

“Challenging Authority” : The Role of Social Movements

Review of Frances Fox Piven's book

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Frances Fox Piven is a Canadian-born Professor of Political Science and Sociology at The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY). Her career is long and distinguished. She's the recipient of numerous awards, has combined scholarship with activism, and is the author of many important books. Most notable is her 1971 classic "Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare." It's a landmark historical and theoretical analysis of how welfare policy is used to control the poor and working class.

A more recent book is her 2006-published "Challenging Authority" and subject of this review. It's about how social movements can be pivotal forces for change because ordinary people in enough numbers have enormous political clout. Abolitionists, labor movements and civil rights activists proved it. Piven examines their collective actions plus one other in the four examples she chose – the American Revolution.

Piven's book is succinct and masterful. Howard Zinn calls it a "brilliant analysis of the interplay between popular protest and electoral politics." Canadian Professor Leo Panitch says the book is "theoretically profound, yet immensely readable," and sociologist and social movements expert Susan Eckstein describes the book as "quintessentially Pivenesque." It "eloquently (shows) how ordinary people....have taken it upon themselves to correct injustices."

Piven's theme is powerfully relevant at a perilous time in our history. The nation is at war on two fronts, a third one looms, constitutional protections have eroded, social services erased, the country is militarized, dissent repressed, and the government is empowered to crush freedom and defend privilege at the expense of beneficial social change it won't tolerate.

Introduction

In light of the current situation, Piven's introductory Thomas Jefferson quote is relevant. It was his response to the repressive 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts. He wrote: "A little patience, and we shall see the reign of witches pass over, their spells dissolve, and the people, recovering their true sight, restore their government to its true principles." Disruptive social actions have done it in the past, and Piven puts it this way: "ordinary people (have) power....when they rise up in anger and hope, defy the rules....disrupt (state) institutions....propel new issues to the center of political debate....(and force) political leaders (to) stem voter defections by proffering reforms. These are the conditions that produce (America's) democratic moments."

Electoral participation alone won't do it. "In the real American political world, numerous obstacles" remain – structural, legal and practical. Despite liberalization of the process through the years, "large numbers of ostensibly eligible voters" are effectively disenfranchised. Former restrictive laws are gone, but new schemes replaced them – intimidation, misinformation, electoral fraud, and the corrupting power of money in a nation beholden to capital at the expense of the greater good.

Piven cites more as well:

- the power of incumbency,
- the two-party system that shuts out independent and minority interests,
- the construct of the law that empowers the powerful,
- the revolving door between business and government,
- the corrupted dominant media,
- the lack of accountability to voters,
- arbitrary redistricting for political advantage,
- believing markets work best so let them,
- disdaining the harm they cause,
- feeling interfering with market excess is "moral trespass,"
- sacrificing democracy in the pursuit of profit,
- and it all turning the public away from a process they no longer trust.

It shows in declining voter turnout with half or less of the electorate showing up at the polls and many without conviction.

Post-WW II, "most political scientists viewed American democracy with a self-satisfied complacency." It wasn't perfect, but it was the best possible at the time. Two decades later, system imperfections were more apparent, and more recently political science professor Robert Dahl said our system is "among the most opaque, complex, confusing, and difficult to understand" to show how badly we fare compared to other democracies.

Inequalities are extreme and growing, and Piven calls it "pernicious." It breeds "patterns of domination and subservience (and) undermines democratic capabilities." She quotes political analyst Kevin Phillips saying Washington is "the leading interest-group bazaar of the Western World," and economist Paul Krugman calling our political system "utterly and perhaps irrevocably corrupted."

Bad as it now is, Piven says democracy "never worked well in the United States." Citing the 19th century, she notes how it "was stamped and molded by intense religious and ethnic allegiances (that in turn created a culture of) political parties (at all levels) steeped in patronage." It was at a time corporate power grew and began to gain advantages that are now commonplace and harmful to the public interest.

Nonetheless, egalitarian reform is possible, and Piven recounts four crucial times when it showed up. Each time, protest movements achieved it by influencing American politics, “if only temporarily.” It’s no surprise that power “flows to those who have more of the things and attributes valued in social life.” But times emerge when “workers or peasants or rioters exercise power,” it’s “distinctive....disruptive or interdependent,” and it happens when conditions are right for it to be actualized.

Piven states the “central question” of her book: “given the power inequalities (in America)” and how it corrupts the political process, “how does egalitarian reform ever occur” at all? It’s only been at times of “disruptive protest movements” with their “distinctive kind of power” Piven calls “disruptive power.”

The Nature of Disruptive Power

First a definition of power in the abstract. Piven notes the “widely held thesis that (it’s) based on control of wealth and force” – big landowners over peasants, rich over poor, armies over civilians, and so forth. However, it’s not always the case, and “history is dotted” with examples of “people without wealth or coercive resources....exercis(ing) power, at least for a time.”

She notes how societies organize through cooperation and interdependence, but disparate interests at times conflict. While workers depend on management for jobs, managers, in turn, need a work force to produce. If labor is withheld, production halts. Both sides have leverage. Either one can activate it. Piven calls the “activation of interdependent power ‘disruption.’ ” It’s a power strategy based on “withdrawing cooperation in social relations.” Protest movements “mobilize disruptive power.” They achieve leverage by breaking down “institutionally regulated cooperation” as in strikes, boycotts or riots.

At these times, ordinary people (potentially) have enormous power – “their ability to disrupt institutionalized cooperation that depends on their continuing contributions.” Key is that great reforms in history have been “responses to the threatened (or use of) disruptive power.” In the US, it achieved representative government, ending slavery, the right to organize, social welfare and civil rights. Grassroots bottom-up “disruptive power” produced them.

But it takes more than marches, rallies, slogans, shouting or even violence. It’s also too simplistic to think power from below is there for the taking. Actualizing power depends on the ability to withhold cooperation. But it’s not “actionable” until certain problems are solved:

- recognizing interdependence and the potential power from below such as workers withholding their labor or wives their domestic services;
- the necessity of people breaking rules; rules are power strategies; they allow some people to dominate others, establish property rights, become law, and so forth;
- individuals must coordinate their disruptive power for strategic advantage;
- they must overcome constraints of an entire matrix of social relations; examples are the influence of family ties or the threat of religious excommunication;
- disruptive power must be sustained, cooperation withheld, and be able to withstand

whatever reprisals occur; and

— the determination to stay the course in the wake of threats and uncertainty – employers who may hire scabs or relocate their plants and facilities.

New strategies aren't invented for each challenge. They're "embedded in memory or culture, in a language of resistance (and) become a 'repertoire' (of a) specific constellation of strategies to actualize interdependent power." New repertoires from below are developed in response to social and economic change. They become "forged in a political process of action and reaction." Popular struggles change over time, so, for example, food riots became rare and strike actions typical. However, they're now threatened with weakened labor protections, the growth of temporary workers, and the ability of employers to operate anywhere in the world under WTO rules.

Slowly over time, new repertoires emerge to respond to conditions of the times. Lessons are learned from defeat, anger and defiance builds, and creative imagination invents new solutions to old problems.

The Mob and the State – Disruptive Power and the Construction of American Electoral-Representative Arrangements

Disorderly and defiant crowds or mobs figure prominently in the history of disruptive movements. They played an important role in the Revolutionary War period and years leading up to it. American elites allied with mobs because they grew uneasy about British rule and developed radical ideas about the right of the colonies to self-government. Without mob support, the war with England couldn't have been won. They provided the troops who fought it.

Most colonists were from England, and by the mid-1700s numbered around 1.6 million. Most had egalitarian ideas and were ordinary people – artisans, apprentices, sailors, laborers, urban poor, farmers, bonded servants, and so forth. They also relied on mob action for results.

In the pre-revolutionary period, "riots and tumults" were commonplace. Bacon's 1676 Rebellion of discontented frontiersmen and slaves was the first one of note. In the next 100 years, another 18 uprisings erupted (according to Howard Zinn) against colonial governments along with six black rebellions and 40 riots.

Tensions grew as the years passed. They challenged Britain and colonial elites. Inequalities also increased, and they spawned protests against them. One study cited 150 riots in cities and rural areas between 1765 and 1769. In addition, merchants and landowners grew angry with the Crown. In 1763, it sent a standing army to the colonies, introduced new taxes, made demands to billet British troops and to curb colonial assemblies' power. It introduced the Sugar Act, Tea Act and a new Stamp Act. Colonists resisted and mob action was crucial.

They made Stamp Act enforcement impossible and dumped tea into more than one harbor to prove it, besides the notable December 16, 1773 Boston action. Historian Edward Countryman called it the "final rupture" leading up to war. Those who took up arms wanted popular democracy, and it affected the post-revolutionary drafting of state constitutions. They reflected "egalitarian and libertarian ideas that were spreading up and down the eastern seaboard." They wanted popular liberty and drafted laws that limited executive

powers, established unicameral legislatures or at least powerful lower houses, short terms of office to force elected officials to face voters more often, and essentially make government accountable to the people.

It alarmed the nation's elites who, in turn, precipitated efforts to reform the new state constitutions and reign in their democratic excesses. Defeating England unleashed electorate demands, and they showed up in popular rebellions. They were fueled by postwar depression, debt, and legislative imposition of poll and property taxes on farmers. They petitioned for relief, got none, so armed mobs closed the courts to stop debtor suits and stave off foreclosure on their farms. Rebellions spread across New England with Daniel Shays leading the most famous one in 1786 and 1787. The rebels were dispersed, but they got amnesty, tax relief, and most imprisoned debtors were released.

Elites were alarmed, excess democracy had to be curbed, and the 1787 Constitutional Convention became the way to do it. There were other problems as well. The Articles of Confederation were unwieldy, had to be replaced, and a new document was needed that would last into "remote futurity" to serve the interests of "the (only) people" who mattered. They were established white male property owning delegates and members of state conventions who rammed the ratification process through in the face of a largely indifferent and uncomprehending populace left out entirely.

The challenge was to offer democratic concessions, create an appearance of democracy, but frame a document for rich property owners in charge of the process for their own self-interest. Only the privileged could vote. Women, blacks, Indians and children couldn't and most who qualified didn't bother. The process, and what it produced, showed operatively democracy is little more than fantasy, but it wasn't designed to appear that way.

The "people" got to elect lower house members, who, in turn, elected senators to the upper chamber. The system stayed that way until the 17th Amendment (ratified in 1913) allowed voters in each state to elect representatives to both Houses of Congress.

Also proposed was a chief executive, a national judiciary with a Supreme Court, and provisions for admitting new states with republican governments. In addition, the Constitution had procedures for amendments and much more, including terms of office and staggered elections to prevent too many officials being unseated at the same time. In the end, the final product was a bundle of compromises, yielded little of substance to "the people," and assured power was left to the powerful.

The Constitution's opening words were "We the people," but, in fact, they were nowhere in sight. The framers "engineered a conservative counter-revolution....whose purpose....was to thwart the will of the people in whose will they acted." Government under the new document was created to fill the vacuum created by the defeat of Great Britain. It restored the essential British commercial and financial system and put it under new management. Monarchal wrappings were removed, everything changed, and yet everything, in fact, stayed the same. Rarely, if ever, was there so much rebellion with so little cause, and with so little to show for it.

Consider the Constitution's crowing achievement, at least so we're told - the Bill of Rights. Adopting them made the difference to get 13 states to ratify the document and make it law. Their protections weren't for "the people." They were for the privileged who wanted:

- prohibitions against quartering troops in their property;
- unreasonable searches and seizures there as well;
- the right to have state militias protect them;
- the right to bear arms, but not the way the Second Amendment is today interpreted;
- - the rights of free speech, the press, religion, assembly and petition - largely for the monied and propertied interests;
- due process of law with speedy public trials; and
- various other provisions worked out through compromise; two additional amendments were proposed but rejected; Jefferson and Madison wanted them; Adams and Hamilton were opposed; they would have banned monopolies and standing armies; in the end, the first 10 alone were adopted; we never saw what difference the other two might have made.

Piven's main point isn't that "constitution-making" limited "popular power." It's that "disruptive power challenges (of the time) could not be (entirely) ignored...." The founders established a republican government, popular liberties (to a degree) were conceded, and the idea (if not the reality) of the "consent of the governed" became a fundamental principle of political thought.

Further, in subsequent decades, suffrage expanded, taxpaying requirements replaced property ones, and these, too, were gradually eliminated. By the 1830s, most white men had the right to vote. It's unlikely these changes would have happened under British rule. So while there was no disagreement on how government was to be run, (in John Adams' words, by "the rich, the well born, and the able,") the mob, according to Piven, "played a large if convoluted role in the construction of a new state with at least some of the elemental features of democracy."

Dissensus Politics, or the Interaction of Disruptive Challenges with Electoral Politics - The Case of the Abolitionist Movement

Piven defines "dissensus" as a tug of war between the need for political leaders to "mobilize majorities" and "disruptive challengers work(ing) to fragment them." She also calls this "the key to understanding" disruptive protest power over public policy decisions. Political coalitions are at times fragile and vulnerable. When opposition to consensus surfaces and builds, it can be fractious, disruptive, and an "opening (to get) policy concessions on the (breakaway) movement's issues."

Case in point - "Abolitionism." By one estimate, free blacks numbered around 59,000 in 1790. By the start of the Civil War, the total had increased eightfold to about 488,000. In the run-up to the Revolutionary War, slavery issues were contentious with hints early on about what later might develop.

In spite of owning slaves himself, Jefferson's first Declaration of Independence draft included grievances against the Crown's involvement in trafficking. Southern representatives took issue, the clause was dropped, and to build postwar consensus the South had to be reassured that their slave system would remain intact.

It led to Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3 of the Constitution saying that slaves would be counted as three-fifths of a person for purposes of allocating congressional representation. According to historian Gary Wills: For southern states, this issue was “a nonnegotiable condition for their joining the Union” and with it they got “a large and domineering representation in Congress.”

Consider some other relevant facts:

- large slave owners had disproportionate power; they controlled state legislatures and selected senators;
- most American presidents until the Civil War were southerners and slaveholders (including Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and Jackson);
- the first US 1790 census reported 757,000 blacks or nearly one-fifth of the total four million population;
- in 1807, Congress outlawed the importation of African slaves after 1808, yet trafficking illegally brought in another 250,000 until 1860;
- enacted slavery provisions were for the North as well as the South; only Pennsylvania and the New England states outlawed the practice; in 1787, most states were slave states, and the new Constitution protected their holdings;
- intersectional planter, commercial, banking and manufacturing interests tied the North and South together; slavery and cotton enriched the South, production boomed, and northern manufacturing also benefitted;
- the human bondage system affected radical abolitionists; they knew that ending slavery meant “overturning” the Constitution;
- to accommodate consensus politics, compromise was preferable to conflict; to protect the South from the majority nonslave North, “balanced” admission of new slave and free states was agreed on as well as a similar arrangement for presidential and vice-presidential tickets;
- nonetheless, compromises were fragile and sectional conflicts arose; one instance was over the Mexican War, annexation of Texas, and disposition of 650,000 square miles of new territory; neither side was satisfied even though compromise was achievable on matters of tariffs, centralized banking, internal improvements, and free western land.

Given the enormous costs of dissolution, why weren’t both sides committed to preventing it? Piven cites “the strident and disruptive abolitionist campaign with its demands for immediate emancipation. Abolitionism fractured....the sectional accord” that held disparate elements together – until 1860.

Who were the abolitionists? According to Howard Zinn, they were “editors, orators, run-away slaves, free Negro militants, and gun-toting preachers.” Together they “shaped....the movement and contributed to its disruptive power.” Its effects fractured intersectional parties, divided the nation, and led to the Civil War and legal emancipation.

“Evangelical revivalists” were committed to reform. They believed slavery was sinful, and

would accept nothing less than ending it. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison founded *The Liberator*. It became the voice of militant abolitionism. "Garrison was no gradualist." He refused compromise and demanded "immediate and unconditional emancipation."

Others were equally committed. They formed antislavery associations, edited papers, spoke publicly, and by 1841 claimed 200,000 members. Religious passion and enlightenment fervor spread throughout the North. In the South, it was opposed by "Southern rights" societies that used the Bible to claim "slavery fulfilled God's purposes." It produced schisms and strife, got Garrison paraded through Boston with a rope around his neck, and vigilante welcoming committees awaited northern abolitionists coming south.

Nonetheless, abolitionism grew, congressional antislavery petitions mounted, Congress claimed no authority to act, and thousands of slaves took matters into their own hands. They resisted by "evasion, sabotage, suicide, or running away." There were also slave revolts – in 1800 in a march on Richmond; 1811 on a plantation near New Orleans; 1817 and 1818 in Florida; and Nat Turner and 70 other slaves in Virginia "kill(ing) all whites" and sparing no one.

Most disruptive was the Underground Railway with whites and free blacks involved. It defied federal antifugitive laws and freed tens of thousands of southern slaves. Abolitionist disruptions "inevitably penetrated electoral politics." It fragmented both parties, made compromise impossible, and led to the emergence of the Republican Party. It opposed expanding slavery as new states entered the union, and in 1860 got Abraham Lincoln elected president. His platform – containing slavery and condemning threats of disunion as treason.

The South responded. Seven states seceded, Fort Sumpter was attacked, the Civil War began, four more slave states joined the others, and Lincoln committed to war to restore the union. As conflict wore on, its horrific toll drove him toward emancipation. Piven notes that the "insurrectionary role of the slaves....was probably critical to his decision." During the war, hundreds of thousands of them refused to work, deserted plantations, and crippled the Confederacy's ability to feed itself. In addition, around 200,000 slaves fought with the North, and their numbers were significant in achieving victory.

Abolitionism grew, southern secession spurred it, and in January 1865 Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment banning slavery. Nominally, former slaves got more rights from the Fourteenth (due process and equal protection) and Fifteenth (forbidding racial discrimination in voting) Amendments as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1866.

"Abolitionists had triumphed," they did it through electoral politics by splitting the parties, yet their victory was limited. Post-emancipation, the movement "melted into the Republican Party," southern and northern leaders became accommodative, and elites in the South "moved rapidly to restore their control over blacks." Nonetheless, an impressive victory was won even if only marginally, and it would take another century before blacks got any of their constitutional rights.

Movements and Reform in the American Twentieth Century

Throughout American history, disruptive protests were common, yet rarely did any have a "big bang" effect. Decades elapsed between successful abolitionism and New Deal reforms. In the 20th century, Piven notes that almost all important labor, civil rights and social

welfare legislation got passed in just two six-year periods – 1933 – 1938 and 1963 – 1968. There was one exception – the 1972 Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for the elderly poor and people with disabilities.

Great Depression hard times spurred important reforms to provide emergency relief:

- the Civil Works Administration (CWA) for work relief; it reached 28 million people (22.2% of the population);

- overall social spending rose from 1.34% of GDP in 1932 to 5% by 1934 and showed that government works for the people when it wants to;

- the 1935 Social Security Act established the framework for all future income support programs – retirement benefits, unemployment, supplemental income, subsidized housing, and all categories of “welfare;”

- most entitlements expanded in the 1960s – old age pensions; unemployment insurance; quadrupling the numbers of women and children receiving Aid to Dependent Children; Medicare; Medicaid; new nutritional programs, including food stamps and school lunches; federal aid to education; and inner-city development through the Model Cities Act of 1966.

Overall in the 1960s, social spending rose from \$37 billion to \$140 billion in the post-1965 decade. By the mid-1970s, poverty levels were down from 20% in 1965 to 11%.

Each period also saw political rights expand. Mass strikes of the early 1930s produced the landmark 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). For the first time, it gave labor the right to bargain collectively on equal terms with management and provided legal protections to strike actions. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act established national minimum wages and maximum hours. These laws advanced worker rights over the next three decades.

In 1964, civil rights actions got the Twenty-Fourth Amendment passed. It prohibited poll taxes in federal elections, and along with the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act overrode state and local franchise restrictions that were in place in the South since Reconstruction. As Piven put it: The 1960s civil rights movement “finally won, a century later, the reforms first announced (but never gotten) in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.” In addition, the 1964 Equal Opportunity Act (antipoverty program) provided federal funds for poor communities.

Why these “big bangs” then and not at other times? It’s because they were gotten during periods of “mass disruption” that mobilized “interdependent power from below....” Veterans marched on Washington, rent strikes spread, people commandeered food, labor walkouts occurred, demonstrations demanded relief, so Roosevelt had to act. It wasn’t out of benevolence, and his 1932 platform showed it. It contained the same old 1920s planks that kept Republicans in power throughout the decade. Conditions now changed, disruptive protests demanded help, echoes of the 1917 Russian Revolution were still audible, so Roosevelt acted to save capitalism. He gave a little to save a lot for the privileged who understood the fragility of their position.

The 1960s saw other disruptive protests – this time by a massive black insurgency on one side against white southern “resistance” on the other. It came to a head in the mid-1960s in the form of civil disobedience. It began in the South, spread across the country, resulted in harsh police crackdowns, greater disruptive riots, and they forced the federal government to

intervene. Turbulence, social unrest, and a climate of general crisis produced reforms to diffuse the disorder of the times.

Electoral forces also played a role the way Piven explains. She calls the “interplay between electoral shifts and political leaders....the most influential explanation of twentieth-century policy change.” Big bangs were “big electoral” ones. Two credible hypotheses explain how they occur:

- the “mobilization” thesis (during hard times) raising the level of voter turnout; new voters are key; they provide impetus for realignment under this theory; and
- the “conversion” thesis (also during hard times) detaching voters from their traditional Republican Party affiliation; here shifting loyalties explain it.

Either way, political leaders respond, strive to win and/or hold their support, and they enacted social relief measures in the 1930s and 1960s.

More is in play as well as voters by themselves have little influence over policy. In addition, politicians need broad majorities, and building them takes avoiding conflict, building consensus and striking familiar appeals for prosperity, God, country and family. As a result, electoral shifts alone don’t automatically produce bold new initiatives. In fact, they rarely do unless special times produce extraordinary responses. In the 1930s and 1960s, disruptive protests and potential institutional disorder got Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson to act quite differently than they would have had conditions been normal.

Under the right circumstances, protest movements are powerful and provide the impetus for social reform. “The urgency, solidarity, and militancy that conflict generates lends movements distinctive capacities as political communicators.” At least for a brief time, “marches, rallies, strikes and shutdowns can break the monopoly on political discourse otherwise held by politicians and the mass media.” They can bring vital issues to the fore and get politicians (out of fear) to address them. Potential or actual “voter dissensus is the main source of movement influence on public policy.” It was true in the 1930s, again in the 1960s, and the latter victories inspired other movements for women’s rights, the disabled, gays, lesbians, and so forth.

The Times-In-Between

Unfortunately, disruptive movements are short-lived. After a few years they pass as politicians mount rollback initiatives when the pressure is off and they’re able to do it. New state constitutions stripped away hard-won abolitionist reforms. Labor rights underwent a gradual erosion after peaking in the 1930s. Union membership declined from a post-war 34.7% high. It was 16.8% after the Reagan era and is currently around 12% overall today but only 7.4% in the private sector.

Social gains have also eroded, and now have Democrats as much against them as Republicans. Why so is the question? It’s because protest movements lose their energy when the reasons causing them subside. Further, it’s because internal movement dynamics are hard to sustain. They wane from exhaustion. Exhilaration can’t last forever. In addition, defiance entails costs and sacrifice. Strikers lose wages. Workers get fired. Plants relocate, and governments support business and sometimes with force.

Protests also fade when gains are won. They always fall short and yet fail to embolden more

action. Movement leaders also get co-opted, become more conciliatory to management, get more enmeshed in party politics, and sometimes run for office at federal, state or local levels. Dissensus has its limits. Inevitably, gains come at the expense of concessions, the movement runs out of energy, disruption ebbs, and hard-won reforms get rolled back. Nonetheless, these are glorious times in our history, momentous advances get achieved, and the lesson is that at other times for other reasons it can happen again.

People in large numbers and with enough will have enormous power provided they use it. Nonetheless, it's disconcerting that the Constitution was designed as a conservative document to protect what Michael Parenti calls "a rising bourgeoisie('s)" freedom to "invest, speculate, trade, and accumulate," and to assure that (as John Jay believed) "The people who own the country (ought) to run it."

After Reconstruction, Abolitionists lost out as well. Southern states regrouped, enacted new laws, and curbed the rights of newly freed blacks. The old planter class was gone but not its mentality. A new capitalist planter class replaced it, many from the North, and it proved easy for them to devise new ways to exploit cheap, vulnerable black labor.

The Supreme Court went along much the way it does today. In a number of decisions, it rolled back civil rights gains, including enough of the Fourteenth Amendment to restore near-total white supremacy in the South. Its 1896 "separate but equal" Plessy ruling added insult to its 1857 Dred Scott support for slavery.

Post-war, blacks were nominally free but light years from equality, and southern states intended to keep it that way. Property tests, poll taxes and literacy qualifications were imposed to enforce disenfranchisement. Jim Crow laws multiplied and lynchings became a way of life. Washington was dismissive.

Labor also lost out in the post-New Deal years. What the NLRA gave, Taft-Hartley and other regressive laws took back. Labor got progressively weaker, its leadership became part of the problem, while business ascended to omnipotence with plenty of friendly governments on its side. Early on, workers hoped the Democrat Party would represent them. How could it in the conservative (anti-labor) South and, in the North, where big city bosses ran things. Over time, business took over and effectively created a one-party state with "two right wings," as Gore Vidal explains.

Post-WW II, Piven notes that America's economic dominance was unchallenged for 25 years, so business opposition to New Deal gains was largely muted. But once Europe and Japan recovered, they became formidable competitors, profit margins got squeezed, and a conservative counterassault gained momentum to roll back earlier social gains. Piven cites four ways:

- a "war of ideas" beginning in the early 1970s with the formation of a right wing "message machine" – corporate-funded think tanks like Cato, Hoover, Heritage and AEI; they preached cutting social programs, weakening unions, ending costly regulations, military spending, tough law enforcement, privatizing everything, and using the dominant media for propaganda;

- building up a business lobbying capacity; "K Street" became a household term, and so is the "revolving door" arrangement between business and government;

— the growth of right wing populism, “rooted in fundamentalist churches” as part of the powerful Christian Right; also pro-life, defense-of-marriage and gun groups, along with others opposed to progressive ideas, racial and sexual liberalism, and the notion that public welfare is a good thing and government ought to provide it; in their best of all possible worlds, markets work best so let them, and democracy is only for the privileged; and

— the effective merging of Republicans and Democrats into one pro-business party with each pretty much vying to outdo or outfox the other; it took Democrat Bill Clinton to “end welfare as we know it,” continue shifting more of the tax burden from the rich to workers, enact tough law enforcement measures, offer big giveaways to business, cut social benefits as much as Republicans, and pretty much make the 1990s a new golden age for Wall Street and the privileged. James Petras calls the decade “the golden age of pillage.”

George Bush then took over and went Clinton whole new measures better – declaring open warfare on workers, waging real wars on the world, enacting repressive police state laws, surrendering unconditionally to business, smashing every social service in sight, desecrating the environment, pretty much acting as despotic and vicious as the worst third world dictators, and getting away with it.

Since the early 1970s, and especially since Ronald Reagan, most notable in Piven’s mind is “the striking rise in wealth and income inequality” that economist Paul Krugman calls “unprecedented.” Moreover, “as wealth concentration grows, so does the arrogance and power that it yields to the wealth-holders to continue to bend government policies to their own interests.”

With business so omnipotent, government as its handmaiden, the scale of corruption extreme, the electoral process so flawed, it makes the task of redressing social gains lost formidable but not impossible.

Epilogue

Given the state of things, Piven poses the essential question – is another “popular upheaval” possible? She calls this “the big question for our time.” Nothing is certain or simple, but historically “hardship propels people to collective defiance,” especially in times of extreme inequalities of wealth. The current American era is the most extreme ever, so how long will people tolerate the decline in their standard of living as the rich grow richer and multi-billions go wars without end.

How does the Bush administration respond – with a dominant media “message machine” touting an “ownership society,” scaring people to accept the outlandish and fraudulent “war on terror,” blaming victims for their own misfortune, letting (Christian) faith-based groups take over welfare, preaching God and markets solve everything, and calling a lack of patriotism the equivalent of treason.

Piven, nonetheless, is hopeful. Independent polls show Bush’s approval at record lows as well as a large majority opposing the Iraq war. In addition, she sees “an intimate connection between what people think is possible in politics and what they think is right.” Popular aspirations tend to rise for what people believe is “evident” and “reach(able).”

So she asks: “What, then, are the prospects for the emergence of new social movements that mobilize disruptive power?” Global justice demonstrations in Seattle and around the

world aren't enough. Much more is needed. Labor must become resurgent, but it's no simple matter doing it and without committed leadership impossible.

Yet it happened in the 1930s at a time of great need, and Piven suggests that "Maybe workers need to see the possibility of worker power again." Activists and organizers must concentrate on "developing and demonstrating power strategies" for a "new economy" that's increasingly service-based, high-tech and global.

Millions still live here, their standard of living is declining, business pretty much has it all, and it's high time that changed. People have power but only if they use it. New times need "new forms of political action, new 'repertoires' that extend across borders and tap the chokepoints of new systems of production (and governance)" where they're most vulnerable to mass disruption.

Piven closes by saying that history shows that "collective defiance" and its subsequent "disruption" have "always been essential to the preservation of democracy." It's no different today than it's ever been, and that's an idea to build on.

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