

REFLECTIONS ON RICHARD A. CLOWARD

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When I enrolled in the College of Public and Community Service (CPCS) at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, it was one of the most fortuitous events of my life. CPCS was founded in 1973 by a group of community activists and academics whose vision (shaped by the events of the '60s) called for a college designed for adult learners that would combine academics with activism, leading to social change. The curriculum centers on experiential learning, recognizing that learning takes place in many arenas, of which the classroom is only one. Students are taught how to document the learning they receive while working on their jobs, in their communities, and in their homes. It is even possible to design new learning experiences that meet the requirements, which are competency-based. Students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning by becoming "self-directed learners," which appealed to my rebellious, independent nature.

One of my first classes was Organizing for Basic Human Needs, which was designed for welfare recipients and human service providers. Since I was on welfare, I was interested in creating social change for women in poverty. Within the first month, those of us on welfare researched reading materials that would help us strategize and develop an analysis. One of the first books we chose was *Poor People's Movements* by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward. This wonderful book, which described the rise of the Labor, Civil Rights, and Welfare Rights movements and how they practiced "structured protest," was inspirational and changed my life profoundly. I exercised my right as a "self-

directed learner" and contacted Francis Fox Piven at Boston University to get some pointers on organizing welfare recipients and UMass. She graciously accepted an invitation to meet with us, and we interviewed her extensively about some of the theories, methods, and risks of organizing.

I worked with several other recipient students and established ARMS, the welfare rights student organization on the UMass Boston campus. We have been organizing to build a movement to abolish poverty ever since—both locally, and nationally.

Richard Cloward was a remarkable man who touched my life, mostly through the written word. As a welfare recipient threatened with proposed policy changes that would require me to leave school to take a minimum wage job, I was spurred to action after reading several books by Richard and Frances. Their books gave us hope that we could make changes. We learned what services and programs we were eligible for and how to access them. We facilitated workshops to educate others living in poverty about their rights. We conducted surveys and held focus groups to help us prioritize the issues that we needed to work on. We represented clients on the Boards of numerous provider agencies. When we learned that legal services were under attack by the Reagan administration, we set about learning everything the lawyers knew so that we could provide advocacy for one another. We got involved in the political process, helping to defeat the Republican governor who had proposed workfare. But most of all, we followed Richard Cloward's advice and spearheaded several direct action campaigns-

rallies, protest marches, guerilla theater, and civil disobedience. We knew we were doing the right thing when we read in the *Boston Globe* that we were “gadflies in the Governor’s hide!”

National conferences, meetings, and protest rallies became a way of life as we began to build alliances with other like-minded people and groups. Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven were often at the conferences, enriching the discussion with their wealth of experience, thoughtful strategies, and sage advice. Many times, I did not even realize that Richard was present because he was a very quiet man, only speaking when his voice or expertise was needed. Yet, any time he spoke, I was always aware of his immense presence. He had a deep personal conviction for justice for the poor and neglected of our society and possessed a warm, witty sense of humor. When I think of Richard Cloward, I am reminded of the movie title, *Run Silent, Run Deep*.

In the mid-90s, I was invited to speak at a conference at Smith College. Richard was also on the panel. It was the first time I heard him speak for more than five minutes. He spoke about Human SERVE and his philosophy for helping the disenfranchised to claim their right to vote by making voter registration more convenient. I was reminded of one of the earliest lessons he taught me when I read his books: just because you are eligible for a benefit or service does not mean you will get it. In fact, you usually have to demand it and fight for it. His casual down-to-earth manner and humorous anecdotes kept the students’ rapt attention. He spoke as a friend, explaining how the students should use their education to become change agents for social justice, a theory he demonstrated through his life’s work.

After the forum, Richard and I went for a short walk around the campus. I tried to convey my utmost respect for his work and told him how his work had impacted my life. I knew he had been criticized for encouraging agitation, and I wanted him to know that I agreed with his methods. It was right to inform poor women that they were eligible for welfare benefits and should confront the government to get the resources they needed to take care

of their families. In my opinion, welfare rights activists simply taught the government how to count! People were encouraged to claim benefits and services they needed, forcing the government to include them in the statistics. They gave voice to the people who motivated others to come forward, building a movement and igniting the spark of change.

Richard and Frances witnessed, documented, and participated in achieving progressive social change through broad-based movements. In the intervening years, much of that change has been reversed because there is so little mass defiance. If we are to progress as a country, we must build upon the successes of the past by organizing the people who are most affected and allowing them to speak and act for themselves without fear. We must stay active and vigilant, watching out for others and practicing true solidarity. We must use Richard Cloward’s life as a template for justice.

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