ON CHALLENGING AUTHORITY: AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH FRANCES FOX PIVEN

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In 2002, Reflections *ran an oral history/narrative interview with Richard A. Cloward. In addition to Cloward's voice, the interview included a few observations from Frances Fox Piven, Cloward's long time partner and collaborator. In the years which followed, those involved with Reflections discussed the idea that Piven's voice needed a more prominent place in this journal. So the author reached out to Piven, one of the preeminent social welfare scholars of her generation. On August 16, 2007, Piven sat for her own oral history interview with* Reflections.

Francis Fox Piven
Smith College Archives

Frances Fox Piven, 2008
Photo by Caroline Shepard

It has now been over thirty years since Cloward and Piven's essay, "Notes Toward a Radical Social Work" was published in 1975. Throughout the interview which follows, we revisit the themes addressed in this essay, as well as the tensions between social movements, direct action, and service provision. Many of these themes have made their way into the collaborations between Piven and Cloward as well as into the writings by Piven herself in the decades which followed. The result is perhaps the most compelling bodies of social welfare scholarship of the last half century.

While the expression "empowerment based practice" has become part of the au courant of social work practice, few have bridged the concept's praxis divide between theoretical implications and practical applications as Piven has. From her years with the highly influential Mobilization for Youth project in the Lower East Side of Manhattan through her contribution to the formation of the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 1960s, work with trade unions and other social movements, her work theorizing and strategizing about the constraints on voting rights so more people could access the franchise in the 1990s, and current research on the role of regular citizens in the process of social change, few social welfare scholars have done as much to articulate a route towards power for poor people as Piven has.

Currently a professor of political science and sociology at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, Piven still continues to publish books, teach, advise students, and support movements. We started our interview talking about her years with Mobilization for Youth, a highly influential radical social work project which spawned a generation of social welfare scholars, including the dean of the University of California, School of Social work, Harry Sprecht. His influential work *Unfaithful Angels: How Social Work Abandoned Its Mission,* was a direct response to those years.

Mobilization for Youth

BS (Benjamin Shepard): Tell me about how you got involved with Mobilization for Youth? So many people have written about and romanticized the period.

FFP (Frances Fox Piven): Well, it is a convoluted story. I had set out to do social and economic planning in the third world. That was the language that we used when I was in school. My husband at the time put a lot of pressure on me to shift to city planning. He made a not unreasonable argument. What was he going to do while I tramping through the swamps and deserts of the global south? What kind of marriage was that going to be? And I didn't think I was making a monumental decision. After all, I thought I could do the same kind of work in American cities. So I got a master's degree in planning.

But then I came to New York and I got a job working on the new zoning proposal for New York City, with an architectural firm which had a contract with the city. I was surprised by almost everything that was going on, and asked a lot of aggressive questions. My colleagues were annoyed but also patient. After all, I was young and I was pretty, so the much more senior people were inclined to

indulge me, treat me like a mascot, or a toy. And I kept asking questions. It seemed to me that two parallel things were going on. One was that well meaning planners, some of the top professionals in the country, were going through the steps of what they considered rational decision making about land use in the city, which meant collecting a lot of information on existing land uses. On the other hand, there were the real estate interests which had big stakes in zoning regulations, usually tacit but still recognized—this was after all an architectural firm—and always in the background.

So I guess I became a pain in the neck. I was given a series of assignments which took me out of their hair. One was to do a survey of all new industrial construction in the city; another was to do a survey of parking space provisions in new residential buildings. They assigned staff to help me, and I did those surveys. I was 21 years old. And I had a little squadron of people fanning out over the city to collect the data. The Buildings Department presumably provided us with the base data identifying new industrial construction, for example. We drove to each of the sites on the Buildings Department cards. Sometimes we actually found new factories, but never did they match the building characteristics on our cards. I finally concluded that the reason was that the fees for building department applications were determined by square footage. So all these applications reporting small 2500 square feet structures were actually big industrial establishments. When I told the head of the Department of City Planning that the huge map that they had on one of their floors with colored flags for different types of industrial construction were all wrong, that a lot of them were not there at all and those that were there were much bigger, and that probably this was because the application data was a scam, he simply said, "You're wrong. That's not so." So I did my study, and formulated my conclusions. And I waited for someone to ask me for it. No one asked me. One day, I was so pissed that I took all the original data home and I put it in my bedroom closet. And I waited for somebody to ask me for it. No one ever asked me for it. I was getting more and more annoyed and discouraged, saying to myself, maybe you've made a big mistake, you're in the wrong field.

So, while I was doing this, I got a letter from Columbia University inviting me to apply for a fellowship to do my dissertation. I got the fellowship, and the dissertation I decided to do was on the uses of research in planning decisions. I knew something about that. I went back and I asked all these accomplished planners, "How did you use this study of parking provisions" or "this study on industrial design which I just conducted?" and they gave me pat answers about how useful this research was in their zoning decisions. Later I watched the legislative process at the Board of Estimates as the real estate troops moved in. All in all, I decided I wasn't going to be a city planner.

I got my Ph.D. degree from the University of Chicago where I'd completed all my course work. The degree was in social science, not planning. But I didn't want to be an academic. I had originally wanted to do economic development in the third world, and I still I wanted to do something that was related to social action. While I was finishing my degree I was invited by the Mobilization for Youth team to write parts of their proposal. And that's how I hooked up with them.

When Mobilization got their big funding (they had first had a planning grant), I got a grant from NIMH to do a study of how the unusual collaborative project between federal and city agencies, and a host of voluntary agencies on the Lower East Side, had come about. I had been there long enough to have a sense that each of these actors had different ideas about what they were doing. And that it was a collaboration sealed by money. I also got tied up with the housing and community organizing programs, the direct action side of the project.

BS: You got the bug.

FFP: Yea.

BS: Tell us about the community organizing that you did.

FFP: Well, we were doing tenant organizing. And later, welfare rights organizing. This was during the height of the civil rights movement, and Mobilization for Youth did something that I thought extraordinary. They rented a train to take people from the Lower East Side to the March on Washington.

But lots of the local organizing was about the rent strikes. I also knew about rent strikes elsewhere in the city, and what I knew was that a lot of the announced rent strikes weren't really happening. So Richard [Cloward] and I wrote an article about the rent strikes. We had come to the conclusion that the problem was that the organizers were trying to follow the regimen, the detailed routines for a legal rent strike, which had been incorporated in state law as the historical legacy of earlier rent strikes. But that routine and the bureaucratic rigmarole it specified, including establishing a record of code violations by a reluctant building department and setting up escrow accounts of rental payments, made it impossible to do a large scale rent strike. We wrote an article which I think was published in *The Nation*, where we argued that the only way to do a big and effective rent strike was to launch "spend the rent" campaigns. And then the organizers had to be prepared to organize crowds to defend against evictions, which people had done in the 1930s. And ignore the bureaucratic process of legal rent strikes because it is too hard to do. Following the rules also eliminates a great attraction of rent striking which was that people did not have to pay the rent. (For more on rent strikes see Piven and Cloward; 1966; 1967)

BS: What about direct action? What other forms of direct action were people using in New York City at this period?

FFP: Well, there were a lot of large street rallies. I remember Jessie Gray, who was great at these events. He was the flamboyant Harlem rent strike leader…He also didn't have an actual rent strike. I remember going to one of his rallies, on 118th Street and 7th Avenue on a Saturday afternoon. It was at the same time that the New York Worlds Fair had opened, 1963 or '64, and Jessie Gray was proclaiming that these two blocks in Harlem were not the World's Fair but the "World's Worst Fair," and there were big crowds. As it got dark I realized there were lots of people, and that I was the only white person there. People were angry and for the first time that can I remember, I became wary. It was a pretty harsh period.

I also remember a big rally with Malcolm X, which occurred shortly after a white minister had led resistance to an urban renewal project by standing in front of a bulldozer and the bulldozer ran over him. He died. I don't remember his name but Malcolm said, "The chickens come home to roost." The mood was ferocious. Not that Malcolm was unkind, but the intensity of the anger that could be tapped!

And then, I think it was in 1963 or it could have been '64, the first riots broke out in New York. The precipitant seemed to have been that a cop had shot and killed a little kid. The city was blanketed with a flyer that said, "Wanted for Murder, Gilligan the Cop!"

This occurred just before *The Daily News* ran a series of front cover stories about how Mobilization was infiltrated by communists. One of the charges was that we had mimeographed the Wanted for Murder flyer. We didn't know if we had mimeographed the flyer because we had a few storefronts in the neighborhood that were used by community groups. It took us months before we got experts to certify that we had not mimeographed that flyer, or rather that our machines had not. It created a kind of crisis at Mobilization for Youth. Everybody was investigating us - all the federal agencies that funded us, the Ford foundation. And the City was investigating us.

Welfare Rights

And as part of the investigation, the Ford Foundation, wanted an evaluation of each of our programs. I got caught up in that evaluation. And one of the services that we were evaluating were our storefront social work services. There were three storefronts where people could walk in, tell social workers their problems, and social workers would help them. The social workers had these forms that they had developed in which they would report

"presented problem," "actual problem," "service provided," or something like that. We got the forms because we were trying to figure out what these storefronts were doing. And what we found out was that on a given day many people came into the storefront because they desperately needed money. They were facing evictions or they had to get shoes for their kids. And what did the social workers do? They called welfare or they sent people to welfare. That was pretty interesting to us because it made us wonder, why weren't these people on welfare if they were eligible? So we did a kind of rough and ready study using all the surveys we could find of New York City neighborhoods, mainly done in connection with urban renewal plans, and tried to determine the income and family structure of the people that were surveyed, and the level of welfare take-up in the neighborhood. Of course, the data was not precisely designed to speak to our questions. Replicating our study where we could, we estimated there were at least one to two families who were eligible for welfare for everyone that was receiving welfare. This seemed a stunning fact, and it was consistent with the experience of the Mobilization storefront service centers.

That was when we developed our proposal for a mass welfare rights movement that would include students and social workers as well as welfare recipients, and the movement would work to demand welfare benefits, opening up the welfare system. We also knew from the legal services program at Mobilization that the welfare department was giving bus tickets to people when they came to go back, say to South Carolina, instead of giving them an application for welfare. So we knew something about what was going on.

When we presented our findings and our proposal we confronted a kind of establishment view in social work. I remember Evelyne Burns sent me an article saying the United States really has a guaranteed income because if you put all the programs together, everybody's covered. That was true only if you put the formal aspects of the programs together. In fact we thought that people weren't being served. So we wrote our article proposing a movement to open up the welfare system, and we highlighted the contradiction between formal entitlement and actual access.

Remember, this was in the mid-1960s, at a moment when the federal government really needed the support of impoverished minorities in the cities. We also said that moment wouldn't last, that the urban poor have more power than they have had in the past or will in the future. Now is the time to do this. And we tried to persuade activists to take up our strategy. We talked to a lot of civil rights leaders. I remember I was in Mount Beulah, Mississippi at a big CORE meeting., and I tried to peddle the welfare rights strategy, without success. We went to see Bayard Rustin who said, "I would rather get one of these women a job as an airline stewardess then get all these women welfare." I should note that he seemed to change his mind once the Welfare Rights Movement had developed and we had something like an infrastructure. He was supportive then, and I do not want to slam him. But he also had a pretty conventional view of politics.

BS: That's fascinating. I have never heard of anyone refer to Rustin as conventional.

FFP: He had an article published in *Commentary*, which wasn't a right wing journal at the time, called "From Protest to Politics" (Rustin, 1964/2003). And the article argued that the protest phase of the civil rights movement was over and now we have to concentrate on voting and participation in the Democratic Party.

BS: He was a Quaker who went to jail rather than fight in World War II, participated in direct action against nukes in the early 1960's, taught M.L.K. Ghandi's principles of non-violent civil disobedience, and worked for unions after the Civil Rights years. Not to mention he was gay. I do wonder if his life and career would have been different if he could have been out, if there could have been a queer public sphere, a bath house, a Christopher or Castro Street, post Gay Liberation in which he could have found some comfort. But that wasn't available.

FFP: Being gay probably did restrain him. I think if you undertook a psychological study of Bayard, I think that would have been true.

BS: People were always nipping at him. He was always subject to public lewdness stings for public sex. But that's another conversation.

FFP: CORE didn't pick up the strategy. But when Welfare Rights became stronger, Jim Farmer would come to our meetings. Did you ever hear Farmer speak? I remember meeting him in the foyer of a big auditorium where welfare rights people were meeting. I don't think he realized we were going to put him on the podium right away, so I walked down the auditorium aisle with him to explain what was going on. That was enough. He took the podium with this booming voice gave a fantastic speech. He really was a great orator, a polemical genius.

BS: So how did social workers collaborate within this strategy? From what I understand the core strategy was to push to get applicants to get the services that were on the books.

FFP: Pursue the services that are on the books and also change the books.

BS: That's the administrative remedy – to actually say…

FFP: But we were going to pursue those administrative remedies with occupations of welfare centers. And we did. So it was a kind of riotous strategy to force administrative compliance.

BS: That's fascinating, talking about how social work and direct action overlap. And it still seems to work today. Its great to push for what is actually there and to say implement it.

FFP: It's like human rights. Think of the transformations that would result from implementing the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights! Rights proclamations and legal entitlements by themselves haven't abolished poverty in the world. And it won't be abolished until people themselves become a force. Of course, even then it might not be abolished. (For more on poor people's movements, see Piven and Cloward; 1977).

So in New York City at that time, which is about '66, there were people in the welfare apparatus who had come into social work in the 1930s. They were well-meaning people, and in principle sympathized with the politics of our movement. But they didn't want anybody occupying their centers for days.

After Lindsay became Mayor, Mitch Ginsberg was appointed Director of Welfare. We knew him personally and we told him that we were going to force him to be a good administrator of welfare. Usually people have a hard time with the idea that the role of activists is not to sympathize with the dilemmas of their opponents, but to push as hard as they can and raise hell as much as they can and make trouble as much as they can. It doesn't mean that the people that they are pressing are evil. Some of them are liberals, progressive people, but you can't leave it to them. You've got to change the constellation of influences to which they react.

We had a little episode like that recently. Last summer, there was a sit-in at [Rep. John] Conyers' office by the Impeach Bush people because Conyers had backed off from his earlier support of impeachment. A couple of weeks later at the American Sociological Association, we had an evening session where Conyers was featured along with Barbara Ehrenreich. Now Conyers' office had been in touch with me asking me to promise that impeachment was off the table. I said, "No, we don't do speech bans." He came anyway. And at the end of his talk, he said now he wanted to talk about impeachment. Medea Benjamin, who had been part of the earlier sit-in, was sitting a few seats away from me. Conyers said, in the voice of angelic reasonableness, "On the one hand we should impeach them all – Cheney, Gonzales, Bush. But if we do that, we won't get anything else done for a year and a half. On the other hand, there is an agenda we might push forward in the Congress. And we have chosen on the other hand." He didn't say I'm absolutely sure we're right. He said this is the choice I face,

and if you know his record, you know how decent he has been. So, I said to Medea (I frankly didn't want her to attack him right there cause I love him), "Listen Media, he's doing what he can do, given his position. And we want him in that position. What we've got to do is raise hell and change the conditions to which he is reacting, and to which Bush and Cheney and the others are reacting as well. I think what you are doing is fine. But I think what he is doing is pretty good too, under the circumstances." She wouldn't have any of it.

BS: She's been on the receiving end too. So she has to understand.

FFP: But the same thing was true of Paul Wellstone, who was an old friend of mine. Every once in a while some movement person would say he promised he was going to organize a nationwide social movement in the United States. And what has he done? And there is silence. But the answer to that is that we are the ones who should be organizing the social movements. And then the decent people in the Senate will be in a better position to move on our agenda. Think of it as a division of labor.

BS: That's part of what we're talking about, which is how does a direct strategy advance the cause of service provision when it is on the table? Actually, getting drugs into bodies as ACT UP said, or getting housing services, or getting a check cut, or just moving a housing application from the welfare department. I was a housing provider. If the city welfare office doesn't move the housing application I can't house someone. Yet, it would be very helpful when I was working with Housing Works, for example. They had their Social Justice squad. The board of directors at Housing Works says direct action is fine. They completely support that. The Social Justice Squad would actually bring people to the welfare centers who would chair themselves up and say they wouldn't not leave until the welfare workers did their job and moved the housing application. When the tactic was used people would actually get housed. Here was a moment where housing provision and direct action overlapped succinctly and effectively (For more on Housing Works see Shepard, 2008). I am just wondering if you saw that strategy working during the campaign of the National Welfare Rights Organization?

FFP: Well, the point of the article that we wrote in *Radical Social Work* in ancient times, a long time ago (see Cloward and Piven; 1975) was that social workers in their preoccupation with being professionals have moved away from delivering direct services, income, material benefits, the things that people need and need most urgently. That's not a high status professional activity. So one of our arguments was that those direct material services are really important. Another one of our arguments was that, no matter whether there is a movement out there or not, social workers should do whatever they can—which may include defying the authorities in the agencies in which they work—to get those services to the people that need them. But think of how much better it is for this kind of practice if there is a movement out there. And in welfare rights there were a lot of social workers who actually worked with the movement. And made the case managers who worked in centers as well as the managers who were social workers come alive again.

BS: They were not being psychotherapists. Can you describe practical ways in which social workers were able to support this movement.

FFP: Well, in a lot of human services there is enormous discretion in responding to applications. In welfare, that included and to an extent still includes the way in which budgets are calculated, how the worker interprets the "work first" emphasis. Most welfare agencies now make it difficult to even allow people to apply. They send them for a jobs search first. And that's a tough one because the administrative crack down that accompanied the elimination of AFDC and the transfer to TANF was so ferocious. Most of the people that had welfare have lost it, in many cases because of sanctions. Most of those sanctions are justified by of some kind

of infraction of the myriad rules they've put in place. In some states, almost all of the cutoffs are a result of sanctions. Where are the social workers in those systems? It would make a difference.

Voter Registration

FFP: That was another episode, very different I suppose, but the political context was very different too. After Reagan was elected, we wondered if we could do something about the electoral situation. I knew that the active electorate in the U.S. was very small compared to other countries, and that it was mainly low income people who didn't vote. Reflecting on this situation, we developed another strategy which depended crucially on social workers. By this time, most social workers had drifted out of the lower rungs of the public agencies. But this strategy looked to the private agencies and to the unions in the public sector agencies. Our idea was that social workers at voluntary agencies and the public sector agencies were being very hard hit by Reagan initiatives. So there was a natural confluence of interests now between social workers, unions, and the huge numbers of low income and low income working people who depended upon services. So why couldn't voluntary agencies and the unions in the public sector agencies launch voter registration services at their agencies directed specifically at the people for whom they provided services. And we knew it could be done. We raised money and hired organizers. And organizers went into the voluntary agencies and at first, registration activities worked well, and people registered to vote.

But there are thousands and thousands of voluntary agencies, and when our organizers went on to the next agency, the first agency let registration activities slide.

During those years '83 and '84, we got tremendous verbal support from the leadership of the big unions, AFSME, for example, the Communication Workers of America, they all announced that their workers should do voter registration in the public agencies. And we got a lot of that kind of support from the national organizations of voluntary social agencies too, including the public health associations. I remember I was asked to speak at the National Public Health Association meeting. I marched in with a color guard, and they had the Star-spangled Banner playing. They loved the speeches, but they didn't do the dull work of registration. I finally came to the conclusion that the voluntary agencies were a bunch of free riders. They wanted somebody else to do it. They were in favor of the idea but not in favor of doing it themselves. Some of the reluctance probably has to do with the fact that registering people to vote is not a professional service (For more on the politics and policy of voting, see Piven and Cloward; 1988).

Social Work Knowledge

BS: One of my favorite lines from your essay in *Radical Social Work* reads, "We learned that inmates interact with prisons; that mental patients interact with mental hospitals; that recipients interact with welfare departments; that everybody interacts. But most clients do not just interact with the systems, they are oppressed by them. And social workers ought not to intervene in these systems, they ought to resist them," (quoted in Cloward and Piven; 1975, p. xv). I wanted to ask you about the use of the word, "oppress." Systems theory is good for diagramming. but it does not get at the point that people who are oppressed do not interface with oppressive systems in an egalitarian manner. Systems theory, like many others, does not speak to the real experience for many social work clients. And that seems to be what you are talking about. Is it that social workers are not learning words or there is not a knowledge about what the issues are that such workers and their clients are going through.

FFP: Well, social work education, while it varies from school to school, is generally not an experience that cultivates good social workers, social workers who are committed to and responsive to their clients. A lot about social work education teaches social workers to be responsive to their agencies. And the agencies in turn are influenced by a political constellation which is oppressive of clients, which is designed to be oppressive of clients. I know something about social work education because my first teaching job was at the Columbia University School of Social Work. Some of my students were rabble rousers, and they worked hard for their clients. But they were likely to get negative evaluations of their field work, reports saying that they were not responsive to authority or that they didn't work well with the agencies. But social workers should resist authority and cause trouble in the agencies when clients are not being served. I don't mean to say that social work as a field is bad. In fact as a field, there is more humanity and decency in social work than there is in most applied fields. It's more like the Conyers vs. Medea situation, where the agency administrators are trying to do as much as they can to insure the survival of the agency and to secure its funding and additional funding and to build political support. But clients, and contentious social workers, don't figure much in their calculations. I think to the extent that social workers can create internal resistance, which is very difficult, to agency compromises, that's a good thing. But for such resistance to become a force, social work needs to become a movement itself. In the 1930's and in the 1960's, something like that happened within social work.

BS: When we read this chapter last Spring, we broke out and the students unpacked it, cause there is a lot to unpack in the article. One of the students was walking back to my office after class. In class I said have irrational hope. Break through those systems because that's what we have to do some times. The great Keith Cylar of Housing Works, he used to say that. She was a student dealing with an illness all spring long. And she said, well I just had to get a lawyer to deal with an issue. And once her opponents heard she got the lawyer they backed down. So I think students are recognizing they are interfacing with many oppressive systems. And they are realizing they have a couple of choices. Many social workers are familiar with the difficulties and dilemmas. This is something they are dealing with every day. That resonates with them.

As far teaching social workers, how do we communicate to students about the realities and challenges of advocating for poor people and maintaining one's job? The other thing the article said was you might lose your job or you might not be that popular in your agency especially if you actually do advocate for the homeless drug user who doesn't really like the system. He may not show up for appointments. And yet that is the social work client. That is often the person who needs help the most. So how are you able to talk to people about being able to stay engaged and be effective at addressing these things.

FFP: That's why I think we do actually need some collective action within social work to protect the people who become strong advocates for their clients. It's a hard row to hoe by yourself. You don't stay true to your commitments very long if you are all by yourself. Well, most people don't. Some people do, and they are remarkable. They do for their whole life. But it is not easy. So we all need lots of friends and comrades But also, if that sort of collective spirit, and the networks for self-defense, emerge among social workers that's really a good thing, not only because it gives social workers some support but also because of the impact over time on the field, as the 1930s and 1960s movements among social workers had an impact an impact on the field. To be sure, over time, the movement fades and then the field bends away from the people at the bottom, until the next movement. That's the way it goes.

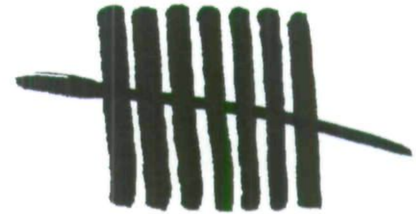
BS: In my dissertation, I selflessly dedicated myself to interviewing a cohort of activists, some my heroes and friends. Throughout the interviews, I noticed a pattern among activists who were social workers who did not say they were social workers. You'd

go around the meetings and people would say, "I'm with Grandmothers for Peace" or whatever. Many were social workers but none of them would say it. Here were all these people doing direct action. And they were not linking it with their profession. People were still out there doing this work, but they were not officially doing any organizing. I came away feeling optimistic that there are a lot of people that continue to have an influence within and outside the field. But they are very quiet about it professionally.

FFP: I think that's probably true. It would be good if being a social worker could become a proud term within the movement.

BS: So how do social workers collaborate with movements, instead of talking down to them? Can you see them taking off the expert hat? I'll give you an example of the problem. At Chicago Area Project, Clifford Shaw had local leaders who would work with kids who had gotten in trouble. The point was to prevent delinquency. So, the group negotiated with courts to have neighborhood youth spend time with mentors stay in the neighborhoods under supervision. Social workers came in and said now you have to have a social work license to do this. And community ties to the people doing the work were lost. The youth did not trust the social workers, they trusted the neighborhood mentors. They were no longer working with the people preventing delinquency that they trusted. I am trying to think about how social workers change the hat that they wear so they can actually collaborate and respect community autonomy and practices…

FFP: And get respect in the community by doing things the community wants, by joining with them and enduring, for a time at least, the mistrust. You have to expect mistrust because it is well founded. But I think only in practice can social workers become credible partners with low income people. It's a long term process.



Legacies

BS: We've gone through a lot of questions. When you think of the advocacy work that you have done, what are you most proud of?

FFP: I think welfare rights because these are the most benighted people in the country. And going to these meetings which I did all over the country was so illuminating and transforming also for me.

We spent a lot of time and worry arguing with the organizers, for example. The arguments and the experience helped clarify for me what we meant by the disruptive power of movements. Richard and I often didn't agree with George Wiley and the organizers in Washington. They wanted to create a nation wide organization. For a period of time we thought, well maybe they could do what they wanted to do and we could do what we felt was important. Later we began to see that the organizing emphasis probably curbed the disruptive movement we wanted to encourage.

Some of the meetings that were most memorable were just groups of poor moms who had come together to form local chapters. That was the intent of the organizers, at least. For the women who came to the meeting, however, there was something else going on. They went through a process of trying to get rid of the disrespect and the insults associated with being on welfare by talking about their feelings. There was a meeting in the Bronx where the women said that they were not going to tell their children to lie to the social workers from welfare about seeing their fathers anymore. You see, the women were proud of the relationships fathers maintained with their kids, but welfare rules made such relationships grounds for cutting grants. It was a small thing, but the intensity of feeling about it was not small.

There was another theme that was very important to the mothers I was on the board of a local welfare rights group in Harlem. All the members were insistent on being called "Mrs.," and here too the ground on which the women were trying to build their self-respect had to do with being mothers. But they were not initially proud. They went through a process of becoming proud of the fact that they were mothers. And they constructed the argument that because they were mothers they were entitled to government support. They were trying to acquire some of the limited respect that our society accorded the people who were mothers. Ironically, they were trying to acquire some of that respect just when American society as a whole was taking away a lot of that respect. But it was very important to them. At the time, I think it was an essential part of what they had to do in order to join a movement that actually made demands.

Or there was another episode, just like that actually. We had a citywide meeting, at our customary locale, the New York Bible society, planning a school clothing demonstration at welfare headquarters, downtown on Church Street, I think at the time. And our plan was that the mothers would come with their children and sit in until they got school clothing grants. The mothers' first reaction was we don't want to bring our children or they will learn that we're on welfare. And the meeting went on and on and on into the night until we reached this point where the women were saying that we're mothers so we can demand school clothing from welfare. It's okay.

BS: So what happened?

FFP: We had the demonstration and got the school clothing grant.

BS: And the kids came to?

FFP: Yes.

BS: That's really amazing. I know how hard that is to do demos with your kids.

FFP: Well, the mothers had to take their kids if they were going to sit in over night.

BS: There is a great tradition of that. Has your thinking changed in terms of this? I saw Jesse Ventura on TV when he was governor Minnesota. And he said, "This whole idea of welfare rights. It makes me sick." You've contended with a rhetorical attack for many years now. How do you handle that through the years?

FFP: Well, I believe everyone is dependent. Some people think welfare rights is terrible because it encourages dependency. Some people become dependent on a government check. Human life is an interdependent life. Children need a lot of support. The other AFDC system was pretty rotten too. But it was getting better in the 1960s and 1970s. So they wiped out that system and they wiped out a lot of what we had won. When you go into a welfare center now the lines are horrendous. There are guards everywhere. People know that if they make a ruckus they'll be thrown out and have to go to the end of the line after they have already waited seven hours. We changed that for a time. And we should change it again.

BS: Well, let's talk about now. A couple of years ago, the New York City AIDS Housing Network (NYCAHN) spent a year monitoring the welfare center on 34th street to make sure the city was actually implementing Local Law 49 which guaranteed people with HIV/ AIDS getting housing that working day. You come at 9 a.m., by the end of the day, you have to be placed, and you leave with an address for a place to sleep. That's what the law stipulated. It is not perfect, but it is better than sleeping on the subway on a rainy night, which is where a lot of people sleep. Yet, over and over again that people were being sent to addresses with no hotels. Or they were being sent by the welfare centers to some place that was closed. So NYCAHN took on a watchdog role for over a year, monitoring where people were sent to make sure the city was in compliance with the law. At one point, a council member from the district showed up with a credit card to pay for a room for someone who was sent to an address with no hotel. At

one point, advocates showed up at the welfare center with sleeping bags saying well I guess we have to sleep here, because the city keeps sending us to these incorrect addresses. And they chained themselves to the furniture and were arrested. Charles King, from Housing Works, got a call from the *New York Times* asking him why he was there as he was getting arrested. And he said no one is getting housed by this department. The city is in violation of Local Law 49. The papers were writing stories about the campaign. And finally the city started following the letter of Local Law 49. I see people still out there trying to make your same strategy work and succeeding with it. Can you talk about other current examples in which your strategy has been effective?

FFP: I think we're going to start to see it, but the beginning will be hard. During these grim years ACT UP and its affiliates have been wonderfully persistent models of activism, and maybe a lesson for the rest of us. I remember we had a little welfare demonstration when the Clintons came to one of the New York City big hotels. And ACT UP was there, leading the chants. It just made me so happy.

ACT-UP as a model leads me to think that poor people, welfare recipients or workfare people, need a lot of support now. Here is the problem. The years-long, maybe decades-long campaign against welfare culminated in the mid-1990s with a Democratic president flaunting the slogans "two years and off to work" and "end welfare as we know it". The flagellation of people on welfare, the endless repetition of the welfare queen story, the stories of the dissolute lives that people on welfare were leading, and their promiscuity, all of this has had a very depressing impact on the most activist welfare recipients. After '96, it became very hard to organize any defense of welfare, any welfare rights protests. And then there were the politicians like Senator Phil Gram saying that "There are all these people in the wagon, letting us pull the wagon. They gotta get out of the wagon and help pull." People *wanted* to go to work to escape the insults. Well, in fact people always wanted to go to work. They wanted respect and they wanted a job, but that job had to come with enough money, with childcare, with healthcare. But the insults of welfare got much worse after this campaign. So that leads me to say that I think its hard for welfare recipients or those who are close to welfare to lead this particular battle at this time. If other people could take the lead, that might make the difference.

BS: I felt so optimistic living in LA watching people in demonstrations downtown every weekend, not welfare recipients but workers, many undocumented, saying, "No One is Illegal." All the while, they are dealing with their family members, their kids being deported or locked up because of these ICE Raids.

FFP: The problem is the Bush regime isn't vulnerable to these people. They can't do anything to the Bush Administration or Republican Congress. So we really will do better when the Democrats take over. Not because they really are on our side but because they really are vulnerable to some of the people on our side. But we have to start trying now.

BS: One final question and I'll shut up. One of these powerful things that you are talking about when you mention the moms doing the sit-inns with their kids and such is fighting that stigma. One of the things I am most excited about watching with advocacy is when people start to feel like their story is a powerful story; it is not a shame story; and people shift the terms of the story, shift the terms of that stigma. It seems to me that is part of what you are talking about. That seems very personal. But it also seems very powerful.

FFP: Well, its personal but its also collective. The transformation is personal but it occurs through a change in the collective understanding to which you are exposed. I remember early in the Women's Movement, there were all sorts of campaigns to get women to say "I Have Had an Abortion." And I remember proclaiming, "I Have Had an Abortion." It wasn't true actually, and I'm sure it wasn't true for a lot of the other women who said that...But maybe now we should all

say, "I Depend on Government Benefits." Well, that would actually be true.

BS: Absolutely. That's the powerful storytelling shift. It's also part of what social workers and advocates can do to help people realize it may not always be a rational game they are playing. So if the rational social policy game of collecting data, writing the report, and no one cares about it has become one game which does not capture people's imaginations, what do we do? So what do we do to get others to play in a new kind of game, to change the rules of the game?

FFP: Well, that's fine – changing the rules of the game. But there is another aspect to it that I think we should talk and act on more. And that is the recognition that collective action is really a lot of fun. There is a lot of joy in it. And all these political veterans who portray themselves and their lives as bitter struggles, as virtually martyrdom, even though the struggle part might have been only a year or two. They are not telling the truth. They did it because they wanted to and because it was so joyful and so satisfying. And it's a lot of fun to confront authority. It's a lot of fun to act with your comrades. And we should also use our imaginations to make the interior of the movement even more fun. We should have purple umbrellas. We should have good songs. We don't have any new good songs.

BS: That's the pleasure part. This is very heavy stuff so being able to feel a little of the joy of justice for a little bit....

FFP: The joy of defiance, you know people don't allow themselves that. But once they do I think its intoxicating. (For more on individual citizens challenging authority see Piven 2007).

BS: A few years ago right after the war started, we all dressed like vampire Billionaires and went down to the front of the Carlyle Group offices and started chanting about how much fun we were having profiteering from the war. "War is great, who, hoo!" Members of Circus Amok! And the billionaires were there. And we only lasted five minutes before we were all arrested. Yet, it was a memorable day.

FFP: It isn't as if you get that kind of experience in others ways. It's so exhilarating. That's why workers often want to go on strike, even when economists doing their calculations later say their wage concessions don't make up for their wage losses. (For more on the domestic costs of the War on Terror, see Piven, 2004).

BS: When I was working in the Bronx we always tried to get our clients from our syringe exchange into the subway at 143rd to go downtown to City Hall for City Council hearings. And you'd never arrive with more than half the group. So the game was getting everyone onto the subway and to see how many would show up. And someone was always slow. Yet a lot of them did show up and testify at the General Welfare Committee meetings of City Council or at demonstrations. And speak up about the issues.

FFP: I had an organizer friend from welfare rights who used to say, "We gotta have better food in the movement. This macaroni and ground beef can only go so long."

BS: Anything else? Any final thoughts?

FFP: No that's fine.

BS: Thank you.

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