

Pretense, Putdowns, and Missing Identities in Activists' Class Talk

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Abstract

Americans are noted for not talking about social class. Does the same hold true for progressive group members? A study of 25 U.S. social movement organizations found that two class categories of progressive activists avoided explicit talk of class and, when asked about class identity, resisted the question or garbled their answers. First, lifelong working-class and poor activists (those lacking college degrees and professional/managerial jobs in both the current and the prior generation) were less likely to use conventional class terms. Second, voluntarily downwardly mobile activists (college graduates raised by professional parents who had chosen to work part-time jobs or no jobs to free up time for activism or to enact environmental or antimaterialist values) tended to equate themselves with involuntarily low-income people, misrecognizing their higher cultural capital. In the absence of clear, open class identities within activist groups, distorted class talk filled the vacuum. Falsely posing as working class sometimes conferred status. References to class and race privilege were sometimes used as insults. When the bottom half of the 99 percent do not name their class identity, and when some class-privileged activists deny their cultural capital, such missing class identities may harm the development of group cohesion in social movement groups.

Keywords

social movements, class identity, comparative group cultures

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Personal Reflexive Statement

My first encounters with fake working-class people took place in environmental coalitions. College-educated sectarian leftist party members raised in professional families would claim to speak for the labor movement, often over the objections of actual union representatives. Unlike other labor organizers who were upfront about coming from elite backgrounds, these posers dressed identically in jeans, plaid flannel shirts, and baseball caps. When they spoke, they dropped their g's, used only short words and spoke in a blunt, gruff tone, imitating what they imagined working-class speech to be. The goal of this pretense was to sway certain coalition decisions to conform to the political line of their party. It usually did not work; most other coalition members regarded them as posers.

I had a very different experience of class talk when I joined Movement for a New Society (MNS), a national network of social change activists (Cornell 2011). MNS's founders, veterans of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, had mostly grown up working class or poor. Newer members like me had recently flooded in to MNS from elite colleges, and the founders experienced many of us as undisciplined and self-absorbed. Since MNS members all worked only part time to free up time for volunteer activism, our below-poverty incomes were similar. Yet some highly educated young members with a family safety net saw no difference between themselves and the lifelong working-class members. Provoked by this, working-class MNS members organized speak-outs in which they told us their life stories and pointed out classism in the organization. MNS began to hold class caucuses during retreats (along with gender and race caucuses) and to include classism workshops in activist training programs.

These MNS approaches to class talk have been continued by the national nonprofit Class Action, on whose board and staff I have served since 2004. Class Action specializes in cross-class dialogue groups and workshops in which participants are invited to share stories from their own class experience. Through Class Action's work, I have witnessed the transformative impact on individuals and organizations of openly sharing class life stories.

Introduction: Unspoken and Misrecognized Class Inequities

It has often been said that Americans do not talk about social class (Aronowitz 1992:35-42; Devine 1992; Metzgar 2010; Shelton and Wilson 2006). Some researchers have found that interviewees give nonanswers to class identity questions (Grusky 2005:68; Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2001), while others have found fluid and changeable class self-identities (DiMaggio 2012:16-17).

But which Americans in particular are least likely to assert a class identity? Contrary to other social identities, for which naming the group has been done first and foremost by members of the group (Martin 1991; Nagel 1994), those most affected by class inequality are least likely to refer to people with any other class

identity words besides the common and vague “middle class” (Metzgar 2003). While women most often raise gender issues within organizations, and people of color most often raise race issues, the same cannot be presumed about working-class and poor people and class issues, as the research findings below will show. Why not?

For one thing, it is hard to talk about something without shared vocabulary. Both ordinary Americans and academics use widely varied terminology for class differences (see review in Wright 2005). Some authors have broken the class spectrum into 2 (Fiske and Markus 2012; Jensen 2012), 3 (Zweig 2011 [2000]), 4 (Breen 2005), 7 (Goldthorpe 1980), or 12 (Wright 1985) categories. To sociologists, “class” usually refers to a cluster of social indicators. A case can be made for giving the most weight to income (Bartels 2006; George 2006), assets (Conley 1999), power (Aronowitz 2003; Dahrendorf 1959), workplace autonomy (Wright 1985; Zweig 2011 [2000]), social status (Breen 2005), or education and other cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Lareau 1988).

Because he put cultural and social capital on a par with financial capital, French sociologist Bourdieu’s (1983, 1984) ideas are especially relevant to social movement groups, where there is often a narrow range of financial resources, but vast inequality in education levels and social networks. His map of social space (simplified in Figure 1) distinguishes between two 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). The vertical distances among those with less and more total capital are class differences; but the horizontal distances between the intelligentsia and business managers are *not* class differences; instead they are distinctions between different *types* of capital. Just as Bourdieu spotlighted the misrecognized cultural privilege of his fellow elite French intellectuals and artists, in this article I spotlight the misrecognized cultural privilege of college-educated middle-class activists.

The pervasive confusion about class pervading American society distorts progressive movement building. The popular myth that the United States is a classless society is scorned by most on the left, but paradoxically the myth of a classless *movement* lives on. As shown below, some activists believe that the very act of sacrificing time 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 classes are nonexistent.

This myth of classlessness did not always prevail on the left. Historically, the discourse within U.S. working-class mass movements has often included an explicit working-class or poor people’s identity (Lichtenstein 2002; Piven and Cloward 1979).

If such widespread class identities are a thing of the past, their absence may impede movement building. Developing shared collective identities is essential for the group cohesion on which social movements depend (Gamson 1991; Melucci 1995). Thus, movements for economic justice could be weakened by the absence

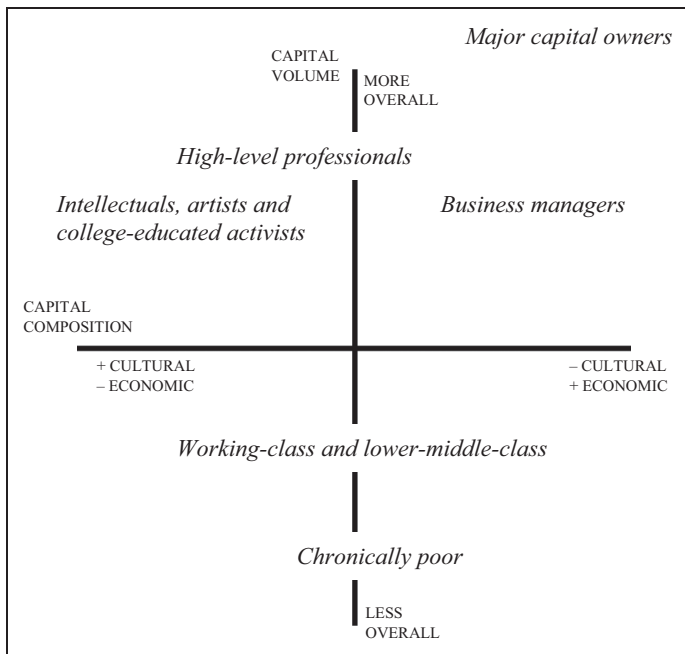


Figure 1. Diagram of social space; the volume and composition of capital.

Source: Chart adapted from Bourdieu (1984:128-29), with U.S. class categories in italics.

of a widely held, explicit and proud working-class identity, as well as by the failure of class-privileged activists to develop an ally identity (Munkres 2008; Myers 2008) based on awareness of their relative class advantages.

The only institutionalized representatives of working-class Americans, labor unions, have shrunk from representing 33 percent of nonfarm wageworkers in 1953 to only 11 percent today (Early 2009; Lichtenstein 2002). This shrinkage would predict a less common and less salient working-class identity now than in the period from the 1930s to the 1970s. Changing rhetoric by the two major political parties, which now tend to avoid the terms “working class” and “poor” in favor of “working families” and “middle class” (Metzgar 2003, 2010), as well as the mainstream media’s paucity of union and workplace coverage, may also have affected many less affluent Americans’ self-identities.

At the other end of the class spectrum, class identities are also weak, and among antimaterialist activists in particular. Movement cultures can be more or less distinct from mainstream culture (Lofland 1995), and for the last half century of U.S. movement history, highly distinct countercultures have correlated with higher education levels and more elite class backgrounds. It is common for anticonsumerists to confuse their off-the-grid or do-it-yourself (DIY) lifestyles with shedding class privilege. Carlsson (2008) went to the annual Burning Man festival in the Nevada

desert, popular among some voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) subcultures, and asked 24 people (almost all white) 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; emphasis added), 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 (PMC) occupations or had dropped out full time and were VDM.

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:

- “*It seems like a really old-fashioned word, one that’s gone out of style.*” (P. 175)
- “*I don’t get the class thing . . . part of it is about self-imposed limitations, and that’s really tragic.*” (P. 222)
- 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.*” (P. 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.*” (P. 203)

Carlsson (2008) by and large accepts the Burning Man participants’ premise that their unpaid, unalienated labor removes them from 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 VDM people as the vanguard of a new utopian economy, believing that their repudiation of class contributes to social transformation toward 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.* (P. 175; emphasis added)

Bourdieu (1984) had a phrase for Carlsson’s (2008) form of denial of class. He described it as “*confusion between class struggles and class-fraction struggles*” (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*” (451). The parallel confusion among VDM activists stems from their failure to recognize DIY

projects and off-the-grid lifestyles as high-cultural capital tastes. For example, for many years, vegan and organic food were popular primarily 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.

Antimaterialist 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 anticonsumerism? Referring to the nonprofit sector, Lamont (1992) 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 ... (P. 152)

In this explanation, bohemian tastes tend to grow from a PMC childhood because experiencing financial security as a child leads to less craving for consumer goods as an adult.

Within social movement organizations (SMOs) in particular, I expected class lines to be blurred by bohemians’ reversal of visible class indicators such as clothing and hairstyling. My hypothesis in this study was that class identities would be weak and inconsistent in general, but especially absent among two groups, lifelong working-class and poor activists, and the most countercultural college-educated activists.

Method and Data

This analysis of class discourse uses data from my comparative, mixed-methods study of U.S. progressive SMOs (Leondar-Wright Forthcoming). An SMO is defined here as a voluntary group with a mission of winning institutional or cultural changes, using member involvement to create pressure on decision makers or on mainstream culture. The pool of possible groups was formed in 2007 by identifying the most prominent progressive issues¹ and contacting SMOs working on those issues in southern New England and Florida. In order to include situations of high-pressure activism in which strangers were thrown together under time constraints, groups planning protest events at the 2008 Republican and Democratic National Conventions in St. Paul and Denver were added, as well as ongoing SMOs in Minnesota and Colorado.

Three fieldworkers observed and taped 36 naturally occurring meetings of 25 SMOs in eight cities; conducted one- to two-hour interviews with 62 members; and collected demographic surveys from 362 meeting participants.²

Table 1. Class Trajectory Breakdown of Study Informants.

Class Trajectory	Acronym or Shorthand	Definition	N
Lifelong working-class range	Working class	Education less than BA, nonprofessional/managerial occupation, in range from poverty to lower-middle class both in parents' and own generation	94
Lifelong professional middle-class range	PMC	Education BA or more, professional/managerial occupation, in range from lower professional to owning class both in parents' and in own generation	125
Upwardly mobile straddler	Straddler	Grew up in working-class range, BA or more, now in professional range	45
Voluntarily downwardly mobile	VDM	Grew up in professional range, BA or more, now doing working-class or no job due to values-based choices	47

Note: BA = Bachelor of Arts; PMC = professional middle-class; VDM = voluntarily downwardly mobile.

The survey data allow for identification of three components of an informant's class identity: class background, current class, and trajectory (upward or downward mobility or steady). To identify class background, the survey asked whether parents owned or rented their home, parents' education levels, and parents' main sources of income when the informants were 12 years old. For current class, survey questions asked about informants' own education, occupation, and homeownership. In analyzing both background and current class, education was weighted most heavily, followed by occupation and source of income.

Class labels were applied to the main categories that emerged from the analysis of survey data: poor, working class, lower-middle-class (LMC), lower professional (LP),³ PMC,⁴ upper-middle class, and owning class.

Most respondents' survey answers revealed a coherent class trajectory. Fewer than 2 percent of 362 survey respondents gave such contradictory class indicators (e.g., a janitor with a law degree) as to be labeled "mixed class" or discarded as dubious data. Most informants fell clearly into one of the four trajectories: (1) lifelong in the working-class range (poor, working class, and/or LMC; $N = 94$); (2) lifelong in the professional range (LP, PMC, upper middle, and/or owning class; $N = 125$); (3) upwardly mobile "straddlers" (Lubrano 2004; $N = 45$); and (4) VDM from a privileged background ($N = 47$; see Table 1).

The VDM trajectory is uncommon in the wider population, but more common in activist circles: college graduates with well-off parents who have chosen not to maximize income in order to enact their values, either to live simply or to give more time to progressive activism, art, or other volunteer work. (College students and

others younger than 23 were categorized by their parents' class during their childhood, as they had not yet had much adult class experience.)

The informants in all class trajectory categories were diverse in gender and age. The VDM informants were almost all white (just two were Asian American) and U.S.-born, while the other three class trajectory categories were diverse in race, ethnicity, and national origin. People of color were 28 percent of the whole pool.

To minimize bias and inconsistency, three people scored the survey data, and only when all three came up with identical or adjacent class subcategories were respondents given one of the class trajectory labels. Mixed-class informants and inconsistently scored respondents were treated as missing data in statistical analyses.

Analysis began with open coding of meeting and interview transcripts (Patton 1990) to generate a codebook of themes observed or brought up by informants, an inductive process aiming for grounded theory (Charmaz 2005). The next step was line-by-line coding using qualitative analysis software; codes were then correlated with informants' class trajectories.

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?" 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 an open-ended prompt 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 did not 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 such as "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?"

For the analysis of class talk and class identities in this article, I created a data set⁵ of instances when informants either mentioned class or were asked a class or diversity question but answered with a nonclass, resistant, or garbled answer. This data set was analyzed for correlations with the class trajectory, race, gender, age, and movement tradition of the informant. The four class trajectories were compiled into a dichotomous variable of lifelong working class versus college graduate (combining the PMC, VDM, and straddler trajectories, shorthanded below as "working-class/college graduate"). A dichotomous variable was created distinguishing resistant or garbled class responses (shorthanded below as "nonclass responses") from all other class mentions.

Most of the 25 groups in the study had economic justice goals, such as poverty reduction, empowerment of working-class and/or poor people, or the reduction of

corporate power. Thus, investigating the prevalence and accuracy of class-identity discourse within the groups is connected to assessing their chances of reaching their own self-described goals.

Findings: Distorted and Missing Class Talk

Absent, Resisted, or Garbled Class Responses by Working-class Activists

Imagine if gender identities were found to be salient for men but not for women, or if racial identity terms were used primarily by white activists. That topsy-turvy situation prevails with class identities in today's social movements. It is ironic that class identity terms and the word "class" itself were more common in the vocabulary of more class-privileged activists and less common among lifelong working-class activists.

Working-class interviewees said "class"⁶ 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 revealed unfamiliarity with one term. The phrase "social class" was completely unknown to some lifelong working-class activists, who answered the question "How would you describe yourself in terms of your social class?" with nonclass answers about their social life. For example, LMC 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 the study was to learn what does and does not communicate across class lines, the interviewers learned one thing very quickly: Do not say "social class" without explaining yourself.

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. In the exchange below, the group that Martina is describing in fact included members with education levels ranging from fourth grade to master's degrees:

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 nonclass answer, resisting the question, misunderstanding it, or answering about race instead of class, to a statistically significant degree.⁷ Race, gender, age, and movement tradition made no difference, except that Latinos were slightly less likely to give such nonclass answers; otherwise, only the working-class category was associated with nonclass answers.⁸

Most college-educated activists, 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.*"

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 was not a statistically significant class difference in who hazarded a guess.⁹ 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 (TPC); he gave two different nonanswers, "*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,¹⁰ 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.

It is not that most working-class nonclass talkers did not talk about class issues at all, of course. Working-class activists were more likely to bring up concrete, proximate class-related facts, such as particular occupations, pay levels, neighborhoods, and

especially their own financial hardships.¹¹ A usually talkative white working-class industrial wageworker, 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:

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.*

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.*

Martha, the LMC 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.*” (emphasis added)

But there is a striking shortage in many working-class activists' speech even of such informal class talk that might indicate a class identity. Some politically experienced working-class leaders claimed poverty as their identity (“*we're poor people, nobody wants to identify with poor people,*” one said), but very few rank-and-file members of their groups 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.*” (emphasis added) Such class-related generalizations from people directly and currently affected by class oppression were rare, and almost nonexistent among people under age 60.

With one exception, each class identity term heard from a working-class informant (such as the examples “*silver spoon*” and “*common people*” quoted above) 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. Shared general class vocabulary seemed to come along with college education,¹² not through living through the experience of class subordination.

The one exception was the word “*poor*,”¹³ which lifelong working-class interviewees were more likely to use than any other class category. They used that word more than three times as often as “*working-class*,” usually unprompted, suggesting that it is in working-class activists’ everyday vernacular—the only general class term they used regularly. “*Low-income*” was used at a lower rate by working-class activists, at about the same rate as other class categories.¹⁴ Of the three main words or phrases for the lower class range, lifelong working-class and PMC activists favored “*poor*,” straddlers and VDM activists favored “*low-income*”—and almost no one regularly used “*working-class*.”

There did not seem to be *any* common vernacular terms for the vast range of the class spectrum above poverty and below PMC, except perhaps the vague, all-inclusive term “*middle class*,” used by just a few of the 61 interviewees. That slippery euphemism, used by politicians and the media for anyone neither rich nor poor, sprang comfortably to working-class Latina Cecilia’s lips in an interview, 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 catchall term “*middle class*” to “*the working poor*” after only a tiny bit of encouragement.

As hypothesized, class identities in this sample were more often absent, more fluid, and less salient for more class-disadvantaged activists. Working-class activists had less class talk overall, responded with more resistance, misunderstanding and avoidance to class identity questions, and used less consistent class terminology.

Class Misrecognition by Antimaterialist VDM Activists

Besides lifelong working-class activists, another class trajectory was prone to garbled or absent class identities: VDM activists, especially those living off the grid in the most drastic voluntary poverty.

For VDM activists, their adult experience of living on very low incomes gave them an unusual perspective on the class system. Two VDM interviewees expressed 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. For example, a young VDM white man, 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 much 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.*” These VDM interviewees seemed to share the same class misrecognition as the Burning Man participants quoted above, 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.** (emphasis added)*

Culturally, Meadow talked, acted, and ran her group in ways consistent with her high upper-middle-class background. Her rejection of money not only did not remove her from “*middle-class status,*” but was, in fact, a choice most commonly made by those from very privileged backgrounds.

Anarchist groups with a VDM majority had among the lowest rates of members of color and working-class members, talked about class and race the least of any movement tradition, and (with one exception) had the fewest alliances with unions or grassroots community-organizing groups. Exclusion of people of color and working-class and poor people was certainly not the intention of these VDM activists. But boundaries can be enacted without conscious knowledge or effort (Lamont 1992, 2000). Misrecognition of the class basis of high-cultural capital bohemian

tastes may have contributed to some VDM activists' weak ability to draw on working-class cultures or to build cross-class alliances. Class-privileged activists may have sincerely wanted to behave in ways that would build bridges across class and race differences, yet simultaneously enacted and reinforced boundaries of taste that keep activists apart.

In settings with such a scarcity of open class identities, in particular by working-class and VDM activists, two kinds of counterproductive class talk cropped up, described in the next two sections.

Posing, Pretense, and Deliberate Class Performances

Within the progressive groups in this study, the mainstream status order was sometimes upside down: Activists could score movement-capital points by identifying themselves as lower on the class ladder. Professional-background activists tended to downplay their advantages and emphasize their hardships, more often than the reverse. For example, a young member of a community-organizing group, 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 oneself down did not necessarily require bending the truth. Class is a set of spectrums, and where one places oneself depends on which class indicators are emphasized. By focusing only on financial situation and excluding cultural capital from their definition of class, activists who were downwardly mobile from privileged backgrounds could sincerely claim similarity to working-class and poor people.

But talking oneself down sometimes crossed the line into posing: performing as a less-privileged class than one's actual life experience (Bettie 2003) or guiltily hiding privilege. When lifelong working-class antipoverty leader 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 led me to believe that class posing was sometimes deliberate. In the grassroots community groups in my study, the role of the poor was played by

members with a wide variety of class indicators. Two welfare rights organizations, Low-income Women Rising and Safety Net for All, portrayed themselves as low-income membership groups. However, some of the spokespeople who represented these groups publicly, speaking firsthand about the experience of being a welfare recipient, in fact had some higher-class indicators, such as college degrees, past professional jobs, or college-educated professional parents. Lifelong poor members tended to stay behind the scenes (as Cummings 2003 also found).

Community organizing 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 did not mention her homeownership or her graduate degree.

Some activists in the study were presumed by other members to be posers, but without any obvious evidence. In one especially rancorous antipoverty advocacy group, the Citywide Interfaith Coalition, some white professional interviewees accused African American leader Jeremiah of being a poser, pretending to be poor to score points in the group's intractable strategy conflict. Upper-middle-class white man Noah pointed out that Jeremiah actually represented a middle-class church to the coalition, while Jeremiah's opponent Brandon represented a low-income church. The audio recordings confirm Noah's point, as sometimes when Jeremiah talked about his "*people power*" philosophy, 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 a 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" was not 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 antipolice-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. (emphasis added)*

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.

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. 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 overidentify with the marginalized group or intrude where they are unwelcome (Myers 2008:176), a fine line that requires cultural competence to walk.

Privilege as Putdown

In the absence of clear, consistent, and openly discussed class identities within activist groups, another form of distorted and counterproductive class talk also oozed into the vacuum: using privilege as an insult.

One striking example happened during an explosive conflict among ad hoc groups preparing to protest the 2008 Democratic National Convention. 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 TPC member regarded by other members as a hothead, Nanette, researched the assessed value of Tye's suburban home, and posted the exact dollar amount and the town, along with a counteraccusation that Tye was white and

middle-class. Tye then wrote an online response in which he defended himself against the heinous charge of being middle-class and used insult words belittling Nanette as stupid.

Why were “white” and “middle-class” taken as insult words? Why would mention of suburban homeownership be offensive enough to warrant a rude response?

Mentioning a dominant identity was often a slur in itself, as in this conflict; and sometimes it preceded other criticisms, or was used to neutralize harsh language. One common conversational gambit was to invoke someone’s privileged identity immediately before or after criticizing them or disagreeing with them. For example, during a conflict over antiracism in a diverse global-cause group, Easthaver Demands Justice, when Deborah found herself in the awkward situation of being a white person pushing an antiracism 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, as people of color of every class experience racism):

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.*** (emphasis added)

In some cases, such descriptions of someone as privileged were accurate, but in other cases they were not. For example, an upper-middle-class TPC member, McKayla, mischaracterized a SUFB 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.***” (emphasis added)

Typically, it was a disliked person who was presumed to have higher-class status, as when working-class black woman Rhonda criticized union staff member 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 when she was growing up. In a similar presumption, working-class Latina Cecilia characterized a resented straddler, Shirley, as a high-level professional equivalent to a lawyer, 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 is easier for unscrupulous activists to use references to privileged social identities to attack and score points, as Tye and Nanette did.

Privilege as putdown only makes sense in a context where an oppressed status confers movement capital. Whenever social standing within a group can be gained by claiming a marginalized identity such as being a person of color, queer, or poor, the converse may also be true: to say activists were privileged could tarnish their reputation.

Discussion: Developing Class Identities in the Service of Movement Building

How can a powerful mass working-class movement be built today without a widespread working-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. Overbroad, universalistic identities tend to be weak bases for mass mobilization (Gamson 1990 [1975]: chapter 5). If the bottom half of the 99 percent could name their shared experience with a class identity term, it would open more possibilities for building and strengthening working-class-led movements.

Conversely, when class-privileged activists obliviously deny the kinds of cultural capital that cannot be shed by abandoning a consumerist lifestyle, that denial also has harmful effects on movement building. Their childhood class experience formed enduring predispositions that did not 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 did not exist. Like the shadow side of a personality, what was denied came back to haunt them.

It is 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 difficult to see oneself as simultaneously part of a marginalized political tendency and also part of the dominant class of college-educated people with professional opportunities. 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. While voluntarily downwardly mobile (VDM) choices may have integrity and purpose, VDM activists' mistake is to believe that their rejection of mainstream lifestyle and culture erases their class privilege.

Writing about the U.S. antiglobalization movement, Starr describes this "*bourgeois bohemian*" (Brooks 2001) tendency toward cultural rejection 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)

The same point can be made about class-based taste distinctions between college-educated counterculture and working-class whites. This small study only began to investigate activists' class cultures. More research is needed to explore class differences in tastes, cultural norms, and approaches to activism and to uncover possible geographic, ethnic, generational, and movement tradition variations in these differences.

A dose of realism about class would be a healthy antidote for many problems of today's social movement groups. Acknowledging that a very high percentage of activists, even in grassroots community groups, come from PMC backgrounds could prompt groups to work harder to recruit actual lifelong working-class and poor people. Knowing who their actual working-class and poor members are could enable groups to better tap into their networks and cultural strengths. 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. Developing shared vocabulary about class identities and class differences could replace confusion and pretense with factually based class identities. Members from more privileged backgrounds could connect over their efforts to become effective allies; lifelong working-class and poor people could bond over their process of individual and collective empowerment.

The political and economic context—unions shrinking as a percentage of the workforce; more contingent, temporary and poverty-wage jobs; the Democratic Party's failure to play the role of a labor party; and paltry media coverage about growing economic inequality—is not favorable for the development of explicit class identities, either in the general population or among activists. But the spread of an explicit, positive working-class identity could be one factor conducive to mobilizing a working-class-led mass movement. On the overall progressive agenda, today's low levels of class consciousness deserve a place in the spotlight.

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Notes

1. Labor solidarity and antisweatshop; environmental justice; post-Katrina reconstruction; antiwar; antipoverty 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. These issues were identified by reviewing progressive magazines, listserv announcements, and aggregator websites published in 2006 and 2007.

2. All names of groups, meeting participants, and interviewees are pseudonyms.
3. The term “lower-professional” describes informants falling between lower-middle class and professional middle class (PMC); most lower professionals were college-educated renters in their 30s working as community organizers, case managers, or other midlevel nonprofit jobs.
4. I chose the term PMC over the vaguer “middle class” to emphasize the distinguishing indicators of 4-year college education and salaried professional or managerial occupations.
5. The data set included 304 times when class and class identities were mentioned or were absent from the answer to a group diversity question.
6. Excluding other meanings such as classrooms and class action suits; just in the sense of social class.
7. A test of the relation between the dichotomous working-class (WC)/college graduate and the dichotomous variable of giving nonclass responses found, $\chi^2(1, N = 301) = .642, p = .011$. Crosstabs for nonclass responses and the WC/college graduate variables show that 17 percent of WC class talk opportunities but only 7 percent of college graduates’ class talk opportunities were nonclass responses.
8. χ^2 shows no significant difference in giving nonclass responses and dichotomous variables for each race, gender, or movement tradition, except that Latinos were less likely to give nonclass responses: for Latino/non-Latino variable, $\chi^2(1, N = 303) = 4.05, p = .044$. Spearman’s ρ is not significant for decade born: $\rho = .056, p = .167$, one-tailed, $N = 299$.
9. Test of relationship between dichotomous WC/college graduate variable and dichotomous variable of mentions or failures to mention class in answer to questions about identities of others in the group: $\chi^2(1, N = 303) = 1.86, p = .173$.
10. Test of relationship between dichotomous white/non-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/non-black: $\chi^2(1, N = 131) = 4.84, p = .028$. For Latino/non-Latino, $\chi^2(1, N = 131) = 1.05, p = .305$. χ^2 is not significant for dichotomous variables for each gender, decade born, and movement tradition.
11. Test of relationship between dichotomous WC/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.
12. Another possibility is that PMC children tend to learn class terms by before college, either at home or at school. As this study only included adults, more research would be needed to separate out the effects of college education from childhood acquisition of cultural capital.
13. 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.
14. “Low income” was said by all interviewees about 1.2 times per 10,000 words.

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