

Book Review: Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. Pantheon Books, 1977. ISBN-13: 978-0394726977 (paperback). 416 Pages. \$15.75.

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Since the inception of the United States, public and private elites have employed “the common man” rhetoric when defining American political systems. Because of this, there is an assumption that American democracy is upheld by bureaucratic institutions such as electoral systems. In turn, the grievances of lower classes get disregarded and disruptive methods of protest are branded un-democratic and, thus, un-American.

In *Poor People's Movements*, Piven and Cloward challenge the democratic assumptions about the United States, analyzing 20th century social movements to ask the question: How do lower class movements interact with the government? The book begins with a general analysis of class-based social movements. One core necessity for successful mobilization is an unstable political and economic structure. For example, the Unemployed Workers' Movement and the Industrial Workers' Movement received the most concessions from governments during the Great Depression. Piven and Cloward observe that class-based social movements require lower-class defiance and disruption of governments and bureaucratic powers. This defiance is often targeted towards the *symbols* of government institutions (instead of targeting capitols and legislative government buildings, welfare grievance committees would stage sit-ins at welfare distribution offices). By disrupting unstable government institutions, movements are more likely to receive concessions from governments. Chapter 4, which focuses on the Civil Rights Movement, analyzes this interaction between the Democratic Party and the movement. The Democratic Party, at risk of losing control in the federal government, adopted Civil Rights rhetoric to secure the Black vote. Thus, Piven and Cloward argue, the social movements become tools

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through which institutions remain in power. The book further addresses how government institutions interact with social movements. In unstable political economies, governments give temporary concessions for social movements. Then, elites begin electing social movement leaders into positions of power, creating the illusion that the movement is being incorporated into government structures. Afterwards, governments pass legislation loosely based on the social movement's needs, decreasing the public's support of the social movement. By creating false illusions of government-movement cooperation, governments decrease public support and mobilization of class-based social movements, legitimizing their subsequent suppression of the movements. In addition to using concessions to suppress social movements, governments also use protestors' identity to suppress social movements. For example, the Democratic Party support of the Civil Rights Movement led to tension between Black Southern protesters and white Southern resisters by centering their conflict around the government itself; by polarizing these two groups, the Democratic Party was able to secure the Black vote and isolate white Southerners.

The book also addresses the structures of social movements as mobilization and recognition increases. In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, the core goals of the movement began to shift. As the movement increased in recognition and was adopted by the Democratic Party, there was a greater pressure for movement leaders to shift from disruptive goals and strategies. Instead, the movement began to focus on voter registration, which would promote the power of the Democratic Party in the South. Piven and Cloward also argue that the internal structures of the movements change as the movements succeed in mobilization and recognition. For example, the Welfare Rights Movement began with the intention to mobilize individuals in need of relief. However, as the movement increased in size, it began to formalize as it congealed as an organization and focused on ensuring mass national membership instead of providing relief to every individual that applies for welfare.

In general, Piven and Cloward's *Poor People's Movement* gives greater insight into the interactions of social movements and governments and how their respective goals affect one another. Class-based social movements begin with protest tactics intended to disrupt government systems. In turn, governments give the movements concessions and elect movement leaders into positions of power. Movement leaders, concerned with maintaining the movement's popularity in American politics and

society, detach themselves from their prior radical beliefs, weakening social movements.