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Frances Fox Piven

2007 President Is a Defender of the "Poorest of the Poor"

by **Barbara Ehrenreich, author of Bait and Switch**

I first met Frances Fox Piven in the early 1980s. I was a struggling freelance writer; she was an intellectual star. Everything about her intimidated me: Her habit of not saying anything until she had thought it through, her sociological erudition, her relentless work ethic, her fearlessness in the face of authority, and—if I may mention it—her drop-dead good looks. I am not sure why she took an interest in me, but within months she had convinced me that the highest feminist priority was the defense of the poorest of the poor, that is, women on welfare. And she had somehow inveigled me into working with her on the program of the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP), over which she then presided.

Fighting to Reduce Poverty

When we met, Frances was already widely known for her classic books, co-authored with her long-time companion, Richard A. Cloward: *Poor People's Movements and Regulating the Poor*. She had achieved tenure at Boston University and considerable recognition, including a Guggenheim fellowship and the C. Wright Mills Award from the SSSP. But because of her activism, she was still a bit of an enfant terrible within academia. She had collaborated with the late George A. Wiley, leader of the 1960s welfare rights movement, and developed the confrontational strategy that led to a liberalization of welfare and a reduction in extreme poverty during that decade. Even more perturbing to many of her fellow social scientists, she always said exactly what was on her mind even if that meant publicly upbraiding them for statements she found condescending to the poor.

At the same time, Frances was—and remains—a diligent and hard-working academic citizen. Sometimes I have chided her for putting so much time into academic committees and slaving over her students' dissertations, but she always insisted on being a responsible professor as well as an activist and writer. How does she do it? The secret, revealed to me over time, is that she does not sleep much, and somehow manages to remain alert on a punishing schedule of meetings, travel, and writing deadlines.

Within a short time of our initial meeting, Frances and I began our intellectual and activist collaboration. We coauthored articles on welfare and the threat of welfare "reform" for a variety of publications, including *Dissent*, *The Nation*, and *Mother Jones*. She is a delightful person to write with—rigorous, logical, meticulous about facts, and utterly ego-free. We spent many hours over tea, outlining our arguments, mustering our data, and dividing up the actual writing. In the 1980s, we launched a series of polemics against the notion that full employment is the solution to poverty, pointing out the expansion of low-wage, poverty-level jobs, even in times of relative prosperity. In the mid- 1990s, we helped organize a committee of women academics and journalists in opposition to punitive forms of welfare reform.

Motor Voter Bill

Economic issues were not all that preoccupied Frances in those years. In 1983, she co-founded, with Cloward, a group called Human SERVE, which was dedicated to the idea that if citizens were allowed to register to vote when they apply for aid from government programs or for drivers' licenses, some of the historic administrative encumbrances on the right to vote could be overcome. The poor in particular, who often lack the time for voter registration, would be effectively enfranchised. Human SERVE's approach was incorporated in the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, popularly known as the "motor voter bill."

One anecdote about that sticks in my mind. Sometime in the mid-1990s, Frances found herself on the way to the airport without her driver's license. She called Richard at their home and asked him to find it and bring it to her at the train station. He failed to find it, and instead brought her a photo of herself and Bill Clinton taken at the time of the signing of the motor voter bill. That was enough to get Frances on the plane.

Nuts, Brilliant, and Courageous

She is not one to confide casually, and it was some time before I came to understand how deeply rooted her passion about poverty is. I could see how she glowed when she talked about her grassroots welfare rights activism and the friendships she had forged in the course of it. She is genuinely comfortable with the kind of poor women, usually African American, she has worked with on welfare rights, and this no doubt has something to do with her own childhood as the daughter of impoverished Russian immigrants in Queens. By all accounts, her family was more than mildly dysfunctional, with a father who worked until late at night and a mother unable to adjust to life in America. At age 15, Frances was accepted at the University of Chicago and left home to matriculate. She was "a bit nuts" then, she now says, but surely also brilliant and courageous.

After graduating—and a brief marriage— she became a young single mother and graduate student. Those were difficult years, with Frances torn between motherhood, academic life, and activism. Her relationship with Richard, which began in the 1960s, no doubt had a stabilizing effect. He was hardly a typical academic, with his rugged, plainspoken manner and impatience with any kind of obfuscation, but the perfect match for Frances. They collaborated on almost everything until his death in 2001. I was proud to call him, as well as Frances, a friend.

Author, Speaker, and Professor

In the late eighties and nineties, Frances's oeuvre expanded and her influence grew. We co-authored, with Cloward and Fred Bloch, *The Mean Season: The Attack on the Welfare State*; she and Richard wrote *Why Americans Don't Vote* and *The Breaking of the American Social Compact*, and she published *Labor Parties in Post-Industrial Societies*. In addition to being a lucid and compelling writer, she had become a powerful public speaker, and when she wasn't writing or working with Human SERVE, she was traveling to speak on college campuses, for professional organizations, and at national and international conferences. She became a close friend and ally of Senator Paul Wellstone, who reliably championed the poor in the Senate until his untimely death in 2000.

Meanwhile, her academic career had been jolted by the conflict between Boston University president John Silber and much of his faculty. When it became clear that the autocratic Silber would prevail, many of the faculty leaders left or were forced out. Frances resettled at the City University of New York Graduate Center in 1982, where she attracted a succession of adoring graduate students. They would arrive at her apartment a dozen at a time, for lengthy discussions over Chinese takeout. Frances told me she thought of them as her "daughters and sons."

Within the last few years, she received increasingly mainstream academic recognition, winning a Distinguished Career Award for the Practice of Sociology from the ASA (2000), a Lifetime Achievement Award in Social Work Education from the Council of Social Work Education (2001), the ASA Award for the Public Understanding of Sociology (2003), and a Charles E. McCoy Lifetime Achievement Award, from a section of the American Political Science Association (2004). In 2002, she lent her own name to a new award: the Annual Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward Award from the New Political Science Section of the American Political Science Association. Meanwhile, the books kept coming: a revised and updated edition of *Why Americans Don't Vote*, (with Cloward) in 2000, *The War at Home: The Domestic Costs of Bush's Militarism* in 2004, and *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America*, forthcoming.

And Modest, Too

But as she won respectability, Frances retained her radical vision and critical spirit. If anything, the Bush years pushed her toward even greater outspokenness and involvement. At CUNY, she was active in the struggle to hold down tuition and fee increases. She also became active in the anti-war movement, signing public petitions and speaking at rallies. I was on a plenary panel with her at the 2004 ASA Annual Meeting, where she received a standing ovation for her rousing challenge to develop a more socially engaged and "public" practice of sociology. Her latest book, *Challenging Authority* (I think it may be one of her best), makes an intellectually impeccable argument for the role of disruption in progressive social change. In a blurb for the cover, I described it as "a Molotov cocktail encased in an elegant crystal decanter."

Frances herself is modest about her "lifetime achievements." After all, welfare reform was enacted in an especially punitive form, and the motor voter law has been vitiated by

failures in enforcement and a rash of new state restrictions on access to registration and voting. But her critique of welfare reform continues to reverberate, and helped spark a growing scholarly concern about the low status of "caring" work, such as child-raising. Similarly, her work on voting rights has fed into dismay over the limitations and violations of electoral democracy. Recently, her work on the effects of militarism on the welfare state has reinforced the growing public discontent with the current administration's foreign policy.

Defining Public Sociology

More important, in this context is her contribution to the social sciences—not only her books and other substantive contributions—but her status as a role model for a morally focused, relentlessly critical style of scholarship. At recent ASA meetings, there has been much discussion of what "public sociology" might mean. It should be no mystery, since Frances herself embodies it. Her research interests are defined by glaring social problems, and she is never content with research, publication, and teaching—always following through with activism and, when necessary, the creation of new organizations for social change. Reading through her accomplishments as an activist scholar, you might think she is actually a fairly hefty, multi-talented, team, and not just one individual.

Finally, on a personal note, I want to express my own debt to Frances—as friend, collaborator, and intellectual guru. She sharpened my indignation at the kinds of economic justice that has inspired my work over the last decade. She has been more than generous with her time and her insights, again and again giving a critical reading to drafts I have written. When I was on the road, working on my book *Nickel and Dimed*, she was one of the only people from my real life, other than family, that I called, telling her that I could not believe what I was finding and experiencing. In that and every other project, her encouragement and enthusiasm have kept me going.

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Piven delivered her [Presidential Address](#) during the 2007 ASA Annual Meeting.

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