Frances Fox Piven
doi:10.1017/S1537592709990107

Over the course of the decade that began in the early 1960s, domestic policies in the United States were transformed. A dizzying series of new federal initiatives followed one after the other: the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Act of 1961, the Community Mental Centers Act and the Equal Pay Acts of 1963, the Civil Rights and the Economic Opportunity Acts of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966, as well as legislation establishing Medicare, Medicaid, and new housing programs, together with the liberalization of programs first established in the 1930s, including welfare, unemployment insurance, and social security. By the time the decade was over, huge steps had been taken to limit discrimination in the workplace and the voting booth, to authorize new streams of funding for services targeted to the poor, and also to create the legislative basis for litigating in the courts to establish the rights of people previously discriminated against because of their race, their poverty, their age, their sex, their marital status, or their sexual orientation.

This upheaval in public policy reflected a commensurate upheaval in politics, but it was not the usual politics of elections and interest groups. To be sure, some analysts have credited the new policies to developments in "normal politics," such as the election of Democratic presidents and Democratic congressional majorities in the early 1960s. But to say that Democrats were in office is merely to push the question back a step. Why did Democrats—calculating politicians who had after all been in office before—suddenly become bold reformers? I think a reasonable answer has to include the need to respond to the extraordinary popular upheavals that began in the late 1950s with the rise of the Civil Rights movement and that continued through the 1960s with the eruption of movements focused on poverty, gender, gay and lesbian rights, peace, the environment, and so on.

Protest movements are complex and hybrid phenomena. But at their core is the surge of popular defiance by which we recognize that something extraordinary is happening, and that for a time gives the movement its distinctive source of power. People who ordinarily more or less obey the rules that define the roles they play in a complexly interdependent social life suddenly defy those rules. In other words, they withdraw their cooperation in the web of institutions we call society. The preconditions that make these moments of transformative defiance possible are complex, and in the United States include shifts in electoral politics that may generate a new sense of possibility and hope. So, electoral politics can matter, albeit as part of a larger movement dynamic.

Moreover, to add to the complexity, the burst of hope and possibility that characterizes the movement also activates and attracts all sorts of organizational efforts and activities. Big movements thus generate an even larger penumbra of political excitement and effort. Included in that penumbra are the social movement organizations (SMOs) that attract much of the attention of scholars of these movements. While some of those organizations precede in time the emergence of the movement, many more emerge in the course of the movement itself. Not only does the movement inspire new organizational initiatives, but the disruptions created by the movement also prompt efforts by both government and private elites to channel popular discontent into more normal and manageable forms of political action. In other words, movements and the threat power they wield stir elites to support organized (and less threatening) forms of political representation of the groups and issues that fuel the movement. As Dara Strolovitch points out in her fine study, the period between 1960 and 1999 saw the formation of 56% of currently existing Civil Rights and racial minority organizations, 79% of currently existing economic justice organizations, and 65% of extant women's organizations (pp. 16–17).

Strolovitch's book picks up at approximately the historical moment when the movements ceded ground to the proliferating organized groups that profess to advocate for the issues and constituencies that the movements represented. Using survey and interview data from a universe of 714 organizations that purport to represent disadvantaged groups, Strolovitch asks how well these groups do in representing the interests of those of their constituents who are the most disadvantaged, or, in her language, who suffer intersectional or multiple disadvantages. Her question is important, her empirical investigation is painstaking and careful, and her conclusions are cautiously hedged. Even so, they are unambiguous, and I think not really surprising. She finds that these social justice organizations themselves marginalize their most disadvantaged constituents, devoting more of their efforts to the issues that affect the most advantaged among their supporters, whose greater influence is more useful in sustaining the organization.

These are social justice organizations, however, whose legitimacy is still derived from association with the movement that helped give birth to the organizations, and so the bias toward those supporters who can provide advantages for the organization has to be justified. Strolovitch reports that organizational leaders develop this sort of justification in the form of arguments that cast the issues of the disadvantaged as narrow and particularistic, while the issues of the most advantaged are framed as benefiting broader constituencies. So, not only is it the case that the disadvantaged are scarcely represented in the world

Frances Fox Piven is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Sociology at CUNY Graduate Center.

of interest groups in American politics, but even the tiny fraction of organized groups that claims to represent the disadvantaged tilts its activities toward those who are less disadvantaged.

Instead of investing their own resources and efforts in the issues of the most disadvantaged, the advocacy groups prefer coalitional efforts. At first glance, it might seem that coalitions are a way to pool scarce resources and, thus, enhance the chances of success on the issues of the most disadvantaged. Certainly that is what the author's informants claim. But coalitional efforts may not be what they seem. The fact of joining a coalition on behalf of the most marginalized may itself be a largely symbolic act, a way that the principled claims of the organization can seem to be satisfied without actually committing the resources or undertaking the political risks that active advocacy would demand. To be sure, Beltway meetings may be called and a good many proclamations may result, but this sort of activity is also easily seen as the shallow position taking that it is.

It is clear that Strolovitch is distressed by her findings, and with good reason. She has studied the organizations that claim to be the conscience of the country, and finds that they, too, are crippled by calculations of organizational maintenance that turn them away from their professed mission. So, what can be done? Strolovitch makes some reasonable recommendations. She calls on the advocacy community to engage in a kind of self-study that would lead them to make proactive and explicit commitments to the disadvantaged, consciously prioritizing their issues and overrepresenting them in organizational deliberations. Somewhere there probably are organizations with the leadership and commitment to make that effort, and to sustain it over time, and in the face of the imperatives of organizational maintenance. Certainly we have to respect the advocacy organizations that try.

We should also remember the part of the history of these advocacy organizations that occurs before Strolovitch begins her empirical analysis. It is, of course, the history of the great protest movements of the 1960s that not only gave birth to many of the advocacy organizations that she studies but also forced into existence new policies that made a huge difference in American society. It was the protest movements that reduced poverty, toppled racial barriers, brought women into public life, and went far toward normalizing differences in sexual orientation. Strolovitch does not tell that part of the story, but it is the complement to her sober assessment of the limits of "affirmative advocacy."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592709990107 Published online by Cambridge University Press