

Poor People's Movements

Review of Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. (1977; New York: Vintage Books, 1979). From *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (1980), pp. 171-173.

In times of societal quiescence, analysts of social movements are drawn toward structural and away from voluntaristic theories of social change. The perspective of the 1970's has offered an opportunity for Piven and Cloward to reflect upon the relatively rare occasions when lower classes and the poor mobilize, agitate, organize, and win reforms. In this book they present a theory of the institutional structures that limit the emergence, forms, extent, and success of social movements among segments of the working class in the United States; a strategy for organizing in periods of massive unrest; and four case studies intended to illustrate and confirm their arguments. This is a bold and important work, worthy of careful attention by all who study social movements and community organization.

The authors consider the analysis in the first chapter on "the structure of protest" to be their main contribution. Although they draw upon frustration-aggression and relative deprivation approaches to understanding and explaining social movements, their most significant achievement is their insistence upon the crucial role of structural crises in social and economic institutions in giving birth to social movements. Most of the time, despite inequality and oppression, the lower classes do not mobilize or are ignored or suppressed if they do. The authors argue that only under exceptional circumstances involving a sequence or a combination of structural dislocations can the poor mobilize successfully for their class interests. Further, the impact of institutional disruptions created by the mobilization of the lower classes is mediated by the political system, and only under conditions of severe electoral instability are reforms favoring the poor achievable.

Much of the viability of Piven and Cloward's argument on organizing strategy thus depends on the sophistication of their analysis of the political system. They have scanned the neo-Marxian literature on the role of the state in advanced capitalist countries, but have drawn from it less than they imagine. Much of this recent neo-Marxian analysis centers on the relative autonomy of state institutions from the direct intervention of economic elites. In contrast, Piven and Cloward argue that those who control economic and political institutions are drawn together over time into one ruling class. In times of normalcy, political institutions are assumed to act as the instruments of economic elites. Only in times of social upheaval and rapid institutional change do segments of the ruling class develop different interests and divide among themselves. At such points, the authors' argument runs, shifting electoral alliances and the interest in remaining in office lead political elites to offer to the lower classes reforms that may be opposed by economic elites. Segments of the economic elites, however, soon learn to live with these reforms and even turn them to their advantage.

From this analysis of state activity, which I consider inadequate, Piven and Cloward derive a strategy for organizing within social movements of the lower classes. They argue that political elites completely determine the response to disruptions caused by the lower classes; the demands and programs put forth by the formal organizations of the poor are of little

consequence. In addition, the organizers and leaders of formal organizations typically act in ways that curb or blunt the disruption that lower class mobilization can create, and they are eventually co-opted. Finally, the imperatives of maintaining mass-membership organizations lead to those inevitable conservative tendencies that Michels described as the “iron law of oligarchy.” The authors conclude that the only fruitful strategy for the lower classes is to escalate disruptive protest when possible by “pushing turbulence to its outer limits” (p. 91). This can best be accomplished by a national network of cadre organizations capable of coordinating mass mobilizations and mass confrontations, rather than by formal, bureaucratically structured, mass-membership organizations.

To illustrate their structural analysis of the emergence of social movements and their organizational strategy, Piven and Cloward turn to the decades of the 1930’s and the 1960’s, retracing some of the ground covered in their 1971 study, *Regulating the Poor*. They analyze two social movements from each decade, the unemployed workers and the industrial union movements of the 1930’s, and the civil rights and welfare rights movements of the 1960’s. Although the analysis of the economic, social, and political crises underlying these periods is excellent, the discussion of organizational strategy suffers from the author’s reading back into earlier movements the conclusions reached from their close association with the National Welfare Rights Organization. In each of the case studies, rural components of the social movements are mentioned, but the emphasis is placed on urban areas.

Distinguishing between the social movements and their social movement organizations, the authors make their best case that few lasting accomplishments were achieved by the formal organizations of unemployed workers and welfare recipients. It is a credit to the authors that the richness of the histories they present is sufficient to undercut their arguments on organizational strategy in the cases of the industrial union and civil rights movements. Contrary to a key assertion of the authors, economic elites were compelled to concede resources that could sustain oppositional organizations over time in the case of industrial unions. The civil rights movements and its organizations encompassed more than the working class; here more attention to a resource mobilization approach would lead away from Piven and Cloward’s pessimistic conclusions on formal organizations. By dealing only with the decades of turbulence, the authors miss the importance of bureaucratic organizations during years of quiescence in consolidating, defending, and even expanding the gains made in times of turmoil.

In an interesting new introduction to this paperback edition, Piven and Cloward respond to critics and emphasize that the victories achieved by the four social movements they study were real and significant; they attribute the gains to the disruptive impact of the broader movements, not the formal organizations. Movements thus leave a “residue of reform” (p. 34) as turbulence recedes. This is an unusual variety of reformism from authors who situate themselves within the Left. It combines a thoughtful anarchist critique of bureaucratic organization with an oversimplified view of the state as the instrument of economic elites. The argument is so well presented that those who would pursue long-range goals for structural change with formal organizations are challenged to present an alternative interpretation of working class movements and strategies.