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Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures

Betsy Leondar-Wright

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Betsy Leondar-Wright : Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures
before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Missing Class:
Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Read it to grow in organizing wisdom and power!By S.
ColemanMissing Class is a highly readable eye-opener for anyone who belongs to a group dedicated to improving
American society, from the environment to labor to women's rights and beyond. The author, Betsy Leondar-Wright,

couples her extensive experience in organizing across social class lines with a solid grasp of the issues involved in class dynamics. This isn't one more set of facts and concepts to juggle: it's a new way of making sense of all the things that needlessly divide us in America today, delivered with warmth and humor. It's also academically solid: if you are teaching a course in sociology or any of the helping professions you would do well to put it in your syllabus or book report list.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Betsy Leondar-Wright's *MISSING CLASS* examines how you can truly tackle the issues of the world from the inside out. By Cyrus Webb I have to say that when I first heard of Betsy Leondar-Wright's book *MISSING CLASS* I wasn't sure what to expect. I believe that part of my apprehension was because of the way the word "class" is thrown around these days. In fact one of the most popular definitions of Class online is "the system of ordering a society in which people are divided into sets based on perceived social or economic status." This might sound a whole lot more harsh than it is, and that is exactly what Betsy addresses in *MISSING CLASS*. When it comes to looking at issues that matter in the world the way we choose to go about it has a great deal to do with where we are coming from in the world based on our ideas, upbringing and experiences. For Betsy she wanted to know how it was that individuals who seem to have a common interest when it came to addressing a problem was still so splintered in their approach. She shows in the book that those who have a certain shared experience or more prone to look at situations differently than those who don't have the same experiences. Because of this she was able to show that by reaching people where they are---based on who they are---more was able to be accomplished. The great thing about Betsy's book once I read it was that it is something that can be applied in all areas of our lives. Everyone who comes from Mississippi are not racist, just as all people who come from New York are not rude. When we dig deeper into who people really are we are better able to address together the problems we are looking to fix---and experience more success in doing so. Written in such a way that even a layperson could understand, *MISSING CLASS* examines how you can truly tackle issues of the world from the inside out.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A Valuable Guide to Bridging Class Differences. By Dick_Burkhardt. This is a very useful book for activists seeking to bridge class differences, based on interviews of 362 members from 25 leftist groups in 5 states, plus transcripts of 100 of their meetings. Most groups were very frustrated, even torn apart, by conflict rooted in class differences but never discussed. With awareness these differences could be a source of strength. The principle categories of class analysis discussed in this book are working class, lower professional class, professional middle class, and upper middle class. But these are supplemented by "straddlers", who grew up working class but became middle class, and by "voluntary downwardly mobile"; activists from middle class backgrounds who chose to join low income, radical groups such as anarchists. Education and occupation are the primary determinants of class status in this scheme, not income. The research goal was to distinguish differences caused by class versus other factors such as race, gender, ideology, and militancy. The major differences that were identified seemed to be most influenced by education and the associated social and occupational networks. The college educated middle class activists are far more individualistic and politically or ideologically motivated and talk abstractly. Less educated working class activists have a more communal ethic of mutual aid, talk more concretely and in shorter sentences, and bond to their group by relationships of trust, especially with leaders or mentors, as well as help actually given or received. I note that this way of interacting harks to the mutual reciprocity in hunter-gatherer societies (read "5000 Years of Debt" by David Graeber). A prime example is that food, even entertainment, is regarded as essential in working class gatherings but often forgotten in middle class meetings. Working class activists often speak in a forthright and direct manner, using teasing and humor to drop hints while building group cohesion, while middle class activists often develop elaborate group processes to avoid confrontation and may regard teasing as harassment. There were some gender differences as well. It was interesting that typical working class people did not even understand the word "class", though they easily saw its manifestations in concrete examples. And none of the groups, of whatever class mixture, discussed class differences. However working class African Americans all understood older abstract terms like prejudice and discrimination, but not newer terms like institutional racism. This suggests to me that the lack of awareness of class analysis is simply a reflection of its disappearance from popular media and education after World War II due to the rapid expansion of the middle class, along with the drastic decline of unionization. Now with the shrinkage of the middle class and escalating economic inequality, class analysis is returning. Leondar-Wright suggests that "If the bottom half of the 99% could name and claim their class identity, it would open more possibilities for building and strengthening working class led movements." (p. 224). This book is a valuable contribution to class analysis in that it started from hypotheses based on prior theories but the observations sometimes contradicted the hypotheses, forcing changes to the theories. It concludes describing how an ideal mixed-class group would function.

Many activists worry about the same few problems in their groups: low turnout, inactive members, conflicting views on racism, overtalking, and offensive violations of group norms. But in searching for solutions to these predictable and intractable troubles, progressive social movement groups overlook class culture differences. In *Missing Class*, Betsy Leondar-Wright uses a class-focused lens to show that members with different class life experiences tend to approach these problems differently. This perspective enables readers to envision new solutions that draw on the strengths of all

class cultures to form the basis of stronger cross-class and multiracial movements. The first comprehensive empirical study of US activist class cultures, *Missing Class* looks at class dynamics in 25 groups that span the gamut of social movement organizations in the United States today, including the labor movement, grassroots community organizing, and groups working on global causes in the anarchist and progressive traditions. Leondar-Wright applies Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and habitus to four class trajectories: lifelong working-class and poor; lifelong professional middle class; voluntarily downwardly mobile; and upwardly mobile. Compellingly written for both activists and social scientists, this book describes class differences in paths to activism, attitudes toward leadership, methods of conflict resolution, ways of using language, diversity practices, use of humor, methods of recruiting, and group process preferences. Too often, we miss class. *Missing Class* makes a persuasive case that seeing class culture differences could enable activists to strengthen their own groups and build more durable cross-class alliances for social justice.

"I cannot recommend *Missing Class* too highly. Some books stimulate you intellectually; some books deepen awareness; some books are practical. It's rare to find a book that does one of these things well. A book that does all three, brilliantly, is beyond rare. It's a historical event." Milan Rai, *Peace News* (August-September 2014) "Leondar-Wright's *Missing Class* is by far the best book available on the touchy subject of 'classism' since her own previous work, *Class Matters: Cross-class Alliance Building for Middle Class Activist*, and Fred Rose's incisive 1999 study, *Coalitions across the Class Divide: Lessons from the Labor, Peace, and Environmental Movements*, also published by Cornell. Like Rose before her, the author illustrates what bridges the divide and what doesn't within left-liberal groups and the broader, more diverse coalitions we need to alter power relationships in the United States." *The Labor Studies Journal* "The book's greatest virtue is that it makes a strong case that class cultures do create substantial barriers among activists and can undermine their groups' efficacy. Anyone working with people of varying class backgrounds will appreciate the material presented in this book. . . . *Missing Class* is a well-done book and a fine contribution to the study of social class in politics, and I hope that it will be a stepping stone for a new generation of research on activist groups that links internal processes with tangible outcomes." Fabio Rojas, *Administrative Science Quarterly* (December 2015) "From fashion sense to senses of humor, *Missing Class* illustrates the subtle cues in which class disparities manifest within activist groups. In a context where class is sometimes conspicuously missing from our stories, this is a welcome reminder to put it back in." Louis Esparza, *Mobilization* "Organizing for change is hard work, but it gets easier when there's honest talk about difference and solidarity. This groundbreaking book will likely start some transformative conversations!" Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org "Betsy Leondar-Wright can always be counted on to raise class from the mist of myth in U.S. society. She reaffirms the critical need for a class framework in understanding the fundamental political, economic, and social inequities of our time." Bill Fletcher Jr., coauthor of *Solidarity Divided* "Betsy Leondar-Wright brings fancy French theory down to earth in this important study of why class cultures talk past each other. Anyone who has sat through the jargon of a professional consultant or read obscure tracts by activist-scholars and said, 'Huh?' will enjoy this book. Take it to the next meeting you go to." James M. Jasper, CUNY Graduate Center "Class is the one thing most Americans never discuss and really don't understand. It impacts the outcome of collective efforts to accomplish social change. If you want to really understand both the successes and the conflicts within the movements you care about, you must read this book! It is brilliant, fascinating, and incredibly readable." Thom Hartmann, author of *Rebooting the American Dream*, host of the nationally syndicated Thom Hartmann Program "Betsy Leondar-Wright's book is crucially important for social justice activists. She offers much-needed advice about how to acknowledge your class background and harness it for the greater good. Eye-opening and insightful, this book provides a new way forward." Matthew Rothschild, Senior Editor, *The Progressive* "Missing Class is an essential primer for building cross-class relationships for social justice. It contains keen insight and practical suggestions for activists and organizers on how to bridge class differences and to tap the resources within all class cultures for solutions to group challenges." Paul Kivel, author of *Uprooting Racism*, www.paulkivel.com "Among the many things that shape organizations, the class identities of principal players are among the least examined. In this insightful and often funny book, accomplished activist and thinker Betsy Leondar-Wright enables us to understand how class affects our ways of organizational being, and what we can do to create truly inviting, radical organizational culture." Rinku Sen, president of *Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation* and publisher of *Colorlines* About the Author Betsy Leondar-Wright is the Program Director of *Class Action* (www.classism.org). She is the author of *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists* and coauthor of *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide*.