

RICHARD A. CLOWARD

Shannon Flynn

Shannon Flynn was a student in Richard Cloward's last class before he retired. This was presented at his memorial session.

I was lucky enough to be in Professor Cloward's last class in spring of 2001. I came home from the first class and told my roommate that being able to take this kind of class was the reason I had come to graduate school. I talked so much about him that semester that everyone in my immediate circle felt like they were taking the class too.

The class was consistently engaging and sometimes intimidating. Professor Cloward did not mince words. Once, after our class revealed a painful lack of knowledge about social welfare policy, he likened our ignorance to medical students not knowing what a pancreas is. However, he said, medical students would flunk out and we would graduate with Columbia degrees.

Professor Cloward was a legend at our school and while legends rarely seem to live up to the hype, Professor Cloward exceeded his reputation. He was an inspired and inspiring teacher. He seemed to know everything. He lectured without notes. His syllabus did not have a tidy breakdown of class projects and percentages. It was education at its most pure: an accomplished activist and brilliant teacher passing on what he knew. At the same time, he was authentically interested in what we thought.

Professor Cloward taught us to look below the surface of the institutions that claim to serve those in need. Though it was uncomfortable, he showed us how to examine the true foundations of the welfare state even though it might be more reassuring to believe in the altruism of our government. One of the greatest gifts he shared was his perspective. He was able to look at things and see the real issue.

When asked about the merits of welfare, he said that was the wrong question. The real issue is not whether welfare is good or bad, but is the workplace hospitable? Is it a place where women with children can work?

Towards the end of the semester, he outlined where he saw the future of the labor movement going and the new brand of disruptive dissent that was to be the subject of his next book. What was most incredible to me was that Professor Cloward could spend his whole life working for the rights of people who had been cast aside and still look for new opportunities to shift the balance of power.

At our final class, Professor Cloward announced his retirement. He shared that he did not regret anything in his career, that he would not have changed a thing. And he wished the same for us: a career working for social and economic justice. As he walked out, I think we all realized that we had been extraordinarily privileged to have him as a teacher. For me, as I am sure has been the case for countless other students, his class was a defining moment in my education. I think that all of us, all of his students, carry his example with us. And we will be better for it, better social workers and better people for having been taught by Professor Cloward.

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