

It's not "them" — it's us!

By Betsy Leonard-Wright

A few years ago, I listened to week-by-week reports from a radical working-class friend who tried to join a corporate globalization group. He told me of snide comments about his fast food; elaborate group process that took hours and hours; insistence that everyone "perform" by answering a certain question at the beginning of the meeting; uniformly scruffy clothes that made his pressed shirts stand out; potlucks that were all tofu and whole grains; long ideological debates over side issues; and an impenetrable fog of acronyms and jargon. He soon quit in disgust. I wonder if the group members understood why he left.

For professional-middle-class progressives activists like myself, it's easy to understand why working-class people would be alienated by the mainstream culture of well-off people. After all, we tend to be alienated by it ourselves, because it represents values we've rejected, like greed and materialism. But the idea that working-class people would have any negative reactions to our own subculture, in particular our values-based "alternative" norms, tends not to occur to us.

I had this insight after facilitating a Class Matters workshop recently, for a thoughtful, engaged group of college-educated people from middle-class backgrounds. When we talked about building bridges across class differences, they all had particular working-class people in mind, whom they worked with every day as parents of their students, members of their union, or clients and staff of their agency.

Earlier in the workshop, we had worked on some "what would you do?" scenarios based on real-life situations, including conflicts over cultural issues like smoking, health food and religion. In the next exercise, the group pretended to create the most unwelcoming of all possible organizations, easily generating a list of barriers that keep working-class people out, such as high dues, locations far from public transit, and no translation. In the same spoofing mode, I asked them, "But let's say that some working-class people did nevertheless manage to get into this organization. What would we do to make sure they felt uncomfortable and to stop them from taking leadership?" The group launched in with gusto: "A dress code — nothing but tuxedos and evening gowns!" "Fancy food — caviar and champagne!" "The real business takes place at the golf course at the country club!"

No-one said anything like "tofu."

A light bulb went off over my head. Middle-class activists imagine working-class people will have a negative reaction to the cultural style of the ostentatiously wealthy — not to our own cultural style. Yet in reality, what I hear from working-class and very low-income activists is very different: many aspects of middle-class culture are baffling, infuriating, intimidating or just plain weird. And while mainstream professional-middle-class (PMC) culture may be familiar from television and from teachers and social workers, PMC activist subcultures can be unfamiliar and thus even more alienating.

Doing community organizing jobs in which I worked with hundreds of grassroots working-class activists, I saw people meet their first vegetarian, their first Buddhist, their first woman with hairy legs, their first white dreadlocks-wearer, and so on, almost always a college-educated PMC activist. When encountered one at a time, these "oddballs" got teased, checked out for trustworthiness, and in most cases eventually accepted. But in environments where such unfamiliar weirdness was the norm, only the most highly motivated working-class people stuck it out; most acted on their "get me out of here!" reactions.

Working-class cultures are very diverse — by race, by generation, by geography, etc. — and what's alienating in one setting may be no problem in another. In my limited experience, middle-class activist traits tend to be more alienating to older, white, recent immigrant, rural, and/or Christian working-class people, and less alienating to young, urban and/or African American working-class people, who tend to be more cosmopolitan. The syndrome I'm describing may be most pronounced between young white counterculture activists and older white working-class people. But I think I can safely say that

some aspect of PMC activist culture has seemed weird to some people in every working-class community I've encountered.

We PMC activists have a tremendous resistance to seeing our own subcultures through a class lens. When I said in that workshop that "tofu is a class issue," one participant said in a puzzled tone, "You mean because health food costs more?" Whether or not there's an obvious connection with money or status, if these cultural clashes happen across class lines, then class dynamics are at work. Of course there are also working-class vegetarians, Buddhists and so on, and when they get culture-shock reactions from other working-class people, it's not a class issue. But whenever there's a big difference in income, assets, education and/or status, then cultural differences become laden with class dynamics.

In professional-middle-class progressive culture, the axis of the world is mainstream versus alternative. The majority of us were raised in non-progressive families; the exceptions, such as "red diaper babies" and children of hippies, grew up aware of their families' outsider status. We grew up surrounded by expectations that we would maximize our income and status by conforming to PMC lifestyles and career tracks. At some point we made a conscious, life-changing decision to take a different course and to put some of our energy to work for a better world. We each place ourselves in a particular place on the mainstream/alternative continuum, contrasting ourselves with those more and less conventional than ourselves. One thing that virtually all of us PMC activists have in common is that we are proud of living a values-based life. It's our best trait — and leads to some of our most classist traits, such as culture-bound elitism. "More-alternative-than-thou" is not a helpful stance to take in building bridges with anyone, and it's especially unhelpful with people with a lot less social privilege than ourselves.

Our alternative values can confuse us about who's the enemy.

- If our alternative values lead us to be vegetarian or vegan, we may see all meat-eaters, including working-class meat-eaters, as part of the mainstream we're rebelling against.
- If our alternative values lead us to be nonviolent, then we may see all hunters and all football players as the enemy, whatever their class.
- If our alternative values lead us to practice group processes that are as egalitarian as possible, such as consensus decision-making, then we may see a hierarchical union that uses Robert's Rules as no different than General Electric.
- If our alternative values lead us to be pagans or atheists, we may equate all Christians with fascist theocrats.

And if we believe our values to be superior, we may take a superior attitude that working-class people will correctly read as classism.

White middle-class activists sometimes give people of color and extremely poor people a free pass from our harsh judgments. But no such forgiving brakes are on with "mainstream" white working-class and lower-middle-class people, who are too often thoughtlessly branded as the enemy. Building the mass movement of our dreams requires solidarity with all working people, not just those that we share all lifestyles and cultural values with.

It's very, very hard for progressive-middle-class activists to see our alternative subcultures as related to our privileged class status. The reason is that we PMC activists often feel like the underdogs in middle-class society. This is not a bad thing; it can help us identify with targeted groups — not just with working-class people, but with people of color if we're white; with women if we're men; with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people if we're straight. Many a rainbow coalition to elect progressive candidates has been formed between people of color, poor people, and white middle-class radicals. But if this underdog feeling leads PMC progressives to think that we are similarly oppressed, we have fallen into a misunderstanding of the nature of systemic oppression.

No matter how unwelcoming your Christian family is towards your wiccan practices, that mistreatment is not actually equivalent to the racism faced by people of color, or the classism experienced by working-class people. The uptight bosses and relatives who make you wear a tie or pantyhose are not actually the equivalent of the employers who pay their employees minimum wage.

I'm thinking of the 1971 hit song "Signs" by the Five Man Electric Band: "And the sign said 'Long-haired freaky people need not apply.'" Since they could cut their hair and get the job, being a hippie in 1971 wasn't actually equivalent to being Irish in 1880. Neither does a voluntarily low income turn you into a working-class person if you grew up in a professional-middle-class household and went to college. Bohemian lifestyles and voluntary simplicity have a long, honored history in middle-class culture, and it's time we recognized our counterculture impulses as part of our professional-middle-class identity.

The cultural differences between PMC and working-class activists are not just neutral differences in taste or style, in which each party should give the other equal deference, but power differences between people with different amounts of education, social and cultural capital, and clout in the wider society.

Why does this matter? Because there are millions of working-class potential allies who find PMC-led organizations culturally difficult — and not just the bigger and more formal non-profit organizations, but also the small, all-volunteer groups full of college students or college-educated activists, such as feminist, globalization, anti-war, queer, animal rights and environmental groups.

Of course, working-class people can have negative reactions to mainstream professional-middle-class culture as well, not only to alternative PMC subcultures. Four-dollar coffee drinks, therapy, tennis skirts with little green whales on them, and the word "whom" are just as likely to get disgusted reactions as tofu is. And if you hear a parent negotiating with a child about when to leave the playground, look around for who's rolling their eyes, and listen for the class overtones in the comments, like "F**king yuppies!"

But alternative PMC activists can be especially attached to our distinctive subcultural traits because they're part and parcel of our activism. Ironically, PMC liberal reformists sometimes do better at recruiting working-class people; the more radical someone is, the more likely they may be to blow it as a cross-class bridge person.

Is the solution to be chameleons and blend in with working-class culture? Many PMC activists have chosen this route. Some of the 1970s Marxists who took working-class jobs seemed to fit in, especially those who grew up working-class before going to college, and those with a deep respect for their coworkers. More often, cross-class chameleons' unwitting parody seems condescending and stereotyped. The negative aspects of their own class conditioning, such as a sense of entitlement and self-importance, become an unacknowledged shadow-side that everyone around them can see. Especially embarrassing to me are middle-class white people who badly imitate the accents, music, clothes and hairstyles of low-income black youth. Showing that you're "down with the people" actually takes consistent hard work and commitment to their causes; there are no shortcuts via mimicking their style.

One of the first groundrules for successful cross-cultural bridging of any kind is authenticity; we need to be who we really are. Fakeness is usually detected, and it worsens the mistrust that's already there towards PMC people.

In my experience, I'm usually identified as PMC at 20 paces. One working-class woman said (once she finally started to trust me) that she had assumed I was a snob because my posture was so upright. In my neighborhood everyone can spot the class differences between women: the working-class women wear make-up and styled hair even when watering their gardens, and the professional women wear no make-up and loose hair even to work, and sometimes even at weddings. And at one meeting of a low-income grassroots group, I realized that I was the only person in the room with all my front teeth. We might as well accept that working-class people will know who we are; there's no hiding our privilege.

But how can we be ourselves and still build bridges with people who find our differences weird?

The first step is to distinguish between two different kinds of weirdness — essential and inessential. An essential weirdness is one that couldn't be eliminated without doing a deep injustice to someone:

- Gay people may seem weird in some communities, but it's essential for organizations to support them being out of the closet.
- Being inclusive of non-Christians is an essential weirdness. I have seen all-Christian groups of grassroots working-class people to whom it seems weird not to start every meeting with a prayer to Jesus and weird not to include Christianity in the group's mission statement and bylaws; yet to let that happen would be oppressive to religious minorities, such as a Jewish organizer or atheists in the neighborhood.
- Speaking out against racism may be taboo in some white communities, but it's essential to go ahead and grate against those traditional cultural norms.

Besides those major societal oppressions, there are personal differences that may seem weird to others but are very important to the individual:

- To a recovering alcoholic, not drinking is essential even if weird in certain circles.
- Some people are deeply attached to a name change or a type of clothing or hair.
- Unusual gender presentation can be essential to an individual's sanity, and can also move the society forward by shaking up our constraining gender roles.
- There's a long and respected movement tradition of being the change you want to see, bearing witness to an issue with your own lifestyle choices.

But it's rarely essential to impose one's personal choices on others. And that's the line we cross too often, unnecessarily imposing a cultural weirdness on others. PMC activists, especially young radicals, make the mistake of imposing our own essential weirdnesses on mixed-culture groups:

- It's one thing to eat vegan yourself, and another to plan all-vegan menu at a diverse coalition conference.
- You might think that civil disobedience is an essential tactic for a certain campaign to succeed, but you don't have to schedule it at the same time and place as the legal rally.
- Abstaining from smoking may be essential to you, but it's obnoxious if imposed on others, for example by choosing a location with no place to go for a cigarette break — especially if accompanied by judgmental statements (like "Cigarettes will kill you, you know!")
- Just because your New Age spirituality is what keeps you sane doesn't mean that a coalition meeting would be improved by starting it with a ritual.

And some kinds of weirdness are just plain inessential.

I coined the phrase "inessential weirdness" in 1979 while watching counterculture Movement for a New Society members attempt to work with more mainstream potential allies. I remember vividly the moment it popped into my head. My anti-nuclear group, a bunch of long-haired men and hairy-legged women, had formed a coalition to stop a local nuclear construction project, and we had set up a meeting with a senior citizen group. 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-oooooooo" went up, I saw some of the senior activists nudge each other and roll their eyes, like "What's up with these wackos?" Their group did join the coalition, but no thanks to the howlers. Something in my gut switched sides at that moment, from a previous enchantment with all things alternative to a skepticism about what and who is effective.

So here's a shorthand version of my point: if you want to build cross-class alliances, don't howl. If howling is important to you, go off on a howling retreat with other howlers; don't do it in coalition spaces. Blend in if there's not a strong reason not to. Truly, you can be your authentic self without indulging your impulses to howl.

My own worst story is almost too embarrassing to tell in public, but I'll share it here in the hopes that laughing at me will embolden some PMC readers to shed their own inessential weirdness. When I was young and countercultural in the 1970s, I lived in an intentional community where we tried to minimize our impact on the environment. In our bathrooms hung a sign about not wasting water, with a little rhyme that started, "If it's yellow, let it mellow..." I was trying to organize a chapter of a local group which met in people's homes. I went to the bathroom in an older woman's home, peed and didn't flush, as was my habit. Luckily, the next person to use the bathroom was one of my counterculture buddies, who flushed for both of us, then came out and hissed at me, "What are you doing? You're not in your group house, you know!" From then on, I made a point of flushing in other people's homes. I realized that building a bond with potential movement members was more important than saving a couple gallons of water.

The late-1960s and 1970s white hippie counterculture was, of course, the pinnacle of inessential weirdnesses in US history. But the syndrome has never gone away, and unfortunately, I began to see a new rash of imposed weirdnesses in the late 1990s. For example:

- Stylized group processes involving waving cards of different colors or prefacing your remarks with whether they are a friendly or unfriendly amendment do nothing except to establish an in-group and an out-group.
- Padding the demands of a demonstration with a dozen lesser-known and more controversial issues is a sure way to keep a coalition small and college-educated. To cite a recent example, the widespread opposition to the Iraq war has remained more unorganized than necessary thanks to coalition organizers who insist on agreement on Venezuela, Palestine and other causes with smaller and mostly middle-class bases.
- One person sitting on the floor may not seem too weird, but providing no chairs, only cushions, can result in cultural as well as physical discomfort.

I did a workshop for the core members of an anarchist drop-in center. They wished that more people in their town would join their animal rights work, but few did. When I presented this concept, one member said, "This whole place is one big inessential weirdness." They had a choice between recruiting a bigger base to their cause and expressing all aspects of their radical values at all times.

Our inessential weirdnesses may, of course, also alienate middle-class and wealthy potential allies — often to an even greater degree, as some working-class people are more used to encountering diversity and eccentricity than are many mainstream corporate managers and their ilk. But in those cases, people with common education levels may have shared ways of talking to fall back on. Cross-class bridging, on the other hand, just plain won't happen without attention to the cultural nuances that alienate people from each other. If we care about our movement's size and strength, it's essential that we be no weirder than we need to be.

So here are some guidelines for professional-middle-class activists to maximize the effectiveness of our work:

1. Be clear on your goals. If the most important political work for you to do is to shake up traditional norms by being different, by all means do it, but don't assume you can both express all your values and be an effective bridge person. If building a diverse coalition with a mixed-class, mixed-culture base is important to you, then take that seriously and don't tack on lots of other agendas.
2. Observe the cultural norms of people you'd like to work with, watch for signs of discomfort, and study what conveys respect and disrespect in their subculture.

3. Figure out which of your weirdnesses are essential to you, and drop the inessential ones when you're doing cross-class outreach or coalition building. Be thoughtful about who your group sends to be the emissary to a culturally different group.
4. Don't impose any inessential weirdnesses on mixed coalitions. Using your influence to push your lifestyle choices onto uninterested working-class people is a misuse of class privilege.
5. If you feel a judgmental statement about others' lifestyles forming in your mind, bite your tongue.

None of this is easy. It's one thing to briefly change ourselves for a job interview or for dinner with the in-laws, but it's painful to have to change ourselves in our own activist groups. But as civil rights activist and Sweet Honey in the Rock founder Bernice Johnson Reagan said about coalitions, "If you're comfortable, you ain't doing no coalescing."