This theoretical underpinning explains why this study puts the heaviest weight on formal education and occupation in categorizing people by class. Higher education is a central component of cultural and social capital: it changes what people know, who they know, how they talk, and their level of confidence about political participation – all relevant to activist involvement.

It may seem less obvious why occupation is weighted so heavily, since this study looks at people in their voluntary associations, not their workplaces. But we are shaped by our work experience, especially by the degree of autonomy we have in our work (Goldthorpe 1980; Wright 1985). The social world, including activism, looks different to people who are supervised at work than it does to people who manage others (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1977; Zweig 2011).

With education and occupation weighted most heavily, and with homeownership and employer status also taken into consideration, one indicator is conspicuously missing: income.

**Income: a deceptive, slippery indicator**

Why didn’t I categorize survey respondents by income? Income brackets are not social classes. Income fluctuates over the typical life span, so the lowest income brackets include students and other young professional-middle-class (PMC) people whose incomes will later rise, as well as briefly unemployed professionals and elderly PMC people whose incomes used to be higher. These temporarily low-income people sometimes outnumber chronically poor people and struggling working-class people in the lowest income quintiles.
One piece of evidence that income brackets aren’t classes is that in US Census data, average household size is smallest in the lowest income bracket, even though working-class families on average have slightly more children than PMC families. Why? At the moment the Census data are collected, millions of childless households of highly educated young adults or old empty nesters are mixed into the lowest brackets along with long-term working-class and poor families (United States Census Bureau 2010).

Even though income is the weakest class indicator, it is nevertheless often used as a proxy for class. For example, when Bartels (2006) tried to prove that voting behavior doesn’t correlate with class by using income quintiles as his sole class measure, all he actually proved was that income brackets are not good class indicators (Frank 2005).

Another version of this mistake is made by George (2006), who looks for and doesn’t find a conscious working-class identity among his arbitrarily chosen bottom half of the income distribution. The particular people below the median income in any given year, of course, are not the same people as in other years. The absence of income-loyalty does not prove an absence of class identities. A class identity could be shared by a group of people with disparate incomes, but who have common life experiences, such as homelessness or college education. While an explicit working-class identity is rare in the US today, when it did exist, for example in the 1930s, the sense of solidarity was based more on workplace roles and hardships than on income per se (Lichtenstein 2002: Chapter 1).

Household annual income has become more erratic as job security has eroded. Average income over an adult’s lifespan correlates with education and occupational level much more closely than does income in any given year (Jacobs and Hacker 2008).
Income is an even weaker class indicator among progressive activists, since activism depends on biographical availability (McAdam 1988; Goldstone and McAdam 2001) and thus is more common among people not currently in the labor force, such as students and retired people. In addition, many activists make choices to earn less than their maximum possible income; categorizing them only by income disregards their cultural capital.

**Race, What and Gender? Intersectionality analysis and class**

In American vernacular speech, race is often substituted for class, with black used as a stand-in for poor, and white used as a stand-in for middle-class. While it’s true that people of color are disproportionately poor, and well-off people are disproportionately white (Lui et al. 2006), overgeneralization of these correlations into stereotypes renders invisible both white working-class people – the biggest race/class demographic group in the US – and millions of African American, Latino, Native American and especially Asian professional-middle-class people, as well as the small number of wealthy people of color. Just as a true understanding of class in the US requires an analysis of institutionalized racism, a true understanding of race requires a class analysis.

The critical race theory first developed by black feminists offers the useful concept of intersectionality: the insight that race, gender and other identities are not experienced separately, but holistically, from an interwoven social standpoint (Crenshaw et al 1995; Collins 1990; Smith 1998). But this insight has been applied most vigorously to race and gender, with class as the neglected stepchild. In “race, class and gender” (RCG) studies, class often plays the role of a conjunction, like ‘and’ or ‘but’, linking the primary topics of race and gender (Aronowitz 1992). See, for example, Rothenberg’s
anthology *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States* (1995), in which essays on race and gender outnumber explicit class pieces by a factor of more than 20 to one. When class is invoked in RCG studies, it often refers to the negative financial impact of racism or sexism, not to a distinct and equally important aspect of oppression.

Some African American leftists criticize this obscuring of class and reveal classism within black communities (Cohen 1999; Dyson 2005; Reed 2001; hooks 2000). As they point out, identity-based movements that don’t tackle class issues end up betraying the interests of the least class-privileged members within the identity group. Strolovitch (2007) studied national advocacy organizations that purported to represent one very broad constituency, such as Latinos or women, and found that the issues affecting the multiply disadvantaged subgroups within the constituency, such as low-income lesbians, got the least attention. Instead, the organizations tended to prioritize issues affecting the most advantaged subgroups. If class is not explicitly looked at, the result is often classism, the devaluing of working-class and poor people’s views and needs.

In the US today, most Americans label themselves with race and gender terms on which there is widespread consensus, making gender and race into self-aware identities, while class is often undefined, making it nothing but a "class on paper" (Swartz 1997: 149-150). Virtually all survey respondents in this study named their race and gender, but most interviewees did not, when asked, provide a straightforward class label for themselves.
Are there class cultures in the US?

Life experiences vary so much within the huge categories ‘working-class’ and ‘professional-middle-class’ that the odds are high against finding much cultural commonality. People in a particular occupation and a particular region may have very similar tastes and opinions, but classes made up of millions of diverse people are defined only by factual similarities, not by much actual shared human experience (Grusky 2005:71; Fiske and Markus 2012). In other words, how likely is it that a white male laid-off auto worker in Detroit would talk like, think like or act like a Mexican American female migrant farm worker in California, given that their life experiences are vastly different, despite sharing the category ‘working class’?

A number of empirical studies have investigated this question and found some class culture correlations. Almost all of them looked for class cultures in other institutional settings, such as schools, workplaces, political polling or social services, not in voluntary groups.

Lamont interviewed professional-middle-class (1992) and working-class men (2000) in the US and France. She found that US working-class men believe in creating moral order, protecting and providing; white men assert a “disciplined self” and black men assert a “caring self” (3). Working-class men value straightforwardness and sometimes see professional middle-class (PMC) people as phonies; they look down on poor people as undisciplined. PMC men in the US value ambition and competitiveness on the one hand, but conflict avoidance and being a team player on the other, a contradictory set of values conditioned by their workplaces.

Lareau (2003) found a difference in child-rearing practices between middle-class "concerted cultivation" and working-class "accomplishment of natural growth." One
finding from her meticulous research into childrearing practices is that professional middle-class children are constantly quizzed by adults, who ask question after question to which the adults know the answers. (For example, "What color is the banana? That's right, yellow! Good girl!") Thus speech is often seen as performance in PMC culture.

Heath’s study of language use (1983), like Lareau’s, found that black and white middle-class parents were very similar in how they talked with children; class differences were more striking than race differences. Bettie's (2003) ethnography of working-class and middle-class Anglo and Mexican-American girls at a California high school corroborated their class distinctions, although she found more racial differences within classes than Lareau and Heath did.

Bernstein (1971) defined a linguistic class difference in Britain between the unfortunately named "restricted code" (in which shorthand stock phrases and repetitive slang are substituted for original sentence-creation) and the "elaborated code" (in which ideas are spelled out more in original, multi-clause sentences). Macaulay (2005) reviewed other empirical studies and disputed some of Bernstein’s specific findings; in particular, he found no class difference in complexity of sentences or thoughts. But he also found that working-class and PMC people do talk differently in many ways; in particular, PMC British people say “I think” more, and they use more adverbs to qualify or intensify their speech (such as “somewhat,” “quite,” and “terribly.”)

Do these language differences exist in the United States? Jensen (2012) thinks the answer is yes; she corroborates Bernstein’s conclusions, finding that working-class Americans rely more on body language, emotional expression and inferences not spelled
out, while PMC people tend to communicate information in more explicit terms, while
restraining emotional expression.

Jensen's shorthand for overall class culture differences is "becoming versus belonging." That is, PMC people tend to see their lives in terms of individual improvement and accomplishments, and working-class people tend to see their lives more in terms of loyalties to extended family, religious affiliation, ethnicity and/or neighborhood.

Holt (1998) asked Americans with high or low cultural capital about their living room décor. He discovered that different classes may consume the same things, but they consume them in different ways, with different meanings. For example, a picture of Elvis Presley may be hung on the wall with admiring or ironic intent. Holt’s findings are similar to Peterson and Simkus’s (1996) idea that the American class variation in taste no longer runs along a low-brow to high-brow spectrum, but from univore to omnivore; that is, working-class people are more likely to stick to one coherent set of tastes, sometimes ethnically specific, while PMC people are more likely to pride themselves on being cosmopolitan and multicultural, consuming a wide variety of styles. In “Anything but Heavy Metal,” Bryson (1996) found that more highly educated people have fewer musical dislikes, and they value tolerance of varied styles, although they tend to dislike musical genres associated with the least-educated fans, such as country and rap.

These studies are all of non-activist settings. The class-culture generalizations made by Lamont, Lareau, Jensen, Holt and others may or may not apply to activist groups.
Are there movement class cultures?

Movements exist within wider societies and draw on them for cultural resources, but they also develop movement cultures of their own, which differ to varying degrees from mainstream culture (Lofland 1995). Activist groups, like all groups, have group styles, “recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group’s shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003: 737). It can’t be presumed a priori that the class culture(s) of any given social movement will be either the same as or different than its wider social context.

On one hand, many social movement organizations (SMOs) grow out of pre-existing community networks or social movements (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Even intentionally oppositional countercultures are shaped by the class background of those creating them.

On the other hand, SMOs are by definition trying to change some aspect of society, and often that means making their internal culture different than the mainstream, to varying degrees. Activists make choices about how much to form a distinct counterculture versus how much to blend in with mainstream norms (Johnston and Klandermans 1995). Too thin an oppositional subculture may mean the SMO will not be cohesive enough to withstand external or internal pressures (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001); too elaborate and too specific a group culture may push potential allies outside the circle of collective identity (Fine 1995; Lofland 1995).

This dialogue among social movement scholars about movement cultures has not often looked at class. Recently there has been a very valuable ‘cultural turn’ in social movement studies, moving away from looking only at material interests and political
contexts, towards the study of emotions and culture in motivating mobilization and demobilization (Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Jasper 1997; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001; Gould 2009). But only rarely do cultural analyses of social movements talk in terms of class cultures.

But movement culture does relate to class, not just in particular class-cultural styles, but in degree of movement culture as well. In US movements over the last 40 years, there has been a correlation between more distinct group culture and more class-privileged members; a counterculture is often a distinctly PMC subculture. A somewhat bohemian, green-living style has spread far and wide among highly educated and prosperous Americans (Brooks 2001), making leftist movement cultures less different from mainstream PMC culture than activists may imagine. Even when class-privileged leaders intend to implement the opposite of a corporate style, tastes in tactics (Jasper 1997) and methods of operating a group may still impart a distinctly non-working-class style.
Chapter 3 - Profiles of four class categories of activists

If I introduced you to the surveyed activists one by one, as 362 unique personalities, or if I clumped them by race or gender, or if I compared the 25 groups they belonged to, in each case you would see very different aspects of the same people. Instead I introduce you below to the commonalities I found within four class categories: all the lifelong working-class activists; all the lifelong professional-range activists; all the upwardly mobile activists; and all the voluntarily downwardly mobile activists. This four-way comparison enables me to explore my hypothesis that there are unseen class cultures operating in US movements for social change. This chapter creates composite class-cultural profiles of the four main class trajectories, describing their typical demographics, cultural tastes, political bents 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 (see Appendix 2) included questions about their own and their parents’ education, how they spend their own time, and their parents’ main income source. Based on these data I categorized the group members by class background and current class. (Appendices 1 and 3 give details on the method of assigning activists class categories.) Table 3.1 below breaks out the typical income sources and education levels associated with each class category. Table 3.2 gives some examples of typical occupations.
Table 3.1 Class categories and their education/occupation indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class category label</th>
<th>Typical education level</th>
<th>Typical income sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Chronic poverty</td>
<td>Less than 12th grade</td>
<td>Public assistance; part-time low-paid work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Working class</td>
<td>High school degree</td>
<td>Steady wage work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Lower-middle class</td>
<td>2-year college or vocational certification</td>
<td>Skilled trade; blue-collar small business ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Lower professional</td>
<td>BA from non-flagship public college</td>
<td>Paraprofessional or middle-management job; white-collar small business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Professional middle class</td>
<td>BA from private or flagship public college</td>
<td>Professional or managerial job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Upper-middle class</td>
<td>Academic or professional graduate degree</td>
<td>High-level professional or managerial position</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Examples of activists’ occupations in each class category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class category</th>
<th>Occupations &amp; other income sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chronic poverty</td>
<td>On welfare; On SSI for disability; House-cleaner; Farm labor (part-time); Childcare worker (part-time in a home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Waitress; Bookkeeper; Factory worker; Taxi driver; Custodian; Postal worker; Human services direct care giver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-middle class</td>
<td>Administrative assistant; Insurance salesperson; Human services case manager; Owner of small print shop; Licensed Practical Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower professional</td>
<td>Salaried community organizer; Substitute teacher; Registered Nurse; Computer programmer; Researcher; Adjunct professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional middle class</td>
<td>K-12 teacher; Social worker; Clergy; Therapist; Program Director or Executive Director of local non-profit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-middle class</td>
<td>University professor; Lawyer; Headmaster of private school; Top manager of national non-profit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For retired people, their former occupations were used to categorize them.

Combining information about respondents’ current life and their family of origin generated their class trajectories (upward, downward, or lifelong in the same working-class or professional range). For people who have dramatically risen in class since childhood, I use the label “straddler,” coined by Lubrano in Limbo (2004) to denote professionals who grew up working-class. Among those who have dramatically fallen in class, I focus only on the more common activist experience of being voluntarily downwardly mobile, meaning that activists’ life choices have led them to drop far below their parents’ professional class level, whether they intentionally chose voluntary poverty or not.
For the majority of informants, there wasn’t a big difference between their childhood class and their class at the time of the survey; there was a statistically significant correlation between class background and current class.\(^{10}\)

Table 3.3 Percent of informants from each class background currently in each class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chronic Poverty</th>
<th>Working Class</th>
<th>Lower middle</th>
<th>Lower Prof.</th>
<th>Prof. middle</th>
<th>Upper middle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... what percent were currently in this class?</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower middle</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Prof.</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. middle</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper middle</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Most common trajectories enlarged in **bold.** Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding.*

Table 3.3 shows the percent of people from a given background who were in each class as adults. Just as in data on US class mobility (Hertz 2006), while it’s common to rise or fall by one notch, it’s rare to move to the far other end of the class spectrum.

**Profile of lifelong working-class activists: Respectable worker bees or powerhouse outlaws**

The 85 lifelong working-class informants were demographically similar to the US working class as a whole: disproportionately women (59%), people of color (56%), with some immigrants and Puerto Ricans (16%). About one-third were in their 20s and 30s; the middle-aged or older majority were virtually all parents. Most were encountered in community-needs or labor outreach groups, though every movement tradition included some of them.

The activists at the lowest end of the class spectrum were at least second-generation poor people facing multiple forms of marginalization, such as overburdened
single mothers, undocumented immigrants living in the shadows, and seniors and disabled people with insufficient public assistance. For example, a middle-aged single mother with only four years of primary education, Gabriña, had recently come from the Dominican Republic; neither of her parents had a high school degree either. She worked part-time cleaning a building at night and was hoping to get a steady unionized job that would raise her pay up to $10 an hour.

Much more common than such lifelong poverty stories were either a rise out of poverty into the stable working class, or a fall into poverty from the higher end of the working-class range. While mobility to the top is rare (Hertz 2006), churning within the bottom class categories has been common in the last half century, and is becoming more common (Gosselin 2008).

The white working-class men born in the US from the 1930s to the 1970s, not surprisingly, tended to fall at the high end of this class range, lower-middle-class or close to it, in their adult lives, even if they had been born into poverty. Some had also grown up lower-middle class. For example, Devin, a young clerical worker, had taken some courses at a public 4-year college but didn’t finish the degree; his mother earned a 2-year degree and his father a high-school degree; they owned the house where they raised Devin. There’s a huge class difference between Devin’s life experience and Gabriña’s.

This lifelong-working-class range, from impoverished immigrants of color to enfranchised lower-middle-class white men, is so broad that it is surprising to find any cultural commonalities at all among them. Yet they did in fact share some similarities in tastes, attitudes and activist behavior.
A stranger watching the meetings in this study through a window would have been more successful in guessing which women were lifelong-working-class than in identifying the working-class men, for two reasons. First, weight correlates with class among women in the US (Clarke et al. 2008); professional-middle-class (PMC) women tend to be leaner and working-class women tend to be heavier. A new manifestation of Veblen’s conspicuous consumption (1899) is reflected in the bodily signs of past recreation; the visible effects of hundreds of workouts and decades of fresh-food meals are markers of class privilege.

Second, while male meeting participants tended to dress alike in jeans and sneakers, the lifelong-working-class women wore much more eye-catching clothes than the mostly plainer-dressing PMC female activists. A few older working-class women dressed up for meetings as if for church; and some young working-class women made an art form of sexy or decorative clothing. Even at a labor coalition meeting where many people wore the same union t-shirt, one middle-aged Latina immigrant cinched hers in with a 5-inch-wide white leather belt covered with silver rivets.
Brightness of clothing colors alone would have made a good predictor of class. In one welfare rights meeting, there was a color contrast between two middle-aged white women wearing t-shirts over worn sweatpants: the large woman in the bright-turquoise shirt over pink sweats turned out to be lifelong working-class; the bony woman in the white shirt over gray sweats turned out to come from a PMC background. Working-class women of color also tended to wear more and bigger jewelry, in particular large hoop earrings.

**Worker bees, some dealing with disempowerment**

Quietly sitting in the background of many meetings were lifelong-working-class activists who saw themselves as worker bees, not expecting to play major or public roles. Some expressed self-doubts and insecurities, seeing themselves as lacking the experience needed for bigger activist roles. In a study of welfare rights groups, Cummings (2003) found that many poor women held themselves back from formal leadership roles because they didn't want to stick out from their peers; they were more comfortable hanging together and presenting a united front.

While some quiet working-class people would no doubt speak more if they were more empowered, many self-confident working-class activists saw meetings as a place to stop in to find out what’s going on and get their marching orders. Their listening was active preparation for other roles.

In particular, some men in blue-collar occupations seemed to fit this mold: they sat silent during meetings, leading me to imagine them to be disempowered or new to activism; but when I talked with them, some turned out to have good energy for follow-up activities, such as picketing, door-knocking, contacting officials, or making t-shirts or
banners. There is sometimes an informal division of labor in which meetings are the turf of the college-educated members.

One quintessential example: at the very moment when the mostly white and all-college-educated-professional board of Green Homes Green World was discussing their disturbing shortage of board members of color, there were quite a number of low-income volunteers of color in the very same building doing hands-on work towards the group’s mission.

This turf division wouldn’t be problematic if it didn’t lead to an under-representation of directly affected and marginalized people in making decisions about the group’s priorities.

**Powerhouse working-class women leaders**

Not all lifelong-working-class activists fell into this predominant pattern of quiet people playing worker-bee roles; others were vocal activists, and a few were powerhouse radical leaders.

Kick-ass working-class women had founded some of the community needs groups. Three white women fit this profile most exactly: Dorothea of City Power; Brandy of Grassroots Resistance; and Elaine of Women Safe from Violence.¹¹ Their differences from PMC leaders suggest that these three working-class leaders’ shared attitudes and behaviors reflect working-class culture. They all believed that social change would come through grassroots empowerment, but they varied in how successful they have been at recruiting and empowering low-income members. At the time of the study, they had been leading their groups for two to four decades. With strong, charismatic personalities, they had all remained in leadership so long by fighting off challengers.
Six or seven other middle-aged or older lifelong-working-class women roughly fit this profile as well, as strong group leaders over decades; one was African American, one Latina, but otherwise all were white women. No working-class men were observed in such major leadership roles. I don’t know whether this is a movement-wide race/gender pattern, or whether it’s a coincidence due to the small sample size that the powerhouse lifelong-working-class leaders in the study tended to be white women.

**The respectable / outlaw spectrum, and rooted or cosmopolitan tastes**

Some working-class interviewees, in particular those who seemed more disempowered, prided themselves on their propriety and moral uprightness. Others, in particular the most empowered, prided themselves on being outsiders and outlaws, fighting the powers-that-be.

The archetypes of respectability were certain older, African-American and Latina, Christian women; but a few men, youth and white people expressed such traditional values as well. Their prior community involvements mostly weren’t in political groups, but in civic or religious organizations. To them, activism seemed to be part of their upward mobility, allowing them to simultaneously network with well-connected people and to enact their value of helping others, “lifting as we climb.” For example, when Brandon, the young black loan administrator with a 2-year business degree, was asked about his prior organizational involvements, he listed a black fraternity, the United Way and the March of Dimes. He joined the more political Workforce Development Task Force at the request of his pastor.

In terms of tastes, the respectable lifelong working-class survey respondents were not the renowned cosmopolitan omnivores (Peterson and Kern 1996; Bryson 1996). Their
most common favorite food was pasta, followed by rice and beans – a sign of the “taste for necessity” (Bourdieu 1984: 374-376). Most working-class activists tended to be rooted in their ethnic cultures. Many specified their own ethnic dishes as their favorite foods; for example, a Jamaican wrote “ackee and salt fish,” a second-generation Polish American wrote “kielbasa,” and an African American wrote “greens with ham hocks.”

Similarly, their television tastes were a mix of ethnic (BET, Spanish soap operas) and mainstream shows. Compared with other classes, more of them liked crime and hospital dramas, such as CSI, America’s Most Wanted, and especially Law and Order. (Just to shake up stereotypes, I should mention that three lifelong-working-class people listed the History Channel, “nature on PBS,” and Bill Moyers.) Unlike anyone in other class categories, several answered the question about favorite TV or radio with station call numbers, for example “1230 AM” — evidence supporting some sociolinguists’ theory that working-class language-use is more specific, requiring local insider knowledge to understand (Bernstein 1971; Jensen 2012).

Of the US-born people, a greater proportion of working-class than in other classes lived in or near their hometown. Putting together their locations with their food and media tastes, the word “rooted” sums up the respectable working-class informants’ culture: rooted in their ethnic background, rooted in extended family, and rooted in mainstream popular culture.

The working-class outlaws, fewer in number, tended to be culturally different than the respectable working-class activists. Most were more empowered and experienced activists, and fell a little higher on the class spectrum, more often lower-
middle-class. The outlaws combined a pride in personal toughness with more radical ideologies, in a few cases including a working-class identity.

In cultural tastes, the outlaws were much more similar to PMC and VDM activists than to other working-class activists (and indeed, some of them may have voluntarily remained working-class, defiantly refusing upward mobility.) Their favorite foods didn’t necessarily relate to their ethnic backgrounds; four of them preferred a vegetarian health food (e.g., tofu). A few also had oppositional music tastes that lined up with some PMC and VDM radicals’ tastes, such as Tupac Shakur, David Rovics and Rage Against the Machine. Some didn’t watch TV (“corporate crap,” wrote one on her survey), while others preferred leftist shows such as Democracy Now and satiric mainstream shows such as The Daily Show and The Simpsons. But these outsider tastes were less common than among PMC and VDM activists; some working-class outlaws were like other working-class people in preferring mainstream crime dramas.

Like those in the PMC and VDM class categories, the outlaws tended to be uprooted, living far from their hometowns. Overall they were culturally more similar to college-educated radicals than to the respectable activists of their own class.

The biggest difference in worldview between the respectable and outlaw working-class activists was religion. Answers to the survey question “Are you religious?” correlated with class: lifelong working-class people were more likely to be religious than people who were or had been professional-middle-class. Catholic was the most frequent denomination, followed by Pentecostal, Baptist, and African Methodist Episcopal. The strongest religion correlation is with class background\(^{14}\): the lower an activist’s class background level, the more likely he or she was to say yes to the religion question. This
corroborates others’ findings on class and religion (Lamont 2000:40). But within this overall tendency, the working-class outlaws were more likely to say no, they weren’t religious.

An example of a religious, respectable working-class activist was Martina, a young African Caribbean immigrant, who said her prior organizational involvement was with “the Girl Brigade, it's a group of girls from the church… We go and tell people about Jesus… We try to inspire young girls from the peer pressure… so they don't get in trouble.”

Within majority-working-class labor and community-needs groups, the most common pattern was that the leaders were not religious, while most rank and file members were Christians. Nevertheless, I didn’t observe any culture clashes on the sensitive topic of belief in Jesus. Community-needs and labor meetings did not include prayers, which was perhaps a sign of deference to leaders.

**Ideological differences, but not barriers in working-class groups**

Instead of ideological common ground, working-class activists tend to be tied to groups by a different set of bonds: personal ties and belief in leaders’ trustworthiness. Solidarity, unity, and strength in numbers defined many working-class activists’ understandings of how social change happens (Fantasia 1988; Rose 2000). They seemed to see activism as analogous to a team of sled dogs, who get anywhere only by all pulling in the same direction. Thus solidarity sometimes meant suppressing individual dissent in favor of standing together and backing leaders. Allowing political differences to divide the group was seen as foolish.
I’m so used to categorizing people along the left/right political spectrum that it was startling to see the sense of kinship and affinity between the respectable and outlaw members of community and labor groups. To my eye, these Christians and these atheists or pagans, these respectable community-uplifters and these foul-mouthed outlaws, seemed quite different politically – and probably many did disagree on controversial issues such as abortion and gay rights. Certainly they disagreed on the role of religion in public life. But many of them simply didn’t have the habit, so common among PMC activists, of spotlighting ideology differences and polarizing groups over them. It appears that for many lifelong-working-class activists, the salient spectrum ran not from blue to red, but from acting for the community to acting against the community.

Here’s a story from the 2008 convention protests that illustrates this way of dividing friend from foe, this lack of ideological barriers, in working-class communities. On the streets during the protests, I ran into a lifelong-working-class African American activist whom I’d met at a local community-needs group meeting. I asked him what he thought of one of the local anarchist direct action groups. He answered positively, that he liked them very much, and described some ways that the group had supported his group and its cause with concrete aid, such as Food-Not-Bombs-style free meals at his group’s events. Then we came into an intersection where 30 white people were in the street, all with bandanas over their faces. We saw some throw bottles and other objects at cars, and specifically at a white stretch limousine, while others overturned a small dumpster into the street. Without saying a word both of us started backing away from the intersection until we were out of tear-gas range, and I turned on my audio recorder to catch whatever happened next. Then he asked me incredulously, “What were they doin’? They were
throwing stuff at cars? …Where did they get that from, to throw that? Who was that?” I showed him a flyer I had taken from a phone pole the day before, in which the direct action group I had asked him about earlier called on protestors to blockade intersections, with the goal of preventing delegates from getting into the convention. He groaned a long, guttural groan, downward from low to very low pitch, “Ohhhh-ohhhhhhh. They’re trying to block? Block routes? But that dumpster and all that, that’s just…” and his voice faded out in astonished disapproval.

To me it was surprising that his earlier positive comments contrasted so much with this negative reaction to seeing property damage in the streets. The flyer calling for street blockades had been stapled by the hundreds on phone polls in his neighborhood. In both convention cities, for several months before the RNC and DNC, mainstream media had used scare tactics about protestors’ alleged dangerous plans, publicizing the realistic possibility of street confrontations, as well as politicians’ imagined fears of much worse (such as violence against delegates and blowing up buildings, never contemplated by any activist group, as far as I know). I don’t know whether or not this man had run into any such coverage, which had permeated television, radio and newspapers to an extent that seemed hard to miss. But it seemed that he hadn’t compared various protest groups’ political lines with his own beliefs, because he had seen their supportive actions first-hand, and his habitual way of dividing friend from foe was ‘whose actions are for us and whose actions are against us’.15

In majority-working-class groups, left/right ideological differences and theological disagreements didn’t usually divide groups, and the basis for group membership wasn’t philosophical.
Profile of Lifelong Professional Range: Polished confidence or self-effacing dominance-avoidance

There are US voluntary groups whose members are prosperous upper-professionals, where a lawyer who’s the daughter of a doctor wouldn’t be uncommon – for example, suburban parent-teacher organizations and charities that hold gala fundraisers – but such mainstream elite groups are not included in this study. By narrowing the focus to activist social change groups, I have ended up looking primarily at a more marginal set of professional middle-class (PMC) people, most of whom bring to groups more subtle and misrecognized class-cultural problems than the upper class’s reputed entitlement and snobbery.

All 140 respondents who fell into the lifelong-professional range (from lower-professional to upper-middle class) had been raised by college-educated homeowners in white-collar occupations. But their parents’ occupations ranged widely, from small-town newspaper reporter to diplomat, from kindergarten teacher to Ivy League professor. And while a few respondents were enjoying high professional success at the time of the study, as professors, top managers and lawyers, most were moderately-paid community organizers, K-12 teachers, social workers, computer programmers, and so on.

PMC activists’ financial situations varied widely as well. A few people revealed a trust fund, inherited wealth, or a vacation home. At the other end of the spectrum, some of the PMC students or recent grads, in particular convention protestors, were currently broke. (I heard that one $25 fee I paid for an interview covered the spaghetti and sauce for that night’s dinner for six at a group house.) Almost the only universal among these 140 activists was lots and lots of education: a 4-year, academic program (completed or
currently underway) in all cases, and quite often a graduate degree as well. These activists’ cultural capital usually far exceeded their financial capital.

Demographically they tended to be US-born and white. They were 86% white or Asian, only 11% black or Latino. About one-third were young adults; most were middle-aged. Six in ten were female.

The theory that the middle class serves the capitalists, assisting them in exploiting the proletariat (for example, see Kivel 2004), would probably not ring true to these activists’ life experience, as almost none worked for a large private-sector firm. Their experience of working as a professional or manager was usually in the context of government agencies, universities, hospitals, human service providers, unions, progressive 501(c)(3) non-profits, and other not-for-profits. Yet if one criterion for class domination is organizational control (Wright 1985: 88-93), then these PMC informants weren’t just higher on a ladder of advantages, they were actually in charge of shaping working-class people’s experiences in significant ways: providing their social services, running their classrooms, managing their non-profit workplaces, leading their religious services, and organizing them into voluntary groups and unions.

The PMC activists tended to have very uprooted lives, thanks to going away to a residential college. The vast majority didn’t live anywhere near where they were born, or were born far from where their parents were born, in most cases both.

Their tastes were uprooted too; they tended to be cosmopolitan omnivores (Peterson and Kern 1996). Their favorite meals tended to be ethnic food unrelated to their own heritage, in particular Asian cuisines (mostly Indian, Thai and sushi), followed by Mexican and Italian food. Vegetarian and vegan food were also frequent favorites.
Similarly, in the favorite music answers, some cosmopolitan PMC activists mentioned world music (Bryson 1996). Many PMC whites loved historical African American greats like Miles Davis, but very few mentioned any contemporary black artists. PMC musical tastes were very diverse; only Ani DiFranco had more than three fans in the pool of 140 people. Some white people old enough to remember the 1960s preferred nostalgic music popular with the anti-Vietnam-war movement, such as Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Phil Ochs, Neil Young, or Pete Seeger.

While working-class and straddler respondents usually specified a TV show in answer to the survey question about favorite television or radio show, PMC respondents were more likely to mention radio, with NPR the most common favorite, Democracy Now next, and the BBC and progressive community stations also mentioned. The only television shows with three or more PMC fans were The Office, Lost, Bill Moyers on PBS, the Daily Show and the Colbert Report. Since the latter three shows cover current events, and since news programs were mentioned most often by this group of respondents, it’s clear that lifelong PMC activists were consuming far greater amounts of news coverage than activists in other class trajectories.

Unsurprisingly, almost half of lifelong PMC activists were observed in global/local cause groups. Only one in five was observed in community or labor groups.

But no type of group, indeed no single group, lacked lifelong-PMC members. They made up more than a fifth of meeting participants in community needs groups; almost a third in labor outreach groups; over a third in anarchist groups; and about two-thirds in staff anti-poverty groups, progressive or non-profit groups, and militant anti-
imperialist groups. As the biggest class category of activists overall, they could be found everywhere.

Figure 3.2 Types of groups where lifelong professional middle class activists were observed

That Polished Air of Confidence

Some lifelong PMC activists, in particular those from an upper-middle-class (UMC) or higher-PMC background, spoke with a confident air of authority, commanding the attention of other group members. For example, when Gordon, a lawyer, and Melissa, an executive director, spoke during Green Homes Green World meetings, others tended to turn their heads towards them to listen. Though the two didn’t push or argue, much less raise their voices, their opinions usually prevailed.

UMC and higher-PMC activists were more likely to have an "opinionated' habitus" (Bourdieu 1984: 415) and to speak with "the authorized speech of status-generated competence, a powerful speech which helps to create what it says" (413). While such high levels of self-confidence were mostly found in white men from the top
of the professional range, some women, people of color and graduate-school-educated lower-professionals displayed it too.

A number of very young activists whose parents both had graduate degrees seemed amazingly empowered and knowledgeable, given their brief prior experience. During the convention protest planning, one inexperienced UMC white student, McKayla, frequently negotiated with public officials, sometimes confronting them, sometimes charming them into approving a protest permit.

Some confident white PMC activists fought to win, seeming to accept the use of power to wage an internal struggle. When the interfaith Workforce Development group blew up after its final contentious meeting (described in Chapter 1), one reason was that several PMC and UMC white men, including Noah and Homer, didn’t take Jeremiah’s cease-and-desist order quietly, but argued vociferously against him, and later went over his head to the Interfaith Coalition’s top leaders. Similarly, Lea, who came from a wealthy family, spoke very sharply at an Action Center meeting about a disagreement with Carrie, and also told Carrie off to her face.

Some confident high-end PMC activists were seen as arrogant and entitled by other interviewees – but fewer than might be predicted. One PMC white man, Rufus, was described by some other Labor Community United members as “difficult,” “righteous,” and “overbearing.” But such criticisms were rare. It wasn’t actually confident high-PMC people, but unassimilated uprooted straddlers who were most often criticized as domineering by fellow group members.

One interpretation is that confidence isn’t necessarily obnoxious if it’s displayed without arrogance. Some self-confident high-PMC activists were strikingly popular in
their groups. White PMC men Fred and Tony were the founders and leaders of groups with large working-class and straddler memberships; members mostly raved about their leadership skills in interviews. Those two and some similar PMC male leaders shared a style of communicating: firm, upbeat, and most importantly, radiating respect for others. Compared with the kick-ass working-class women leaders described above, these male PMC leaders related to members less personally, expressing collegial respect rather than affection; they were less likely to swear, criticize, or hug; they were calmer, less heated. They were quite forceful, but coolly so, with no edge of aggression or harshness.

Confident, popular high-PMC and UMC women were praised by other group members for playing conflict-resolution roles during meetings, suggesting compromises, saying soothing things, and explaining the combatants to each other. For example, during the Citywide Interfaith Coalition conflict described above, white PMC technical expert Stacy said, “I totally understand what you’re saying” three times to three different people, as well as “we all want the same thing.” In interviews, Brandon called her a “peacemaker;” Jeremiah said he felt understood by her and added, “I admire her.”

Sometimes people of color from the highest class backgrounds were the most beloved group members. For example, within the contentious group Easthaver Demands Justice, two smooth-speaking professional members of color seemed to be everyone’s favorite group members: Mia, an UMC South Asian immigrant, who was a nurturing conflict-mediator as well as an inspiring big-picture thinker; and Rodney, an African American man in a top management job, who was the calm, humorous voice of reason during disagreements.
It’s been said that people like to join a winning team, and all these confident, positive high-PMC people may have seemed like winners to the interviewees who admired them. And compared with people from other classes, it seemed easier for the confident high-PMC activists to talk hopefully about a positive future vision. The people with the easiest lives, less damaged by the class system, may sometimes be the ones to bring the gifts of hope and vision to social movements.

**Low-key styles, inconspicuous workhorses and lack of pizzazz**

Not all lifelong-PMC were so confident and polished. Another cluster were self-effacing and ambivalent, or were so understated that they faded into the background, or deliberately held themselves back to avoid dominating. Most of these lower-key activists were white people at the lower end of the professional spectrum.

Unclear communication characterized these PMC activists’ speech in various ways, such as mumbling, low volume, being tentative, contradicting themselves, speaking in a monotone, and complaining so indirectly that it was impossible to tell what was displeasing them.

Most groups included one or more members who fit this profile: a low-key lower-professional woman, usually white, usually middle-aged, who played a central role in the group, working an unusually large number of hours behind the scenes, without being a publicly recognized leader. These women’s roles in their groups included being the treasurer, maintaining the database, fundraising, researching and sharing technical expertise on the group’s issue, and teaching group process skills. Some were employed by the group, sometimes as the one and only employee who did all staff roles, including bookkeeping and computer systems. During the convention protests, some white PMC
women served as street medics or gave legal aid to arrested people. Some were low-key leaders of their groups; some were followers. In any case, their groups were leaning on them. Each of the working-class leaders in the study had one or more of these women quietly backing them up, doing their organizational work.

Most of these female workhorses wore notably drab clothing, usually well-worn jeans with t-shirts or button-down shirts, in earth colors, with a little small jewelry or none at all. The few exceptions wore Third World craft items or business-casual slacks. Their hair either hung down or was cropped short; except for a couple women older than 67, none had chemically styled hair. Contrasting them with the working-class women was like comparing a female and male mallard duck, inconspicuous brown versus vivid colors meant to catch eyes.

Thirty years earlier, these plain personal styles would have clearly been a feminist statement, a refusal to fulfill the feminine mandate to be decorative or sexy; and no doubt some of the middle-aged women first adopted this style during the heyday of second-wave feminism. But in 2007 and 2008 their style didn’t seem to be a gender rebellion; none described themselves as feminists. If they had been asked about their clothing, I would guess, based on their other political values, that many of them would probably have talked about rejecting consumerism, avoiding a mainstream corporate image, and not wanting to show off their difference from grassroots group members. In other words, fading into the background was more of a class statement than a gender statement.

These lower-professional white women were also inconspicuous in other ways besides personal style. In fact, most of them were living quite interesting lives, yet compared with other activists they tended to come across as boring. Many had traveled
internationally; many had been arrested for civil disobedience; some were lesbians; some were artists. But they had such dry ways of talking (some polite and feminine, some nerdy and intellectual, some no-nonsense practical) that such life experience wasn’t very visible within their groups. I heard one low-key lower-professional woman give a speech in public — cogent, radical analysis delivered in a mumbling monotone — and had trouble concentrating on what she was saying. Eliasoph (1998:43-44) found that her activist informants used plain speech to signal an egalitarian ethic; this may have been the case with these low-key women as well.

A moderate form of voluntary downward mobility, high in education but lower in profession, was common among these low-key workhorse women. This wasn’t always a chosen lifestyle: recent college graduates of course tended to be renters with lower-level jobs; and some lower-professionals were no doubt “blocked aspirants” (Gouldner 1979) who had unsuccessfully tried to climb the class ladder. But the study evidence reveals an element of choice in many slightly downwardly mobile PMC stories. Given a choice between a better-paying corporate career and lower-paying work that allowed for more expression of their values, they had taken the second choice. These income-limiting choices were quite different than the more extreme voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) category profiled in the next section, which included drastic off-the-grid lifestyles, as well as intentionally avoiding professional occupations or financial prosperity. These lifelong-PMC activists had chosen a more modest course of downward mobility. Some did professional work, such as therapy, part-time to free up time for activism or art; some worked lower-paying jobs meaningful to them. Some non-profit and union staffers, like Rodney and Owen, were so elite-educated, male and impressive
that a high-professional career would clearly have been an option for them, but their values led them to stay in lower-salaried social change jobs. Others, mostly women, had chosen to work as social workers or teachers. Some were nevertheless prosperous because they were married to professional men.

None of this is new in the social history of US elite classes. Nineteenth and twentieth century social roles for PMC and owning-class women as volunteers and human-service professionals (Ostrander 1984) continued in a new form in these women’s lives. While their PMC great-grandmothers might disapprove of the causes they were devoting themselves to, they would recognize and approve of putting career aspirations secondary to community needs, as many of the great-grandmothers had themselves done in earlier generations (Faderman 1999).

A tiny number of men and transgender people, people of color and activists from other class trajectories also played this understated, behind-the-scenes role, but by and large these inconspicuous workhorses were PMC white women. I almost missed seeing this race/gender/class-cultural pattern. It’s easy to overlook them because of their striking lack of pizzazz. But perhaps the other reason I almost missed them is that I am one of them. Contemplating them as a subcultural cluster made me want to run right out and buy some more colorful clothes, and maybe a motorcycle.

While it’s helpful to serve a group by quietly taking care of its organizational matters, lack of pizzazz and avoidance of public leadership can have downsides. As we will see below, a predisposition to avoid showiness and to hold back from openly dominating is sometimes ineffective as a way of empowering others, can lead to cross-
class misunderstanding, and can sometimes even strengthen PMC influence in a mixed-class group.

**Profile of Straddlers: Pushing moral certainty or feeling fortunate**

Activist groups are full of first generation college graduates and students, upwardly mobile from working-class roots, straddling the two class experiences of their working-class childhood and their professional adulthood. (Lubrano (2004) coined the term “straddlers”; Jensen (2012) uses the term “cross-overs”).

Straddlers were observed in every type of group: they were the most common in labor outreach groups, where 29% of members were straddlers. They were least common in anarchist groups, where only one survey respondent was a straddler. About one in five or six members of community needs groups, progressive global/local cause groups and staff anti-poverty advocacy groups were straddlers. (See Figure 3.3 for a breakdown of where straddlers were observed.)

The race and gender make-up of this pool of 53 straddlers was almost exactly the same as in the whole pool of activists (about 70% white and 30% people of color; more women than men). But they tended to be older than the whole pool: over a third were seniors, and over 40% were middle-aged; fewer than one-quarter were in their 20s or 30s. Only a few were immigrants themselves, but almost a quarter of them were the children of immigrants.

Straddlers’ tastes were much more mainstream than their fellow college graduates in the lifelong-PMC group. Their favorite meals, like working-class activists’, were conventional comfort foods from their own ethnic backgrounds, not PMC omnivore tastes: the foods most often mentioned were pasta, ice cream, and turkey. Unlike the
white PMC lovers of international food, the straddlers who preferred enchiladas were actually Mexican American.

Figure 3.3: Types of groups where straddlers were observed

N=53

Similarly, their musical favorites were the mainstream artists most popular among their age bracket and ethnic group: Bob Marley was chosen by a Jamaican immigrant; Frank Sinatra, the Beatles and Johnny Cash by older white men; two older Chicanos wrote “Mexican”; and an older Irish American wrote “Irish country music.” Only a very few chose explicitly radical artists such as Dave Rovics or Rage Against the Machine. About half of the straddlers had favorite television shows with massive popular audiences, but with more upbeat themes and comedy than the working-class crime dramas: *Seinfeld, Heroes, Dancing with the Stars, and Top Model*. The other half had news-oriented tastes similar to the PMC favorites (PBS, *Democracy Now*, NPR, and *The Daily Show*). Similarly, about half were religious and half weren’t.

These tastes show much less rejection of the dominant culture than is seen in the PMC or VDM groups, and much more straightforward ethnic identities. Perhaps
consuming entertainment and food similar to their childhood communities and their families was a way of staying in touch with their working-class roots.

**Straddlers who push moral certainties in their groups**

I had a hypothesis when I began this study that straddlers would tend to serve as class-bicultural bridge people, using their mixed class experience to explain one class to another, and using the cultural capital from their education and professional experience to confidently play mediator roles.

Was I ever wrong!

There were only two or three examples, in all the observed meetings and all the interviewees’ stories, where a straddler seemed to play such a mediating bridge role. By contrast, there were many, many examples of straddlers playing very strong roles in their groups, pushing a moral certainty that they linked with their loyalty to their working-class roots. Many of them, true believers in some set of values, were at the center of their groups’ conflicts. Some tried to be the conscience of their group, persistently calling on the group to be true to its principles, sometimes gently and sometimes vehemently. A few were seen by other members as obnoxious, haranguing ideologues.

The story in Chapter 1 in which Jeremiah scolded the Workforce Development Task Force for not following the Citywide Interfaith Coalition’s community organizing method is a good example of a straddler with moral certainty pushing a group to adhere to his values. The more pragmatic people who pushed back against him were all non-straddlers. Jeremiah was no longer working-class, but he saw his “people-power” advocacy as a way to stay true to his roots. What other members saw as an obnoxious, bullying power play, he saw as remembering where he came from.
Some straddlers spoke with awareness of how their working-class roots, and sometimes their ethnic identities as well, led them to identify with the currently working-class members of their groups and to be their fierce defenders. Hannah, a young Latina organizer, referred to her class and ethnic roots in describing her reactions to Rufus, a domineering white PMC man:

*I'll be honest, I'm a harsh critic [of Rufus] because... I think as a Latina... like, ‘who is this white man trying to run this African-American organization?’ ... I am protective of Latinos, I am protective of African-Americans, and low-class — and who am I to speak? Because... my parents were working people.*

How assertive straddlers were with their moral certainty correlated with two aspects of their life stories: how unassimilated or assimilated into PMC culture they were, and how uprooted from their families and childhood communities they were.

By “straddler,” Lubrano means established professionals like himself and most of his informants, people who have come very far from their working-class roots and now fit into their new professional/managerial class milieu. But some working-class people get college degrees (in particular as non-residential older students, at public colleges, and/or in vocational fields) and yet remain fairly unassimilated into PMC culture. Such unassimilated straddlers continue to have some aspects of a working-class life after gaining a four-year degree, such as renting in a working-class neighborhood, working a working-class job, and/or keeping their working-class friends and cultural tastes. I quoted Slim, Elaine and Cecilia in the lifelong-working-class section above because, even though they got public-college bachelor’s degrees after age 40, they kept their working-class jobs.

Culturally such borderline straddlers were similar in some ways to lifelong working-class people: they spoke with the accents of their childhood neighborhoods;
many lacked interest in group-process debates; their involvements had come through one-on-one relationships or through issues personally affecting them and their families. They seemed to keep many working-class strengths, sometimes including proud working-class identities and loyalties, while gaining through higher education the additional confidence and skills to play stronger activist roles. One such example was Laverne, a black woman who had steadily gotten more involved with community groups since going to vocational public college in middle age. Higher education combined with enduring connections to working-class communities sometimes produced activists with the best of both worlds.

But in other cases the resulting mix of class cultures was problematic. Sometimes straddlers had lost the rootedness that stabilizes and constrains many lifelong-working-class activists; they were not just unassimilated straddlers, but uprooted straddlers, with no accountability to neighborhood, workplace or extended family. In their families’ class journeys, these activists may be the Moses generation, those who have left the land of bondage but won’t live to enter the Promised Land.

Some of these uprooted, unassimilated straddlers had gained PMC faults, such as ideological rigidity and cold impersonality, without losing working-class faults, such as a quick mistrust-trigger and interpreting disagreements in personal terms. Harsh critique plus thin skin adds up to a syndrome best described by the playground taunt ‘you can dish it out, but you can’t take it’. As a result, the uprooted and unassimilated straddlers were the class trajectory most likely to be identified as problematic hotheads or accused of extreme misbehavior by other group members. With neither working-class roots to stabilize them nor the smooth confidence of lifelong-PMC cultural capital, they risked being seen, fairly or unfairly, as the loose cannons of the left.
In the story in Chapter 1 about Dirk’s overbearing and allegedly deceptive behavior, he exemplifies this pattern of borderline-straddlers who play the role of problematic hotheads in activist groups. He had just barely done four years of public college but had only worked working-class jobs, and he lived far from his family, making him both unassimilated and uprooted.

As we will see in Chapter 10, other straddlers were also criticized for extreme misbehavior: Carrie threatened to call the police on fellow activists; Tye threatened to kick someone’s ass. Such unassimilated straddlers were going beyond the usual and accepted ways of waging conflict in working-class communities and in progressive groups; they pushed their sense of moral certainty in a way that fellow activists saw as problematic. Straddler strengths – class-bicultural perspectives, working-class class anger amplified with new words and new confidence by PMC cultural capital – sometimes seemed to be wasted if expressed in excessively antagonistic or destructive ways.

All straddlers have to make sense of the contrasting class environments they encounter, but the meanings they draw from the straddler experience vary (Jensen 2012). Some of the most intense conflicts within groups had a pair of uprooted unassimilated straddlers at the center of the storm, each pushing a different way of being true to working-class people or values. An example from the explosive DNC convention protest-planning inter-group conflict illustrates how varied straddlers’ moral certainties can be. Two young men each invoked loyalty to their working-class roots to explain their decisions about which convention protest group to join, but in diametrically opposite ways.
Porter, a white founder of the People’s Convention, was the first in his family to go to college. He was one of three People’s Convention founders to push most insistently for a stronger nonviolence pledge for all the convention protests. He brought up the need for “unconditional nonviolence” over and over in meetings. As a graduate student in a majority-PMC group, Porter was relatively assimilated into PMC culture, but as an uprooted straddler living far from his family, he shared with less assimilated straddlers this trait of pushing moral certainty within groups.

To Porter, nonviolence was a class issue. He was very critical of radical groups that verbally or physically attacked police, US troops or veterans. To him, “unconditional nonviolence” meant respecting working people who were just doing their jobs. He practiced what he preached: during protest events, I watched Porter walk up to cops, offer to share his water, and say things like, “How are you doing with this heat, officer?” and “Thank you for watching out for us.” Needless to say, this was quite different than how some other protesters talked to the police.

Contrast Porter’s way of framing his hybrid class identity with Emilio, another young upwardly mobile college student, actually the son of straddlers. Emilio prided himself on both keeping the toughness he learned on the streets of his poor urban neighborhood and learning new ways as an adult activist in Stand Up Fight Back (SUFB), a militant convention-protest group. His interview had a back-and-forth rhythm as he asserted and then modified his childhood values.

You know I didn't have the best childhood… I grew up around people who … were quick to fight. They were quick to be very primitive… And me, trying to evolve as a human being… trying to say ‘no, we can't be quick to fight’… [but] my primitive instinct is to say we need to kick this kid’s ass… Unfortunately my anger can get the best of me.
Emilio described himself and another activist by saying “we're not your liberal do-everything-the-proper-way activists, we're a little more underground, we're a little more radical…you don't know what we're capable of, not that I'm threatening anyone.” He had a strong outlaw identity, but as a college graduate, he was both more self-righteous and more threatening than the lifelong-working-class outlaws described above.

Like other unassimilated straddlers, Emilio held onto some working-class cultural traits. To explain his activism, he referred to family members and friends wounded in Iraq, a moral shock affecting people he knew personally, akin to how lifelong-working-class activists tended to describe their activist beginnings. Like many working-class interviewees, he revered his group’s founders and loyally rejected all criticism of them. His perspective on the inter-group conflicts was that the issues at stake were so life-and-death serious that it was foolish to get hung up on unimportant ideological distinctions, a very working-class view. His understanding of how change happens fit the working-class unity frame: “I don't even understand how people want to divide. I mean we have power in numbers. The only thing I see that matters is a mass show of participation.”

Growing up, he was taught a masculine warrior ethos from soldiers in his family, but he had reinterpreted it to reflect his family’s shift from the working class to the professional middle class: “I'm not going to follow blindly anymore… If anything I'm giving the orders.” True to the PMC personalist mode, his ultimate loyalty was to his own ideals. He drew ideological lines in the sand; for example, he regarded groups with nonviolence pledges as liberal sell-outs.

Emilio’s way of defining a hybrid class identity was very different than Porter’s: a transformed warrior ethic of disciplined aggression, instead of pushing respect for
workers and being the conscience of the group; insistence on unity and loyalty, instead of a commitment to civility across differences.

Their ethnic difference may have had something to do with which aspects of their working-class roots they felt determined to remain loyal to. Others in their groups guessed that Emilio grew up poor and that Porter was middle-class. But contrary to such guesses based on ethnic stereotypes, Porter actually came from a lower rung on the class ladder than Emilio, whose father became a lawyer and a homeowner during Emilio’s adolescence. He said about himself, “Me, I grew up middle class, lower middle class, I'm not coming from straight poverty or something like that, but at the same time I'm a Puerto Rican kid who grew up in [a large, mostly poor city].” Porter, as a white man with a gentle manner, could pass more easily for lifelong PMC, but in fact he was raised by hourly wage earners with high-school degrees. Their contrasts are an example of how relying on assumptions about race and class, instead of facts, can cast fog over a situation.

**Smiling at good fortune: rooted &/or assimilated straddlers**

The uprooted, unassimilated straddlers pushing their certainties in helpful and unhelpful ways made up only about four-tenths of the total number of straddlers. They stand out because of their forceful roles, not their numbers. The other straddlers, the majority, were either more deeply rooted in working-class communities or more assimilated into professional life, or both.

Some straddlers, in particular people of color, still lived where they grew up, and several organizers were doing outreach to working-class people matching their own ethnicity – the most rooted straddlers. Others had achieved high professional status as
professors, lawyers, local politicians, or executive directors; some had reached medium professional status as teachers, social workers, or non-profit managers; some of these full-time employed professionals now lived and socialized among PMC suburbanites – the most assimilated straddlers. A few fit both categories, both rooted and assimilated, such as Katrina, a Latina executive director who worked and owned a home in a mostly low-income neighborhood where her national heritage was the majority.

Comparing these rooted and/or assimilated straddlers with the lifelong-PMC activists in similar occupations, there’s a difference in emotional tone. These straddlers seem more contented with their lives and their activism. Like the loyal working-class worker-bees described above, they appeared to have little desire to make waves inside their groups. They criticized their own groups much less often than did uprooted unassimilated straddlers or lifelong PMC and VDM activists. Perhaps because they perceived their careers as going well, they didn’t seem as ego-invested in their voluntary groups as did many other activists. Or perhaps cross-class life experience sometimes imparts resilience. From observations of meetings, my composite impression of these contented straddlers, who were disproportionately US-born Latinos, is a lot of big, relaxed smiles. Their personalities ranged from jovial jokesters to serene spiritual women to curious leftist intellectuals, but the commonality was a happy affect.

My interpretation of this upbeat affect is that some straddlers regard themselves as lucky. In a visceral way unknown to people from professional backgrounds, straddlers with satisfying and/or well-paid work feel fortunate to have escaped their childhood circumstances. They think they dodged a bullet, and it shows. When I interviewed a Latina social worker, Shirley, at her small single-family home on a tree-lined street, and
asked how she liked living there, she said, “It’s what I dreamed about as a little girl, looking out the window at the projects – so I got my dream!”

It’s not surprising that a well-paid lawyer or professor from a working-class background would exude a glow of gratitude, but even some straddlers with insecure non-profit jobs described themselves as fortunate. Hannah, a Latina straddler employed as an organizer with Labor and Community United, said of her position, “I’m secure for at least two years. Two, three years… so this is a semi-permanent thing… I like [my job].”

In a chapter of *Limbo* titled “Duality: The Never-Ending Struggle with Identity,” Lubrano interrupts his tale of straddlers torn between two worlds, feeling at home nowhere, to say, “You’ll find among the limbo set people who are totally at ease, despite the duality. When I meet such a man, I linger in his presence, hoping to glean a secret or two… Self-possessed and centered, they easily handle the dichotomy of their past and present circumstances. For them, it just happens. For the rest of us, however, duality is hard work.” In this study too, a subset of straddlers seemed to feel at home and at peace.

**Profile of Voluntarily Downwardly Mobile Activists: Punk or pagan individualists**

Some college-educated respondents had made choices that drastically lowered their occupational level. Some were living in voluntary deep poverty, squatting, deliberately remaining unemployed, lowering their carbon footprint, and/or avoiding spending money in the capitalist economy. Others were organizers getting only stipends or poverty-level wages from activist groups. Some lived in collective houses or apartments and worked part-time at restaurants or copy shops, freeing up time for activism, maximizing their “biographical availability” (McAdam 1988:45). Before the
August/September 2008 convention protests, some who usually fit into the latter category had left their part-time jobs and collective homes to volunteer full-time for the summer in one or both convention cities, temporarily falling into the voluntary deep poverty category. These VDM activists varied in how much poverty was an intentional class destination and how much it was an unintended side effect of choices made for other reasons.

Most voluntarily downwardly mobile people (VDM), 82%, were encountered in anarchist groups. But anarchists were not all VDM; most fell into other class trajectories. And as we saw above, many modestly voluntarily downwardly mobile activists had managed to attain homeownership and stable white-collar jobs that qualified them for the PMC category. With those groups subtracted, only 22 survey respondents out of the whole pool of 362 respondents fit the strict definition of VDM – in the professional range in childhood but working-class range now – 18 in anarchist groups and 4 in other groups.

Figure 3.4 Types of groups where voluntarily downwardly mobile activists were observed

N= 22
But while their numbers were sometimes small, voluntarily poor members were iconic within anarchist groups. For example, living off the grid to minimize one’s carbon footprint and learning do-it-yourself (DIY) skills (Schor 2010) were prefigurative ideals mentioned both by those who were and weren’t practicing them to the degree of becoming VDM.

The element of choice, often values-based choice, takes the VDM trajectory out of any definition of a ‘class’ as an outcome of economic and social stratification forces. Also, while the other three broad trajectory categories (lifelong working-class, straddler, and lifelong PMC) were diverse by gender, age and to various extents race, the VDM cluster was more homogeneous: two-thirds male; 91% white; and almost three-quarters in their 20s. All grew up in the US.

Thus, to be more precise, the VDM activists form not a class trajectory category but a race/age/class/lifestyle/ideology cluster. Yet their privileged class backgrounds are a crucial component of their profile; a well-off child is more likely to become a VDM adult. As Lamont puts it, “people [who] have had more ‘formative security’, i.e. they or their families had a strong market position during their growing-up years are, therefore, less concerned with materialist values and with economic rationality” (1992: 152).

VDM activists were even more consistently uprooted than the PMC activists. Very few were born in the same metropolitan area where either of their parents were born, and very few lived near where they themselves were born.

The VDM lifestyle is often presumed to be a youthful phase, and indeed some of the convention protestors were voluntarily homeless and unemployed only for that one season of direct action planning. But for some, downward mobility is a fairly long-term
state. Almost all the VDM interviewees had been VDM for several years, up to a decade. If the economy allows it, some young currently VDM activists may eventually find ways to become only moderately downwardly mobile. They may attain by middle age the stable housing and the employment compatible with their values that the PMC moderately downwardly mobile people profiled above had found; in some cases these may be similar life stories glimpsed at two different stages. Or perhaps some of these VDM activists will be working in middle management at Sprint or City Hall in ten years. But there’s historical precedent for never ‘selling out’ by getting a mainstream job. ‘It’s just a phase’ is a patronizing assumption.

**The bonds of VDM subcultural style**

The VDM survey informants were tightly homogeneous, with shared styles, tastes and opinions — a true subculture (Hebdige 1979; Hall and Jefferson 1996; Adilkno 1990). Olivia from the Parecon Collective called it “the whole DIY [Do It Yourself] scene.”

The personal style that marks the anti-authoritarian subculture – dreadlocks on white people; worn-out black clothes; multiple piercings; and patches with torn edges and slogans or A’s in a circle – was common but not universal among them. Some would have blended in among the casual plain-styled PMC progressives, in jeans, t-shirts and sneakers. A common pattern was to dress in eye-catching anarchist garb during direct actions, but to wear plain, casual used clothes at meetings.

The style elements that were permanently part of one’s body, such as tattoos and dreadlocks, served to distinguish the long-term, fully committed subculture members from newcomers and weekend activists, just as long hair signified immersion in the 60s
counterculture. By the end of two weeks at the convention protests, I found myself relying on dreadlocks as a subcultural sign. For example, when I couldn’t figure out which bus stop was nearest to a Convergence Center, I just got off when the white people with dreadlocks got off. Unlike bandanas and black clothing, which can be easily put on and off, these permanent markers served as a rough safeguard against disguised infiltrators. Though activist-turned-FBI-informant Brandon Darby and some Earth First! infiltrators blended into radical groups over many years, the shorter-term police spies I saw in convention protest groups were shorthaired, un-pierced people who looked more like cops than anarchists. (The police plant Canton, profiled in Chapter 1, who explained his silent note-taking by claiming he was working-class and intimidated, didn’t even bother to put on dark-colored clothing, which was just foolish.)

All the VDM survey respondents answered “no” to “Are you religious?” except for one Taoist and some pagans. Their most common favorite musical genre was radical punk (such as Mischief Brew, Stiff Little Fingers, and Bad Religion). Otherwise their music tastes, mostly explicitly radical, were spread across genres and artists, ranging from hip-hop (bambu) to folk (Pete Seeger) to Afro-Latin (Orishas).

In answer to the question about favorite television or radio show, pirate radio, Democracy Now and anti-TV answers such as “I don’t indulge” outnumbered NPR and PBS. Tellingly, the one and only apolitical mainstream-hit TV show mentioned, Project Runway, was the favorite of the one and only African American VDM person, who was also the only one to have a meat dish as her favorite meal. Most white VDM activists, as in the professional range, preferred ethnic food from ethnicities not their own (especially Thai, sushi, and Indian) or vegan dishes.
Compared with the wider variety in the other class trajectory categories, these preferences show a very narrow range of tastes, reflecting cohesive values pervading all areas of life, including food, music, clothing, lifestyle and activist practices. This homology of style suggests that atheism and anti-TV attitudes express meanings similar to black clothing and vegan food. These tastes drew a circle of connection among those inside it; but also sometimes drew a circle of exclusion for those outside it and alienated by it.

Two VDM styles from two historical taproots

On close inspection, the VDM anti-authoritarian activists were roughly divided into two styles, punk and pagan, two overlapping value systems that led people to make similar food, clothing, media and activist choices. The cultural differences between punk and pagan seem to be between urban and back to the land, between cooler and warmer, and between more ironic and more sincere.

Today’s punk piercings and patches with angry slogans seem designed to provoke and offend, as did the safety pins of the 1970s. Some punk women’s shirts were tight and sexy, and lace-up boots were more common. This provocative urban style was exemplified by Zorro, whose hair was in many small separate strands, some braided and some beaded, some hanging over her face; her clothing was a postmodern pastiche of skin-tight vintage items.

Zorro’s communication style was fierce. Even more than others in her faction of most-radical punk-derived activists, she swore like a sailor, and she was vehement in drawing ideological boundaries.
Some of those attracted to the harder-core punk-influenced wing of VDM anarchist culture seemed to have socially withdrawn personalities. While urban radical anarchists intentionally emphasized self-sufficiency in terms of rejecting the capitalist business world, they sometimes also unintentionally came across as individualistically self-reliant.

The noms de guerre taken on by these more urban, punk-influenced activists tended to refer to radical political prisoners (such as the one pseudonymized as Amira) or to violent street confrontation (such as the one pseudonymized as Zorro). By contrast, the assumed names of the more pagan-influenced VDM activists tended to refer to nature, such as those psuedonymized here as Sparrow and Meadow.

The pagan-influenced activists drew community-building and emotion-arousing techniques from wiccan spiritual practices (Starhawk 1979, 1988; Williamson 2001:63).

The punk and pagan subcultures are not mutually exclusive; some individual activists seemed influenced by both of them. I had a handy method of distinguishing who was in which camp that seemed to work well in both convention cities: when a pagan facilitator asked people to close their eyes and visualize something for a guided meditation, I kept my eyes open and noted whose eyes were closed and whose were open – and especially whose eyes were rolling. The open-eyed and eye-rolling activists tended to wear more black and more patches, and to advocate more confrontational messaging and tactics, suggesting a political difference between the two VDM styles. The eyes-closed pagan-influenced VDM activists’ clothing tended to be looser, in earth colors rather than black. Some pagans’ clothing was hand-knit or obviously hand-sewed (for example, a patch-work vest), and some VDM activists knitted or sewed during meetings.
Most of these pagan VDM activists were women, but at pre-direct action Spokes Councils, some men and transgender people also wore pagan-looking clothing (including skirts), had nature-inspired names, and/or led pagan-influenced activities. Downward mobility had a similar anti-corporate motivation for pagans as for punks, but with a different back-to-nature slant.

**Class, tastes and militance in the four class trajectories**

The picture painted by the above class profiles is oversimplified, of course. There are exceptions to every generalization. But defining these eight types within four class trajectories gives a useful class-culture orientation:

1. Respectable, relatively disempowered working-class worker-bees;
2. Powerhouse working-class outlaws;
3. Uprooted, unassimilated straddlers pushing moral certainty;
4. Contented straddlers not making waves;
5. Polished, confident higher-PMC and UMC people, beloved if respectful;
6. Inconspicuous, tentative lower-professionals and PMC workhorses avoiding dominance;
7. Mistrustful voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) punks insisting on autonomy; and
8. DIY off-the-grid VDM pagans.

Though clothing styles and preferences in food, music, and radio and television programs may not seem to have much to do with strengthening social change groups, the taste distinctions among these four broad class trajectory categories (see Table 3.4 and
Figure 3.5 below) can sometimes be obstacles to coalition building, especially if not recognized as class cultures.

Table 3.4 *Most common tastes and styles by class trajectory*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Favorite meal</th>
<th>Women’s clothing</th>
<th>Favorite music</th>
<th>Favorite TV or radio show</th>
<th>Religious?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lifelong WORKING CLASS</strong></td>
<td><strong>Taste for necessity:</strong> (Pasta, rice &amp; beans); Own ethnic food</td>
<td>Eye-catching: Brighter colors; Bigger jewelry; Make-up; Styled hair</td>
<td>Respectable: Own ethnic music; Christian; Soft rock; Outlaws: Radical (Tupac; David Rovics) or black (Miles Davis)</td>
<td>Respectable: Ethnic TV; Hit TV crime &amp; hospital dramas; Outlaws: Political (Daily Show; Democracy Now)</td>
<td>Respectable: <strong>Yes, Christian</strong> (Catholic, Pentecostal, Baptist, Jehovah’s Witness, etc.) Outlaws: Mostly no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRADDLERS</strong></td>
<td><strong>Comfort food:</strong> (Pasta, ice cream, turkey); Own ethnic food</td>
<td>Mixed professional and casual; not bohemian</td>
<td><strong>Top hits</strong> for own age &amp; ethnicity: (Bob Marley; Frank Sinatra; Johnny Cash; Beatles)</td>
<td>Half upbeat TV hits: (Seinfield; Top Model) Half similar to PMC (PBS; NPR)</td>
<td>Half yes; half no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lifelong PROF. MIDDLE CLASS</strong></td>
<td><strong>Omnivore:</strong> International not from own heritage (Indian; sushi; Mexican) Vegetarian (tofu)</td>
<td>Plain casual; Earth tones; jeans, t-shirts, sneakers or neutral slacks Unstyled hair</td>
<td><strong>Ethnic not nec. from own heritage</strong> (Miles Davis; Brazilian) Ani DiFranco 60s counterculture favorites (Dylan; Pete Seeger)</td>
<td><strong>Radio, not TV:</strong> (NPR, BBC, Democracy Now)</td>
<td><strong>Mostly no</strong> If yes, varied (Protestant, Jewish, UU, Quaker, pagan, spiritual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VOLUNTARILY DOWNWARDLY MOBILE</strong></td>
<td><strong>Homemade and cheap:</strong> (beans, veggies, dumpster food) <strong>Vegan:</strong> (Seitan, kale) <strong>Omnivore:</strong> International not from own heritage (Thai; sushi)</td>
<td>Anarchist/ DIY style: Used or homemade clothes; Dreadlocks; Patches; Piercings</td>
<td><strong>Radical political</strong> (Bamboo, Pete Seeger), esp. punk (Mischief Brew, Stiff Little Fingers)</td>
<td><strong>Radical:</strong> Pirate radio; Democracy Now Anti-TV answers</td>
<td><strong>No, except for pagans</strong> Many vehement atheists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Examples in parentheses; strongest patterns bold.
Figure 3.5 Activists' tastes in the social space of volume and composition of capital

Note: Small arrows indicate class trajectory, upward, downward or lifelong in one class. Italics indicate mixed tastes.
Militance is not a class culture trait

Militant or moderate political beliefs did not line up with class. There are some folk theories on the left about which class tends to be more radical and which more reformist, but none of them appear to be true. Activists at each end of the liberal-to-radical spectrum sometimes try to gain credibility by claiming that low-income people and people of color are on their side. Radicals may try to claim that poor people are the ones who really understand what’s wrong with the system and who will take action because they have skin in the game, while privileged people are too invested in the status quo to accept structural critiques. Moderate liberals, on the other hand, may try to claim that privileged, intellectual ultra-leftists don’t understand the bread-and-butter concerns of working-class people, who need a bigger piece of the existing pie and can’t risk the little they have on dangerous tactics for utopian goals.

But the reality is that within every class category of activists, there are radical and moderate strains. Among my informants, the respectable working-class activists, the contented straddlers and the confident, polished upper-PMC activists tended to be more moderate, closer to liberal reformist in their political philosophy. The empowered outlaw working-class activists, the uprooted unassimilated straddlers, the dominance-avoiding lower-professionals and the VDM activists tended to be more radical. But there were counter-examples to all these generalizations.

Some interviewees expressed frustration with other activists’ excessive militance and ideological rigidity, while others complained about too little militance. But there was no class or race pattern in whose complaints went which way.
In the whole US population, there are some class/politics correlations. Working-class people overall tend to be more socially conservative and more economically liberal (Frank 2004, 2005; Greenberg 2005; Bageant 2008). But among left-of-center social change activists, such as my informants, the most radical or most moderate person in a group may come from any class.

The typically working-class focus on implementation details should not be presumed to be less idealistic or values-laden than the ideological orientation more often injected by PMC and VDM activists. A wonderful example of a majority-working-class group injecting its political values into its operations happened when the office manager of City Power came to a board meeting with a proposal to switch banks, because a notorious conservative politician was part-owner of their current bank. Several members expressed horror at the idea of supporting that politician with their banking business; no one dissented from the proposal to switch to a community-based bank. Their political idealism was expressed through a nitty-gritty operational decision.

Most groups in the study had attracted people with roughly similar views on the controversial issues most relevant to their efforts. A sense of ‘we’ seemed to grow out of similar political perspectives, even when they were not openly discussed in meetings, as was usually the case. Similar political beliefs were associated not with shared class, but with shared movement tradition.
Chapter 4 - Movement traditions and their class-cultural troubles

Going into different 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 (SMOs) have classed and raced roots, from the earlier generations of activists who created their movement tradition, and the past political and economic environments that shaped those earlier generations. These roots formed the group styles inherited by today’s SMOs, styles which today’s activists perpetuate, change, expand or resist in varied ways.

In the last chapter I introduced the 362 individuals in the study by their class trajectories; now I move on to introducing the groups’ movement traditions. The 25 groups in the study fell into four broad movement traditions: grassroots community organizing; professional anti-poverty advocacy; the labor movement; and social change groups with global and local causes (further divided into three ideological tendencies). (See Table 4.1.)

Both class background and current class were strongly associated with movement tradition. Class trajectory correlated with movement tradition most strongly. 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 anarchists. (For percentage breakdowns of movement traditions and class trajectories, see Tables 4.2 and 4.3. Appendix 4 has a visual representation of the class composition of each movement tradition.)
Within each movement tradition, interviewees raised a fairly consistent set of worries and criticisms, and distinctive troubles cropped up repeatedly at meetings. In each case the typical troubles are related to the predominant class culture of the group.

Table 4.1 Groups categorized by movement tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grassroots community needs groups in the community organizing tradition</th>
<th>Staff antipoverty coalitions in the professional advocacy tradition</th>
<th>Union outreach groups in the labor movement tradition</th>
<th>Global/local cause groups in 3 social change traditions…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City Power Grassroots Resistance</td>
<td>Brontown Affordable Housing Consortium</td>
<td>Labor and Community United</td>
<td>Action Against Empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care Subcommittee of Neighbors United</td>
<td>Inner City Advocates</td>
<td>Local 21 Organizing Committee</td>
<td>Convention Protestors Coalition*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-Income Women Rising Safety Net for All</td>
<td>Workforce Development Task Force of Citywide Interfaith Reform Coalition</td>
<td>Tri-city Labor Alliance</td>
<td>Easthaver Demands Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Safe From Violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Green Homes Green World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Immigrants United</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peace &amp; Justice Now Coalition</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The People’s Convention *</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sustainable Future*</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Action Center*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Autonomous Zone*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parecon Collective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spontaneous Streets*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stand Up Fight Back*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All group names are pseudonyms.
* Ad hoc convention protest group

Community needs groups in the community organizing tradition

Six groups fought for very basic unmet needs, usually for local poor people but sometimes with a wider geographic scope. All used variations of the methods of the
community organizing tradition pioneered by Saul Alinsky (1971) and still taught by the Midwest Academy (Bobo et al. 2001). There are four key elements of this methodology:

1. recruitment through one-on-one outreach, such as door-knocking;
2. empowerment through victories on small, winnable campaigns;
3. leadership development through giving inexperienced recruits a slowly escalating series of tasks and roles; and
4. people-power tactics of packing hearing rooms and confronting officials.

The goal of community organizing is not just winning reforms, but developing disempowered people into empowered, committed activists, those referred to (sometimes euphemistically) as ‘leaders’.

The best-known networks in this tradition are the Industrial Areas Foundation and the recently disbanded Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) (Atlas 2010; Warren 2001; Kahn 1991). But more common than local affiliates of such a large, staffed national networks are small, local, freestanding community groups (McCarthy 2005: 195-9), such as five of these six groups.

Three of the groups in the study, mostly female, traced their roots directly to the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 70s (Abramowitz 2000; Kornbluh 2007). While one is now multi-issue, all three fought to protect the safety net from welfare reform legislation in the mid-1990s.

The study period, 2007-8, was a relatively calm political moment for anti-poverty organizing, not one of those rare openings for mass disruption and grassroots political pressure described in Piven and Cloward’s iconic book *Poor People’s Movements* (1979).
But co-author Piven would no doubt see a resemblance between these groups and the style, ideology and tactics of the poor people’s movements she wrote about.

Five of the six groups provided some form of direct help for members in need, such as individual advocacy with welfare offices or health care bureaucracies; food giveaways; eviction resistance and squatting assistance; or help with court appearances. But more of their work focused on winnable campaigns for specific reforms, such as reversing a budget cut, getting a law passed, or filing a court order against a slumlord. While all six groups did educational work as well, it usually played a secondary role to mutual aid and reform campaigns. Their funding came from individual donations, fundraising events, and in three cases foundation grants or government contracts. The staff size ranged from zero to three.

Figure 4.1 Breakdown of class trajectories of participants in community needs meetings

![Pie Chart](image.png)

N=54

**Nearly absent poor activists, and disempowered working-class activists**

These six groups especially welcomed low-income grassroots people, in particular those directly affected by the group’s issue, whether that meant violence survivors, uninsured people, people facing foreclosure or eviction, or welfare recipients. All six
groups were impressively mixed race, though most leaders were white. And each group was successful in including some low-income and otherwise marginalized people.

However, the reality was usually less grassroots than public portrayals implied. The active membership also included students, professional advocates, and voluntarily downwardly mobile people from professional backgrounds. Two of the six groups were founded by professionals not personally affected by the problem; two had mixed-class founding groups; only two were founded by working-class people affected by their groups’ issues.

At these groups’ meetings, fewer than ten percent of attendees were currently living in poverty; about half were working-class or lower-middle-class. By class background, one-fifth came from poverty backgrounds, and about 40% came from working-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds. More than four in ten members either were or had been in the professional range. Both upward and downward mobility were more common than in other movement traditions, with about two-thirds in a different category now than in childhood. These groups seemed to be gathering spots for class-mobile people, more so than for poor people.

The spokespeople who publicly represented the cause tended to come from higher class backgrounds than the grassroots members. Professional women of color in particular seemed able to use stereotyped assumptions about their race and gender to gain the activist status to speak for the poor, without in fact being poor. It was rare to see a lifelong poor person in a public or leadership role.

The central trouble for these grassroots community groups was how seldom leadership development actually happened, how few lifelong poor people actually
became empowered. Three groups asked recipients of direct aid to pledge to help others after their situation stabilized; but only a small percent came through on that promise.

All these groups were adept at overcoming the “invisible walls” (Stout 1996) of transportation, childcare, translation, etc. Four of them regularly served free meals with their meetings; two paid stipends to some members. Clearly, the logistical nightmares of poverty were not the only barriers keeping poor people out. It is time-consuming to form the intensive, long-term relationships that result in transformation of very disempowered people into formidable leaders; and paid staff members are usually too expensive, given limited funding, to deploy in such a labor-intensive role. And not everyone has the knack of empowering others. The result was a mismatch between intentions to raise directly affected people’s voices and the reality.

The downsides of personal ties: turnover and over-reliance on leaders and founders

In community-needs groups, personal bonds were the main glue that held people together – or didn’t hold. The downside of personal loyalty to leaders combined with disempowerment may be quitting when trust is eroded. Over-reliance on personal bonds of trust makes recruiting hard and retention even harder, leading to a rotating door of poor and working-class people joining and disappearing.

Despite the relative absence of ideological disagreements, most long-term community groups were missing earlier cohorts of members who had quit in mistrust and rancor. For example, Grassroots Resistance had recently lost some member groups who became critical of the leadership. While of course quitting in disgust happens in all kinds of groups, in majority-working-class groups, loss of disaffected members seemed to
happen more regularly, not only during epic show-downs and not only when the group’s issue waned.

The history of most long-term community groups includes rift after rift, schism after schism. In some cases it seems that the bitter former members vastly outnumber the small numbers active today. Most founders had won power struggles to keep control of their groups.

_Dorothea: There've been three or four major [blow-ups] in the life of City Power. But they don't tend to be about political issues. Or sometimes they wear that clothing, but in the end, that's not what it's about._

_Interviewer: So what would you say they're about? About political issues?_  
_Dorothea: Oh. Power...um...yeah, usually._

Since these groups’ moral authority with government officials and funders came largely from having people personally affected by the problems as active members, whenever those numbers fell, it was a major problem not just politically, but for the organization’s very survival. Small numbers also precluded the use of the mass confrontation tactics favored by many activists in the community organizing tradition. Thus losing previously active people was a serious form of trouble for these groups.

The weakness of groups based on personal loyalty is revealed by the fact that of the eight long-standing community and labor groups in this study, there had been zero transitions from the founders to new leaders. Not just Elaine, Dorothea and Brandy, but Tony and another leader of the Tri-City Labor Alliance, Fred of Neighbors United, a pair of founders of Safety Net for All, and another pair of Low-Income Women Rising founders had each been in continuous leadership for 12 to 35 years. These ten leaders were aging (they were all born in the 1940s or 1950s, except for one born in the 1960s); they won’t be leading these groups forever. By contrast, a number of successful founder
transitions had happened in the long-term activist groups in the other movement traditions.

Since the long-time members who had stayed active were those loyal to these particular leaders, and since these powerhouse leaders had rare combinations of needed strengths, it is hard to imagine a transition to new leadership after the current leaders are gone.

Many community needs groups without such long-term, dedicated and trustworthy leadership have arisen and folded while these older groups plugged on, creating cohesion through bonds between the founding leaders and the core group. They are only as strong as those relationships. Since any given leader can only sustain a limited number of one-on-one relationships, this basis for group cohesion serves to keep groups small. And building a group on pre-existing social ties tends to reinforce the racial and class segregation of the wider society.

Trusting bonds are central to all social movement groups, but the necessity for such individual relationships of trust seems to be a defining characteristic of working-class-majority community groups in particular. Mistrust will crop up everywhere, some pairs of individuals will always become estranged, but a healthy group should be able to survive those broken personal bonds.

The Alinsky community organizing tradition has a number of mechanisms to prevent such overdependence on founding leaders, including the IAF’s regular rotation of lead organizers among regions (Warren 2001; Polletta 2002). But as McCarthy (2005) found in a national study of social movement groups, most local grassroots groups addressing community needs are not part of networks with such rules, but are
freestanding local organizations or smaller networks of groups. They are on their own in figuring out solutions to their troubles.

The labor movement tradition

Three of the 25 groups were labor-outreach groups rooted in the labor movement tradition. One was a successful unionization drive, with meetings attended by potential members from multiple worksites and their supporters. The second was a multi-union body attended by members and staff of many unions in one geographical area. The third was a labor-initiated coalition, whose member groups included not only unions but also community groups and social service agencies giving support to worker justice campaigns.

Such coalitions with non-unions have become much more common since John Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO in 1995 and reversed decades of labor movement insularity (Lichtenstein 2002: 255-269). Labor federations and Central Labor Councils used to do political work almost entirely with and for their member unions, but have increasingly collaborated with faith-based organizations on living wage campaigns (Pollin and Luce 1998), with immigrant organizations on workers centers (Fine 2006), and with students, environmentalists (Mayer 2008) and other progressive groups. Jobs with Justice is the best-known national network of local community/labor coalitions. To what extent unions’ internal culture has changed to facilitate such alliances with other groups, or whether culture clashes continue to happen, is an open question.

Unions are almost unique in the left-of-center political scene in the US in having their own large and steady funding stream from member dues. These three labor outreach groups each had only one or two staff dedicated entirely to the group, but they had many
union resources to draw on for administrative, lobbying and communications functions.

Despite setbacks from weak and unenforced labor laws and a steadily shrinking unionization rate (Lichtenstein 2002: Chapter 6; Shaiken 2007), unions and labor-sponsored groups remain the wealthiest and most independent political force on the U.S left. Confusion about cross-class alliance-building is often caused by the contrast between such large-budget organizations with working-class members and small-budget organizations with professional middle-class members.

Labor activists base today’s organizing on the historical exemplar of the early labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s (Lichtenstein 2002: Chapters 1-3). But today’s labor movement is very different from those years of industrial union growth. Looking at the membership of these three groups, they included both ‘old labor’ (mostly white, middle-aged men doing relatively high-paid jobs in manufacturing and skilled trades, in shrinking unions in shrinking industries) and ‘new labor’ (mostly immigrants and women of color doing low-paid service work, in growing unions in growing fields).

At labor outreach meetings, the majority of participants came from working-class or poor backgrounds. But only four in ten were lifelong in the working-class range; almost 30% were straddlers, the highest proportion of straddlers in any movement tradition. These straddlers were not only teachers and other unionized professionals, but also allies from non-labor groups. Involvement in a coalition convened by unions may appeal to activists from working-class backgrounds as a way of staying true to their roots.

The average current class of the labor groups was pulled down by some very low-paid, scantily educated workers recruited to their first meeting by the Local 21 Organizing Committee. Most long-time union members in labor outreach groups were
part of the labor aristocracy, stably employed homeowners, many of whom had taken some college courses or earned a public-college 2- or 4-year degree.

Figure 4.2 Breakdown of class trajectories of participants in labor outreach meetings

Compared with rank and file union members, experienced labor activists disproportionately had leftist politics and experience with other social movement groups. Many staff and elected leaders didn’t rise from the rank and file, but were moderately downwardly mobile PMC people who joined the labor movement out of political conviction (Early 2009: 149-152).

**Power from above**

Top-down, command and control authority was found in this study only among union staff. Some union members and staff expressed frustration with hierarchical decisions by union management. They chafed against the limits placed on the decision-making power of rank and file members, low-level staff and community partners. Workers praised staffers Owen of Local 21 and Tony of the Tri-City Labor Alliance for respecting the members and empowering them, as if that were a surprise.
Around the US, some autocratic labor leaders have taken advantage of working-class disempowerment and a tendency to rely on strong leadership. Rank-and-file struggles for internal democracy, such as Teamsters for Democratic Union and recent breakaway SEIU locals (Early 2011), are outnumbered by situations where corrupt or simply out-of-touch union officials have faced little resistance (Lichtenstein 2002: 257-260; Early 2004). The contrasting models of directive versus participatory leadership, which seems fairly irrelevant within most all-volunteer social change groups, is still hotly debated inside unions (Early 2009, 2011). Passive acceptance of strong leadership, even when untrustworthy, is a working-class pitfall (Lichterman 1996) that sometimes weakened the solidarity within these groups.

**Small turnouts weaken solidarity**

A united front of solidarity, all for one and one for all, makes sense to people rooted in stable working-class communities, with their norms of mutual aid and closing ranks against outside threats. Given this reliance on mass solidarity, small turnouts were not just disappointing, but sometimes left organizers at a loss for other tactics. Labor interviewees defined small numbers as their most serious trouble. Inactive members were seen as free riders, benefiting from the hard work of the active few.

Sometimes absence was given a class interpretation by union interviewees: the absence from meetings of the relatively prosperous homeowners in the labor aristocracy and of professional allies was interpreted as middle-class complacency and lack of solidarity; conversely, the absence of low-wage service workers was seen as evidence of hardships in their lives. The question labor interviewees most wanted answered was “Where is everybody?”
Staff antipoverty coalitions in the professional advocacy tradition

Three coalitions brought together professionals who in their day jobs responded to a single thorny, intractable problem facing local low-income people, such as poor schools, lack of health care, joblessness, or unaffordable housing. These coalitions’ goals were to share information about the problem with each other and to collaborate on joint activities that their individual organizations couldn’t do alone, such as lobby days and educational forums. Such joint efforts, aimed at generating the clout needed to reform policies and win state funding, can be found in most major metropolitan areas and in most human service fields.

Besides professional associations of legal aid lawyers, social workers, etc., there are few permanent national federations of such local or state groups. In the 1990s I directed a federation at the state level, the Massachusetts Human Services Coalition.

The advocacy coalitions in this study took more risks than do more mainstream, respectable multi-agency groups, such as the United Way or Mayor’s Commissions on community problems. They pushed government agencies and elected officials harder, and proposed more expensive reforms or more community input than those respectable groups would advocate. Less formal and more political than trade associations, advocacy coalitions are able to be nimble in responding to budget cuts or community crises (Meredith 2000). Individual professionals and agencies can let the coalition make the risky criticisms of state and local governments and advocate deeper change, while protecting their separate reputations.

A few informants reported being assigned to represent their agencies to the coalition, but most participants had volunteered to join. Some were able to count the time spent on the coalition as work hours for their employer, while others gave their time as
volunteers. Members included social workers and public health educators; legal aid lawyers; developers, teachers and other individual professionals in the relevant field; clergy; low-level government officials and politicians; and researchers, organizers and lobbyists from advocacy organizations. The top leaders of these three mixed-race, mixed-gender groups were professionals of color. Just one paid staff person served each group (although the Workforce Development Task Force was part of a bigger interfaith coalition with multiple staff).

**Tenuous ties among competitors**

The central trouble reported by members of these coalitions was turf wars and competition among member groups. Because coalition members included large, staffed organizations such as social service agencies, dependent on public and foundation funding, the financial stakes were higher than in other movement traditions. Direct competitors for the same funding sometimes met at coalition meetings, which made collaboration a dicey matter. The Brontown Affordable Housing Consortium had recently reconstituted itself after a rift between groups who accused each other of being territorial and undercutting other consortium members’ funding. Inner City Advocates was tiny during the observation period, and much whiter than before the African American director had stepped on the toes of a number of black community leaders working on the same issue.

At other times the competition was more subtle, over community prestige, or over whose frame would be used in the coalition’s messages and joint projects. The coalition’s choices of framing and program activities could make or break a member’s reputation with government officials and private funders. The Workforce Development Task Force
actually disbanded after the power struggle described in Chapter 1. At the heart of this conflict was a clash between the professional advocacy and community organizing movement traditions. Such fierce clashes were rare; more commonly, the polite indirectness and weak conflict-resolution skills learned from lower-PMC childhoods gave most members of these coalitions inadequate resources for dealing with competing interests.

Individual members’ career advancement might get a boost from the coalition’s joint activities; but a controversial coalition involvement might jeopardize future job opportunities. They had the contradictory allegiances (Wright 1985) of the so-called new class (Gouldner 1979) of not-for-profit employees: allegiances to the people whose needs they serve, allegiances to their individual organizations or careers, allegiances to the coalition itself, and allegiances to a vision of a fairer society that motivated them to attend more meetings and take more political risks than they had to.

A few interviewees saw it a problem that none of the people affected by the issue attended any of the meetings observed. Except for a few interns and community organizers, class diversity in these groups came primarily from people’s differing class backgrounds; these groups had 17% straddlers and another 17% who had risen within the working-class range, totaling less than 35% from working-class backgrounds. Involvement in such coalitions may have appealed to these straddlers and working-class anti-poverty workers as a way to stay true to their roots and give back to their communities of origin while working in a human service job. However, the mean, mode and median current class of participants at staff antipoverty coalitions was PMC. As this class composition would predict, the modes of dealing with territorial conflicts within
these coalitions veered from dominance by over-confident PMC, to fights started by unassimilated-straddler conflict-wagers, to indirect politeness by lower-professional conflict-avoiders.

Global/local cause groups in three social change traditions

Thirteen social change groups were multi-issue, making the connections between varied injustices. Thus their missions tended to require more words to explain, and more abstract words, than the labor outreach, advocacy coalition and community-needs groups’ missions.

Twelve of these 13 global/local cause groups, including all the ad hoc convention protest groups, were all-volunteer groups with no paid staff. Their fundraising tended to rely on requests for individual donations and on grassroots benefit events. Again, confusion about class dynamics among organizations arises when PMC-majority voluntary groups have vastly less money than dues-funded unions and grant-funded community-based organizations.
These groups tended to have a less racially diverse membership than those in the other three movement traditions. Three were entirely white. Only three of the 13 groups had achieved the cherished diversity goal of a substantial contingent of active members of color.

A bit of class diversity was present in several of these groups, but in contrast with the much-scrutinized racial diversity, this class diversity usually evolved incidentally, without intentional effort and without remark. All 13 groups had mean and median class backgrounds in the professional range. (See Table 10.4 and Appendix 4). One was a student group at a private four-year college. Most founders came from professional middle-class backgrounds.

**The personalist pitfall**

The most frequent trouble reported by interviewees from these 13 global/local cause groups was rancor, factionalization and difficulty getting people from different political tendencies to work together. This trouble stems from the class life story most common in these groups: radicalized in college, individually choosing an issue or ideology to give primary loyalty to, then carrying this individual commitment into an organization – the kind of self-directed political identity that Lichterman (1996) calls “personalist” and Rose (2000:16) calls “internally controlled.”

To some PMC activists with such personalist political loyalties, struggling with other activists over the political line, or over which group process best reflected the group’s values, could seem as valuable as external political struggle. The movement traditions in which these groups were rooted have historically included many groups that blew up after a short lifespan over ideological or group process differences, such as the
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panthers and SDS (Polletta 2002; Breines 1989); the Clamshell Alliance (Epstein 1991); and early feminist groups (Strobel 1995). In almost every case, the fiercest combatants were college-educated activists, many from professional families. Organizing inner-directed PMC activists is like herding cats.

Jasper (1997) calls this movement tradition “post-citizenship movements” (7). Compared with groups working to get a piece of the pie for a pre-existing social identity such as women or African Americans, these groups have to do more internal work in order to create a collective identity, more often identifying with a particular tactic (87) or subcultural symbol (159) – a set-up for internal focus and arguments.

To describe these 13 groups as one movement tradition is tricky, since they strongly disagreed on ideology and historical exemplars. The phrase ‘social change’ was used by all of them to summarize their vision of a more just world; they all prided themselves on thinking globally but acting both locally and globally; and all saw themselves as building a multi-issue radical movement. But they agreed on little else. The three main ideological strands are described below.

The progressive and non-profit traditions

Most of these groups had their roots in the so-called “new social movements” that arose in the 1970s and 1980s, the mostly white, mostly PMC feminist, environmental, anti-nuclear power and anti-militarism groups that stressed egalitarian process and direct action tactics (Epstein 1991; Breines 1989; Jasper 1997). Well-known examples of this movement tradition in 2007-8 were anti-war groups United for Peace and Justice and
Code Pink\textsuperscript{27}; Bill McKibben’s climate change network 350.org\textsuperscript{28}; School of the Americas Watch; and the new incarnation of Students for a Democratic Society\textsuperscript{29} founded in 2006.

While anarchist and militant anti-imperialist activists sometimes referred to this movement tradition as “liberal,” many college-educated activists within the tradition considered that word to be an insult, connoting a wishy-washy tendency to compromise with the powers that be. They tended to prefer the word “progressive” to describe themselves, a word they share with the Democratic Party liberals to their right on the political spectrum.

Whether or not they were pacifists, these activists were comfortable making a nonviolence pledge for all direct action. Some saw themselves continuing the nonviolent civil disobedience tradition begun by the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s.

The ad hoc convention protest groups in this tradition, such as The People’s Convention, had recent roots in the globalization movement’s mass protests at international bodies’ meetings and at the 2000 and 2004 political conventions. In the rare and iconic moment of multi-movement convergence at the Seattle World Trade Organization protests in 1999, this movement tradition was found in the Direct Action Network’s disciplined blockade, which successfully shut down the WTO meeting site for a day, and in the march with labor on the permitted route, not with the anarchist property destruction in downtown Seattle.

Group members born in the 1940s, 50s and 60s – baby boomers, more or less – tended to be the carriers of this tradition. They were majority white, mostly college-educated, and majority female. While every class trajectory showed up in these groups,
each group’s average was in the professional range. Less than one-third of the participants in these groups came from working-class, poor or LMC backgrounds, and fewer than one in six were in those classes as adults.

The internal eye, with non-profit versus social change process differences

Many progressive global/local activists kept one eye focused on the internal workings of the group at all times. Interviewees variously reported the groups’ worst troubles as too much or too little time spent discussing internal process, too many bureaucratic rules or too much internal chaos, too much domination by a few people or too extreme anti-leadership attitudes. Most of the passionate advocates of consensus decision-making or majority rule were found in the progressive global/local groups. Collectivist, prefigurative norms of striving to embody a just society in how the group operated collided with impatient desires for efficiency in reaching external social change goals.
Some of the sharpest conflicts over organizational structure and group process arose between the non-profit group style and the “new social movement” group style — two movement traditions which are combined in this section because they were so often found in the same coalitions, the same voluntary groups, and sometimes within the same person. Nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organizations with boards, executive directors and offices were a major influence on how the more informal voluntary groups in the study operated. Because this study spotlights voluntary groups with regular membership meetings, staff-run nonprofits are underrepresented here compared with their strong presence in the US left overall (McCarthy 2005). National progressive non-profits with local chapters active during the study period included the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Sierra Club. Among the progressive groups in the study, only Green Homes Green World was a staffed 501(c)(3) non-profit, with over a dozen staff; but so were many member groups within coalitions such as Peace and Justice Now, the Convention Protest Coalition, and The People’s Convention.

Two examples of norms that came into voluntary groups from this non-profit tradition are quorums and strategic plans with goals and objectives. While such non-profit norms were familiar to most of these activists, the new social movement tradition of volunteer-led, single-issue nonviolent-action campaigns was home base to more of them. Arguments over consensus versus majority-rules decision-making sometimes erupted between activists with these two sets of experience. Often, but not always, the nonprofit mode lined up with more moderate, liberal political values, while the progressive social change mode lined up with more radical political ideology.
Diversity angst

The progressive and non-profit global/local cause groups faced a contradiction between their professed antiracist values and their weak membership diversity. All these groups were founded by white college-educated people, except for Immigrants United, which was founded by college-educated people of color (mostly not immigrants themselves). But their diversity problem stemmed not just from having white PMC founders (some diverse community and labor groups had those too), but from being founded by activists with personalist commitments to stick to a particular issue, tactic, group process or political line, which, unsurprisingly, tended to appeal primarily to other white PMC people. Many members wanted racial diversity, but wanted even more to hold onto some white-culture-derived feature of the current group.

Individual members disagreed about whether or not disproportionate whiteness meant the group was a failure. To some, lack of racial diversity or male domination was an intolerable violation of their political values.

Groups in the militant anti-imperialist tradition

The militant anti-imperialist tradition is under-represented in this study compared with its presence the US movement today. Only the ad hoc convention protest group Stand Up Fight Back (SUFB) had a far-left ideology and a focus on imperialism by the US and its allies.

SUFB was an unstaffed, low-budget, ad hoc convention protest group. Neither wanting nor being qualified to receive foundation grants or government funding, it raised money through fundraising concerts and donations from a few active members. The membership was disproportionately male, middle-aged, white and PMC. But there was
some class diversity (a handful in the working-class range and 12% straddlers) and a few
members of color. This limited diversity was not seen as a particular problem. Though
the group claimed to represent poor communities of color, according to the leaders’
political values, a privileged group could be in solidarity with oppressed communities
without including them as members, as long as they consulted leaders of color for
political advice and were accountable to their feedback.

SUFB’s conflict with the People’s Convention reflects a key ideological split in
the movement today, most visible in the rift in the mid-decade anti-war movement
between the Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER) Coalition\textsuperscript{30} and United
for Peace and Justice (UfPJ). The Workers World Party\textsuperscript{31} founded ANSWER; among
many Marxist-party-sponsored coalitions attempted over the last 30 years, this was the
first one to gain a widespread following. If SUFB were not part of a major movement
strand of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century left, exemplified by ANSWER, I might have dropped it as an
outlier.

The signature issue of the disagreement between these two movement traditions
has been Palestine. To over-simplify, militant anti-imperialist activists emphasized this
Middle East issue more strongly than others, and criticized only Israel and not Palestinian
leaders; on the other hand, if progressive and non-profit groups talked about the Middle
East at all, the war in Iraq was their primary issue, and most strove to sound even-handed
in criticizing both Israeli and Palestinian leaders and in affirming a two-state solution.
This issue continues to be so hotly contentious that it’s rare for college-educated people
with opposing views to stay in the same organization unless the topic is completely
avoided.
In terms of rhetorical style and political vision, the ANSWER/UPJ split roughly parallels the differences between the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Harding 1993; Brown 1992). Some SUFB members and other militant leftist interviewees praised black nationalists and other male heroes of color from the 1960s, such as leaders of the American Indian Movement and Third World national liberation fronts. Arguments over nonviolence continue virtually unchanged from those movement divisions of 40 years ago.

The missing base

This militant anti-imperialist movement tradition today faces the conundrum that most working-class and poor people of color, whom they vocally champion, don’t hold radical-leftist frames on social issues, including their own oppression. In the late 1960s, public expressions of rage had a galvanizing, mobilizing force (Cluster 1979; Gould 2009): the militant rhetoric of the Black Panthers, American Indian Movement and other such groups lit a spark at the grassroots level, mobilizing many new activists. But those who have tried to do the same since have found a much less favorable political environment. Look, for example, at the terrible, tragic story of MOVE in Philadelphia: radicals were shot, firebombed, killed and jailed in 1978 and 1985 without ever winning support in the African American community that the group intended to ignite. The ANSWER Coalition has had more success in building a militant anti-imperialist organization, largely through mobilizing experienced college-educated activists, and by avoiding the violent rhetoric and tactics that have marginalized some other militant groups.
The militant anti-imperialist tradition was a vocal minority within the convention protests. SUFB shrank over the months before the DNC, keeping close alliances only with one anarchist group and two militant groups of color. SUFB’s political position, while clearly sincere, lost credibility in some interviewees’ eyes when they claimed a mass base they couldn’t produce.

Figure 4.5 Breakdown of class trajectories of meeting participants in one militant anti-imperialist group

Any class-culture conclusions about this movement tradition would be unwise given the sample size of just one group. But it is suggestive for future research that the contentious SUFB was the only group in which a plurality of core founders were uprooted and unassimilated straddlers.

The main troubles of this movement tradition seem to be rancorous conflicts with other activist groups. The harsh language and heated emotions that these activists directed at political elites were sometimes turned against movement rivals and internal dissenters as well, which intensified the intra-movement conflict before the Democratic National Convention. Interviewees from Stand Up Fight Back, including Emilio (profiled in Chapter 3), all agreed that their greatest problem was the other groups who insisted on
separate organizational identities and refused to subsume themselves into SUFB; they expected all compromises to be made by others.

Extreme breaches of shared values happened in all types of groups, but by celebrating outlaw status and eschewing remedies such as civility codes, this militant anti-imperialist group left itself with the fewest resources to rein in its own hotheads. This tradition has strengths, such as courage and persistence, but its angry emotion norms and anti-process bias can leave groups without much capacity for conflict resolution.

**The anarchist tradition**

Three of the convention protest groups as well as the Parecon Collective were explicitly anarchist, although all welcomed non-anarchist members. In addition, some activists born in the 1980s brought anarchist ideas and the DIY subculture into other coalitions, similar to the way that the anarchist influence appeared early in the early stages of the Occupy movement in 2011 through the emphasis on horizontal group process.

In today’s anarchist ideology, all forms of authority — from the US military, to multinational corporations, to local cops, to leaders of non-anarchist progressive groups, to individual activists who talk too much at a meeting — are seen as manifestations of the same system of domination that is the root of all injustice (Bookchin 1982; Irwin 1997). A few anarchists condemned groups in other movement traditions as “the authoritarian left,” refusing to participate in coalitions with them. The masked street confrontation for which this subculture is renowned, including property damage and physical resistance to police control, is intended to express such wide-ranging resistance to all authority. In the Seattle WTO protests in 1999, masked activists in the “black bloc” made headlines by
smashing store windows and fighting with police in Seattle, although in fact many other anarchists participated instead in the well-disciplined nonviolent blockade of the WTO meeting site.

Most anarchist groups choose to remain local and independent, affiliating only loosely with national or international networks such as the Anarchist Black Cross Federation. The best-known network of groups to grow out of this movement tradition is Food Not Bombs, whose volunteers cook and serve vegan meals to homeless people and others in many US cities. Critical Mass, which takes over city streets with swarms of bicycles, is another national network in this tradition.

On many tactical, group process and style questions, the anarchist movement tradition seems to have two strands that correspond with the punk and pagan styles described in Chapter 1. The roots of punk lay in alienated working-class British youths’ imitation in the 1970s of Jamaican and other West Indian styles, using chains and ripped clothes to project a menacing, forbidding asceticism (Hebdige 1979:65-66, 87). “The punks wore clothes which were the sartorial equivalent of swear words, and they swore as they dressed – with calculated effect…” (Hebdige 1979: 114). Punk style spread across the Atlantic with music, the Sex Pistols and the Clash, and morphed into today’s hard-edged urban anti-authoritarian VDM scene (O’Connor 2008). While particular style details have changed from 1970s British punk to 21st century American anarchism, an impulse towards expressing resistance in clothing persists. When I asked protestors with bandanas across their faces why they wore them, some of their answers, such as “We don’t want the cops to see us as individuals, but like we’re all one,” echoed Hebdige’s description of punk intentions of projecting “impregnable solidarity” (1979: 66).
The pagan anarchist subcultural strain grew out of the cultural feminism, wiccan spirituality and back-to-the-land subcultures of the 1970s (Griffin 1978; Starhawk 1979, 1988; Binkley 2007). Some wings of the 1970s feminist and anti-nuclear movements, as well as the 1980s movements against military intervention in Central America and for lesbian and gay rights, incorporated pagan rituals into meetings and direct action (Jasper 1997: chapter 8; Epstein 1991). Some of the very same core organizers of the pagan wing of those movements also played central roles in the 2008 convention protests. For example, feminist pagan author and activist Starhawk (1979, 1988) was mentioned as an inspiration and role model by some anarchist interviewees. As a participant in the 1990s globalization movement myself, I concluded that she had almost single-handedly carried pagan frames and practices from those earlier movements into recent waves of direct action. She spoke at some 2008 convention protest events and wrote about them afterwards (Starhawk 2008).

Anarchist direct actions and DIY projects have been the fastest growing movement tradition since the globalization movement arose in the late 1990s (Yuen et al 2004; Starr 2005; Kutz-Flamenbaum 2010). Within the initial Occupy mobilization of fall 2011, experienced anarchist activists appeared to be a small minority of occupiers, but very influential. The largest meetings observed in this study were the Spokes Councils convened by anarchist groups during the 2008 Republican and Democratic conventions, some as large as 400 people.

The three anarchist ad hoc convention protest groups were very low-budget, relying on individual donations and fundraising events, as well as on the unpaid work of
VDM members. But not all anarchist groups were penniless; the Parecon Collective supported its educational efforts through a collective business and some large donors.

The commonly held image of the prototypical anarchist as a young, white, college-educated male from a privileged background was roughly true of the mode in these groups, but was complicated by the presence of a few middle-aged people and some lifelong working-class people (over one-quarter of all members). Three of the four groups were disproportionately male, but all had some central women.

Two-thirds of members of anarchist groups came from the professional range of backgrounds. Their mean class background was the highest of any movement tradition (see Appendix 4), with the highest percent of members, 22%, from upper-middle-class backgrounds. But most were not current professionals: more were VDM, or students and other young adults who had yet to hold professional jobs.

Figure 4.6 Breakdown of class trajectories of participants in anarchist meetings

![Figure 4.6 Breakdown of class trajectories of participants in anarchist meetings](image)

Limited racial diversity was not raised as a problem by anarchist interviewees as it was by many progressive global/local activists. Ideological agreement was the basis for
group identity, and it seemed to be fine for homogeneous individuals to be drawn together by shared political values.

**Mistrust and troubles with community building**

Members of anarchist groups were more likely than those in any other movement tradition to express worries about their own groups and severe criticisms of the anarchist movement as a whole. And by far their most frequent complaint was mistrust. Suspecting (often correctly) that infiltrators paid by the government were present at meetings, anarchists in direct action groups withheld trust from anyone who hadn’t been vouched for by a trusted comrade. To prevent law enforcement from disrupting them, many anarchists agreed to a discipline often called “security culture,” which involved secrecy and sharing information only on a need-to-know basis, leading to in-group/out-group dynamics. Besides fear of infiltration, there was mistrust about inadequate courage for street battles, mistrust about egoistic opportunism, and mistrust about domination within groups, particularly sexist male domination.

Unlike labor and community groups’ roots in a shared neighborhood, workplace or family, or in preexisting friendships, all global/local cause activists tend to arrive at the group as disconnected individuals. In progressive and militant groups, bonds of trust with newcomers were sometimes built by what happened in meetings; but in anarchist groups, a stranger coming to a meeting aroused suspicion. Trust was built instead during street confrontations – a relatively rare opportunity to watch how someone acted, not readily available when there was a need to check out any given newcomer – or through intensive experiences of living together or playing in bands, experiences shared only by a small core group. Only in a few times and places has a large “scene” of antiauthoritarians
provided a social context for anarchist political action (Leach and Haunss 2009). When the social scene was weak, the ‘herding cats’ problem with organizing any inner-directed PMC-background activists became even more acute in anarchist groups.

In Leach’s (2009) terms, the punk-derived strain of anarchism emphasized “oppositional autonomy” (confrontations with political authorities) and the pagan-derived strain emphasized “constructivist autonomy” (creating alternatives that prefigured a non-coercive society). These emphases don’t have to be contradictory — a group can do both — but some who stressed oppositional autonomy had reservations about the community-building focus of some constructivists. A very young white women with dreadlocks, Amira, said of her direct action group, “Autonomous Zone is the most radical in what they do… They’re not just creating communities like the hippies did, they’re trying to change the system, taking action.”

The organizational tone that resulted from such mistrust and antagonism was often strangely cold, quiet and cliquey. Given that trust and solidarity were especially needed for some of these groups’ high-risk tactics, the weak resources for building a sense of community with new recruits were a big problem within this movement tradition.

Missing strategy components

The lack of pragmatism that is a risk of any ideologically driven activism seemed most pronounced in the four anarchist groups. Between the broadest goals of overturning neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy and all other oppressions and the most immediate goal of blocking a certain street, anarchist interviewees tended to articulate few intermediate goals. This weakness in identifying targets and winnable goals also plagued the early
Occupy movement in 2011. Intermediate reform goals, or even acknowledging authorities enough to negotiate with them, sometimes seemed to be a betrayal of the dream of a horizontal, autonomous society.

The entire strategic vocabulary used by other groups to talk about public education, media framing, and pressuring politicians was rejected, leaving a large, muddy hole.

Some off-the-grid lifestyle proponents seemed to naively envision a simple additive process whereby a sustainable economy would pop into effect when enough individuals changed their habits, with no pushback by corporations or other entrenched powers. Meadow put this strategy into words most clearly. Looking no older than 25 in her late 30s and energetically upbeat, Meadow was a good advertisement for the healthy effects of an off-the-grid lifestyle, and her low carbon footprint no doubt had some direct positive effect on the planet. But she revealed a limitation of individual VDM lifestyle choices as a movement strategy when she expressed intense frustration and sadness over how few Americans, even radical activists, were willing to drop out of the capitalist economy:

_There aren't bike tribes going from garden to garden, it's not happening. Because I've experienced that, I grieve… I feel like a foreigner; I don't feel I belong in American culture. I'm a visionary; I see how things could be different and I'm acting towards that vision. That's very unusual in this country. Most people are resigned; [people say to me,] 'I'm glad you have those ideals, but we're never going to have that in this country'.” [They say,] 'Wouldn't it be great if we grew our own food and stopped this environmental catastrophe from happening? But it's never going to happen' – hopelessness!_

The convention protest action she was organizing had few takers, presumably in part because it included physical rigors. Her story reveals weaknesses of the political
strategy of being an exemplar of a different mode of life, in hopes that others’ lifestyle choices will eventually add up to a mass withdrawal from mainstream institutions.

There were exceptions to this anarchist avoidance of intermediate strategies. I participated in a well-planned anarchist march to the headquarters of all the major polluters who funded the supposedly environmentally friendly Democratic National Convention. When we handed out flyers about each corporation’s violations, some bystanders seemed shocked to learn of convention sponsors’ environmental violations; thus we met the goal of exposing the hypocrisy of the proclaimed “greenest convention ever.” But this was an exception to an overall vagueness of purpose.

Some of the anarchists’ historical exemplars, such as the Zapatistas and the Russian and Spanish anarchists of the early 20th century, existed in such different political times and places as to provide little concrete guidance to 21st century US anarchism. The anarchist interviewees were looking farther into the past and farther into a utopian future for their model of activism than were those from the other movement traditions.

Groups that some interviewees admired as heroic, such as Earth First!, had been effectively suppressed by criminal prosecution and other government opposition. The repression of protestors during the 2008 conventions (arrests for activities protected by the First Amendment, such as walking in a public park, and some heavy charges under post-9/11 anti-terrorism laws) revealed that this law enforcement strategy of suppression continues (Starr et al. 2008; Starhawk 2010).

The Occupy movement has raised interesting questions about whether the anarchist political tendency is growing or shrinking. While their hand signals, tactics of
claiming public space and iconography took a great leap into the mainstream in late 2011, there were also more signs of open disagreement with anarchist activists than during the globalization and anti-war movements of the 1990s and 2000s (Starr 2005). When Occupy Oakland participants scrubbed off graffiti, apologized to store managers and offered to pay for windows smashed by self-identified anarchists during the port-closure actions of November 2011 (CBS 2011; East Bay News 2011), a new line may have been drawn between the broader network of prefigurative progressive activists and the hard-core anarchists. The uniformly firm nonviolence commitments of the Occupy movement are also a repudiation of the ‘diversity of tactics’ compromises of the prior decade.

The interplay of classes and movement traditions

The chapters that follow take up the class-culture troubles of each movement tradition and each class category profiled above: low turn-out and high turn-over; disempowerment and entitled domination; over-reliance on leaders and anti-leadership attitudes; excessive ideological barriers and too much internal focus; clashing approaches to anti-racism; class pretense and confusion; mistrust, rancor and intra-movement attacks; self-effacing and indirect communication; and weak conflict-resolution and community-building mechanisms.

Table 4.2 Group types where each class trajectory category was encountered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Range</th>
<th>Community needs</th>
<th>Labor outreach</th>
<th>Anti-poverty staff advocacy</th>
<th>Progressive global/local</th>
<th>Militant global/local</th>
<th>Anarchist global/local</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working-class range</td>
<td><strong>35%</strong></td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straddlers (upwardly mobile)</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional range</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td><strong>49%</strong></td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntarily downwardly mobile</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td><strong>82%</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N = number of respondents*
As we saw above, every group in this study was class-diverse, and there were many members class-incongruous with their group’s movement tradition, such as lifelong-upper-middle-class labor leaders. When movement tradition norms contradict core members’ class predispositions, there’s no neat formula for which one prevails. Many stories in the coming chapters will demonstrate how the interaction played out in
practice. Individual personalities, political contexts, and race and gender dynamics also complicate the picture.

Each class culture and each classed movement history has its own distinct resources and strengths, as the coming chapters will show. The challenge of building a stronger and more unified movement for progressive social change is not just to find common ground to bridge these different movement traditions, but also to tap the resources within all class cultures to find new solutions to group troubles.
CHAPTER 5 - ‘Where is everybody?’ Approaches to recruitment & 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 or figuratively. Too few new people joining; 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 tried to solve such turnout problems and finds that their attempted solutions tended to correlate with their class trajectory.

Activists talked about two components of improving turnout, continually recruiting new people and getting people to return by improving group cohesion. First, the need for new people and the best ways to recruit them were the most 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 bonded 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 varied approaches to recruiting new members and building group cohesion.
To summarize this argument: working-class activists, most of whom were recruited into activism through pre-existing networks to work on issues that affected them personally, turned more often to immediate incentives to recruit others. They used food, mutual aid, services to individuals, and teasing and self-deprecating humor to strengthen camaraderie.

By contrast, professional middle-class (PMC) people, who first made commitments to activism based on individual conversion to progressive ideas and then joined ideologically compatible groups as a second step, tended to rely on agreement with the group’s political ideas to draw in new people, often overlooking working-class community-building practices.

Voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) activists were even more likely to have joined a group through ideological affinity, as well as through attraction to a distinct subculture. Even more than other college-educated activists, some majority-VDM groups omitted food, humor, individual relationships with new recruits, cheers and even greetings as means of developing group cohesion. As a result, their meetings tended to be relatively cold and unwelcoming. But as the most distinct movement subculture, majority-VDM anarchist groups had their own unique ways of strengthening identity with the group.

In other words, activists’ own experience of getting involved shaped their practices of getting others involved.

The study participants’ paths to activism and their beliefs about recruiting others were probed in interviews, and were often revealed during meetings as well. The question “How did you first get involved?” was asked of more than 50 of the interviewees, and
was also asked by several meeting facilitators during introductory go-arounds. Meeting participants came to activism by three well-trodden paths. First, their friends, family or colleagues invited them to join a group (McAdam 1988; Klandermans 1997; Somma 2009). Second, they were shocked by something awful in the community or the world (Jasper 1997: 324-5; Teske 1997), and they then found similarly concerned people with whom to work on that one issue (Han 2009). And I observed a third path among informants whose job or religious affiliation involved attending a coalition meeting, which then became a voluntary passion. These three common answers (invited, shocked or extending from another role) were just as likely to be heard from people of all classes, all races, all age brackets, and in some cases all genders. (Women disproportionately mentioned being recruited by a friend.) But in terms of who invited them to get involved with what issue, there were some class-distinct patterns, described in the three class profiles below, that reveal how the very meaning of activism differs in different class communities.

Activists’ beliefs about recruitment methods were also uncovered in both interviews and meetings. Most interviewees were asked, “What would it take to make this into a bigger group?” and “Who else can you picture at these meetings, and what would persuade them to come?” In addition, at several meetings with low turnout, the gripe sessions about low turnout included revealing discussions of how to get more people to come in the future. Very different ways of thinking about recruitment emerged from these interviews and discussions. Two cases of low-turnout meetings in particular, profiled in the next section, illustrate this striking contrast in activist class cultures.
Straddlers, with their hybrid working-class/PMC life experience, did not have a distinct set of group-building beliefs and practices; but the working-class, PMC and VDM trajectories each had a very distinct class cultural pattern in how they solved turnout problems. Three class profile sections, following the two illustrative meeting stories below, unpack the logic of these class categories’ approaches to recruitment and building group cohesion.

**Class contrast between two low turnout meetings**

The classed approaches to recruitment and group building can be illustrated by comparing two cases. At both these meetings, more than half the elected board members didn’t show up: first, a meeting of the all-PMC Green Homes Green World (GHGW); and second, the same tiny working-class-majority meeting of the Local 21 Organizing Committee profiled in Chapter 1, where rank-and-file members clashed with the lower-professional organizer Lynette.

These two meetings offer a contrast between races, as well as a class contrast: the Local 21 rank-and-file elected board members were all black, with only white organizer Lynette and one other white activist present; GHGW board members were mostly white, with just one Latina.

In both meetings, some members came late, so that there was a prolonged informal time in which even smaller groups had ‘Where is everybody?’ discussions.

The most obvious difference between GHGW’s and Local 21’s discussions was the issue of selective incentives (Gamson 1990: 69-70). Much of Local 21’s discussion focused on what incentives would get new people in the door. The lifelong-working-class black rank-and-file leaders couldn’t believe that other workers would ignore a campaign
that would so clearly benefit them, possibly within a year if their unionization campaign succeeded. They wearily discussed how to get people to show up for even shorter-term gratification, such as skill training or a free zoo trip for their kids. By contrast, material self-interest never came up at GHGW, whose members were presumed to have enough interest in the issue and enjoyment of the group’s activities to stay involved.

Food, the most immediate kind of incentive, was handled very differently in the two groups. Though the GHGW meeting started at 6 pm, no food was provided. (One member brought a bag dinner from home, another a take-out sandwich). In the discussion of low board member turnout and recruitment, food was never mentioned. By contrast, like all working-class-majority meetings observed in this study, the Local 21 meeting provided food for everyone. The quality of the food was discussed, sometimes jokingly, as the reason for the board absences. Those who preferred Chinese food pretended to blame the pizza for the low turnout.

This emphasis on quality of food and entertainment continued in the argument, described in Chapter 1, over whether or not a party with hot dogs and no alcohol in a public park would draw in new people, with all the black working-class members vehemently arguing that it would not. Marion said, “If [the party] ain’t on a boat, can’t get them to [show up]... Bring your family, have a zoo day or something.” The proposed hot dogs were seen as a step down from the pizza served at regular meetings.

The members couldn’t believe that white lower-professional organizer Lynette didn’t understand that a workplace skill-certification training that would enable people to earn immediate higher wages would be the biggest draw, giving workers a tangible taste of the kind of benefits that unionization would bring.
By contrast, during GHGW’s long discussion about prospective board members, what the individuals would gain by joining the board was not mentioned. Potential board members were considered because of their affiliation with the mission, and usually ruled out because they would be too busy with other commitments. In her interview, board member Melissa said those who “share the ethic” tended to join Green Homes Green World. No one suggested recruiting their own relatives, which some Local 21 members had done.

When asked what their family and friends thought of their involvement in the group, GHGW interviewees mentioned only supportive reactions, except for one from a right-wing Republican relative who disagreed ideologically. But Martina of Local 21 answered, “Well, they say it’s a waste of time, because we’re not getting any benefits from it.”

Both groups laughed a lot, releasing the frustration about the no-shows, but their type of humor was different. The joking comments about tardiness in particular exemplified class differences in senses of humor. As I’ll show in the Humor interlude following this chapter, working-class-majority groups more often elicited laughter with teasing and fake bad behavior in meetings, while PMC-majority groups also laughed at wordplay and cultural references. Lynette’s faux scolding of latecomers was one of many fake-bad comments that elicited laughter:

*Alonzo: Man, these Pepsis are hot!*  
*Marion <sarcastically>: You didn't really expect us to get ice, didja?...*  
*Lynette: The pizza was hot for the people who came on time!*  
*Martina: Oooh! < group laughter>*
Since GHGW board members sincerely wanted to recruit more people of color and low-income people to their board, the obscurity of some of their humorous references could pose a problem in making recruits with less formal education feel welcome:

Melissa: I was saying that the only way to start on time is if we really start the meetings on time. <Calling into hallway:> Perry, where are you?
Perry <from hallway>: I’m right here.
Maya: We’re subverting the tardiness paradigm; you should join us. <group laughter>
Melissa: My God, that’s great. Can I put that in the minutes? <laughter>

Not as obscure as Maya’s academic postmodern reference, but still perhaps difficult for a politically inexperienced member to follow was this exchange about a vendor whose acronym, NEDO, was pronounced similarly to the acronym for the North American Treaty Organization:

Melissa: NEDO? We’re paying NATO? It sounds so wrong <group laughter>…
Gordon: Dick Cheney doesn’t surveille us if we make a regular contribution.

Gordon of GHGW also used a certain fake formality, imitating a legal document or a textbook to sound funny, that was heard only from white and black men from upper-middle-class backgrounds. For example, he sidestepped a question from the staff director by pretending to dictate for the minutes, “‘Board expresses its sense of appreciation for being informed of these impending changes, but defers to it being an executive director’s function’.” As a lawyer, Gordon mixed managerial technicalities with a characteristically PMC sense of absurdity in word play:

Maya: We’re adjourned.
Melissa: We can’t vote to adjourn though. <group laughter>
Gordon: Right, we don’t have a quorum, so we have to stay here until somebody gets here. Of course we didn’t have a quorum to convene, so maybe we were never really here at all. <group laughter>
On the other hand, Local 21 members filled in the pre-meeting time of waiting for more people to show up mostly with teasing and banter, a very different flavor of humor. Marion seemed to be pretending to be at a singles party, Alonzo mock-accused her of drinking, and Will used an exaggerated mock insult:

Marion <in fake flirtatious voice>: Hi-i! <giggles>
Alonzo: Marion, did you have a beer before you here?...
Marion <to Alonzo>: I didn't know for sure you were a Scorpio, but your eyebrows-
Will: You should have looked at his tail! <Big laugh from Marion>

The emotional tone of the two meetings’ ‘where is everybody’ discussions was also very different. Local 21 rank-and-file members expressed anger at the no-shows in their tone of voice, body language and ad hominem criticism, including exaggerated antagonism to the point of mock threats of violence. For example, Alonzo said, “I remember Martina call somebody [who said] ‘don't call me no more…’ Probably if Martina was right in front of her, she'd have knocked her out! <Marion laughs>” When Local 21 members were united in frustration at Lynette, they made eye contact with each other, tag-teamed each other in teasing her, and used expressive body language (the women slumping and leaning into each other, Alonzo pacing around the room, putting on his hat and pretending to walk out).

By contrast, in the relatively formal non-profit GHGW, low-turnout was calmly discussed as a procedural problem, a lack of a quorum. At a white high-professional’s suggestion, all agenda items requiring a vote were postponed. The proposed solutions to low turnout were more procedural than in other groups, such as polling absent members about the best night of the week for future meetings. All GHGW members stayed upright
in their chairs, with no body language more notable than looking downward or up at the speaker. If they were angry at the no-shows, it was impossible to tell.

Why did these two groups react so differently to a poorly attended meeting? The answer is that activism itself means two very different things to lifelong-working-class and college-educated people, and these different definitions lead to different approaches to recruitment and building group cohesion. The roots of these differences are seen in activists’ autobiographical statements about how they came to the group or the movement.

**Working-class paths to activism and resulting group culture traits**

Because working-class activists were often recruited by people with whom they already shared circumstances (neighborhood, family, workplace or a common social problem); because they had more often been offered selective incentives that benefited them individually; and because they usually saw no clear contrast with other less-political community involvements, working-class activists tended to define activism as helping people and providing mutual aid for each others’ day-to-day needs.

People from working-class backgrounds (both currently working-class and straddlers) not only tended to describe how the group’s issue affected them personally (as Han (2009) also found), but also how the group’s work benefited particular people in need. Altruistic motives of helping others and ‘giving back to the community’ were incorporated into working-class accounts of their activist life stories, not in opposition to wanting to improve their own family’s lot, but woven together, often in the same sentence or paragraph.
Elsie: I go all around the world fighting for better health care, not just for myself but for the millions of people that don't have medical and the seniors and the children that can't get insurance.

Working-class activists talked about children and grandchildren much more frequently than PMC and VDM activists. Sometimes younger generations were invoked as the motivation for activism, its intended beneficiaries (cf. Eliasoph 1998: Chapter 3 and 246-8). When Nicole was asked why she got involved in activism, she answered:

My personal reason is, I have a three-year-old grandson… I want to see things be better for him…. My family leaves it up to me to do all this community work… I wanna change things.

Similarly, when asked what people in her group had in common, one working-class Latina in a staff advocacy group said, “I think that the people who are at the table really, really care about kids.”

Working-class people used the word “kid” more than seven times per 10,000 words spoken, a very high incidence. This working-class rate is more than twice as frequent as PMC interviewees and as all college-educated interviewees, and more than three times as frequent as VDM interviewees. Similar ratios were found for the less common words “child” and “grandchild.” Straddlers talked about children less often than lifelong-working-class interviewees did, but more often than PMC and VDM interviewees.

In addition to children and families, relationships among activists were also central in working-class involvement stories. In answering “How did you first get involved?,” many lifelong-working-class and straddler activists referred to a trusted leader who had recruited and/or mentored them, or a politician or other public figure who
had inspired them. As a result, they also tended to emphasize such one-on-one relationships with leaders when they talked about drawing in new people.

Most majority-working-class groups in the study were based on a shared circumstance, such as an occupation or a workplace in need of unionization, a neighborhood, or being a welfare recipient. This partially explains why working-class and straddler interviewees talked about activist groups in terms of linked fate and shared benefits.

But even when it wasn’t literally true that everyone in the group was affected by a problem or helped by the group’s work, people from working-class backgrounds made a rhetorical point of tying everyone’s self-interest together. For example, in explaining why Women Safe from Violence attracted both survivors and those who hadn’t faced violence, Nadine said, “No one is actually immune from [violence], a whole spectrum of different people have been brutalized.” To rally support for a health-related bill that would affect one member union in particular, a member of Tri-City Labor Alliance made the point that “we’re all patients.” Common threats and common needs were invoked both rhetorically and literally in working-class narratives and recruitment efforts.

**Not political ideas but personal impact**

In a strangely strong correlation, agreement with the group’s ideology or political ideals was mentioned as a recruiting tool by an informant from a working-class background only once: one straddler talked about creating a moral shock by publishing horrific “My Lai type” images of the Iraq war. All lifelong working-class interviewees and all other straddlers, when asked what works to recruit, entirely omitted political ideas from their answers to questions about recruitment. More broadly, informants from
working-class backgrounds only rarely mentioned political agreement in meetings and interviews. A study of thousands of working-class activists would no doubt find at least a few who stressed using their group’s underlying political ideas to recruit like-minded people. But clearly ideology as a recruitment tool was much less often emphasized by working-class activists than by PMC activists.

Instead, the personal impact of the issue was key for people from working-class backgrounds. As seen in the Local 21 example above, working-class activists stressed material incentives, what benefits the new recruit would get in the short-term: immediate help with their problems; a chance for money or job advancement; or a realistic short-term plan to win a campaign benefiting their families. This was true even if interviewees were now college-educated straddlers, even if they were in anti-war or environmental groups — but personal impact was most heavily stressed by lifelong-working-class activists in labor or community-needs groups.

Working-class activists tended to be very skeptical that simply education or information about issues would motivate non-activists to become active. Nicole said,

*I think that a lot of the people don't wanna get involved… until it actually happens to them, or … if it hits them in a personal way, then you'll see them react and they wanna make a change.*

Even straddlers working on issues that didn’t affect them imagined that others would be drawn in by a personal connection with the issue, as Jeremiah suggested:

*Someone* was saying ‘we can't get students involved in these issues’. And one of the things I was suggesting is that maybe we got the wrong issues…maybe if we stop trying to organize students around issues of the 60s, you know, and look at issues of 2008, maybe we can organize it. And he said, ‘like what?’… If you throw out students loans… you’re gonna get a lot of takers, people are gonna come to you and say ‘what about this student loan things?’.
Even advocacy campaigns for longer-term policy change were sometimes framed in terms of personal unmet needs to attract new recruits. For example, Dorothea said that the City Power staff would soon be going to the welfare office to recruit for a grassroots lobbying campaign against a welfare budget cut by “flyering, and saying stuff like, you know, ‘Come to this meeting and tell us why you need more money on your welfare check’.” With issues that were difficult to personalize, such as climate change, some activists, disproportionately from working-class backgrounds, found self-interest angles, such as saving on energy bills.

When working-class activists focused on self-interest and personal benefits, instead of political ideals, as the key to recruitment, was that a realistic or unrealistic assessment of their constituencies? In a study of the pro-life movement, which has many working-class adherents, Munson (2008) found that agreement with the movement’s anti-abortion positions did not always precede joining a pro-life group, but in fact often came second; he concludes that most social movement scholars over-emphasize the role of ideas and political beliefs in mobilization (5). Eliasoph (1998) heard both activists and community volunteers attribute self-interested motives to potential recruits (83, 186) and avoid idealistic discourse, even though they themselves had public-spirited motivations. She explains this contradiction by tracing a long history of highlighting individualism and “the language of self-interest” in US public discourse (253).

Similarly, it was obvious that the working-class activists in my study were familiar with altruistic self-sacrifice as part of involvement in social change groups. They themselves gave many unpaid hours, and most did unpleasant tasks for little glory. For example, Bette, a core member of Women Safe from Violence, spent day after day for
many years in courtrooms, monitoring for judicial misconduct; a less inherently rewarding task can scarcely be imagined. But when they talked about getting new people in the door initially, even the most altruistic working-class activists focused on others’ individual incentives. As one labor outreach activist put it, “We think it’s important to increase community participation...but people say ‘what’s in it for me?’ It’s a real challenge.”

The shrunken size of some working-class-majority groups may have stemmed from their habit of not discussing what issues and frames would attract more or fewer new recruits. A number of the community-needs groups had had bigger memberships in past years, for example during the welfare reform fight of the mid-1990s; and a decade later, some had made very few changes in their messages and goals despite a new political context.

Different understandings of the purpose of organizing for collective action seem to underlie these differences in recruitment pitches, as the next section shows.

**Working-class definitions of activism as helping and mutual aid**

‘Helping people’ was the very definition of activism in some working-class communities. Because they themselves or someone they knew had gotten concrete assistance from their group or its members, interviewees from working-class backgrounds described the goals of their groups as helping people, while those from professional backgrounds virtually never did.

For example, a low-income African American, Courtney, said the goal of City Power was “To help and empower people...Help them help their selves.” White straddler Estelle said of Safety Net for All said the group “began to help poor women
find out how to get the benefits they needed, how to work their way through the welfare system.”

In their interviews, working-class informants used the word “help” (and its variations such as “helping”) more often than interviewees of other classes, 1.3 times as often as PMC activists, 1.5 times as often as straddlers, and 1.8 times as often as VDM activists. Most commonly, they included the word “help” when describing the goal of their group.

In talking about community needs groups, it may seem tautological to say that the group met community needs. Of course members of these groups are more likely to talk about helping people in need, since their members and constituency included people personally affected by pressing problems. But individuals’ own class trajectories predicted whether they talked about helping people more reliably than did their movement tradition. The PMC members of community needs groups didn’t mention helping individuals. For example, Alexis, a lifelong-professional Latina in a mostly low-income anti-poverty group, said her reason for joining was “contributing to ending what’s going on right now with poverty in America,” which framed the group’s assistance to impoverished individuals as an abstract, generalized cause. I suspect that “helping” would seem to many PMC activists too patronizing, too condescending a role for someone as advantaged as themselves to play.

Conversely, working-class members of advocacy and global cause groups did tend to frame their groups’ goals as helping individuals, even when other group members didn’t. For example, in the majority-lower-professional Brontown Affordable Housing Consortium, whose mission was mostly policy advocacy, one of the few lifelong
members from a working-class background, Michael, a young white straddler, was also one of the few to omit references to policy change from his answer about the goals of the group, and to stress instead how the consortium enables member agencies to better help people in their urban community:

*It allows all of those organizations… to tell what they're doing… what's going on so that everybody can get together to decide who can help who… what would best help [low-income people] in [Brontown].*

To emphasize the virtues of their groups, working-class activists tended to tell stories about particular individuals who had been helped. For example, older white working-class welfare-rights organizer Toni said,

*One of the participants in one of [our] workshops did get help through Safety Net for All. He came out of prison, he got married, had a family, couldn't get a job, couldn't get an apartment. Through information that we provided, he was able to get an apartment and turn his life around, so that's good.*

At a meeting of the diverse but majority-white-PMC group Easthaver Demands Justice (EDJ), there was an introductory go-around about members’ other community involvements. PMC members mostly talked about their environmental and anti-militarism causes using general terms, but African American straddler Laverne focused much more on her other community groups’ impact on individuals in need. She seamlessly linked opposition to the Iraq war to support for one particular traumatized veteran; and she described bank-reform advocacy in terms of preventing one particular woman’s foreclosure. Her brief check-in mentioned far more specific individuals in need than did any PMC-background member’s check-in.

Working-class activists seemed to use a zoom lens on the impact of activism, focused closely on a small number of known human beings, in contrast with PMC activists’ wide-angle lens. For example, note how Rhonda starts with her
labor/community coalition’s general issues but then zooms in on vivid images of family life:

That's why we push things like living wage...anything in the labor movement that we feel can empower the black community, we take it to them... We want families to work one job so that they have someone at home to be with their children the rest of the hours. We don't want them working two or three jobs, then the home is neglected.

The three experienced white working-class founders of community groups, Dorothea, Elaine and Brandy, all described well-tested methods of recruiting by first providing services to people in crisis, then asking for pay-back in the form of volunteer hours, drawing them in to activism through direct individual assistance. Brandy said, “We developed a system...*where we help people* with food, clothing, housing, utilities, getting their kids back, whatever it is. It's a commitment to giving back to this movement. People have to give time.”

Dorothea talked ambivalently about the costs and benefits of direct service, which City Power had alternated doing and not doing over the years:

*We couldn't do services and organize at the same time*… I would be asking different folks, "If you had to describe City Power, what would you [say we] do?" and they would say, "Oh, you help people." And it's like, "Oops!" Well, not that we don't, but...when that became the primary definition...something's off track here...I actually have very mixed feelings about leaving [behind] some of the kinds of services and advocacy that we did before, like having clothes to give away and a food pantry. It did, in the end, *really divert us from the more political...stuff*, and we just had to give it all up… they came in for food, and *came back as a volunteer*… the Black Panthers did it.

For these experienced working-class leaders, direct services were a means to an end, with strategic pros and cons. But to most less experienced working-class-background activists, there was not a meaningful distinction between providing services to individuals and advocating or agitating for policy change. Combining services with
organizing was usually taken for granted, and direct aid to individuals was presumed to help draw the recipients in and bond them with the group.

All community involvements that helped someone were part of one big category for many working-class activists. A Neighbors United member, middle-aged Latino Gil, mentioned both activist and non-activist groups in a go-around about community involvements:

*The reason why I got involved with this is the first thing I believe in [the goal]. As far as my participation in the community, *I'm involved with kids in Little League, basketball, football, and just to make it a better place for everyone.**

For many working-class informants, as with Gil, activism was just one form of giving back to the community and helping others. Brandon referred to his parents’ immigrant roots in his explanation for community involvement:

*Interviewer: Okay, where does your interest in social justice come from?*  
*Brandon: Our parents never reached anywhere and closed the door behind them. Being from the Caribbean, we’ve always had family come up, sometimes family would live with us for a while. You always had to reach back and you always had to give back.*

It is surprising to find that this sense of obligation to community service was as common among working-class whites and Latinos as among black activists. African Americans have often been observed to have a sense of linked fate across class lines (Shelton and Wilson 2006; O’Brien 2008). “Lifting as we climb,” the slogan of the National Council of Negro Women, has historically been a black ethic of race solidarity and community uplift. Many black people have been taught to give back to the community once they achieve any above-average educational or occupational advantage. Thus it might be predicted that references to giving back to the community would have been heard primarily from black activists in this study — which was disproportionately
true, but only among straddlers and lifelong-working-class black activists. Black informants from PMC or upper-middle-class backgrounds did not use similar ‘giving back’ language — they had learned different ways of talking about their political ideals — nor did they report doing any apolitical community assistance. It appears that the African American ethic of giving back to the community, in its traditional form and rhetoric, usually persists for only one generation after leaving the working class.

Conversely, several white and Latino working-class activists did use the linked fate frame for community involvement. For example, lower-middle-class white Martha said, “You have to give back to the community. If I were a singer, I'd sing for free. I'm a [health care worker], so I give to [health care access].” The class association with a helping ethic seemed stronger than the race association.

Mutual aid among members was common in all working-class-majority groups, both formally as part of the mission and informally through one-on-one connections among members. While the term “direct services” implies a giver and a receiver, mutual aid means any member can give and any member can be a recipient. Unions and community needs groups’ missions often included defending members against attack. Women Safe from Violence (WSV) founder Elaine said members “look out for each other’s back”; and the group’s mission included protecting members as well as others from violence.

Unlike the one-way definition of solidarity common among white PMC activists, who usually presume themselves to be the givers of solidarity support and less-privileged people to be the receivers, the word “solidarity” for working-class activists usually meant an exchange of aid in times of need, with an expectation that any member might be the
next to need help, based on the norms in many working-class extended families (Gerstel 2011; Jensen 2012). The symmetrical language of mutuality seemed central to working-class-background activist talk. For example, Slim described the mission of the Tri-City Labor Alliance as “Anything in solidarity with any of the locals.”

In low-income groups and unions, commitment to the group was often equated with commitment to each other, because solving members’ problems was the goal of the group. The words “protect” and “protection” came up in descriptions of such groups’ missions. A member of Grassroots Resistance said, “It makes me feel so much more protected that somebody out there looking out for me. There isn't anybody else going to look out for us.” Union staffer Gary said at a meeting, “Protect as many as you can the best you can—that's what unions are all about”; and other Tri-City Labor Alliance members responded en masse by calling out “right” and “yeah.”

Informal mutual aid mentioned within working-class-majority and straddler-majority groups included visits to sick members, setting up email accounts for digitally-divided members, doing members’ hair, pet-sitting, driving to rescue a stranded member with a dead car, offering home hospitality, and lots and lots of childcare. Women were more likely to give such personal assistance to each other, but some men offered it as well. Working-class-majority groups were more likely to recognize milestones such as birthdays, births, weddings and deaths with cards or by attending individuals’ life-cycle events. Only one PMC-majority group was observed doing a group card, for a graduation.

One template for working-class-majority activist groups was the family. In working-class calls for solidarity and mutual aid, analogies to sibling relationships were
sometimes used. For example, one community needs group had “sisters” in its slogan; and some old-time union activists called members “brothers and sisters.”

Working-class-majority groups were also much more likely to include actual relatives, so references to being a family were not only figurative. Almost every labor outreach group, community needs group and working-class-majority group had one or more family cluster: siblings, parent/child combinations, spouses, in-laws, and in a few cases, cousins or more distant relatives. Leaders in particular drew their family members into their groups. Even those relatives who weren’t part of the group were often invited to open events or participated in a loose social network around the activists.

There is a downside to this working-class norm of mutual aid and family-style small-group culture: if fellow activists are expected to be as close as family, involved in each other’s lives, then groups must remain small or the expected intimacy is lost. The skill of collaborating with many near-strangers can become rusty if all prior activist experience has been with brothers and sisters in a small, intimate group.

**Offer immediate incentives… in other words, feed people!**

The most common and easily arranged form of immediate incentive for meeting attendance is food. Food was mentioned as a recruiting tool far more often by lifelong-working-class people than by those in any other class category. They had a pragmatic sense that the quality of entertainment and refreshments mattered to recruits. “Snacks are so important,” said Myra, a working-class Latina in a professional-majority advocacy coalition. In fact, in many cases food and entertainment were the first things working-class-background interviewees mentioned when asked how to get new people to join, as a member of Neighbors United explained:
Interviewer: What would it take to get other people? Like, what would persuade the not already active to come to this?
Devin: Hm. Well, I think you need some kinda entertainment. …. You can bring a friend and say, ‘we’re gonna go get some food, listen to some music, ya know, hear [a Neighbors United leader] speak and you can tell me what you think of her’.

Food was offered to everyone at all working-class-majority groups and all groups in the community organizing tradition. Sometimes the organization paid for pizza or other take-out; sometimes leaders or hosts cooked; sometimes members brought store-bought or home-cooked food to share.

Gender also played a role: male-run straddler-majority groups didn’t provide food, but straddler-majority groups mostly run by women did. Cooking was a special role of some working-class-background women and some women of color. For example, Pamela, a white straddler, made lasagna for the Health Care Subcommittee of Neighbors United meeting, and welcomed latecomers with “Have you eaten?” But a few regular cooks and food providers were male, as were some of the working-class interviewees who emphasized food as a recruitment tool. Class is associated with food mentions and food-providing more than is gender.

Not surprisingly, the groups that tended to have pre-planned social events were those with the highest budgets, such as unions, union-sponsored coalitions, and staffed non-profits. The Tri-City Labor Alliance had lots of what Slim called “perks,” such as trips to ball games and a holiday party with free food and drink. Low-budget groups, such as ad hoc convention protest groups, socialized only informally, if at all. Part of the class correlation with food stems from this difference in size of budget; the all-volunteer groups with no institutional funding tended to have PMC or VDM members. Ironically, bigger budgets were associated with working-class-majority groups, resulting in the
organization paying for more food and entertainment. But even the low-budget grassroots community needs groups offered more food and other selective incentives than the global/local cause groups did.

Is it just common sense that because the constituencies of community groups and labor groups have financial hardships, recruits would be more responsive to selective incentives? Are the motivations of a movement’s beneficiaries inherently different than the motivations of other activists (Myers 2008: 168, 183)? Is this perhaps just a pragmatic matter, not a class-culture difference? Apparently not: straddlers and working-class members of global/local cause and advocacy groups with mostly middle-class constituencies, such as Jeremiah and Laverne quoted above, also stressed self-interest factors and immediate incentives, while PMC members of low-income groups didn’t. The pattern matched the informant’s class background more closely than the group’s movement tradition or constituency.

**Person-to-person relationship building**

When working-class people talked about outreach, they were more likely than PMC people to stress developing relationships between key leaders and new recruits. Similarly, while the time-honored method of asking new people to take on small roles was mentioned by all classes except VDM, people from working-class backgrounds were more likely to say that distributing tasks was the leader’s role.

In Chapter 6, we will hear from some working-class women about the strong role that particular leaders played in empowering them. These women all answered the recruitment question with references to leaders drawing new people in. Straddler Hannah, from the other side of the relationship, described how she gradually built her relationship
with rank-and-file union member Aaron, got him involved in Labor and Community United, and worked with him to gradually take on bigger roles. One-on-one relationships with empowering leaders seem to be central to working-class understandings of recruitment.

Putting together these four themes heard in working-class descriptions of paths to activism and approaches to recruitment and group cohesion-building – being personally affected by the issue; mutual aid and giving back to the community; sharing food and entertainment; and one-on-one bonds with leaders or core members – the overarching theme is connection. Activism is rarely a solo path for working-class-background people, who have been conditioned to live a more interdependent life (Fiske and Markus 2012:2).

The fact that well-off straddlers also described their activist paths in these same connected ways is evidence that this approach is not simply a matter of necessity, but a class-cultural understanding, a predisposition formed by a working-class childhood and family.

**Professional-middle-class paths to activism and group culture traits**

Because people from professional-middle-class (PMC) backgrounds tended to enter activism through an individual decision about their political values, predating involvement in any particular group, and because their groups tended to be collections of strangers brought together by such individual political passions, more of them expected ideas and ideological agreement to bond the group together — and indeed, political beliefs were the strongest bond in some majority-PMC-background groups. Chapter 10 will include stories of majority-PMC groups that fractured and even became hostile to
each other over ideological conflicts, which was not observed in any working-class-majority groups.

Many lifelong-PMC and voluntarily downwardly mobile people’s accounts of how they became activists included moments of private decision, along the lines of ‘I was reading a lot of Howard Zinn, and I started looking for a progressive group to get involved with’. For example, when asked how she got involved with Green Homes Green World, Bethany said, “I had recently moved to [this city], and I was wanting to, you know, get connected to progressive work around town.” The private, individual dimension of such commitments is why Lichterman (1996) calls the typical PMC activist identity “personalist.” When Teske (1997) finds that activists on both the right and the left had three themes in their stories of how they became politically involved — a personal crisis, a moral discovery, and a lifelong commitment (51-56) — he seems to be describing the formation of a personalist activist identity, most commonly held by college-educated activists.

Because of their idea-based path to activism, many PMC activists think that militance correlates with class and race (a mistaken impression, as pointed out in Chapter 3), and thus they emphasize ideology in their approach to recruiting. They tend to overlook the importance of short-term pleasures at meetings: they laugh and tease less, and usually don’t serve food. Currently PMC activists have fewer unmet basic needs, so mutual aid doesn’t often occur to them as a means of building group cohesion. While many working-class activists mentioned the name of the mentor, leader or role model who invited or inspired their activism, the PMC or VDM interviewees never once mentioned a known mentor in their own activist stories, only invitations from peer
friends. Some did mention authors they had read, but the emphasis was on the ideas, not on the person as leader or role model.

Given their own paths to activism, it’s not surprising that some activists from PMC backgrounds said that the key to recruiting new people is the right issues or ideas. Five PMC interviewees talked about the value of working on multiple issues, because each issue attracts different people (Han 2009). Picking the wrong issue is a recipe for failure, others said.

Opinions varied on how ideas and issues would draw new people in. Some activists from PMC backgrounds felt that horrific information would jolt people into action, the moral shock theory (Jasper 1997). Others said that new recruits would match the group’s ideology or agree with its political stance. Some pointed out that each possible focus has its own constituency, an “issue public” (Han 2009, citing Converse 1964), and so the choice of issues affects who becomes interested. For recruiting PMC-background people, this approach seems realistic, since so many PMC interviewees did refer to the group’s ideas or issue in their autobiographical explanations of how they became involved.

Only PMC and VDM activists, especially in very radical groups, talked about the ideology or long-term vision of the group as a factor in attracting new people. Unlike the activists Eliasoph (1998) observed, who talked politics backstage but switched to a self-interested ‘I’m just a mom who wants to keep my family safe’ rhetoric in the public sphere, these college-educated activists presumed that potential recruits would be attracted, not repelled, by broad political ideas. Perhaps the difference is that Eliasoph analyzed “front stage” communications with the media and I analyzed “backstage”
interviews and meeting discussions (Goffman 1959). Or perhaps what she calls “momism” (183-5) holds sway in certain movements, such as anti-toxics groups, more than others, such as the anti-war issue most prominent for my PMC-majority groups.

Some global/local and advocacy groups included spouses and unmarried romantic pairs, but no siblings, parent/child combinations or other relatives were observed in those PMC-majority movement traditions. Only one set of PMC relatives was seen in any group, a 4-person cluster in Neighbors United. Most PMC activists had joined their groups as solo individuals, so it probably wouldn’t occur to them to invite their relatives to join. While working-class activists were more likely to have nearby relatives to recruit, PMC activists tended to live far from their families of origin (more on this in Chapter 10), making family recruitment infeasible.

**Absence of working-class recruitment incentives**

In another strangely strong class correlation, when activists were asked how they came to get involved in their group, being personally affected was never once mentioned by a PMC-background informant. This complete absence is especially strange given Eliasoph’s (1998) findings of activists’ public performance of self-interested ‘just a mom’ explanations for their involvement; not one PMC activist put on such a performance for me or my fellow interviewers. This must be a statistical fluke; if thousands of PMC-background activists were asked how they first got involved, at least a few of them would no doubt mention how the group’s issue affected them personally. But clearly personal impact is a more common theme among working-class-background activists.
As a result, methods of recruitment involving selective incentives only for members – empirically shown to correlate with SMO success (Gamson 1990: 69-70) – were rarely emphasized by lifelong-PMC interviewees.

The working-class emphasis on mutual aid was also missing in PMC accounts of activism. With one exception, when Sheila babysat Ranelle’s kids, it was unheard of for a lifelong-PMC activist to offer such personal assistance to another group member, except to a romantic partner or spouse.

Most strikingly of all, not one lifelong-PMC interviewee mentioned food in answer to the question about recruitment. Most PMC-majority groups didn’t have food at their meetings; the few that did were the most racially diverse urban groups. Perhaps they imagined that their potential constituents were not poor or hungry, and thus wouldn’t be lured by food; if so, they should learn from the luxurious junkets offered to high-earning doctors by pharmaceutical companies. Trade shows and professional seminars that serve shrimp, caviar and champagne are evidence that all classes respond to food incentives. The same argument can be made for entertainment; more professional conventions are located in Orlando and Las Vegas than in Omaha.

It’s not necessarily a problem not to serve food, particularly in more-advantaged class and race settings where it’s not expected. Some foodless meetings had great turnouts. But in four situations where majority-PMC groups were plagued by poor turnout, even though their frustration-filled “where is everybody?” discussions included brainstormsof possible recruitment methods, they didn’t mention food.

The absence of the most common working-class recruitment methods — stressing the personal impact of the issue; offering selective incentives and immediate
gratifications; family-style mutual aid; and developing one-on-one relationships with leaders — seems to be a symptom of the class segregation of PMC activists. If they had had more exposure to working-class activists, these additional recruitment tools might have occurred to them.

**Special problems of community building in majority-VDM anarchist groups**

Voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) anarchists sometimes defined themselves as the opposite of PMC progressive activists: more radical, more committed to ‘being the change’, more opposed to hierarchy within activist groups, and less beholden to mainstream employers and consumer culture. But in fact, anarchists who were VDM from professional- or upper-middle-class backgrounds tended to have the PMC personalist traits to an even greater degree.

Shared ideology was usually the centerpiece of their collective identity. Most decided which group to join based on deeply held political values, and they expected others to affiliate on similar grounds. Some drew sharp ideological boundaries:

*Gail: The anarchists are suspicious of the motives of the [local branch of a national socialist party], and this is based on the fact that they know that the socialists have double-crossed anarchists back to the Bolshevik Revolution and don't trust the socialist agenda, don't trust them because the socialists are statist and believe in the power of the state.*

Because these individuals usually affiliated with groups based on agreement with anarchist ideals, and because some reject not just authoritarian coercion but sometimes even the seductions of persuasion and incentives, they sometimes find themselves with a very narrow repertoire of acceptable recruitment and group-building practices (Leach 2009).
However, the VDM anarchist groups also had advantages in group building: they had the most distinct movement culture; they shared the clearest ideological affinity; and they intentionally recreated the need for mutual aid among people living off the grid or thrown together during direct actions. But these advantages didn’t outweigh their distinct weaknesses.

Even more than majority-PMC groups, they tended to offer no selective incentives. As we will see below, some even opposed recruiting on principle, to the point of not greeting new people at meetings and in other ways keeping their internal group culture unenthusiastic. As mentioned earlier, mistrust of possible infiltrators exacerbated an already chilly meeting culture, leaving this movement tradition/class trajectory combination with a serious recruitment problem. Their most vibrant activities took place on the streets, or in private gatherings such as parties and squats. But new people interested in plugging in to the scene were sometimes unable to find those gatherings, which had unpublicized locations, and more likely to be able to find anarchist meetings, which didn’t tend to give a good impression of this subculture.

**The conundrum of how anti-recruitment groups can recruit**

When I walked into a meeting of a third anarchist group, and for the third time no one greeted me, I knew I’d found a subcultural pattern worth investigating. As I watched others arrive, the core members mostly didn’t greet them either. In no other kind of group was ‘hello’ omitted. What was going on? I started asking every anarchist interviewee about greetings and the warmth or coldness shown to newcomers.

I discovered among some young white anarchists a deliberate, values-based avoidance of any explicit community-building efforts, and sometimes even an intention
not to recruit new people. Some of them saw the resulting coldness as a problem. For example, Dallas said, “I'm remembering my first Action Center meeting, ‘Isn't anyone going to say hi to me?’” Gail, a lower-professional non-anarchist and thus somewhat of an outsider within the majority-VDM-anarchist Action Center, said “the attitude of the meetings is not very warm and welcoming towards newcomers at all… That funny silence, and that funny coldness or reserve — while they say they're all about community, it makes it really hard to feel that there is much of any community at all. It's not a warm community.”

**Mistrust of infiltrators**

One reason for the chilliness was the presumption that strangers might be spies. Newcomers were often met with initial suspicion and had to prove themselves trustworthy. VDM white man Dallas said, “*When new people come, [I feel a] twinge of suspicion, wondering their motives.*” Virtually every interviewee in militant and anarchist protest groups brought up worries about government infiltration.

Experienced anarchist activists modulated the conversation depending on who was in the room. A white VDM man in a convention protest group, Brodie, said, "*Gauge trust by who's there and have the conversation you can have based on who's in the room.*” Some experienced anarchists were angry when inexperienced participants asked about confidential matters at the wrong moment.

This mistrust not only chilled the organizational culture within anarchist groups, it sometimes shredded the bonds among individuals. Whether this fear and mistrust was excessive and harmful was an active debate within this movement tradition.

_Zorro:_ **Anarchists don’t do coalition building [because we have] trust issues, because there's so much repression, it makes it hard for us to organize… A lot of**
the Green Scare people that were locked up, you know, that happened because of the snitches and informants… We don't work in a very close, intense way with people if we don't know them well… We also have this critique: are we being too paranoid? Should we loosen up a little bit to be able to coordinate and talk to each other more or is it completely necessary?… We laugh at ourselves, okay, we're the paranoid crew… Sometimes people think someone's an informant and it's not that, they just said something that makes people not trust them… Anarchists are so hunted that we sometimes lie to each other to keep each other and ourselves safe.

Most common precautions against surveillance didn’t interfere with group bonding: taking batteries out of phones in case locations could be tracked through cell phones; wearing masks during street actions; banning photography and recording; and keeping no confidential information on computer hard drives. Tactical details went unmentioned at open meetings.

But other measures did come between people. Newcomers had to wait until trusted associates vouched for them before information would be shared or before they were allowed into certain sub-groups and roles. Using pseudonyms, not giving out contact information, making sure the addresses of convergence spaces and meetings didn’t appear on the internet, and changing times and places at the last minute were all practices which put up barriers that kept even innocent new people out.

It seems to me that actual government repression may be doing less damage to this movement than the self-inflicted harm of mistrustful ‘security culture’.

But security fears and ‘security culture’ can’t explain all the anarchist chilliness towards new people. The Parecon Collective was an alternative business, not a direct action group, and members expressed no concern about government repression, yet one of the most extreme examples of interpersonal coldness was observed at a Parecon meeting. Sinestra was a trial member waiting to be approved as a collective member. She
wasn’t part of the social clique of Parecon members who met at parties; she was older than most members. The facilitator forgot to put her membership decision on the agenda; at the end of other business, when the meeting was about to end, she brought it up. The members sent her to wait outdoors in the cold while they discussed her potential membership and quickly approved it unanimously — but then they got chatting and forgot to call her back in. Finally someone went to tell her to come in. But then they didn’t tell her what their decision had been, until she eventually asked, at the last minute before they dispersed. When I asked several members about this incident in interviews, only Sinestra thought it was terrible behavior (“I have this little panicking inside… I get irritated at being ignored. ‘Yeah, come on!’”) Other members brushed it off as no big deal, revealing a startling lack of empathy.

This was an extreme example, but not a unique one in Parecon history:

Olivia: [One man] has been in the collective for like, maybe ten years… and he’s really hard to talk to… he will not say hello to me. He’ll come down, and he’ll be like, ‘hey, what’s up’, and I’m like, ‘I’ve been here for like, two hours and you haven't said hello’.

What could explain this interpersonal chilliness? Are young, white, PMC-background men weak in interpersonal sensitivity attracted to certain cold anarchist groups, or do the group cultures of these groups cause people to turn off their social empathy and warmth? Gail and Dallas of the Action Center had the first interpretation, that their group was attracting people with weak social skills. Gail said, “The desire for connection I think is there… They don't know how, I think. I really put that down to youth.” Dallas included some self-analysis when asked why there were no greetings as people arrived: “We're just waiting for [the meeting] business [to start]… I self-identify
as a misfit, not 100% socially comfortable; I feel as though the people in the group are similar in that way.”

I was disturbed to hear that Dallas saw all attempts to recruit new members as too manipulative:

_We're not a recruiting organization. I want people to associate with us because they feel similar. We don't want to evangelize! …All these forces that want to convince [you]: religion, politics—someone's always pushing something! …[We don't want] fake smiles: <fake over-enthusiastic voice:> ‘Oh, hi, we're really glad you're here’!

Dallas was not the only VDM interviewee or the only anarchist to express ambivalence or negativity about the very idea of recruiting. To find the same attitude in the Parecon Collective, where fears of surveillance were less salient, and where most members were lower-professional, emphasizes that it is a specifically anarchist subcultural trait:

_Interviewer: Have you tried recruiting at all? Do you talk to family and friends who are not part of [Parecon] about it, and how do they react, have you tried to persuade anybody and how did they react?

_Rupert: …Not really. …I don't want anyone to perceive that I'm pushing it on them, and furthermore, you know, I'm not interested in someone doing something they don't actually want to be doing.

The entire approach to recruitment and mobilization of the community organizing movement tradition — appeals to self-interest, one-on-one outreach and invitations to play small roles — seemed foreign to VDM anarchists. Even those who didn’t oppose recruitment on principled grounds didn’t mention any of those methods. The political philosophy itself was expected to be the agent of recruitment. For example, a founder of the convention protest group Autonomous Zone, Brian, said, “A group should come together under common political goal, whether because we’re all anarchists…”
Similarly, Meadow answered a question about her group’s ground rules and membership criteria by stating that ideological agreements would take care of all that:

_In contrast to sitting down and writing set of bylaws, instead, use the cause of the group to make group attractive to the right kind of people and they would take on responsibilities...People are only going to join who know what the cause is, if they believe in it. That's the screen._

Collective identity was sometimes based on nothing more than affiliation with anarchism:

_Zorro: I can’t even speak to who ‘we’ are because Autonomous Zone only exists in this context. So when I say ‘we’, it’s a temporary, suspended group of anarchists who have all traveled here and are working together._

It seems that ideological agreement alone is supposed to be the main glue keeping anarchist groups together. Despite the rapid growth of the anarchist movement tradition in the 1990s and early 2000s (Kutz-Flamenbaum 2010) and their role in the Occupy movement, this seems to me a fragile bond.

**Chanting as coercion: a story of contact across subcultures**

One story exemplifies the VDM anarchist rejection of explicitly revving up group cohesion. Several months before the conventions, a Convention Protest Coalition had a multi-group gathering for everyone and anyone who wanted to protest. Over 200 people gathered in an auditorium for plenary sessions led by a series of upbeat activists, mostly women of color. In particular, Janelle, a middle-aged African American wearing a spangle-covered electric-blue jacket, led a call-and-response to get the crowd chanting. She mostly used familiar leftist rally chants ("What do we want?" “End the war!” “When do we want it?” “NOW!”), but she also improvised requests for responses. Later a Latino speaker called out, “How’s everybody doing?,,” and then asked again more loudly when the first crowd response was too soft. Another cheerleader called out each
organization and every state represented at the gathering, yelling “Let’s hear it for –.”

Clearly the goal was to get everyone pumped up and yelling in unison, a familiar group-bonding technique in the labor and community organizing movement traditions, particularly in African American groups, as well as in non-activist settings such as sporting events and self-help seminars.

At the next meeting of the anarchist Action Center (AC), several members mocked those Coalition plenaries, and especially the mass chanting. After a meeting break, Dirk gathered people’s attention by chanting sarcastically, “Three Word Chant! Three Word Chant! Three Word Chant!” He was making fun of the group-building efforts that he associated with those he called “communists” and “liberals,” who seemed to him the top-down opposite of anarchists. During a discussion of the conference, Dirk said, “They had the usual rhythm-less chants.” In his interview, Dallas explained this disapproval of chants: “I see chants as empty, as a feel-good artificial [thing]… Personal autonomy means not forcing yourself, not forcing anyone else…”

But another dimension to the story reveals what anti-chanting anarchists were overlooking. At the Action Center meeting, members expressed surprise that the AC and other anarchist groups were not attacked or marginalized during the conference, even though they knew that many participants disagreed with their diversity of tactics approach (advocacy of disruptive street protest without an explicit nonviolence commitment). One of the concrete outcomes of the coalition gathering was to get everyone’s agreement on a pre-drafted statement that included a commitment not to say anything negative in public about any other convention protestors. AC members cynically expected to hear objections to including them and other anarchists under the umbrella of
this unity pledge, and also expected it to be violated before the conference was over. They were surprised that this didn’t happen.

I see a connection between their opposition to unison chanting and their surprise at the strength of the unity pledge. During the big coalition conference, a collective identity, a sense of ‘we’, was created and reinforced among the varied groups, some of them rivals or even previously hostile, planning to protest the conventions. The plenary chanting and cheering was a powerful ingredient in how that alchemy happened. Since most AC members regarded it as manipulative groupthink, they were at a loss to account for its effects in cementing the coalition unity that included them.

Mock-chanting to signify anti-ritual attitudes seemed so idiosyncratic that I assumed I wouldn’t encounter it again after hearing it at that one Action Center meeting; but then I heard something very similar at a Parecon Collective meeting, an anarchist setting where there were no notable tensions with non-anarchist groups:

*Rupert: Should we bring it in for the Parecon Cheer?* <Olivia laughed sharply at his sarcasm>
*Taylor: How does the cheer go?*
*Rupert: I dunno – [sarcastically] ‘camaraderie’!*
*Taylor: Gimme a P, gimme a A…*

Similarly, Zorro called a call-and-response chant at an Autonomous Zone meeting “fucking cheers, and that’s bad facilitation.”

Zorro took it upon herself to explain to me the values underlying punk-anarchist opposition to explicit community-building efforts. After a Spokes Council at which pagans led a guided meditation (during which she and her friends didn’t close their eyes as instructed), she told me, “*I hate that religious shit. Keep it organic, don’t force it.*"
To Zorro, Dirk and some other punk-influenced anarchists, “natural” and “organic” were the opposite of authoritarian. Their threshold for what seemed too coercive was very, very low. Whole-group cheers, rituals, exercises and even invitations to get involved seemed like brainwashing, impinging on individual conscience.

Pagan-influenced anarchists who favored more explicit efforts at group building were sometimes clever in how they dodged the opposition of more punk protestors, acknowledging the anti-ritual faction and attempting to bridge culturally to them. To open a Spokes Council with a ritual, Sage said, “I’d like to ask your permission to raise up energy in the room. If that’s not your cup of tea, it’s ok to tolerate it. In the pagan [affinity group], this is how we express solidarity.” Nevertheless, many people kept their eyes open and rolling during the song and ritual that followed.

The recent literature about emotions and social movements (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001; Gould 2009) has shown how emotional arousal related to public identities (Han 2009:96) can lead to political involvement. Social movement groups often succeed in recruiting when they touch emotional chords in potential recruits. The cool atmosphere at some VDM-majority anarchist meetings may prevent this emotional reaction.

Subcultural style, music, and DIY re-creation of mutual aid

The young white anarchist subculture, despite its problems with mistrust and opposition to recruitment and explicit community building, also had some strengths in building a sense of cohesion. Their distinct movement culture in styles of clothing, patches and hair, their lingo, and other subcultural markers meant that their group identities were more distinct than those of non-anarchist groups. They were the only true subculture (Hebdige 1979) among all US movements in 2007-8.
The most powerful SMOs tend to have a three-part identity: with the group, with its wider movement, and with a social location (such as ‘women’ or ‘workers’) (Gamson 1991). The anarchist groups in this study had the strongest movement identity of any movement tradition studied, rivaled only by the labor identity in certain unions. On Lofland’s (1995) spectrum of degrees of movement culture, from easily blending into the mainstream to highly distinct, this subculture had the greatest amount of movement culture.

As a participant in the convention protests, when a march route went through crowded city streets, I often couldn’t distinguish protestors from passersby, because bystanders were dressed so similarly to many marchers; but I could always distinguish the boundary of the anarchists’ actions by their bandanas, black clothes, and flags on tall poles. Anarchist direct action participants seemed to have a strong sense of cohesion during street actions.

In addition, since for some majority-VDM anarchist groups, voluntary poverty was part of a prefigurative effort to create a more collective, sustainable economy in miniature, they mirrored the mutual aid ethic observed in working-class community groups. By their principled disconnect from the mainstream economy, off-the-grid activists artificially created needs for interdependence. Without credit cards, and in some cases without jobs, homes or health insurance, some young convention protestors relied on Food Not Bombs or similar groups to feed them, and found housing by couch-surfing with other activists. Local squatters oriented out-of-town protestors on where and how to stay safely in abandoned buildings. Street medics took care of minor medical needs. Like the Occupy Wall Street-inspired encampments around the globe, convergence centers,
such as the ones set up for every major globalization protest in the 1990s, and every political convention since at least 1996, were places not only for meetings, but for basic needs such as sleeping, bathrooms, first aid, internet connection, and food and water. These free and shared goods and services were seen as prefiguring an alternative economy.

But this mutual aid during direct action campaigns didn’t usually extend to meetings. There was shared food (gleanings from a dumpster diving expedition) at only one of the observed anarchist meetings. At one meeting, individuals went out to buy their own slices of pizza and brought them back to eat; probably a whole shared pizza would have cost less than the slices.

Playing in bands together, whether punk bands or the kind of anarchist-flavored political brass street bands that gather for the annual Honk festival,\(^39\) is another way of building a sense of subcultural identity. The hilarity I’ve seen at the Honk Festival has given me a completely different impression of the DIY anarchist subculture than I got by going to four groups’ chilly, low-affect meetings.

Historically, some anarchist movements, such as the Spanish anarchists and the Wobblies in the 1930s, had substantially or primarily working-class memberships. It’s an interesting thought-experiment to imagine how current anarchist groups would be different if the same was true today. It’s difficult to imagine the same lack of greetings, low affect and refusal to pump up group spirit in any majority-working-class group today, regardless of race, gender, age or movement tradition. The avoidance of explicit group-building seen in the four studied anarchist groups is not only a matter of ideology, age,
personality type, race, or gender, but has been influenced by the class-cultural
predispositions of members from PMC and upper-middle-class backgrounds.

If so many VDM activists didn’t reject identity with their privileged class
background, their PMC class cultural traits, such as an over-emphasis on ideology and an
under-emphasis on relationship building between core and new members, might have less
power to weaken the anarchist movement. Class cultures denied always cast a longer
shadow.

**Are class culture differences in group-building a problem?**

To some extent, each activist class culture emphasizes the recruitment mode that
is most effective for their class constituency. Currently working-class and poor people
may in fact be the most likely to be drawn in through short-term benefits and incentives,
and once in the door, may form attachments to groups through one-on-one relationships,
mutual aid, and laughter-filled meetings that build camaraderie. Progressive-leaning
college-educated people may be best recruited by cutting-edge ideas. Young VDM
people with anti-authoritarian leanings may be best attracted by subcultural markers of
rebellion and anarchist ideology. Perhaps these are just class culture differences, not
class culture clashes?

The problem with each group happily continuing its habitual recruitment and
group-building practices is that all the groups, and all their movements, were too small to
reach their goals. Most participants wished for new members and better turnout. Some
wished for more cross-class alliances with other groups. In addition, some groups had a
goal of being more race-diverse. Growth and diversity depend on understanding what
appeals to people of other classes.
**Class Speech Differences I - Humor and Laughter**

In the last chapter we saw how two groups coped with low turnouts by laughing and using humor. Whole-group laughter was heard during almost every meeting, but at different rates of frequency depending on class. Working-class majority groups laughed an average of once every 8.75 minutes. PMC-majority groups laughed an average of once every 15.71 minutes. VDM-majority groups seem to have laughed even less often.

Group sense of humor — what tends to make everyone laugh in meetings — also varied quite a bit by the groups' majority class. None of the 37 meetings included any actual jokes with punch lines. Instead, humor was woven into conversations. Laughing about individuals' foibles, both self-deprecating humor and teasing others, was much more common in working-class-majority groups than in lifelong-PMC-majority groups. Laughing at word play and cultural references only tended to happen in lifelong-PMC-majority groups.

| Table I.1: Mean rates per hour of three types of humor in meetings, by class background |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
|                                 | Working-class-background majority meetings | PMC-background majority meetings | Ratio between rates |
| Number of meetings              | N=8             | N=10            |                   |
| Individual foibles: teasing & self-deprecating | 3.2             | 1.2             | **2.73**          |
| Fake bad behavior               | 3.2             | 1.3             | **2.54**          |
| Word play & cultural references | 0.44            | 1.28            | **0.35**          |

*Note: Working-class-background includes straddlers; PMC-background includes VDM.*
Senses of humor stayed with people from their class backgrounds even after upward or downward mobility. Straddler-majority groups tended to have a similar humor pattern as lifelong-working-class-majority groups.\textsuperscript{45}

Leaders and other very enfranchised members were the most likely to make self-deprecating statements (as was also found by Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001: 146). After leader Tony made a motion at a straddler-majority Tri-City Labor Alliance meeting, he was shot down and then joked about it:

\textit{Man: I move to table it.}
\textit{Woman: Second it.}
\textit{Tony: Okay—so much for my proposal! <group laughter>}

Teasing was often part of a multi-part back-and-forth in which pairs or clusters of people joshed each other. Teasers often knew the targets of their teasing very well. In a Brontown Affordable Housing Consortium meeting, for example, members needed no explanation of why Charlotte wouldn’t actually be baking for the bake sale:

\textit{Charlotte: I am bringing really good desserts. <group laughter>}
\textit{Darla: She is such a good faker!}
\textit{Charlotte: I bake really well at the stores. <group laughter>}

A related form of humor, fake bad behavior, was the most common source of laughter in all class categories, but working-class-majority meetings laughed about it more often than PMC-majority meetings. Sometimes fake insults were met with laughter, but usually it was the group itself that was targeted. Only rarely was a specific individual directly mock-insulted, and never a new or marginalized person. For example, note the general focus of this quick retort from a working-class white man in a City Power meeting:

\textit{Ranelle: How about a talent show, like have community people be in a talent show?}
Darius: *I don't know anybody with any talent.* <group laughter>

Pointing out something problematic about the group’s functioning (shorthanded here as SNAFU – ‘Situation Normal, All Fouled Up’ – to reflect the typically irreverent tone) was a very common cause for laughter in activist meetings of all classes, with no class correlation. SNAFU comments that don’t sound like jokes nevertheless evoked lots of laughter: “*We could read the minutes if I hadn’t left them home*”; “*We can’t vote on it without a quorum anyway.*” This laughter was a way of coping with negative emotions about the group’s shortcomings.

Sometimes working-class people’s SNAFU comments were combined with fake bad behavior, teasing and self-deprecating, as in a working-class Latina’s jumble of excuses in response to the white lower-professional chair’s sarcastic request:

*Erica:* Do you mind sharing what the Resource Committee should be doing?  
*Darla:* The Resource Committee met, but we didn't meet about what we were supposed to be meeting about. And since I am on the committee, and those of you know me, you must say that it was Corazon's fault <group laughter>… *She's not here to defend herself!*

These three types of humor — self-deprecating and teasing, fake bad behavior, and SNAFU — have in common negativity about the group and its members. Such negative barbs account for 62% of all laughter-eliciting speech at working-class-majority meetings, compared with only 45% at PMC-majority meetings. (See Table I:2.) Such negative humor was heard most often in labor outreach and community needs groups.

Humor scholars Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001) categorize humor in task groups as “differentiating humor” versus “cohesion-building humor.” They find that differentiating humor, including self-directed jokes at one’s own expense, is used more
by higher-status members of the group (men and frequent participators), and has the effect of reducing group cohesion.

Differentiating humor calls attention to the separate group members, as when a speaker jokes about him- or herself, or when a speaker teases another group member, or subset of other group members. These types of jokes may be more likely to be used in hierarchy building. At any rate, they break down the sense that ‘we’re all in this together’ and point out distinctions among group members. (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001:142)

My findings contradict Robinson’s and Smith-Lovin’s in two ways. First, I found an association between differentiating humor and lower class status, not higher. Is class different than gender? Perhaps, or perhaps the groups we observed were different. Their task groups were ad hoc groups of southern undergraduates in the 1980s, while mine were ongoing groups of adult activists. Their groups probably included few people steeped in the working-class negative-humor cultural style I observed.

Table I.2: Percent breakdown of types of humor in meetings, by predominant class of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of humor</th>
<th>Working-class-majority meetings</th>
<th>PMC-majority meetings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual foibles: teasing &amp; self-deprecating</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake bad behavior</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group foibles / SNAFU</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal – Negative internal references</td>
<td><strong>62%</strong></td>
<td><strong>45%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcasm / Political Cynicism / Shared disdain for opponents</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word play &amp; cultural references</td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silly / playful</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal – References external to group</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notable contrasts bolded.*

Second, differentiating humor, including both teasing and self-deprecating, did seem to serve to build cohesion in these working-class-majority groups. The most successful groups and those whose members were most clearly enjoying each other’s
company tended to have lots of laughter. As noted above, negative comments about self, others and the group made up the majority of laughter-prompts in working-class-majority meetings.

How did negative comments about the group and members build group cohesion? First, they seemed to signal familiarity, sufficient closeness and comfort to abandon polite formality (Hay 2000: 720). Members and leaders demonstrated publicly that their bond was too strong to be broken by negative comments that might cause offense if said by an outsider. “Conventionalized or ritualized insults can serve to stress solidarity because they flout the usual constraints of deferential (or ‘negative’) politeness…playful impoliteness conveys solidarity by eschewing conventional harmony” (Norrick 2010: 233). Others have also noted the prevalence of teasing among working-class people as verbal play (Heath 1983; Miller 1986). Bourdieu describes French peasant humor this way:

Ritual mockery or insults which are neutralized by their very excess and which, presupposing a great familiarity, both in the knowledge they use and the freedom with which they use it, are in fact tokens of attention or affection, ways of building up while seeming to run down, of accepting while seeming to condemn (1984: 183).

Second, teasing and self-deprecating comments played a role in preventing free riders from avoiding meetings and shirking group tasks. Frequently negative humorous comments referred to slacking off, the desire to spend less time in meetings or to do less work. Meetings are often boring, and members of voluntary groups often feel tempted to show up late, leave early or not come at all. By joking about wishing the meeting would end, these individual temptations are transformed from a private stress to a shared experience, something everyone feels, thus building the sense of ‘we’. Note the opening
joke of guest speaker Reggie, a labor leader unaffiliated with Tri-City Labor Alliance who wanted TLA’s support but knew his presentation would prolong the meeting:

Tony: Thanks for coming.
Reggie: Thank you for having me. What a great night, it's ninety degrees outside, everybody probably wants to be somewhere else. <group laughter>

While direct criticism might weaken group cohesion, a joking tone followed by laughter allows absences to be scolded more lightly, as when a Safety Net for All core member said about the poor turnout, “Everybody's playing hooky today! <group laughter>.” Hannah scolded side-talkers at a Labor Community United meeting by imitating a strict schoolteacher: “Next item on the agenda – <subgroup cross-talk> You guys can't sit next to each other! <group laughter>.”

With volunteer tasks, there is a similar temptation to let others carry the load. Teasing others about what they had failed to do chivvied members along; it was a gentle form of social sanction for malingering (Hay 2000: 719, 723-4). For example, at the small Safety Net for All meeting to which several members didn’t show up, there was this exchange between two working-class women, white founder Toni and black board secretary Lidia:

Toni: I just wanted to ask the minute taker if she would put down the people who are absent as ‘absent’ on that list. We haven't been doing that…
Lidia: So why do I have to do that?
Toni: When I see my name as absent…on a meeting that I'm supposed to be at, I always feel guilty. <group laughter>
Lidia: So is that what it is, to make them feel guilty?
Toni: No, to let them know we were thinking of them! <group laughter>.

Whereas direct criticism might disrupt group cohesion, a teasing reference to a shortfall in effort, and the laughter it evoked, served to ease the potentially tense moment
(Hay 2000: 735-6). “To tease is to convert a dispute into a mock dispute” (Miller 1990:209).

These positive functions of differentiating comments work for PMC activists as well, but more of them, especially white women, seemed to be constrained by a cultural prohibition on teasing. Such polite restraint may be what keeps the mean rate of laughter at individual foibles down to 1.3 per hour in PMC groups, compared with 3 per hour in working-class-majority groups. In addition, Robinson and Smith-Lovin found that women used self-directed humor less often than men; only high-status members can afford to joke at their own expense, they hypothesized (146).

While leading workshops on classism in the mid-2000s, I learned that there is a teasing taboo for some PMC women (especially middle-aged and older white women in the helping professions) that contrasts with some working-class people’s comfort with teasing. I offered a workshop called “Promoting Respectful Communication: Responding to Verbal Classism,” in which one participant quotes a real-life classist comment and another has to respond instantly. After several of these role-plays in pairs, the group formulates general principles for what works with people who make classist comments. Three times I did this exercise at social worker conferences, and in that mostly PMC and female setting, I as the facilitator was the only person ever to suggest that anger or forceful disagreement might work. In other settings too, I found that professional women tended to formulate very reasonable and polite modes of changing the minds of classist-commenters, never suggesting teasing.

But one workshop included blue-collar men, the unionized maintenance staff of the agency hosting the workshop. A white, Italian-American man, Antonio, tried this
retort to a classist comment: “Cut it out, that makes you sound like an asshole.” A subset of the group laughed, including some other working-class men; but others didn’t laugh. A lively disagreement broke out, with several professional women insisting that insults never work, always alienate the listener; Antonio and another blue-collar man insisted that sometimes that’s exactly what does work. “But not teasing! Teasing is never ok,” cried out one white woman in a distressed tone. My interpretation was that she thought of teasing as cruel tormenting of the marginalized, what bullies do. I don’t think this is what Antonio was advocating; I think he was imagining a relationship of sufficient familiarity that an exaggerated put-down would work to chasten offenders without making them feel mistreated. To pull this off successfully requires some specific cultural competence.

Teasing and other banter has often been documented as an African-American test of in-group knowledge and cultural competence (Heath 1981; Kochman 1981; Miller 1986). I suspect that there’s a similar class-cultural boundary between working-class and PMC Americans of all races about being able or unable to tease and be teased.

Another form of humor, though not very frequent in any group, occurred almost exclusively at PMC-majority meetings: word play and cultural references. Laughter at such references happened three times as often in majority-PMC meetings as in working-class-majority meetings.

Most examples of word play that elicited laughter in PMC-majority groups were brief puns and neologisms. For example, the pre-training before the training could be “kinder-training”; instead of retiring, someone was “re-wiring.”

Similarly, most cultural references that were met with laughter in PMC-majority groups were brief figurative allusions with political content, such as “It’s another ‘Good
"job, Brownie!" (referring to President George Bush’s praise of the official who botched the federal response to Hurricane Katrina). A typically PMC sense of absurdity was evident in a whimsical collective riff on the train to an anti-war rally being a “peace train”: “Cat Stevens [songwriter of “Peace Train”] is coming!,” with lots of laughter as preposterous details were added to this imaginary scenario.

Most laughter-evoking cultural references seemed to be easily understood by all group members, as when the interfaith group used allusions to the Bible and Saul Alinsky.

More problematic were cultural references that were not understood by working-class or otherwise marginalized members of mixed groups. In a mixed-class meeting of Easthaver Demands Justice, a member mentioned the hand sewing that Irene was doing on her lap, and an upper-middle-class member responded with a literary reference to Dickens and the French revolution that other members didn’t understand, including at least two working-class members.

Irene: I’m always sewing….
Mia: Irene is our Madame Defarge. She’s deciding who’s going to get guillotined.
Man: We wish! <laughter>
Several people: What? What?
[Overlapping speech as others answer with explanations about French revolution, Tale of Two Cities, <laughter>]

As seen in the last chapter, the board members of Green Homes Green World were troubled by poor turnout and the difficulty of recruiting their working-class volunteers of color to serve on the board. No doubt there were many causes of these recruitment troubles, but the kind of humor enjoyed by the all-PMC board members, such as the “subverting the tardiness paradigm” comment, probably didn’t help.
Unique to working-class-background women of color was a form of body language that bonded them as they laughed together: making eye contact and moving upper bodies towards and away from each other. For example, when Fred barked at an overtalker, “Doug, be quiet!,” Gil made a big hand gesture and said, “Ooh, smack down!,” and three working-class and straddler women of color made eye contact, then shrieked and laughed as they rocked their bodies forward, then back, in sync. The meeting then moved forward with noticeably less tension. An almost identical pattern of eye contact, body language and laughter was observed among the black women at the small Local 21 meeting profiled in Chapters 1 and 5.

Laughter and humor helped create and demonstrate a sense of comfort and familiarity at activist meetings; they were key building blocks of group cohesion and trust. Yet humor culture clashes, such as unfamiliar cultural references and the PMC women’s teasing taboo, may cause problems for mixed-class groups.
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 of 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, they also did most of the tasks between meetings. Two of them, Alton and Ira, found themselves in the uncomfortable position of holding anti-hierarchy values and yet being treated as the informal leaders of their group.

These two men, one a white lower-professional, 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 over-participation, and introducing group processes designed to draw out the less active people. At the Action Against Empire (AAE) meeting I observed, neither approach worked: more than half the group was silent except for initial introductions and saying yes or no to proposed dates. Only a few core members left the meeting with any concrete action step related to the group’s work.

Many voluntary groups face this problem of too many passive members and too few active ones. And as we will see below, many college-educated activists try the same two strategies that Alton and Ira tried in AAE, only to find them insufficient, or
sometimes even backfiring. A third approach, trustworthy leaders championing member interests, suggested almost entirely by working-class activists, was not a panacea either, but did add some methods of mobilizing the inactive that were missing from the first two strategies. The leaders who used it won members’ trust through beneficial action and protective mutual aid, and then played strong roles in developing inactive members’ involvement.

**Dimensions of disempowerment and class**

The essence of movement mobilization is transforming people from passive to active, from unwilling to speak up to outspoken. Until that transformation happens, newcomers and socially marginalized people, as well as simply shy people, can find activism intimidating; they may struggle to find their voice and their sense of inner power. They may feel timid about speaking, doubt their own ideas, or believe they lack the knowledge or skills for group responsibilities.

Ten informants put their experience of disempowerment into words, making insecure statements like these:

- “I’m not that smart to do that”;
- “I have a fear of getting up in front of people and talking, and I’m still sort of nervous about that”;
- “I never want to be in charge… I’m just a helper in the background”;
- “I don’t know if it’s really my place… maybe because I don’t really have too much knowledge of it like they do.”

Nine of the ten people who put their disempowerment into words were women. Racially they were diverse in proportion with the whole pool. In terms of class, half had lived lifelong in the working-class range; none were lifelong-professional-middle-class. It seems that disempowerment is experienced, or at least verbalized, most strongly by less-
class-privileged women (as Cummings 2003 also found). The triple threat of being female or transgender, working-class, and new to activism was associated with the most passivity, the most silence, and the most self-reported intimidation.

How do marginalized people become and remain disempowered? When Gaventa (1982) investigated why poor people in an Appalachian Valley didn’t rebel against the exploitive coal companies, corrupt politicians and inattentive union locals that impoverished them, he turned to Lukes’ (1974) dimensions of power to define three kinds of powerlessness: a straightforward lack of resources and clout to make something happen; barriers to participation in decision-making arenas, along with discouragement due to anticipated defeat; and susceptibility to myths and ideologies that block critical consciousness (21). The quiescence in the Appalachian Valley was caused by the interrelationship of those three kinds of powerlessness (256), and no doubt the same mix inhibits working-class activism throughout the US today.

In another very revealing study, Croteau (1995) interviewed working-class non-activists about why they didn’t get involved in middle-class-led social movements. His findings show that it’s not disagreement with the cause, lack of knowledge, lack of time or logistical obstacles that primarily keep working-class people from becoming activists. The main reason for their lack of involvement is “the absence of efficacy” (Croteau 1995: Chapter 5), a sense that activism wouldn’t do any good. Sometimes this discouragement reflects a realistic understanding of how little regard politicians have for input from people like themselves. But sometimes disempowerment is learned helplessness, carried over from experiences of oppression, which prevents effective political action.
In interviews, core members of virtually every group expressed concern about quiet, inactive members and how to get them to speak up and take on more roles. This seems to be one of the most universal social change group troubles.

**Three approaches to inactive members and leadership**

Three approaches to activating inactive members were suggested by interviewees and observed in meetings; and each approach came most often from those of a particular class trajectory.

Because concepts of leadership were very closely tied to preferred solutions to the problem of inactive members, these three approaches show up most clearly in response to a question asked in 51 interviews, “Who are the leaders of your group?”

To both activists and social movement scholars, successful leadership usually means fostering member empowerment (Morris 1984; Starhawk 1988; Payne 1995; Stout 1996; Polletta 2002). Activist how-to manuals emphasize this activating function of leadership (Kahn 1991; Lakey et al. 1996; Bobo 2001; Miller 2009). These manuals talk about leadership very differently than the most widely known leadership typologies, which contrast dichotomous types: directive versus participative modes (Likert 1961; Heller 1973); or task-oriented versus people-oriented leadership functions (Bales 1950; Shartle 1956; Gusfield 1966; Hersey and Blanchard 1977; Belenky et al. 1997). The task/relationship dichotomy is not a controversy on which today’s activists are polarized. Almost universally, interviewees valued both.

Command-and-control leadership is not an option for an SMO, as members are free to choose their own level of participation. Only three of the 51 interviewees who were asked about leadership (all three respectable African American Christians from
working-class backgrounds) presumed matter-of-factly that leaders make a plan and tell the members what to do. The other 48 expressed the goal of getting members to participate more actively in decision-making. But there were class differences about what leaders should do to advance that goal.

The three classed strategies of activation and concepts of leadership

Three strategies for increasing active involvement, each with a different underlying concept of leadership, were each promoted primarily by informants with certain class profiles:

1. **Holding back from domination.** Underlying this strategy is a concept of leader as dominator, best serving member involvement via self-monitoring, allowing others room for **autonomous action**. This strategy was advocated and practiced most often by voluntarily downwardly mobile and lower-professional activists.

2. **Facilitating stylized group processes.** Underlying this strategy is a concept of leader as manager, best serving member involvement by designing and managing processes that require everyone’s verbal participation for the **concerted cultivation of equal participation**. This strategy was advocated and practiced most often by PMC and assimilated-straddler activists.

3. **Trustworthy championing of member interests.** Underlying this strategy is a concept of leader as trusted protector, best serving member involvement via strong chairing, fostering mutual loyalty with concrete aid, leading to the **accomplishment of natural involvement**. This strategy was advocated most often by working-class activists, and practiced most often by class-diverse leaders of working-class-majority groups.
Not only did these approaches come primarily from distinct class trajectories, but the dissenters who raised concerns about each approach also typically came from a different class than the proponents. The rationales for and against each strategy had roots in informants’ class cultures.

**Strategy #1. Holding back to avoid domination: Allowing autonomous action**

This strategy required more dominant group members to hold back and deliberately speak less, to make space for quiet members to speak up.

The interviewees who advocated holding back were mostly young, white members of the groups in the anarchist traditions. In 10 of the 15 interviews with members of anarchist groups, this strategy for increasing quiet members’ vocal participation was advocated. Half the interviewees who advocated holding back were younger than 28; half were male and half were female; nine were white and one was Asian American.

For example, in the Action Against Empire meeting described at the beginning of this chapter, this was Alton and Ira’s main response to the vastly unequal participation within the group. They left long pauses. But it didn’t work; the quiet people remained quiet. Even when they held back, Ira and Alton were by far the most vocal members. In his interview, Ira expressed guilt about this imbalance and said that he should have been "stepping back and not taking up so much space." However, whenever he and Alton did sit silently for a few minutes, they fruitlessly waited for the facilitator or someone else to speak up, which casts doubt on the effectiveness of using only this strategy. Analyzing the silences in the meeting in light of Ira’s self-described intention to hold back, we can see that he and Alton were intentionally performing a non-dominating, egalitarian role,
and more specifically performing their disinvestment in the group’s decisions (Goffman 1959). But in other members’ eyes, this performance didn’t work to remove them from the leadership of the group.

The mostly VDM or lower-professional advocates of the holding back strategy tended to answer the question "who are the leaders of your group?" with a negative judgment of the very concept of leadership, or else they answered, “We are all leaders.” Some referred to race and/or gender domination, suggesting that men and/or whites should try to speak less. Twenty or 30 years earlier, such negative definitions of leadership would have been associated with radical feminism (Taylor and Whittier 1995: 169), but in 2007-8, anti-leadership was primarily an anarchist ideal.

Leon, a VDM white convention protestor, was the only holding-back advocate to include class as a basis of domination:

I hate the word ‘leaders’. I see it come up over and over, informal hierarchies. The people who've been here for a year and a half are more comfortable in their voice, can voice things…It's hard for new people, or non-white or non-middle-class people, to incorporate themselves. People self-select; those who can, dive in.

Men in two ideologically anti-hierarchy groups displayed a telling behavior. While chatting before the meeting, three college-educated men spoke at an average volume, with typical male cadence; but as soon as they stepped into a facilitation or presenter role, they spoke at a much softer volume. Sometimes their sentences ended with an upward lilt like a question, in the way that some deferential young women speak, but men rarely do. For example, “For the agenda? we could start with this issue from last time? that we didn’t finish?”
In answer to a question about why he spoke in that lilting way, Ira’s self-aware response explained the ambivalent, self-doubting, seesawing quality characteristic of lower-professionals’ speech:

Alton and I, we’re both men, and I think relative to other people in the meeting, we take up a lot of space. And especially when there’s female facilitators, we don't do a good job of like stepping back… one side of my brain is trying to be like hyper-conscious and somewhat overcompensate for trying to recognize when I should be speaking up, when I shouldn't be speaking up, who's speaking up, who is not... I guess associating like softer voice, not being so imposing, either in the volume of my voice or my body language… it's more of an effort to put ideas out there, not impose them.

Rupert, the young white man from an upper-middle-class background in the Parecon Collective, also answered a question about this phenomenon by describing being torn between assertiveness and holding back:

Interviewer: I noticed Julius, before the meeting started, he was chatting, say <loudly> this was the volume of his voice — but when he was in the facilitator role, his voice was really soft, and he had those little tentative things where it goes <lilting, questioning tone> up at the end of the sentences. What do you think is going on there?

Rupert: I think he is conscientious about being authoritarian in a group setting and perhaps over-compensating or would rather err on the side of being tentative instead of being authoritarian...

Interviewer: Like a firm voice might sound like making too much of his facilitator authority?

Rupert: Right. Going from facilitator to ‘discussion leader’ — you know, you can't draw the line that says this is where you go from being a good facilitator to, you know, pushing the conversation along…. I think I tend to be more authoritarian. It's a balance of being conscious that I'm a guy, and I shouldn't be taking up all the air time [and] pushing the conversation where I want it to go — and balancing that with like <louder, frustrated tone:> ‘we're not talking about what we're supposed to be talking about here!'

These white men were prefiguratively trying to embody their goal of a world with no top-down authority by refusing to act in a dominating way themselves. Like VDM lifestyle choices, holding back appears to be not a class culture strategy only; it could
better be described as a norm typical of a particular age/race/class/gender/ideology intersection.

The association of the holding back strategy with a VDM class trajectory is strengthened by observing who dissented from it: primarily non-VDM people in majority-VDM groups. Its most articulate critic was Gail, the middle-aged white lower-professional non-anarchist in the primarily VDM and anarchist Action Center. Her critique echoed the classic article "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" (Freeman 1972). She described the unintended negative consequences of the anti-leadership stance common in young anarchist groups more generally:

> We're talking about the very micro, micro things about the anarchist culture, the young people culture. There's… a real unwillingness to speak out and take leadership or be assertive about one’s point of view… I identify it as being about power. I identify it being about leadership and the reluctance to take leadership.

Within the Parecon Collective, Olivia, the one lifelong-poor member, was the only one to express skepticism about avoidance of leadership. Instead she proposed stronger and more conventional facilitation and simple majority-rules voting to draw in new and marginal people; she didn’t propose to solve the problem of under-participation by holding back, nor by innovative group process, though she had been exposed to both those leadership strategies in the Parecon meetings. Both she and Gail pointed out how the holding back strategy backfired, how VDM activists’ discomfort with power ended up reinforcing the power of core members.
Strategy #2. Facilitating stylized group process techniques: managing concerted cultivation of equal participation

In answer to questions about their groups’ leaders and about their ideal group, 12 interviewees each brought up three to six specific group process techniques, often advocating them as ways to get quieter members to talk more.

Most of these techniques required each meeting participant to speak, for example by answering a particular question. Often they required certain people to speak in some stylized way (for example, just one person per small group reporting back on only the points everyone agreed on). More contemporary examples of stylized speech are the Occupy movement’s General Assembly “mic check” (a call-and-response sometimes used even when actual amplification is available) and hand signals during consensus decision-making.

The most frequently suggested process was go-arounds (each person taking a turn speaking without any response). Go-arounds had various purposes: evaluations of the meeting; opinion go-arounds during decision-making; and to open the meeting, something more elaborate than the ubiquitous introductions, such as personal check-ins or playful question (e.g., ‘If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?’) For example, Ira said, “The go around the circle thing is something I like, ‘cause everyone has a chance… I think it makes the situation more comfortable. So if I’m facilitating, I like to ask if we can go around, go around the circle.”

Many interviewees suggested group process techniques to solve other problems as well, such as formal conflict resolution procedures. Many advocated a structured sequence of steps in consensus decision-making. Several spoke in favor of facilitation training to learn the group’s processes.
The 12 interviewees who advocated stylized group processes were diverse in
gender, age, and race. This strategy seemed to predominate in one movement tradition:
seven of the 12 were in global/local cause groups. But class background was their biggest
commonality: 11 of the 12 came from privileged class backgrounds, higher than the
overall pool of interviewees and higher than the median for their groups. Four were
lifelong professional-middle-class (PMC). Seven were voluntarily downwardly mobile;
of these seven, three were raised owning-class or upper-middle-class and four grew up
PMC — very privileged class backgrounds.

The only lifelong working-class person who advocated multiple stylized group
process techniques was also the most ambivalent about them. Dorothea, the founder of
City Power, told a story about identity caucuses with both positive and negative
outcomes. She also answered a question about how her ideal meeting would begin with a
nuanced statement containing both positive and negative aspects of process techniques:

Sometimes City Power has started meetings with check-ins, and that's been interesting, but if somebody's in a personal crisis, that can totally divert the whole meeting... I like it when agendas are put together collectively and where anyone who's interested in learning the skills of facilitation and leadership can do so. Not everybody is. Some people would really prefer to be the doers, but most people are interested.

The 11 more class-privileged interviewees favoring this strategy tended to have
far fewer qualms than Dorothea about stylized processes as a means of increasing active
involvement.

A few PMC interviewees with high-level non-profit jobs emphasized the
sophisticated skills required to run a good meeting. For example, a professional union
staffer wished members got more training in parliamentary procedure. And an African
American top manager in a national non-profit said that his views differed from other members:

*Interviewer*: If you were in charge of the next meeting, what would you do to make it go better?

*Rodney*: I would try and **set the context**, like what is it that has gotten us to this point, what decisions do we need to make… I’m a trained facilitator, I’ve run trainings before, so I kind of come at this with a very, very specific, almost technical lens.

Blake, a middle-aged white man moderately voluntarily downwardly mobile from an upper-middle-class background to become a lower-professional nonprofit staffer, was an exemplar of the leadership style that emphasizes managing stylized processes. While facilitating one Easthaver Demands Justice (EDJ) meeting, he was observed using four stylized processes: a personal check-in with a specific question to answer; breaking into pairs and reporting back on what the other person said; a goal-setting process with a sequence of several steps; and writing key points on big paper under pre-written headings that sorted what members said into categories. He frequently cut off those whose words did not fit into the current process step and re-directed them to another part of the agenda when their point would be appropriate. He blended the managerial orientation of his early PMC conditioning and elite education with the countercultural process style of his chosen movement tradition. Clearly, facility with creating and leading such group processes is part of the PMC cultural capital needed for leadership roles in both the non-profit sector and in global/local cause groups.

This association between PMC culture and the stylized process leadership strategy is strengthened by examining who dissented from it. When Blake facilitated the EDJ meeting in such a stylized way, not everyone cooperated, and not everyone approved. The dissenters and non-cooperators were all people who grew up working-class or poor.
Interviews with two dissenting EDJ members, one a white male and the other an African American female, illuminate how stylized group process might not fit with working-class cultural conditioning. Mack called for a more spontaneous and natural way of building group participation. From a working-class background and retired from a unionized skilled trade, he was a fairly unassimilated straddler, class-culturally different than most EDJ members, and also a blunt curmudgeon in personality. His disagreement with EDJ’s process is worth quoting at length, because he put into words sentiments signaled less directly by other working-class-background informants:

Mack: I don’t happen to believe that these organizational tricks… I come out of the union movement, but the way small groups, you know, and this writing things on a paper and putting them all up, I don’t happen to think that any of that is very useful. I mean people feel like they're doing something but then the process becomes an end to itself, and I don’t think it contributes anything of substance. I have a pretty extreme view of this stuff… and bridle at being put through that stuff…People who come out of a certain tradition, in a sort of non-profit world in what's called community organizing, tend to love that stuff… I feel that that practice, although it tries to present itself as being very democratic, and it really strives for everyone to participate, but the reality is if a small number of people develop a very complex agenda and really control what happens, my view is that, in fact that's less democratic than something that's more spontaneous.

Interviewer: So you're saying by having it be in this very stylized way, the small number of people end up controlling....

Mack: Yeah, in the name of not controlling it, or in the name of more voices spoken, and it ends up people are herded into these activities willy-nilly.

Another EDJ process-noncooperator, Laverne, was one of three middle-aged or older black interviewees from working-class backgrounds who were notably disinterested in organizational questions. A veteran of many grassroots campaigns in her urban, mostly black neighborhood, Laverne answered questions about group process with brief, vague, passionless answers, but became passionate when discussing her past community activities. She proudly invoked black leaders' names as she described the wonderful
things that groups had accomplished under their direction. She said about one group, “Oh my goodness, they kept us hopping! [Well-known black male leader] was a very good teacher!” After repeatedly probing for group process opinions and finding none, the interviewer asked her directly:

Interviewer: Some people I talked to, they're super opinionated about the process and how decisions get made, you know, the structure and how the meetings get run. But I get the feeling that that's not something you care that much about.
Laverne: Well, you mean in running the meeting?
Interviewer: Some people are really opinionated about how decisions get made, by a vote or who's facilitating and how that's done...what about you?
Laverne: Well, as long I'm able to take part in the meetings, I'm not really too upset about who's facilitating the meeting. As long as it comes to a good conclusion.
Interviewer: You don't care how you get there.
Laverne: Exactly. As long as it's not too drastic.

Within this mixed-class group, both meeting behavior and opinions about group process roughly lined up with class, in particular with class background.

The roots and purposes of the stylized group processes strategy

These stylized processes have come into US social movements from numerous sources: social work (Benjamin et al. 1997); Quaker tradition (Butler 1981); the second wave feminist movement (Iannello 1992; Ferree and Martin 1995); and organizational development consulting and diversity training (Lakey et al. 1995; Adams and Lee 2007). During the prefigurative movements of the 1970s and 1980s (Breines 1989; Epstein 1991), Movement for a New Society (Cornell 2011), the War Resisters League, the Highlander Center, and the National Coalition Building Institute, among others, trained activists in these techniques; Training for Change continues to teach them today. Meetings that use these methods can be formal, with many pre-set agreements on process steps, or spontaneous, with innovative processes coined on the spot. But in any case, their
creative and interactive process style contrasts with the simpler, more businesslike meeting procedures taught by labor educators and the Midwest Academy’s community organizing school (Bobo et al. 2001).

In the 1990s, the anarchist and direct action wing of the anti-corporate-globalization movement kept some processes from these earlier traditions, dropped others, and added new ones, as has the Occupy movement. The most anarchist-influenced groups in this study were more likely to use hand signals during decision-making and to use consensus decision-making methods with a set sequence of steps.

The rationale for more elaborate group processes is often expressed in terms of cultivating the empowerment of less empowered members. For example, the social workers who authored the book Making groups work (Benjamin et al. 1997) wrote that a facilitator’s role includes “increas[ing] the competence and confidence of group members” (89) and leading “structured exercises” that foster “experiential learning in groups” so that the “group can see its dynamics” by encouraging members to “take a slight risk, experiment or try something out” (131). These authors put stylized group processes into the context of a long process of increasing agency and skills, akin to Freire’s (1970) conscientização, critical consciousness-raising that gradually expands the capacity to act. In Polletta’s (2002) formulation of the three benefits of participatory democracy — solidary, developmental and innovative — these stylized process advocates stress the developmental aspect.

But to other proponents, stylized processes are intended to instantly equalize power by creating identical spaces for each voice. Iannello (1992), for example, says that anarchist feminist practices of consensus decision-making, rotating roles and other
alternative structures themselves prevent domination and create shared leadership (42-43). Sociocracy is another method in which egalitarian processes are expected to produce an equality of power (Buck and Villines 2007). This short-term outcome of equal turns to speak is sometimes stressed over the more realistic developmental goal of slow skill building over time.

**Resonances of an earlier movement era: a personal reminiscence**

I’m not a neutral observer of these controversies over stylized group processes. I was once a group process zealot, until my activist experiences brought me to a more skeptical, nuanced view.

What first attracted me to lifelong activism was participatory group process and prefigurative movement culture. In 1977, I was a Princeton student languishing without clear purpose when more than 1,400 Clamshell Alliance protestors were arrested at the Seabrook nuclear construction site and jailed in New Hampshire state armories for two weeks. The *New York Times* had reporters inside the armories, and day after day they reported on the remarkable scene there. A group of us began reading those articles aloud in the dining hall every evening. The protestors were organized into affinity groups; they spent their time singing and leading workshops; and they managed to change jail policies such as gender segregation by mass non-cooperation. Most amazing of all, they were making all decisions by consensus – with hundreds of people. They used an elaborate system of small-to-large-group transmission of concerns and objections, which actually worked to make tricky decisions such as refusing to be bailed out. Like the young activists galvanized by the beginning of the Occupy movement (Delvino 2011), I had
never wanted anything as fervently as I wanted to be inside the armories with the anti-
nuke occupiers.

I dropped out of college and joined Movement for a New Society (MNS), a
national network of activists that had played a major role in organizing the Seabrook
occupation and facilitating the group process in the armories. For the first year or two, I
loved everything about MNS organizational culture: the playfulness of incorporating
games into meetings; the freedom to challenge anything and process everything; the long
deliberations over internal dynamics and political positions. For me, it was a
tremendously empowering experience of participatory democracy. My only criticisms
were that it didn’t go far enough, for example that we didn’t recognize that only pagan
spirituality was consistent with our anti-hierarchical values.

Ten years later, MNS disbanded, fading away with a sad failure to flourish. My
own evaluation, shared with some others (such as MNS co-founder George Lakey
(Cornell 2011)), is that rigidity about consensus decision-making was one of the reasons
it languished.

Consensus can be deeply conservative, as the status quo is the fallback position if
consensus can’t be reached on a change. I saw this first with gay rights: despite MNS’s
focus on ‘oppression/liberation’ issues such as sexism and classism, the organization was
about five years behind most of the left in adding homophobia to its analysis of social
problems. Why? Because one single person, in one local chapter, who as a boy had been
molested by a man, blocked consensus on taking that stand. Wave after wave of younger
people brought new political energy into MNS, only to have their ideas not achieve 100%
consensus. There may not be many MNS veterans who would say this as strongly as I’m
saying it, but I suspect that if we’d had a more flexible decision-making system, MNS might be alive today.

Many attempts have been made since to modify the consensus process, preserving its channels for minority opinions but making it less time-consuming and less conservative, for example in some feminist groups (Iannello 1992), in some self-managed collective workplaces that use methods such as sociocracy (Buck and Villines 2007), and in some Occupy groups.

More broadly than just problems with consensus, I had gradually realized that the movement culture that had charmed me did not charm others. And there was a pattern in who wasn’t charmed: not only champions of the status quo, no loss to our movements, but also working-class people with plenty of critiques of social problems. My tastes for creative, ultra-egalitarian process had grown out of my upper-middle-class background, and like all tastes, they separated people by class (Bourdieu 1984). The anti-nuclear power movement, for all its success, stayed smaller than it had to, given that a majority of Americans came to oppose nuclear plants. Those most threatened by radiation in their back yards and by rate hikes in their electric bills did not join in great numbers.

I remember my first glimpses outside my countercultural bubble. Building an anti-nuclear coalition with local working-class groups exposed me to coffee-and-donuts community organizing. Meetings were quick, teasing was rough, and leadership was seen as a good thing if it resulted in stronger action against unjust authorities. I was in culture shock. But the down-to-earth working-class organizational culture appealed to me, and I started to see MNS group process through these activists’ eyes: stilted, over-stylized, over-sensitive to small imperfections and slights, and sometimes just plain bizarre.
Here’s one memory that exemplifies the culture clash. My anti-nuclear group, a bunch of long-haired men and hairy-legged women, had gone to a meeting of a senior citizen group to recruit them to help stop a local nuclear construction project. They were mostly white men retired from blue-collar trades jobs. The meeting was going well when someone proposed we take a coffee break. One of my esteemed counterculture colleagues said, “I know! For the break, let’s all howl like wolves!” And even worse, several people did it! As a big “Owwwww-oooooooh” went up, I saw some of the senior activists nudge each other and roll their eyes, as if they were thinking, ‘What’s up with these wackos?’ Their group did join the coalition, but no thanks to the howlers.

Something in my gut switched allegiance at that moment, from a previous enchantment with all things alternative, to a skepticism about what is effective in movement building. I began pushing my sister and brother countercultural radicals to blend in more with the norms of less culturally distinct groups’ norms, in particular working-class groups; and to confine their ‘howling’ (metaphorically speaking) to special small groups just for howling devotees. We had thought of ourselves as prefiguring emancipatory participatory democracy, but in ways that were invisible to us, we were also performing class-exclusionary PMC counterculture.

Now fast-forward to the 90s and the rising anti-corporate-globalization movement and the growing anarchist subculture. Many of the same admirable qualities of MNS reappeared: the emphasis on creating positive alternatives; a comprehensive analysis in which all injustices are interconnected; and the courage to do nonviolent direct action with unpredictable tactics.
But sometimes it seemed that all MNS’s mistakes were being made again. I see process tastes intensifying the very problems they are meant to solve. Excessive rigidity in group process and strict equality have sunk many groups aiming to prefigure their ideal world (Epstein 1991). Polletta (2002) calls for a more sophisticated idea of participatory democracy, based on a more complex equality, to enable social movement groups to give all their members a voice, develop their deliberative skills, and do their work effectively and efficiently.

In MNS we had a checklist of skills that every activist should strive to acquire. If I were amending that list for today’s college-educated radicals, I would add the skill of participating in a brisk, leader-run, majority-rules, action-oriented labor or community-organizing meeting without whining about the process.

While I still advocate that facilitators think in advance about how to use a meeting to increase the group’s creativity and cohesion, and while I still judge meetings by how many new or marginalized people’s ideas are drawn out, I no longer think there’s a formula for the right group process to accomplish those goals. In fact, I think that belief in a formula is a problem for cross-class movement building.

So as I did the fieldwork for this study, I could not observe the most process-heavy meetings with a neutral eye. I had an agenda of discovering which participatory democracy methods work to activate the most disempowered activists — and an agenda of making PMC group-process proponents more aware of which of their class-culture-specific processes may be less effective with working-class and poor people. While this study uncovered some examples where stylized group processes did work to make new or
marginal members more outspoken and active, I also found many examples, summarized below, when they seemed to make things worse.

**How stylized group processes sometimes backfire**

The Action Against Empire meeting described in the opening of this chapter exemplified how stylized group processes sometimes didn’t simply fail, but actually backfired. Several techniques Alton and Ira introduced had the unintended consequence of intimidating or marginalizing the less active members.

First, rotating facilitation backfired. A different person facilitated each AAE meeting. This meeting’s facilitator, inexperienced activist Cass, was the only member from a clear-cut working-class background, and the only transgender person in the group. Cass spoke so seldom that I didn’t learn who was facilitating until interviewees told me later. With the facilitator almost silent, no one called on members to speak or asked them evocative questions. Only the three most active members presented information or suggested roles that needed filling.

Rotating facilitation is a popular way of sharing leadership and empowering marginalized members by giving them a turn to be in charge. Of 26 interviewees with an opinion on who should chair meetings, 16 (including every voluntarily downwardly mobile informant) favored rotating facilitation; only 10 interviewees favored a steady chair. But to rotate facilitation without any training, and without any explicit agreements about what facilitators should do to encourage member participation, is to leave meetings too weakly chaired. Its effect on inexperienced one-shot facilitators like Cass is questionable; it may sometimes work to strengthen their facilitation skills and sense of enfranchisement, though sometimes it fails at this too. But its disempowering effect on
other less active members is undeniable. Many new and marginalized people didn’t speak until someone asked them to, and rarely did anyone ask except a confident, skilled chair or facilitator.

Second, hand signals backfired. Hand signals communicate agreement, disagreement and other messages during consensus decision-making in many global/local cause groups with younger members. Four groups in this study used hand signals; no two used identical versions. At Action Against Empire (AAE), arms crossed over chest meant blocking consensus, and wiggling fingers in the air meant consent.

One newer AAE member, Lowell, a Latino lower-middle-class man, the only person at the meeting who was neither white nor Asian, and the only one besides Cass from a working-class-range background, was exactly the kind of quiet, marginalized member that the stylized group processes were meant to activate. In this explicitly anti-racist group, whose leaders fretted and felt guilty about too little racial diversity, getting Lowell more actively involved might have been seen as a top priority. But when a decision was made early in the meeting, everyone wiggled their fingers in the air except for Lowell, who stared at the wigglers, dumbfounded. Ira explained the signals only after this decision. Lowell was almost silent for the rest of the meeting, asking just one three-word question. Seeing eccentric hand motions done by everyone else may have had the effect of marginalizing him further.

I asked Alton about hand signals, and he said, “If there are new people, we want them to get acclimated to the signals in the group. It's a responsibility that we should try and keep up to date, especially when there is a new person there… [W]e scan the room, go around and make sure that everyone is doing some kind of signal.” But this
attentiveness to shared understanding of hand signals had broken down at the meeting Lowell attended.

Third, it seems that strict consensus decision-making didn’t always have its intended empowering effect either. Unlike more informal groups, in which the word “consensus” meant talking until a sense of the meeting emerged and those with minority opinions spontaneously quieted down, at AAE “consensus” was used in the stricter sense that any dissenting opinion could have the power of a veto. This veto-power was key to how Alton described the enfranchising effects of consensus:

*I really enjoy the consensus-based decision-making. While it does make meetings longer and maybe decisions don’t get made as quickly, I think that it’s important to make each individual feel that they have something to contribute to the group; and if you give an individual the power of veto...that really sort of gives people the responsibility, makes them feel like a participant.*

But in practice, newer and less-active members had rarely if ever blocked consensus at AAE meetings, to Ira and Alton’s despair. Alton described how non-leaders avoided expressing dissenting opinions:

*I feel that the way to overcome people's concerns with the group, especially with this unspoken hierarchy, is to combat the habit of looking to [other] people for consensus... I feel that people sort of look around the room and then give their opinion, which means that if they see someone who they feel to be a larger part of the organization consenting, then they make their decision on that.*

The phenomenon Alton described is not uncommon in strict-consensus groups, where only the most enfranchised were observed taking the dramatic step of blocking consensus. Blocking consensus is a much higher-risk action than casting a nay vote. The final authority granted to an individual’s veto makes it harder for any new person except the very boldest to block. Given the very wide gap in participation levels in this group,
it’s not surprising that the less-enfranchised AAE members weren’t exercising their veto power. The very process meant to level hierarchies was, in fact, reinforcing them.

These stylized group processes were the main tools that Ira and Alton had in their tool kit (Swidler 1986), and even after some techniques didn’t work, they continued to suggest more similar processes to make the group more egalitarian and participatory. One process, separate race caucuses, reportedly did work to give a stronger voice to members of color: Alton said that everyone spoke during the first caucus of people of color. But it seemed that most of the other group process solutions didn’t have the intended positive effects.

I don’t know what AAE’s problem was, why so many members hung back from speaking or taking on tasks. Perhaps, as Ira and Alton suspected, the dynamics of a few dominating leaders, all white and/or male, had disempowered others; perhaps some personality clash or political disagreement was unspoken in the room. But in any case, most of the stylized group processes introduced by the informal leaders did not solve the problems, and some backfired and made things worse.

The anti-authoritarian wing of the globalization and anti-war movements developed some of these protocols specifically for protest planning meetings. Spokes Councils or General Assemblies before direct action do require different processes than other meetings, because they are often one-shot ad hoc meetings; some have hundreds of participants; sometimes the action under discussion is less than 24 hours away. Hand signals and speech restrictions (such as that only affinity group representatives can speak) are methods of coping with those special circumstances. Strict consensus, with an emphasis on individual veto rights, means that the majority cannot make a plan that puts
the minority at risk of arrest or injury. But when processes developed for those unusual situations become the norm for regular meetings, as they have in some anarchist and Occupy groups, their downsides may have unintended negative consequences. Some voluntarily downwardly mobile white anarchists saw these processes as a non-negotiable characteristic of egalitarian activism, without evaluating their effectiveness.

**Breaking up natural conversational sequence**

Another reason that some stylized processes backfire is because they interrupt the accustomed conversational flow. In the most common pattern of natural conversation, each utterance responds to the immediately prior utterance (Sacks 1992: 41-43; Furo 2001: 27-29).

For example, ‘keeping stack’ kept conversations choppy. In this method, a stack-keeper, usually a separate role from the meeting facilitator, keeps a list of people waiting to speak and calls on them, ideally in the exact order that they raised their hands. The process is intended to equalize access to the floor, to prevent dominant personalities or informal leaders from talking more than their share. But with its lack of a mechanism for keeping the discussion on topic, the stack system made some discussions disjointed. I observed new people ask questions that were never answered because someone with a different point was next in the stack.

Some systems of hand signals have a signal for ‘direct response’, pointing alternating forefingers at the prior speaker to indicate to the chair that there’s a reason to break the stack to allow another comment on the same topic. But this signal was rarely observed in practice, and then only by the most process-savvy insiders. So the effect of keeping stack was to make the meeting much less like a naturally occurring conversation.
Group discussion became a series of individual solo statements, and joint productions (Sacks (1992 [1968]) were prevented.

The same interruption of the conversational flow is often a feature of go-arounds. In the form common in PMC- and VDM-majority global/local cause groups, the rest of the group listens silently until one person is done, then turns their gaze to the next person, which signals her or him to start speaking. The facilitator speaks only if a back-and-forth breaks out, to restore the one-turn-each norm. Not only is the question usually asked just once, at the beginning of the go-around, and not only are most contributions greeted with silence, but the expectation is that each speaker will respond not to the prior speaker, but to the original question, making the flow very different from natural conversation. While appreciative laughter or comments did sometimes happen during go-arounds in global/local cause meetings, such interruptions were less frequent than in the majority-working-class community organizing groups.

Overall, in PMC- or VDM-majority global/local cause groups, meeting participants tended to be left on their own to formulate their contribution, which stood alone, without a conversational preliminary or a follow-up response. Individuals were expected to perform a freestanding utterance during go-arounds, in small group reportbacks, and when keeping stack was the means of calling on the next speaker. This requirement is reminiscent of the speech performances that Lareau (2003) found to be expected of middle-class children, who were continually quizzed by middle-class parents and teachers and asked to perform their knowledge. Lareau found working-class adults’ interactions with children to be very different, without such demands to respond to questions with a solo performance. Thus processes requiring solo speech performances
may seem more comfortable to PMC activists and more foreign to some working-class activists.

There’s a race and gender dimension to this cultural strain as well. Some working-class black communities have coached boys, though not usually girls, to compete in creative public solo performances from a very young age (Heath 1983); working-class African American men with this childhood experience might find solo-performance process demands more comfortable than would working-class women and/or whites, most of whom have been socialized into more interactive, collaborative speech norms (Heath 1983; Tannen 1996; Belenky et al. 1997).

As the findings of this previous research would predict, those who expressed discomfort with go-arounds were women from working-class backgrounds, in particular women of color. No one had problems with the ubiquitous, straightforward introduction go-arounds requiring only name and organization, just those with substantive or icebreaker questions. At one meeting of the Health Care Subcommittee of Neighbors United, all those from PMC backgrounds, all men and all white women cooperated with a go-around about what the group should do next, but three Latinas from working-class backgrounds made these comments instead:

Stella: Uh - what was the question again?  <group laugh>

Shirley: I can't think of anything right now. <group laugh>

Blanca: I kind of just walked in, so I'd like to hear what everybody else has to say, as far as that goes.

Though go-arounds are much more common and thus comfortable for more people than, say, hand signals, it seemed that these women felt self-conscious about being put on the spot by a go-around question. But all three of them offered opinions and
volunteered to do tasks at other points of the meeting, either spontaneously or when a leader asked them a direct question.

A review of empirical studies (Hackman and Morris 1978) on the effectiveness of group processes found that those that increased group creativity, such as brainstorming, did have positive effects, but that there were “process losses” when the methods “severely limit the amount of spontaneous interaction that can occur among group members and constrain interaction” (58). The take-away point from their review is that it’s worthwhile to put attention on how group processes foster creativity and problem solving, but groups should use sparingly methods that stifle participants’ responses to each other.

The two leadership strategies advocated by activists from more privileged class backgrounds – holding back and facilitating stylized group processes – have in common attentiveness to how much each member is talking. The goal of sharing airspace equally was emphasized; sometimes it was equated with equal power. Equality in the number of utterances by each person, or as close to equality as possible, appeared to be a key measure of the group’s effectiveness in involving the less active members. But as we shall see below, this is not a goal central to everyone’s concept of leadership.

**Strategy #3. Trustworthy championing of member interests with protective leadership: Accomplishment of natural involvement**

The notion of leadership was much less problematic for another set of interviewees, mostly from working-class-range backgrounds. Some displayed a frank acceptance of power differences, though they frequently opined on whether or not
particular leaders abused their power. Others opposed excessive power differences, but nevertheless described effective leadership as championing member interests.

Seven community needs or labor groups appeared to rely primarily on this leadership strategy for activating the inactive. Twelve interviewees from those 7 groups praised a strong protective leadership style.

Early in this study I had hypothesized that there would be a correlation between class composition and the formality or informality of meetings, but that hypothesis was proven wrong. The meeting styles of the seven groups with large working-class memberships and led by trusted protective champions in fact varied widely, ranging from the casual family-style discussions common in small low-income community groups; to the simple majority-rules process taught in most community-organizing training, such as at the Midwest Academy (Bobo et al. 2001); to the more elaborate Roberts Rules procedures common in industrial unions. In any case, their meeting process tended to be both less innovative and less time-consuming than in the groups where the stylized group process strategy was observed.

When these interviewees advocated democratic input, they praised leaders for using their authority strongly to ensure all members a chance to speak. Listening was closely linked to forcefulness, not opposed to it. For example, a middle-aged white man from a working-class background, Slim, said about an officer of the Tri-City Labor Alliance, “He's been around. He knows how to argue. He knows how to fight. He knows when to make his point, when to shut up… he's very effective as a political leader… He makes his points and he listens.”
Nicole from the Health Care Subcommittee thought the question about leaders was a straightforward one:

Interviewer: And who do you see as the leaders of the group?
Nicole: Fred.
Interviewer: Fred?
Nicole: I see Fred as a leader.
Interviewer: And how is he as a leader?
Nicole: I think he does a great job. He's very organized. He knows how to recruit people to get them to where he needs them.

Note that Nicole's praise of Fred accepts that members should get to "where he needs them," but she sees him as a persuader, not a commander.

When Elaine, the much-admired founder of Women Safe from Violence, was asked, "Who are the leaders of your group?," she answered:

It's pretty clear I'm a leader of the group. I'm not going to act stupid about that. <In a funny little voice:> 'Who, me?' I have power. I try extremely hard to get people to step up and do new things.

Working-class-background activists tended to evaluate leaders by the trustworthiness of their actions, not by how little or much they talked (except in cases of extreme overtalking). Phrases such as “walk the talk” and “the proof is in the pudding” expressed this watchfulness for actions with integrity corresponding to avowed values.

Here’s how working-class Latina Darla defended Carolyn, a Brontown Affordable Housing Consortium leader whom other members criticized:

Some people kind of take, like, ‘what the hell is she? You know, a white woman from [middle-class suburb], she doesn't even know what the hell she is talking about’. ‘I'm sorry, honey, but once she's the one here at eight o'clock at night reading to kids, oh yeah, that cuts it for me’…She works, she definitely puts her money where her mouth is, she absolutely does, she would be someone that would be here on a Saturday, she's here at night …talk is cheap…so for me it's like ‘you go, girl!’
A tiny number of labor and community group members criticized their current group’s leaders for failing to make all members feel respected, for breaking the rules, or for abusing power. But more common was criticism of a leader of a group they had formerly been involved with. Voting with one’s feet by quitting a voluntary group in which a leader had proved untrustworthy appears to be part of the strategy of entrusting strong, protective leaders. For most working-class activists, to stay in a group required feeling fairly positively towards the leader(s).

**Figure 6.1 Mean number of negative comments about own group, by class trajectory**

![Bar chart showing mean number of negative comments about own group by class trajectory](chart.png)

*N=49 interviews*

“Exit, voice and loyalty” (Hirschman 1970) are three possible responses to problems in an organization, and there’s a class correlation in who tends to choose which option. Speaking up with complaints and remaining in the group was more common among college-educated activists. Working-class activists were more likely either to quit or to stay loyal, and less likely to voice criticisms while still in the group. (See Figure 6.1.) Because so many of the interview questions probed for problems in the group, it
took some effort to avoid voicing complaints, which made this working-class verbal loyalty conspicuous.

Why so few criticisms by working-class interviewees? Most working-class interviewees seemed sincerely enthusiastic about their current group, more so than any other class group. But a few seemed to be exercising restraint in not expressing criticism. Closing ranks and loyalty to leaders were clearly working-class habits. Openly dissenting was sometimes interpreted as disloyalty. For example, Slim regarded it as a major betrayal when Executive Committee (EC) members failed to present a united front to the membership of the Tri-City Labor Alliance. He was angry at EC members who revealed at membership meetings their individual dissenting opinions that had already been outvoted at the EC pre-meeting. Backing leaders seemed to him an essential part of being a good member.

There was also probably reluctance to air dirty laundry to a stranger, a presumably middle-class interviewer, particularly on tape. One rooted working-class interviewee snuck in a quick criticism of her group’s leader after the recorder had been turned off.

The old canard that working-class people are passive followers who prefer authoritarian or even fascist leadership (Lipset 1960), long disputed as empirically wrong (Miller and Riessman 1961), differs from this watchful, conditional support given to trustworthy leaders only. Evidence against Lipset’s stereotyped portrayal of sheep-like working-class people is found in interviewees’ critiques of their former leaders. When the lifelong working-class interviewees were asked about their current group or about their hypothetical ideal group, many of them — across all differences of respectable/outlaw, religious/non-religious, race, gender and age — answered by telling
stories about how awful their former group had been before they quit. When their trust and positive bond with particular leaders eroded, they quit, which reinforces the point that loyalty is the basis of working-class group affiliation.

Two lifelong working-class members of the Health Care Subcommittee of Neighbors United, Nicole and Cecilia, had both quit the same group. Both avoided questions about the Subcommittee by instead criticizing that former group.

Interviewer: Do you have any pet peeves with people at the Health Care Subcommittee meetings?
Nicole: I’m sure Cecilia told you about the other group we belonged in.
Interviewer: She did. She did, yeah.
Nicole: It was very one-sided… She was very controlling. Nobody else’s opinion mattered.… [Story about beginnings of abuse of power]… I finally left. [Long story about the last straw]… So I’m very glad that [my current group] runs differently.

This pattern showed up in working-class activists’ interviews over and over: someone joined a group, had a negative reaction to something the leaders did, walked out, and later used it as a cautionary tale.

Lifelong-working-class activists were also more likely to speak positively about their current group’s leaders. Seven leaders of labor or community groups were especially praised by interviewees as strong leaders. Observing their leaders’ behavior during meetings, as well as hearing them described by other group members, suggests that championing member interests and ensuring member input are components of a broader strategy of protectiveness (Lamont 2000).

All seven of the most-praised strong leaders lived in the same working-class or poor community as most members, but had more privilege than the typical member. Five were white and one was mixed-race. Four of the seven were homeowners; four had college degrees (although vocationally oriented and only acquired in middle age in two
cases); five had decent-paying, steady jobs. Other members didn’t tend to share all these class advantages, and leaders’ protective acts could be interpreted as sharing them with members.

Their form of protective acts varied by gender. The four admired male leaders socialized with members, sometimes going out to bars after meetings, sometimes personally buying refreshments for parties or hosting social gatherings in their homes. The four men were also praised for skillfully standing up to authorities on behalf of members, as well as for forcefully intervening to prevent domination during a meeting. For example, in the Health Care Subcommittee incident described in the Humor interlude above, remember that Fred barked “Be quiet!” at a white PMC man who had repeatedly interrupted others. Working-class interviewees and interviewees of color expressed only positive reactions to Fred’s authoritative handling of this incident. They appreciated his forcefulness in making space for the rest of them to speak.

The three women most praised as strong leaders (Elaine, Dorothea and Brandy, profiled in Chapter 1) played much more intimate roles in members’ lives. They fit Collins’ definition of “community othermothers,” who use their power not to dominate but to uplift (Collins 1991:131; Belenky 1997:168). Their protective acts included taking a homeless member to live in her home; lending a member money; going to the emergency room with a member; attending at a member's childbirth; and cooking and providing food. As we saw in Chapter 4, members also sometimes aided each other in these ways; leaders seemed to be the most active protectors within a network of mutual aid, the kind of reciprocal care common in working-class extended families (Gerstel 2011; Jensen 2012).
An anecdote from a meeting of Women Safe from Violence illustrates the link between leaders’ protectiveness and members entrusting them with power. The founder, Elaine, was not at this meeting, as she was out trying to rescue a member from a dangerous situation. A timely issue on the agenda had to be decided at that meeting: accepting or rejecting someone’s offer of sanctuary for group members, which could possibly endanger the person making the offer. The members vehemently disagreed with each other; roughly half opposed taking the offer and half supported it. Then the chair revealed that Elaine opposed taking the offer and suggested "just going on Elaine's judgment." Others spoke immediately:

*Nadine (white lower-middle-class):* She's the one up close and personal.
* Randall (white involuntarily downwardly mobile):* We have a founder and leader and she's the best. Elaine has to make decisions for the group all the time. We should trust her judgment.
* Laci, the chair (white middle-class) and newer member Kateri (working-class Native American), echoed in unison: We trust her.

The chair called for a vote; those who had supported the offer during the earlier discussion all abstained, so only votes opposing the offer were recorded. Loyalty and deference to Elaine were so strong that no one voted contrary to her opinion even when she wasn't there. The group discussion linked this loyalty to trust in Elaine’s commitment to protecting members.

The downside of relying on trust in a leader, of course, is that sometimes trust isn't there. In particular across race, it can be difficult to establish. Latina straddler Hannah described the dynamics in her mixed-class, mixed-race labor/community coalition:

*People like Yvonne [white staff member] and Kevin [white volunteer], their legitimacy is always scrutinized, questioned by African-Americans.... Are they serving their own power and getting ahead on the ladder? Or are they really*
trying to represent the people?... So there's always a lot of questioning, and there's not a lot of trust.

Note how Hannah emphasizes “questioning” and “scrutiniz[ing]” “legitimacy,” an example of how trustworthiness is monitored in community and labor groups.

And sometimes leaders aren’t trustworthy. Unscrupulous opportunists can gain excessive amounts of power or community status if they manage to tap into a working-class community’s propensity to follow a strong leader. Although we didn’t observe any leaders amassing or abusing power in these 25 groups, Lichterman (1996) found a “centripetal cycle” in some grassroots toxic-waste groups, in which all energy and legitimacy were drawn into too few leaders (122-126; 222).

Dissenters to the strategy of entrusting authority in trustworthy champions of member interests tended to be notably higher in class than the other members. For example, Sheila, a white lower-professional woman expressed a wish that her mostly working-class community group, City Power, didn’t concentrate leadership functions in so few people.

What processes foster the developmental process of empowerment?

Some working-class people described their own process of empowerment and praised their labor or community needs groups and/or particular leaders for assisting them in that growth. For example, a working-class black woman, Pearl, said about Low-Income Women Rising:

*Everyone's a leader. We teach leaders. We promote leaders. So when I came into welfare rights, I wasn't a leader in anything, you know, [anything] but my house, of course. They make you, they don't 'make' you, they empower you to stand up, speak out and fight back. My first task was holding a sign. I never, you know, was holding a sign… so I held the sign, and then from there I listened to the protests, and I'm very much a speaker so, I like to talk … so my first time was in reading a press statement from the people, I was so nervous, I was, my voice was*
chattering, you know. So … it's been a good experience for me, and I've been there for like seven years now.

Courtney told a very similar story of how City Power leaders helped her become more empowered by encouraging her to advocate for herself, instead of doing it for her, so that she gradually became more involved. The empowerment method that Pearl and Courtney said worked so well for them — leaders asking new people to take on small, low-risk tasks, then gradually bigger roles and eventually leadership responsibilities — is the sequence recommended by the Midwest Academy (Bobo et al. 2001) and other community organizing trainings and manuals (Kahn 1991; Szakos and Szakos 2007). Some leaders were inept at this facilitation of others’ empowerment, while others were good at it; there was no class pattern in who did it well, only in who praised it.

By looking at the participation of 48 lifelong-working-class or poor people attending their first, second or third meetings, before and after various process interventions, I found two techniques by chairs and facilitators that seemed to be especially effective in increasing their participation.

**Asking tailored questions and suggesting tasks**

A middle-aged African immigrant woman in a low-paid job, Michelle was reluctant to speak at her first meeting of the Local 21 organizing campaign, but by the end of the meeting she asked a question and agreed to attend a rally. What caused this change in her behavior? Owen, the PMC black union organizer, deliberately drew her out. He was chairing a meeting attended by seven new recruits, all inexperienced women of color with very low incomes, five of them immigrants whose first languages weren’t English; and he was determined to get them as involved as possible.
Owen went around the circle and asked each person directly, “What improvements are needed in [your workplace]?” Most workers could easily answer this question, even the first-time attendees. But Michelle answered by saying “I’m just a guest.” Owen then asked her follow-up questions about her experience until he got a response from her:

**Owen:** You’re a guest?

**Michelle:** This is my first time.

**Owen:** Are you [employed in a workplace being organized]?

**Michelle:** Yes.

**Owen:** For how long?

**Michelle:** 8 years.

**Owen:** In that time, have you seen anything that changed?

**Michelle:** This is my first time, I just listening.

**Owen:** OK. OK. What do you feel needs to be improved in the [workplace]?

**Michelle:** More hours.

**Owen:** How many people do overtime? <Most hands went up> How many get paid for overtime? <1 hand went up>

After each newcomer spoke, Owen responded with a general affirmation, such as “Great, great,” with a restatement of what the person had said, and/or with a probe for more, such as “More training, is that it? Anything else?” Similarly, an elected worker-leader, Marion, asked a quiet young working-class newcomer, “Let me ask you a question. Are you getting any benefits?”

Throughout the meeting Owen asked for commitments very specifically: “Put your name down and when you’re available.” His colorful wall-charts included the words “YOU need to get involved NOW!!!”

Michelle was quiet through most of the rest of the meeting. But when a sign-up sheet went around for attending a rally, she signed it and asked, “Where do we get the bus?” – a small empowerment success story.
Effective organizers of inexperienced working-class people, such as Owen, make go-arounds more like natural conversation. In the form of go-arounds most prevalent in working-class-majority labor and community groups, marginalized people speak when someone asks them a direct question, and then they get an immediate response from one or many people, similar to what they would get in a friendly one-on-one conversation.

Fred and Dorothea also asked less-active individuals questions at various points during meetings, often customized to that person’s knowledge and roles. Without patronizing them with gushing compliments, these leaders affirmed the value of new members’ knowledge, gained from their life experience, by asking about things relevant to the group’s goals that they would be likely to know. For example, Fred asked a Puerto Rican member whether passing out flyers was allowed at the Puerto Rican Day parade.

Asking direct questions seems like a promising empowerment practice, with two caveats. First, the most evocative questions are open-ended ones with no wrong answers. Once when Owen asked a question with a right answer, a feisty elected worker-leader answered it wrong and he corrected her; she then slumped in her chair, stared at the floor, and was uncharacteristically silent for a few minutes.

Second, putting people on the spot with direct questions can backfire if there’s insufficient trust between the asker and the person asked, or if it seems that only certain marginalized people are being singled out. I once saw veteran activists Attieno Davis and Louise Dunlap do a skit at a conference to dramatize the excessive, patronizing attention sometimes given to newcomers of color by white activists. Louise, a white woman, used a fake-nice, emphatic tone to say to Attieno, a black woman playing a new recruit, “Oh,
we’re so glad you came! I want to know what ideas you have!” The point was that putting an exaggerated or forced spotlight on a marginalized person can be alienating.

Hannah, the staff organizer of Labor and Community United, described an incident where that kind of patronizing attention backfired with working-class Latino union member Aaron:

“When we went to that [high-level political] event, Aaron was there, he was invited, and he felt really uncomfortable. And they tried to bring him into conversation and they were like, ‘Oh so, Aaron, where are you from?’ and stuff like that. And it did sound a bit condescending. And [he] was just like, ‘Don’t talk to me’. <laughter>

One lesson from these stories is that new people sometimes need some initial time to quietly hang back to get comfortable with a group; it can backfire to come on too strong too fast. The broader lesson is that no technique works without genuine, tuned-in respect behind it.

Spotlighting these methods of activation drawn from working-class activist culture puts the story of Lowell’s silence in the Action Against Empire (AAE) meeting into a different light. Alton and Ira felt guilty and self-critical about their unwanted domination of the group, but felt powerless to change the dynamic, given that their preferred solutions weren’t working. But they never tried the common, everyday methods observed in labor and community-needs groups. No-one spoke directly to Lowell during the meeting; no core member asked him to do any specific task; no one tapped into his expertise or any networks he might have had, even though he was the only representative of the local Latino community present. Instead, suggestions for more involvement were spoken to the whole circle at once, often using third person: “What time on Saturday would people want to meet?”
Why didn’t the quiet new AAE members hear direct questions or get individual invitations to get more involved? I would guess that Ira and Alton, intent on making all members into peers in a horizontal group, would have thought they were being patronizing if they singled out a quiet new member, in particular if they as men tried to influence women’s involvement, or if Ira as a white person tried to influence the involvement of a person of color. They would have rejected the idea that they were Lowell’s leaders; who were they to empower him? They were in a double bind: trying to demonstrate equality within the group by their holding-back behavior, but prevented by that very ideal from playing active roles that would bring equality into reality. As with many lower-professionals in this study, their discomfort with power ended up reinforcing their power.

Of course, it is easier to play a developmental role for new and disempowered members from a paid organizer position. It was Owen’s and Hannah’s job to activate inactive workers; it wasn’t Ira’s or Alton’s job to empower Lowell, and they were no doubt right that too strong a role would have been seen as domineering, particularly given the group’s anti-authoritarian ideology. But others of the most-praised leaders were leading from peer positions. Founding leaders Dorothea, Fred, Elaine, Toni and Jasmine were all unpaid members of their groups, some of them elected to a board slot or officer position, but some leading entirely without formal position. Some of their empowering communication came across as friendly and curious, not directive, and thus could probably have been pulled off even in the most anti-authoritarian group.
Mentoring and encouragement

Empowerment also happened through intensive one-on-one relationships of friendship or mentoring. Contrast the weak, inexperienced rotating chairs described above, who were left on their own to flounder through the meeting, with the collaborative process recounted by Nicole:

*I like the way we do it at the Interfaith Coalition. Each leader has an opportunity to run the meeting...We have a director. He's the only paid person. We're all volunteers. And he sits with us before that meeting and helps us to get our meeting together. And I like that.*

Similarly, after Hannah noticed Aaron’s disempowerment, she helped him prepare to chair meetings:

*I'm like 'Aaron! Why didn’t you say anything?’ He’s kind of taken a step back… He’s supposed to chair. I've seen him chair one time, you could feel it in him, he did not feel confident… I always try to prep him beforehand. I'll meet with him, to let him know what's going to be on the agenda, what's the real politics behind stuff. Also like how to chair… I've given him some information on like parliamentary procedure and stuff so he'll feel more confident…. His opinions are valued, but he doesn't see it that way because he's … sitting next to all these prominent-position people.*

One-on-one encouragement happened both inside and outside meetings. Owen credited his success in turning out lots of workers for Local 21 organizing meetings to his one-on-one conversations outside of meetings:

*Workers] came as a result of my follow-up, because when I follow up with people I connect with them. I talk to them and I listen to them, and as a result of that that's what makes them return…I ask them ‘what do you think about the meeting, is there any way that meeting could have been better or more improved, do you feel as though you got anything out of it?’

Local 21 achieved a huge victory soon after the meetings I observed, with a majority of workers voting to approve union representation – tangible proof of the effectiveness of organizers’ and rank-and-file leaders’ one-on-one outreach.
Why would approaches to low participation and leadership vary by class?

Unlike the holding back strategy, which was advocated mostly by activists who fit a particular age/ideology/race/gender profile in addition to sharing the VDM class trajectory, the other two strategies were advocated across varied races, ages, and genders. There was a contrast specifically in class cultures between who favored facilitating stylized group processes and who favored trustworthy championing of member interests.

These two class-specific strategies for overcoming member inactivity parallel Lareau's (2003) two philosophies of childrearing, “concerted cultivation” and “accomplishment of natural growth.” Activists’ class trajectories predict whether their goal was cultivating equalization of speech or accomplishing natural involvement through a trusting relationship with a leader.

Counting the number of times each person speaks, attempting to equalize airspace by holding back or by equalization techniques, and requiring the creation of an original solo speech act are concerted-cultivation solutions to the problem of too little member participation.

Because professional and managerial occupations involve speech as a central work activity, activists from PMC backgrounds may tend to stress participants' amount of speech in meetings as the primary indicator of a central role in a group, as opposed to amount of work performed, amount of inside knowledge, or closeness of relationships.

But while activists from class-privileged backgrounds were more likely to be monitoring who was taking up how much airspace, less-privileged activists were more likely to be monitoring trustworthiness and dedication to the cause, as expressed primarily in actions, not words.
Why would working-class labor and community activists be more likely to favor strong, protective leadership? Lamont found protectiveness to be one of the primary values of working-class white and black American men (2000). Providing and protecting were seen as ways to keep the world in moral order. This value did not appear in her earlier interviews of professional-middle-class men (1992).

Working-class activists tend to have a different relationship to power, with less of the ambivalence that many lower-professionals feel about using the power conferred by their privilege in the service of social justice. In light of Croteau’s (1995) finding that feeling hopeless about the likely impact is why working-class people don’t join social movements, evidence of power amassed on their side may give a jolt of energy to counteract such hopelessness.

Processes experienced as empowering by activists from PMC backgrounds are sometimes uncomfortable for working-class people, who may experience mandatory-speech requirements as facilitators’ attempts to manage them (Ellsworth 1989; her article is titled “Why doesn’t this feel empowering?”). Well-meaning PMC people may try to resolve tensions by doing organized team-building activities that require stylized speech, explicit sharing of personal feelings, or tasks reminiscent of school assignments — not realizing that if the people they’re trying to activate have felt alienated from school teachers or workplace managers, their efforts may make the environment less comfortable, more enmeshed in the PMC style than before. In addition, shy PMC organizers without a flair for informal social bonding may over-stress formal community-building methods and overlook opportunities for more natural socializing.
The class association with leadership concepts found in this study runs contrary to the traditional association drawn from the white gender duality (Helgesen 1990; Taylor and Whittier 1995; Belenky 1997; Payne 1995), which associates the more privileged male style with directive, foreground leadership, and the less privileged female style with participative, background leadership. While the normative ideals of almost all activists of every class were on the participative end of the directive/participative spectrum (Likert 1961; Heller 1973), to working-class informants, that didn’t necessarily mean that leaders should stay quietly behind the scenes. The actual practices of the most-praised and effective leaders in working-class-majority groups tended to be both forceful and nurturing of others’ involvement (as Ransby (2005) described Civil Rights leader Ella Baker).

Both individual class conditioning and the norms of movement traditions affected activists’ concepts of leadership. Protectiveness and strong leadership were found in groups rooted in the historically working-class labor and community-organizing movement traditions, even when current members were class-diverse. Facilitator-managed equalizing processes and stylized speech requirements were most often found in global/local cause groups; in addition, they were advocated by PMC and VDM individuals within all kinds of groups.

The class-incongruity in who dissented from each strategy provides evidence that class was often a stronger influence than movement tradition. Most dissenters were quite different in class from the majority of their groups’ membership. When these class-incongruous dissenters came from a higher class background than the group mode, as with Sheila in City Power, or when they were currently in a higher class, as with Gail in
the Action Center, they were more likely to prevail in getting the group to modify its leadership style. When the dissenters came from a lower class background, as with Olivia in the Parecon Collective or Mack and Laverne in Easthaver Demands Justice, their different approaches didn’t seem to have much effect on how meetings were run.

What can an activist do about passive, inactive members? Occasionally it works simply to hold back from dominating. Sometimes it works to facilitate group processes that require everyone to speak. Sometimes it works to demonstrate strong, trustworthy leadership and offer one-on-one mentoring. But over-emphasis by class-privileged activists on equalizing airspace may obscure the importance of building empowering relationships of trust.
Class Speech Differences II: Abstract and concrete vocabulary

As I listened to the recordings of meetings and interviews while holding activists’ class categories in mind, I heard a clear-cut class difference in abstract versus concrete vocabulary that crossed race and gender lines.

Remember that when the professional-middle-class (PMC) facilitator profiled in the Introduction used organizational jargon words to instruct a labor-sponsored coalition’s goal-setting process, the majority working-class background members used none of her terms, but talked instead about concrete political issues and operational details. This pattern was found throughout all the meetings and interviews. Lifelong-working-class activists referred to more specific people, places and events, even when answering general questions, as Bernstein (1971) also found in his studies of British teenage boys, part of his unfortunately named “restricted code” of working-class speech. In contrast, lifelong-PMC and voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) activists used more abstract words and phrases in their speech, even when asked concrete questions, as in Bernstein’s “elaborated code” (77-109).

For example, when the chair asked people to go around the circle and “say some of the major ways you think that [the group's goal] can be done,” here’s how two community-needs group members began their answers:

Lower-middle-class white woman: [Governor’s name]’s campaign had a calendar of where he was going to be, what he was going to do. I think if we do some standard, like routine things, like be at the supermarket like on a Saturday morning or afternoon, everybody goes shopping!

Professional-middle-class white man: I think it's important for media time, being visible, I just think being a catalyst for getting other people real excited so they can get other, they can start spreading the word.
A listener to the first answer could picture first the governor and then the group recruiting support outside the supermarket at a particular time. The second answer, with more general terms, doesn’t lend itself to such visualization.

Of the 61 interviewees, 13 included notably concrete answers to questions where more abstract answers might be expected, and 16 included notably abstract answers to questions where more concrete answers might be expected. Such especially abstract or concrete speech correlates very strongly with the lifelong class trajectories, with lifelong PMC activists much more likely to speak abstractly and lifelong WC activists much more likely to speak concretely.\(^{55}\) Class background also had a strong correlation.\(^{56}\) Current class had a weaker correlation, but still statistically significant.\(^{57}\)

Speaking more abstractly or concretely is primarily a class predisposition, much more than a function of other identities. Abstract/concrete speech is not associated with any gender,\(^{58}\) race,\(^{59}\) or movement tradition.\(^{60}\) Younger activists were somewhat more likely to speak notably abstractly than older activists.\(^{61}\)

Tastes, not just habits, accounted for this class speech difference, as this quote shows:

*Interviewer: Does anyone in the group drive you crazy?*

*Lower-middle-class white woman: There’s someone who used to come. She’s going to be a lawyer. She drives me mad…. I couldn’t make head or tails of what she said. She was scattered. Maybe it was her language…like ‘Stakeholders have to buy in’. She’d be linking concepts up in the air, and we'd be like, ‘What does that mean we do?’ No action steps! She would talk to [community members] and they would look at her—they respect how erudite she is, but they couldn’t understand her. She can’t put things into the common man’s language… Dern’s a lawyer, but he talks in steps, like 1,2, 3.*
To pin down these abstract and concrete speech styles to particular classed vocabulary, I created word-frequency lists to measure how many times certain terms were used per 10,000 spoken words by interviewees within broad class trajectories. Lifelong-PMC interviewees used these words far more often than lifelong working-class people:

- Network (6.3 times as often as working-class interviewees);
- Outreach (5.4 times as often);
- Activist / Activism (5.1 times as often);
- Context / Contextualize (4.7 times as often).

What these words have in common is that they are generalizations for some aspect of the group’s work.

In some cases, not only lifelong-PMC but all more class-privileged informants (those with 4-year college and professional/managerial occupations in the prior generation and/or in the current generation, i.e., all PMC, all voluntarily downwardly mobile and all straddlers, shorthanded below as college graduates) used similar abstract generalizations more often than working-class people did:

- Strategy / strategize (8.1 times as often by college-graduate interviewees as by lifelong working-class interviewees)
- Principle (7.4 times as often)
- Connection (5.7 times as often)
- Perspective (5.5 times as often)

Activist author Linda Stout, who grew up in poverty, refers to one of these very words when she discusses “the different languages of class,” which she noticed when she first worked with middle-class activists:

*I remember getting frustrated with words like ‘strategies and tactics’….I came to terms with the language problem by translating what I was taught into my own language. For ‘strategy’, I thought, oh, this is what I call a ‘plan’. I realized that I had different words for the same concepts and that, in fact, some of the things I
was doing as a community organizer, and which felt to me like just common sense, were being taught as complicated concepts. (Stout 1996: 119-120)

Some PMC activists used jargon, in particular from the non-profit organizational development field (e.g., “operational decisions” and “management and evaluation”). They answered questions about their group’s goals with abstract phrases such as “capacity-building” and “symbolic impact.”

Fortunately for cross-class communication, some general words were used with similar frequency by all classes:

- Coalition
- Goal
- Issue
- Community
- Situation
- Conflict
- Decision
- Fact
- Power
- Story
- Task
- Recruit

Besides organizational development jargon, the other source of abstract vocabulary was radical theory and ideology. All three college-graduate trajectories were much more likely to use the words nonviolence/nonviolent (35.5 times as often) and oppress(ion) (6.5 times as often).

It’s a very sad commentary on the state of the labor movement that the word solidarity – the rallying cry of unions around the world — was used more than 14 times more often by more class privileged activists than by lifelong working-class activists.

Socialist and socialism were used 20 times more often by PMC than by working-class activists, and 7.1 times more by straddlers, but were not used by VDM interviewees,
who didn’t tend to be socialists. Conversely, VDM activists, but not PMC or straddlers, used a number of other anarchism-associated ideological words far more often than working-class interviewees did:

- **Anarchist / Anarchism** (49.6 times more often than working-class)
- **Autonomy / Autonomous** (11.5 times more)
- **Hierarchy / Hierarchical** (19.1 times more)
- **Consensus** (8.7 times more)
- **Vision** (5.1 times more)

It was not just the presence of certain abstract words that made the speech of those from more privileged backgrounds distinct, but the relative paucity of concrete referents. Sometimes an entire sentence would have no people, times, places or actions in it, such as this sentence by Zoe, the lifelong-PMC facilitator of the Tri-city Labor Alliance annual meeting: “That's a whole big category of developing a plan in order to achieve a number of these goals.” Working-class activist speech is less likely to include such entire sentences or paragraphs without any concrete referents.

Thus there is no equivalent list of words that working-class interviewees said at least four times more often than other classes. Instead, there is a steep drop-off in their frequency list, as thousands of specific proper nouns are used a small number of times each, with each interviewee supplying different concrete specifics. Contrary to studies of poor children’s vocabulary (Hart and Risley 1995), the total vocabulary of distinct words (per 10,000 spoken words) used by working-class interviewees was not smaller than the more formally educated PMC people’s vocabularies, due to the many proper names of neighborhoods, people, organizations, nationalities, and other specifics that each working-class interviewee mentioned.62
Of all the words spoken in interviews, the lifelong working-class activists as a group used only 11% of their total vocabulary words twice or more per 10,000 words spoken. Straddlers (despite their college educations) had a very similar rate of using non-repetitive words, using only 12% of their vocabulary words twice or more per 10,000 words spoken. By contrast, lifelong PMC activists as a group used 16% of their vocabulary words twice or more per 10,000 words spoken, relying more on repeated words, such as the abstract terms listed above.63 This is evidence against Bernstein’s early theory of a “public language” (1971: 42-43), deficient by comparison with middle-class speech (Macaulay 2005), in which working-class British boys repeated stock phrases instead of inventing original utterances.

One particular interview question, “What are the goals of your group?,” turned out to be especially revealing of abstract/concrete class speech differences. At one extreme were some young white or Asian-American men from PMC backgrounds in globalization and direct action groups, who described their groups’ goals in very abstract terms. For example:

_Interviewer: What are the goals of your group?_
_White lower-professional man: Just, I think, social consciousness…to organize around social justice issues like broadly and to do actions, take action in solidarity with different struggles that are taking place internationally and locally, educate about radical political issues and struggles and be a space where that kind of conversation can happen._

At the other end of the spectrum were some lifelong working-class women in labor and community groups. For example:

_Interviewer: What are the goals of your group?_
_Working-class white woman: More parent involvement in school. Reducing the dropout rate in our city and showing how education is an important part of everyone’s life._
Even more striking is the contrast in goal statements between people of different classes in the same group. In the next examples, notice how two African Americans each start with the same straightforward statement about a current focus of their group (stopping the war in Iraq); but the woman from a working-class background then shifts to more concrete, local aspects of the issue, while the lifelong-PMC man then moves to a more general level:

*Interviewer*: What are the goals of your group?
*Laverne (black straddler woman)*: We don't want to see the war in Iraq, we want to see that come to an end. *We don't want to see the recruiters harassing the kids in the high school, which they do.*

*Interviewer*: What are the goals of your group?
*Rodney (black lifelong-PMC man)*: One, we want to end the war, two is to become a multi-racial, multi-class, multi-ethnic peace movement for social and economic justice.

In place of abstract generalizations, lifelong working-class people tended to make points with examples, metaphors (Bernstein 1971: 176), and especially analogies, typically starting with a phrase such as ‘say you and I were…’ These extended hypothetical scenarios were never once heard from a lifelong PMC informant, but were heard over and over from lifelong working-class activists, and occasionally from straddlers.

For example, working-class African American Rhonda explains why she advocates reparations for slavery:

*Rhonda*: Until there is true reparation for slavery, it's not going to happen. *If you stole my TV, you and I going to have a conflict. Now if you were sorry for stealing my TV, you came and told me you were sorry for stealing my TV, what's the first thing you think you need to do to make it right?*

*Interviewer*: Buy you a new TV.
*Rhonda*: Right, until you replace what you took from me, would I think it's sincere? No.
When a labor coalition had a long debate to decide between two pieces of legislation on hospital staffing, hypothetical scenarios (such as “If you were in the hospital…”) were used six times by five people during the debate. The point of these mini-stories usually did not have to be spelled out; it was obvious what the speaker was arguing for.

Colorful metaphors eloquently expressed working-class interviewees’ political choices. Brandy, a lifelong working-class white woman, used a metaphor to explain why she felt compelled to organize against extreme poverty: “[It] is like seeing kids on a railroad track, and when you push those kids off that railroad track, is that a choice or did you have to do that? I have to do that.” Some metaphors used by working-class activists were brief, familiar clichés, as Bernstein (1971) would have predicted: “other fish to fry,” “heavy foot on the gas,” “light at the end of the tunnel,” “hit the roof,” “stepping stone,” familiar to and used by activists of all classes and cultures, though less frequently by the PMC. Others were culturally specific traditional sayings, especially common among African-Caribbean immigrants and older African Americans. Martina said, “Back home they say, ‘you want good, your nose has to run’; you have to put that effort in it.” But other working-class vivid metaphors seemed freshly coined, such as “I’m a pebble in their shoe.” Such creative, vivid speech contradicts Bernstein’s assertion that working-class speech is largely restricted to repetitive, learned stock phrases. In fact, PMC speech tended to be more repetitive, as documented above, and working-class activists seemed to coin more new phrases and to speak more colorfully.

Bernstein’s early idea that working-class sentences use “low-order symbolism,” while the elaborated code has a “complex hierarchy for organizing experience”
(Macaulay 2005: 41-42) also turns out not to apply to US activists. The political ideas expressed by working-class activists, such as Rhonda’s reparations argument quoted above, were just as likely to be complex and nuanced as PMC activists’ ideas, just expressed differently. In fact, a repetitive abstract word, such as ‘imperialism’, occasionally flattened out a PMC activist’s speech into simplistic generalizations, not elaborated with examples or explanations.
**Class Speech Differences III - Racial terms**

Another example of abstract/concrete speech turns out to play a key role in the next chapter on class differences in approaches to anti-racism. Activists of different classes, regardless of race and ethnicity, tended to use different terms for ethnic groups. Why? One explanation is that certain broad racial terms, such as ‘people of color’ and ‘Latino,’ are in fact abstract generalizations, shown above to be more common in the vocabulary of college-educated activists.

The only racial term for which activists of all classes shared nearly universal usage was ‘white’. More than 90% of references to those of European ancestry by all class groups used ‘white’. But there was a small class difference in use of European nationality terms, such as ‘Irish’ or ‘Polish’: they were 6% of working-class references to white people, compared with only 3% of references by college-educated activists.

To refer to people of color, lifelong working-class activists used markedly different terminology than 4-year-college-educated activists. Racial terminology for the ethnic groups targeted by discrimination has been controversial throughout US history (Smith 1992), with gradual changes in what is considered a respectful term and what is considered a slur. The terms favored as respectful by most professional-middle-class (PMC), voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) and straddler activists in 2007-8 – ‘people of color’, ‘African American’, and ‘Latino’ – were all less commonly used by working-class activists. Working-class terminology was more mixed, and in some cases much more nationally specific.

Many progressives have worked to promote the terms ‘Latino’ and ‘Latina,’ which are inclusive of Latin American indigenous peoples and Brazilians in a way that
the term ‘Hispanic’ (literally meaning ‘Spanish’) is not. This effort has been very successful among the college-educated activists: 69% of PMC, VDM and straddler interviewees’ references to people of Latin heritage used ‘Latina/o,’ compared with only 4% using ‘Hispanic.’ Lifelong working-class people of all races, however, used ‘Latina/o’ only 17% of the time, overwhelmingly favoring specific national terms, such as ‘Cuban’ and ‘Mexican.’ (See Table III.1.) Even when working-class people said ‘Latino’ or ‘Latina’, often they also said a specific nationality in the same sentence.

Table III.1 How did interviewees refer to people of Latin American heritage?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic terms used</th>
<th>Working-class said…</th>
<th>College-educated said…</th>
<th>t-test for significant difference between percents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>t=7.03 p&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>t=1.69 p = not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalities (e.g. Mexican, Dominican)</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>t=5.92 p&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% N=53</td>
<td>100% N=98</td>
<td>Total N = 151, df=149</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two middle-aged Latinas from the same staff advocacy group in a Puerto Rican neighborhood exemplified this contrast in race terms – and in reasons for mentioning race, whether to refer to particular people or to discuss a political generalization:

**Working-class Latina:** You don’t find many Puerto Ricans up there… We lived in the Italian section of the town; we were one of two Latino families, Puerto Rican families in the entire town.

**Professional-middle-class Latina:** I just went to a meeting with [the governor] and a group of Latino leaders in education… I think there’s an openness there for Latino voters, <laugh> not that I think electoral politics is going to save, solve everything.

There was a similar class breakdown in how African Americans were referred to. While ‘black’ was the most common term among all races and classes, college-
educated activists said ‘African American’ 42% of the time, compared to 14% of the time by lifelong working-class activists, a statistically significant difference.

Table III.2 How did interviewees refer to people of African heritage? % of all references made, by class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic terms used</th>
<th>Working-class said…</th>
<th>College-educated said…</th>
<th>t-test for significant difference between percents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>t= 5.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>p&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms from earlier eras (e.g. Negro, colored)</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>t=4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality terms (e.g. Haitian, Afro-Caribbean)</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>p&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% N=79</td>
<td>100% N=137</td>
<td>Total N = 216, df=214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percents may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

In talking about people of color generally, some class differences also appeared.

Variations of the term ‘people of color’ were used three-quarters of the time by college-educated activists, but only 58% of the time by lifelong working-class activists of all races.

Table III.3 How did interviewees refer to people of color generally? % of all references made, by class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic terms used</th>
<th>Working-class said…</th>
<th>College-educated said…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People of color; [___] of color (e.g. ‘youth of color’)</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority or non-white</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% N=15</td>
<td>100% N=79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percents may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

In general, college-educated people referred to people of color as a general category far more often than working-class people did. Overwhelmingly, when working-class people of all races mentioned race, they were referring to one specific ethnic group or nationality,67 and often to a specific person or people — one manifestation of the class culture trait of using concrete rather than abstract speech.
Within each racial category, there were also class differences in racial terminology. When referring to their own ethnic group, working-class African Americans were more likely to say ‘black,’ and college-graduate African Americans were more likely to say ‘African American.’ But no matter their class, they didn’t use ‘Latino/a’; in all the interviews and meeting transcripts, there’s not a single example of a black activist saying ‘Latino/a.’

Latino activists of all classes only rarely said ‘Hispanic’; they either used nationalities or ‘Latino/a’. Based on a small number of observations, it seems that the term ‘African American’ may have been adopted by many more college-educated Latinos than working-class Latinos.

Among white activists, college-educated people were more likely to say ‘Latino’ and ‘African-American’ than working-class whites.

These significant class and race differences in racial terminology are striking in comparison with the absence of gender-term variation. Regardless of race or class, activists all used the word ‘woman’, never ‘lady’ and rarely ‘girl’; they said ‘man’ or ‘guy,’ not ‘boy’. Within the trinity of ‘race, class and gender’, in 2007-8, race terms were contested, gender terms had been settled, and class terms were not even on the map.
Chapter 7: Diversity Ironies: Clashing anti-racism frames and practices

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 anti-racism, which turn 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 the city’s 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 exchange below, note that members presumed that counting people of color and going to a workshop would be the kinds of anti-racist activity that a funder would like:

Ranelle (working-class black): They're just going after racism this year.
Dorothea (working-class white): We went to that workshop.
Sheila (lower-professional white): Yeah, we went to that workshop and it fucking sucked <group laughter>
Man’s voice: **It was boring…**

Dorothea: _They will ask some questions about racism to every single group, but the questions will be a little different depending on how the Emma Fund perceives the group._

Adriana (working-class black): _These questions seems like they know everything that happened within City Power._

Dorothea: _They think they do._

Sheila: _I feel like walking in there and saying and calling them on their shit and not falling into this trap and saying, <sarcastically> ‘Oh look, look, look, let me show you, we have Courtney, we have Quincy, we have Adriana, we have Ed, we have Ranelle, and in the past we had Carmen’._

Thelma (working-class white): _‘Yeah, fuck you, give me the money!’_ <group laughter>…

Sheila: _Right, I feel like walking in there and saying we are doing the best that we can._

Ranelle: _We’re a grassroots organization that’s really stepping up._

Adriana: _And we’re still around._

Another funder question was why City Power didn’t have any Latinos on its board, despite organizing in a city with a big Latino population. Only the lone PMC member Sheila expressed the excuses in broad societal terms and in the third person: _“We can’t be expecting those of the most oppressed classes, of the most oppressed groups to be able to find all of this free time.”_ Working-class members, on the other hand, brought up specific information to exonerate the group, for example mentioning particular collaborations with Latino groups. Bastian mentioned that City Power’s food give-aways had attracted Latinos. Darius, a working-class African American, asked defensively, _“What’s the make-up of their organization?”_

Sheila’s college education and other cultural capital were needed to put the group’s work into terms that would satisfy the funder. She was one of only two members who used the funder’s term _“institutional racism,”_ seen below to be a frame predominant among college-educated activists. Atypically, this frame was brought up first by Dorothea, the working-class white leader with abundant self-taught cultural capital and
radical politics. In the following exchange, the two white women of different classes stressed institutionalized racism to a similar degree, but Dorothea then segued into a class analysis and a critique of class-privileged single-issue anti-racists:

_Dorothea:_ I will say this in favor of the Emma Fund. They made a commitment to tackle institutional racism in their organization… I think that they are missing the class analysis because of this absolutely non-stop focus just on race. Do you remember, Ranelle, when we were at the [national gathering of poor people’s groups], remember there was, in one of the workshops there was this guy… he was African-American, [his organization had] strong leadership of color?  
_Ranelle:_ I was shocked when I seen all those colored people in the front. I mean in the front. Some of the main organizers are either Hispanic or African-American.  
_Dorothea:_ They just said, ‘You’re on the wrong track, we have to focus on what unites us, not what divides us’.  
_Several people:_ Yeah, right.  
_Dorothea:_ I think [the Emma Fund is] really sincere, but at this point in time I also think …the pendulum has swung too far.  
_Sheila:_ … they are very focused on like a multicultural model, which I feel is getting out-dated. We are operating under a system of white supremacy now…We’re not just talking about racism; we’re talking about white people’s dominating all over the place.  
_Ranelle:_ Right.  
_Dorothea [bringing class back in]:_ Rich white people!  

This City Power discussion of the Emma Fund’s anti-racism questions was only one of several examples of a low-income community-needs group criticizing funders’ approaches to diversity and stressing unity instead. To listen to white working-class leader Brandy rant about funders would give the impression that identity politics as a whole are an elite preoccupation:

_We live in a silo nation where people are very much organized around identity issues and are awarded by funders for organizing around those identity issues, never working together; and people will fight with their life to never cross urban and rural issues, race issues, women and men, unity doesn’t pay, unity doesn’t get you a foundation grant in this country… There’s definitely no money in having actual poor people involved in our own fight for our own lives._
Is there in fact a class difference in activists’ approach to diversity, as Brandy and City Power members believed? This chapter explores how the activists in the study – all of them too progressive to openly espouse racial prejudice or even color-blind denial of its existence (Bonilla-Silva 2010) – differed in how they defined racism and how they thought it should be opposed.

**Social identities and classed approaches**

Every organization has choices to make about how to relate to the social identities within it. For example, a social change group can try to keep racism and racial identities in the forefront, on the back burner, or out of sight entirely (Einwohner et al. 2008: 4-5).

Debates over identity politics have raged over the last half-century, including on the left. Retrospective analyses of the movements of the 1960s and ’70s are sharply divided on the question of how much they should have focused on marginalized subgroups. At one extreme, some former activists, such as Gitlin (1987; 1996; 2007), blame the failure to win more lasting structural change on the splintering of diverse movements into separatist Black Power, women’s liberation, gay rights and other identity-based groups. Countering him are many observers of the sexism and racism within ‘60s movements, who saw a much-needed emergence of suppressed voices (Evans 1980; Epstein 1991).

The feminists of color who pioneered intersectionality analysis (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Collins 1991; Crenshaw et. al. 1995; Smith 1998; hooks 2001) documented how simply spotlighting one marginalized identity at a time – for example, first convening a women’s caucus to create a program on sexism, then convening a
caucus of color to create a program on racism — denied the realities and suppressed the power of multiply marginalized people with distinct standpoints, such as black women.

Around the turn of the new millennium, one progressive ideal was mixed coalitions (Anner 1999; Warren 2001) that advocate vigorously for oppressed subgroups of members. Even when an organization’s members share only one identity, as with a women’s group, systematic attention can be paid to raising the voices and the leadership of the members with other oppressed identities, such as women of color. But more often, the multiply marginalized remain on the sidelines (Vaid 1996; Strolovitz 2007).

What do lifelong-working-class activists tend to think about these controversies over dealing with diversity? Two empirical studies by Kurtz (2002) and Ward (2008) offer insights into how a working-class-influenced approach might look different than today’s typical practices.

In the labor movement, “do it but don’t talk about it” seems to be the usual mode of dealing with diversity (Kurtz 2002). In the Columbia University unions that Kurtz observed, workers and union leaders stressed worker unity across race and gender, rarely talking explicitly about identities other than ‘worker’. These unions did bargain for the concrete needs of the multiply marginalized members, such as childcare benefits needed by single mothers and race-based affirmative action. But they framed these simply as workers’ issues, as if no other identity needed to be verbalized to tackle them.

I saw something similar to the Columbia unions’ ‘we’re all workers’ framing in the Tri-City Labor Alliance (TLA), where a recurring meeting topic was how to get more conservative rank-and-file members to support TLA’s advocacy for oppressed subgroups of workers. On the controversial public issues of immigrant rights, same-sex marriage,
and transgender protection from workplace discrimination, progressive TLA members discussed framing each issue as a workers’ rights problem, calling on the members to show solidarity with workers who were getting a different kind of flack from employers, but who had the same needs for job security and benefits as every worker. Action on behalf of subgroups was not usually controversial, though too much identity-talk sometimes was.

This working-class culture of diversity action without diversity talk is not found only in unions. Ward studied non-profit groups whose working-class members were very different than unionized university employees, but she reached similar conclusions as Kurtz and I did. In the three Los Angeles lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) organizations at which she did participant observation, diversity attitudes and practices tended to break down by class. She found that working-class people were further marginalized by the diversity practices in each organization. Ironically, sometimes people of color were marginalized by anti-racist ideas and activities. Two of her cases illuminate mine so well that I summarize them at some length.

One case in Ward’s book, *Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organizations* (2008), is especially analogous to the groups in this study, because it concerns an all-volunteer group: Christopher Street West, which planned the annual Gay Pride parade. The board of this group was taken over by a new and very different group after the old board was charged with incompetence and insensitivity to diversity. The longtime board had been made up of white and black working-class gay men (none with a university degree), but at the time of the study, the board also had two white lesbian newcomers, including Ward herself.
The accusations were a mix of understandable concerns (such as drunkenness at board meetings and money unaccounted for), along with some classist over-reactions to the “lack of professionalism” in working-class gay subculture. Politicians, journalists and other prominent people criticized the working-class board members for their awkward public presentations and for their poor fund-raising and publicity skills.

Ward defends the old board as more truly “queer” than the professionals who replaced them. She describes the situation as an example of the “politics of vulgarity,” class non-conformity as a basic element of US queer culture in its earlier decades. One of the board co-presidents said that LA Pride wasn’t “political like San Francisco”; instead, he described LA Pride as “You pay, you drink, you fall down.” (57) The board had five- or six-hour meetings with dramatic, emotional exits in the middle; once the board secretary walked out after another member called him “Mary.” Ward mourns what was lost in the transition to the newly respectable, family-friendly Gay Pride.

When community disapproval rained down on the old CSW board, some criticisms were couched in classist terms. Ward quotes articles and letters in local gay newspapers: “Everyone knows that they are better suited to work at 7-11 [convenience store] than to be on that board”; “There’s this lack of skill on the board, they are afraid of people who have good minds and ideas”; “Maybe you’re all as dumb as dirt.” (62)

The contrast between the old and new boards was not just in degree of slickness, but specifically in attitudes to race and gender. The old board, while ignoring race in a mainstream color-blind way (58), was in fact quite racially diverse, black and white, and won praise from the Latino community newspaper for including a Latin dance party in the Pride celebrations (63). But they were lacking in some diversity competencies that the
new white members brought to the board: connections to ethnic and female community leaders and to politicians of color; lingo about diversity in public descriptions of Gay Pride festivities, and in particular in communications with funders and corporate sponsors; and emphasis on visually obvious demonstrations of diversity, such as the Native Americans and Latinos in “ethnic costumery” proposed by the new board. When many in the LGBT community insisted that people with professional expertise join the board, they didn’t mean only financial and public relations expertise, but also diversity expertise.

Enough college-educated professionals joined the board to outnumber the old board members, most of whom stayed on for a while before quitting. Ironically, the long-standing working-class African-American board co-president was pressured to step down for a new, white president known for his “diversity skills” and his connections with diverse community leaders and politicians (70). The new board won more funding from corporate sponsors, more city council approval, and national recognition for producing a “polished” Pride festival (72). The kind of diversity success that counted most was making connections with the most class-privileged people of color and the most class-privileged women. Class diversity not only counted for little, but in fact often proved an embarrassing liability.

Some aspects of this story rang very true to what I observed in the activist groups in the study. Diversity work was often PMC turf; think of white lower-professional Sheila writing up City Power’s anti-racist credentials in the grant proposal. Approved forms of diversity expertise earned what Ward calls “liberal capital” (6) and I call ‘movement capital’. Class identities were rarely talked about, and almost never as a positive form of
diversity. The diversity competencies of working-class people were invisible, in part because they tended to be rooted in a tolerant anti-bigotry frame that avoided explicit race talk, as we will see below. But in fact, working-class white people often had more multicultural social networks than PMC white people did.

Ward’s second case study, though it concerned a workplace instead of a voluntary group, also resonated with my findings. The LA Lesbian and Gay Center, the largest LGBT social service agency in the world, held an annual Diversity Day. One of its purposes was to overcome the agency’s reputation as a “white organization,” which persisted even though the majority of the staff, including many top leaders, were people of color (78). Mention of Diversity Day, which was mandatory for all employees, brought groans at a staff meeting (89). Staff of color in particular expressed resentment at the idea that they had to be forced to think about racial diversity (91). In interviews with Ward, some staff mentioned bizarre racial stereotypes peddled by the supposed diversity experts brought in to facilitate (e.g., that African Americans listen with their eyes closed) (93).

As in corporate diversity programs, the emphasis was on how multicultural differences improved service to clients; inequality of power and money as an injustice in itself was downplayed (89-90). White progressives, as well as some managers of color, tended to believe that Diversity Day should be run by trained experts, not by well-meaning staff amateurs; a white manager said, “It would be as if we attempted to call together a group of Center employees who didn’t have management expertise and turned them loose with developing a strategic plan for fundraising” (91). Just as in the Christopher Street West story, diversity skills were regarded as another form of professional expertise. The professional approach involved gathering data, facilitating
dialogue, and using human resources expertise to recruit and hire the right staff of color. The knowledge gained by actually living with racism or sexism didn’t count for much.

Lower-level employees of color favored more action and less talk. It didn’t make sense to them that the organization had to psych itself up via a prolonged multi-year process just to hire diverse staff and serve diverse clients. Instead they suggested “just doing the right thing” and “doing it now” (79). When Diversity Day speakers called on the Center to form more relationships with organizations of color, some staff of color were offended by the implication that the Center was a white organization, asking, “Isn’t this an organization of color?”

All these negative reactions sounded familiar to me; some working-class informants in my study also expressed suspicion of talk-heavy designated diversity sessions and favored a more pragmatic approach.

Ward worked as a grant writer at the Center, and she learned that the organization had to satisfy funders’ diversity demands in order to survive. Affirmative action policies and Diversity Day itself were selling points to diversity-conscious funders. It was management staff, of all races, who had the right knowledge and expertise to lead such programs, not support staff or clients in need of services.

At the root of these varied relationships to diversity work were very different worldviews about how to approach social identities. In the groups in this study, I found a rough agreement about a micro definition of sexism – particular domineering men who didn’t hear women’s voices — which kept gender issues on the back burner within all movement traditions. But with race and racism, a hot frame contest was in progress, and activists’ ways of framing racism in particular tended to differ by class.
Class differences in framing racism

The word ‘racism’ can be understood in several different ways. Is it primarily bigotry and discrimination? Is it an absence of multicultural diversity? Or is it also the economic and social disadvantages built into US society by centuries of biased policies, leading to white supremacy in every institution, including activist groups?

Most references to race or racism in the meetings and interviews fell into one of these three broad frames, each with deep cultural resonances (Gamson 1992: 94-103, 149-150): an institutionalized racism frame, a multicultural diversity frame, or an anti-bigotry tolerance frame. At the time of the study, this distinction was one of the most important of all concepts to leftists – especially leftists from professional middle-class backgrounds.

### Table 7.1 Three frames on racism and anti-racism expressed by activists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame on racism</th>
<th>Implied cause of problem</th>
<th>Implied solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalized white supremacy</td>
<td>Systemic white privilege and subordination of groups of color, both inside activist groups and in the political economy</td>
<td>Policy changes such as affirmative action and transformation of internal organizational culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural diversity</td>
<td>Racial segregation and too-white institutions and organizations</td>
<td>Recruitment of more diverse participants and celebration of minority cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-bigotry</td>
<td>Prejudice, discrimination and hate</td>
<td>Tolerance and unity among all ethnic groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first frame, the problem is all-pervasive institutionalized white advantages and systemic subordination of entire communities of color, even where intentions are good. The solutions are both macroeconomic and political policy changes and micro changes to organizational culture to give more clout to members of color.

In the second, the problem is racial segregation, in particular excessively white organizations and neighborhoods, and the solution is encouraging more diversity and celebrating minority cultures.
In the third, the problem is prejudice and discrimination, with hate as its worst form, and the solution is tolerance of all races and cross-racial unity against injustice.

A growing movement of anti-racists has been vigorously promoting the institutionalized white supremacy frame since the 1990s. I’ve been part of this public education effort through United for a Fair Economy’s Racial Wealth Divide project, including co-authoring *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the US Racial Wealth Divide* (Lui et al. 2006).

Some of my informants were among the 130,000 people who have attended the “Undoing Racism” workshops of the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, one of the main promoters of the institutionalized racism frame in the US since they were founded by two African American community organizers in 1980. Their statement of their approach (People’s Institute website 2011) clearly distinguishes the institutional-racism frame from the other more mainstream frames:

*The People’s Institute is one of the few existing programs in the U.S. that focuses on institutional and structural forms of racism. The model makes important distinctions between individual expressions of prejudice, bias and discrimination, and institutional or systemic forms of racism. It critiques the dominance of individual-level approaches that fail to address the more prevalent, less visible, systemic dimensions of racism.*

The People’s Institute is also explicit about racism being the primary oppression in US society: “*Racism is the single most critical barrier to building effective coalitions for social change*” (2002). I have encountered a few People’s Institute graduates who downplayed class and gender oppression, compared with the primacy and severity of racism. This race-first political focus has spread along with the institutionalized-racist frame; the two often go together.
While for many years activists of color (such as the Center for Third World Organizing\textsuperscript{70}) took the lead in anti-racist organizing with an institutionalized-racism frame, over the last decade white anti-racists have become more vocal and visible within the US left (Thompson 2001; Kivel 2002; Wise 2005; Warren 2010). While activists of color shifted away from race-specific organizing in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, towards more multicultural coalitions (Anner 1999), simultaneously more white radicals began to do specifically white anti-racist work. The annual White Privilege Conference has steadily grown in size from 1999 to 2011.\textsuperscript{71} Gradually the institutionalized white supremacy frame seems to have become more common among white leftists.

**Class and the racism frames**

I heard each of the three racism frames from informants of every class, though not at the same rate. For example, in a Women Safe From Violence (WSfV) meeting, when a side-conversation about racism broke out among white and black people from working-class backgrounds, less experienced white liberal activists brought up slurs and social discrimination, reflecting the anti-bigotry frame, while the long-time radicals raised systemic problems and used abstract terms reflecting the institutional white supremacy frame:

*Elaine [white straddler radical leader]: An all-white out-of-state jury ruled against [a falsely accused person of color]. The judge was so horrified… ‘2007 and this much racism!’…*

*Bette [working-class African American; long-time radical]: The judge said, ‘Mr. Welton, you were treated wrong. Prosecutors should right wrongs, not win cases’.*

*Louellen [lower-middle-class white woman; non-activist – note how she reframes institutional court story into bigotry frame]: I lived in backwoods Tennessee—we're supposed to be the backward ones!*..."
Elaine [note how she shifts back to institutional frame]: You're talking to the right place. We get white privilege and white supremacy here. Ignoring problems doesn't make them go away.

Ly-Anne [lower-middle-class white woman; more politically mainstream – note how her story shifts the topic to interpersonal discrimination]: I worked in a large office, black and white working together, all nice. I joined this white group for lunch—I removed myself from that group – Ed, this African American dispatcher, they called him ‘n——’, but to his face they were nice, ‘Oh, how are you doing?’ [I felt towards the lunch group:] ‘I don't want to talk with you people!’

Louellen: In 1993 in Tennessee people said ‘n——...’

Rondell [Working-class African American; experienced activist – returning discussion to the institutional frame]: We've gone from individual racism to corporate racism.

Elaine: There was always corporate racism.

Louellen: What is ‘corporate racism’?

If this example were typical of racism conversations in the groups I studied, the liberal-to-left political spectrum would predict racism frames, and class would not.

However, in the meetings and interviews as a whole, people like Rondell and like Dorothea in the City Power story at the beginning of the chapter – lifelong working-class people who clearly use the institutionalized white supremacy frame – turned out to be quite rare. Less than one-quarter of the mentions of race or racism by lifelong working-class activists invoked that frame, compared with two-thirds or three-quarters of the other class categories. (See Table 7.2.) Most of those working-class mentions were by the same three radicals with an outlaw identity, and very few involved an abstract generalization such as “corporate racism.”

Instead, lifelong working-class people of all races disproportionately used the most mainstream bigotry frame, injecting the ideal of tolerance and opposition to racial discrimination and hate speech.
Table 7.2  Mentions of race or racism in meetings and interviews by frame and by class trajectory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame and Trajectory</th>
<th>Lifelong working-Class</th>
<th>Straddler</th>
<th>Lifelong PMC</th>
<th>VDM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalized racism &amp; white supremacy</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural diversity</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-bigotry and tolerance</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% (N=44)</td>
<td>100% (N=20)</td>
<td>100% (N=64)</td>
<td>100% (N=6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a strong correlation between the three college-educated trajectories and the institutionalized-racism frame, as well as between the lifelong working-class trajectory and the anti-bigotry frame.72

All the 25 groups observed in this study were open to people of all races, so all the working-class members of color expected to encounter white people in their groups. Their non-racial rhetoric signaled their acceptance of working across racial differences, in particular demonstrating that they had no problem working with whites. For example, working-class Latina Cecilia took offense in the Health Care Subcommittee meeting when she misheard white working-class Devin and thought he said she had advocated the colors of the Puerto Rican flag for the group’s t-shirts:

*Cecilia:* I said, ‘Well, how ‘bout red and white and somethin’’, right? ... And I thought he said, ‘Oh, she want, she's always tryna get the Puerto Rican colors in’. And I was like ‘What? I ain't tryna get no Puerto Rican colors!’ He’s like, ‘I didn't say that. I said Republican color’...But you know, when he said that at first, I was like, ‘What is his problem about Puerto Rican colors? Why is it have to be, you know, about nationality?’

*Interviewer:* That's how you took it.

*Cecilia:* That's how I took it, like, ‘Why you tryna make it into something that it’s not?’ You know? I mean, I'm proud of my heritage. I like being proud of it. But I'm not going to force it upon you.

To Cecilia, an ethnically diverse group was a stronger group, and avoiding partisan race talk helped protect that multicultural strength.
Valuing multicultural diversity for its own sake was a minority view among my informants of all classes (see Table 7.2), without the class pattern found by Lamont (2000). None of the working-class white and African American men she interviewed referred to multiculturalism as a positive thing, but her professional and academic interviewees did (58-59). My informants, as liberal and progressive activists, tended to have broader definitions of racism and were more likely to take an anti-racist political stance than Lamont’s non-activist informants.

Additional evidence that these racism frames correlate with class trajectory comes from rates of usage during interviews of the most common words associated with the frames. Lifelong working-class interviewees were more likely to say two words associated with the anti-bigotry frame:

*Prejudice* (said by working-class interviewees 3.2 times as often as by all college-graduate interviewees, 4.2 times as often as by lifelong-PMC interviewees);

*Discrimination* (said by working-class interviewees 1.7 times as often as by all college-graduate interviewees; 4.8 times as often as by lifelong-PMC interviewees).

These higher working-class rates of saying the abstract, general words “prejudice” and “discrimination” are especially remarkable given the relative scarcity of abstract words in working-class interviewees’ speech, documented in the “Abstract and Concrete Vocabulary” interlude above. Since working-class interviewees used more unique specific references, working-class multiples as high as 3.2 times the college-educated rate are extremely rare in the entire word list, which makes the higher rate of saying “prejudice” stand out.

Interviewees in the three college-graduate trajectories were more likely to say these words associated with the institutionalized white supremacy frame:
*Privilege* (said 4.7 times as often by college-grad interviewees as by working-class interviewees);

*Oppressed* (said 1.6 as often by college-grad interviewees as by working-class interviewees; 2.3 times as often by voluntarily downwardly mobile interviewees as by working-class interviewees).

Key terms associated with the multicultural frame did not have dramatically different rates of use by interviewees of different classes, except that *diversity* was said 1.6 times as often by lifelong working-class interviewees as by lifelong PMC interviewees. The multicultural frame wasn’t strongly associated with any class trajectory; but the institutionalized white supremacy and anti-bigotry frames were.

**Working-class activist worldviews manifested in attitudes towards anti-racism**

Why would lifelong working-class activists be more likely to use the anti-bigotry frame? There are several possibilities. In some cases, such as the Women Safe from Violence meeting quoted above, use of the dominant mainstream anti-bigotry frame by inexperienced working-class people stemmed from their performance of respectability through demonstrating their rejection of hatefulness, and from more mainstream political values generally. Some of the respectable lifelong-working-class meeting participants weren’t multi-issue radicals, but people recently mobilized on one issue. To some extent these various race frames fell along the familiar blue-red, left-right spectrum; and some of the working-class activists weren’t very far to the left.

*White* working-class activists in particular seemed more comfortable sticking with tolerant actions and avoiding explicit race-talk. Like the community volunteers observed by Eliasoph (1998), some of them felt it was best “not to make an issue of including minorities but just treat them like everyone else” while working together on
concrete community projects (35). In addition, some white resistance to the institutional frame may have stemmed from unspoken racist attitudes (Van Dijk 1987; Bonilla 2010).

However, some experienced lifelong-working-class progressives promoted the anti-bigotry or multicultural frames on racism for what seemed like well-thought-out reasons related to their overall social change strategies. In most cases, it wasn’t that they disagreed with the structural analysis behind the institutional white supremacy frame, but that they saw that frame being pushed in counter-productive ways, such as the use of jargon or alienating group processes. In particular, worry about divide and conquer tactics by power-holders led them to stress racial unity. Brandon, the young Caribbean American loan officer in the Interfaith Workforce Improvement Task Force, newly lower-middle-class after a working-class childhood, stressed pragmatism in explaining his disagreement with high-professional straddler Jeremiah over how much to stress racial differences:

*He comes from the Civil Rights era mentality, which is great...but the spin has to be for 2008, 2007 as opposed to ’88 or ’68...Differences can get in the way, but you can't get hung up on it. You have to look past it sometimes.*

When working-class activists (usually activists of color, but occasionally whites) raised charges of racism, it was virtually always at the macro level, externally against people in authority in the wider world, not the micro level, internally within the group (Einwohner 2008: 7-8). Police, politicians, courts, mainstream media, employers and teachers were accused of abusing power, using hate speech, and fomenting divisions. Congruent with their prevailing anti-bigotry frame, the forms of racism most worthy of their notice seemed to be the most dangerous and extreme ones, often as experienced by their own family and friends. For example, low-income Native American Kateri said she knew her son wouldn’t get justice for being beaten up by thugs after a prosecutor called
him “nothing but a damn Indian.” A lower-middle-class white woman was shocked when her daughter’s black friends reported that guidance counselors told them they couldn’t go to college. At times working-class activists seemed to regard college-educated people’s sensitivities to subtle internal racial dynamics as the sheltered naïveté of hot-house flowers who didn’t know how hateful the world outside the group could be.

Working-class interviewees of color who mentioned cultural differences were referring to ethnic food, music, and social occasions, not different interaction styles. These references were usually quite specific and descriptive. For example, Darla said her working-class Puerto Rican relatives “look Italian but [the neighbors] know you’re not Italian… your Christmas dish is not lasagna!... We had certain cultural things that other people didn't. They had theirs and we had ours.”

When working-class activists of color brought up cultural differences in the context of their activist group, the point was usually to figure out how people of different ethnicities could socialize together, as part of building up group cohesion.

By contrast, college-educated activists, especially unassimilated straddlers and those in more radical groups, tended to bring up racism as an interpersonal power dynamic within their own groups. Whatever their race, they were less likely to bring up racist violence and discrimination in the wider society, and more likely to talk about low turn-out by people of color and the whiteness of the group’s internal culture. Their presumption, in keeping with their predominant institutionalized white supremacy frame, could be summarized in the phrase ‘as above, so below’: the pervasive racism of the wider society was just as present inside their groups as outside. Often these references to internal culture had a guilty tone. White lifelong-PMC activists in particular seemed to be
performing racial humility. Ira said he regretted the “white ethos” within Action Against Empire. With a similar guilty tone, Sharon spoke defensively about her disagreements with EDJ’s Anti-Racism Subcommittee, “I can’t deal with it, not because I haven’t dealt with my racism, though I’m sure that’s part of it…”

And Melissa told a story about five Jewish women in a radical collective who realized that their cultural style of simultaneous talk was silencing members of color from cultures with one-at-a-time speaking norms, such as a Haitian American member; she and the other four Jewish women made a pact to hold back and leave room for others to speak. These examples show how PMC whites often saw racism as a cultural dynamic inside activist groups.

Only one lifelong working-class person, frequent outlier Dorothea, brought up white cultural norms within the group, and she put it in much more concrete terms than lifelong-PMC people did: she said she got “a message from one of the women of color… ‘Well, you don't understand. This is just what black people do; we yell at each other’. So that was where I'd say, ‘Alright. Maybe that's true. Maybe I really don't get that’.

Contrast the specificity of Dorothea’s quote with the abstract references to racism that Sheila used to describe City Power’s mission: “using the classism or the racism that they're feeling in their everyday experience and give them an opportunity to understand that as part of a larger social structure that is oppression.” As with concrete and abstract speech generally, PMC activists more often framed racism as a general category, a property of organizations, less often as particular incidents with times, places and people.
Arguing over racism in a mixed-class group: How is an anti-racist commitment expressed?

These class differences in approaches to racism were clearly visible in a conflict at one meeting, a special session to talk about racism. The mixed-race, mixed-class group Easthaver Demands Justice (EDJ) had a commitment to be anti-racist, but members disagreed about the implications of that commitment.

The least controversial form of anti-racism was getting involved with low-income grassroots groups of color in their urban neighborhood, for example joining a picket by an environmental justice group trying to stop construction of a toxic incinerator in a mostly-black residential area. Such involvements as hands-on allies to grassroots campaigns (advocated as a best practice by Piatelli 2009) were one of the few things that everyone in this fractious group could enthusiastically agree on.

But all other ways of expressing anti-racism were the subject of vociferous conflict during the study period and the two prior years. Workshops and special sessions to talk about internal diversity had proponents and opponents, as did hanging diversity-related behavior guidelines on the wall. Affirmative action to deliberately recruit new members of color was controversial. Publicly describing their wider movement as “white and middle-class” was controversial. And what happened at this specially called session was particularly controversial. Analyzing who took which position, by class and by race, is very revealing of the different approaches to race found in other activist groups as well.

When I arrived at this special session about EDJ’s anti-racist positions, the first thing that jumped out at me was how much whiter it was than the earlier meeting I had observed, with just three people of color instead of six. Almost all the community
activists of color who had been drawn in by EDJ’s concrete work on local urban problems skipped this meeting, as well as a later public event on institutionalized racism.

The special session had been convened by the Anti-Racism Subcommittee, which had mostly white, college-educated members. The facilitator, Judith, was a friendly, humble straddler who had often served as a bridge person between the working-class community of her youth and her chosen community of mostly PMC radicals. The subcommittee had chosen Judith and lower-professional Deborah to lead the session instead of a sharp-tongued white member, perpetually angry at EDJ for insufficient anti-racism, described by two interviewees as “blasting” other white members.

The subcommittee had circulated ahead of time a statement written by Deborah that began, “The power elites of this country… have successfully used white supremacy to keep white people from uniting with people of color,” and ended with a call to white activists to “support and follow the leadership of activists of color.” The subcommittee’s intention was to increase the acceptance of the institutionalized white supremacy frame within the group. Judith introduced the proposal with words that exemplify the macro/micro linkage in that frame:

In a white-dominated society, it’s easy for white people to dominate discussions and groups. We have privilege that comes with our white skin that sometimes we don’t even notice. This [proposal] is a conscious effort to follow activists of color, to listen more than lead in our collaboration, in an effort to move towards something where we can truly be equal partners, recognizing the inequality in the society that exists right now.

But at the meeting, they got overwhelmingly negative reactions, in particular to the last part about “follow[ing] the leadership of activists of color” in EDJ’s work. All three members of color present opposed it, along with most white people not on the Anti-Racism Subcommittee. Dissecting the varied objections provides a cautionary tale for
how not to promote the institutionalized racism theme in a mixed-class and/or mixed-race group.

Two politically inexperienced white members from working-class backgrounds, both speaking with heavy working-class accents, quickly interjected the anti-bigotry frame into the discussion. Stuart, an impoverished white man, responded to the written statement by saying, “Dr. Martin Luther King was one of the greatest heroes in America… If we can’t build unity between the races, that’s going to further divide America, and that’s one thing America doesn’t need” — a mainstream liberal view with no political kinship to the leftist written statement.

To the dismay of the more radical meeting conveners, both Stuart and late-straddler Doris also returned the discussion to its most superficial level, the presence or absence of African Americans at EDJ’s meetings. (In the dialogue below, when Judith was startled by Doris’s response to her initial statement, note how Doris assumes that the problem was her terminology.)

Doris: I’ll bring my black friends next time.
Judith: I’m sorry? <laughs>
Doris [correcting her terminology to match Judith’s]: I’ll bring my friends of color.
Judith: Your friends of color. For an illustration of this?
Doris: No, so they can begin to work with us.
Judith: Oh, okay. <laughs uncomfortably>

Stuart’s and Doris’s liberal anti-bigotry frame on race is the predominant one in mainstream media. The subsequent ideological debate in the meeting involved cultural capital that Stuart and Doris didn’t have and references that were foreign to them. The more radical anti-racist ideas were brought into the conversation by people with college degrees and international travel experience.
A more politically sophisticated member from a working-class background, the white contrarian Mack, injected the labor movement’s variant of the multicultural frame, the strength-in-numbers emphasis on unity, exemplified by the common union rally chant ‘Black and white, unite and fight’. Promoting an anti-ideological, pragmatic action orientation, he said, “I agree racism is a very powerful force of disunity…. [but] we need… a tactics that isn’t very strictly bound by some long-term vision.”

When the disagreement heated up, the one and only working-class person of color in the room, a black experienced activist, Wendy, who had remained silent for most of the meeting, said, “Maybe we should forget about it, because it's divisive.” Given that the purpose of the meeting was to strengthen cross-race ties, neither her silence nor her suggestion to drop the proposal seemed like a healthy sign.

Putting together Wendy’s concern about divisiveness with Mack’s “powerful force of disunity” comment and Stuart’s call to unity for the good of America, it is clear that the working-class members (diverse in race, movement tradition and political experience) shared a strong value on unity. In their varied ways they were cautious about over-emphasizing racial differences.

While the working-class members were introducing the anti-bigotry and multicultural unity frames, while they were raising concerns about the impact of approving the statement on solidarity and pragmatic action, the PMC members were arguing about the wording of the statement, its ideology, its negativity and especially the passive follower role it proposed. One PMC white man initiated an abstract discussion of whether imperialism or structural racism causes more problems around the world, and asked for more emphasis on imperialism in the statement.
Two PMC people of color, as well as several PMC whites, objected to the way that the statement lumped all activists of color together and romanticized them. PMC African-American Rodney also objected to the implication that EDJ was a white group. He said in a later interview that he had taken offense at this erasure of members of color:

*There are people of color in the group, and often we hear this voice that ‘we’re this sort of white, middle-class, middle-aged group’, and it drives me up the wall… This ‘where are the black people? — there are black people there, okay, so what are you saying?… That’s a pretty disturbing speech. One, because you’re not leveraging the existing assets that are within the group. Two, because you’re almost… through your own speaking, marginalizing the very people* <laughing> *that you’re trying to bring in….*

The other controversial part of the proposal was a vow to shun any group that didn’t agree with a particular political platform, including a strongly worded version of the institutionalized white supremacy frame. This too was rejected, not because of disagreement with its political values, but because of the constraints it would have put on EDJ’s local work, which involved collaborating with many groups of varied ideology. Radical analysis on paper seemed to be fine with all members, but not when it limited their program options. The abstract, ideological way the pledge was framed didn’t make sense to the most culturally working-class members of EDJ, nor to people of color of all classes.

Three white PMC women with more elite professions than Deborah’s or Judith’s, including two older Quakers – the polite faction – all spoke in favor of softening the tone of the pledges and rejecting the commitment to shun some groups. Irene said, “*Working with people is better than refusing to work with them.*” Thus, in a different way, the most race- and class-privileged people in the group also rejected the anti-racist pledges.
For their part, Judith and Deborah had a frustrated tone at times, as if they couldn’t believe how hard it was to sell EDJ members on the self-evident sense of an anti-racist organization making an anti-racist commitment. Their first loyalty was to organized groups of color not in the room, not connected to EDJ, with whom most members were unacquainted. To them, being white allies against racism meant acting in solidarity with radicals of color, being accountable to them, even at the expense of the good will of their fellow group members. But it proved impossible to get others to sign on to such a commitment when presented in the abstract.

The special session about the proposed pledge was not the first time EDJ members had argued about anti-racism. In recent years the Anti-Racism Subcommittee had organized workshops led by outside diversity trainers. Their most vocal critic was Mack, the curmudgeonly white straddler rooted in the labor movement tradition:

*We've had more programs than I feel comfortable with on dealing with racism… people of color are pretty cynical about it…There are cultural issues, I just don't feel that it's very easy to address them by...codes of behavior or inward assessing...We've had a number of programs which were considered like training… which I personally find really, really off-putting. We paid a lot of money; actually, part of it is that people who do this kind of thing don't do it for free...I hate that kind of thing... that approach is kind of patronizing … well-meaning but sometimes odd, patronizing, paternalistic… a lot of black people don't appreciate it either, even though it's well-meaning, it's something just odd about these white people wringing our hands all the time. <laughs>*

Arguments over anti-racist practices came to a head between Mack and Deborah; they were two poles of a polarized group. Deborah felt that Mack and many other EDJ members (mostly but not only whites) didn’t see the cultural racism within their group or the multi-faceted meaning of solidarity with people of color. Convincing other members, including members of color, of the institutionalized white supremacy frame and the
meaning of being a white ally (Myers 2008; Munkres 2008) was an ongoing mission for her.

Of all the 362 activists in this study, Deborah best fit the profile of long-time white anti-racists described in Thompson’s *A Promise and a Way of Life* (2001) and Warren’s *Fire in the Heart* (2010). She described a conversion experience of being convinced by another white radical that most white activism ignores racism and betrays the interests of people of color. Deborah’s life exemplified the low-key, plain-dressing, moderately voluntarily downwardly mobile lower-professional white women profiled in Chapter 2; her speaking style and self-presentation came across as sincere but lacking in pizzazz; and she had made occupational choices that lowered her income somewhat in order to keep her time flexible for activism. Most recently she had poured hundreds of volunteer hours into EDJ’s urban grassroots partnerships in the Easthaver neighborhood. While Thompson, Warren and others praise white anti-racists almost without reservation, emphasizing their importance in ridding the United States of racism, Deborah’s difficulties in persuading EDJ members suggest caveats about how the most committed white anti-racists are sometimes perceived by other activists, and why their persuasive efforts sometimes fail.

Deborah, Judith and the rest of the Anti-Racism Subcommittee convened the special meeting and proposed the anti-racist pledge because milder forms of persuasion weren’t working. Yet the very form and language of their proposal – ideological, abstract and general, and speaking from a humble solidarity more fitting for class-privileged whites to express – backfired, increasing the resistance of the rest of the group.
The common ground for this impressively varied group was combining work on global justice with work on local community-organizing projects. In theory, all members saw connections between international and local injustice; and in practice, they were all happy that EDJ worked at both levels. But their reasons for connecting those usually distinct political realms were so different and sometimes conflicting that they were unable to put out a joint statement explaining their dual focus. The strength of EDJ was its political, class and race diversity, but that variety turned this discussion into a Tower of Babel, with different political languages being spoken.

Up close and personal, and with no excuses

The class contrast between approaches to racism can be seen very clearly by shifting attention from the EDJ disagreement back to the majority-working-class City Power meeting. After the discussion of the funder’s questions, Dorothea opened up a broader question of race dynamics within the group, setting off a rare meta-conversation about race-talk by working-class people.

To make the class contrast more vivid, first picture Deborah asking EDJ to sign on to a general vow to follow the leadership of unnamed activists of color, and calling EDJ a “white middle-class group” despite the presence of people of color in the room. Then picture white lower-professional Ira giving general definitions of the words “oppression” and “privilege” at the Action Against Empire meeting spotlighted in Chapter 5, and never speaking directly to Latino newcomer Lowell. Now notice how very personally Dorothea spoke to the African American members at the City Power meeting, with how much less social distance:

_Dorothea: This is not to put you guys on the spot at all, but you know, if you got something to say about, ‘Well, hey, I do think City Power is sort of like not letting_
me develop as a leader the way I want to, or not having given me the opportunities I deserve’, nobody is going to take that bad, you know, we got to think about this stuff.

Most members of color had positive reactions to what Dorothea said. However, Adriana very clearly rejected the cultural domination theory and replaced it with an economic “invisible walls” (Stout 1996) explanation, speaking in the first person:

_I don’t believe you’re not allowing…. For me things just keep being thrown in the way and I know everybody else has things thrown in the way, but for me it just seems hard sometimes... Speaking honestly, I can’t come here comfortably when I’m not going to have any lights tomorrow...I have to go and take care of my business first, and then still try to come to City Power second._

Working-class African American Quincy agreed with them that economic hardship was an obstacle to activism, but pointed out that poverty also drew people to City Power: _“When they're having the hardships and don't have nowhere else to go, and they need information, we're going to be probably the main networking for people.”_

Thus, after working-class outlier Dorothea made the typically PMC move of putting a spotlight on the cross-race dynamics within the group, several working-class members of color shifted the spotlight back to wider-society hardships by tying involvement by people of color to their concrete life circumstances.

**Does white cultural domination keep people of color down?**

Then the City Power conversation took another revealing turn. Courtney, a lifelong-low-income black woman, was sitting quietly, not intending to participate in this discussion, until Dorothea asked her what she was thinking. She hesitantly made a controversial comment that then became a hot topic in all five subsequent interviews with City Power members:

_Stop listening to me. I don't think you want to hear what I want to say. I don't want to say all, but some black people are lazy, and they just don't want to give it_
as much as it should be given to get where they need to be… [They] make excuses. Everything is hard, yes, but if you want to do it, you make the time to do it.

Ranelle chimed in, speaking as one black woman to another: “We know the way to struggle, to make our way out of no way.” Dorothea said, “You’re at the table right now.”

But most of the members didn’t respond to Courtney’s comment at all. White women Sheila and Thelma both made long statements that weren’t directly related, that carried the conversation in other directions; and in their interviews both expressed discomfort about not knowing what to say in that awkward moment. They assumed Courtney was speaking from internalized racism, a negative stereotype of African Americans as lazy, which may have been true. But her rejection of cultural and economic explanations for low participation also gave more agency to black non-activists.

Courtney was at the far end of the disempowerment spectrum (she’s the one who said, “I never want to be in charge… I’m just a helper in the background”). But she was not the only working-class person of color to repudiate the argument, heard almost entirely from college-graduate activists, that it is white cultural domination keeping people out of, or out of leadership of, activist groups. A similarly tough, ‘no excuses’ argument was also heard in another group, Labor and Community United, by a more empowered lifelong-working-class African American activist, Rhonda:

*When I'm in primarily black or solely black groups and they'll say, “I'm having this clash, blah blah blah, the white person blah blah”...I'll say, “That supervisor don't [dis]like you because you're black, that supervisor don't like you because you're a butt.”* <laughs> Sometimes you just have to be frank with people and just tell them. *‘It don't have anything to do with your color, it has a lot to do with your attitude’.* <laughs>
Instead of cultural domination, the micro dimension of the institutionalized white supremacy frame, all the working-class City Power members, both black and white, along with many working-class activists from other groups, had a distinctive way of talking about race and racism: factually descriptive of particular people’s ethnicity, loyal to their group, blaming the powers-that-be for injustice, and pragmatically emphasizing unity. Working-class activists tended to favor concrete help to protect specific individuals from external racial injustice.

PMC and VDM diversity practices, while occasionally appreciated for their good intentions, were criticized by working-class activists as sometimes too rigid and formalistic; sometimes as too filled with weird or boring group processes or too jargon-laden; sometimes as too holier-than-thou or condescending; and sometimes as impractical, taking the group’s energy away from action and into endless talk and ideological conflict.

But talk-centered PMC diversity practices, not working-class approaches, were the ones that funders and large employers seemed to prefer. In a post-industrial society, when knowledge and management skills are the basis of class power (Derber et al. 1990; Wright 1985: 107-108), the abstract diversity lingo and stylized workshop processes known and practiced almost entirely by progressive college graduates are an example of Bourdieu’s point that cultural practices sometimes classify, rank and exclude people (1984: 223; Lamont and Lareau 1988). Just as we’ve seen that most activist groups treated group process and organizational development as the turf of the professional-middle-class members or staff, so similarly a focus on internal diversity and ‘isms’ was
also frequently PMC turf — which is ironic, given that the ostensible purpose of diversity work is to boost up marginalized people within the group.

The institutionalized white supremacy frame favored by many PMC and VDM activists seems to me to include some important aspects of the reality of racism that are missing from the anti-bigotry and multicultural frames, such as structural explanations and historical context. Since it is often learned at universities and is most prevalent among more class-privileged activists, spreading it means sharing cultural capital across class lines. The question is how this can be done more effectively, in ways less distorted by PMC cultural dispositions, especially to persuade politically inexperienced working-class whites – the huge demographic group that would have to be convinced for that frame to gain mainstream prominence (Teixeira and Rogers 2000; Zweig 2011; Metzgar 2010). An anti-racist practice that wasn’t class-exclusive would look very different from the accepted practices in social movement groups today.
Ironically, the word “class” seems to be fairly common in the vocabulary of more class-privileged activists and uncommon among lifelong working-class activists. Working-class interviewees said “class” only .34 times per 10,000 words, compared with 9.55 times for college-graduate interviewees, a large ratio of 28:1. Straddler interviewees used the c-word more than any other class trajectory, 35 times as often as working-class people, followed by PMC and VDM activists.

An inadvertent bad wording in the interview protocol turned out to be very revealing of an unused term. The phrase ‘social class’ was completely unfamiliar to some respectable lifelong-working-class activists, who answered the question “How would you describe yourself in terms of your social class?” with non-class answers about their social life. For example, lower-middle-class middle-aged white activist Martha answered, “I was a social outcast,” and then proceeded to describe her social life in each grade school classroom, starting with her first-grade class. Working-poor young Afro-Caribbean immigrant Martina answered, “Well, for me it’s good, I get along with everybody, I try to socialize myself, let people know me and stuff.” If one goal of this study was to learn what does and doesn’t communicate across class lines, the interviewers learned one thing very quickly: don’t say ‘social class’ without explaining yourself.

Non-class answers to class questions

But even clearer questions with prompts such as “poorest and richest” sometimes got garbled answers, or racial answers to class questions, especially by lifelong-working-class activists. The members of the group Martina is describing in the following exchange
in fact had education levels ranging from fourth grade to masters degrees, and a fairly wide range of income and assets as well:

*Interviewer:* What about educational background, class?
*Martina:* That would be about our race, our culture, our skin color; they say we’re African-American or whites...

*Interviewer:* How about owners vs. renters, people that have more opportunities than others...
*Martina:* You’re absolutely right.

*Interviewer:* Is there anybody that you notice that has more or less?
*Martina:* I don’t think so; I guess everybody is on the same level.

Some interviewees resisted the class questions for principled reasons, not wanting to buy into unfair inequalities by naming them.

*Interviewer:* How would you describe yourself in terms of social class?
*Courtney* (low-income African-American): *I don’t have a social class. I’m just me. I don’t compare myself with anyone, and I don’t put myself above anyone.*

Overall, lifelong working-class people were more likely than college-educated people to answer an interviewer’s questions about class with a non-class answer, resisting the question, misunderstanding it, or answering about race instead of class.\(^{77}\) Except that Latinos were slightly less likely to give such non-class answers, race, gender, age and movement tradition made no difference; only the interviewee’s class was associated with non-class answers.\(^{78}\)

Focusing the lens down further to look within each gender, race, movement tradition and age category, in every case the working-class people were more likely to give non-class or class-resistant answers to class and diversity questions than were the college-educated people in each category.\(^{79}\)

Other researchers have found similar non-answers to class questions. “Open-ended queries about class identification tend to yield confused responses, refusals to
answer, and even explicit denials that classes exist” (Grusky 2005: 68; see also Savage et al. 2001).

But most PMC, VDM and straddlers, once prompted, did use conventional class terms to answer questions. To the question about how they describe themselves in terms of class, most gave without hesitation responses such as “I consider myself working-class” and “I probably grew up more middle-class...I have a lot of class privilege.”

Unknown class identities in the rest of the group

When interviewees were asked explicitly about the class diversity in their group – which seemed to be the hardest interview question to answer – many of all classes avoided the question; there wasn’t a statistically significant class difference in who hazarded a guess. Several interviewees of varied classes expressed uncertainty about the class backgrounds of others in their groups, saying things like, “I don’t know their backgrounds” and “I’m not good at noticing class.” But such uncertainty was more commonly heard from people from working-class backgrounds.

The college-educated interviewees who did answer the question used more conventional class terms in their answers, such as “It tends to be middle-class, I mean people come from middle-class backgrounds” and “Edie is pretty solidly working-class; but Beatrice is probably more middle-class.”

Contrast those answers with what working-class white Reginald said when he was asked twice about class diversity in The People’s Convention; he gave two different non-answers, “Just average white people,” and when pressed about class, “There's never any discussion about class as far as within the group itself.”
White activists were more likely than others to specify other group members’
class, and African Americans were significantly less likely to, but there was no
 correlation with gender, movement tradition or age in how interviewees answered
questions about class diversity in the group. Only class and race predicted answers to
questions about others’ class identities.

**Class as the facts of everyday life**

It’s not that most working-class non-class-talkers didn’t talk about class issues at
all, of course. Working-class activists were somewhat more likely to bring up concrete,
proximate class-related facts, such as particular occupations, hardships, amounts of
money, and neighborhoods. The usually talkative white working-class man, Slim of Tri-
City Labor Alliance (TLA), was uncharacteristically silent on the general question of
class identities in TLA before answering a follow-up question with a dollar figure:

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**Interviewer:** How would you describe people in terms of social class?

**Slim:** <Long silence>

**Interviewer:** Like, are there differences in homeowners, renters, education levels,
etc?

**Slim:** Well, I make 26 dollars an hour. Ok? I would assume that, you know, some
of the service-sector people don’t make nearly that much.

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Many working-class and especially impoverished people openly told the stories of
their own hardships:

**Adriana (low-income African American):** It’s hard for me when I have my lights
getting ready to get shut off and my car, Lord knows I’ve been trying to get it
running for the last two years.

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Even when making general points about society, not just about themselves,
working-class people were more likely to use concrete language and human details and to
omit general class categories:
Aaron (working-class Latino member of union-sponsored coalition): Look at the crisis in medical care...some people are actually going bankrupt. People in their 60s who want to live their golden years in peace cannot even enjoy their golden years because they have to mortgage their homes, sell everything to pay their medical bills.

Martha, the lower-middle-class white woman quoted above answering the social class question by talking about her childhood social life, made this insightful comment about class diversity in activist groups without saying the c-word:

*Usually the people that a group is about aren't there. Like the farm workers group didn't have any farm workers. The criminal justice reform group — people with drug histories, the homeless, ex-offenders — they bring them in to speak, not that they stay engaged. They have to get on with their lives, I think.*

Occasionally working-class people did use colloquial terms for class identities, as when Brandon said, “I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth, and to be honest with you, I don't have a silver spoon to sell right now if I wanted to.”

But there’s a striking shortage in many working-class activists’ speech even of such informal class talk that might indicate a class identity. Older working-class long-term leaders like Dorothea and Brandy claimed poverty as their identity (“we’re poor people, nobody wants to identify with poor people,” Dorothea said), but very few rank-and-file members of their group spoke similarly.

A few African Americans old enough to have lived through the Civil Rights movement made inspirational statements about the larger class group on whose behalf their group worked. For example, an elderly impoverished African American in Grassroots Resistance, Terrell, said, “We speak for the common people as a whole.” It was uplifting to hear such general class statements from people directly and currently affected by class oppression; but such references were rare, and almost non-existent
among people under age 60. Most vocal champions of working people or poor people were straddlers staying true to their roots or PMC radicals, in particular those in labor and community groups, not anyone lifelong in the working-class range.

The words “classism” and “classist” were rarely said in the interviews, with just four mentions, and never heard in a meeting. All the four mentions were by college-educated people, none by working-class people. Again, it’s not that classism isn’t perceived, just that there’s absolutely no consistency in how it is described. For example, working-class African American Adriana said of a politician, “We’re little people to him.” White lower-middle-class woman Rickie said about a bad emergency room experience, “The nurse said, ‘Money or no money, everyone should be treated the same’.” But no such phrase or term about classism was used by more than one person.

With one exception, each class-identity term heard from a working-class informant was seldom or never heard from anyone else in the same class category. College-educated people, by contrast, often used the same terms as each other. Once again, shared general vocabulary seemed to come along with college education, not through living through the experience of class subordination.

The one exception was the word “poor,” which lifelong working-class interviewees were more likely to use than any other class category. They used that word often than three times as often as “working-class,” usually unprompted, suggesting that it’s in working-class activists’ everyday vernacular – the only general class term they used regularly. “Low-income” was used at a lower rate by both lifelong working-class and college-educated interviewees; VDM activists used it more often. Thus, of the three words or phrases for the lower class range, lifelong working-class and PMC activists
favored “poor,” straddlers and VDM activists favored “low-income” — and no one used “working-class” very often.

There didn’t seem to be any common vernacular terms for the vast range of the class spectrum above poverty and below professional-middle-class, except perhaps the vague, all-inclusive term “middle class,” used by just a few of the 61 interviewees. The frequently heard idea that almost all Americans call themselves middle-class is an exaggeration; by my calculations, one-third of American households are in fact professional-middle-class, and only half again as many (about 45%) pick out “middle class” to describe themselves on multiple choice surveys that also offer “working class” (Metzgar 2003).

‘Middle class’ is a term commonly used by politicians and the media for anyone not rich or poor, a slippery public euphemism. It sprang comfortably to working-class Latina Cecilia’s lips, perhaps presumed to be a word an interviewer from a college would like, but she then took it back:

Cecilia: I think that this group is a little mixed, a little bit middle-class and a little bit more upper class. Like just a step, not two step, just one step higher…. I know Pamela and Fred are above us, I think Shirley is one too…. And Clayton is right with me. <laughs> He’s at my level, he ain’t goin nowhere.

Interviewer: And so you call yourself middle class?
Cecilia: Um hum.

Interviewer: What do you think about that definition? People use that word…
Cecilia: And I hate, and I hate to use it too because I really don’t. I call myself actually the working poor. That’s where I’m at… You got your little working poor like myself that’s making only 25 to 30 a year, that would be the working poor. Then you have the poor, and they’re on the welfare system or whatever, tryna survive. I’m one of the working poor. I can’t pass the [bar] for middle class because I ain’t even there….

Interviewer: Do you think that most people are in that same working poor boat?
Cecilia: I would say at least, four, five of us out of that group…. Living check by check.
Interviewer: So there's maybe three people that you think aren't living check by check?
Cecilia: Well. Um, yeah. Yeah. 3 or 4… that are living, that they don't need that check that bad. It can wait. If they didn't get paid they'd be alright. 'I'm good, I'm settled'. Yeah, I'm like, 'No, I want my money and I want it now. Gotta pay my rent'. You know? That sort of thing. I gotta feed the kids. Ain't have time for this.

Like most working-class interviewees, Cecilia reverts to describing class realities in concrete terms such as “gotta feed the kids.” She switched from the public catch-all term “middle class” to “the working poor” after only a tiny bit of encouragement. Other researchers have found similarly fluid and changeable class self-identities (DiMaggio 2012: 16-17).

For a few black interviewees, their reference group was the huge population of chronically poor African Americans. Having more financial security than those trapped outside the primary labor force was a very significant class boundary, often marked by that word ‘middle-class’. For example, PMC African American Rodney described himself as “at least fourth generation middle-class”; his definition tallies with mine for himself, his parents, and two of his grandparents, who were college-educated professionals; but his other grandparents and great-grandparents, who did construction, stone masonry and non-credentialed nursing, were middle-class by the standards of the black community at the time, but working-class by my definition.

I categorized Rhonda as lifelong working-class because neither she nor her parents went to college nor held professional or managerial jobs; she lived in a rented apartment and was laid off from a union job at a phone company. But she defined herself differently:
I'm a different kind of black girl. I've always been middle-class. My father was a laborer and he made good money...I grew up during the 60s like most white families. The mother was at home while the father worked...I thought that everyone else went to the dinner table every day and had meat and vegetables and starch and drink.... I realized later that most of the people that I grew up with, they didn't have meat on their table every night. Eating Delmonico steak...we were considered rich. I'm not ashamed...I started working when I was 17 for [a phone company] and I've worked for 33 years. I like living in an apartment. I'm not hurting. I'm blessed and thankful for the union.

Rhonda had a strong loyalty to the labor movement, but she took such respectable positions on some controversies within the black community that she, Hannah and others in her group believed her attitudes made her middle-class: she deplored the half-naked dancers on Black Entertainment Television and performers who used the n-word, and she admitted to a prejudice against dreadlocks. What seemed to me primarily a generational difference in cultural standards was seen within Labor and Community United as a class difference.

The inconsistent class identities and scarce class talk found in these activist groups don’t seem like a healthy sign among activists of any class, but they are especially disturbing among working-class and poor activists. Historically, the discourse within US working-class mass movements has often included an explicit working-class or poor people’s collective identity (Piven and Cloward 1979; Lichtenstein 2002). How can a powerful mass working-class movement be built today without a widespread class collective identity and shared language to talk about it? The Occupy movement’s call for the unity of “the 99%” erases great differences in class life experiences; over-broad, universalistic identities tend to be weak bases for mass mobilization (Gamson 1990 [1975]: Chapter 5). If the bottom half of the 99% could name and claim their class
identity, it would open more possibilities for building and strengthening working-class-led movements.
In the spring of 2008, when the conflict among DNC protest groups worsened, a few groups split off from the original Stand Up Fight Back (SUFB) coalition to form The People’s Convention (TPC). Some of the Denver public first learned of this rift from a spat in a newspaper and its online readers’ forum. First, SUFB founder Tye was quoted in an article characterizing TPC as a “white, middle-class group” – a fairly accurate description, but one that TPC members took great offense at.

In response, a hothead TPC member, Nanette, researched the assessed value of Tye’s suburban home, and posted this comment online: “I think you should be careful about who you categorize as white middle class, considering you are white and you live in a home in [wealthy suburb] that you paid $335,000 for... Does that not make you white middle class?” Tye then wrote an online response in which he defended himself against the charge of being middle-class and called Nanette an “ignorant fool.”

Why were “white” and “middle-class” taken as insult words? Why would mention of suburban homeownership be offensive enough to warrant a rude response like “ignorant fool”?

This incident exemplifies the ‘privilege as putdown’ phenomenon: mentioning a dominant identity was often a slur in itself, and at other times preceded other criticisms or was used to neutralize harsh language. This chapter looks at this phenomenon and related problems resulting from confusion about and denial of class identities, especially by voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) and moderately downwardly mobile lower-professional activists.
Privilege as putdown

Privilege as putdown only makes sense in a context where an oppressed status confers movement capital. If social standing within a group could be gained by claiming an identity such as being a person of color, queer, or poor, sometimes the converse is also true: to say activists were privileged could tarnish their reputation.

One common conversational gambit by activists was to invoke someone’s privileged identity immediately before or after criticizing them or disagreeing with them. For example, during Easthaver Demands Justice’s conflict over anti-racism, profiled in chapter 7, when Deborah found herself in the awkward situation of being a white person pushing an anti-racism frame that some people of color disagreed with, she sometimes used the higher class backgrounds of members of color to undermine their case (a dubious move, in my opinion, as racism is experienced by people of color of every class):

Deborah: There's a few people in the group that haven't gotten past feeling guilty every time these [race and class] words are uttered and don't want to hear about it.
Interviewer: Do you mind saying who had a negative reaction to [a public anti-racist statement]?
Deborah: [Member’s name], he's not white but he's upper class.

In some cases, such descriptions of someone as privileged were accurate, but in other cases they were not. For example, McKayla mischaracterized a Stand Up Fight Back member who in fact came from a working-class background: “This may just be gossip, it may be true, I don't know, that she's more of a trust fund kid… She's a giant pain in the ass.”

Typically it was a disliked person who was presumed to have higher-class status, as when working-class black woman Rhonda criticized union staffer Suzy and described her as a “rich white woman,” “on the higher economic status than the rest of us.” In fact
Suzy had only a high-school degree and listed her race as “American Indian”; she was a homeowner, but her parents had done working-class hourly wage jobs. In a similar presumption, Cecilia characterized resented straddler Shirley as a high-level professional, exaggerating the difference between their direct-care and program manager human service occupations.

Often these were honest mistakes. But in an environment without much coherent talk about class, it’s easier for unscrupulous activists to use references to privileged social identities to attack and score points, as Tye and Nanette did.

Privilege-putdowns are just one type of the misuses of class identities that flourish in the absence of reality-based class talk. Other problematic class distortions were posing and pretence, misrecognition of class advantages, and even denial that class exists at all.

**Posing, pretense and deliberate class performances**

PMC-background activists were observed downplaying their advantages and emphasizing their hardships, more often than the reverse. For example, a young member of City Power, Carla, a second-generation university graduate who had been temporarily doing a blue-collar job after graduation, equated herself with lifelong poor and working-class members when she said, “*We are predominately poor people. I, myself, am definitely a poor person* <laughter>.”

Such talking yourself down doesn’t necessarily require bending the truth. Class is a set of spectrums, and where you place yourself depends on which class indicators you emphasize and to whom you compare yourself. By focusing only on financial situation and excluding cultural capital from their definition of class, activists who were
downwardly mobile from privileged backgrounds could claim similarity to working-class and poor people.

But talking oneself down sometimes crossed the line into posing as poor. When Brandy was asked, “Do you ever run into fake poor people, people who are like voices speaking on behalf of poor people, but like a fake – ?,” she answered, “All the time.”

Brief experiences of poverty were highlighted in many interviews and meetings, presumably to gain movement capital. One woman from an upper-middle-class background introduced herself to an observing researcher by describing her brief stint on welfare, omitting mention of her professional jobs until they came up later in the meeting. Tye said, “I was homeless for a while.” Sometimes a neighborhood was used as a presumed class indicator, equivalent to a New Yorker saying “He lives in the South Bronx,” obscuring the part of the story in which a progressive person deliberately moved to a low-income neighborhood after college for a community organizing job. In one low-income group, several members who declined to fill out the demographic survey were all later described by acquaintances as secretly belonging to a certain socialist group that often places its members in grassroots groups.

These examples lead me to believe that class posing is sometimes deliberate. Class is always a performance (Bettie 2003), but usually not a conscious one (Bourdieu 1990: 55-56; Swartz 1997: 101). Class posers are those who deliberately perform a lower class than their actual life experience.

In the 1970s I was repelled by the fake ‘working-class’ members of sectarian Marxist groups, with their plaid shirts and baseball caps, slapping each other on the back and dropping their g’s in a futile attempt to hide their usually PMC backgrounds and
university educations and to pose as just another union member or neighborhood resident. Thankfully, posing as working-class seems to have become less common in recent decades.

However, in the community-needs groups in my study, the role of the poor continued to be played by members from a variety of class categories. Two welfare rights organizations, Low-Income Women Rising and Safety Net for All, portrayed themselves as low-income membership groups, but in fact many public spokespeople about the experience of being a welfare recipient had some higher-class indicators, such as college degrees and past professional jobs or college-educated professional parents. Lifelong poor members tended to stay behind the scenes (as Cummings 2003 also found).

Community-needs groups also had members who were openly PMC, playing unhidden ally roles (Myers 2008); but in other cases there was individual or collective class pretense, at least in public. Stereotypes about women of color aided the portrayal of college graduates of color as needy single mothers. For example, some white members of Safety Net for All pushed African American straddler Jasmine to be her group’s public spokesperson about poverty, even when she was reluctant, perhaps suspecting that she was being used as black window-dressing. Some public portrayals of Jasmine didn’t mention her homeownership or her graduate degree.

At the difficult historical moment of 2007-8, a low ebb for the welfare rights movement, this disjuncture between the public portrayal and the actual class composition of the membership may have been necessary for organizational survival, as some progressive funders wanted reassurance that directly affected people were in charge.
While some hiding of class advantages is understandable, it does add to the general unclarity about class dynamics in social change groups.

**Posing or code switching?**

Some activists were presumed to be posers, but without any evidence that I could find. In the Workforce Improvement Task Force of the Citywide Interfaith Coalition, the white PMC interviewees thought Jeremiah was a poser, pretending to be poor to score points in the conflict over the organization’s strategy, described in Chapter 1. Noah pointed out that Jeremiah actually represented a middle-class church to the coalition, while the person that Jeremiah rejected as too private-sector, Brandon, represented a low-income church. I knew what Noah meant, as sometimes when Jeremiah talked about “people power,” his voice fell to a gravelly growl and he dropped his ‘g’s’. But in fact, Jeremiah was honest in his interview about his very high education level and elite profession, calling himself “one of the privileged.” In the meeting he said, “All of us have housing, so we're not experiencing the issue like the people in my neighborhood.” He saw himself as many straddlers do, speaking on behalf of the low-income community he had come from.

When black professionals like Jeremiah suddenly shifted to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Rickford 1999), the everyday speech of many lifelong-working-class black people, they were not posing, but code switching (Auer 2002). Code switching seemed to signal affiliation with or advocacy for low-income people of color, verbally invoking those not in the room. For example, a Chicano professional in Immigrants United usually spoke standard (‘white’) English, but injected this line during a disagreement over moderate versus militant messages, using AAVE grammar to
reinforce his radical credentials as he argued for a more mainstream approach: “It ain’t about us hard-core movement folks.” The word ‘ain’t’ wasn’t part of his ordinary speech, but something he added to display his grassroots affiliation.

But when white people code-switched into AAVE, they got negative reactions, including from me; I found myself presuming that they were pretentious class-posers. Rufus, an older PMC white male leader of a mostly black police brutality group within the Labor and Community United (LCU) coalition, grated on my nerves with his fake African American accent and inaccurate AAVE grammar when he gave this stereotype-laden hypothetical situation:

> What’s important to that black kid who's going to the store for his mother, getting there and getting back without being stopped three times, or having his car searched...He doesn’t give a damn about George Bush. He's just trying to get the store and back because Mama’s going to be beat his ass if he comes in there and doesn't give her a good explanation about why a 20-minute trip turned into a 2-hour trip.

Immediately after Rufus spoke, a woman of color from a working-class background, Native American straddler Suzy, signaled her negative reaction to Rufus’ cultural appropriation by briefly switching to AAVE herself and stressing that people of color have a more valid source of knowledge, personal experience:

> I would like to see us do some action, because there ain't anything like driving while Black. Those of us who have experienced it all our lives, we know that's the way it is.

Suzy then suggested a lifelong-working-class Latino, Aaron, to be the first one to go out on a cop-videotaping mission, bypassing Rufus. Whether Rufus was an obnoxious, racist poser or a dedicated activist who had paid his dues was a hot topic in the interviews with other LCU members of color, with Hannah mostly holding the first opinion and Rhonda mostly thinking the latter.
Posers usually seemed to get away with pretense that crossed only class lines, but faking ethnic culture went too far. To be trusted, white people had to tread carefully and not overstate their affiliations with communities of color. Allies must demonstrate solidarity and commitment, but not over-identify with the marginalized group or intrude where they are unwelcome (Myers 2008: 176), a fine line that requires cultural competence to walk.

**Anti-materialism and class misrecognition**

Posing and pretence happened in all kinds of groups, but they were most endemic in downwardly mobile circles, both among the drastically off-the-grid voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) and among the plain-dressing moderately downwardly mobile lower-professionals.

For VDM activists, their adult experience of living on very low incomes gave them an unusual perspective on the class system. One or two of them had a subtle understanding of how their class privilege persisted very powerfully through cultural capital and social capital (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Lareau 1988), despite their lack of money. But more common was a mistaken conflation of voluntary and involuntary poverty. For example, Benton was sent to college by his professional parents, then dropped out, got a job in a print shop and joined an anarchist group; he said, “I consider myself working-class.”

It’s understandable that activists without the trappings of luxury and with a heartfelt identification with the oppressed would regard themselves as lacking class privilege. The fact that objectively one has more opportunities than working-class and poor people may not feel significant to someone who is turning down opportunities for
principled reasons. It can be hard to see oneself as simultaneously part of a marginalized political tendency and also part of the dominant class of college-educated people. Class confusion is understandable.

However, there were incentives to continue this misrecognition of intangible cultural capital within groups where an oppressed status conveyed movement capital, and yet where PMC cultural capital was rewarded with respect and influential roles. Remember the cross-shaped charts in Chapter 2 based on Bourdieu’s (1984: 128-129) “social space” diagram of French society? The horizontal axis for differences in type of capital – more cultural capital for the intelligensia and more financial capital for business managers – is often regarded as a class difference by those with less money but more education. In Bourdieu’s view and mine, only the vertical distance between those with more or less total capital of all types is actually a class difference.

Bourdieu saw such "confusion between class struggles and class-fraction struggles" (1984: 451) when artists and intellectuals equated their own cultural antagonism with bourgeois elites with the working class’s structural conflict with the dominant class. This confusion stemmed in part from a certain set of tastes very different than rich business managers’ typical tastes: an aesthetic of "refusal of ostentation" (Bourdieu 1984: 451). The parallel confusion among VDM activists stems from not recognizing do-it-yourself (DIY) projects and off-the-grid lifestyles as high-cultural-capital tastes. For example, for many years vegan and organic food were popular almost entirely among graduates of elite universities. Just as French artists competed in contests for symbolic rewards in the name of pure art, some activists score symbolic points in ‘more green than thou’ competitions.
High-cultural-capital bohemian tastes have been observed in a much wider cultural segment of the US population than just activists (Holt 1998; Brooks 2001; Florida 2002). Anti-materialism itself is countercultural symbolic capital among certain elites:

...with materialism as the dominant status game, how are cultural elites to distinguish themselves? The only option, structurally speaking, is to develop a set of tastes in opposition to materialism: consuming that emphasizes the metaphysical over the material — idealism — is prestigious currency in the cultural sphere... cultural elites have their own set of exclusionary practices in which they invert materialism to affirm their societal position (Holt 1998: 20).

Anti-materialist choices by class-privileged people have roots going back to the bohemians of the 1800s (Hebdige 1979: 13). Why would there be a correlation between high education levels and anti-consumerism? Bohemian tastes tend to grow from a PMC childhood because experiencing financial security as a child leads to not craving it as much as an adult. Referring to the non-profit sector, Lamont explains the correlations between privileged class backgrounds, liberal political values, and denial of an economic frame on society:

People who grew up during periods of economic prosperity are more prone to favor postmaterialist values such as self-actualization, environmentalism, sexual permissiveness, and opposition to nuclear power and armament: these people have had more ‘formative security’, i.e. they or their families had a strong market position during their growing-up years and are, therefore, less concerned with materialist values and with economic rationality... (Lamont 1992: 152)

It’s hard to feel part of a dominant class whose predominant tastes you despise. White PMC activists in particular often perceived themselves as so culturally different than non-activists of their class and race that they deployed their activist identity to make visible their opposition to mainstream society (Bernstein 2008: 281). And in fact PMC activists are different in their tastes from their mainstream counterparts to a degree that
rooted working-class activists usually are not, as the class profiles in Chapter 3 showed. The people of color, second-generation farmers, and people from trade-union families who become activists are often those who embrace their root culture most fervently.

White PMC and VDM activists, on the other hand, see their parents' and mainstream acquaintances' culture as part and parcel of the structure of domination, and thus they are more likely to use lifestyle differences as the political boundaries of their opposition. While this move has integrity and purpose, their mistake is to believe that their rejection of mainstream lifestyle and culture erases their class privilege.

Olivia brought up another motivation, guilt, when she connected privileged class backgrounds with the anti-materialism of her anarchist group and her punk social scene:

*Me and the girl who got me into the collective, both our parents have worked in factories, don't have enough money, and like I am excited that I can buy my own clothes...I definitely think it's a guilt thing, and [other Parecon members are] like over-compensating by like, you know, rejecting these things that were like forced upon them...If you're radical and like your parents are like, you know, upper-middle-class, up-standing citizens...you don't want to tell your friends where you come from, or like have them come and meet your parents...it's embarrassing, you know, you have all this privilege and it's a lot to work through, and there's a few people in the collective that like are very conflicted about it.*

Movement cultures can be more or less distinct from mainstream culture (Lofland 1995), and for at least the last half-century of US movement history, more distinct countercultures have correlated with higher education levels and more elite class backgrounds. Writing about the US anti-globalization movement, Starr describes this "bourgeois bohemian" (Brooks 2001) tendency as a racial dynamic:

*A common aspect of white countercultures is the tradition of individualistic self-creation in which one's family, church, and history are cast off in an exuberant personal embrace of a highly ideological, self-defined individualism which has no accountability to an inherited communal culture or history...In contrast with countercultural politicization, activists of color often become politicized through their families and immediate communities...Two countercultures common in*
activist circles are punk and hippie cultures… Both resist what they understand to be capitalist interpellations of the body, including grooming, fashion, acceptable body types, and behavior… While white subcultures may be alienating to many whites, they are actually experienced as exclusionary and painful by people of color. Expressive culture, even when countercultural, can be a manifestation of power. (Starr 2004: 145)

During the week of the 2008 Democratic National Convention, the thousands of African Americans who flooded the city to celebrate the first black major-party candidate may have shared a critique of the Bush administration with protestors, but as the black-clad anarchists with bandanas covering their faces marched through the streets, I repeatedly saw black bystanders shrink back from them, sometimes grabbing their children and pulling them into store doorways, perhaps from fear, perhaps simply from subcultural alienation.

Exclusion of people of color and working-class or poor people is certainly not the intention of VDM activists. But boundaries can be enacted without conscious knowledge or effort (Holt 1997; Lamont 1992, 2000). Class-privileged activists may sincerely want to dress and behave in the way that best builds bridges across class and race differences, yet may simultaneously enact and reinforce boundaries of taste that keep activists apart.

Erasure of class

I happened upon a wonderful source of evidence that my VDM and anti-consumerist PMC informants were not unusual in confusing their DIY lifestyles with shedding class privilege. Carlsson (2008) went to the annual Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert, popular among some VDM subcultures, and asked 24 mostly white people for their class identities and what the word ‘class’ meant to them, with fascinating results. Carlsson himself calls Burning Man a “Working-Class, Do-It-Yourself World’s Fair” (chapter 9), but in fact only a tiny number of his interviewees lacked a college
education or did working-class jobs in their regular lives. Most were either taking a break from professional-middle-class lives or had dropped out full-time and were voluntarily downwardly mobile.

By and large, these off-the-grid VDM dropouts believed that they were no longer part of the class system, now that they had no professional job and did little consumer spending. A few quotes illuminate this VDM view on class:

- A bicycling activist said, “When I hear the word ‘class’ I think we need to break that down... ['Working class' and 'middle class'] are just labels created by the corporate media” (202).
- A free software programmer said, “No one sees themselves as any class anymore. The whole class thing has sort of dropped out... I see myself as a knowledge worker” (203).
- “It seems like a really old-fashioned word, one that’s gone out of style” (175).
- “I don’t get the class thing.... part of it is about self-imposed limitations, and that’s really tragic” (222).

Carlsson himself by and large accepts the Burning Man participants’ premise that their unpaid, unalienated work takes them out of the class system. In fact, volunteer work has long been associated with college-educated elites, and especially with owning-class women (Ostrander 1984). Carlsson sees voluntarily downwardly mobile people as the vanguard of a new utopian economy, believing that their repudiation of class contributes to social transformation towards a “new politics of work” and a “classless society” (3).

Choosing exodus from much of the work and trappings of ‘middle-class success’... biofuels activists find themselves wealthy with free time and use it to do unpaid work. Curiously, this biofuel ‘techno-rebellion’ has erupted from people who resist class as a useful category... Biofuel tinkerers and activists are producing new kinds of work, and most importantly, new kinds of work-based relationships... that reject the limited choices imposed by contemporary capitalism (175).

If Bourdieu were alive today, he would no doubt describe those Burning Man participants as a classic case of misrecognition, as self-deluded as the French intellectuals
whose high-cultural-capital, low-financial-capital class position was given a gloss of selflessness that obscured their competition for academic honors (Bourdieu 1983, 1984).  

Some of my downwardly mobile informants, as political activists, were less completely oblivious of class than Carlsson’s. Young VDM Jason answered the question about social class in his anarchist group in this savvy way: “Definitely middle or upper. It’s hard to tell with hippies—either way they wear ratty clothes. But socioeconomic class seems high.” But more VDM interviewees seemed to share the same misrecognition as the Burning Man participants, as Meadow did:

> We grow our own food, I live with bunch of people with no car, we ride bikes… I still work 4 hours a week for money. I can envision a world where we’re not paying bills. I’ve experienced real life free of the corporate empire. I gave up my middle-class status.

Culturally, Meadow talked, acted and ran her group in ways consistent with her high upper-middle-class background. Her rejection of money not only didn’t remove her from “middle-class status,” but was, in fact, a choice most commonly made by those from very privileged backgrounds.

When activists guiltily or obliviously deny the kinds of cultural capital that cannot be shed by abandoning a consumerist lifestyle, that denial has harmful effects on movement building. Activists in the majority-VDM anarchist groups were the most discontent with their groups of any movement tradition, and some of their self-critiques can be traced back to mainstream PMC class-culture traits: individualism (Fiske and Markus 2012; Jensen 2012); greater focus on ideology and less on expanding one-to-one relationships of trust; resistance to the follower role; and the lower-professional trait of excessive verbal restraint and conflict-avoidance (Lamont 2000:36; Schmidt 2000:...
Their childhood class conditions formed enduring predispositions that didn’t disappear when their ideologies and lifestyles changed. Nor did their class predispositions evaporate when they claimed that they were no longer middle-class, or that class didn’t exist. Like the shadow side of a personality, what was denied came back to haunt them.

The VDM-majority anarchist groups had among the lowest rates of working-class members, talked about class and race the least of any movement tradition, and (with one exception) seemed to have the fewest alliances with unions or grassroots community-needs groups. Misrecognition of the class basis of high-cultural-capital tastes may contribute to some VDM activists’ weak ability to draw on working-class cultures or to build cross-class alliances.

It seems to me that a dose of realism about class would be a healthy antidote for many social movement groups’ problems. Acknowledging that a very high percentage of activists, even in grassroots community-needs groups, come from PMC backgrounds would enable more realistic planning for how to recruit actual lifelong-working-class and poor people. Developing shared vocabulary about class identities and class differences could dispel confusion and pretense. The ugliness of using privilege as a put-down and doing crude imitations of oppressed people might recede after some honest conversations about members’ experiences with the class system. On the overall progressive agenda, today’s low levels of class consciousness deserve a place in the spotlight.
**Class Speech Differences V: Talking longer, talking often**

Most groups had a distinct style of how much people typically talked in meetings, which varied by the group’s predominant class. Members of mostly professional middle-class groups used more words but talked less often; members of mostly working-class and lower-middle-class groups talked more briefly but more often.

A conversation analysis principle is that “turn size is not fixed, but varies” (Sacks 1992 [1974]); in other words, there’s no typical number of words people speak at a stretch. But even though all groups had some almost silent and some talkative people, participants’ typical wordiness corresponded with the group’s predominant class. When three mostly working-class meetings are compared with three mostly professional-middle-class (PMC) meetings, the median lengths of members’ longest speaking turn are strikingly different: 36 to 65 words in the working-class groups, and 151 to 364 words in the PMC groups. Race differences don’t seem to account for this difference, as the median lengths for each class are about the same regardless of racial composition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Racial composition</th>
<th>Predominant class</th>
<th>Median # words in longest turn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City Power</td>
<td>Half black, half white</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local 21 Organizing Committee</td>
<td>Mostly black</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care Subcommittee of Neighbors United</td>
<td>Majority white, some Latinos &amp; other people of color</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce Development Task Force</td>
<td>Half black, half white</td>
<td>PMC</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The People's Convention</td>
<td>All white</td>
<td>PMC</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easthaver Demands Justice</td>
<td>Majority white, several black</td>
<td>PMC</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excluding those in chair, staff or presenter roles*

In terms of how many speech turns there were in the meetings as a whole, there was also a class pattern: in the three medium-sized working-class groups, the total
number of speaking turns per hour was very high, much higher than two of the three PMC groups. (See Table V.2.) Whiter groups also seem to have a lower number of speaking turns per hour. In working-class-majority community-needs groups in particular, production of joint utterances by several simultaneous and overlapping speakers (Sacks 1992 [1972]: 57-59) were common, resulting in a great number of brief speaking turns.

Table V.2 Speaking turns per hour, individual median and whole group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Racial composition</th>
<th>Predominant Class</th>
<th>Group's total speaking turns per hour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City Power</td>
<td>Half black, half white</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local 21 Organizing Committee</td>
<td>Mostly black</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care Subcommittee of Neighbors United</td>
<td>Majority white, some Latinos &amp; other people of color</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce Improvement Task Force of Citywide Interfaith Coalition</td>
<td>Half black, half white</td>
<td>PMC</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The People's Convention</td>
<td>All white</td>
<td>PMC</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easthaver Demands Justice</td>
<td>Majority white, several black</td>
<td>PMC</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Class differences in individuals talking long or frequently

This pattern in group norms was mirrored in individual speaking behavior: professional-middle-class (PMC) and other more-privileged people spoke longer but less frequently at meetings; working-class, poor and lower-middle-class people spoke more briefly but more often.

The median number of speaking turns per hour is almost twice as high for lifelong working-class meeting participants as for lifelong-PMC participants.89 (See Table V.3.) Given that quite a number of working-class or poor meeting participants, in particular people newer to activism, were almost or entirely silent, and that those quiet people pull the median down, the median of 13 turns at speaking is surprisingly high. Those working-
class people who did participate verbally tended to speak more frequently than more-privileged people.\textsuperscript{90}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Median speaking turns per hour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working-class or poor</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower middle-class</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional middle-class or upper-middle-class</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of subset of meeting participants for whom exact turn counts were possible, excluding chairs, staff, presenters. Excluding very large or very small meetings.

There was little difference in frequency of meeting speech between lower-middle-class meeting participants and those who are working-class or poor, even though these categories encompassed a very wide range of class life experiences, from those stuck in deep poverty to homeowners working in well-paid skilled trades. This suggests that the key factor in less frequent speech may be the experience of academic higher education, which may train people to restrain themselves and wait their turn.

The class pattern for brevity or length of speech is the opposite of the frequency pattern. Class-privileged people tended to speak longer at a stretch, taking “\textit{multi-unit turns},” meaning speech that continues past the first possible moment of completion (Liddicoat 1007: 286). For lifelong PMC or upper-middle-class meeting participants, the median length of their longest speaking turn was 139 words, compared with 51 for lifelong poor, working-class or lower-middle-class participants, who tend to stop or be interrupted sooner.

In wordiness, lifelong lower-middle-class people were more similar to PMC people; in the frequency analysis above, they were more similar to working-class people.
Thus length of holding the floor rises with class privilege even when four-year academic college isn’t part of activists’ life experience.

Table V.4 Median length of longest speaking turn by participants lifelong in one class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Median # words in longest turn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working-class or poor</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-middle class</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional-middle or upper-middle</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of subset of meeting participants for whom exact word counts were possible, excluding chairs, staff, presenters. Excluding very large or very small meetings.

Thirty-five percent of lifelong PMC people, but only 17% of lifelong working-class, used more than 174 words (triple the overall median word count of 58 words) in their longest speaking turn.92

There wasn’t a strong race pattern in who talked especially long at a stretch, but men were more likely to use a lot of words than women, and older people talked longer than younger people.93

Was talking long a function of enfranchisement in the group? This is born out by looking at the four most extreme long-talkers, those using 540 or more words in their longest speaking turn (ten times the median length): all were founders or long-time core members of their groups. However, 15 of the 24 longest-talkers were not founders, officers, or otherwise identifiably leaders, but rank and file members.

Confirmation of the class-background difference in length of speech, independent of role in group, can be seen by looking at how many words the chairs of meetings used. Two lifelong working-class people in chair roles used 72 and 155 words in their longest speaking turn, while the two chairs from the highest upper-middle-class backgrounds
used 342 and 352 words. Class background is associated with wordiness for people at all levels of involvement in the group.

Table V.5: Who talks long? Number & percent speaking longer than three times median in longest turn, by class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting participants</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% with over 174 words in longest turn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional background</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working-class background</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Subset – Lifelong in one class:*

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong in PMC range</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong in working-class range</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excluding those in chair, staff or presenter roles*

In interviews as well, PMC people gave longer answers. An archetypal example is how African American labor organizer Owen, raised by college-educated homeowner parents, answered the question, “What did you like about that meeting, and what did you dislike?” (a question which, needless to say, most interviewees answered by mentioning things that happened at the meeting). When I first heard him make the long, long statement excerpted below, I felt I had witnessed a small work of art:

*The true value lies from the bottom up, not the top down, you know, and an agenda should be worker-centric as opposed to organizer-centric. Everything has to come out of the context of the struggle that you, that people find themselves in, like Paulo Freire says, Pedagogy of the Oppressed…. Jesus sayeth in order to follow him we have to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily. Now I'm one who has had to bear the cross, I grew up in certain neighborhoods, so you know, so I understand what that's about… It's important to me that if I organize that I be in the community that I organize; and this goes back to the tradition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who talked about the cost of the discipleship; he lived in Harlem, you know; it goes back to Langston Hughes, you know, even though he grew up middle-class, he still lived in Harlem; goes back to Miles Davis, even though he was from Juilliard Music School and his father was a dentist, he went down into Harlem to work with Charlie Parker and to learn from him. Unfortunately he had*
to experience a heroin addiction and all those other things — but if you're going to be true to your art, if you want to be true to your social justice, then it's important that you are engaged with those people that you say that you represent. That's the fallacy and the travesty of communism and socialism is that, for the most part, as it was advocated in Eastern Europe, most of the people who spoke on behalf of the proletariat were not proletariat themselves. Most of them were a part of the bourgeoisie, [not] of the working class, and that made it very hard for them to relate... you have to be organically related to the people that you represent.

While Owen’s answer is exceptional in its number of intellectual references and its elaborate cogency, and while it no doubt drew on the eloquent African American rhetorical tradition in particular, it exemplified not only the PMC tendency to wordiness, but also the verbal facility, use of intellectual sources, distance from other group members, and focus on well-developed political beliefs common among many PMC interviewees.

When was talking a lot seen as a problem, and when did it pass without complaint? The next chapter shifts the spotlight from simply describing varied class speech norms to an analysis of everyone’s pet peeve, overtalking.
Chapter 9 - 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. Next I explore class differences in how activists responded to problematic behavior, first analyzing the most common of all annoyances, overtalking, in this chapter; then in Chapter 10 looking at extreme violations of group norms. The difference between the two analyses reveals a lot about the relative influence of class cultural dispositions, movement traditions, and newly innovated group coping mechanisms.

Almost every activist disliked it when others talked too much in meetings. When 55 interviewees from 20 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, 41 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, 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, working-class versus 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 men, and soft-spoken lower professionals, pop out. It turns out to matter whether activists were class-congruous or -incongruous in their groups. Some of these class culture patterns persist in the analysis of extreme behavior violations, but
others don’t, giving us a window into how class predispositions sometimes break down under stress.

**Who was seen as an overtalker, and who wasn’t?**

Not all talkativeness violated group norms. Eleven active members, diverse in race, class and gender, may have been overtalkers by objective measures, speaking an average of four times their share of the meeting’s total speech turns, but they got no negative reactions from other members, either during the meeting or in interviews. In fact interviewees praised some of them. They stand out for their long tenure with their groups; 8 of the 11 were founders; two were paid staff of their mostly volunteer groups.

These 11 frequent-talking leaders provided information on most agenda items, usually staying on topic. Other members often addressed questions to them, and turned to face them when a question or problem came up. Many less-active people seemed to be motivated to come to meetings mostly in order to hear stories and information from those closer to the heart of the action, so these leaders’ frequent speech was welcome. It appears that in many groups, talking frequently was expected from those with long-term core involvement, and frequent tuned-in, on-topic speech was appreciated as contributing to the mission.

Two white leaders from working-class backgrounds sometimes drove me crazy as I observed their meetings, but didn’t seem to bother other current members. Tye, a founder of Stand Up Fight Back (SUFB), had a bombastic style and spoke *seven* times his share, setting the study-wide record among non-chairs; I heard many criticisms of Tye’s overtalking from former members who had quit the group to found The People’s Convention, but not from those who remained in SUFB. Elaine, the powerhouse founder
of Women Safe from Violence, interrupted almost every time any other member spoke, finishing their sentences — even while individuals told their own personal violence stories, which seemed appalling to me. But no current members seemed to share my negative reactions. In fact, all interviewees in both groups expressed passionate loyalty to these two founders.

Just as with the 11 respected frequent-talking leaders, especially beloved group members also seemed to earn the right to talk longer than the group norm. A long-time member of Easthaver Demands Justice, Mia, took six minutes for a personal check-in, during an introductory go-around in which most others spoke for one minute or less; yet no interviewees who later complained about member misbehavior mentioned her as an overtalker. In fact, three mentioned her as a skilled mediator who had played key roles in resolving conflicts.

Criticism of overtalkers was targeted at a very different profile of meeting participants. While most interviewees declined to name names, thirteen overtalkers were criticized by name: for eleven of them, their speech behavior is also documented in meeting transcripts. Seven of the 11 resented and documented overtalkers held no formal leadership role and were not described as leaders by any other group members. These eleven resented overtalkers were somewhat varied in gender, race and age, though they were disproportionately white and male.

My acquaintances who heard I was writing about overtalkers presumed the offenders would fit a certain profile: an older, white, highly educated, professional man. But in fact only one of the eleven resented overtalkers fit that profile, Rufus from Labor and Community United. So many people I know seem to have met such an obnoxious
over-privileged guy that it may be I simply have lucked out in avoiding more than one of them in this sample; or else that profile is a stereotype, and overtalkers are actually more diverse than expected.

The eleven resented overtalkers spoke a mean of 2.66 times their equal share, making them much less talkative than the frequent-speaking leaders described above. Clearly something besides sheer volume of speech causes group members to see someone as a problematic overtalker. They were far more likely to be off topic or in other ways out of sync with the majority of the group. They seem to have been resented for their unawareness of what kind of talk others in the group valued. Each group had its own style of interaction, and the resented overtalkers were people who talked more than others while also breaching the group style (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; van Dijk 2008: 146).

Is overtalking a class dynamic, or just a matter of personalities clashing with group styles? Strikingly, nine of the eleven resented overtalkers were class-incongruous, distinctly different than the class mode of their group, whether higher, lower or with a mobility trajectory moving in the opposite direction.96

Another class pattern was that the median class level of the resented overtalkers was far lower than the median class composition of the meeting participants as a whole. Sometimes an overtalker fit in with the group demographic in every way except for a class difference. For example, Hilda, a middle-aged working-class Latina, was named by multiple interviewees in her majority-professional, majority-Latina affordable housing group as a person who drove them crazy. She shared a town, a type of occupation and a
national heritage with most of the group, but had less class privilege and talked twice her share.

Similarly, Doris, an older white woman from a working-class background, was in the class minority in the majority-PMC group Easthaver Demands Justice, though she matched the group in its majority gender, race and generation. While some working-class women, African Americans and others tend to say supportive “back-channel” minimal responses such as ‘UH-huh’ and ‘yeah’ while others speak (Mesthrie et al. 2000: 198; Gardner 2001), these unobtrusive responses were never criticized as overtalking. But Doris had an exaggerated version of this speech-practice in which she frequently exclaimed or asked clarifying questions while others spoke, in a full-voiced way too intrusive to be called back-channel. Doris’s speech style might have fit in at a community-needs meeting of working-class women, where multiple members frequently created joint productions by overlapping speech (Sacks 1992 [1968]), but in this group she was seen as disruptive. Not just the chair but also two other members intervened repeatedly to try to curb her overtalking.

It is notable that in three of the five conflict stories viewed through a class lens in Chapter 1, the lighting-rod person was a class-incongruous overtalker. First, in the Action Center (AC), the ad hoc convention-protest group, in which several members didn’t realize that Dirk was virtually their only lifelong-working-class active member, the recent efforts to curb Dirk’s dominating behavior had been focused in part on his aggressive overtalking. Dirk’s number of speaking turns was more than four times his equal share of airspace.
Second, during the conflict at the Workforce Improvement Task Force meeting, Jeremiah was resented not only for scolding the group and trying to thwart their plans, but also for overtalking. A straddler from a low-income black family in a mostly PMC and upper-middle-class group, Jeremiah was class-incongruous in the meeting where he spoke both very frequently and very long.

Third, the white man who raised the upsetting criticism in the Women Safe from Violence meeting, Randall, was a habitual overtalker. The context of the quarrel about evaluating a public presentation was that Randall had already gotten on everyone’s last nerve by overtalking earlier in the meeting. His verbal patterns were reminiscent of Asperger’s Syndrome: he had exhaustive knowledge of one topic that he interjected over and over, despite its limited relevance to the discussion. Before the meeting, he saw my recorder and literally backed me into a corner as he rapidly told me many facts from his life story, seemingly oblivious to my attempts to escape. Despite having highly educated professional parents, Randall worked as a driver, an occupation with no regular coworkers to resent his aggressive overtalking. His critique of the public presentation might have been received better if it had come from a better listener, someone more tuned in to the group’s conversation.

Randall was not the only involuntarily downwardly mobile (IDM) person from a professional family to be heard overtalking in a mostly working-class community group. In Safety Net for All, there seemed to be a collective effort by the class-diverse members to cut off frequent overtalker Angelica, a white woman from a very high upper-middle-class background, who kept a stream-of-consciousness monologue going throughout the meeting. Both Randall and Angelica were IDM activists in groups dedicated to
empowering low-income people. Perhaps the same personality problems that led these two to their extreme off-topic overtalking also contributed to alienation from the PMC social and professional networks into which their privileged background might otherwise have led them.

A picture emerges of uprooted individuals joining a voluntary group unconnected with their own neighborhood, workplace or social identity group. Some class-incongruous resented overtalkers may also fit Jasper’s (1997) definition of a crank: a stubborn personality who persists in activism even when lacking supportive activist community or a promising political climate. Dirk, Randall, and Angelica may have sought out new social circles after interpersonal problems in their former class-background networks.

But unlike the activists who offended others by more extreme breaches of basic norms, to be profiled in Chapter 10, virtually all of whom were unrooted, some class-incongruous resented overtalkers, such as Doris and Hilda, were actually deeply rooted in their communities and matched the predominant race and class of the neighborhood, if not of the group. Frequent interrupter Doug, a young white lifelong-professional resented overtalker, was also very enfranchised in his community group. Overtalking is a lesser offense that neither requires nor causes exit from root communities. Thus it is not being an uprooted transplant generally, but specifically being class-incongruous within a group that is associated with being resented as an overtalker.

**Class patterns in reactions to overtalkers**

When someone violated group norms against overtalking in a meeting, reactions varied strongly by class. Most working-class interviewees unambivalently wanted
stronger chairing to keep people on topic. Their praise for chairs tended to stress firmness in cutting off overtalkers. For example, Alonzo from the Local 21 Organizing Committee said, (using the word “teacher” to mean facilitator, as some other working-class interviewees, mostly older African Americans, also did):

There’s nothing more aggravating to me than a meeting that’s supposed to go one or two hours that runs for three hours…. Teachers have the skill to move the conversation on, saying something like ‘I want to make sure we get to everything’.

Similarly, Olivia complained:

There’s someone in the Parecon Collective who likes to facilitate but is really, really bad at it… they just forget there’s a facilitator, or like they don’t listen to the conversation, and like they’re the ones who are [side-chatting by] making [social] plans with their friends.

But some working-class non-leaders, especially but not only women of color, sounded disempowered and hopeless about this topic, as if disruptive overtalkers were an unfixable problem. Much as they wished for less overtalking, they didn’t sound confident that anything would work to curb it. Some spoke about the chair/facilitator role in the third person, not imagining themselves in that role. Even when asked directly, “If you were in charge of leading the next meeting, what would you change to make it go better?,” some of these working-class non-leaders had a hopeless tone about effectively implementing their own process ideas. Myra, a middle-aged working-class Latina immigrant in the Brontown Affordable Housing Consortium, answered that question by saying,

One person would speak a lot more than others, and they would take a lot of the time. I don’t know how <pause>… sometimes it could be a little bit rude, if you’re trying to interrupt somebody when they’re trying to express themselves… It’s hard sometimes to do, people get offended, ‘geez, let me finish’. 
Many PMC people, by contrast, put themselves into the chair role in their answers even without being asked to, suggesting things they had done or would do to limit overtalkers.

But their relatively higher sense of empowerment didn’t mean they acted decisively. In fact, many of them squelched their own annoyance and let overtalkers keep talking. A strikingly high number of lower-professional, medium- and lower-PMC, and voluntarily downwardly mobile interviewees, mostly but not all white, expressed ambivalence in their attitudes towards overtalkers, revealing inner tension between wanting everyone to be able to express themselves but also wanting to keep the meeting on track.

No poor, working-class or lower-middle-class interviewees expressed any such self-criticism, nor described straining to be even-handed; some went back and forth about whether it was possible to restrain overtalkers, but not about whether it was desirable.

A seesaw pattern characterized these professional-background interviewees’ thoughts on dealing with overtalkers: on the one side this, on the other side that. The word “*but*” and silent pauses interrupted many of their statements, revealing a mid-stream shift in opinion. Listen to how Rupert, a white young man from an upper-middle-class background, switched courses midstream as he described his pet peeve in the Parecon Collective this way:

> Chronically getting off topic and chronically focusing on minutia… and that's why I think it's important to have a good facilitator or for people to have good facilitating skills… *But <pause>*— I think it's more important that [everyone] get practice facilitating than to make sure everything runs smoothly as I'd like it to. *But I certainly do appreciate a good facilitator, you know, ‘this has nothing to do with what we're supposedly talking about’.*
Note that something about pulling members back onto topic went unsaid during the pause after the first “but.” Bernstein (1971) quantitatively analyzed hesitations and pauses in the speech of working-class and middle-class British teen boys; he concluded that middle-class speech is more hesitant because it involves planning what to say while speaking.

Some middle-class interviewees felt irritation and frustration at overtalking, but also said that they shouldn’t feel those negative emotions; they seemed to be holding back their reactions, sometimes tying themselves in knots. Two said their ideal selves wouldn’t be annoyed by anyone. When asked “Does anybody in the group drive you crazy?,” a white professional in the Brontown Affordable Housing Consortium, Charlotte, said, “I’m a therapist, nobody drives me crazy.”

First lower-professional (LP) and PMC interviewees would express their desire for meeting participants to talk less, then they would pull themselves back and state their support for everyone expressing themselves. Some interviewees openly described their inner resistance to their wish that meetings could be tighter, and how they reoriented themselves to the belief that it’s more democratic to hold back from intervening.

Complaints about particular overtalkers by lower professionals often also contained praise for the same individuals, sometimes seesawing back and forth. For example, a white lower professional said of a working-class white man in City Power,

*Sometimes Bastian would start saying things, and it would seem to me like it was totally off topic, which is … a pet peeve of mine when people start filibustering … but I learned pretty quickly that he's a pretty insightful guy... And so now it’s kind of more like if I find myself getting annoyed, like ‘Oh, here we go’, I think, ‘Wait, I have no idea where this is going to end up’.***
Self-conscious ambivalence and self-questioning appears to characterize PMC activists, in particular white lower-professionals (LP). This LP class disposition will also play a central role in responses to extreme behavior violations, discussed in the next chapter.

**Class patterns in how chairs dealt with overtalkers**

When the group went off topic or someone was overtalking, the most common intervention by chairs of all classes, races and genders was simply to restate the agenda item the group was supposed to be talking about. But when the chair or another leader intervened in some additional way besides just restating the topic, class and race patterns showed up.

The most direct confrontations of overtalkers were by middle-aged white working-class women founders. These formidable women sometimes snapped at whites of their own class level or higher, at times using the imperative verb form to issue commands. They were not observed ‘shh’ing or scolding people who were less privileged than themselves, such as people of color or currently poor people. At a Women Safe From Violence meeting, when lower-middle-class white newcomer Ricki persisted in repeating her own awful story, the founder, Elaine, interrupted her, saying “hold on, hold on, hold on.” Another white working-class leader of that group barked “Focus!” at overtalker Randall; by contrast, Adaline, a white woman from a PMC background, made a more indirect comment to steer Randall back to the meeting topic, “That’s a whole other deal.”

Other blunt interventions by working-class white women leaders used the second person ‘you’ to stop overtalkers, as well as the imperative. Toni from Safety Net for All
interrupted overtalker Angelica’s wordy reveries on her lunch choices by snapping, “You don’t need to tell us what you're ordering...just pass the menu around.” City Power founder Dorothea said to an overtalker, “You just interrupted the last three people.”

At the other end of the class spectrum, blunt interventions to stop overtalkers were also heard. For example, Blake, the Ivy-League-educated white facilitator of an Easthaver Demands Justice meeting, snapped, “Hey! SHHH! Folks!” Thus the most forceful, directive intervention to stop overtalking was done by white people at the two ends of the class spectrum.

People of color tended to intervene with politer language than whites, though still assertively in the case of those at a higher class level. This race contrast can be seen in two reactions to Doris, the white very frequent talker from a working-class background in Easthaver Demands Justice. When white PMC Blake was facilitating, he became increasingly annoyed at Doris as the meeting wore on. When she started another digression, he twice barked, “Doris! Doris! Doris!” But another of the most class-privileged group members, Mia, a South Asian professional from an elite background, handled Doris’s overtalking differently. She moved to sit next to her and whispered answers to her many informational questions, keeping up a steady but quiet side conversation with her. Once when Blake cut her off, she suggested gently, “You could raise your hand and you will be called on.” Doris immediately raised her hand for the first time during the meeting.

Working-class African Americans usually used courtesy words or laughter to soften their interventions, which were mostly in the second person. During the heated conflict between Jeremiah and members of the Workforce Improvement Task Force, the
black lower-middle-class chair, Brandon, called two combatants’ names and then said,
“Please hold for one second.” At a Safety Net for All meeting, when overtalker
Angelica began to read aloud a long letter she had written, a lower-middle-class black
woman, Lidia, used a lighter joking tone, different from Toni’s sharp lunch menu
intervention quoted above, laughing as she said, “You don’t have to read every word!”

All these direct communications stand in stark contrast with the indirectness of all
lifelong-lower-professional chairs, as well as some other white and/or female PMC-
background chairs. Listening to some of them, it would be impossible to tell whose
speech they were attempting to curb, as they rarely used names. For example, when one
Easthaver Demands Justice meeting went off topic, an older white PMC woman, Nancy,
made these two tentative statements into the air: “Probably we do need to get going”;
and later, with an upward inflection, “I don’t know if we want to stick to our schedule?”

Professional-range chairs tended to use third person to refer to people in the room.
The UMC leader of the Health Care Subcommittee, Fred, said, “Let's go around and
people can put the ideas out.” Also note UMC Blake’s third person “Folks!,” quoted
above. When a Parecon Collective meeting went into an extended side-conversation,
Rupert murmured ineffectively, “Shift coverage! Who wants to talk about shift
coverage?” Using third person words such “folks,” “people” or “everybody” for people
in the room seems to reveal a greater social distance than the working-class second
person (Mesthrie et al. 2000: 503). It may also be that indirect speech is one way that
PMC activists attempt to avoid domination and communicate respect.

For lower-professionals and some other white PMC-background activists, there
appeared to be a long, convoluted pathway from thought to speech. They took more
words to say their thoughts, contradicted themselves more, and spoke more distantly to and about others in the room.

The significance of finding class patterns in reactions to overtalking

Most conversation analysis looks only at how people speak, not how they react to others’ speech; it doesn’t investigate whether interlocutors believe that other speakers are behaving well or badly, following or breaking norms and expectations (Sacks 1992; Goodwin 1981; Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008; Liddicoat 2007; Goffman 1981). Even studies of status and power differences manifested in interaction tend to rely on observed behavior, without including participants’ evaluations (Labov 1966; Lakoff 1975; Tannen 1996; Kochman 1981; Brown 1980; Macaulay 2005). The analysis above incorporates both what happened in group discussions and what participants said about it afterwards.

Speech practices and norms can rarely be correlated with huge demographic categories because the contexts of speech vary so widely (van Dijk 2008: chapter 4). Intersecting race and gender differences could reasonably be expected to wipe out any class correlations. The class patterns in overtalking and especially in reactions to it were found to cut across other identities, which strengthens my overall conclusion that distinct, cross-cutting class culture differences do exist.

Do the fundamentally classed ways of approaching life and activism revealed by analyzing overtalking also show up when activists react to more dramatically problematic acts? Chapter 10 finds some of the same class patterns, but shows a more complicated interaction between movement traditions, class cultures and newly improvised ways of coping with unexpectedly upsetting situations.
Class Speech Differences VI: Anger, swearing and insults

Within every class category, a subset of activists expressed anger, swore and used hostile language. But class differences showed up in different ways of expressing anger and antagonism.

PMC activists were much more likely to talk about being angry, using emotion words such as “pissed off” and “angry.” Lifelong working-class people usually expressed anger in other ways besides describing their emotions in words, such as with tone of voice, body language, loud volume, and swearing.

Besides the class difference in who raised their voice, there was a race difference too: everyone who yelled was white or African American; no Latinos, Asian Americans or Native Americans yelled.

One word in particular shows up frequently in white and Latino PMC quotes about conflictual situations: “frustrated” and its variations (said 1.6 times per 10,000 words in interviews). This may be an acceptably polite euphemism for being angry among people taught to value emotional restraint.

Table VI.1 Rates of interviewees’ anger words by two broad class categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>College-graduate rate per 10,000 words</th>
<th>Working-class rate per 10,000 words</th>
<th>Ratio of college: WC rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pissed off</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hate</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Rates include all variations of words, such as anger, pisses me off, hated.*

Another clue that the word “frustrated” was a sign of attempted emotional restraint was that it was sometimes used during PMC criticisms of others’ unproductive emotional venting:
Deborah (white lower-professional): She's a person who's been massively frustrated for about four years about the resistance to anti-racism stuff and dealing with white privilege... She's...[been] beating on people and expressed a lot of frustration with people... I've been talking to her about... that we have to find a more productive way to deal, to communicate with the group about this stuff...

Swear words

A subset of interviewees in every class swore, but which swear words they used varied by class (see Table VI:2). Working-class activists were more likely to say “shit,” “bullshit,” and “hell,” usually in the phrase “what the hell.” Lifelong PMC activists were more likely to say “fuck(ing)”; working-class people rarely said the f-word and never said “screwed.” I can’t explain why scatological terms would be more common among working class activists and sexual terms more common among professional middle class activists. It’s possible that among respectable working-class people, “fuck” is the single most proscribed word, never to be said in a public setting.

Class-mobile activists swore more than those lifelong in one class, either in the professional or working-class range. Straddlers — mostly the uprooted, unassimilated subset of straddlers — combined the high rate of saying “fuck” of their current PMC class status with an even higher rate of saying “shit” and “bullshit” than those with whom they shared their working-class background. Adding in less common words such as “ass(hole)” and “goddamn,” straddlers have a very high total rate of swearing, 3.23 per 10,000 words. As the next chapter will show, this speech pattern is consistent with more combative behavior overall by uprooted, unassimilated straddlers.

Swear words were the most obvious difference between the speech styles of the respectable and outlaw working-class activists. The working-class outlaws tended to pepper their routine speech with swear words that the respectable working-class activists
tended to avoid. For example, a one-hour interview with Brandy included these eight sentences:

"It was like a greater force that made this damn thing come here... you can't have poor people who have been taught that they are a piece of shit thinking that they can lead unless you first deal with that shame... hell no ... that's all a bunch of crap .... they don't give a shit... the hell with this... A lot of people don't give a shit that you're poor."

Table V.2 Rates of using swear words, by class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PMC rate per 10,000 words</th>
<th>Working-class rate per 10,000 words</th>
<th>Straddler rate per 10,000 words</th>
<th>Ratio of working-class to PMC rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shit or bullshit</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>3.87:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hell</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>3.10:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuck(ing)</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.19:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All swear words</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1.35:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Working-class outlaws’ blunt speech adds confirming evidence to Lamont’s finding that working-class American men prized directness, the courage to face open conflict and to risk giving offense, as a very high value (Lamont 2000: 36-37).

But despite their casual use of swear words, even the toughest outlaw working-class activists showed some restraint in their language. They tended to avoid expressing hostility towards individuals, instead just sounding rough and tough, refusing to tame their speech to polite manners.

Halfway between the working-class outlaw frequent-swearers and the respectable non-swearers fell the most common degree of moderate respectability among working-class interviewees. Their standards allowed for an occasional restrained swear word, without strong disapproval of others’ swearing, within reason. Middle-aged, working-class Latina Cecilia explained this moderately respectable viewpoint in a story about a hip-hop recording by a local youth organization (note that she says “shit” herself,
evidently a less offensive word, as she describes her negative reaction to youth profanity):

_There was a CD… and I told my boyfriend, ‘get that shit out [of the CD player]’. Because I didn't feel that for youth to send out a message you need to use profanity...You can express yourself positively, without using negative words… You don't use the foul language…. These kids… can express themselves, without using profanity of course…. letting out all that anger._

**Classist intelligence slurs**

College-educated people, and especially lifelong PMC people, used insult words maligning someone’s intelligence more than twice as often per 10,000 words as lifelong-working-class people. (See Table VI.3.) The rate of saying the word “stupid” per 10,000 words was 6.8 times as high for the combined college-educated trajectories as for lifelong working-class interviewees. The word “idiot” was used by PMC activists but never by working-class activists. Only “dumb” showed no class difference. For all intelligence-based insults combined, the PMC/working-class ratio was more than two to one.

Table VI.3 Rates of using intelligence-based insults, by class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PMC rate per 10,000 words</th>
<th>Working-class rate per 10,000 words</th>
<th>Ratio of PMC to working-class rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idiot</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stupid</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td><strong>6.46:1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumb</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td><strong>.81:1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All intelligence-based insult words</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td><strong>2.33:1</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intelligence-based insults evoke resonances of institutionalized classism (Jensen 2012) and racism, in particular of tracking within public schools. Thus a classism alarm
should start ringing at this finding that insult words implying stupidity had a strong class association.
Chapter 10 - 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 (DNC), he spent all his daylight hours riding around Denver\(^{101}\) 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.

The “lie” that his signs referred to was a newspaper quote in which Tye said that three cops had emailed him a flyer about police intentions to harass SUFB. In fact, the flyer was political satire created by a local professor.\(^{102}\) Since Anthony knew the actual provenance of the flyer, he concluded that Tye’s assertion that three cops had emailed it to him must have been a deliberate lie to paint himself as a victim of police mistreatment.

Anthony’s logic was shaky; there was no hard evidence that Tye had lied. But the real question is why he cared enough to devote hundreds of hours to personally alerting Denver residents to the situation. 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 social movement 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, unassimilated 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 so militantly anti-police, with such certain expectations that they would be brutalized just for peacefully protesting (justified expectations, as it turned out), that I would have sworn they would never turn to the police to resolve a dispute. Their organizational t-shirt urged people not to snitch. But eyewitnesses corroborated that they called the police on Anthony. What people do under extreme provocation is sometimes different from their everyday behavior, and these unexpected reactions may give a unique glimpse into how flexible or rigid their class predispositions are.

As the date of the 2008 Democratic National Convention grew closer, protest planners were under more and more stress. It was Obama’s moment, not the anti-war movement’s moment. When I first met the protest planners six months before the convention, their weak support from funders, media, city officials, and potential recruits was already stressing them out. By the final weeks before the convention, organizers were tearing their hair out. As it turned out, the protests were spirited, but the biggest only drew a few thousand people, and some events had tiny turnouts, which is always hard on organizers’ morale.

But most Denver interviewees were far more upset about the behavior of other activists than about the wider political environment or low turnout. They had expected activists to treat each other honorably. In their interviews, they tried to convince me of
how outrageous the breaches by other groups and individuals had been, patrolling moral boundaries (Lamont 1992: 3, 9-11) and articulating the limits of what was acceptable and what was intolerable.

This DNC-protest situation was a perfect opportunity to see how activists, many thrown together as strangers, at an unsettled time (Swidler 1986), reacted under extreme pressure – and to test ideas about how and when group expectations are formed. My overall premise that movement traditions and class predispositions interact in influencing activists’ attitudes and behavior has been generally confirmed by the evidence in the last five chapters, but it has been hard to pin down how they interact, or to figure out which tends to prevail when group norms and class habits conflict.

Clearly, in all social contexts, behavior stems from both preexisting individual habits and from interactions that reaffirm or change the field’s behavior conventions. But how people combine their individual predispositions with the co-creation of situational expectations in a social context is a difficult, much-studied question (Garfinkel 1967; Collins and Makowsky 1972:102-115; Heritage 1984; Bourdieu 1984: Part 2; Bourdieu 1991; van Dijk 2008: 47, 56). Because ad hoc coalitions begin without a group style (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), the interplay of movement traditions and members’ class and other cultural predispositions can be more plainly seen as strangers work out their ways of operating together.

Activists faced with extreme behavior violations sometimes drew on their pre-existing conflict-resolution repertoires, rooted in their class predispositions and/or rooted in their movement traditions; but at other times they reacted to emotionally upsetting
situations in out-of-character ways, improvising new responses to offensive breaches within or among their groups.

**Intolerable violations of behavior norms**

As the rivalry between DNC protest coalitions degenerated into open enmity, activists made many accusations of bad behavior. The content of DNC groups’ conflicts was familiar to me – disagreements over ideology, tactics and nonviolence – but the degree of bad behavior topped anything I had ever seen in 30 years of movement involvement.

Recall the example of privilege-as-putdown in which Tye called The People’s Convention a “**white, middle-class group**” and in retaliation, Nanette of The People’s Convention (TPC) posted the price of Tye’s house online; then Tye called Nanette an “**ignorant fool**.” This was the most discussed incident by interviewees in both groups. Members of both groups had a strong negative reaction to the personal attack in Nanette’s post. Lissa, a PMC white woman from a peace group in TPC coalition, said, “**I was appalled, I was absolutely appalled.**” Some but not all thought that Tye had also misbehaved by publicly calling TPC a “**white, middle-class**” group. As noted in the “Privilege as Putdown” section, most Denver interviewees seemed to take it for granted that to point out someone’s dominant identity in public was a form of unfair attack. Bo, a PMC white member of the TPC, said “**That kind of race and class baiting should never be in any kind of organizing…We have members from all classes in our group.**”

DNC activists made dozens of other accusations of varied intolerable acts, including threats of violence, threats to sue, hate language and insult words, “**spying**” and “**stealing bands**” from other groups.103
While the DNC protest groups had the greatest number of alleged violations of activist norms, several other groups also had some incidents regarded as intolerable, including drunkenness, theft, hitting and yelling. In total, I heard approximately 30 individuals accused of intolerably bad behavior, 12 of them DNC protestors.

Below I look at who did and didn’t perpetrate these low blows, by life circumstances, by class and by movement tradition; at how activists of different classes explained such intolerable behavior; at differences in group conflict norms; and at how activists responded when someone breached a basic behavior norm. Then, by going into more detail about the worst conflict in the study, the SUFB/TPC clash, I try to extract evidence for the relative weight of movement traditions and class predispositions in influencing activist behavior.

Who crossed the line and who didn’t?

There was no class pattern in which activists perpetrated which kind of problematic behavior. I had hypothesized that perhaps threatening to sue would be a PMC act, but found two examples where working-class activists threatened to sue an activist. I wondered (perhaps falling into a classist stereotype) whether alcohol or drug violations would happen more commonly in low-income groups, but found at least one story of public intoxication in each class trajectory. Extreme offenders were atypical of every class and, as with overtalkers, were sometimes class-incongruous in their groups.

Nor were there any race, gender or age patterns in who was accused of behaving badly.

Each class trajectory category contained at least one offender. However, 5 of the 12 DNC protestors accused of intolerable acts, a disproportionate plurality, were
unassimilated straddlers, the first in their family to graduate from a 4-year college, but not then going on to a professional job — a class pattern, but not an overwhelming one.

Looking at who didn’t behave outrageously helps explain the precondition for extreme breaches. There were entire categories of DNC protest activists who had zero incidents of hostile behavior towards other activists, despite some intense provocation: members of religious congregations; salaried employees of non-profits; union members; parents with kids in the local schools; people who grew up in Denver and whose parents and/or extended families still lived there. In short, rooted people of all classes didn’t take public hostile action during the DNC conflicts.

By contrast, the 12 DNC offenders’ greatest commonality was that they were exceptionally unrooted. All lived on the fringes of society in some way. Most had no employer; they were either unemployed or self-employed, for example as a non-union carpenter. Some were students many miles away from both their college towns and their hometowns. Two were voluntarily downwardly mobile and nomadic. None of these dozen offenders had dependents. Most rented; a few were just crashing in Denver to organize the protests; only two were homeowners. None practiced their parents’ religion. Most belonged only to an ad hoc protest group that would disband after the convention.

Who were such unrooted activists accountable to? If they behaved abominably under stress, whose displeasure did they have to face? No employer nor coworkers, nor neighbors, nor religious congregants, nor family members – none of the ties that bind more rooted activists.

The preconditions for intolerable breaches of activist behavior expectations lie in this lack of community interdependence. Lone cranks can join groups, act out, and
disappear; hot-tempered activists can crack under stress, do and say things that appall others, and face no consequences except for some criticism from acquaintances or, at worst, from friends.

Even though intolerable misbehavior happens in every class category, this lack of community accountability is a class issue, because unrootedness is a feature of PMC lives, and is intensified by VDM choices (Leondar-Wright 2005). Among my 362 survey respondents, the relationships between rootedness or unrootedness and all college-graduate trajectories were statistically significant. Working-class activists were the most likely to be very rooted; VDM activists were the most likely to be very unrooted.

Table 10.1 Percentages of each class trajectory very unrooted or very rooted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class trajectory</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Very unrooted</th>
<th>Very rooted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straddler</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional range</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntarily downwardly mobile</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages do not add up to 100% because moderately rooted people are omitted.

It is typical for PMC and straddler young adults to move far away from their families to go to college, often never returning to their hometowns. By contrast, working-class people are more likely to live near where they grew up. Immigrants are of course the exception, but like other working-class people, they are more likely to move with multiple family members, less often as lone individuals. As described in Chapter 3, in the last two generations, college-educated people have left their ancestral religions in droves, while the working-class population has shifted to being secular at a slower rate; thus working-class people disproportionately belong to religious congregations.

PMC and VDM activists are even more uprooted than PMC non-activists. Becoming an activist often means breaking family ties. And the way that global/local
cause groups form, with each individual motivated by a personal commitment to the cause (Lichterman 1996; Teske 1997), means weaker ties among members than in working-class groups. The setting most likely to breed hostile misbehavior towards other activists is a short-term group whose members joined one by one, as strangers.

When activist groups grow out of the shared life experience of a workplace, a neighborhood, or a particular hardship, they tend to have some members who are tied to each other long-term, including clusters of relatives; those ties make openly hostile behavior riskier. In some working-class-majority groups, when offensive behavior crossed the line into criminality (such as violence or theft), some perpetrators had to leave town afterwards; they had broken the trust of their neighbors or coworkers or family members too severely to remain part of the community.

Rootedness and unrootedness also vary by the four broad movement traditions, with labor outreach groups including the highest rate of very rooted people. (See Table 10.2). Not surprisingly, unrootedness strongly correlated with age. The most typical unrooted activist is a VDM member of an anarchist or militant group in his or her early 20s. The most typical rooted activist is a lifelong-working-class union member in his or her 60s.

Table 10.2: Rates of very unrooted and rooted activists in each movement tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members of what movement tradition</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Very unrooted</th>
<th>Very rooted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community needs groups</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor outreach groups</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff antipoverty advocacy groups</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global/local cause groups – all ideologies</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive global/local groups</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anarchist global/local groups</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages don’t add up to 100% because moderately rooted people are omitted.

Unrootedness is a double-edged sword. Having been uprooted is also what allows many activists to think and act so boldly and independently. People from PMC
backgrounds turn to progressive activism in greater numbers precisely because they are relatively free from dependence on conservative extended families and because they are less embedded in hometown community and religious traditions. Some unions, community-needs groups, and staff advocacy coalitions are relatively cautious in their demands and tactics because of their embeddedness in community ties. Radical analysis and action more commonly come from unassimilated straddlers, working-class outlaws, and PMC and VDM activists who have moved far from home. But weak community ties also create the environments where hotheads, cranks and whack-jobs can act out.

Of course, most activists, no matter how unrooted, would never dream of threatening or harassing another activist. The offenders were unusual people. A disproportionately high number of the individuals accused of extreme misbehavior, more than one-third, were class-incongruous within their groups, either higher or lower in background or current class than most other members. A picture emerges of problematic personalities wandering the movement in search of trouble, or escaping from past troubles encountered in groups demographically more like themselves.

**Emotional reactions to activists behaving badly**

Activists reacted with anger, fear and general upset feelings to extreme misbehavior by other activists and groups, which is not surprising. We know from Garfinkel’s famous breaching experiments that people tend to get upset and angry when someone violates their expectations for ordinary behavior. When his experimenters repeatedly asked clarifying questions about whatever subjects said (e.g., “What do you mean, you had a ‘flat tire’?”), subjects became more and more heated, red in the face, angry and yelling; one said, “You know what I mean! Drop dead!” (Heritage 1984: 80).
Subjects expected experimenters to draw on shared background knowledge of what ‘everyone knows’ to supply recognizable, common-sense understandings of what the subject said (81).

Such emotional reactions have been documented across a wide variety of social settings (McKinnon 1994: 127-138; Garfinkel 1967). How people create and maintain the stable features of an organization is illuminated by their upset responses to breaches. When someone crosses the moral boundaries between what’s acceptable and what’s intolerable, negative reactions are experienced as repugnance and discomfort by the excluder, and as snobbery, distance and coldness by the excluded (Lamont 1992: 10-11).

But there is an additional reason why moral breaches are upsetting to activists in particular. Whether or not the group is intentionally prefigurative (reflecting qualities of the sought-for better society in its operations), there is a widespread expectation that social change groups will live by the values they espouse and create an island of better social relations within an oppressive society. Many union members expect worker solidarity; peace activists expect peaceable relations among members; anarchists expect an absence of coercion; and so on. Breaches of these expectations may be experienced as betrayals of the cause.

As other activists responded to intolerable behavior, face-to-face confrontation was far less common than talking about breaches behind the offenders’ backs. But occasionally trouble led to more trouble, as yelling and insults about earlier breaches erupted.

Raised voices didn’t correlate with class. The context of yelling was usually a conflict so rancorous and intractable that it threatened to break up the group. The two
cases in which groups actually split (the SUFB/TPC separation and the end of the Workforce Development Task Force) were the only groups in which more than two people yelled. Yellers varied by class, race, gender, age and movement tradition. Young white PMC McKayla, a leader of the mostly civil TPC, described surprising herself by yelling for the first time in her life during a long, conflictual DNC coalition meeting.

The most rancorous conflicts were a stressful context in which activists surprised themselves by acting in ways outside their own class predispositions and outside the norms of their movement traditions.

**Class differences in explanations for outrageously bad behavior**

While no class had a monopoly on offensive behavior, there was a revealing class difference in what activists believed caused extreme misbehavior. When they thought another activist had behaved intolerably, many interviewees from working-class backgrounds turned to individualism as the explanation, while some activists from professional middle-class backgrounds turned to a failure of self-restraint.

Fourteen working-class and straddler interviewees used terms like “*selfish,*” “*individualistic,*” “*ego,*” “*competitive*” and “*self-promotion*” in explaining a whole range of bad behavior, from power grabs to media denouncements, from lawsuits to embezzlement.

For example, in both Cecilia’s and Nicole’s explanations of why they had left their former anti-violence group, the leader’s self-centered attitude was seen as leading to her malfeasance. When Nicole told a story about the leader yelling at her in a church during a funeral service for someone killed in street violence, she said, “*Everything was always about her grandson and nobody else's murder victim.*” Cecilia was offended that
the leader re-named the group after her murdered relative, saying, “*no one ever voted that in, and it just came to be a personal thing.*”

Brenda was eloquent about what she believed was wrong with The People’s Convention:

*This group has the dysfunction of America…*‘*We're individuals, we're bad-asses, we're #1’, instead of being community-oriented. When something happens, people don't think community, they think ‘how can we be individuals, how can we stand on our own?’*

The word “ego” was especially common in these working-class explanations of activists behaving badly. Eight working-class people, including Slim, Dorothea, Tye, Brenda, Reginald from TPC, and Dale from Grassroots Resistance, all used the term “ego.” So did three straddlers or semi-straddlers: Brenda, working-class-identified Elaine, and Emilio, half a generation away from his family’s working-class roots. By contrast, only two people from PMC backgrounds ever used the word “ego.”

Working-class communitarian values were clearly at play in these explanations. Despite the lack of explicit working-class identity among working-class and poor informants, despite their diversity in race and movement tradition, this anti-individualistic stance hints at an embryonic culture of solidarity (Fantasia 1988). A working-class communitarian ethic has also been noted by other class culture analysts (Lichterman 1996; Lamont 2000; Rose 2000; Fiske and Markus 2012; Jensen 2012.)

In some cases working-class-background informants explicitly linked individualism to a more privileged status. For example, when Tye accused the Immigrants United group of “*only thinking about themselves*” after they changed an event date to conflict with a SUFB event, he made a classic privilege-as-putdown statement that many members were not actually immigrants, but US-born Chicanos.
By contrast, PMC and VDM activists virtually never used egoistic individualism explanations for behavior breaches. Instead, they tended to see hothead personalities as exercising insufficient restraint on their emotions or their behavior. An anarchist leader from an upper-middle-class background, Brian, described the nasty disputes among DNC protest groups as “the politics of bad manners.”

Eight activists from PMC backgrounds referred to uncontrolled personality problems or lack of emotional restraint to explain problematic behavior, using terms such as “poor form,” outbursts “without thinking,” “negative personality,” and “argumentative.”

When working-class people talked about restraining anger, they were usually talking about their own outbursts. For example, Brandy said, “I need to go to anger management.” Working-class African American Rhonda said, “You have to have your emotions in check,” after telling a story in which she had snapped at her nemesis Suzy. It seemed out of character when Tye recounted getting advice from a mentor on how to stoically ignore verbal attacks, and then described struggling to squelch his usual impulses to fight back.

The lifelong PMC activists who advocated emotional restraint, by contrast, were usually talking about a working-class person’s or a straddler’s outbursts. Corazon called Irene “abrasive”; Gail said Dirk could be “brutal”; Deborah said Mack “can’t control his anger.” Whether or not there actually was a class difference in expressing or restraining anger, clearly PMC activists believed there was. They were right that some working-class activists vented emotionally during meetings, but may have been in denial that sometimes college-educated activists did too – another red flag for possible classism.
Groups’ conflict cultures as resources and impediments to repairing breaches

To last beyond one event or campaign, groups must have ways to cope with ordinary conflicts: the personality clashes, the differences of opinion over tactics, messages, and group process, and the cultural differences that so often come up in voluntary groups. But groups’ usual methods of coping with conflict often didn’t work as well with extreme breaches. Groups were seen scrambling to invent new rules covering the new situations and taking previously unacceptable actions. Individually improvised reactions to unanticipated situations seemed to be less class-specific than groups’ habitual anger norms and conflict cultures.

For example, City Power had a written protocol that called for a mediation committee to sit down with both parties to a conflict, which was used for some very intense conflict situations; but when some misbehavior crossed the line into criminal acts, the group kicked some members out and socially shunned them without first going through the mediation process.

I began this study with some hypotheses about conflict resolution, such as that straddlers and women would tend to be mediators, and that working-class people and African Americans would tend to be the most bluntly confrontational. Almost all turned out to be wrong, at least in situations of extreme violations of basic norms. For example, although many African Americans of all classes were forthright and emotionally expressive in ordinary conversation, most tended to become cautiously polite and diplomatic during hot conflicts. One by one my prior hypotheses bit the dust. But both class and movement tradition were associated with approaches to conflict, just in different ways than I had anticipated.
One useful typology of conflict cultures, created by Rothschild and Leach (2007), divides voluntary social change groups into three categories of handling conflict: cultures of avoidance; fight cultures; and an ideal balance between them, cultures of candor. In cultures of avoidance, conflict is seen as a negative thing (358). Touchy topics go unspoken, and problematic individuals are not confronted (351). A premium is put on harmony and unanimity, even when that means problems fester indefinitely (352). This conflict-avoidance profile matches the conflict culture defined as “white” by Kochman (1981) in his research on middle-class whites.

In fight cultures, to prevent informal hierarchies from developing, members quickly challenged any emergent domination, without consideration for individuals’ feelings (Rothschild and Leach 2007: 352). Conflict was seen as a positive thing (358). Unpopular opinions and criticisms were aired, with no taboo topics; the very harshness of the debate was seen as a good sign that the group was truly egalitarian (352). Even though many participants in fight culture said they enjoyed conflicts, nevertheless feelings were often hurt, and some people experienced the disagreements as unpleasant (355).

Most groups aim for something in the middle, the culture of candor: talking openly about disagreements, but in a respectful way. Domination and hierarchy can be curbed, but without trashing individuals (355). In a culture of candor, it is important to prevent the false appearance of agreement that is characteristic of the culture of avoidance. Everyone is expected to speak up honestly and not to take disagreements personally (357). Communication has to happen openly, with no “clandestine” talk
This is an ideal type, with most groups falling short, erring on the side of either avoidance or fight culture.

The culture of candor ideal resembles the best practices advocated in the iconic conflict-resolution book *Getting to Yes* (Fisher and Ury 1981) and by other negotiation and conflict-resolution experts (Gray 1989; Breslin and Rubin 1995): forthrightly getting all interests and concerns on the table; listening across differences; and co-creating compromises and other options that hadn’t originally been considered.

These three kinds of conflict cultures are not fixed features of groups, but can evolve over time. Rothschild and Leach tell a story of a Quaker Friends Meeting that started with a polite culture of avoidance, fell into a fight culture over an intractable disagreement over same-sex marriage, and finally reached a culture of candor that members saw as true to the Quaker ideal of egalitarian group process (357). Such evolution is evidence that new group styles can be created through interaction, as Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) claim: these mostly white PMC people moved away from their traditional Quaker culture of avoidance into two modes not learned from their childhood conditioning.

For 19 of the groups in this study, enough conflict was observed and discussed by interviewees to be able to categorize the group by Rothschild and Leach’s three ideal types. I diagnose a culture of avoidance whenever interviews revealed big surprises about the very issues that had supposedly been discussed at the meeting, whenever members talked about conflict as a negative thing, and whenever interviewees reported lots of talk behind someone’s back about criticisms that were never brought directly to the person. Five groups clearly had a culture of avoidance by this definition.
For example, poverty-class Olivia thought the LP and PMC men in the Parecon Collective were terrible conflict-avoiders, as noted in Chapter 1. When an applicant for membership in the Parecon Collective was visibly drunk while representing the group to the public, the mostly LP members found another pretext to stall his official membership, so that they didn’t have to bring up the issue of the drunkenness. Both Parecon and another majority-LP group let situations in which someone was misspending the organization’s money drag on for years without confronting the offenders. Those stories show a dysfunctional degree of conflict avoidance, harmful to the organization.

In considering whether a group had a fight culture, I looked not only for lots of open conflict, expressed in harsh or heated terms, but also for multiple members who advocated bluntness and direct challenges as healthy organizational practices. By this definition only one group had a clear-cut fight culture, the anomalous Stand Up Fight Back. Two other groups had a faction advocating for the fight-culture ideal.

While no group completely reached the high standards of candor held up as ideal by Rothschild and Leach, if many areas of disagreement appeared to be discussed openly and respectfully at meetings, and if interviewees said they free to express their conflicting views, then I categorized the group as having a culture of candor. Six groups clearly fit this bill; five others were hybrids between candor and one of the other types.

The groups that were clearly thriving – growing in membership and/or winning their goals – varied in their conflict norms: some had a culture of avoidance; one had a partial fight culture in formation; and several had cultures of candor. (See the right two columns of Table 10.3 to see how groups’ conflict culture lined up with their success as a group.)
Table 10.3 Conflict cultures, movement traditions, class composition, and success/failure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Pseudonym</th>
<th>Movement tradition</th>
<th>Conflict culture</th>
<th>Group’s success / failure at goals, or growing/shrinking¹⁰⁸</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action Against Empire</td>
<td>Lower professional (LP)</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Shrinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convention Protest Coalition</td>
<td>LP</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Growing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brontown Affordable Housing Cons.</td>
<td>LP / PMC / PMC</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Thriving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parecon Collective</td>
<td>LP / PMC / LP</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Thriving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety Net for All</td>
<td>Straddlers</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Shrinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tri-city Labor Alliance</td>
<td>LMC / WC / WC</td>
<td>Candor but</td>
<td>Thriving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local 21 Organizing Committee</td>
<td>WC</td>
<td>avoidance of</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Health Care Subcommittee of Neighbors United</td>
<td>WC risen to LMC</td>
<td>Candor but</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women Safe From Violence</td>
<td>WC / LMC / LMC¹⁰⁹</td>
<td>Candor but</td>
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<tr>
<td>City Power</td>
<td>WC</td>
<td>Candor</td>
<td>Success</td>
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<td>Immigrants United</td>
<td>Straddlers</td>
<td>Candor</td>
<td>Growing</td>
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<td>Easthaver Demands Justice</td>
<td>PMC</td>
<td>Candor</td>
<td>Thriving</td>
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<tr>
<td>Green Homes Green World</td>
<td>PMC</td>
<td>Candor</td>
<td>Thriving</td>
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<tr>
<td>The People’s Convention</td>
<td>PMC</td>
<td>Candor</td>
<td>Growing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Workforce Dev. Task Force</td>
<td>PMC</td>
<td>Candor</td>
<td>Failure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spontaneous Streets</td>
<td>VDM</td>
<td>Candor</td>
<td>Failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Action Center</td>
<td>LP / VDM / VDM</td>
<td>Contested:</td>
<td>Growing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autonomous Zone</td>
<td>VDM</td>
<td>Fight culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand Up Fight Back</td>
<td>LP / PMC / Straddlers</td>
<td>Fight culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the 19 groups where multiple conflictual issues were observed. Notable patterns shaded.
If median, mean and/or modal scores for group members fall into different class trajectories, the three types of averages are listed with a slash.
The groups that were shrinking or failing were also varied, with some cultures of avoidance, some cultures of candor and a fight culture. While a culture of candor seems to be roughly associated with growth and success at that group’s self-defined social change goals, it does not appear to be a requirement.

Only Stand Up Fight Back had a full-blown fight culture ("they wanted to yell and point fingers," said Jason after he tried to serve as an outside facilitator of a SUFB meeting). While SUFB’s internal culture repelled many potential and former members, its most loyal members seemed to regard the fight culture traits as a positive feature of the organization. Unassimilated, unrooted straddler Brenda expressed the SUFB fight culture ideal:

*People should and do call each other on stuff. I've called people out on stuff, I've been called out; it's not that serious. You bring it to the table ASAP, and don't hold grudges…sometimes the hard things are going to be said. Sometimes we have stuff to iron out but everyone's fine afterwards…We're there for each other…for the next round too.*

Fight culture seems far less common in the US than Leach found in Germany (2009; Leach and Haunss 2009). It is associated more with very radical anarchist or militant anti-imperialist politics than with any particular class trajectory. Only two other convention protest groups, both with anarchist political values, had a faction of active members advocating for and practicing fight culture: the Action Center (mixed VDM and lower-professional); and the Autonomous Zone (majority VDM and students).

Five lifelong-working-class majority groups displayed a lot of candor, openly discussing many areas of disagreement — but in four cases there was a distinctive limit to the candor: the big questions of power and leadership within the group were never mentioned during meetings, and sometimes not during interviews either. (See second
shaded section of Table 10.4.) For example, the members of Women Safe From Violence, who argued with Randall and each other so openly, never questioned that Elaine would chair all the meetings and would informally set the group’s priorities.

Similarly, the rank-and-file elected leaders of the Local 21 Organizing Committee hashed out disputes and yelled at the condescending organizer Lynette, but none of them questioned the right of Local 21 management to direct the overall timeline and strategy of their campaign.

Since Rothschild and Leach see a major goal of candor as preventing hierarchy and equalizing power, they would probably disqualify these four groups from counting as a true culture of candor, despite their healthy open disagreements on most issues important to them.

The one exception to this working-class avoidance of power and leadership issues within otherwise candid groups was City Power, where everything including internal power dynamics seemed to be on the table – apparently a full-fledged culture of candor.

Four predominantly lifelong-PMC groups also had cultures of candor, with no topics forbidden, as far as I could tell. These groups’ typical members, both in their class backgrounds and their current class, were well above the average class of most conflict-avoiding groups, which tended to have lower-professional majorities.

Once again I see a cultural divide between the high and low portion of the professional range. The self-confident upper-PMC and upper-middle-class people were much more comfortable with giving and receiving criticism than the more cautious, tentative, soft-spoken, self-censoring lower-professionals.

Table 10.4 Summary of class trajectory associations with conflict cultures
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class profile</th>
<th>Typical conflict culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower-professional-majority groups</td>
<td>Culture of avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMC- and upper-middle-class-majority groups</td>
<td>Culture of candor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong-working-class-majority groups</td>
<td>Culture of candor but avoiding big power issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual unassimilated uprooted straddlers</td>
<td>Advocating fight culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some militant VDM individuals from high-PMC/UMC backgrounds</td>
<td>Advocating fight culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Avoidance," "candor" and "fight culture" terminology from Rothschild and Leach 2007

This overall class/conflict-culture pattern is summarized in Table 10.4. During some conflictual meetings, the class dynamic looked like a tennis match: verbally aggressive unassimilated straddlers and judgmental critics from high-PMC/UMC backgrounds traded shots, while diffident lower-professionals and politically inexperienced, respectable working-class people looked from one combatant to another with frozen faces, as the silent, uncomfortable spectators.

With this helpful framework in mind, we now return to the Denver conflict, the best setting for seeing both typical and atypical responses to conflict. Like the other irreconcilable rift observed at the final meeting of the Workforce Development Task Force, this schism was between groups predominantly composed of the two class subcategories with the most distinct and problematic conflict-waging modes: lower professionals versus uprooted and unassimilated straddlers — the class category most associated with cultures of avoidance versus the one most associated with fight cultures.

The DNC conflict is also an example of a clash between the militant anti-imperialist and progressive movement traditions, a conflict of worldviews that has played out in the national movement between United for Peace and Justice and the ANSWER Coalition, and which no doubt will erupt again.
A perfect storm of conflict-escalating factors: Stand Up Fight Back

Stand Up Fight Back (SUFB) was the first DNC protest coalition to form, and for a while it was the largest. But over the months that I followed the coalition, the list of endorsers on its website got shorter and shorter as groups withdrew. One much-admired national group threatened to sue to get their name taken off the SUFB website. The People’s Coalition (TPC) started late as a split-off from SUFB and grew steadily until the convention.

To summarize a complicated conflict, there were three contested issues:

1. The terms of nonviolence pledges (SUFB’s pledge allowed for self-defense against police attack, while TPC’s was unconditional);

2. The name of the coalition (as with the pseudonym Stand Up Fight Back, the actual name could be interpreted literally to suggest violence by activists, or metaphorically interpreted, as the founders intended, to suggest militant resistance to injustice);

3. Internal democracy and roles for women.

The last issue grew out of arguments over the first two: when the most vocal and visible SUFB leaders, white males Tye and Arthur, refused to budge on the nonviolence pledge or the name, they were then accused of sexism and autocracy. In their interviews, Tye, Brenda and Emilio vehemently denied these charges.

After two disastrous multi-group meetings at which voices were raised and no resolutions were reached, some activists walked out and then met privately to form The People’s Convention (TPC) coalition. Some other SUFB members were able to talk calmly about and with TPC members after this rift, but Tye, Brenda and Emilio remained
in a state of rage for the months until the convention, especially towards one TPC member who had been very active in SUFB in its early months, Elijah.

Approximately equal numbers of accusations of outrageous misbehavior were made against SUFB members and by SUFB against members of other groups. But the reactions to such accusations were very different, reflecting different anger norms and conflict-resolution resources in different movement traditions and class trajectories.

SUFB was the only group to have all the conflict-exacerbating factors I’ve identified so far: several leaders who were very unrooted, unassimilated straddlers, under extreme stress and provocation, in an ad hoc group, with militant ideology. Tye, Emilio and Brenda were each accused of behavior breaches by TPC members, and were also observed responding to other activists’ misbehavior. Tye and Brenda were archetypal unassimilated straddlers, people from working-class background with virtually nothing PMC-like about their life story except a BA (and Tye’s famous homeownership, which was a recent development). As profiled in Chapter 3, Emilio was the child of straddlers, a young student whose parents had become professionals and homeowners by the time he was 12; but the powerful peer influence of low-income youth of color in his urban neighborhood created a similar culture clash with older white PMC progressive activists as many unassimilated straddlers reported. None of the three had employers, dependents, religious affiliations or permanent group memberships. All expressed symbolic class loyalties to their working-class roots in their anti-capitalist politics, but none were currently tied to their childhood working-class communities.
SUFB’s explanation for the rifts was that other groups were “liberals,” meaning sell-outs to the powers that be. Talking about the disagreement over nonviolence ground rules, Emilio linked more idealistic politics with class privilege:

A lot of people who are in these groups, you know like [TPC], have never really been oppressed, and when you come from an oppressed community and you have experienced oppression in your life, then you tend to believe more in self-defense. So you lived a sort of sheltered life, and you're doing this activist thing…to make yourself feel good about yourself...yeah, they kind of have these ideals that are a little unrealistic.

I was struck by the similarity between the behavior that offended these three SUFB unassimilated straddlers and their own verbal behavior. Brenda was hurt by TPC members talking behind her back, yet she didn’t object to how SUFB members often talked scornfully about TPC at their meetings, and sometimes she joined in herself; the only difference I could see was that milder language was used at TPC meetings. Emilio was furious when Dina rejected one of his solidarity overtures by saying, “I don’t appreciate you coming to our meeting and doing this”; he said he was “almost appalled” by what she said. Yet “don’t appreciate” is much milder language than how he talked about TPC, for example calling their reasons for separating from SUFB “bullshit” and saying about Elijah that he wanted to “kick that kid’s ass.”

Brenda, Emilio and Tye were simultaneously touchy and aggressive – a recipe for trouble. “High offense-low defense” is Kochman’s (1981) phrase for people who aggressively criticize others but are touchy when criticized (162-4). When he surveyed white and black men and women, he found that white males were the most likely to be high offense-low defense. White women tended to be “low offense-low defense,” careful not to offend and sensitive to criticism. Black men tended to be “high offense-high defense.” “Don’t say no more with your mouth than your back can stand,” one black
male informant told Kochman (164). I found a less clear race and gender pattern than Kochman did. The most high offense-low defense people I observed, Brenda, Emilio and Tye, were varied in race and gender, similar only in militant politics and class trajectory.

I was surprised to hear both Tye and Emilio describe their intense desires to do physical violence to Elijah and reveal the verbal threats they had actually made toward him. In the setting of an interview with a (white, female, academic) interviewer, it was unusual to hear such a lack of self-censorship and front-stage impression-management (Goffman 1955 and 1959; Charon 1998: 191-197).

The three SUFB unassimilated, unrooted straddler interviewees had no criticisms of each other or of any SUFB member’s behavior – not of calling the police on the whack-job Anthony, shoving him or threatening him; nor of wrongly accusing Elijah and McKayla of being government infiltrators; nor of threats to kick Elijah’s ass; nor of Tye trashing TPC to the media. Brenda and Emilio were uncritical followers of leaders Tye, Arthur and Virginia. Under attack, they closed ranks and remained uncritically loyal to each other. While some TPC members, especially Porter, acted swiftly to confront the offenders in their own group with requests for better behavior, and to expel repeat violators of the group’s written civility code, no SUFB members did anything equivalent, as far as I know.

These three militant uprooted straddlers in SUFB were unaware of how partisan and clannish they appeared. They couldn’t see their double standards on rude language and hostile behavior by their own group versus directed towards them. Their working-class roots showed in their intensely personal loyalties, activism tied to particular relationships, trustingly following particular leaders and quick to mistrust outsiders, but
without the tempering effects of ties to a working-class community and the pragmatic approach that usually accompanied such ties. And their ideologically partisan militance reflected their uprooted lives and their college educations, without the tempering effects of having to fit into a professional workplace. They combined the self-confident righteousness gained from PMC cultural capital with working-class rage, directed not only at unjust power-holders but also at rival progressive activists.

This combination of faults showed up in class-incongruous unassimilated straddlers in other groups as well, such as Jeremiah in the Interfaith group, Mack in Easthaver Demands Justice, and Carrie, the peace activist who threatened Lea. While many other straddlers were the steadiest and most easy-going of activists, these straddlers seemed to combine the worst of both their class cultures. These cases are too few to conclusively prove a class culture correlation. But I suspect that if hundreds of conflicts within and between social movement groups were examined, other very-unrooted, unassimilated straddlers would be discovered at the heart of many of them, combining the righteousness and ideological investment gained from upward mobility with gut-level impulses to loyalty and mistrust learned in their working-class childhoods. Especially in situations of extreme movement stress, such as government repression and rancorous splits, I would guess that people fitting this profile would be found popping in and out of groups and unleashing this troublesome combination.

**Maintaining civility in a white lower-professional convention protest group**

In contrast, the predominant emotional tone in The People’s Convention (TPC) was the low-key, restrained politeness often seen at the lower end of the professional spectrum. And indeed, the most common class trajectories in the virtually all-white TPC
were lower-professional (a plurality), modestly downwardly mobile PMC, and students from PMC backgrounds. Their conflict resolution repertoire lined up with the class cultures of those typical members.

First, TPC relied on private communication with the hotheads in their own group. As a multi-issue coalition with low ideological barriers, TPC attracted cranks, who were welcome as long as they remained civil. But extreme misbehavior, no matter whom it targeted, got swift negative reactions by email or one-on-one conversation. When Nanette posted the price of Tye’s house online, several TPC members spoke privately to her about how unacceptable they thought that was. When a loose cannon threatened to secretly cancel the plane ticket of a SUFB rally speaker, straddler Porter said privately that he would personally buy a replacement ticket, which prevented the threat from being carried out.

The next line of defense for TPC was severing ties. People who had quit SUFB had founded TPC, so the founders were by definition people willing to initiate a rift. When serial haranguer Stanley circulated emails accusing various activists of being infiltrators, “Stalinists” and other insults, at first several TPC members emailed him privately to ask him to stop. But eventually white assimilated-straddler Porter – a gifted mediator who only resorted to severing ties in extreme cases, after lots of one-on-one conversation — invoked TPC coalition’s civility code and banned Stanley from the listserv, an example of someone going outside their habitual conflict responses in the face of unacceptable breaches.

Outright counter-attacking was rare in TPC (except by the three hotheads seen as problem people by most other members). Public confrontation in the whole group was
also rare. When a white member spoke against a potential rally speaker by calling him “an angry black man,” the group responded only with stunned silence at that meeting, then did lots of hand-wringing behind-the-scenes conversation about racism, and finally resolved the incident via private conversations with the offender and only a brief discussion at a meeting. Talking behind people’s backs was very common, and seemed to occupy a lot of some TPC members’ time.

TPC hammered out far more written policies governing members’ behavior than any other convention protest group. But they continued to need new policies as the convention approached. Even once the convention had started, TPC was still scrambling for new policies to handle last-minute conflicts. Under intense stress and time pressure, they added threats, abrupt expulsions, and public confrontations, ad hoc, to their more comfortable conflict resolution repertoire of private one-on-one communication and written civility guidelines.

Ambivalent, conflict-avoidant class culture: why lower professionals and not others?

As we saw above, majority-lower-professional (LP) groups were most likely to have a culture of conflict avoidance. Individual LPs, in particular whites, were also conflict-averse, even in situations where conflict seemed hard to avoid: they were more likely to speak privately than publicly with offenders and conflicting parties, and it was very rare to see one of them confront someone in a whole group or to facilitate a group conflict resolution process. Lifelong working-class people, straddlers, VDM and higher-PMC/UMC people were all more likely to advocate direct feedback and talking out disagreements than LPs were.
To combine the prior chapter’s findings on responses to overtalking with this tendency towards conflict-avoidance in the face of extreme violations paints a vivid lower-professional class-cultural profile. Remember that in the overtalking analysis, LPs sometimes self-censored and self-critiqued their own responses to overtalkers and other violators, telling themselves not to have the emotional reactions they had, and as a result they spoke in an ambivalent, see-saw way. In situations of extreme behavior violations as well, some LPs reported biting their tongues to avoid expressing critical thoughts.

Why would lower-PMC class experience lead to such inner tension over one’s own and others’ speech and behavior? Many analysts of middle-class culture emphasize self-restraint, suppressing emotion and avoiding conflict. Middle-class children are taught to internalize self-control (Rose 2000: 16; Lareau 2003). According to Schmidt (2000: chapters 9 and 13), graduate students are rewarded for avoiding criticism and conflict, conforming to faculty expectations and being deferential. In a classic double bind with the competitive demands of many professional positions, in which failure can result from not standing out, overaggressive people who aren’t soft-spoken team players are also sometimes rejected (Lamont 1992: 36-37). Thus it’s not surprising that activists from PMC backgrounds would see hostile behavior as insufficient emotional restraint and self-silencing.

In interviewing white and black American professional men, Lamont (1992) discovered in their moral code a prohibition on sticking out or showing off, which put them in a double bind, since they also valued ambition and individual success. “If I don’t like you, you don’t know the difference,” said one of Lamont’s upper-middle-class male informants (Lamont 1992: 36). They were expected to avoid conflict (Lamont 2000: 36).
while also being competitive, a contradictory set of expectations (Lamont 1992:35). “The goal is to maximize integration in the workplace by playing down power differentials… Only when associated with humility and at least a formal egalitarianism does professional success become equated with moral purity.” (38)

Professional education includes training in self-restraint, deference and conflict avoidance (Schmidt 2000: chapters 9 and 13). Professionals are rewarded for not rocking the boat (Derber et al. 1990). Professional positions rely on an internal locus of control (Rose 2000) instead of the external supervision more typical of working-class jobs (Zweig 2000; Aronowitz 2003). Upper-middle-class people conditioned to have a sense of entitlement and self-confidence may be able to override these contradictions; but lower-professionals end up with an inner monitor that self-silences any impulses to intervene (Fiske and Markus 2012).

Such double binds may tie up lower-professional activists, particularly whites, even more than lower-professional people as a whole. To come from a class-privileged background and be a social change activist, particularly in a mixed-class group, is a social location filled with conundrums, not faced by working-class activists or by unabashed, entitled class-privileged people. PMC activists assert their political goals in the face of power-holders’ opposition while simultaneously avoiding dominating the very social change groups in which they want to express their alternative ideas. This contradiction between downplaying dominance and fighting injustice may explain LPs’ more convoluted and conflicted thought processes and their more indirect, lengthy and ambivalent speech.
Working-class activists, particularly women and people of color, on the other hand, usually face no such conundrum. They may or may not be stuck in the disempowered position where society has placed them, depending on their degree of empowerment; but in any case there is no contradiction between self-empowerment as an activist and self-empowerment as someone in a subordinate social role. They need to draw fewer distinctions between their subordinate culture within mainstream society and their activist subcultures; thus prefigurative goals for their groups’ internal functioning are less central to them. Since working-class activists have less need to avoid reproducing social hierarchies by dominating their own groups, they can carry the style of their root cultures into their social change groups, even if it means being confrontational, blunt, or a strong leader. For them, activism can be a direct shove against their own oppression, pushing outward with all their might; while for lifelong-PMC people, especially white male lower-professionals, activism is a sideways move, simultaneously pushing against unjust authorities and stepping away from their advantaged social position.

**When do class predispositions prevail? Degree and rarity of offense**

Such patterns of class culture differences explained more of the variation in responses to *everyday* offenses than to the more unusual and shocking situation of *extreme* behavior violations.

With the very common pet peeve of overtalking, brought up unprompted by 41 interviewees, remember that I found several very clear-cut class patterns: working-class people unambivalently wanted overtalkers quelled, while lower-PMC and especially LP activists had mixed, ambivalent reactions; strong working-class chairs used direct second-person and imperative language to shhh overtalkers, while PMC chairs used the
third person and LP chairs objected only indirectly. Everyone runs into overtalkers at meetings, and thus people turn to the habits of their class predispositions when responding to something so familiar.

But faced with a shocking breach, some people were swayed by the overheated context to act outside their class character. It seems that the relative rarity of extreme violations led to a less-developed repertoire of responses. In addition, hot emotions, such as anger toward and fear of the violator, may also have brought out class-atypical behavior. As Bourdieu put it, class predispositions ("habitus") "may be superseded under certain circumstances – certainly in situations of crisis which disrupt the immediate adjustment of habitus to field" (1990: 108).

When activists acted in ways contradictory to their own previous behavior and to the typical predispositions of their class trajectory, the context was often especially stressful or emotional. When City Power abandoned its mediation process and expelled a member whose breach was too extreme; when SUFB leaders called the police; when McKayla found herself yelling at a meeting for the first time in her life; in those cases, out-of-character behavior emerged under stress. Most of the convention protest ad hoc groups evolved new ways of responding to conflicts and breaches that were not identical to what any member had done before, typical of neither their movement tradition nor their class disposition. Faced with a challenging new situation, they developed new standards and responses.

Such uncharacteristic responses are evidence that people’s reactions to extreme breaches are not simply tools deliberately chosen from a predetermined toolkit of responses (Swidler 1986). Instead, out-of-character actions provide confirming evidence
for the view that shared understandings of expected behavior are sometimes freshly produced and reproduced through interaction during the situation by the behavior of actors (Garfinkel (1967; Heritage 1984: 111-117; Charon 1998; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

On the other hand, some activists actually intensified their class predispositions even in the face of extreme behavior violations, as when white lower-professional TPC members created more and more written policies, and spent more and more time bemoaning people’s misbehavior behind their backs.

Many class-incongruous people brought sturdy, even stubborn, class predispositions to their groups, going against the group grain with long-internalized attitudes and habits characteristic of their class backgrounds. When lifelong-poor Olivia talked more bluntly about Parecon’s problems than her lower-professional fellow anarchists; when PMC Adaline pushed the mostly working-class Women Safe From Violence to do explicit organizational self-evaluation instead of closing ranks against criticism; when uprooted, unassimilated straddlers insisted on a blunt fight culture in convention protest coalitions even when they were outnumbered by lower-professional peace activists in favor of written civility codes; in these and other cases, we saw class cultural habits persist even removed from the contexts that formed them. Remember that nine working-class-background activists explained breaches as individualism and ego, while eight of their PMC counterparts explained breaches as inadequate emotional restraint – clearly class cultural lenses applied to activist troubles.

But the varied responses to the more unusual and upsetting violations, and especially the out-of-character innovations in ad hoc groups where strangers were thrown
together, show the interactive, innovative influences on human behavior. The habits that
individual activists brought to groups from their class backgrounds and movement
traditions were the jumping-off points for attempts to develop a shared group culture that
could prevent and resolve problematic behavior.
11 - Conclusion: Building a movement with the strengths of all class cultures

The years of this study, 2007 and 2008, fell during time of relative movement drought, when more progressive energy went into electoral politics than into social change groups. But after the drought came the inspiring movement resurgence of 2011. Against the backdrop of the Arab Spring uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East, students, union members and local supporters took over the Wisconsin State House to try to stop a union-busting initiative. Then in the fall, Occupy Wall Street began in Zuccotti Park; “Occupy” went viral; and hundreds of local encampments sprang up and held their ground. Longtime homeless people, longtime radicals, students and some recently foreclosed and laid off people, living together in crowded tent cities, experienced cross-class contact of the most 24/7 immersive kind. *Time Magazine* named the protestor “The Person of the Year.” As of this writing in 2012, hope is in the air that a multi-racial grassroots mass movement is developing.

As just a casual observer, I saw many movement traditions coming together in the early Occupy movement. The labor movement was there: it seemed that every time Jobs with Justice or a union local visited an encampment or endorsed a local Occupy, the entire left blogosphere lit up with excitement (for example, González 2011). Activists from progressive groups and nonprofits were there, offering workshops and bringing food, sometimes occupying, sometimes recruiting (Segal-Wright 2012). The pagan anarchists were there: Starhawk and others who brought rituals of deliberate community building to the globalization movement and the 2008 convention protests coordinated a nationwide effort to train hundreds of thousands of Occupiers in nonviolent direct action
and participatory decision-making. And in many cities community-organizing groups teamed up with Occupy groups, at least briefly.

My favorite early Occupy Boston action was when the occupiers came out in support of City Life/Vida Urbana, a kick-ass community organizing group whose Eviction Free Zone campaign against foreclosures had been organized long before the recent housing market bubble burst, so the group was poised to intervene to protect vulnerable homeowners in its Jamaica Plain neighborhood. With mixed-class leadership, City Life has mobilized directly affected neighborhood residents and their allies to block evictions and get foreclosures stopped through protests at banks and auctions. Their October 2011 march to the Bank of America had hundreds of extra protestors because the occupiers joined in. Once City Life added the crucial ingredients of opponent-targeting and action-planning — strengths of the community organizing tradition that had been in dire short supply at Occupy Boston to that point — the occupiers’ exuberant rebellious spirit made a real difference to particular people in trouble, which made Occupy Boston into local heroes.

But I’ve been discouraged by some of what I’ve seen as well. Some Occupy groups had gotten bogged down in group process quarrels and ideological quicksand by late 2011, reminiscent of the discouraging death throes of SDS, SNCC and the Clamshell Alliance. Some of my initially enthusiastic friends dropped out of Occupy Boston because they were burned out by endless internal debates. Looking through a class lens at the complaints — long meetings, jargon, eccentric hand signals, and a shortage of specific winnable demands — reveals the familiar downsides uncovered above in groups dominated by professional-middle-class activists.
One cold, windy November night at Occupy Boston, I watched a three-hour General Assembly move at a painfully slow pace to decide whether to change the times of General Assemblies. To their credit, the facilitators explained the sequence of consensus steps and the hand signals at the beginning. However, of the 200 or more people participating, it appeared that only a couple dozen were fluent in the process. I could have predicted who did and didn’t gain the floor by using the appropriate hand signals (for example, fingers curled into a C to signal a clarifying question). Like the facilitators, the successful hand signalers were all white people with newscaster-standard accents and all their teeth. Also present in the crowd were people with missing teeth, people of color, and people with working-class accents; I didn’t see any of them use any hand signals or hear them say any consensus jargon terms. Most were silent or had side conversations with people near them; a few simply called out, speaking in violation of the process. Someone who snuck in a negative opinion as a Point of Process was chastised by many downward-twinkling hands for not sticking to the order of steps. One gaggle of weathered older black and white men wearing worn clothing were clustered at the edge of the lighted stage area. One African American man, carrying a stack of the _Spare Change_ newspapers that homeless people sell on the Boston streets, was agitated, bouncing on the balls of his feet and saying repeatedly, “This is bullshit, man!” Others were trying to calm him down. The clarifying questions, points of information and points of process took so long that only in the second hour were any pro or con opinions permitted on the minor internal organizational proposal on the floor.

The much-touted horizontal participatory democracy of Occupy General Assemblies seemed to make space for some process-savvy people’s voices but to shut out
others, including some of those most personally affected by the financial crisis that triggered the movement. Realizing the powerful potential of Occupy and other future movement mobilizations will mean asking some hard questions about class cultures and learning more about what it takes to become truly cross-class and multicultural.

**Implications for change in understanding all influences on group style**

The metaphor of looking through lenses that I used in the introduction now seems too static to describe the active interplay of movement traditions, race, gender and class cultures in the stories of how activists actually grappled with their groups’ troubles. Like the metaphor of a ‘toolkit’ (Swidler 1986), the lens metaphor implies that movement traditions, race and gender predispositions and class cultures each provide a fixed, unchanging repertoire.

A better metaphor would include moving parts, gears meshing and gears grinding, or an interdependent ecosystem. I discovered no straightforward formula for what happened when an individual’s class predispositions clashed with the group’s usual modus operandi, whether drawn from its movement tradition or from the membership’s predominant class and other cultures. I’ve spotlighted stories where movement tradition prevailed, where the activists with the highest social status prevailed, where the majority class prevailed, and where an innovative response to the particular situation was created.

But given how often the class culture dimension goes unmentioned or underemphasized by both activists and academics, my findings of powerful class predispositions are significant. Many things didn’t correlate with class, such as the militant to moderate spectrum; how formal or informal meetings were; and how much meeting time was spent talking about wider political issues versus the group’s business.
Some items I tested had a greater race or gender correlation than class. But more than I expected, as I tested behavior after behavior, word after word, idea after idea, class patterns appeared. In the absence of explicit class identities and class talk, it was remarkable to see how durable, even stubborn, class predispositions could be.

However, I wouldn’t want the reader to take away the impression that I believe class cultures are the answer to every question about voluntary groups. I have stressed class cultures in this book because I believe that overlooking class harms movement building, and because too few others have studied them. But by emphasizing class predispositions, I find myself unwittingly weighing in on a longstanding conversation among sociologists about where regular patterns of social behavior come from. This academic conversation matters for activists because transforming society requires accurately understanding the sources of change and resistance to it.

Just as I told each story in Chapter 1 in four ways (first with just the bare facts and then through three lenses), each of the following four statements partially explains how these 25 groups’ typical practices came to be:

1. **Idiosyncratic interaction**: The members of each unique group worked out its own particular group style over time, through their interactions, in a mostly unconscious but sometimes deliberate co-creation;

2. **Movement traditions**: Each movement tradition had institutionalized its unique repertoire of group processes, rhetoric and approaches to activism; thus these 25 groups’ practices reflected their movement roots;

3. **Race and gender predispositions**: Members brought in habits from their ethnic communities and their gender conditioning, which varied by their
generation and where they grew up, so knowing each member’s social identities and hometowns might allow some pretty good predictions about the internal dynamics;

4. **Class predispositions**: Members carried their class culture conditioning into the group, and the group’s predominant class was reflected in its operations, so knowing the class composition of the group might enable one to predict some of the group’s habitual practices.

For those who want to see social movement groups grow and succeed, there’s a pitfall in overlooking any of these four explanations for groups’ typical practices. To omit one is to lose some leverage for improving group effectiveness.

To over-emphasize individuals’ pre-existing predispositions (in other words, to imply that childhood race, gender and/or class conditioning alone determines behavior) is especially controversial among sociologists. Criticizing those who give such socialization explanations, Garfinkel (1967) coined a great phrase: he said we are “making out the person-in-society to be a judgmental dope” (68). And of course I agree with him that human beings are not blindly governed by internalized norms. The thoughts and behavior of the 362 activists in the study were not rigidly determined by their childhood socialization into social identities. Rather, those predispositions provided the jumping-off point for their actions in the group, some of which were deliberate strategic choices, some of which involved blending into the pre-existing group practices, and only some of which were individuals’ old habits.

Our attitudes towards our own class conditioning and other inherited behavioral expectations can vary from unawareness to enthusiastic justification to skepticism to
fierce resistance. Greater awareness of how we’ve been socialized can make us more flexible and can strengthen our resistance to the harmful parts of our childhood conditioning.

To say that groups create their styles through interaction – the symbolic interactionist view (Charon 1998: 27-18; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) – is inadequate on its own to explain much of what happens in groups. Familiar repertoires appeared and reappeared in regular patterns in the observed meetings and interviews. People “construct chains of action beginning with at least some pre-fabricated links” (Swidler 1986: 277). But knowing that group styles are created to some extent by interaction in the moment can give activists hope that how we relate to other members makes a difference to the health of our groups.

An all-of-the-above perspective provides the most forward momentum. If we know that our individual predispositions are woven together with social structures and with unfolding situations to generate our conscious and unconscious strategies towards our goals (Bourdieu 1984: Part Two; Heritage 1984; Swartz 1997: Chapter 5; van Dijk 2008: 47, 56), such an understanding enables us to struggle with what we’ve inherited in a more conscious way. Becoming aware of the patterns of class, race, gender and other predispositions shaping ourselves and our groups, we can choose to strengthen or transcend them; becoming aware of the institutionalized group norms of a movement tradition, we can celebrate them or work to change them; becoming aware that activists’ interactions have the power to create behavior expectations and group style, we can become more mindful of the effects of our speech.
However, for many groups, the most neglected discussion is about internal class dynamics and what gifts members can bring from their class cultures. What would it look like to openly discuss class, claim class identities, and tap all class cultures to strengthen the group? I’m fortunate to have seen such transformative discussions in practice.

**Identifying class cultural strengths and limitations**

The nonprofit organization Class Action has a workshop exercise that I’ve done dozens of times: participants meet in caucuses according to their class backgrounds, discuss what they took from their upbringing, and look for commonalities. Each caucus brings back to the whole group two lists, one of the strengths and one of the limitations of people like those they grew up among. I’ve never yet found a class caucus that couldn’t generate two long lists, nor a group where the class caucuses’ lists weren’t quite distinct from each other. Almost always the list of strengths goes beyond the material realm (e.g., “Can cook dinner for 4 on $1”; “International travel=learning about other cultures”’) into the subtle cultural realm (e.g. “Resilience in crisis”; “Bold ‘cuz we feel safe in the world.”)

So before I researched this book, I already took it as axiomatic that every activist class culture brings distinct gifts to the coalition table, and that each has its own particular limitations. Once the class lens is made available and the facts of everyone’s life story are shared, the distinct strengths and weaknesses become visible to the group.

The purpose of naming limitations is not to be self-deprecating, and not to denigrate the people we come from, but to acknowledge that the unjust class system damages everyone, and for all of us, it’s a struggle to regain our full humanity. As long as there’s an attitude of respect for everyone, in particular for working-class and poor
people, but also for those with more class privilege, open discussion of how to tap all class culture strengths can be transformative.

Class Action’s founding story attests to this potential for transformation. Six Western Massachusetts activists – three who grew up working-class or in poverty, three from multi-millionaire owning-class families – formed a cross-class dialogue group and spent one day a month together for six years (Koch-Gonzalez et al. 2009). They dug deep into how their class conditioning had affected them, and in particular how it continued to thwart their dreams. The members from working-class backgrounds changed their lives most dramatically, as all three began to pursue their heart-work in a way they had not felt entitled or empowered enough to do before. But the owning-class members changed their lives as well. Owning-class pioneer Jennifer Ladd teamed up with the late, great, proudly working-class Felice Yeskel to found Class Action in 2004. Their intention was to bring their own profound experience to as many people as possible. I hope this book will help inspire such cross-class dialogue within social change groups.

Towards a resurgence of class consciousness and a class-multicultural movement

How could future progressive movements become more powerful and effective by tapping all class-cultural gifts? To explore this question, let’s do a thought exercise and imagine a mixed-class activist group with all the strengths of the class cultures uncovered in this book, and none of the limitations. What would it be like?

In this idealized group, the working-class and poor members have taught the others how to create a warm, family-like group style through food, teasing and laughter, mutual aid and one-on-one bonding among leaders and members. But when personal bonds go sour or leaders prove untrustworthy, all the working-class members keep their
eyes on the prize, valuing the group for its social change goals, and speak up instead of quitting. All powerhouse working-class leaders have apprentices in training, mentoring them for leadership transitions to come.

The working-class preference for action towards short-term winnable goals has caught on in the whole group. But the working-class and other members with a distaste for meetings and organizational management topics nevertheless bite the bullet and engage with them, because they know that ceding that territory to the managerially oriented college graduates would create a power imbalance in the group.

The straddlers in the group bring in deeply held moral principles, sharing with the group the values and the class loyalty they kept from their working-class roots — but all of them do it flexibly, with no self-righteousness and no hostility towards group members who see things differently.

The voluntarily downwardly mobile activists create egalitarian alternative institutions and suggest ways for the group to prefigure its ideals in its operations and tactics, but without erecting ideological or subcultural barriers between themselves and other activists. They matter-of-factly describe themselves as coming from class-privileged backgrounds and choosing to use their cultural capital for movement building. VDM members build warm, trusting relationships with other members, even leaders, and even new recruits, despite their assumption that paid informants are present in the group.

The professional-middle-class process-junkies-in-recovery have realized that facilitators of many classes and movement traditions will feel more competent using simpler forms of decision-making, and that discussion more similar to everyday
conversational patterns will foster more creativity. They suggest innovative processes, but accept defeat graciously if the group doesn’t take their suggestions.

The lower-professionals have learned to speak up more boldly and directly, their tongues unbitten, even during conflicts. The LP and PMC behind-the-scenes workhorses are not just pillars of the organization, but can also speak from the heart, express anger, make people laugh and reveal their lively minds.

Thanks to mentoring from some class-bicultural straddlers, all the college graduates have figured out how contribute the useful theories and historical parallels they’ve read by speaking briefly and without jargon, not using their knowledge to dominate but humbly offering it as one gift among many. Self-assured upper-middle-class, owning-class and high-PMC members in particular have found ways to share their informed hope and heightened sense of efficacy with other members without arrogance. As they help turn their self-confidence into group confidence, they do it with no presumption that this valuable gift entitles them to be in charge.

The college graduates have also learned from the working-class people and from the labor movement to subordinate their individual agendas to a greater solidarity so that everyone pulls together as a team. There’s room in this group for many people to take on leadership roles, without being shot down for stepping forward, but there are no uncritical passive followers either.

Food and other short-term material incentives are used to get new recruits in the door, but the group also systematically discusses which issues and frames are most likely to catch on with the media and with potential constituencies. As new, disempowered, and especially multiply marginalized people arrive, all hands are on deck to encourage them
to gain skills and confidence; but everyone recognizes that straddlers and working-class powerhouses have a special role to play as role models who can teach them to become class-bicultural without losing their working-class strengths. The group has explicit goals of empowering marginalized and inexperienced people, affirming and drawing from working-class culture, and having a high percentage of lifelong-working-class people in leadership.

The group has a culture of candor: conflicts are discussed openly but don’t break up the group, because loyalties to both people and ideals are strong. Members are assertive but not aggressive in raising their ideas and concerns. Unrooted activists grow new roots in the group and in the informal networks around it, which hold them accountable for their behavior. But if extreme behavior breaches do happen, they are met with a full range of responses drawn from all movement traditions, including both private and group discussion, both informal responses and a formal mediation process.

The group spends a modest amount of time away from its wide-world struggles to build its sense of community, to educate members on the political context, to talk about ‘isms’, and to evaluate and improve the organization — but without bogging down in looking inward. When windstorms of opposition and failure shake the group, members hold on tight to their political ideals and to their relationships with each other, and refuse to let the group be blown apart.

If such class-multicultural groups exist, I haven’t encountered them. How could they come into being? I know one necessary though not sufficient first step: talk openly about class. Share class life stories, without pretense, and without any shame or blame about the hidden hardships and privileges that are revealed. Define class by differences in
education and cultural capital as well as finances, and then have some reality-based conversation about who’s present in the group and who’s not. Respectfully put into words the class culture differences in the group, as well as all race, gender, age and other intersecting cultural differences. And then take action to reach out across class, form alliances, and incorporate missing class cultural strengths.

Coalitions and cross-class movements would be much easier to form among such class-aware and class-multicultural groups. No single movement tradition, and no one activist class culture, has all the elements needed for building a mass progressive movement, especially in today’s daunting political environment. But groups that draw on the best of each class culture and each movement tradition will have a better shot at building powerful cross-class movements.
Appendix 1 – Methodology Notes

Like all social science research, this study began with a burning curiosity about a question that couldn’t be answered any other way: what are the class culture differences among progressive US activists? As I sought the answers, the tools of social research allowed me to listen to the voices of hundreds of activists and to hear them collectively saying things that neither I nor any one of them could have articulated.

The statistics and the qualitative analysis reinforced each other, both evocative and both rigorous. Electronically coding the transcripts and then sorting the coded portions by class was like putting on 3D glasses: patterns popped up that were invisible to the naked eye.

I was able, to some degree, to create grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Berg 2007), meaning I drew the themes and hypotheses inductively from the contents of the meetings and interviews themselves. I had some initial hypotheses, but almost all were abandoned along the way. Some group troubles and class culture traits were suggested by the activists themselves, and the rest I noticed while coding the transcripts. Overtalking, for example, was not on my list of topics until I discovered that it was what activists most wanted to talk about.

This appendix is aimed not only at answering readers’ questions about this particular study, but also at providing suggestions and resources for those who might want to do a similar study themselves. One resource I would especially recommend to anyone tackling any large, multi-year research project is “Write in Mindful Ways” by Boice (2000:103-202), my mentor in book form.
Seven steps in the research process

I considered many possible research designs before deciding on observing meetings, a written survey and follow-up interviews. The most useful tips for this early design phase came from Patton (1990), a pragmatic and funny book with pros and cons for types of sampling and data gathering.

1. Finding the groups

The study design depended on observing a varied sample of activist groups. To make sure the class patterns we found were not particular to any one movement tradition, in late 2006 graduate student Erin Balleine and I generated a list of currently active issues from progressive magazines and websites, and then set out to find membership-based groups working on those issues.

To make sure we weren’t seeing only group cultures particular to any one geographical area, we hired another researcher and drew 2-hour-drive circles around our three hometowns in Massachusetts and Florida, generating a list of cities and towns in five states, up and down the East Coast. By searching online and through acquaintances, we gathered contact info for over 50 activist groups that relied primarily on volunteer member efforts. We prioritized mixed-class groups, contacting them first in order to make sure they were included. We reached out to many groups, but the list shrank rapidly. Only in two cases did a group say no to being observed, but often there was no upcoming meeting planned, or we never successfully connected with the group or its meetings.
2. Going out into the field

We wanted the questions we asked on the survey and in interviews to draw out as much from activist informants as possible, yet to take a realistically small amount of their time and to yield consistent, comparable answers (Converse and Presser 1986). Once we had drafted the survey (see Appendix 2), interview questions, field-notes form and consent form, we applied for and got IRB approval. Then, as we got invitations from group contacts, Erin, Jerry Koch-Gonzalez and I each began attending meetings. We would explain the study, get consent forms signed by all participants, and ask permission to tape the meeting. Whether or not we were able to record, we wrote field notes during meetings, describing the room, people’s clothes and body language, and our own reactions. Immediately after meetings, we typically spent longer than the meeting itself writing our impressions and reactions; we have voluminous field notes for most meetings (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995).

At almost every meeting (except for a few large, open direct-action-planning gatherings), almost all the participants filled out the survey. A piece of insider social science lore was responsible for this unusually high response rate. Social psychologist Rafe Ezekiel kindly reviewed the research design and proclaimed it workable except for one missing element: chocolate. Why would activists linger at the end of a meeting to fill out a survey? Some irresistible incentive was needed. Sure enough, if we pulled out surveys and chocolates simultaneously at the end of the meeting, all eyes were riveted in our direction; once we explained that the chocolate was a reward for filling out a survey, the surveys practically flew from our hands – especially when we offered Lindt truffle balls.
At the bottom of the survey was an offer of $25 for a one-hour interview. If four or fewer people in a meeting gave their contact info for an interview, we attempted to contact all of them for an interview. If more than four people in a group signed up to be interviewed, we sorted the surveys by race and approximate class, shuffled each pile, picked surveys randomly from each pile and contacted those people first. This had the effect of over-sampling working-class and poor people and people of color, as those piles were often smaller than the college-graduate and white piles.

The interviews were semi-structured, with a set of starter questions, but with freedom to ask unstructured follow-ups. In addition, for each group, particular questions were added about what had been observed at the meeting(s). The amount of unstructured discussion varied depending on who conducted the interview: Jerry Koch-Gonzalez, with his smaller role as a contracted interviewer, tended to stick most closely to the interview protocol, while Erin Balleine and I, as principal researchers, felt freer to depart from it. In all cases the interviewer was the same researcher who had observed the meeting(s). Most interviews lasted about one hour to 90 minutes, but the lengths ranged from a few mini-interviews of 15 to 20 minutes to a few over three hours. The interview location was wherever the interviewee preferred; in the group’s meeting space, at the interviewee’s home or workplace, at a bar or fast-food restaurant, or over the phone.

The target amount of fieldwork (Emerson 1983) was two meetings and interviews of four diverse members of each group. In most cases a smaller amount of data was collected, for various logistical reasons.

At some point during 2007 I began to feel that the sample of groups was problematic. As I mentioned in the conclusion, that year turned out to be a relatively calm
one for the US left. Without intending to, I had found myself studying a time of movement abeyance. It was striking how many of the groups we contacted had no next meeting planned.

As a result, the groups who welcomed us to observe their meetings were almost all long-standing, stable groups. In meeting after meeting, we met combinations of people who had been activist colleagues for five, ten, or even thirty years. While interesting, this stability did not seem ideal for seeing whether group cultures formed through interaction, or for learning how diverse activists negotiate class culture differences. The ideal sample would include both newer and older groups.

To fill this gap and find newly formed groups where strangers would interact, in early 2008 I contacted all the groups organizing protest events at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions in Denver and the Twin Cities. In the five months before the conventions, I attended planning meetings of seven protest-planning groups, as well as a few ongoing groups in those cities, and did some interviews. During the two convention weeks, I observed last-minute meetings and Spokes Councils, interviewed meeting participants, and was a participant observer at the protests themselves, which gave me a deeper understanding of those groups (VanMaanen 1988).

3. Drawing a circle around the subjects of the study and disguising their identities

By the end of 17 months of fieldwork, we had collected data on 30 groups, but in five cases I decided the amount of data was too small to consider the group as part of the study. (For example, for one excluded group, we observed only one public event, no meetings, and did one interview.) Twenty-five groups had sufficient data to be included in the study — the 15 New England and Florida ongoing groups, the 7 ad hoc
convention-protest groups, and three more ongoing groups in the convention cities. Of the 25, 18 groups had full data (one or two meetings and multiple interviews), while 7 groups had partial data (for example, meeting(s) but only one interview; or multiple members interviewed and a public event observed, but no meeting observed). Within this final pool of 25 groups, we observed 34 meetings and did 61 interviews.

The 25 groups, in five states, were varied in every almost way I had hoped: by issue, movement tradition, geography, size, race and gender composition, and most relevantly class composition. While no sample of 25 groups could be fully representative of the tens of thousands of US social movement groups, I can be confident that the class commonalities found in the sample don’t actually reflect another variable, such as a certain region or race.

To assign pseudonyms for groups, towns, issues and people, I tried to mimic cultural style without giving any clues to actual identities. For group pseudonyms, I imitated the style of other groups in the same movement tradition, then searched online to make sure no actual group of each name existed. (For example, there are no towns called Easthaver or Brontown.) More tricky was creating a pseudonymous issue for each group, matching not just movement tradition but how common or uncommon, controversial or mainstream, broad or narrow, technical or populist the actual issue was.

To assign pseudonyms to group members, I drew from online lists of the most common names given in each decade to baby boys and girls by white, African American and Latino families, so that most informants’ pseudonyms are typical of their age, race and gender. I tried to match the cultural resonances of the actual name.
When interviewees raised worries about exposure of their identities, they were never concerned about the reactions of readers in general, and only in a few cases about law enforcement officials knowing who they were; usually they didn’t want other group members to know that they had said something critical. To respect these concerns, in a number of cases I falsified additional details that might give away identities, without changing quotes or altering the cultural resonances of the context.

4. Categorizing survey respondents by class

The success of the study hinged on creating valid class categories and on accurately and consistently assigning the 362 survey respondents to those class categories, a process with many tricky steps.

The first step was to assign numeric values to many variables and load them into a database in the PASW (SPSS) statistical program (Norusis 2008). Then we combined class indicator variables to create two index variables, class background and current class, with values ranging from 1 to 7 for poor, working-class, lower-middle-class, lower-professional, professional middle class, upper-middle, owning/upper-upper-middle class. For scoring survey data on these index variables (Boslaugh and Watters 2008: Chapter 3; Warner 2008: Chapter 4), we wrote up a protocol (see summary in Appendix 3) for how to treat various answers, including missing data.

To prevent assumptions based on race, gender or other survey answers from distorting the class categorization of respondents, a stripped-down spreadsheet was created with only the pseudonym and the class indicator survey answers (parents’ income source, parents’ education, and housing when respondent was age 12; respondent’s
occupation, education, employer and housing). For retired people, their former occupations were entered when known.

When occupation and education both indicated the same score, then that became the informant’s score. If education and occupation were scored three or more degrees apart on the 7-step scale, or two degree apart but crossing the class divide between lower-middle-class and lower-professional, then that informant was categorized as mixed-class and treated as missing data. One example of a mixed-class informant was a custodian with a law degree.

When education and occupation fell just one degree apart, on the same side of the class divide, then informants’ housing (rented or owned) and their employers’ status were taken into consideration. Homeownership tipped respondents up into the higher category, while renting (including living rent-free with relatives who were homeowners) tipped them down, as did being in foreclosure proceedings; homelessness and public housing pulled the score down even further than just renting. A large, high-status employer (such as a name-brand national corporation, big hospital or university, or a state or national agency) tipped respondents up into the higher category; a tiny or informal employer (such as a domestic employer or a 3-person office) tipped them down.

To see the effect of using homeownership and employer status to tip the balance in ambiguous cases, consider this example. Two high school graduates (education score of 2, working-class) worked as human service case managers (occupation score of 3, lower-middle-class). The case manager who was a homeowner working at a large state agency was categorized as lower-middle-class (3) despite his lower educational
attainment; the renter on the 4-person staff of a small group house for mentally disabled people was categorized as working-class (2) despite her relatively high job title.

Housing did not tip the score of class-ambiguous people between 18 and early 30s (for whom renting is common in all classes), or of those who fell between professional- and upper-middle-class (who were all homeowners except a few with special circumstances).

For those who listed two or more sources of income (such as circling “Wages” and “Salary” for parents’ main income source when informant was age 12), the mean of the two was used as the occupation score. Small business income was scored as lower-middle-class unless the business was specified as a professional practice, such as a book editor or law office.

For younger respondents, when multiple parents’ and guardians’ education levels differed, the score rose for each additional degree in the family, as children can absorb more cultural capital depending on how many caretakers they learn it from. But for older respondents born in the 1950s or earlier, an era when women tended to get less formal education, if the father’s education level was higher, only his was used in calculating the score.

This class categorizing protocol was so complicated that there was a risk of error; and it required so many judgment calls that there was a risk of rater bias, especially with people who fell into the gray areas between two class categories. For example, since I had met many of the survey respondents, if I as a white woman were scoring the survey of an African American who gave some ambiguous answers, unaware racial stereotypes might have influenced me to give a lower class score than the survey answers actually
warranted. The scoring had to be done without knowing anything about the informants except for the class indicators on their surveys. I oriented two people to the class scoring protocol, and each of them and I scored the 362 survey respondents using the same sequence of rules. Respondents who did not get identical or very close scores from all three scorers were given an ambiguous class value. An example of someone the scorers disagreed about was a guitar-maker: one person thought that making guitars was a manual labor occupation, which bumped the score down, while another saw it as a professional art form, which raised the score up.

To check how valid the class scoring system was, interrater reliability was tested with Cohen’s kappa for each pair of scorers; kappa ranged from to .795 to .763, very high levels, all significant at the .001 level (N=362). All three raters agreed on class categorizations 77% of the time.

For the other 23% of cases, usually two raters agreed and the third scored either class background or current class just one degree away on the 7-point scale, on the same side of the class divide; in those cases the majority vote prevailed. But the cases with any greater discrepancy than that – in other words, where any two scores were two or more degrees apart or crossed the class divide, or where all three raters disagreed – were given the ambiguous class value and treated the same as mixed-class people, omitted from statistical analysis.

Some informants who in my opinion were very strong examples of a certain class culture disappeared from the quantitative analyses because one or both of the other raters interpreted their survey data very differently than I did. In a few cases, I had extra information from interviews, meetings or informal conversation and knew that another
rater had misinterpreted a survey response, so I rescued someone from the mixed-class discard pile and put him or her back into one of the class categories. For example, one survey respondent wrote that her parents neither owned nor rented a home, and one rater took this as a sign of homelessness, which contradicted the other background indicators, requiring categorization as mixed class; however, I had heard the informant say that her father was a preacher and they lived in a parsonage owned by the church, so I kept her in the PMC-background category where the other rater and I had placed her.

After the background scores and current class scores were determined, they were then combined to put respondents into one of four class trajectory categories: lifelong in the working-class range; lifelong in the professional range; upwardly mobile straddler; or downwardly mobile. All young undergraduate students and other very young adults were put into the lifelong trajectory for their class background, as they were closer to their childhood experience and hadn’t had enough adult experience with the class system to be considered upwardly or downwardly mobile yet.

For all the respondents whose trajectory was downwardly mobile, I went over their surveys, their meeting participation and (for interviewees) their interview transcripts, seeking indications of whether the downward mobility was voluntary (VDM) or involuntary. The VDM category encompassed the 22 who wrote or talked about making choices after college that led to downward mobility into the working-class range. Another 21 went into the involuntary category because of a story of an addiction, a disability, a layoff or other misfortune. For a few other downwardly mobile people, there were no clues either way. In statistical analyses, the downwardly mobile for involuntary
or unknown reasons were combined with the ambiguous-class, the mixed-class, and the incomplete surveys, and treated as missing data.

From a total of 364 survey respondents, 309 people ended up assigned to one of the four class trajectory categories compared throughout the book. The number with a class trajectory (N=309) is greater than the number assigned to a class background category (N=291) or a current class category (N= 288) or both (N=246). The reason is that a few people were labeled mixed-class in either childhood or adulthood because of conflicting indicators that nevertheless fell entirely within the working-class range or within the professional range, so they were assigned to a trajectory. For example, a professional whose parents’ education would suggest a lower-professional score, but whose parents’ occupations would suggest an upper-middle-class score, resulting in a mixed-class score for her background, was nevertheless put into the lifelong-professional trajectory category; thus she was excluded from analyses based on class background, but included in analyses based on class trajectory. Similarly, mobility between lower-middle-class and chronic poverty during childhood meant a mixed-class background score for someone whose trajectory was lifelong in the working-class range. In other words, mobility across the class divide was treated as more important in activists’ class conditioning than was mobility within one of the two broad ranges.

Once respondents were assigned to class categories, the three numeric scores were entered into the PASW data file, two ordinal variables for class background and current class, and a nominal variable for class trajectory. Movement traditions were also entered as a nominal variable.
It was also important to characterize the groups in terms of class. For each group I calculated the mean, mode and median of members’ class backgrounds and current class, creating Table 10.3 and the boxplot in Appendix 4.

Simultaneously with this process of organizing the data, another form of magic was also being performed, transforming the audio recordings into written documents.

5. Creating and coding the transcripts

I knew the precision of the transcripts would make a huge difference in what kinds of analyses could be done and what kind of class patterns could be seen. After investigating transcription marking systems used by linguists to indicate simultaneous speech, pauses, tone of voice, emphasis, etc., I created a simple composite protocol and wrote up instructions for transcribing with Olympus DSS transcription software. Transcriber Jack Danger created exact transcripts for nineteen of the 34 meetings and more than 50 of the interviews.

Once I had the transcripts, I created composite demographic summary tags and attached them to the pseudonyms throughout the transcripts. For example, each time Martina spoke in a meeting, the transcript said “Martina WC22imBf80s,” meaning that Martina was an African American immigrant female born in the 80s who was categorized as lifelong working-class because both her childhood and adult class scores were 2. This enabled me to see at a glance the ethnicity, class, gender, and age of all meeting participants as I read.

I read the versions of the transcripts with these demographic pseudonyms, along with the field notes – over 1,000 pages in all – making notes about whatever I noticed, and writing memos about my observations and possible hypotheses (Charmaz 1983). This
is the stage when I realized that speech differences were going to play such a prominent role in the book, because there were so many notable class differences in how meeting participants and interviewees talked. I drafted a list of possible chapters, based on the strongest emerging themes, in particular the group troubles that activists talked most about.

After this open coding, I organized the themes in my notes and memos into an alphabetically organized codebook with over 500 items in 13 categories. For example, the category “B Humor” included “BB2 Laugh at fake bad behavior,” and the category “F Conflict” included “F3indir Avoid Conflict - Deal indirectly.” I entered the codebook and the 95 transcripts into HyperResearch, qualitative coding software that lets researchers mark their material with codes and then run reports that assemble all instances of any given code. I went through transcript by transcript and applied the codes to the text. As I coded, I wrote memos about patterns and hypotheses (Emerson et al. 1995: Chapter 6).

6. Looking for class culture patterns

Here’s the metaphor I used to describe finding class culture patterns among these voluminous data: approaching a room full of butterscotch pudding and carving it into Michelangelo’s David. It was a very slow, painstaking process, clearing away the pudding.

I went through my memos, codebook and early drafts and created a 21-page menu of analysis options, covering all my questions and hypotheses. For each analysis option I made a list of steps to investigate it, always including running HyperResearch reports. In the case of interview excerpts, the coded bits came up sorted by class of interviewee, so I could read, for example, all the straddlers’ quotes marked with a certain code, which
enabled me to catch nuances of similarities. For example, I don’t think I would have noticed how often lifelong-working-class activists criticized the leaders of the groups they had quit in the past if I hadn’t read all the working-class excerpts related to leadership at one sitting. I kept a running log of everything I noticed on each topic and pulled out especially telling stories and quotes.

My aim was to include statistics whenever possible, to confirm that the patterns I saw were unlikely to have appeared by coincidence. However, many measures can be used only with sufficiently large Ns and with variables with the appropriate levels of measurement, and on many topics I had small Ns and only nominal variables (categories like gender or type of humor that can’t be ranked). Often only descriptive statistics were applicable, not inferential statistics. I got a crash course in correlating nominal and ordinal variables with low and medium-sized Ns (Chen and Popovitch 2002). It was like climbing up and down a ladder, finding the highest level statistic possible for each analysis (Malec 1993: Chapters 7-11; Warner 2008: Chapter 7-8).

I was able to use the Pearson’s $r$ correlation only in a few cases where I had two ordinal (rank-order) variables for all survey respondents, such as correlating class background with current class. Similarly, analysis of variance (ANOVA) could usually not be used, but testing ANOVA for activists’ racism frames gave me confidence that I had found a very strong difference among classes.

At the other end of the spectrum, sometimes my quantitative data qualified for no inferential statistic at all. For example, for the class comparison in number of unique vocabulary words used per 10,000 words of speech, all I could present was the comparison of raw numbers, with no way to test them for significance. Is the class
difference between 400 and 450 non-repeated words a big difference, or not? I couldn’t find a way to tell.

Comparing rates or means was a little stronger than comparing raw numbers. Some of my word-use comparisons, such as the ethnic terms, had sample sizes too small to calculate a t-test, so all I could do was present the rates or means for an eyeball comparison. Similarly, only the means of the frequency of laughter per hour and the mean number of criticisms of interviewees’ own groups could be presented; there was no way to test how likely it was that the class differences had happened by chance.

Most of the time I was in the middle range of statistics, able to use, for example, chi-square to test the relation between two dichotomous variables; a t-test to see whether differences in word-use rates were significant; or Spearman’s rho to correlate an ordinal variable with another variable. I created dichotomous variables out of a number of nominal variables, such as turning the multi-value racial variable into four 2-value variables: white/non-white, black/non-black, Latino/non-Latino and Asian/non-Asian. Though it cost me some nuance among all four class trajectories, at times it was useful to combine the three college-graduate, PMC-past and/or –future class trajectories (PMC, VDM and straddler) into one value of a dichotomous variable to compare with the lifelong-working-class trajectory.

Sometimes a quantitative analysis meant converting a variable to numeric form or calculating a new variable. For the rooted versus unrooted analysis, for example, I created an index of the sum of five measures of rootedness (sharing parents’ religion; living near where born; born near where parent(s) were born; having dependent children; and working for an employer) and added that new variable to the PASW data file.
For the class-talk section, I combined all the class mentions initiated by informants with all the interviewers’ diversity and class questions that either were or weren’t met with a class-related response, and created a data file of 304 such opportunities to talk about class.

To assemble the data for the analysis of frequency and length of speech at meetings, I searched the meeting transcripts for each participant’s pseudonym (for everyone not in a role requiring extra speech, such as guest speaker, staff or chair/facilitator). I kept a tally of how often each spoke and then calculated rates per hour. As I was doing this frequency tally, I also used the Word Count tool in Word to measure how many words participants spoke in meetings, finding for each person their longest speech-turn. The “Talking Long, Talking Often” class speech interlude and the overtalking chapter relied on analyses of these data.

Originally the purpose of the vocabulary rate comparisons was only to quantify the obvious difference in activists’ abstract/concrete speech. But once I had developed the method of comparing rates of word use, it came in handy for many topics. I created text documents for each class trajectory category that included all the interview transcripts of activists of that class, then used Simple Concordance Program\textsuperscript{114} to call up and count all incidences of significant words (subtracting those in the interviewers’ speech and those used in different senses of the word). The frequencies of each word were divided into the total number of words spoken by all interviewees of that class trajectory, then divided by 10,000 to get rates. I used an online t-test calculator\textsuperscript{115} to test ratios between rates for significance.
Despite the limitations of the data, statistical analyses let me assert class culture
traits much more strongly, confident that what I saw was not just based on anecdotal
patterns that would disappear in a larger study.

7. Writing up the findings

As I analyzed each topic, I wrote up all the class patterns I found, along with key
examples and quantitative results. Once I compiled these write-ups by big themes into
oversized rough documents, there was a risk of deluding myself that I had drafted a
chapter. In fact, writing chapters was another stage, starting again almost from a blank
screen (as advocated by Becker 1986).

I found hundreds of items that correlated with class, but most of them ended up on
the cutting-room floor. It was challenging to decide what to cut and what to include. I had
two criteria: first, whether I could understand the finding in a bigger context, explain it
and tie it to other findings to make an argument; and second, whether it seemed to have
action implications for strengthening social change groups. If any draft-readers asked me,
“What’s the point of this?” or “What’s the implication of this?,” I either had to sharpen
that point or cut it. (A useful resource on the revision process is Zerubavel 2001: Chapter
3, evocatively titled “A Mountain with Stairs.”)

William Faulkner once said, “Kill your darlings,” meaning edit out the bits of
writing you’re most attached to. (Lamott 1995 gives similar advice.) It pained me not to
tell you certain stories, and to leave some of my favorite interviewees and even entire
groups unmentioned. But I knew that no one wants to read a 500-page book.
This editing process has increased my respect for every focused, concise social science book I’ve ever read. Behind every incisive new theory lies a big, messy pudding-swamp of data.
Appendix 2 – Survey

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR MEETING PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for answering these 20 quick questions. Your answers will help the Culture Contrasts in Coalitions study learn how groups can work together better.

We will keep your answers confidential. (If we quote you or anyone from today's meeting, we will change the name of the person and the organization.)

Your first name ____________________ Your neighborhood / town ____________________

Please circle one answer for each question or write on the line provided.

1. Before today's meeting, how many meetings of this group have you attended?
None - today is my first One Two or three Many

2. Your race/ethnicity ____________________

3. Your gender Male Female _________

4. Where were you born? City/State______________________ Country ___________

5. Please tell us one of your favorite:
   Meals ______________________________
   TV or radio shows ______________________
   Musicians ____________________________

6. Which of these take up most of your time?
   Job Student Unemployed Homemaker / at-home parent Self-employed Other____
   If you have a job, what's your occupation? ___________ Employer? ___________
   Do you have kids? Yes No Age(s)__________________

7. In what decade were you born? 1990s 1980s 1970s 1960s 1950s 1940s 1930s

8. Are you religious? Yes No If yes, which faith tradition? ________________

9. Do you live in a …
   House or condo you own Apartment or house you rent Shelter Other ______

10. What was the last school you completed?
    10th grade or less High School 2-year College 4-year College Graduate degree

11. Are you a veteran? Yes No

(Please turn sheet over to see more questions.)
Please tell us a little about your family background.
Thinking back to the household you lived in when you were about 12 years old . . . :

12. Did your family (or guardians) Own their home? Rent their home? Or other?____

13. How much education did your parent(s) or guardian(s) have?
(Circle one for each parent or guardian you lived with at age 12)

Father?
10th Grade or less    High School    2-year College    4-year College    Graduate degree
Mother?
10th Grade or less    High School    2-year College    4-year College    Graduate degree
Other guardian(s)?
10th Grade or less    High School    2-year College    4-year College    Graduate degree

14. What was the greatest source of income of your parent(s) or guardian(s)?
Hourly wages    Salary    Small business    Welfare    Investments

15. Where were your parent(s) or guardian(s) born?
Father ________________ Mother ______________  Other guardian(s) ______________

16. Did you grow up in any particular religious tradition? ______________________________

Now we'd like to know some of your opinions related to this group.

18. In your opinion, the amount of time that this group has spent talking about how people work with each other is . . .
Too much    Just right    Too little

19. Thinking back over today's meeting, do you feel it went . . .
Very well    OK    Not very well    Very badly

Thank you very much for your information.

WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN EARNING $25 FOR A ONE-HOUR INTERVIEW?

If so, please give us your contact information:

Name ______________________________

Phone number ________________ E-mail (if any) ______________________________

Best time of day to reach you ______________________________

We may get in touch with you to schedule a phone interview at your convenience.
### Appendix 3: Summary of protocol for assigning ordinal scores and class categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>Class tag &amp; abbreviation</th>
<th>Current indicators</th>
<th>Background indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 7    | Owning class & upper-upper-middle (OC) | Graduate degree  
Self-disclosed owning class  
Occupations: Major institution CEO, etc. | • 2 parents/guardians w/ grad degrees  
• Income from investments |
| 6    | Upper-middle (UMC) | Graduate degree (or grad student)  
Occupations: Doctor, lawyer, professor, top mgr of institution | • 1 grad degree, any others BA  
(If born 1950s or earlier, regard only father)  
• Income from salary only |
| 5    | Professional middle (PMC) | Private or flagship public BA  
Salaried occupations: mgmt, lower professional, small nonprofit-ED or program director, etc. | • All BAs  
(If born 1950s or earlier, regard only father)  
• Income from salary only |
| 4    | Lower professional (LP) | Public non-flagship BA  
Occupations: Organizer; lower mgmt; white-collar skilled  
Married homemaker if spouse occupation unknown  
Small business if specified professional (eg, tax preparer) | • One BA, another HS degree  
(If born 1950s or earlier, regard only father)  
• Small business if specified as professional (eg, editor)  
• Mixed salary and hourly when professional job specified (eg, journalist) |
| 3    | Lower middle (LMC) | Education:  
2-year; AA  
Vocational public BA (esp. older)  
Unknown whether AA or vocational BA  
Occupation:  
Skilled trade (eg, machinist)  
Small business (unless specified professional)  
Stable salaried line staff | • All HS or 2-year degrees  
• Small business (unless specified professional type)  
• Mixed salary and hourly wages (unless specified professional job) |
| 2    | Working class | HS degree  
Steady waged non-mgmt job | • More than 1 parent/guardian, all HS degree  
• Income from hourly wages |
| 1    | Chronic poverty (POV) | No HS degree  
Income source: Welfare/SSI  
Erratic or PT low-paid job (unless also a student) | • All parent(s) less than HS degree or  
• Only one parent listed, HS degree  
• Income from welfare |
Appendix 4: Boxplot of movement traditions’ class background compositions

The boxplot below gives a snapshot of the class background makeup of the groups in each movement tradition.

To read this unusual type of graph: The thick black line is the median, meaning that half of group members grew up higher and half are lower than this level. For the four movement traditions on the right, this median is very close to the PMC level (indicated by 5); for the left two movement traditions the median is lower. Half the members of the community needs groups grew up at or below the lower-middle-class level (indicated by 3); half the members of the union outreach groups grew up at or below the working-class level, 2.

How tall each box is shows how class-diverse group members’ backgrounds were, how tightly clustered around the median: the top of the box is the 75th percentile, and the bottom is the 25th percentile; thus a very class-diverse group will have a very long box, and a class-homogeneous group will have a stumpy little box. The progressive and anarchist groups have the shortest boxes, meaning the least class diversity, with about half the group clustered between LMC and PMC.

The thin vertical lines show the range from the lowest to highest class-background in that category of groups. All but one underrepresented movement tradition had members ranging from a poverty background to an upper-middle-class background.

Class background composition of groups in each movement tradition

Key to class backgrounds: 1= Poverty; 2= Working Class; 3= Lower Middle; 4= Lower Professional; 5= Professional Middle Class; 6= Upper Middle.

Thick line = Median. Top of box = 75th percentile. Bottom of box = 25th percentile. Top of line = Highest individual. Bottom of line = Lowest individual. Longer boxes and lines mean more class background diversity.
Acknowledgements

As soon as the idea for this project occurred to me in 2006, my longtime mentor Bill Gamson invited me to present it to a session of the Media and Movement Research Action Project (MRAP) seminar at Boston College. After the session, graduate student Erin Balleine came up to me and said, “I want to drop my master’s thesis topic and do your research project instead!” For the next two years, I had a wonderful collaborator in designing the study and doing the fieldwork. Erin and I were fortunate that a skilled and experienced interviewer, my friend Jerry Koch-Gonzalez, was available to recruit groups, observe meetings and interview participants.

The Sociological Initiatives Foundation awarded a grant to Class Action to cover the expenses of this study. Many thanks to the SIF and to Class Action staff who administered the grant. Between that funding and the Time Trade Circle, I was able to get help with labor-intensive data management from myriad detail-oriented people: Carmen Lee, Roy MacKenzie, Rachie Lewis, Allison Stieber, Naomi U, Chris Bowker, Sandra Herforth, Laura Tennenhouse, Daniel Verinder, and Rahima Sage.

Transcribing is the hardest part of qualitative research. At first Erin and I struggled with hiring inexperienced undergraduates and transcribing the audio ourselves, until we found the peerless transcriber Jack Danger. Jack created amazingly accurate transcripts of most taped meetings and interviews, figuring out whose voice was whose at even the biggest and most chaotic meetings, and consistently marked pauses and laughter, which enabled much more fine-grained analysis of what happened at meetings. Her smart-ass comments from a working-class perspective were icing on the cake.

In the fall of 2007, I entered the Boston College Sociology PhD program and submitted this project as my dissertation proposal. I was fortunate to have a Dissertation Committee with such a storehouse of relevant wisdom: chair Bill Gamson, Lisa Dodson, Francesca Polletta and Eve Spangler. Many thanks to them for their feedback, and for the inspiration of their own work.

The faculty, administrator and graduate students in the Sociology Department gave me innumerable types of support. A summer research fellowship freed up the time and covered the travel costs for two trips to each convention city, and a dissertation fellowship gave me two semesters for writing. The department’s Dissertation Seminar, led by Natasha Sarkisian, Leslie Salzinger and Zine Magubane, provided a peer-support home base to try out my ideas; much appreciation to all the fellow graduate students who caught problems in my drafts. Meeting sociologists outside of BC led me to new ideas and literature suggestions as well. In particular, I appreciate the Center for the Study of Social Movements for inviting me to participate in the 2011 Young Scholars in Social Movements conference.

You don’t have to be a statistics genius to do quantitative analysis if you have the right mentors. Stephanie Howe, John Williamson, Natasha Sarkisian, Sandi Propp-Gubin, and the ever-generous Sara Moorman guided me through the statistical rapids. For uncovering the mysteries of Bourdieusian theory, thanks to David Swartz, Juliet Schor and the Harvard Bourdieu Study Group.

When I was daunted by the prospect of applying the 500-item codebook to all 91 transcripts with HyperResearch – the most boring 4-month stretch of the 5-year journey –
my friends created a 91-link paper chain for me; each link had a special and unique reward, such as an inspiring quote, a joke, a photograph or words of encouragement about the value of the research. Each time I finished coding a transcript and tore off a link, I had a wonderful sense of a circle of support around me. Thanks to Anne, Judy, Kathy, Maynard, Felice, Felicia, Gail, Annie, Sally, Katie, Maddie, Olivia, Alaya, Sadia, TD, Sammy and Nina. I especially cherish the links that Felice Yeskel contributed, the last thing she wrote to me in her own hand before her untimely death.

Many friends and colleagues read drafts and gave me savvy advice and encouragement: social scientists Rafe Ezekiel and Kathy Modigliani; Susan Legere; MRAP leader Charlotte Ryan; and labor activists Maynard Seider, Steve Early and Suzanne Gordon, and Anne Ellinger. Anne also organized a book group who read the manuscript and from whom I got very useful reactions: Marc Breslow, Robert Dove, Rafe and Kathy, Helena Halperin, Bob Irwin, Ellen Robertson, Puneet Syal, and Anne Wright. I’d especially like to thank Jack Metzgar, a gifted editor and supporter of writers, who read every single draft chapter, including the ones that were much, much too long; taking his advice was always the right thing to do.

In the history of books, no writer has ever had a more supportive spouse than I have in Gail Leondar-Wright. She never doubted for a minute that I could pull off writing this book. She read every draft and gave me insightful feedback; her sage advice was sometimes informed by her long experience as a book publicist. She graciously accepted the sacrifices in my time availability and breadwinning capacity, often taking on more than her share of responsibilities to give me time to study and write. But I’m grateful to Gail for much more than just these forms of tangible support. At a deeper level, relaxing into such an exceptionally happy marriage released me to dream of doing something ambitious. “It only gets better and stronger, and deeper and nearer, and simpler and freer, and richer and clearer.”

Finally, my thanks to the hundreds of activists who let a researcher observe their meetings and the interviewees who gave their stories and ideas about social change groups. They are my inspiration.
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often remain class-bicultural. of assimilating into professional middle-class cult
between classes; of class consciousness (the collective awareness of being a class); and of organizations
acting on behalf of an entire class’s self-interest (Aronowitz 1992:127; Wright 1985:35 and 2005; Grusky
2005: 51-66). These are good points. However, by those last two criteria, there are no classes-for-
themselves in the US today (except perhaps a ruling class), only classes-in-themselves (unorganized,
unself-aware aggregates that merely share some class indicators). Thus the sociological way of aggregating
people by class indicators is more practical for the current study.

Bourdieu coined the word “habitus” for these inculcated attitudes and practices. To avoid academic jargon and to promote terms more likely to be adopted into everyday vocabulary, I use “predispositions” or “habits” as close synonyms for “habitus.”

In his later work (1998, 2001), Bourdieu began acknowledging gender and ethnic habitus as well as class (Swartz 1997:154-156).

Bourdieu (1980, 1984 and elsewhere) insisted that anyone trying to understand social realities must reject individuals’ own common-sense views of their own social positions, just as they must reject a falsely ‘objective’, scientific overview (Swartz 1997:54, 56-57).

One exception is Fantasia’s (1988) analysis of working-class cultures of solidarity.

Jensen (2012) uses the term “crossovers” for straddlers, a term which emphasizes to the adult experience of assimilating into professional middle-class culture. I use Lubrano’s term to emphasize how straddlers often remain class-bicultural.

The Pearson correlation between class background and current class is \( r=.522, p<.001 \), significant at the .01 level, one-tailed, \( N=246 \). Mixed-class and ambiguous-class informants in either background or current class treated as missing data.

Since founding Women Safe from Violence, Elaine had risen into the straddler category, because she had finally earned a college degree in a vocational field after 20 years of taking courses while working full-time. See the straddler section below for more about the distinct roles played by activists in the gray area between the lifelong-working-class and straddler categories.

Pizza was a favorite food in every class trajectory. Since it’s not a taste that reveals a class contrast, it’s not listed in any profile. It is surprising how unusual this was, how few favorites showed up in every class category.

While generally the outlaw/respectable spectrum correlated with the empowered/disempowered spectrum, a few disempowered outlaws were also observed, such as Olivia, the young Parecon Collective member featured in the first story in Chapter 1. There were also some empowered respectable activists, such as Alonzo from the Local 21 Organizing Committee.

Spearman’s rho for ordinal class background variable and dichotomous variable religious/non-religious: \( \rho=.227, p<.001 \), significant at the .01 level, one-tailed, \( N=235 \). For current class religious dichotomy: \( \rho=.129, p=.024 \), significant at the .05 level, one-tailed, \( N=235 \). Test of the relation between dichotomous class trajectory variable (working-class/college-educated) and dichotomous religious/non-religious variable: \( \chi^2 (1, N=249)=7.66, p=.006 \). Clear-cut yes and no answers to the question “Are you religious?” were included in the dichotomous variable; ambiguous write-in answers such as “Spiritual but not religious” were omitted as missing data.

Details of this story have been changed to obscure which convention was being protested by what groups. Confidentiality about tactics that could provoke prosecution if revealed was the greatest concern expressed by direct action planners in considering whether to be interviewed for this book. To respect this concern, any references to direct action tactics include falsified details, without changing the gist relevant

Notes

1. All names of groups, individuals and cities are pseudonyms.

2. Throughout the book, *italics* indicate exact quotes. Emphasis by the speaker or writer is indicated by *underlining*. **Bold type** shows where I’ve added emphasis. [Square brackets] indicate my insertions and notes; <angle brackets> indicate informants’ actions and sounds.

3. The issue is pseudonymized here as job creation and job training, funded through the community benefits payments required of big developers as a condition of city approval for a private development project; the actual issue has similar technical complexity.

4. Neo-Marxists tend to see sociologists’ method of defining classes by indicator similarities as terribly flawed. For example, Aronowitz mocks sociological class analysts as mere ahistorical “map-makers” (2003:48.) They say that socioeconomic status categories are missing the elements of power relations between classes; of class consciousness (the collective awareness of being a class); and of organizations acting on behalf of an entire class’s self-interests (Aronowitz 1992:127; Wright 1985:35 and 2005; Grusky 2005: 51-66). These are good points. However, by those last two criteria, there are no classes-for-themselves in the US today (except perhaps a ruling class), only classes-in-themselves (unorganized, unself-aware aggregates that merely share some class indicators). Thus the sociological way of aggregating people by class indicators is more practical for the current study.

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to class culture analyses. In this case, the man’s quote is his exact words, but what we saw and both of our past contacts with direct action groups are altered. The white stretch limo, however, was real – too perfect a detail to omit.

16 All those lifelong in the broad professional range are sometimes referred to by the shorthand “PMC,” for brevity’s sake, even though some were more precisely upper-middle-class or lower-professional, or had moved up or down within the professional range.

17 Students and other very young adults aged 18 to roughly 24 were never categorized as straddlers, but by their childhood class, as they had had too little adult experience in the class system to be fully socialized into a new class. Similarly, the VDM category only contains people who had some years of adult experience in the class system. This age requirement lowered the N for the VDM category.

19 Another reason the VDM number is low is that participants in large Spokes Councils during the conventions were the most likely of all observed meeting attendees to decline to be surveyed. No doubt some VDM activists were among them, along with students and temporary protestors with day jobs. In some cases informal sources indicated that certain unsurveyed meeting participants were VDM. A conservative estimate of the number of VDM activists observed at meetings is 70, more than triple the number who filled out the demographic surveys.

20 There were also 21 involuntarily downwardly mobile people surveyed; they were considered involuntary if they didn’t communicate any VDM intentions, but did communicate a cause for downward mobility such as a disability, an addiction, a long-term layoff, or a Vietnam veteran PTSD story. There were also a few people whose reasons for being at a much lower class level than in their childhood were unknown. All were treated as missing data in quantitative analyses.

21 In some cases interviewees used the terms punk or pagan to describe themselves or other activists; in other cases I interpreted their subcultural traits and applied these terms myself.

22 I had planned to analyze political discussions during meetings and look for class patterns in how groups framed issues, but such discussions turned out to be too rare to warrant analysis.

23 Correlating class background and movement tradition, Spearman’s rho=.260, p<.001, one-tailed, N=289. For class background, rho=.265, p<.001, one-tailed, N=286.

32 Personal experience is my source here. I was at the demolished MOVE house on the day of the 1978 shoot-out and spoke with many West Philadelphia neighbors, then and later.
36 The methodology for this “kid(s)” rate and all other vocabulary-frequency comparisons below involved making one text document out of all interview transcripts for each broad class trajectory, as well as another one combining the three college-educated trajectories; creating a concordance of vocabulary in order of frequency, using Simple Concordance Program; dividing frequencies into the total number of words in the whole document to get a rate of use for each word; calculating a rate per 10,000 words; then calculating the ratio of those rates. The t-test for significant differences between working-class interviewees (N=35) and all college-educated interviewees (N=42) shows t=10.19, p < .001, extremely statistically significant. Any higher rate of a word by working-class interviewees is unusual, because they used so many more specific names of people, places, and organizations, making all general terms a smaller share of their speech. However, since working-class activists are more likely to be parents, and since most interviews included reviewing answers to the survey, which included questions about numbers and ages of children, some of the working-class references to children were in the context of these factual descriptions of family configuration.
In all word counts here and below, all variations of the words were included, such as “kids,” “grandson,” “granddaughter(s),” “grandkid(s),” etc.

Again, using the concordances of interview transcripts, frequencies of the word “help” were divided into the total number of words spoken by all interviewees of each class trajectory, then divided by 10,000 to get rates. The working-class rate of 6.5 times per 10,000 words was contrasted with 4.7 times by PMC interviewees, 4.4 times by straddlers, and only 3.6 times by VDM interviewees.


The total number of group laughs was divided into the meeting’s total number of minutes. Because of some untaped meetings, a few transcriptions that didn’t include notes on laughter, and other problems with tallying both group laughter and meeting length, N=15 (out of the 34 total meetings observed): five working-class-majority groups, eight PMC-majority, three straddler-majority, and one VDM-majority.

The median was a very similar 8.47, suggesting that outliers are not distorting the mean for working-class-majority groups.

The median was 11.86, suggesting that a few high-laughter groups pulled up the mean for PMC-majority groups.

I wasn’t able to calculate an exact average for the VDM-majority groups since some didn’t allow taping, but at one meeting zero group laughs were heard, and two others inspired field notes about the strange dearth of laughter.

In all transcripts of lifelong-work groups' organizational styles, regardless of class.

When class-mobile categories are combined with lifelong categories, the rate of laughing at individual foibles at meetings of working-class background (straddlers plus lifelong-working-class) groups (N=8 meetings) was 3.2 times per hour, compared with 1.2 times in PMC-background (VDM plus lifelong-PMC) groups (N=10), a 2.09:1 ratio.

The mean rate of SNAFU laughter was very close to 2 per hour of meeting for all class categories. The few groups with very high numbers of laughter at SNAFU comments, 4 to 8 per hour (the Parecon Collective, City Power and Green Homes Green World) were very different from each other in class, race and gender composition and in movement tradition. This kind of humor seems to be a feature of certain groups’ organizational styles, regardless of class.

When class background is included, the PMC/working-class ratio of mean rates per hour of meeting laughter about word play and cultural references is 2.9:1 (working-class/straddler N=8; PMC/VDM N=10). The ratio is 3:1 when only lifelong-PMC-majority groups (N=9) are compared to lifelong-working-class-majority groups (N=5).

Thanks to Francesca Polletta for suggesting this phrase.

Thanks to Francesca Polletta for suggesting this phrase.

Writer and counselor Fisher Lavell, a Canadian straddler, told me that such direct responses by a leader would be considered offensively patronizing in her rural working-class community, particularly among indigenous people; silent listening would be the respectful response. This feedback was helpful in showing me that some of the class culture patterns I observed were specific to the United States.

Test of the relation between the dichotomous variable indicating lifelong-professional-middle-class or not-professional-middle-class and the dichotomous abstract/concrete speech variable: \( \chi^2 (1, N=27)=12.71, p<.001 \). For lifelong-working-class or not working-class: \( \chi^2 (1, N=27)=8.13, p<.004 \). For straddler/not-straddler, \( \chi^2 (1, N=27)=3.14, p=.076 \). The dichotomous variable indicating voluntarily downwardly mobile or not does not have a statistically significant association with abstract/concrete speech, because the number of VDM interviews is too small, only 7.

Correlation between class background and dichotomous variable of interviewees’ notably abstract or concrete speech: \( \rho=.526, p=.002 \), significant at the 0.01 level, 1-tailed, N=29.
Correlation between current class and dichotomous variable of interviewees’ notably abstract or concrete speech: \(\rho = .412, p < .013\), significant at the .03 level, 1-tailed, \(N = 29\).

Test of the relation between the dichotomous variables male/not-male and female/not-female and the dichotomous abstract/concrete speech variable: \(\chi^2 (1, N=29) = .017, p = .897\).

Test of the relation between the dichotomous variable white/not-white and the dichotomous abstract/concrete speech variable: \(\chi^2 (1, N=29) = 1.42, p = .233\). For black/not-black, \(\chi^2 (1, N=29) = 3.02, p = .082\). For Latino/not Latino, \(\chi^2 (1, N=29) = 0.05, p = .823\). For Asian/not-Asian, \(\chi^2 (1, N=29) = .842, p = .359\).

Test of the relation between the dichotomous variable community-needs-group/not-community-needs and the dichotomous abstract/concrete speech variable: \(\chi^2 (1, N=29) = .057, p = .811\). For labor/not-labor, \(\chi^2 (1, N=29) = 3.02, p = .082\). For progressive-cause/not-progressive-cause, \(\chi^2 (1, N=29) = .607, p = .436\). For anarchist/not-anarchist, \(\chi^2 (1, N=29) = 2.43, p = .119\). For staff advocacy/non-staff-advocacy, \(\chi^2 (1, N=29) = .738, p = .390\). Only one interviewee in a militant anti-imperialist cause group was notably abstract or concrete, so \(\chi^2\) couldn’t be calculated.

Correlation between notably abstract or concrete speech and decade born: \(\rho = .326, p = .042\), significant at the .05 level, 1-tailed, \(N = 29\).

Working-class interviewees as a group used approximately 450 distinct words per 10,000 words spoken; professional-middle-class interviewees used approximately 400 distinct words per 10,000; straddlers used approximately 500 distinct words per 10,000.

To find the rate of non-repeated words, I sorted the concordances for each class trajectory’s interview transcripts by decreasing frequency of word use; found the cut-off rank for words used twice or more per 10,000; divided the total number of vocabulary words by the cut-off rank to get the rate of multiple uses; and subtracted this percent of two or more uses from 100 to get the percent of rarely used words.

The percentages in Tables III: 1, 2, 3 and 4 come from the word-frequency lists created in Simple Concordance Program from the combined interview transcripts of each broad class trajectory. The college-educated row represents the totals of the PMC, VDM and straddler frequencies. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding. The t-tests here and in Tables 3, 4 and 5 were calculated on online calculator at www.graphpad.com/quickcalcs, using standard deviations calculated online at http://www.quantitativeskills.com/sisa/statistics. \(p < .001\) indicates an extremely significant difference.

There may be similar class differences in terminology for Native Americans (“indigenous” and “Native American” versus “Indian”) and for Asian Americans (“Asian” versus nationality words), but the total number of references is too small to be sure.

The few people using the antiquated terms “colored” and “Negro” were almost all African-American, sometimes young people with a hip, ironic tone, sometimes older working-class people with old habits.

The small N for working-class references to people of color generally, just 15, virtually guaranteed that the class difference would not be statistically significant, but the small N itself is evidence of how working-class people tended to talk about race, with more specificity and fewer general references.

Transgender references were too few to correlate with class or race. It appeared that people in more radical groups and in groups with transgender members were more likely to mention gender identities such as “genderqueer,” “transsexual,” and “transgender.”

Analysis of variance shows that informants in different class trajectories vary statistically significantly in the race frames they invoke: \(F = 8.85, df\) between groups = 3, \(p < .001\). Post-hoc Tukey tests show that the statistically significant variations are between lifelong working-class activists and each of the three college-educated class trajectory groups: working-class and straddler, \(p < .001\); working-class and PMC, \(p < .001\); working-class and VDM, \(p < .05\). The voluntarily downwardly mobile trajectory had a smaller N, not just because they are the smallest group of informants, but also because they talked about race least often.

Excluding other meanings such as classrooms and class action suits; just in the sense of social class.

One of the exceptions is the uncommon term “working class,” which college-educated people said as infrequently as working-class people did. All working-class interviewees were 1.15 times as likely as others to say “working-class.” But when outlier Dorothea was excluded, working-class interviewees were then slightly less likely to use “working-class” than college-educated interviewees. In addition, in some cases the interviewer used “working class” as a prompt, and some working-class interviewees said the
The interview protocol fished for class awareness and class terminology in several ways. First came an open question along the lines of “How are the members of your group similar and how are they different?” sometimes including the word “diversity.” If no demographic identities were mentioned, interviewees were then prompted with a gender observation, such as “It seems that there are more women than men,” and a question such as “what else?” About half of the 61 interviews included these opportunities to bring up class unprompted, with no prior mention of class by the interviewer; in the other half of the interviews class had already been mentioned by interviewer or interviewee. If the interviewee didn’t mention class or any class indicators (such as education or occupation) in answering those first questions, they were then asked explicitly, “How would you describe the people at the meeting in terms of their social class?,” followed if needed by a prompt, “For example, who might be the richest and who might be the poorest?”. Then in the last portion of more than three-quarters of the interviews, while going over what the person wrote on the paper survey, the interviewer asked, “How would you describe yourself in terms of your social class?” The answers to these questions were coded for conventional and unconventional class terms, and whether class mentions were prompted or unprompted; each code was assigned a numeric score and entered into a PASW data file.

A dataset of 304 times when informants either mentioned class or were asked a class or diversity question but answered with a non-class, resistant or garbled answer was analyzed for correlations with the class trajectory, race, gender, age and movement tradition of the informant. Class trajectories were compiled into a dichotomous variable of lifelong-working-class vs. college-graduate (the PMC, VDM and straddler trajectories) (shorthand term below “WC/college-graduate”). A dichotomous variable was created distinguishing resistant or garbled class responses (shorthand term below “non-class responses”) from all other class mentions. Test of the relation between the dichotomous WC/college-graduate and the dichotomous variable of giving non-class responses: $\chi^2 (1, N=301)=6.42, p=.011$. Crosstabs for non-class responses and the WC/college-graduate variables show that 17% of working-class class-talk opportunities but only 7% of college-graduates’ class-talk opportunities were non-class responses.

$\chi^2$ shows no significant difference in giving non-class responses and dichotomous variables for each race, gender, or movement tradition, except that Latinos were less likely to give non-class responses: for Latino/not-Latino variable, $\chi^2 (1, N=303)=4.05, p=.044$. Spearman’s rho is not significant for decade born: $\rho=.056, p=.167$, one-tailed, $N=299$.

Crosstabs for the dichotomous non-class responses variable by the dichotomous WC/college-graduate variable, broken out by layers of race, gender, movement tradition and age cohort. $\chi^2$ is not significant except for females, for whom $\chi^2 (1, N=186)=3.96, p=.047$; for people under age 28, for whom $\chi^2 (1, N=53)=7.10, p=.008$; and for members of labor outreach groups, for whom $\chi^2 (1, N=63)=4.86, p=.028$. In other words, working-class people in every subcategory are more likely to give confused, resistant or non-class responses to class and diversity questions than college-educated people, but that class difference is strong enough to be statistically significant only among women, young activists and members of union outreach groups.

Test of relationship between dichotomous working-class/college-graduate variable and dichotomous variable of mentions or failures to mention class in answer to questions about identities of others in the group: $\chi^2 (1, N=303)=1.86, p=.173$.

Test of relationship between dichotomous white/not-white variable and dichotomous variable of mentions or failures to mention class in answer to questions about identities of others in the group: $\chi^2 (1, N=131)=3.95, p=.047$. For black/not-black: $\chi^2 (1, N=131)=4.84, p=.028$. For Latino/not-Latino, $\chi^2 (1, N=131)=1.05, p=.305$. $\chi^2$ is not significant for dichotomous variables for each gender, decade born and movement tradition.

Test of relationship between dichotomous working-class/college-graduate variable and dichotomous variable of mentioning concrete proximate class facts: $\chi^2 (1, N=300)=4.43, p=.035$. There was no significant relationship between any race, gender or movement tradition and such concrete class talk.

In 2007 the non-profit group Class Action, whose board and staff I have served on, set a goal that the spell-check function in major word-processing programs would no longer flag “classism” and “classist” as spelling errors. As of 2012 that goal has not been reached.
Excluding other meanings such as “did a poor job”; just in the sense of low-income. Working-class interviewees used “poor” 4.92 times per 10,000 words compared with 1.7 times for all college-educated interviewees. Straddlers said “poor” only .5 times per 10,000 words. “Low-income” was said by all interviewees about 1.2 times per 10,000 words.

Bourgeois bohemians, a phrase coined by Brooks 2001, *Bobos in Paradise*, to describe the rise of elite anti-consumerist tastes.

Though Carlsson lists an impressively thorough bibliography of non-Bourdieuian class analysts (including Marx, Aronowitz, Wright, Gorz and many other classic and recent texts), he doesn’t cite Bourdieu, nor other analysts who see transmission of status hierarchies through distinctions of cultural capital, social capital or tastes. What he rejects as outmoded and soon to be transcended is the neo-Marxist materialist definition of class as exploitative relations of production, which he seems to regard as the only definition of class.

This subset of six was selected because they are the only meetings with such clear-cut class compositions at the two ends of the class spectrum for which complete word-for-word transcripts are available (excluding extremely small and very large meetings, which tend to have atypical conversation patterns). These meetings each had between 5 to 20 people who weren’t playing a speaking role such as chair, staff or presenter.

This comparison also excludes all chairs, staff, and guest speakers, those with a responsibility to speak extra at the meeting.

Minimal responses such as *right, right* (also known as “response tokens,” “continuers” and “back-channel responses” (Gardner 2001)) were counted as turns if they included words, but not counted if they were only sounds such as *mmm-hmmm*. These responses were more common among working-class women and people of color. But only a few people frequently chimed in with such conversational supports; the vast majority of the speech turns tallied in the utterance counts involved actually taking the floor.

Ns are different than in Table 3 because of four meetings with partial transcripts for which turn counts but not word counts were possible.

Again, this comparison excludes all chairs, staff, and guest speakers.

All race/gender combinations in the overall pool have at least one long-talker except for Latino men. Percent using more than 174 words in their longest speaking turn: 31% of men; 22% of women; 25% of whites; 28% of African Americans; 20% of Latinos; 17% of those born after 1960; 30% of those born before 1960.

To measure frequency of talking, the number of total speaking turns in each meeting (excluding speech within the roles of guest speaker, staff or chair/facilitator) was divided by the number of attendees to determine an equal share of airspace, the number of times each person would have spoken if participation had been divided equally. Then a ratio was calculated for the 143 participants for whom exact turn counts and complete demographic information were available, by dividing their number of speaking turns by the equal share. Twenty-four meeting participants (17% of the 143) spoke at a rate twice or greater than their share.

4 women, 7 men; one black, one Latina, one Asian American, 8 whites; born in 5 different decades.

Three were lifelong-working-class in mostly professional-range or VDM groups. Another was the only straddler in a mostly PMC group. Two overtalkers were lifelong PMC, one in a group with a lower-middle-class majority and one in a group that was mostly straddlers. And three overtalkers in mostly working-class groups came from professional backgrounds; two of them were involuntarily downwardly mobile, perhaps for reasons related to their overtalking.

Asperger’s Syndrome is a mild form of autism characterized by poor skills at reading social cues.

It should be noted again that almost all people of color were observed in mixed-race groups. Only one meeting made up entirely of people of color was observed. Thus these observations might not reflect how people of color would interact without any whites present. For one interpretation of this race difference, see Brown 1980 on politeness as the expression of social distance or subordination.

The extremely high rate of swear words by voluntarily downwardly mobile interviewees, 17.58 per 10,000 words, is not a reliable finding for two reasons: the small number of VDM interviews, just 8, and distortion from one outlier, Zorro, who peppered almost all her sentences with swear words, in particular “*fucking*.”
Excluding cases of disapprovingly quoting others as saying “fuck.” Several PMC interviewees criticized a militant group that used “Fuck the troops” as a rally chant. Included in this table are only cases in which the interviewees themselves said the swear word, not as a quote.

In all other parts of the book, I obscure the geographical locations of the groups by using city pseudonyms and other concealment; the Denver DNC protest groups in this section are an exception. My reason is that there were only two 2008 convention cities, and in the Twin Cities, the RNC protest groups agreed to a unity pledge, vowing not to speak publicly against other activist groups. There were also some antagonisms among RNC convention protest groups, but they were successfully kept confidential, almost never visible in the media or online. Most groups publicly supported other groups’ events. Several Twin Cities interviewees expressed pride in how well the pledge of solidarity worked. It would be an unfair betrayal of my Twin Cities informants to write vaguely of activists attacking each other in “one of the convention cities,” placing suspicion on them for the intra-movement hostilities in Denver. Elsewhere in the book, less controversial Denver stories are told with their location obscured, as with all other groups in the study.

I interviewed and surveyed Anthony and the professor who made the disputed flyer, recorded and transcribed their words; but they are not counted among the 61 interviewees and 362 in the study because these two men were neither activists nor group members.

DNC activists’ accusations of unacceptable behavior included three other threats of violence; two threats to sue; drowning out another group’s rally by shouting into an amplified bullhorn; a hate-blog almost entirely devoted to profanity-filled trashing of The People’s Convention, using insults comparing them with mentally disabled people; “spies” who attended meetings only to report on them to rival groups or to the hate-blogger; denouncing activists publicly (in the media, online or from a rally stage), including two public accusations that someone was a government informer, without evidence given, and one false accusation of posting violent content online; “stealing bands” and speakers from one rally for another (several accusations, at least some probably unfounded); a threat to change an event time deliberately to conflict with another group’s event; a threat to cancel a keynote speaker’s plane ticket secretly; and many email and listserv messages using harsh language (e.g., “shut up,” “Stalinist”) towards or about other activists.

In several groups, a member was believed to be drunk or drugged at a meeting or public event; in two groups, someone spent the organization’s money in unauthorized ways; in another group, members stole money; in one group, a member hit another member; in several groups, members abused power, such as stacking a meeting to win a vote or hiding a financial conflict of interest; members of several groups yelled, swore, said insult words or were verbally hostile in ways that offended other members.

Survey respondents were scored by whether they shared their parents’ religion; whether they lived near where they were born (in the same metropolitan area or within 100 miles); whether they were born near where one or both parents were born; whether they had dependent children; and whether they worked for an employer. Those with three or more of those factors were categorized as very rooted. Those with one or none of those factors were categorized as very unrooted. An intermediate score of two became a middle value in a three-value variable. For the correlation between the ordinal rooted/unrooted variable and a dichotomous variable of working-class or not working-class, rho= -.159, p=.003, significant at the .01 level, 1-tailed, N=305.

Three dichotomous variables were also created: very unrooted or not; very rooted or not; and medium rooted or not. Only 15% of college graduates (N=221) were very rooted, compared with 30% of working-class activists (N=84). Test of relationship between dichotomous working-class/college-graduate variable and very rooted or not: \( \chi^2 (1, N=305)=8.69, p=.003 \). Of college graduates, 59% were very unrooted, compared with 45% of lifelong working-class activists. Test of relationship between dichotomous working-class/college-graduate variable and very unrooted or not: \( \chi^2 (1, N=305)=4.86, p=.028 \). Relationship with medium rooted was not significant.

Decade born significantly correlated with dichotomous variable of rooted or unrooted: Spearman’s rho= -.360, p<.001, one-tailed, N=270.

For example, one of only two members from working-class backgrounds in a majority-VDM group; the only steadily employed lifelong-PMC person in a majority-VDM anarchist group; and three lone straddlers in PMC-majority groups were accused of extreme misbehavior.
“Success” indicates a decisive victory in a campaign or other external goal; “thriving” is a less clear-cut measure of success, measured by group longevity, high activity level towards goals, and growing membership; “failure” indicates disbanding the group or abandoning its main activities. “Growing” and “shrinking” indicate membership size during study period and the six months before and after. Excluding several student interns, who mostly acted as observers at meetings. Mean and median class trajectory of this group including interns would be lower-professional.

Eliasoph (1998) devotes an appendix to justifying her decision neither to categorize her informants by class nor to describe the cultural themes she found as class cultures.

The issues on which we found social change group activity in 2006 were labor solidarity and anti-sweatshops; environmental justice; post-Katrina reconstruction; anti-war; anti-poverty (including fighting budget cuts in human services such as daycare, affordable housing and health care) and welfare rights; living wage and minimum wage; immigrant rights and civil liberties; climate change; racial profiling and police brutality; reproductive rights; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights; and prison reform.

Sources of current activist issues included the magazines The Progressive, ColorLines, Z, In These Times, The Nation, Ms., Yes, Utne Reader, Mother Jones, and the websites Common Dreams, Alternet, Black Commentator, and Racewire.

I recruited the two raters through the Time Trade Circle (http://timetradecircle.org/), paying them in hours that they could spend on other TTC services. I also got TTC help with data entry, typing up literature notes and statistics research and fact-checking — a good tip for other researchers without expense budgets. Both were white middle-aged women who had been laid off from technical professional jobs during the Great Recession.
