

## INTERVIEW

# Poor Peoples' Movements and the Power to Disrupt: An Interview with Frances Fox Piven

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*During this interview with academic and activist icon Frances Fox Piven, we discussed the arc of her career; the challenges of U.S. neoliberalization, the role of the academy in fostering resistance, and the possibilities of social action through poor people's movements given the current political, economic, and social climate.*

*KEYWORDS* social movements, neoliberalism, poverty, poor people's movements, Frances Fox Piven, social welfare, social inequality

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Reuben Miller (RJM): Professor Piven, I'd like to first say it is a great honor to interview you.

Frances Fox Piven (FFP): Reuben, please call me Frances.

RJM: Thank you Frances. Your work has been so important to scholars, academics and various publics concerned with the shape of politics and issues of marginality and inequality. When I think about *Regulating the*

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*Poor or Poor People's Movements*, I read them as academic texts written to inform public and civic life. How did you get started doing public work?

FFP: I think I started out doing public work in the 1960s. I got my degree in 1962. I didn't intend to become an academic. I got a job at what became the first poverty program, Mobilization for Youth. And I started writing articles mainly but not entirely with Richard Cloward. Those articles were published in *The Nation*, or *The New Republic*, or *The Saturday Review*. And we were very much oriented toward the emerging movements in northern ghettos. I worked on rent strikes. Then later we worked on welfare rights. But we weren't doing that to write articles or to get academic credits. I didn't have an academic job.

We did want press though. Because that's an important part of movement work. So that's where I was oriented first; toward the public sphere and political activism. And later, I was having trouble with child care and I did begin to think about the advantages of an academic job. I got a divorce and, in the 1960s, child care was not oriented toward working mothers. The hours were all wrong. And I made arrangements with first an Irish family that had a bunch of kids. Then with a Puerto Rican family that had a bunch of kids.

RJM: (Laughs)

FFP: But that was difficult because if one of the kids, or my kid was sick. . . . The arrangements didn't work. I was getting so stressed by this. So, I looked around me and I saw academics had a much more flexible schedule than I had. (Laughs)

RJM: (Laughs) Right, you're right!

FFP: So, I sent two memoranda that I had written for the team that was planning the War on Poverty, who I knew. They were asking me to write on participation. I sent those into social work journals because I thought maybe I could get a job at the Columbia School of Social Work. And they got published. I applied and I got a job. So that's how I became an academic.

RJM: That's fantastic and encouraging all at the same time. Do you feel at the time the academy was ready for this more gritty, activist approach you were taking to scholarship?

FFP: Not at all. I don't think that the experience of the later 1960s and 1970s, when schools of social work had more people doing organizing, made deep marks on schools of social work.

[On the other hand] when we were doing welfare rights organizing we would be at a demonstration, or a welfare center, and it would turn out that the director of the welfare center came out of the 1930s welfare protests. So there always are markings of past movements, but you wouldn't know that if you looked at an overall picture of how welfare operated in the early 1960s.

RJM: What kinds of responses were you getting from faculty? Did you feel isolated in some ways?

FFP: Oh, absolutely. One of the things they kept pointing out to me was that I wasn't a social worker. My PhD is in social science. And there was this almost paranoia about whether or not I criticized social work in my classes. Then when this student protest at Columbia started in 1968 there was an endless faculty meeting (laughs).

RJM: (Laughs)

FFP: And one faculty member actually said, "I understand there was a faculty member at the student meeting last night."

And I said, "Yea, I was there."

Someone proposed a resolution that everything that was said at the faculty meetings should be confidential. I said, "Well I better leave. I'm not keeping things confidential from my students."

They withdrew the resolution but there were a lot of those kinds of things happening. Faculty there insisted on protocol. They were very upset that students called me by my first name. They thought, students were students and faculty were faculty and never the twain shall meet unless the faculty was at a podium or something like that.

RJM: Were you worried about tenure?

FFP: Not as much as I should have been (Laughs).

RJM: (Laughs)

FFP: I came up for tenure in 1972 and had mixed feelings about it. I was very much with the student protests and to the students, tenured faculty were their enemies. So, did I want tenure? Well, I was raising a child and I needed a job. So, Richard, who liked to play practical jokes sometimes, he was at the faculty meeting. I of course was not. And he called me and said, "I'm sorry sweetie, but you lost." And hung up. I called my daughter and said, "Sarah, I didn't get tenure, we can go anywhere! Do anything!" (Laughs)

RJM: (Laughs)

FFP: I was rolling on the floor. I was so liberated. And then the dean called and said "Congratulations." (snickers) But what actually happened at the meeting was that I lost the vote, but the dean asked for a new vote, saying if we did this it would be an embarrassment to the Columbia School of Social Work. So I got tenure. And then I quit.

RJM: Wow! Where did you go?!

FFP: I went to Boston University Political Science Department. I didn't teach in a school of social work again. I've always taught in Political Science or Sociology Departments since.

RJM: Hmm . . . I feel like Sociology Departments are at least as rigid. Disciplines tend to be guilded, and your work, while it is certainly political science or political sociology, lends itself well to

interdisciplinarity. Do you find sociology and political science programs more accepting of your approach?

FFP: No, I don't think, really. I think the Columbia School of Social Work, at least at that time, was especially rigid because it fancied itself as the premier school of social work in the world and came out of a case work heritage that it wanted to preserve and promote. People were nasty. I've never found that to be true of other schools of social work and have enjoyed visiting them. But all graduate programs, including programs in social science, to some extent are afflicted with the insecurity of trying to be scientists. You run into this quite a lot, different kinds of rigidity. Different forms of self-protection.

RJM: What role, then, do you think the academy has in poor people's movements?

FFP: They do have a role. Notwithstanding the complaints I just voiced, universities have grown considerably, and they are constantly expanding. They are perhaps unique in the sense that they are institutions that in a way produce ideology and have nevertheless succeeded in warding off a right-wing takeover. The mainstream media has not. With the exception of the *New York Times* perhaps, the press has not. The churches have not. The liberal protestant churches that were so important in the Civil Rights movement are mostly cowed. But universities, perhaps because of the institution of tenure, have continued to be places where left-wing perspectives get a hearing. And that's very important for movements. The university is not going to en masse join the movements, though students and faculty may. But production of these alternative perspectives does help to nourish movements.

RJM: Thinking about movements, you have for years written about and advocated for poor people's use of the power to disrupt. I wondered why the study of disruption has been so important to you. Can you talk about this a little bit?

FFP: Sure, well, I came of age in the 1950s politically and professionally. And I had a job on the Lower East Side of New York with a program that was supposed to use a wide variety of approaches to help reduce poverty on the lower east side. So, I was in New York and I was in a poor community, and it happens that I lived on the edge of Harlem. So I felt very much that I was a kind of viewer of what was going on in the streets. And already in 1962, 1963—the first riots in New York were in 1963—people were in motion. There were small protests all over the place. And they were disorderly.

Many of my colleagues would say, "Well, we agree with the goals of the protests but not with the methods." That led me to think, "Well what do they want people to do?" They want them to run for election? To lobby? Those were the things that poor people were in no position to do. They didn't have the wherewithal to do that. I wrote an article

in 1963 called “Low Income People and the Political Process” (Piven, 2011b) I was fresh out of graduate school and went through all the arguments that political scientists of the pluralist persuasion were making about the influence of ordinary people. You can go through their arguments and see they don’t apply to the poor. So, the complaint by erstwhile sympathizers, “we agree with your goals but not your methods” didn’t make sense to me. I thought people were beginning to employ the only methods really available to them.

RJM: That’s so interesting. Seems like those older critiques keep showing up. I’m thinking here about the critique from detractors and supposed sympathizers of the Occupy Movement, “What are your goals. You’re just this mass [of people] that’s messing things up. You’re in the way. We’re trying to get to the Federal Reserve here. You’re in the way and blocking us.”

FFP: It’s a sister critique, I think. It’s related to what I think of as the more familiar critique, “You’re not doing it the right way.” It falls under a family of critiques that say “To do things right you have to listen to us.” The current critique is “What are your demands?” It’s perfectly obvious what their demands are. Your critics will say you have to write down a series of legislative proposals and we’ll begin to discuss with you why they can’t be enacted. And that is, I think very, very deceptive. You know there’s an interview with Martin Luther King from I think 1967 or 1968. It was in the *New York Times Magazine*, I think. And in that interview King said, reflecting on poor people’s occupation to come in Washington, D.C., he said, “Those who criticize us” meaning the protestors, “for not having articulated policies are pretending that they don’t know what to do about poverty. They know what to do.”

RJM: Right . . . That’s a lot to think about . . . (sits in silence soaking in the moment)

So, I hear folks who consider themselves moderate talk about the futility of marches and demonstrations. They suggest we are in a new time with new challenges and the methods of social movement actors are old, outdated. I see this as problematic, but there may be something to this argument. Thinking about the social, political, and economic climate we find ourselves in, marked by the retrenchment of government in the economic sphere of poor people’s lives for instance, the assault on unions and unionization, and the ways in which these political logics pervade themselves as common sense, that small government is good, big government is bad, and subsequently the celebrated “end of big government” per a president most consider to be left of center, how would you speak to folks who think that contemporary social movements are ineffectual, and how do you think about the kinds of crisis people face in this post-1980s world?

FFP: Well, some things change, but some things do not change. I would agree that demonstrations and marches and rallies are not often very effective. There have been quite a few since the 1980s, by the labor movement for example. What they do (demonstrations) with varying effectiveness is communicate to the public what the issues are for the demonstrators. But they're not so effective because everyone knows that come sundown people go home.

While they are a way to communicate issues that demonstrators want to project into the political sphere, they are not the whole of a movement by any means. Movements that have been effective have had demonstrations, marches, and rallies, but they've also found the power of refusing to cooperate, the power of disruption. That's what makes them effective. In fact, that's strike power. Strike power comes in many forms. Sit-in strikes, when demonstrators refuse to go to school or occupy a building, were the most powerful forms of disruption in contemporary American history. And the occupation, when that was announced down at Zuccotti Park, that was a little bit better than a demonstration because demonstrators weren't going to go home. They weren't occupying Wall Street either. They were occupying a little park four blocks north of Wall Street, but never the less, it was a little bit more tenacious than a march around the block. So much so that the mayors decided to clear the parks, didn't they? They decided it together, it does seem. And they did it because the idea of an occupation, the idea that "we are not going home," the idea that we are the 99%, that's such a good slogan, resonated quite well in American politics.

But I don't think that's the end of Occupy. I think that's still the communicative stage. I think now they have to find more powerful forms of refusal. Like joining with those who resist eviction and foreclosure, or joining with the student protests that I think will occur this spring over student debt and tuition hikes, or like joining workers who are protesting against the lockouts that are spreading in the United States. So we'll see, but I think that it may well turn out that evicting Occupy from the slew of squares and parks precipitated the spreading out of the movement and it's linking with neighborhood, workplace and school actions.

RJM: So, "We are the 99%." I agree it's a wonderful slogan. Do you view the Occupy Movement as being inclusive of poor people? One critique is that it is not a poor people's movement. That these are college students. That these are middle classers, tired of not being able to find their way. That it's a largely White movement and that there aren't very many poor people or people of color represented.

FFP: I agree with all that, and I'm hoping it will change. I think Occupy has been pretty good about welcoming other people to their occupation.

They have never protested about the homeless joining them, for example. They've been good about that. But I think that they have to reach out more to poor people. And I think they're trying to do that with foreclosure actions and I know that the groups in New York, poor people's and welfare rights organizations like Community Voices Heard, or FUREE, or Make the Road, they're very open to Occupy.

Here's the importance that I think it has. For 40 years now poor people have been the butt of right wing politics, and sometimes of Democratic Party politics too. The corporate mobilization that began in the early 1970s didn't just single out poor people, although they were singled out. They mainly singled out the great mass of working people; to redistribute tax burdens; to weaken unions, push them back; to relax financial and environmental regulation; to chip away the safety net; those were the goals of corporate mobilization. But in doing that they singled out poor people as irresponsible, as the source of their own poverty, for their bad character. So the real targets were not poor people, certainly not just poor people. It was the huge swath of working people who were intimidated by the scapegoating of the poor. Because they didn't want to be poor. They didn't want to be like the poor. And they didn't defend the poor either. And of course they were Black and Latino, those poor people. They were certainly characterized that way. But the insult that has been heaped on poor people over 40 years in this country is devastating, and the audience for it is not only the guy who is working 50 hours a week at the minimum wage for fear he will tumble into that castigated category, but the poor are the audience too. And I think it has a big effect on people. It's not the only thing they think. People have the capacity to overcome that kind of labeling, but it can have a demoralizing effect for a time until people discover their own reservoirs of definition and redefinition, which they sometimes do. That's what happened in the welfare rights movement. Again, it helps to have allies in that process.

I wrote a little piece in the nation about a month ago about this called "The Proud and Angry Poor" (Piven, 2011a). We usually think people's heads have to change. They have to become rebellious, to develop another way of understanding things. And then, maybe they are potential recruits for a movement. I don't think it happens that way. People may become a little bit discontented and then join a movement, but it's participation in the movement that changes people's minds. And, the occupy movement needs the poor for it to be a movement of decent reform in the United States. And the poor need to be in a movement. So I'm hoping that happens as time goes on.

I point out to you that the movements of the 1960s did not begin with the poor, although the movements of the 1930s did, actually. The thirties movements began with food and rent riots.

RJM: So, disruption is important. You talk about it as an extension of rule breaking.

FFP: Yes, typically it is a way to activate the power that people have. Everybody has a power that most of the time remains latent. In institutional life everyone has to cooperate, right. You have to go to school. She has to come and teach you. The babysitter has to arrive. So, institutional life is a complex system of cooperation. Everyone in this system has some power because it breaks down if anyone in these groups refuses to cooperate. That's the latent power of working people, poor people, and the kind of power capital also has. But the difference in power between capital and working and poor people is that poor people's cooperation tends to be kept in place by rules. So in order to activate the power of refusal they have to break rules.

Just look at the history of working people in the United States. For a century the Supreme Court regularly issued injunctions against unions as illegal combinations, and against strikes as violations of the master-servant interpretation of property law. But working people did violate those rules. When things got bad enough, they broke the rules.

RJM: This dialectic interplay precipitating movements, "things getting bad enough," for the occupy movement, things are bad enough for them [largely White college graduates]. But do you think things are bad enough for the poor. I ask that with the caveat that institutions tasked with helping poor people seem to be driven by the same logics that animate the rules, and the corporate mobilization to reinterpret and enforce them. So, for instance, social service work tends to operate on a psychological level and is often driven by the promotion of "self-sufficiency" among their poor service populations. These programs seem to domesticate through and for flexible low wage labor. [They seem to say], "We are interested in changing you into the kinds of people that will take flexible work" for instance.

FFP: Right.

RJM: With that kind of "help" available, are things bad enough for poor people's movements? Do you see poor people standing up in interesting ways? Is there hope here for poor people's movements, is really what I'm trying to get at here.

FFP: Who can be sure? But I see absolutely no reason to think that poor people don't have the capacity for defiance that they have demonstrated in the past. It is somewhat harder for them because they have been bullied, or, as you describe they have been so cajoled by the people that help them. But people have enormous reservoirs of imagination and self-assertion. I sat through endless meetings in the 1960s of welfare moms. And we [the organizers] all came to the meeting to plan some action or another, but that didn't happen until the women first worked

out for themselves between themselves an answer to the question of why they had a right to assistance. And they did that. We were not leading that. That was what they wanted to work out. And they did.

I remember meeting in an apartment in the Bronx with welfare moms and they started saying to each other, you know women on welfare always lied about having any relationship with their kids' father, because that could get you cut off of welfare. So these women started almost chanting that they weren't going to tell their kids to lie about seeing their father anymore. Rather, it was a source of some pride that the father did pay attention to their kids. So, people do have that capacity to resist if the conditions are right. And maybe the conditions are getting more right.

RJM: So a recent forum on Michael Dawson's book *Not in Our Lifetime: the Future of Black Politics* in the *Boston Review* engages questions about new opportunities for Black Progressive Movements. Thinking about Black movements and poor people's movements more generally, a response from Robin D.G. Kelly (2012) stood out for me. He called neoliberalism "a more powerful foe than we have seen before," suggesting that it presents a new kind of challenge for social change efforts. I wonder if you agree with that.

FFP: Oh, in some ways I agree. In other ways I don't. Robin doesn't mean that there's nothing similar between the present moment and earlier moments. He means that in some ways it's different and in some ways it is. The main way I think it's different, or two main ways, is that we have a different kind of ruling class, less rooted in this country, and less rooted in particular firms, or particular corporations. It's more of a grab it and run kind of ruling class. Take what they can and build their palace in Dubai. And that changes things. With this ruling class you can't be quite as certain that they will have to respond to disruption in a particular corporation, a particular institution, or a particular country. I hope they will because there is still enough [invested] in this country that they will want to defend it.

It's also a ruling class that doesn't have a firm, sure time horizon. This is unlike the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They are always looking at the bottom line and moving around. So, that's a big dilemma, I think. But waiting won't help.

RJM: This is because of the way we make money now; because of financial capital?

FFP: Yes.

RJM: So you see a kind of flexibility at the top and at the bottom.

FFP: Yes. We don't have any guarantees about what will happen. We never do, really.

RJM: Do you see any potential from international poor people's movements to inform the U.S. scene?

FFP: There's certainly a lot of international communication between movements generally. Certainly the crowds that are protesting in Greece, and those that may begin to protest in Portugal, Spain, and Italy are poor. And people know about that, and they pay attention to that. What happens to people in one country is quickly communicated to people across the ocean. There's always been some contagion between movements. Polish revolutionaries were attracted to the French revolution but that contagion took a long time. Now communication is almost instantaneous. But I think you want something more than inspiration. I think you mean more like collaboration.

RJM: Yes.

FFP: I don't quite see how that would happen.

RJM: Switching gears a bit, it seems like the public/private collaboration is an old but newly glorified vehicle. It is now trumpeted as the solution to poverty, the solution to poor education, etc. Bad education outcomes. . . . Build a charter school. I wonder if you see any potential in public private collaboration.

FFP: Well, in principle I'm not against public private collaborations. I don't however think privatization is really the same thing. It's been the privatization of the public sphere, and the use of the public sector as a new arena of profit making. So I wouldn't call it public private collaboration, but a use of public sector institutions as a new field for entrepreneurial investment. I'm very skeptical of privatization on one hand. On the other, I do think that there was something to the critique that the huge public bureaucracies became stiff, stodgy, self-protective and indifferent. I can remember the critique of the public school from the 1960s and 1970s and there was something to that. So I would not have been against experiments in public private collaboration in the school system. But that's not what's happening. The charter schools are taking public money for private profit. And that's a different matter altogether.

RJM: What are your thoughts about where we are with electoral politics?

FFP: I think the swamping of the electoral system with money and lobbyists has become overwhelming and it is getting worse with the Citizens United decision on the one hand. On the other hand, this isn't the first time this has happened. The gilded age was very much like this too with robber barons drowning out state and national legislators. So, yeah it's bad and it seems to be getting worse. But what to do? There is, I think, a dilemma that we're going to hear a lot about over the next year. Do we want Romney to win the presidency? Do we want the Tea Party dominated Republican Party to take over both houses of the congress? Will that help poor people or anybody else? No. So even in its soaked-with-money corrupted form electoral politics matters. We don't want it to get worse. If Romney becomes president and the Republicans take

over the senate and the house, the Supreme Court will get even more evil. We'll probably be at war in Iran. We'll never end upper class tax breaks. So, I want Obama to win. I want the Democrats to win for all of their compromises and timidity, which of course applies to Obama too. But I don't trust them to make it better by themselves, which is why I would work with the movement. Now, in Occupy circles, talking about working for the election is really forbidden. I mean, they can't stand that. They are so disillusioned with electoral politics, and rightly so. Nevertheless what Occupy does will affect the election and it is already affecting the election. They have already forced Obama to take more populist positions on questions of taxation and jobs, for example. So, Occupy should do their thing. They don't have to work in electoral politics, because what they do affects electoral politics.

RJM: This is a great note to end on. Thank you so much for your time. It has been quite an honor to interview you.

FFP: Thank you. I enjoyed the interview.

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