

REFLECTIONS ON RICHARD A. CLOWARD

Ken Grossinger

Ken Grossinger, M.S.W., was Richard Cloward's student and a long time friend. He works at the AFL-CIO.

I am not sure whether Richard Cloward took me under his wing of his own volition, or if I was so persistent in my determination that he had no alternative. In 1980, after a four-year hiatus from undergraduate school, I entered the Columbia University School of Social Work (CUSSW). I had all but resigned myself to doing some combination of law and social work in order to make a living, or perhaps I would earn a Ph.D. and teach. I assumed politics, my first love, would have to become an avocation.

Then, as today, if one is not exposed to political careers through family or friends, or as part of a social movement, there is no obvious way to become familiar with and learn about job opportunities in community organizing, philanthropy, labor, or other public interest work. That was my situation—until I met Richard Cloward.

Richard recognized the fire in my belly. He nurtured my intellectual curiosity, helping to shape my ideas about poverty, race, class, and social movements. And he helped legitimize my way of thinking about the world and my political relationship to it.

Richard introduced me to class conflict in concrete ways, through organizing campaigns and by challenging elite ideas that derided the poor. He introduced me to intellectuals and to organizers in community, labor, and social welfare advocacy organizations. In large part, Richard Cloward is the reason I've worked over the last 20 years as a community and labor organizer and, now at the AFL-CIO, on campaigns for social and economic justice.

Our 21-year relationship took many forms. Student-teacher, employee-employer, friend

and mentor. As Richard's student, I was struck instantly by his enormous intellect and scholarship. In the classroom, he spoke with dry humor, sharp insight and passion, and always with a thought provoking style. He possessed a sweeping knowledge of history and delivered a bravura performance for his students.

Before entering CUSSW, I worked at a residential treatment home for delinquent youth. One day, I was describing my experiences at the home to Richard, talking to him about delinquency and arguing that society wrongfully defined deviant behavior as a psychological dysfunction when it actually expressed something more. The next day he brought me *Medicalization of Deviance*, a book that exactly captured the points I tried to articulate. It was sometime later that I learned Richard co-authored *Delinquency and Opportunity* (1960) with Lloyd Ohlin, the landmark book that provided the intellectual underpinnings for progressive work with gang related problems.

Richard's interest in deviant behavior shaped his thinking about social movements. He argued that participants in social movements deviated from the norms; therefore, they were, by definition, deviants. They broke laws. They sat down at lunch counters to protest segregation. They got arrested demanding an adequate income. Richard maintained that, while some deviance might reflect mental illness, other forms of deviance had political or sociological explanations. *Delinquency and Opportunity* influenced the formation of Mobilization for Youth (MIY), which Cloward helped found in 1961 and went on to become the model for the Federal War

on Poverty, including anti-poverty legal services and community action programs.

Richard did not just teach me in the classroom, but one on one, often over breakfast at the Mills Café, a luncheonette near Columbia run by two holocaust survivors. There he would order a lime-rickey to drink with his eggs and pontificate. We also met after class up the street from Mills at the West End, a bar once famous for patrons like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and other 50's beat-era poets.

One night after class in the early 1980's, Richard said that social workers needed a vehicle to express more militant opposition to then-President Reagan's attacks on the welfare state. He was sensitive to the 501(C)3 non-profit status of private sector welfare agencies and the constraints under which they operated, including the possibility that their public funds could be put at risk if used for direct advocacy. He wanted to create a new vehicle for more strident forms of action without duplicating the work of existing social welfare agencies. I was just graduating from CUSSW, and he and Frances Fox Piven, his partner and collaborator, asked me to staff what would become known for a short period as the Emergency Campaign to Save Human Services. Paying me out of their pockets, Richard and Frances gave me my first organizing job when I finished graduate school. The position opened doors for me throughout the New York City and national social welfare community.

In 1983, when President Reagan received an award from the National Council of Christian and Jews at the New York Hilton, the Emergency Campaign network organized a rally to protest Reagan's proposed cuts in school lunch programs. The President was trying to redefine nutrition to include kitchen table condiments such as ketchup and mustard. We planned to use a flat bed truck as the stage. But the Emergency Campaign's steering committee member who ordered the truck ordered it from Brooklyn. Sure enough, the truck was delayed on the Brooklyn Bridge and didn't get to the New York Hilton on time. This truck became a metaphor in our political work for years to come: "Make sure the truck shows up!" I can still hear it now. It is a lesson I have never forgotten.

Shortly thereafter, Richard and Frances had a new idea, and they turned their attention to building support for the social and health programs by focusing on registering millions of poor people who depend upon these programs to vote. They argued that welfare agencies and motor vehicle departments should offer voter registration services at intake as a way to bring millions of low income and minority voters into the electorate. This type of voter registration was called agency based voter registration.

An early version of their article outlining this strategy was entitled "Toward a Class Based Realignment of American Politics." Excited about the idea, Richard asked me to read and comment on the draft during one of our regular evening meetings, section by section. All I could think about was the article Richard and Frances published roughly 20 years earlier called a "Strategy to End Poverty," which appeared in *The Nation* and gave rise to the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). And the uncommon humility of a scholar and activist of Richard's stature asking a 20-something, fresh out of graduate school, to comment on his work.

We shared a taxi ride up to Harlem the following week and discussed the article again. He told me I was about to go on the ride of my life. And he was right. We transformed the Emergency Campaign to Save Human Services into the Human Service Employees Registration and Voter Education Campaign (Human SERVE). I would become its first staffer.

Richard taught me to test the waters before undertaking projects, and to keep checking the temperature. That seems to be little more than common sense. But history is filled with policy advocates and in particular academics, who generate seemingly good ideas and solutions to problems that have absolutely no grounding in real world politics. Sensitive to drawing scant money away from other organizing work, Richard was careful not to raise money or build coalitions for projects until there was a basis to assess their value and the possibility of achieving their goals.

And so it was that in the coming months he and Frances tested the agency-based voter

registration idea. They held a series of meetings with a range of constituent groups; ACORN founders, leading social welfare community executives, religious leaders including William Sloane Coffin, philanthropists brought together by David Hunter and Richard Boone, students, and as many relevant constituent groups as possible.

Community organizers did not need to be sold on the value of bringing into the electorate millions of low income and minority voters. They wanted to talk nuts and bolts: Was it possible? How long did it take to register a person to vote? Would there be trouble accessing enough voter registration cards to do this on a scale that mattered? Because of these discussions, I learned about an historic difference in orientation between community- and movement-oriented organizers that shaped my approach to organizing throughout my career.

This difference was about the role of organization and the extent to which organizers can control the direction of campaigns, particularly those that revolve around class conflict and race. Community and labor organizers typically approach campaigns in building block fashion, building organization along the way. Indeed, sometimes they use issues primarily as an organizational building-block. Moreover, community organizers believe that the stronger the organization, the more ability it has to influence the outcome of a fight. Richard and Frances argued the opposite is true in an influential book called *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (1977). In it, they analyzed movements and the role of organizations, and they make the case that political influence begins to diminish when organizers shift their focus away from campaigns and the disruption they cause to building organization.

Richard used to say that strategies are like corks in the ocean. Organizers pop them into the sea and try to direct them, but ultimately, it is the tides that move them in one direction or another. Organizers are key to the success of any mobilization, but it is movements, through their capacity to disrupt economic and political alignments, that sometimes shape national legislation such as the New Deal and civil rights

laws.

Human SERVE initiated many campaigns over the next 17 years. It sought executive orders from big state governors, litigated to implement agency-based voter registration, and promoted national legislation. Human SERVE's idea was eventually incorporated into the National Voter Registration Act and became law in 1993. On stage with then-President Clinton at the signing ceremony, Richard and Frances reflected that "this legislation represents an historic advance in the struggle to win full enfranchisement for low-income people and people of color. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 stopped government from preventing people from registering to vote. This act goes further by embodying the principle that government has an affirmative obligation to register the eligible electorate."

I left Human SERVE in the mid-1980's and went to work for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), one of the few unions organizing low-income and minority workers. Shortly thereafter, I talked with Richard about the 1960's welfare rights strategy embraced by the NWRO. We discussed his and Frances' research on the number of poor women who were eligible to receive benefits but had not applied for them. I thought it stood to reason that, with the growth of the low-wage service sector, there also might be tens of thousands of low wage workers who were eligible to receive benefits but had not applied, partly because they were working and didn't know they would be eligible. If unions were to link these workers to benefits, the unions' prospects for organizing them to receive additional benefits and pay increases through a contract might be enhanced. In retrospect, I learned the history of the welfare rights movement and applied its ideas to current political realities.

Richard had the unusual ability to turn big ideas into action. His understanding of history informed more than his theories. He helped organize new campaigns through which to apply them. His theory in *Delinquency and Opportunity* gave rise to MFY. The strategy that he and Frances developed to flood the welfare roles with welfare recipients gave rise to the NWRO, and their agency based voter

registration strategy to bring millions of low income people and people of color into the electorate gave rise to the Human SERVE Campaign and the National Voter Registration Act. Frances and Richard not only helped organize these campaigns but raised money to support them, as well.

Thus, it made sense that Richard encouraged me to pursue my ideas regarding the entitlements of the working poor to welfare. Eventually, the Poverty Race Research Action Center funded my research that demonstrated that tens of thousands of low wage workers were eligible to receive benefits but were simply not applying for them.

Richard died of cancer on August 20, 2001. He was 74 years old. We celebrated his life and work one month later on September 20, 2001. Five hundred people came together at the celebration and heard from his friends and colleagues: former Berkeley Mayor Gus Newport, who was a child at one of the nation's first integrated summer camps where Richard was a counselor; Howard Zinn, Barbara Ehrenreich, Cornel West, Diane Dujon, Tim Sampson, Terry Mizrahi, Alex Gitterman and many others. Each reflected on Richard's life and work in the anti-poverty program, the national welfare rights movement, and the Human SERVE voter registration effort, as well as on his major writings.

I think of Richard often, my mentor and friend, who gave his student so many of his gifts. His life and ideas are a vivid part of my own. I hope to make him proud.

For information on how to obtain a copy of the video of the celebration please e-mail kgrossin@aficio.org.

Proceeds will be used to strengthen grassroots welfare rights organizing.

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