

# Reflections on Classism

*This is a tool to support white people to think about classism in our lives and in our social justice work. It is meant to be used after doing our [homework](#) on understanding your own class background, along with [this sheet](#) on understanding class characteristics (full links at the bottom). This homework was sparked by and adapted from questions that two queer working class Southern organizers put out in 2015, Jes Kelley and Caitlin Breedlove. We owe much gratitude to them and the work that they do.*

Classism impacts our movement work in similar ways as it shows up in dominant society. Beliefs, norms, ways of communicating, expectations, language, and how entitled or undeserving we feel are all shaped by our class experiences and the messages we get from our families and communities, and our educational, political, religious and cultural institutions. When classism is present in our movement spaces, it actively discourages the participation and leadership of poor and working class people, which means our movements lose wisdom, experience, skills and leadership that are crucial to our success. Because of how prevalent classism is, if we aren't actively working against it, we are generally colluding with it. Because of internalized oppression, even poor and working class people can perpetuate classist beliefs and behaviors. The impacts of classism intersect with other systems of oppression like racism, ableism, misogyny, and queer and transphobia.

Please use the following questions to reflect on classism and how it might be showing up for you in your relationships and in our overall movement cultures. Use the questions to journal and have a conversation about your thoughts with someone. It's great if it's someone from your class background who shares your values and politics.

The questions are broken down into three categories: 1) General Questions that everyone should engage with, 2) Questions for class oppressed people, and 3) Questions for class privileged people. We know that class is complicated and you might straddle the lines, please do the set of questions that feel both most useful and most challenging. When we say class privileged, we are referring to middle and upper class people. Refer back to these class characteristics for support understanding your class background.

## General Questions

- 1) What does it look like to build true trust across lines of class difference in your personal relationships or in your movement work? What about building trust across lines of race and class?

- 2) How have the ways white communities have done racial justice work as separate from economic justice short-changed all working class people and alienated poor whites from racial justice work?
- 3) What's possible when poor/working class folks build with each other without middle/upper class involvement?
- 4) What would be different about how white anti-racism is done today if it was framed more by working class leadership?
- 5) When do whiteness and class privilege get confused for one another? What's the impact of that conflation?

### **Questions for white poor and working class people to consider in working across class**

- 1) How have respectability politics f\*cked up working class organizing?  
Respectability politics refers to when minority and/or marginalized groups are told (or teach themselves) that in order to receive better treatment from the group in power, they must behave according to dominant cultural values, such as when poor people or people of color are told (or tell themselves) that they should be more articulate or dress better if they want mainstream society to respect them.
- 2) Have you been encouraged to adopt middle or upper class cultural norms as part of your own leadership development? What are the class and race backgrounds of people who have mentored you? Have there been people who helped you develop an understanding of your own class, analysis of class within capitalism, or how to develop anti-racist strategies that center poor and working class communities?
- 3) How has class impacted your sense of belonging in white anti-racist spaces?  
When has it been awesome? When has it been hard?
- 4) What kinds of culture and spaces help you feel like you can bring your leadership? How can you help build that for other people?
- 5) What messages did you receive about what it means to be working class or poor? What messages did you receive about what it means to be white? How do these contradict each other? How do they reinforce one another?
- 6) How do you think about yourself in terms of leadership? Are there ways you hold yourself back or don't think you should be in leadership that are about internalized classism? What do you feel about the nuances of how race privilege and internalized classism play out here?
- 7) How has your class background/experience contributed to your work as an anti-racist organizer? Are there values you learned in your class upbringing that can inform how you do white anti-racist organizing?

- 8) What does white privilege mean for poor and working class whites in your area? What are helpful ways of talking about this concept without shutting people down or out?
- 9) It is often difficult to maintain a strong awareness of whiteness/white privilege when talking about class oppression. What are ways you can practice holding both at the same time?
- 10) What do you and your family have to gain by ending racism and classism?

**Questions for white class privileged people to consider in working across class**

- 1) How do you think cultural values from your race and class upbringing have shaped how you show up in your political work and relationships? What of those might come from class privilege?
- 2) How and when do you put your cultural values on poor or working class people? What have you learned/could you learn from working class values?
- 3) What do you notice about how you respond to or avoid conflict or anger? Are you doing work to increase your comfort with working class styles of confrontation? If not, what's a first step you could take?
- 4) What values did you learn in your family and community of origin about money, including sharing money, raising money, talking about money, and how money is used in families and groups? How does that impact how you think about sharing resources and the value of collaboration?
- 5) For many working class people, loyalty to families, communities and groups is essential for daily survival. Class-privileged people usually have a very different experience, because lack of loyalty to causes, ideas, groups, and people often carries less consequence. How do you think about commitment and how do you show it? What/who do you regard as disposable in the work?
- 6) What do you feel is within your arena to pass judgment on? How wide is that sphere? How do you think race and class privilege plays into your ideas about what is and is not subject to your scrutiny, judgement or disapproval?
- 7) What do you notice about how you delegate tasks and assume control across lines of class?
- 8) How do you respond when a working class person doesn't behave in a way you consider appropriate or doesn't do something in the way you want them to? Do you attempt to control other people's actions?
- 9) Growing up with race and class privilege often means people are socialized to believe that their material, physical, and emotional needs are important and should be met, even if it means that other people's needs are not met. This, along with other cultural values we have referenced above, often leads to a

subconscious sense of individualism and entitlement that can deeply and negatively impact our movement cultures. What work can you do to notice and shift the ways that entitlement and individualism surfaces in your life?

- 10) How are you sharing and redistributing money and other resources that you have because of your class privilege? What discomfort are you willing to experience, and what risks are you willing to take towards wealth redistribution/reparations?
- 11) How has class privilege affected your activism? For example, have you been able to do unpaid internships or unpaid movement work in ways that would have been hard if you had to work to support your family or pay off debt? What was made possible by doing that unpaid work? How have you thought about supporting the leadership of poor and working class people who might not have access to doing unpaid, underpaid or overworked movement work?
- 12) In what ways do you attempt to mask your class privilege? What's at stake for you if you were transparent about the resources you have access to? Is there a way in which you focus on what you don't have or a marginalized aspect of your identity in order to downplay or divert attention from the power/access that your privileges award you?
- 13) Have you had shame about your or your family's wealth or privilege? What has that felt like? What do you think might be underneath that shame? What do you think has been lost because of shame around your or your family's privilege or wealth? What do you think would be possible if those of us who have class privilege had less shame about our own or our family's wealth?
- 14) What do you and your family have to gain by ending racism and classism?

### **Links to other homeworks**

Deconstructing Class:

<https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Deconstructing-Class.pdf>

Class Characteristics:

<https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Class-Characteristics.pdf>