

# Retrospective Comments

By Frances Fox Piven

*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 was based on four case studies of major twentieth-century protest movements by the American poor: the mobilization of the unemployed during the Great Depression that faded into the Workers' Alliance of America; the industrial strike movement that built the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO); the Southern civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s; and the 1960s protests by welfare recipients spearheaded by the National Welfare Rights Organization. Richard Cloward and I undertook this work in the 1970s, as a decade of social turmoil was coming to a close. Protests by minorities and the poor were at the vortex of this turmoil, and we were provoked by these extraordinary events to try to understand why some movements achieved more political success than others.

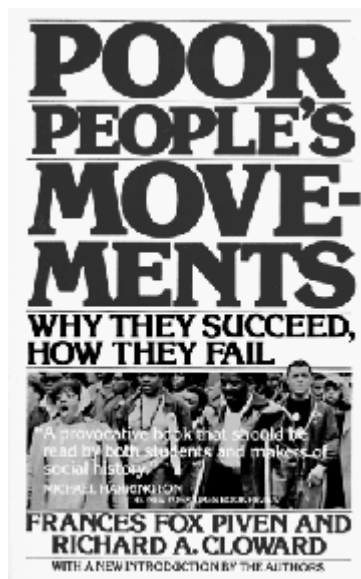
This was not the kind of question that most academics asked, nor is it now. To be sure, there was already a spate of movement studies, but observers mainly concentrated on identifying the social conditions that gave rise to protest. As is usual in the academy, this preoccupation led to division and debate, primarily between those who emphasized social dislocation or breakdown as the main cause of protest and those who belonged to the newly emergent resource mobilization school, which emphasized social solidarities. While we were also interested in the question of movement origins, we did not side with either school, but argued that a concatenation of social changes was necessary for the rise of mass protest. In any case, we cared more about examining movements as a form of politics, as strategies by the poor to exert power under tightly constrained conditions. We thought experience

showed that poor people could achieve little through the routines of conventional electoral and interest group politics. What remained as their main resource was what we called disruption, the breakdowns that resulted when people defied the rules and institutional routines that ordinarily governed life. In this respect, the protests of the 1960s had much in common with protests earlier in the century by industrial workers and the unemployed. Each of these movements had its roots in local disruptions; each

gained such political leverage as it had through the electoral fragmentation that local disruptions threatened; and each was to varying degrees limited because leaders and organizers aspired to move beyond disruption in order to build a mass-membership organization that could exercise regular power over time.

If disruption was the main resource of the poor, though, it was shaped and limited in multiple ways. For one thing, collective defiance by people at the bottom occurred infrequently because they were usually hemmed in by their daily routines. Only when large-scale socioeconomic change interrupted those routines, simultaneously increasing privations and loosening the hierarchical controls inherent in daily life, were people likely to consider their circumstances both wrong and subject to redress. And only when such a transvaluation occurred were people likely to be willing to

strike or sit down, to demand relief, to cease paying rent—in other words, to withhold their usual cooperation in performing institutional roles. Additionally, as these examples suggest, the acting out of defiance is constrained by the very specific institutional situation of the discontented. Workers can strike; welfare recipients can disrupt only welfare offices. These actions risked reprisals, sometimes terrible reprisals. And they were not necessarily effective, for the simple reason that, except in the case of industrial workers, lower-strata people in the United States typically did not play important roles in major institutions. However, the ultimate test of the power of the poor was not in their ability to disrupt particular institutions, but in the responses of electoral leaders to such disruptions. When political leaders were unsure of



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*Frances Fox Piven is a distinguished professor of political science and sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (fpiven@hotmail.com). She writes about social movements, the welfare state, and American electoral politics. Her books include Regulating the Poor, The New Class War, and Why Americans Still Don't Vote.*

their support, even disruptions localized in peripheral institutions could provoke conciliatory reforms. These reforms were limited, certainly, and they were shaped as much by elite ideas and interests as by movement demands. Even limited reforms were intertwined with measures to both conciliate and repress movement activists, helping to account for movement decline.

We thought that these lessons from the history of protest were important not only to the academic study of movements, but to the practice of movement leaders and organizers, who tended to enter each organizing venture fixed in the conviction that the task was to develop formal organizations of the poor capable of coordinating large numbers and capable of enduring, as if no one had ever tried this before. Despite the persistence of this credo, the organizations that resulted remained small, except when massive disruption prompted elites to provide the resources that made organization possible. Elite largesse rarely outlasted the movement that provoked it. The organizer model did not lead to power; in fact, it often led organizers to act in ways that diminished the disruptive mobilizations that sometimes did yield power.

I am honored by the respectful and critical attention paid to *PPM* in this symposium. Because the criticisms are important, I am glad for the opportunity to respond.

Sidney Tarrow asks where Cloward and I would have stood on Todd Gitlin's call for a universalist politics, in contrast to the identity politics movements of recent decades. For most commentators, the rise of "identity politics" means primarily the rise of the women's movement and the black movement, both of which challenged a "universalism" that depicted white, European, Christian males as the universal subject. That sort of truncated universalism was, of course, culturally repressive to the majorities it did not represent. It was also politically repressive. African Americans in the North and the border states who had the right to vote joined the New Deal majority coalition. But while some few made gains as workers, the leaders of the Democratic Party resisted any moves to overturn the legal underpinnings of American apartheid. Similarly, truncated universalism overlooked the distinctive needs and aspirations of women—until women themselves developed the demands associated with "body politics." Even now, the traditional work roles of many women as caretakers continue to be ignored or disparaged, as evidenced by our current "work first" welfare policies.

The women's movement and the black movement, by challenging this distorted universalism, helped to unleash other claims to distinctive identities, perhaps most importantly by the gay and lesbian movements. History gives us little grounds for faith in the "self-corrective" character of the old universalism. Rather, it was the diverse identity movements, their claims for recognition and response, that inched us toward a truer universalism. As for the resulting fragmentation of the New Deal majority coalition that so many commentators bemoan, it seems to me

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unreasonable to place the blame for division on the groups in that coalition, whose interests and identities had been for so long suppressed.

Which brings me to the argument that Tarrow invokes in Geoff Eley's name, that the unifying myth of the proletariat is dead, an argument with which I would agree. In some ways Cloward and I had respect—even awe—for the myth and its empowering effects on industrial workers, particularly in Europe. But when we wrote *PPM*, we thought the historical moment that gave the myth credibility had passed. The industrial proletariat, never a majority, was already shrinking. We thought that the

myth failed as dialectical analysis because it "did not anticipate the specific institutional patterns which evolved under modern capitalism, [or] . . . anticipate the particular forms of struggle which would be generated in response to them."<sup>1</sup> We talked instead about "working people" or

"poor people." What was true then is even more evident now. Note that contemporary movements do not draw on the proletarian myth. Rather, they simply demand economic justice on the implicit assumption that a variety of groups in diverse circumstances can rally around that sort of claim. As for an alternative unifying force, we did not offer one then, nor am I ready to do so now. Remember that the price of such unity as the proletarian myth achieved was the marginalization of majorities.

Tarrow also queries our discussion of the causes of movement decline. Here, I think he misreads our argument—which, if anything, was hyperstructuralist, both in its analysis of the rise of movements and in its analysis of decline. We searched for the systemic forces—provoked by protest—that accounted for decline, an examination that Joel Lefkowitz summarizes in his essay. Our criticism of movement organizers and leaders was limited, because we found the role of organizers and leaders to be limited; their effectiveness was circumscribed by forces they did not control. Still, to the extent that leaders and organizers mattered, we thought that the test of their effectiveness was whether they escalated the disruptive effects of the movement while disruption was still possible. In other words, did they help the movement win as much as it could, while it could? We were oriented to the organizers because we believed that they often misread the nature of movement power. Instead of escalating disruption, they tried to turn the movement to organization building in the hope that organization would sustain the movement and make it effective electorally. But the effort to build resource-needy organizations increased the opportunities for cooptation. And when the movement faded, so did the organizations to which the movement had given rise.

Sanford Schram defends *PPM* by saying that it "emphasized strategy." He is correct that we were preoccupied with the strategic options available to the poor. But we maintained that political strategy depended on theory, most importantly a theory of power. Our emphasis on the distinction between mobilizing and

organizing reflected our theoretical assessment of the limited power resources available to the poor in the American political system. As Schram points out, this did not lead us to dismiss electoral politics. Far from it. Our strategic analysis focused precisely on the interplay of the disruptions mounted by movements and their electoral reverberations. We tried to show that electoral politics shaped the ideas and actions of the protesters and that the protesters achieved what they did as a consequence of the destabilizing impact of protest on electoral coalitions.

Schram also counters charges that our very use of the term *the poor* contributed to their cooptation. I would add to his defense of our work that collective identities are not freely chosen, but are always shaped by social and political experience. “The poor” became a group identity in the 1960s, mostly because that was the language of a Democratic administration responding with sympathetic talk and programs to the threat power of the cities’ increasingly insurgent minorities, who were indeed poor. When the most vulnerable of these poor—impoverished women raising children—were spurred by the insurgency all around them to mount their own protests, they directed their demands against the welfare agencies, to which they had some access. As a result, people were “sequestered” into separate and inferior programs. But the programs also became the context for organized resistance. And resistance, in turn, produced more generous welfare programs, more liberally administered. As Schram reminds us, these women were not content to call themselves poor. They discovered that they too had rights, because they were mothers. In effect, they asserted their right to receive state support for performing traditional gender roles. And for a while, in a limited way, they won that right. Critics are forever proposing that movements should do something else, demand something else, without attending to the constraints within which they try to do what they do.

I appreciate Lefkowitz’s overview of the essays on *PPM*, especially for the careful attention he gives to parsing the arguments of the book. He stresses the complexity of our argument, and this is a point that I would also like to underline. I made this point earlier in discussing our view of the conditions that led to the emergence of movements. We thought the processes that accounted for protest victories were also complex, as were the causes of movement decline.

We expected movements to decline, which made some of our critics impatient. Is that all there is, these brief bursts of defiance, followed by concessions that also channel the protesters into normal and less effective political routines? And then, once the movement subsides, does the rise of political opposition lead to the whittling away of the limited concessions that were won? Well, yes. We believed that most of the gains made from the bottom would fade if the threat power of the poor was not reasserted. We were pessimistic, but the subsequent losses in all of the policy areas championed by these movements shows that we were correct. Larger and more lasting reforms are not likely to be won by poor people’s movements alone.

Joe Kling makes a number of interesting observations about the connection between *PPM* and other intellectual traditions. I

tend to agree with these comments, and in any case, I do not have the space to respond here. I would, however, demur at his characterization of Eric Hobsbawm’s *Primitive Rebels*.<sup>2</sup> While Hobsbawm thought protests by the poor deserved academic attention, he also thought them archaic and for that reason doomed. *Primitive* was not an accidental term. In this respect at least, Hobsbawm was the one who was “myopic and arrogant,” dismissing movements because they did not “fit the Marxist mold.”

But the main point Kling makes has to do with our critique of the role of formal membership organizations. This has always been what sticks in the craw of our critics. As others have done, Kling tries to counter our argument by showing that civil rights activists were tied together in social networks that were the vehicles of collective action. We took pains in our discussion of the civil rights movement to make exactly that point, as Kling also seems to acknowledge. Of course, social infrastructure undergirds protest (although just how dense and enduring an infrastructure collective action requires is usually exaggerated, an issue we discussed elsewhere).<sup>3</sup> Thus, workers are connected to each other in the workplace, and their experiences there inform their defiance when it occurs. The factory in this sense organizes workers, just as the welfare system “organizes” recipients. Our critique of formal organization does not stem either from a belief in individualistic and anomic action or, for that matter, from a belief in spontaneity (an issue we dealt with explicitly in chapter 1 of *PPM*). Our critique had instead to do with the role of formal membership organizations, often created on the crest of protest. Kling is correct that the networks that undergirded the civil rights movement included preexisting organizations, such as the NAACP. But the militance and spread of the movement did not depend on such organizations and, indeed, often depended on limiting their influence. Lefkowitz’s discussion of the important study of the civil rights movement by Aldon Morris is relevant here. The boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, did not flow from the NAACP hierarchy, but from networks of activists that penetrated—and went beyond—the NAACP. Much the same pattern is evident in the strike movement of the 1930s; there were unions that predated the strike movement. But with virtually no exceptions, the union leaders worked to limit strikes, not to escalate them.

The debate over organization versus mobilization is not simply about alternative forms of collective action. It is also about power and which forms of collective action are likely to yield it. We concluded that the main power resource of the poor was in the reverberations of disruption, in the trouble they caused when they withdrew their cooperation in institutional routines. Efforts to build formal organization did not contribute to disruption, but often stymied it. Yet most of the organizers in our case studies believed that the poor could exert influence through the electoral-representative system if only they shifted from disruption to organization.<sup>4</sup>

Fred Block points to the importance of contextual factors in the rise and success of protest movements of the poor, particularly dominant ideological currents and the availability of potential allies, two elements of the environment of protest that are surely

intertwined. He sees these contextual dimensions as the terrain for a Gramscian project of intellectuals and professionals allied with the poor. At the same time, he argues that the “big story” is the success of the right in mounting its own project: making the arguments, crafting the language, and developing the strategies to promote a conservative grassroots movement and policy agenda. And behind this successful project are the powerful and wealthy foundations whose influence pervades government and the media. No wonder the poor are quiescent.

Although it is true that a concerted right-wing mobilization has had far-reaching influence on American politics, the advantages of established power and money *usually* tilt to the right. When is it different? Protest movements sometimes change that. Thus they are not only the beneficiaries of a sympathetic ideological environment and the allies it makes available, but they also can help to create that environment. So while we cannot wish liberal think tanks or lobbying organizations into existence, disruptive movements and their electoral reverberations may nevertheless help to dislodge the suffocating paradigm of neoliberalism and nourish ideological currents more sympathetic to the poor.

The dominant model of organization on the left that we critiqued was the formal mass-membership bureaucracy. Early in the twentieth century, some on the European left had also scrutinized and criticized this form, but over time, with the rise of unions and parliamentary socialism, it became taken for granted as the way working people could exert influence in electoral representative systems. The model worked better in Europe than in the United States, however, probably because features of American electoral institutions that guaranteed low voter turnout and weak political parties distorted the context in which these organizations tried to exert influence.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the mass-membership bureaucracy was difficult to sustain and acutely vulnerable to oligarchy and cooptation. So we raised the organizational question again and called for a consideration of alternative forms of organization through which “working people can act together in defiance of their rulers in ways more congruent with the structure of working-class life and with the process of working-class struggle, [forms] less susceptible to penetration by dominant elites.”<sup>6</sup>

This search for alternative forms has been under way for some time by movement activists themselves. It was evident in the wariness of formal structure of the new social movement formations of the 1970s and 1980s, and it is a distinguishing feature of

the global justice movement. Across the world, especially in the Southern hemisphere, new movements of the poor have taken over unused land, reconnected the water and electrical lines severed by privatization, and blocked the operations of multinational corporations. Naomi Klein describes their organizational model—with its hubs and spokes and affinity groups—as organic, fragmented, and decentralized, yet intricately linked, infinitely expandable, and clearly capable of international coordination. And it is difficult to control.<sup>7</sup> Academics may continue to focus on the unions and political parties of the industrial era, but alternative models of organization are emerging nevertheless. And I, for one, am hopeful.

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## Notes

- 1 Piven and Cloward 1979, x.
- 2 Hobsbawm 1963.
- 3 See Piven and Cloward 1992.
- 4 Or “from protest to politics,” as in the title of a widely read article by Rustin 1965.
- 5 Piven and Cloward 2000.
- 6 Piven and Cloward 1979, xvii.
- 7 Klein 2002.