

Class Attitudes

Just after I sent a note about "class", occasioned by friendly comments I had from a couple of the conservatives on the joke list about a cartoon I'd sent, I thought of an excellent example of the "class attitudes" of those in the working class, which I should have mentioned. Again, it isn't a matter of virtue, right and wrong, etc., but simply a difference in class attitudes.

The year was probably 1951, the place was Ocean Park, California, and I was a student at UCLA. I had joined the Socialist Party, was a campus radical, and was living in the "Bohemian" area of Ocean Park which was primarily the area for low-income Jews from the East Coast (I rented my shack from a couple who lived in a little house right in front of my shack - and it was a shack, with no bath tub, no hot water, and walls so thin that the most they could do was keep out the rain), and of equally low-income folks from Oklahoma and the Midwest - debris from the Dust Bowl days.

I had discovered the blues of Bessie Smith and was given to playing my LP's of her quite loudly. I didn't realize how loudly until one night, while I was giving a party, the plaster on one wall exploded into the room because a neighbor had hurled a hunk of metal at the wall from his upstairs apartment. (As I said, the walls were very thin).

When I went out, he yelled at me about the loud noise. I didn't know him. I don't think that, aside from the brief drama of that evening, I ever exchanged a word with him. He was very much a working class guy (who needed to sleep at night).

Then one evening, perhaps a year later, he approached me in the little alley than ran along behind the shack (in fact my shack sort of faced onto the alley) and said he thought I should know that the FBI had been around asking questions about me, and he wanted to warn me.

This wasn't a political event. It wasn't a matter of working class solidarity with a radical youth. No, it was simply a working class response to the police. The middle class would not have done this. But to the working class, I might be a pest who had strange friends and played loud music, but when it came to the FBI, I was entitled to a fair notice. We (the middle class) think of the police as our friends. The working class knows they are trouble. It is one of those "class differences" of which I don't think most people in the middle class are even aware.