

The Praxis of *Poor People's Movements*: Strategy and Theory in Dissensus Politics

By Sanford F. Schram

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.

P*oor People's Movements* by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward is an important and controversial book. It has challenged us to think differently about resistance by the oppressed. My disagreements with it pale in comparison to my concern about the ways in which critics have missed what I consider to be the book's real genius. In what follows, after examining how *PPM* has been misunderstood by critics, I discuss the continuing relevance of its central arguments for social movement politics—poor people's movements in particular and the welfare rights movement especially.¹

Many readers see *PPM* as a revisionist, neo-Marxist challenge to the conventional wisdom of labor, community, and grassroots organizing. The book questioned the necessity and even the value of organization, suggesting that “the poor” were so politically marginalized and bereft of conventional political resources that often their only major political asset was to create instability and political turmoil. If there were cracks in the edifice of consolidated power, elites would be moved to legitimate popular grievances, although at times only to recreate the conditions of what Murray Edelman called “mass quiescence.”² Quietude, if not consent, was prized by elites. Yet if the poor sought to consolidate their gains by organizing to participate in the conventional interest group system, cooptation was the likely result, with leaders being bought off by job offers and other individualistic benefits. The poor's best bet was to work the system, looking for opportunities to

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practice a politics of dissent, resisting assimilation into the power structure, remaining loose organizationally, building coalitions, and staging demonstrations and other political actions so as to extract concessions when conditions allowed. This theory seemed most applicable to the most marginalized: the welfare poor, particularly low-income single mothers, who were disproportionately nonwhite and were at the bottom of the class, race, and gender system we call the socioeconomic order.

PPM was simultaneously more and less optimistic than much of the extant literature on social justice organizing, highlighting as it did the poor's potential to extract immediate benefits from elites, yet cautioning against the futility of organizing the poor to participate in the pluralist interest group system. Pluralism was hopeless, but protest politics could be productive. This bittersweet message did not sit well with a left that had been taught to organize the masses for the coming revolution. *PPM* was denounced as “blind militancy”³ that offered nothing but an “anti-organizational philippic.”⁴ Conservatives called the book a “riot ideology” that irresponsibly agitated for mass turmoil.⁵ These tired complaints persist today and continue to confuse *PPM*'s thesis and undermine our ability to appreciate its significance.⁶

The first critics failed to appreciate fully how *PPM* stressed strategy at least as much as theory. *PPM* explicitly questioned organization as a universal goal for social movements; but it, in my mind, can be read as also implicitly challenging the priority given to generic theories disconnected from the exigencies of specific struggles. Piven and Cloward examined case studies of movement politics among the poor and oppressed: the Great Depression mobilization of the unemployed, the struggles of the fledgling trade union movement during the same time period, the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and the welfare rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. The authors focused on these groups not because they were interested in the reified category of “collective behavior,” in mass-membership social organizations, or in social movements generally, but because they were concerned about the specific challenges of social activism among

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society's dispossessed. They offered a finely grained "praxis for the poor" more than they did a universalistic theory of social movements.⁷ Piven and Cloward gave us what amounted to a "middle range" theory.⁸ For C. Wright Mills, such theories were preferable because they avoided "excessive abstraction" and the deployment of "sponge words" that made "grand" theories politically useless.⁹ *PPM* was therefore not, strictly speaking, a work of social movement theory as much as it was a study of the strategic considerations that arise in particular contexts when the poor try to exercise power.

Then again, *PPM* was not about reifying such distinctions. It sought not to replace theory with strategy, but to make theoretical work more strategically relevant. The same could be said of the distinction between a politics of protest and one of organization. *PPM* examined their interrelationships in specific settings rather than universally privileging disruption over organization for all times, places, and movements.

The welfare rights case study was one in which Piven and Cloward had firsthand experience as scholar/activists, and it best represents the way they were producing situated knowledge tied to a specific political struggle. The politics of disruption in this case was energized by Cloward and Piven's paper "A Strategy to End Poverty." This widely circulated paper appeared in 1966 in *The Nation* and later in various other publications.¹⁰ Thousands of welfare activists were drawn into the strategy. The paper used recent research by Piven and Cloward indicating that about one out of every two families eligible for welfare was not receiving it. Using this issue as the basis of strategy, the authors proposed mobilizing the poor to sign up for welfare so as to overload the system, underscore its inability to meet legitimate need, and thereby force a crisis that would lead to replacing the inadequate welfare system with a guaranteed income. This approach came to be called the "crisis strategy," and it almost worked when the guaranteed income was seriously considered by the Nixon administration and Congress.

The crisis strategy was what its name says it was: strategy—not theory—using a politics of disruption as a critical but contingent tool for creating political change. To highlight the contingent character of such a resource, Piven and Cloward famously wrote at the conclusion of their first book: "A placid poor get nothing, but a turbulent poor sometimes get something."¹¹ Years later, the all-pervasive reality of political contingency became clear. In the face of the 1990s welfare retrenchment, Cloward was asked whether their crisis strategy had backfired, and he responded: "We knew that trouble was coming. Our view is the poor don't win much, and they only win it episodically. You get what you can when you can get it—and then you hold onto your hat."¹² I call this orientation "radical incrementalism," where activism pushes for fundamental changes by forcing concessions from those in power, taking what incremental gains can be had and using them to build a better future.¹³ The crisis strategy did just that, effectively combining a "politics of survival" with a "politics of social change."¹⁴

The strategy of radical incrementalism among activists collided with the theories of social movement scholars that emphasized the importance of building organizations to approach policy change

more systematically. Piven and Cloward wrote that social movement theorists often seemed to be saying that social movements were too disruptive and in need of "normalization."¹⁵ While social movement theorists in the resource mobilization (RM) school (led by Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy) did not agree with the collective behavior theorists (such as Neil Smelser), who saw movements as irrational, RM theorists did see social movements as often inchoate.¹⁶ They prided themselves on offering a new strategic realism to social movement theory.¹⁷ Yet their approach to strategy was often overly theoretical, abstract, generic, and disconnected from the exigencies of specific struggles. These scholars were also far too often preoccupied with theorizing the conditions for creating solidarity through organization. RM theorists repeatedly hypothesized about the rational calculus that could build social movements into sustainable mass-membership organizations. They tended to elide the important differences between protest politics and more conventional forms of politics rather than examine the strategic relationship between the two. They often failed to see how protest politics was valuable in creating a distinctive way of exercising political influence. As a result, RM theorists were at risk of "normalizing" protest politics and likely to dismiss the most disruptive forms as inconsistent with the conventional politics they favored.¹⁸

RM theorists often misunderstood Piven and Cloward as diehard proponents of disruption in all cases.¹⁹ Rather, Piven and Cloward saw protest politics in terms of contingencies: sometimes there was no other viable course. As early as 1963, Piven—in support of rent strikes in New York City—wrote that poor people are "without regular resources for influencing public policy," so "disruptive and irregular tactics are the only resource, short of violence, available to low-income groups seeking to influence public policy."²⁰ For the poor, mobilizing for protest politics was often strategically smarter than organizing to build mass-membership organizations. In *PPM*, Piven and Cloward noted that a strategy for poor people's political action that emphasized building mass-membership organizations was flawed for one major reason: "[I]t is not possible to compel concessions from elites that can be used as resources to sustain oppositional organizations over time" (xxi).

Reflecting the RM tendency to prize solidarity, organization, and conventional politics over discontent, disruption, and protest politics, Sidney Tarrow (in this symposium) is also wrong to characterize Piven and Cloward as "radical Durkheimians" content to assume that the poor would always be alienated and could not be organized. Tarrow notes the strategic realism offered by *PPM*; however, he fails to appreciate that this strategic realism was contextually based. *PPM* suggested that the issue was not whether the poor should organize, but what forms of organization would be most appropriate for poor people, whose main political resource was their ability to be disruptive.²¹ In short, the book was about leveraging power in particular instances, for particular movements.

It is also a mistake to suggest that Piven and Cloward rejected conventional politics generally. (This is yet another way that critics have missed *PPM*'s nuanced grasp of the contingent relationship between protest politics and conventional politics, electoral politics in particular.)²² *PPM* reiterated the theme of a 1968

article by Piven and Cloward: while protest politics and electoral politics were different—one emphasized conflict, the other consensus and coalitions—they were also interdependent.²³ The strategy of *PPM* was not to pursue protest politics independent of electoral politics, but to play them off each other. Electoral politics often created unsatisfactory results that over time could lead to the development of protest politics, and protest politics could help marginalized groups gain a greater voice in the electoral process.

The politically strategic character of Piven and Cloward's scholarship is made clear by how its critics could turn 180 degrees when the context changed—and Piven and Cloward's strategizing adjusted accordingly. *PPM* predicted that the time would come when protest politics would not be the strategic option to emphasize. For the welfare rights movement, that time came in the 1980s. In 1983, Piven and Cloward worked with others to form the Human Service Employees Registration and Voter Education Fund (Human SERVE), which eventually became instrumental in winning passage of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (the Motor Voter Law). This law required motor vehicle, welfare, and other state government offices to help register citizens to vote. Critics from the left began to suggest that Piven and Cloward had forsaken the radical politics of protest for the conservative politics of the ballot box.²⁴ Yet Piven and Cloward did not forsake one form of politics for another; they simply emphasized one over another as context and contingency suggested. The strategic uses of protests and elections were both part of what Piven and Cloward would later emphasize as the “power repertoires” associated with movement politics.²⁵

A failure to appreciate the strategic character of *PPM* continues into the present. Piven and Cloward sought to negotiate how the poor could be mobilized, but not in a way that would lead to organizational ossification; nonetheless, they have been criticized recently for not attending to how mobilizing the poor as “the poor” would in fact lead to the very cooptation that Piven and Cloward took great pains to avoid. In her own thoughtfully strategic analysis, Barbara Cruikshank takes Piven and Cloward to task for allowing an overly essentialistic form of identity politics to inform their efforts to “empower” low-income citizens as “the poor.” Cruikshank suggests that one mistake in Piven and Cloward's strategy was accepting the government-sponsored invention of “the poor” as a distinct group of people.²⁶ Part of Cruikshank's argument is that the government promoted reification of the poor during the war on poverty so as to ensure their domestication and the return of domestic tranquility.

Cruikshank is critical of what she calls the “will to empower” and the role it played in efforts to mobilize and organize people with low incomes as “the poor.” This strategy was problematic because it assumed that low-income persons automatically constitute a coherent population with unified interests. “The poor,” for Cruikshank, do not preexist government intervention but are an artifact of it. Therefore, mobilizing “the poor” helps the government do its own work by sequestering low-income people into their own separate, inferior programs. Indeed, welfare has

been an inferior track of social policy since the 1960s mobilizing days.

Yet, as should be clear by now, *PPM* emphasized strategy. It did not so much reify “the poor” as use that category for strategic representation. A close reading of the organizing efforts of the welfare rights movement suggests that low-income women were organized as “the poor” as an alternative to the already delegitimated state-imposed category of “welfare recipients.”²⁷ And both “the poor” and “welfare recipients” were, according to ethnographic accounts, often dropped in favor of “mothers” in certain organizing efforts.²⁸ In fact, *PPM* emphasized that a politics of dissensus resisting how power positioned “the poor” was of supreme importance. “The poor” was, therefore, as strategic as latter appellations such as “the homeless,” designed to highlight injustice and leverage concessions from those in positions of power.²⁹ This tactic was an instance of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called “strategic essentialism.”³⁰

John Gilliom addresses a contemporary issue at the other end of the organizing spectrum. He details a welfare system that so thoroughly regulates the lives of welfare recipients that the issue is not whether they will be organized too much but whether they will remain isolated. Welfare has been “reformed” into an invasive system of monitoring and surveillance under the guise of a more therapeutic approach to the problem of “dependency.” The single mothers on welfare that Gilliom's researchers talked to dissent, but their politics is limited in the face of the all-encompassing bureaucratic oppressiveness of the new welfare regime.³¹ At best, recipients can undertake everyday acts of resistance and employ what James Scott has called the “weapons of the weak.”³² Welfare recipients today face obstacles of isolation and individuation that make difficult even the fluid protest politics of *PPM*.

The pervasiveness of surveillance in the newly medicalized regime of reformed welfare antiquates the very idea of mass action in the public sphere. The public sphere as a realm of freedom and political expression is imperiled when publicity becomes nothing more than a prerequisite for monitoring and control.³³ When public action is anticipated, dissected, and suppressed, mass organizing becomes even more questionable and organized social groupings of marginal persons are at greater risk of being assimilated into the disciplinary practices of the welfare state.³⁴

Under these conditions, can a “politics of survival”—where people cope individually with their own oppression—ever promote a “politics of social change” dedicated to transforming the systemic roots of society's inequities? The public, collective politics of protest risks collapsing into fragmented, private forms of everyday resistance. These may provide some relief to oppression in individual circumstances but do not lead to the structural transformations needed to further achievement of any particular social justice agenda. A poor people's movement that only helps individuals extract immediate concessions may actually become its own form of cooptation, preventing the poor from mobilizing on behalf of more dramatic collective action and more substantive changes. Ultimately, what good is a politics of dissent if it only encourages resistance that is not informed by a positive program for change?

This line of inquiry, however, can be too bleak.³⁵ *PPM* teaches us that even today, in the shadow of the surveillance state, mass mobilizing beyond everyday acts of resistance is still possible and as relevant as ever. We need look no further than the rising tide of activism against globalization in various forms. Additionally, welfare rights activism has not withered under welfare reform; it has been mobilized by the cruelties of the new regime. Mass protest geared toward a politics of disruption often remains the best political resource that the otherwise politically powerless have.

The politics of disruption championed by *PPM* returns now to take on heightened strategic significance in an age of globalization. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who invoke Piven and Cloward in a laudable attempt to articulate a contemporary movement politics for the oppressed, advocate “a politics of subversion” situated between everyday acts of sabotage and the more organized forms of mass politics. Hardt and Negri show that globalization creates new venues for public activism even as it closes down the older ones.³⁶ Global social movements against sweatshops, environmental degradation, and human rights abuses spring up and even coalesce with increasing frequency, first against the World Trade Organization and then against unilateral war by the Bush administration. “Smart mobs” arise via the Internet.³⁷ Public activism does not die with globalization; it is transformed.

Hardt and Negri make the point that compared with the national economies that preceded it, the emerging global empire—with its postindustrial economy—is ever more dependent on the cooperative participation of what they call the “multitude” (i.e., the diverse groups of people around the world who are needed to participate in the emerging global system of production).³⁸ More docile bodies and more malleable minds are needed in a transcultural, global system of exchange. And so “reproduction,” in the broad sense of reproducing the type of private family, community, and social life needed for participation in the global public spheres of exchange, becomes as critical as the production that goes on in those spheres. The emerging global empire is more dependent upon the cooperative efforts of the multitude for the success of economic, political, social, and cultural relations. A politics of resistance at the level of creating compliant subjects therefore generates the political potential to threaten power's consolidation. The new world order is in this sense arguably more vulnerable than the old to attacks from below.

In the end, Hardt and Negri demonstrate that a politics of protest can be grounded in a positive program of social change.³⁹ A radicalized multiculturalism tied to resisting the consolidation of political and economic power informs this positive program, motivated by cultural and economic justice. This multiculturalism would not rationalize global capitalism by making diversity a source for corporate legitimacy with clients and customers in foreign countries. Instead, it would allow diverse people around the world to unite in their need to resist global capitalism's appropriation of their cultures and subordination of their communities. Like Piven and Cloward in *PPM*, Hardt and Negri in *Empire* thoughtfully resist the temptation to lay down blueprints and foundational theories for justice, pre-

ferring instead to emphasize the contingent character of social justice struggles.

In closing, I want to note a final irony. Piven and Cloward were once criticized for offering a “Machiavellian” perspective.⁴⁰ What better compliment to give strategic thinkers? Like Machiavelli, Piven and Cloward were misunderstood, blamed for the injustices they brought to light, and vilified for daring to think strategically about realistic ways to effectively address these injustices. While Machiavelli's strategy was in service of his beloved Florentine republic, Piven and Cloward's was in service of the poor and oppressed in capitalist America. Piven and Cloward's “praxis for the poor” was a sophisticated response to the contingencies involved in poor people's politics. It can be understood as the basis for a radical incrementalism that achieves as much political change as possible at any one point. More than any theory of social movements, such insight into the real world of activism by the poor is still valid today. While the current climate of welfare retrenchment is bleak, a beacon began burning brightly when Piven and Cloward started writing books like *PPM*.

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Notes

- 1 For further discussion, see Schram 2002.
- 2 Edelman 1960.
- 3 Hobsbawm 1978, 44.
- 4 Gans and Schmeidler 1984, 584.
- 5 Siegel 1997, 46.
- 6 See McAdam and Su 2002 for the mistaken association of Piven and Cloward with a preference for more violent forms of protest at the expense of “more persuasive” protests (e.g., large but peaceful demonstrations).
- 7 See Schram 2002.
- 8 Merton 1967.
- 9 Mills 1959, 43.
- 10 Cloward and Piven 1966.
- 11 Piven and Cloward 1971, 338.
- 12 Quoted in DeParle 1998, 59.
- 13 Schram 2000.
- 14 See Soss 2000, 60–1.
- 15 Piven and Cloward 1984.
- 16 Zald and McCarthy 1979; Smelser 1962.
- 17 Gans and Schmeidler 1984.
- 18 See McAdam and Su 2002.
- 19 Gans and Schmeidler 1984.
- 20 Piven 1974, 85–6. This essay was originally written in 1963 for a training program sponsored by Mobilization for Youth.
- 21 See also Piven and Cloward 1997.
- 22 Fording 1997; Fording 2001.
- 23 Piven and Cloward 1968.
- 24 For a review of the criticisms of Piven and Cloward’s turn to emphasizing voter registration, see Schram 2002.
- 25 Piven and Cloward 2000, 413.
- 26 Cruikshank 1999.
- 27 White 1999.
- 28 Valk 2000.
- 29 Stern 1984; Schram 1995; Rosenthal 1997.
- 30 Spivak 1988, 314.

31 Gilliom 2001.

32 Scott 1985. Also see Scott 1990.

33 Rose 1998; Dean 2002.

34 Hänninen 1998.

35 See Deleuze 1992.

36 Hardt and Negri 2000.

37 Rheingold 2002; Packer 2003.

38 Hardt and Negri 2001.

39 Ibid.

40 Durman 1973.