

FOOTNOTES April 2010

The Right's Attack on Frances Fox Piven

by Peter Dreier, Occidental College

Former ASA President Frances Fox Piven often receives requests from students who want to interview her about her political theories and activism. So when Kyle Olson phoned her, told her he was a college student in Michigan, and asked if he could videotape an interview with her about her recent book, *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America*, Piven agreed.



Frances Fox Piven

Temporarily housebound after an auto accident, Piven invited Olson to her New York apartment. On February 1, for about an hour, Piven and Olson sat at her dining room table and talked about everything from the founding fathers to Fox News, while his friend videotaped them.

"Students these days use cameras to 'write' term papers," Piven said later. "It didn't seem unusual that he wanted to use a video."

Two weeks later, Piven, who teaches at the City University of New York, learned that eight minutes of the interview appeared in three segments on Big Government, a conservative news website. The same outlet achieved national prominence last year when it published the highly edited but hugely destructive hidden-camera recordings of ACORN employees.

Olson is not a college student. He is a 31-year-old Republican Party operative, conservative activist, and would-be journalist. He runs a Michigan-based conservative advocacy organization, the Education Action Group (EAG), which primarily attacks teachers unions.

The real reason for Olson's interview with Piven was a 1966 article in *The Nation* magazine, "A Strategy to End Poverty," co-authored with Richard Cloward, which has become the centerpiece of a right-wing conspiracy theory. Olson no doubt hoped to trap Piven into

saying something outrageous to confirm the Right's view that the article is the blueprint for a radical takeover of American society.

The video segments posted on Big Government featured no major revelations about America's imminent socialist uprising. In one snippet, Piven remarks that Thomas Jefferson "would be stunned by the oligarchical character of American society." In another segment, she remarks that the current wave of foreclosures could trigger mass protest if "millions of people refuse to go along with foreclosure procedures and refuse to pay off those mortgages that are under water." In the third video clip, Piven calls Glenn Beck's efforts to find an easy "scapegoat" for the country's troubles typical of "right-wing ideologues."

In their *Nation* article, Cloward (who died in 2001) and Piven proposed organizing the poor to demand welfare benefits they were eligible for and to pressure the federal government to expand the nation's social safety net and establish a guaranteed national income. To put their strategy into practice, Cloward and Piven worked with George Wiley to create the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). At its peak in the late 1960s, NWRO had affiliates in 60 cities and had some success increasing participation in the federal Aid to Families with Dependent Children program by organizing protests at welfare offices and elsewhere. In 1970, NWRO organizer Wade Rathke started ACORN to build a broader movement for economic justice. ACORN eventually grew into the nation's largest community organizing group, with chapters in 103 cities in 37 states.

Cloward and Piven soon concluded that a successful anti-poverty movement had to combine grassroots protest with electoral politics. They wrote *Why Americans Don't Vote* and helped build a movement to expand voting among the poor. Their idea led to the National Voter Registration Act (e.g., the "motor voter" law), which President Clinton signed in 1993 at a White House ceremony at which Piven spoke.

Conservatives have been attacking Cloward and Piven's ideas—outlined in many articles and in *Regulating the Poor*, *Poor People's Movements*, and other books—for decades. But the demonization of the couple by the extreme Right has escalated since Obama's election.

The right-wing has transformed the duo into Marxist Machiavellis whose ideas have not only spawned a radical movement dedicated to destroying modern-day capitalism but also, in their minds at least, almost succeeded, as evidenced by what they consider Obama's "socialist" agenda

Conservative radio jockeys Rush Limbaugh and Mark Levin have, on multiple occasions, warned their listeners about the nefarious sociologists. "The Cloward-Piven strategy is essentially what Obama and a number of these people are following," Limbaugh told his listeners, "and its ultimate objective is to have everybody in the country on welfare, by destroying it."

Other right-wing outlets, including *American Spectator*, *FrontPage*, *Washington Times*, *American Thinker*, *Free Republic*, *NewsMax*, and *WorldNetDaily*, have all warned readers about how the Cloward-Piven has infected society like a dangerous left-wing virus.

Beck has mentioned the "Cloward-Piven Strategy" 33 times on his Fox News show since March 2009. In September, he connected Cloward and Piven to Woodrow Wilson, Che Guevara, Bill Ayers, ACORN, the SEIU, the Apollo Alliance, the Tides Foundation, George Soros, Van Jones, Valerie Jarrett, and Obama—some of the right's favorite villains. In March he said that Obama's health-care proposal followed the Cloward-Piven strategy to "melt the system down and have it collapse into a new system."

At February's Tea Party convention, *WorldNetDaily* editor Joseph Farah devoted eight minutes of his 38-minute keynote speech to fulminating about what he called Cloward and Piven's "manifesto."

Obama is still employing the Cloward-Piven strategy, not as a community organizer but today as the community organizer in chief," Farah explained. "He's still creating crises as a means of empowerment....The goal remains the same as when it was first outlined in 1966. Bring the system to its knees, and ultimately to collapse."

These attacks are meant to whip up anger and resentments, to discredit Obama's liberal policy agenda, and to destroy the progressive movement that pushes the president and the Democratic Party to be bolder, as they did in the recent health-care battle. This maneuver is hardly new. As far back as Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon, Republican politicians and hired strategists have perfected the art of linking liberal Democrats to communists, socialists, radicals, subversives, "welfare queens," and terrorists.

It is this world of right-wing opinion-shapers to which Olson aspires. After graduating from Michigan State in 2001, Olson worked as a Realtors' lobbyist and then for a Republican state Senator. In 2006 he lost his campaign for county .office but served on the state GOP committee. In 2007, Olson started EAG, which served as a platform for his op-ed columns and to get quoted in the Michigan media in his crusade against teachers' unions. But Olson soon revealed his broader conservative agenda. For example, EAG's political arm recently paid for a billboard depicting a Democratic candidate for the state Senate as a supporter of partial-birth abortions.

Olson has branched out beyond the GOP anti-union and anti-abortion mainstream. His pieces on the Big Government website rant about health care reform, ACORN, SEIU president Andy Stern, and Obama. Greg Steimel, a researcher for the Michigan Education Association, calls him a "Glenn Beck wannabe."

Olson manipulated his way into Piven's home hoping to entrap her into saying something outrageous that he could use to further his own career. However his tapes have produced no mainstream controversy. That's because, watching Piven answer his questions, most viewers would be hard-pressed to disagree with her basic analysis of America's current condition. Big corporations have too much power. The concentration of wealth has gotten out of hand. Only an outraged and organized movement for change among the poor and the middle class is likely to bring about the reforms we need.

Piven admits to being "unnerved" by Olson's lying in order to get her to agree to the interview. "He made no impression on me. Perhaps I should have wondered why he'd drive all the way from Michigan, just for an interview."

"He interviewed me under false pretenses," Piven says. "If I'd known he was a right-wing operative, I wouldn't have let him into my apartment. I might have talked to him in my office or over the phone."

Contacted by phone at his Michigan office, Olson hung up when asked about his interview with Piven. When called again for comment, his colleague, Steve Gunn, answered for him. "He doesn't have any interest in talking with you. He doesn't care anything about you," Gunn said. "If you call again, I'll call 911. You have a miserable day." 🌐

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