**Social Class and Social Action**

Aaron Schutz, 2008

schutz@uwm.edu/electronic version at: educationaction.org

**People from different cultures have different ways of organizing themselves for collective action and different understandings of “democracy.”   Here, I talk about differences between people from working-class and middle-class professional backgrounds.**

It’s important to stress that I am not talking about individuals, but instead cultural patterns that play out (or don’t) uniquely in different contexts.

**Class Cultures**

Middle- and working-class cultures emerged in coherent form in America during the last decades of the 18th Century.  Middle-class professionals, as a new group, increasingly built themselves a world of privilege doing non-manual work, while the working-class was buffeted by numerous depressions, poverty, and lived with often backbreaking work conditions.  (For a more detailed historical overview, go here: http://www.educationaction.org/class-history.html.)

When I talk about the middle-class, today, I am referring mostly to the culture that still dominates the way middle-class *professionals* interact, albeit in intensified form. Class, in the cultural sense I mean it here, is less linked to income than to educational background and job type.  Plenty of progressive professionals “choose” relatively low-income jobs. The working-class has fragmented over the last century, sustained in its strongest form in some unions and long-term communities where people still have deep relationships with neighbors and extended family.

Two key texts: *Unequal Childhoods,* by Annette Lareau, and *Coalitions Across the Class Divide,* by Fred Rose.  This is a simplified version of a longer paper: Aaron Schutz, “Social Class and Social Action,” *Teachers College Record 110*, no. 2 (2008). Also see: Aaron Schutz, *Social Class, Social Action and Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). This was originally a blog post on OpenLeft.com and may contain some typos.

**Middle-Class Culture**

Middle-class professionals tend to be fairly mobile and based in relatively self-sufficient nuclear families.  Middle-class professionals depend highly upon their credentials and learned practices, and often believe, at least, that they are judged in a meritocratic job market as individuals.

The parenting practices of the middle class are significantly different from those of working-class families. Middle-class children learn at an early age to make their own judgments, often participating in adult life as if they were “mini” adults. They are frequently asked for their opinions and are allowed (and even encouraged) to disagree with adults. These families celebrate children’s unique characteristics. Middle class parents focus so intently on cultivating their children that their “lives” can have “a hectic, at times frenetic, pace” (Annette Lareau).

Collaboration and teamwork have become increasingly central characteristics of middle-class life over the 20th century. Group success often requires managers and professionals to work closely with people they have no long-term relationship with. Each individual in these contexts is expected to independently contribute his or her own particular knowledge and skills to an often weakly defined common project.

**Working-Class Culture**

Woe unto the [worker] who stood alone in this pitiless struggle for existence [at the end of the 18th Century].

--Montgomery

Working-class families have long been structured to a much greater extent around an established hierarchy between children and adults.  In part because working-class parents lack time to constantly monitor children, hierarchies and limited tolerance for “back talk” make more sense than constant negotiation. Lareau found that “in working-class and poor homes, most parents did not focus on developing their children’s’ opinions, judgments, and observations.”  In contrast with what she termed the “concerted cultivation” approach of the middle-class, then, Lareau argued that working-class parents are more likely to “engage in the accomplishment of natural growth” giving children plenty of time to do their own thing outside of the gaze of adults.

“Working-class people in the United States are more likely to live where they grew up, or to have moved as a family and not solo. They are more likely to live near extended family and [are] … likely to have been raised and socialized by traditionally rooted people” (Betsy Leondar-Wright).  Even though the old ethnic enclaves of the 19th and early 20th century have largely disappeared, Alfred [Lubrano](http://www.amazon.com/Limbo-Blue-Collar-Roots-White-Collar-Dreams/dp/0471714399/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1208040596&sr=8-1) found that a “core value of the working class” still involves “being part of a like-minded group-a family, a union, or a community.” As at the end of the 19th century, today this tendency to value deep connections with families and communities is partly driven by the material conditions of working-class life. Many workers have no choice but to depend on a web of links with others to get them through hard times, and the impoverished, especially in the central cities, suffer greatly to the extent that these relationships have fractured.

**Studies of Working- and Middle-Class Approaches to Social Action**

A small number of studies look at how middle- and working-class people engage in social action. The studies I refer to, here, focused on those groups that most seem to embody key characteristics of the class cultures described above: middle-class professionals and members of long-term, established labor unions.  In other groups you probably won’t find these distinctions showing up as clearly, or you may find other issues emerging as most important.

**Social Action and Middle-Class Professionals**

In organizations dominated by middle-class professionals, speakers generally need to be “comfortable with theoretical, impersonal discussion.” Because these groups generally lack formal rules for participation, they often expect people to be able to “just jump in when they want to speak,” following a format resembling “college classroom[s] … familiar to those who are college educated” (LindaStout).

In part because the issues addressed by middle-class activists are usually only weakly linked to group members’ lives, (think of the Sierra Club or Greenpeace) Rose found that “even the most pragmatic middle-class organizations frame their issues in broad ethical terms, … never in terms of advancing the interests of a particular group,” possibly indicating how little the “struggles faced by low-income people” actually impinge on the “reality” of middle-class people.”  In fact, middle-class groups generally believe that they advance universally valid goals, not “the interests of their class” (Stout)

Participants in middle-class, professional organizations are encouraged to “continue to act very much as individuals” (Rose). Groups often allot plenty of time for self-expression and see it as problematic if everyone doesn’t contribute.

A range of other characteristics of these organizations also seem driven by middle-class life conditions and culture. Reflecting the often fluid nature of professional lives, for example, participation is generally understood as an individual choice, and engagement with a particular issue “may ebb and flow depending on shifts in personal priorities and interests.” Joining a social action group is one of the best ways to meet people who think like them. “Middle class politics is therefore an extension of personal development” (Rose)

Not surprisingly, Rose found that middle-class groups “find the hierarchy and formality of the union structure foreign and distasteful,” since “peace and environmental organizations have few if any formal rules about membership and participation.”  New arrivals are often asked “  
to take part in decision-making just like longer term members.”

One environmental activist described her experience learning to work with the formal structure of the labor movement in these terms: “You’ve got to kiss the ring.  That’s my shorthand for paying deference.  …  So they go to the mechanism that they’re used to working with, for the formal structure.”

Because middle-class professionals assume that other people operate (or should operate) in the same individualistic manner that they prefer themselves, they often believe that “‘if people only knew about the problems being raised, then they would be more likely to act’” (Rose). The point is not that these groups do not often seek structural changes, especially in laws, but that the mechanism for this change is often envisioned on a model of reasoned, discursive democratic education.

**Working-Class Culture and Social Action**

The approach of culturally working-class groups to social action can be fundamentally different. In contrast with the comparatively formless character of middle-class organizations, workers’ groups tend to follow established formal rules for participation and are generally organized around clearly defined hierarchies. In fact, “Labor activists frequently find the meeting styles of middle-class organizations difficult and tedious.”  Rejecting wide-ranging dialogue about the personal opinions of individuals, they focus on pragmatic questions of action and on rituals that sustain group solidarity. As one union leader stated,

These peace people don’t understand that it’s a war out there.  …  The contrast between giving people hell at a bar over the union vote and then going to a conversion meeting where people sit around and eat cheese and sip herb tea is really frustrating.  These people seem like they’re from a different solar system.   ….  The peace people are too intellectual and always wanting to work on the structure of the organization.  …  The union is used to getting down to work and getting things done. They wouldn’t talk to the governor more than once, and if he wasn’t listening the first time then he’d read about it in the paper next.  This is a war, and you can’t be nice about it.   …  I feel a sense of urgency about it that I don’t get from the peace people. (Rose)

Those who are most respected in working-class contexts embody the core values of the working class: speaking their minds, contending, often loudly, over their commitments, and expressing the emotions behind their commitments. Eschewing abstractions, they speak from experience, often telling stories that serve to embody their particular perspectives while demonstrating loyalty and connectedness.

Membership many of these groups is not simply chosen but the result of a long-term embeddedness in community and family networks. Identity is something that one has, not something that needs to be found; it “comes from being accepted and known” and “being a member of a … community with a good reputation defines who one is” (Rose). Thus, these “close communities” make “a clear division between members and outsiders.” Trust is built over time, and newcomers are not easily allowed entry.

Finally, the issues tackled by groups like unions and local community groups are usually closely tied to particular community needs. Instead of focusing on universal values (although they may often refer to these), they tend to define their battles in terms of “competing interests,” experiencing “their own interests … in opposition to the interests of others” (Rose). A problem is rarely seen as the result of a simple misunderstanding that can be rationally dealt with. Instead, power must be wrested from others who will generally not give it up without a fight. Win-win solutions may sometimes be possible, but experience has taught them that conflict generally involves a zero-sum game.

Note that the issues embraced by middle-class activists are also often deeply connected to their own self-interests. For example, there is good evidence that middle-class participation in the anti-Vietnam War movement began its decline as the threat of the draft declined. In the current Occupy movement, middle-class participants often cite college debt as a key concern.

**Class Tensions**

It’s important to reemphasize that Rose, especially, focused on groups that especially exemplify the class characteristics I have been discussing.  Even in less distinct circumstances, however, differences in approaches to social action frequently create conflicts and tensions between middle-class and working-class groups. In fact, I have watched these dynamics play themselves out in the context of community organizing efforts I have worked in over the past few years.

Because they have different ways of speaking, when people from different classes meet together they often find that they can’t communicate very well, misreading discursive and social cues that seem so natural to one group and so alien to the other. Furthermore, the structure of each context tends to alienate and suppress the participation of people from the other class. For example, the quick repartee of middle-class meetings can make it difficult for working-class people to get a word in edgewise, whereas the formalistic and hierarchical structure of working-class settings can seem, to middle-class members, like a tool for suppressing their individual voices.

Rose summarizes the differences between middle-class professional and working-class organizations in this way:

The middle class is prone to seeing the working class as rigid, self-interested, narrow, uninformed, parochial, and conflict oriented.  The working class tends to perceive the middle class as moralistic, intellectual, more talk than action, lacking commonsense, and naïve about power.  Each side has a different standard for evaluating information, with the working class trusting experience and the middle class believing in research and systematic study.  The result is a wide gulf in understandings of nature, sustainability, economics, and human conduct.  Worse yet, working-class unions and middle-class environmentalists seek change differently.  The working class seeks to build power to confront external threats, while the middle class hopes to change people’s motivations, ideas, and morality.

And he emphasizes that these differences arise, in part, out of very different experiences with power:

Different degrees of power and vulnerability are also decisive.  Middle-class movements tend to have greater access to the bureaucracy because it is staffed by their professional peers.  Bureaucratic processes also function through expertise and abstract rules that middle-class values.  The middle class tends, therefore, to have greater faith in the ability of these institutions to accomplish its goals.  The working class, by contrast, is often the weakest party in conflicts and tends to pay the costs of many political and economic decisions.  Its strategies reflect both this vulnerability and the interpretation of politics as a conflict about interests.

**Bringing the Strengths and Weaknesses of Each Together**

Despite these gulfs, Rose argued that when they operate in isolation, class-based movements often end up “reinforcing and reproducing [problematic] aspects of society even as they work to change other aspects.”

For example, middle-class reforms have often “inadvertently served to reproduce the subordinate role of the working class in society and the economy” by placing decision-making power in the hands of experts or by downplaying the effects of inequality on democratic engagement. Working-class approaches bring their own problems, however. A tendency to focus on local interests has sometimes led working-class organizations to downplay more universalistic visions of social transformation. In unions and elsewhere, a dependence on hierarchy can threaten democratic engagement. And because working-class efforts have often depended on exclusion of other, less privileged persons from gaining access to limited resources, they can reinforce social divisions of race, ethnicity, and gender, among others.

Overall, the practices of these different groups embody contrasting strengths and weaknesses. Both sides have much to learn from each other, if they can find a way to listen.

And, in fact, many groups have increasingly begun to recognize these challenges (among other cultural gulfs) and have been trying to make changes in how they interact internally and with external groups.  One key person who has been pushing nationally for recognition of these issues is Betsy Leondar-Wright, whose website, <http://www.classmatters.org> is a great resource.

This post covers a range of issues around power and inequality in organizing that I will return to in later posts.  As should be clear to people who have read my introductions to post-Alinsky organizing, the Alinsky model tends to draw much more extensively from working-class than middle-class culture.

For more posts in this series, go to: http://www.educationaction.org/core-dilemmas-of-community-organizing.html.