



# Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail

*Frances Fox Piven , Richard A. Cloward*

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**Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail** Frances Fox Piven , Richard A. Cloward  
Have the poor fared best by participating in conventional electoral politics or by engaging in mass defiance and disruption? The authors of the classic *Regulating The Poor* assess the successes and failures of these two strategies as they examine, in this provocative study, four protest movements of lower-class groups in 20th century America:

- The mobilization of the unemployed during the Great Depression that gave rise to the Workers' Alliance of America
- The industrial strikes that resulted in the formation of the CIO
- The Southern Civil Rights Movement
- The movement of welfare recipients led by the National Welfare Rights Organization.

## Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail Details

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# From Reader Review Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail for online ebook

## Mark says

Had a hard time getting into this book, but it was worth it in the end. I would actually recommend that potential readers read Howard Zinn's People's History of The United States first, as this would provide a good background. The conclusions drawn from the inter-war industrial strikes were a welcome surprise and the argument concerning the Civil Rights movement similarly new for me, as well as convincing. Finally, the final chapter on the National Welfare Rights Organization was unlike anything I have read before!

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## Alex says

a very instructive history of 20th century social movements - specifically, the unemployed movement of the Great Depression, the industrial workers' movement of the 30s, the civil rights movement, and the welfare rights' movement of the late 60s.

Piven's argument is that movements succeed through disruption (direct action). disruption causes elites to have to appease movements with reforms, whereas negotiating, lobbying, or other tactics are more easily ignored. Piven also contrasts disruption with attempts to build "organization", which is presented as the bugaboo. what is meant by "organization" is hierarchy and bureaucracy. movements that fell into hierarchical institutional patterns, such as the ones highlighted in this survey, generally became co-opted by the system and lost their radical edges. consequently, they were no longer able (or interested) to make real change happen, and became more about managing constituencies. the classic case is the labor movement, where labor leaders became another part of the restraining apparatus against workers' militancy.

however, i bristle at the sweeping attack on "organization" itself. does Frances Fox Piven know nothing of nonhierarchical, directly democratic organizing? surely she isn't so inexperienced. instead, the book reads as an overreaction against the insanely hierarchical and bureaucratic National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), which Piven and Cloward were heavily involved in until the 70s, when this book was written. it's as if their experience there left such a bad taste in their mouths that any positive associations with genuinely radical, democratic organizations such as the IWW, SNCC, or SDS, were tainted in their minds and no longer worth considering.

in summary, if one substitutes the words "hierarchical/top-down organization" for the overly broad "organization" found throughout the book, this actually becomes a very helpful summary of where some key movements in the 20th century made huge inroads, only to become part of the system they originally set out to topple.

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## Emily Alvarado says

This text is amazing. Surprisingly radical--- its a marxist based analysis of social movements.....very pragmatic with historical examples and extremely well synthesized theories of how political movements succeed/fail

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### **Just A. Bean says**

I learned so much reading this book. It was a bit technical, and tended to repetitive, but really worth the time if you're into mid 20th-century history, or the history of mass movements. Very well thought out, organised and insightful.

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### **cory says**

Written by veterans of the welfare rights movement, this book analyzes four mass movements in U.S. history in the 1930's and 1960's and draws interesting conclusions about the reasons behind their successes and failures. I don't agree with all the conclusions, but it's definitely food for thought, echoing some themes of "The Revolution Will Not Be Funded."

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### **Steven Peterson says**

This is another work by the authors of "Regulating the Poor." It probes the question of why poor people's movements succeed--and fail. The authors develop four case studies, representing the Great Depression Era and the post-war time frame. When can mass defiance work? Piven and Cloward do a nice job in trying to explain that.

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### **stephanie says**

absolutely brilliant account of social movements, social theory, and how politics plays its part - looking at how people try to affect the system from the outside. her assessment of power is smart, clear, and well-written, and she never shies from saying that as citizens we should be doing more. piven is the type of person when i think of "patriot", and i mean that as a compliment. it's an astounding work of social criticism and in the end, hope.

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### **Brandon Wu says**

Compelling and persuasive, but also depressing and kind of disempowering - Piven and Cloward's classic study of how marginalized people in the United States succeed and fail at mobilizing for social change holds up to scrutiny 35 years after its publication. Interestingly, I've heard that today, Piven is somewhat less intensely structural, and is more focused on agency and relational power. That makes me want to read her more recent work, as Poor People's Movements is extremely well-argued but very much a downer for anyone interested in actively organizing for change.

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## **Drick says**

This is a classic in the study of social movements. The authors were scholar activists in the 1960's and 1970's who looked at the ways poor people's movements in the 1920's and 1960's were able to make significant gains, but then also lost momentum and saw some of those gains retrenched by the ruling elites. Essentially, the authors posit that the greatest resource that poor and working class people have to initiate change is the capacity to gather large groups of people to create social disruption. From the authors' perspective, when these movements gained some social and political legitimacy they were easily incorporated and derailed by the ruling bureaucracy and those lost some of their power to continue to make change and maintain changes that had been won.

In light of last fall's Occupy Wall St occupations around the country, the authors raise interesting questions as to whether significant social and political change can be achieved through working in the system or if in fact disruptions and chaos may be necessary to get power elites to listen and act.

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## **Cait • A Page with a View says**

It's been about 8 years since I read this, but I've always referred back to a lot of what it said while watching various social movements unfold. Some parts of the text are a bit dry and it's not the most entertaining read, but it's definitely applicable.

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## **Stas says**

Unfortunately, i didn't know about Poor People's Movements (1977), until Glenn Beck branded Piven a dangerous radical. Having just read Piven's introduction to the paperback edition of her book, I actually see why Beck would choose her book to lash out against. Her thesis is that worker "organizations endure, in short, by abandoning their oppositional politics", that concessions made by the elites are a response not to the organizational strength of the movements, but to the chaotic, mass disturbances of the actions of the crowds and masses of workers. Organizations only come on the scene as a result of spontaneous mass mobilizations, and they stay and grow less because they harnessed and continue to rely on the masses, then because they are co-opted by the elites to become a stabilizing factor.

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## **Jacob says**

Interesting read. Probably the only people (that I am aware of) to suggest that the civil rights movement could possibly be considered a failure, in one respect.

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## **Ysa says**

Both academics and activists who were involved in the organizing of the Welfare Rights Movement of the

1960s, authors Piven and Cloward talk the talk and walk the walk. Their thesis is simple: the most concessions can be won from power through spontaneous, local and direct economic disruption, rather than through building formal bureaucratic organization and lobbying in the federal government. The effectiveness of a direct local tactic lies in its ability to create local political/financial strain and transform local and state politicians into lobbyists for their demands. As their historical investigation of four major American social movements show, this is not merely an outlaw romanticism, but a material necessity if any gains are to be made. From disruption in relief offices during the Great Depression, to sit-down strikes in industrial workplaces, to strategic provocation of violence in the pacifist Civil Rights demonstrations, P&C explore the most and least effective movement strategies employed throughout the 20th century. Finally they analyze the Welfare Rights Movement's effectiveness based largely on their own direct experience and observations. Such a rigorous and important book for activists, aspiring or current.

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### **C. Scott says**

I found this book a little like eating a plate full of spinach every day for lunch. You know it's good for you, but that sure doesn't make you look forward to reading it. That said, there is a lot of good information here. I kind of had to check some of my assumptions about how movements accomplish their goals. Overall I learned a lot.

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### **Dana Sweeney says**

An extremely compelling sociological / historical view of social movements in the United States. Piven and Cloward are convincing contrarian thinkers whose critiques of the typical "community organizing" model are necessary and historically grounded. This work challenges me to think very differently about how communities can (and often cannot) leverage significant social change. It is extremely well-researched, tactically and strategically valuable, and productively discomforting.

All of that being said, it reads like a brick. Reading this book is work. On the upside, some sections are useful in case of insomnia.

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