

# MY REFLECTION

Frances Fox Piven

Richard was my lifelong collaborator and partner. He was also the great passion of my life, so his death leaves a huge absence at the center of my being. I cannot help but know, especially in the aftermath of 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan, that there have been many awful deaths. But each death is of a person concrete, particular, and unique. I speak of one such person.

Richard's moral beacon was his preoccupation with the social injustices that follow from extreme inequality. His concern was not only with material deprivation, with poverty, but also with the social exclusion that accompanies poverty, with the marginalization of people at the bottom of our society, and with the harsh indignities, the deprivation of respect, that follow from exclusion. Most important, Richard was convinced that the forces to overcome exclusion, to ameliorate poverty, and to reduce inequality could arise from the poor themselves as they came to recognize their own anger and to discover their capacities to make trouble for those in power.

These beliefs, together with Richard's unshakeable tenacity and the political engagement in which conviction and tenacity were combined, gave Richard a rich and full life, a wonderful life, a life passionately linked to comrades, a life rocked by the rhythms of effort, defeat, and victory, a life joined to the struggles and hopes of a larger community. And Richard knew that he had had a very good life. At the end of his illness, he often talked about it, savoring his memories of the past, and glowing as he reminisced.

What would Richard have said of the present and the future and the prospects for

social justice movements today? In just the past few months, the terrain on which we work has been transformed. We have become uncertain of our footing and wary of unpredictable political dangers. The United States, proclaiming victory in Afghanistan, now contemplates a far broader military campaign that is certain to lead to the deaths of thousands of innocents, and the smashing of the communities and livelihoods of many thousands more. Of course, we should try to curb the politics of terror wherever it arises, for it inevitably makes hostages of ordinary people. But this new political terrain has not been created by the menace of terrorism alone. Indeed, for a long time, American leaders were reluctant to shut off the finances of the terrorist networks because the bankers were against any limits on their dealings, just as our leaders are reluctant to shut off the arms trade because arms producers are against any limits on the trade that is turning the world into a powder keg. It is quite apparent that our politicians prefer a military build-up and the profits and political payoffs such a build-up generates.

Moreover, the war on terror has been accompanied by a surge of fanaticism in the United States. Our leaders work to generate a blind popular support by speaking a new and alarming language, by launching "Operation Infinite Justice," by talking of ridding the world of evil. America is good, its enemies are evil, and anyone who qualifies or suggests some nuance smacks of disloyalty. On the one hand, this sort of jingoism permits the continuing rape of our resources by the business interests that run our government, on the grounds, for example, that continuing environmental degrada-

tion contributes to the war on terrorism. On the other hand, it permits the stifling of democracy, partly by the outright withdrawal of civil liberties on the grounds of a national emergency, and partly by the mindless propaganda that associates all sorts of political dissidents with terrorist and lunatic cabals. There is irony here; unlike cabals, social movements tend to be inherently democratic. Indeed, the social movement is usually direct democracy in action, for the simple reason that movement leaders who fail to name issues that resonate with their constituency, or who fail to propose actions that make sense to their constituency, will soon find themselves without a following. One might wish as much could be said of many of our elected politicians. But the new patriotic fervor makes it easier to brand any dissent as disloyalty, and the danger is serious, because repressing social movements means stifling the main force for domestic reform in the United States.

Still, there are also glimmerings of possibility on the horizon. The new political terrain may encourage us to raise our sights, widen our perspective, so that we are more firmly aware of the global dimensions of our social justice causes. Richard's projects were oriented to alleviating American poverty, and his writing was about the role of politics and policy in generating and sustaining American poverty. Surely that was worthwhile. But recent events force attention to the global dimensions of human suffering and the role of American politics and policy in perpetuating that suffering. We are wiser for that understanding. And more than wisdom may be at stake. Perhaps the coming struggles for social justice will not be ours alone. Perhaps we will join our domestic causes to those of the masses of the poor and trampled who are already in motion across the globe.



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