

Organizing versus Mobilizing: *Poor People's Movements* after 25 Years

By Fred Block

Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail. By Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977. 381 pages.

The small number of books in the social sciences that become classics are usually those that escape the limitations of their theoretical frames. Although *Poor People's Movements* was written within the frame of the neo-Marxism that characterized much critical social science work in the 1970s, the book retains its relevance and interest even when much of the scholarship of that period seems dated and unsatisfying. Part of the reason why is that Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward deliberately challenged a premise shared by much of the political left—that building a leftist political party should be at the core of any radical political practice. The combination of their heterodox starting point, their deep immersion in actual social movements, and their careful historical case studies allowed them to escape their initial structuralist frame and anticipate some of the themes that have become progressively more central to the analysis of American politics and social movements.

In my view, the key contribution of *PPM* was a distinction—implicit in the authors' analysis and in their own practice—between organizing and mobilizing. Much of the book can be understood as a cautionary tale for reformers and radicals who aspire to “organize” the poor. Setting labor unions to one side, Piven and Cloward clearly argued that applying the middle-class model of membership organizations to the poor is deeply mistaken for two reasons. First, such organizations are difficult to sustain and unlikely to make a big difference in the poor's capacity to exercise political power. Second, leaders who seek to preserve such organi-

zations end up discouraging the poor from engaging in disruptive activity, their most powerful political weapon. And even in the case of trade unions, successful organizing has often given rise to unions that are bureaucratic and conservative, and that fail to place priority on expansion of their membership base.

But in cautioning reformers and radicals against organizing, Piven and Cloward did not let off the hook those with resources to help the poor. It is wrong to see the book as a kind of ode to

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spontaneity, a claim that there is nothing to do until the poor suddenly decide to act. On the contrary, Piven and Cloward made their argument about the systematic political marginalization of poor people precisely to suggest that academics, social workers, employees of nonprofits and foundations,

and other professionals have a moral obligation to act to help the poor overcome these structured inequalities. The way to help, though, is not by organizing the poor, but by engaging in activities that can contribute to the mobilization of the poor.

The role of mobilizer echoes Antonio Gramsci's discussion of organic intellectuals,¹ but it transforms the concept to fit a political space no longer dominated by political parties. It involves five different elements that are, not coincidentally, the same things that Piven and Cloward did in supporting the mobilization of welfare recipients in the 1960s and 1970s. The first is to challenge the dominant narratives that work to justify and legitimate society's harsh treatment of the poor, while also validating the claims of the poor for a larger share of society's resources. The second is to search for strategies that could link protest action to concrete political goals, as exemplified by Piven and Cloward's proposal to expand the welfare rolls to force the government to provide the poor with jobs or income. The third is to locate allies and resources that could help ensure that the mobilization of the poor would result in victories. In the welfare rights campaign, the efforts of lawyers were particularly important in breaking down barriers that blocked access to the welfare rolls. The fourth task comes into play when the poor begin to engage in disruptive

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activity. There is a need to interpret and defend the protest activities of the poor, to help persuade the public that what the poor are seeking is, indeed, just. Finally, it is useful to develop concrete legislative proposals that can be passed when political elites decide that they need to make concrete concessions to demobilize the poor.

Implicit in Piven and Cloward's approach is the idea that there is no way to know for sure when the poor—or other insurgent groups—will have an opportunity for effective political protest. Rather, mobilizers make repeated efforts to test the environment, probing for weaknesses in the arrangements that ordinarily keep the poor in their place. Since virtually all upsurges in resistance by the poor come as a surprise, mobilizers must be continually alert to the possibility that groups that have long been dormant might suddenly become available for protest activities. Most recently, we have seen this happen with union campaigns by groups of Latino immigrant workers, many of whom are undocumented. While these workers were often assumed to be too vulnerable to engage in protest activities, significant investments in their mobilization by unions such as the Service Employees International Union have produced a series of very militant and effective protests.²

This role of mobilizer involves serious moral and political dilemmas, particularly around issue of accountability to the people that one seeks to assist. But Piven and Cloward claimed that these dilemmas are solvable; they are not a sufficient excuse to leave the poor to fend for themselves. More important, thinking through the theoretical dimension of mobilizing provides us with a research agenda that remains urgent even after 25 years.

Those who would engage in the mobilizing task need a better analysis of the powerful ideological winds that blow across the terrain of politics with enormous consequences for the fate of movements. How do we understand the dramatic delegitimation of political liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s?³ How do we make sense of the rush to “end welfare as we know it” in 1996 that seemed like an unstoppable force?⁴ Conservative intellectuals' critiques of Aid to Families with Dependent Children so dominated the policy space that opponents of “welfare reform” simply could not be heard.⁵ Since such ideological shifts have huge implications for the capacity of people to mobilize and sustain mobilizations, we need to develop a better understanding of why and when they occur.

Closely related is the alliance question—how does one identify and win over the potential allies who could make a difference in the poor's ability to mobilize and win concessions? In each of Piven and Cloward's case studies, these coalitions—both open and tacit—make an enormous difference, particularly in closing off the attractiveness to elites of a purely repressive response to protest activity. But we also know that they have a huge impact on whether particular groups are available to help the poor.⁶

Finally, there is the cooptation question: can poor people's movements gain concessions from government that actually sustain their capacity to mobilize rather than contribute to demobilization? In *PPM*, Piven and Cloward suggested that concessions almost always have demobilizing consequences; but in some of their other writings, they have recognized that certain reforms

create durable political forces.⁷ What makes welfare politics in most of Western Europe so different from politics in the United States is certainly that unions and social democratic parties in Europe have won changes that cannot easily be reversed. Hence, we need a better understanding of the dividing line between those concessions that disorganize and demobilize insurgent forces and those that increase their political capacity.

The Right's Mobilizing Campaigns

But the big story is that in the quarter century since *PPM* appeared, the kind of protest activities by the poor that Piven and Cloward advocated have been relatively rare. This quiescence is a direct consequence of the success that intellectuals of the right have had in enhancing the political clout of their grassroots activists. Ironically, it is the right that has become expert in the Gramscian project of mobilizing potential activists. On a whole series of issues from tax policy to welfare to abortion to foreign policy, conservative intellectuals and activists at well-funded right-wing think tanks have invented new language for framing political debates, have laid out long-term strategic campaigns, have maneuvered to create allies and neutralize opponents, and have drafted legislative language to enact their preferred policies. In combination with activism by groups such as the Christian Coalition and the strong electoral mobilization of their political base, the result has been a dramatic rightward shift in American politics.

Behind this change lies an asymmetry between right-wing foundations and centrist and liberal foundations. While the former have invested billions in mobilizing activities, centrist and liberal foundations have been reluctant to finance explicitly political campaigns to alter the terms of debate.⁸ For more liberal foundations, programs to fund social services for the poor and other constituencies have had priority over mobilizing activities. Centrist foundations have tended to accept the right's successes and have pursued an increasingly narrow range of policy options. For example, the foreword to a Brookings Institution study on the reauthorization of Temporary Aid for Needy Families notes in regard to welfare policy that the “playing field—the realm of politically feasible debate—has narrowed considerably, making consensus more possible.”⁹ The essays that follow rarely challenge the conservative assumptions on which the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act was based.

In the meantime, the circumstances of America's poor continue to deteriorate under the combined pressure of more restrictive welfare programs, higher unemployment, and dramatic retrenchment in state and local budgets. But reports of increasing levels of hunger and homelessness are unlikely to be heard amid the news from the various overseas fronts in the global “war on terrorism.” Whether the current neglect of the poor can be reversed is uncertain, but *PPM* remains an indispensable text for those who aspire to transform our national priorities.

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Notes

- 1 Gramsci 1971.
- 2 Milkman 2000.
- 3 One recent study that seeks to answer this question is Blyth 2002. See also Hirschman 1991.
- 4 Weaver 2000.
- 5 On the history of this conservative ideology, see Block and Somers 2003.
- 6 Two studies that are relevant to this issue are Gilens 1999 and Lakoff 2002.
- 7 See Piven and Cloward 1997, especially chapter 1.
- 8 Covington 1997; Callahan 2001.
- 9 Armacost et al. 2001, vii.