

## A Conversation with Frances Fox Piven

*Q: Prof. Piven, you were one of the most prominent supporters of Ralph Nader's last campaign. What do you think of him now and how do you explain his stubborn perseverance during this election?*

**Piven:** Well, I'm very disappointed in his persistence. I don't understand it. I find it completely puzzling. I do think that he is a great man. I thought at the beginning of this campaign that he would, as he said himself, he would pull out. But he hasn't pulled out. I do think that early in the 2000 campaign he said that he would pull out because of the contested states and he didn't. And so I suspect that the explanation is in some aspects of his personality that are not transparent to me. I was a member of a large group of his more prominent supporters who joined together in a public statement asking him to pull out.

*Q: What would it mean for American social movements if, either Kerry or Bush were to win in November?*

**Piven:** Well, some people think that if Bush wins it will energize social movements because his policies are so provocative and they're so transgressive. They violate so many American values and they violate so many groups of the American public. I think that that's wrong—that it's too simplistic. That's the sort of theory that says the worse things are, the more likely people are to rise up in anger and defiance. I think that what makes people rise up is hope and a sense that they can have influence; that if things are very bad people become despairing and fatalistic and they withdraw.

I think that American history provides ample evidence of that. So, one of the reasons, not the *only* reason, but one of the reasons that I really do hope Kerry wins—although I don't think it looks good—is that he will create a political environment which will encourage social movements. And not so much because he shares their goals, because he doesn't, he's not as distant from their goals as is Bush, but he doesn't share their goals. But, because people will understand—women, poor people, blacks, gays, workers—will all understand that the Kerry coalition is vulnerable to their

appeals. That the elements in the Kerry coalition will respond to the issues that they raise.

*Q: Even though the Democratic Party is seemingly drifting to the right?*

**Piven:** Yeah, but it's drifting to the right, I think, partly because there are no social movements pulling it back to the left and democratic politicians have tried to suppress social movements. Bill Clinton was very skillful at this, making people feel like he was going to be nice to them and charming to them but he wasn't really going to press their issues. But the fact of the matter is that if Bill Clinton had confronted a vigorous, defiant, noisy, troublesome, ungovernable social movement he would have had to change his policy. And I think the same is true of Kerry and people are more likely to figure that out with Kerry than with Bill Clinton.

*Q: So what social movements do you think right now would be best positioned to put pressure on a Kerry administration if Kerry were to win?*

**Piven:** Well, I think that, we haven't heard very much, for a very long time, from low-wage workers. And, they may organize under different identities. They may organize as people of color, for instance. A lot of the labor activism of the last ten or fifteen years, has been, under these dual identities. They've been workers, but they were clearly minorities and immigrant minorities. And, I think that's one promising possibility and one that is desperately needed because these people have fallen so far behind in the last thirty years or so. I also think that the peace movement has huge possibilities. Kerry is not going to get out of Iraq, if he can help it, because that would just make too many waves. He won't even exert himself to try to create the international authority that would permit the United States to withdraw from Iraq. But he *will* if there's a vigorous peace movement. And a vigorous peace movement, who is it going to arouse, provoke? Well, I think women, and around the old feminist issues as well as the economic issues that affect women so much because women are a big chunk of that low-wage, working class strata. The inroads that have been made on women's reproductive rights, if women were to mobilize about those issues Kerry would be extremely vulnerable.

*Q: So, you'd see almost a shadowing of the concerns and movements of the 60's, the minority low-wage workers, women, and the peace movement.*

**Piven:** Yes, the peace movement, and, well the global justice movement. Although, I think it's hard now to disentangle the peace movement from the global justice movement because there's so much overlap between them. But certainly, that could also become an arena for activism, trade policy for example. And you know, especially, American agriculture subsidy policies which are so outrageous—policies that are starving the cotton-producing countries of the Southern hemisphere, for example.

*Q: And how do you see the difference between Kerry and Bush with respect to the welfare state?*

**Piven:** Oh there's a big difference. It's not as big a difference as I'd like to declare, but it's a big difference. The Bush administration has been almost incomprehensibly mean-spirited in a lot of its regulatory initiatives. For example, in the area of social policy: cutting out programs, small programs, for the most blighted groups. Kerry would never do this kind of thing. This is a little nutty almost, this is a little "Texas." Take the Medicare prescription drug act of 2003. This is so bad, and at the time it was hard to know how bad it was going to be and it's only been a year or so since it was passed. And the official federal agencies, the General Accounting Office, has begun to reveal what is happening as a result of the privatization, that the act, provides for or gives incentives for or what the real cost of the act is.

Or in the way in which the Bush administration actually took funds from a program called C.H.I.P., which is the Child Health Insurance Program. It has a kind of pathetic, ironic history because it was initiated under Clinton and it was Clinton's way of trying to make up for what he had done in welfare reform. So, he expanded Medicaid for poor children and Bush has actually taken those funds and re-directed them. His welfare reform proposals would put women on welfare who worked for a full 40 hours a week, without increasing any funds for child care. To say nothing of the marriage madness that is part of that proposal.

The other thing the Bush administration is doing that's weird, but it's frightening, because it speaks to sort of a larger direction that they're taking is all the funds that are being channeled to faith-based organizations for the delivery of social services. They're basically creating a big patronage operation at the heart of the left in the United States because so many of these service-giving organizations—in other words, the churches that are going to get the money—are going to be in the Black and Spanish communities. But, it speaks to a kind of larger politics that they're trying to construct, and, with some success. They're looking in the direction of authoritarian populism. And it's the large role of the church, it's the theatrics that they're so good at, it's the guise of trickster in the center of American politics. Everybody knows that the charges in the CBS memoranda were true, but they were embedded in fake documents. Well, who did that, Karl Rove maybe? And they will work hard to steal the election I think.

*Q: So Bush is more draconian, but is one simply more draconian than the other or is this a broader agenda?*

**Piven:** Well, in the first place, that's a difference. Being harsher, meaner, more cruel, wanting more inequality, those are real differences. So, you know, I'm always in favor of the lesser evil. So, I think there are other substantive differences that have to, that really matter. One is that Kerry will restore multi-lateral relations internationally and what Bush has done is very, very dangerous.

*Q: Alright, well let's start with the lesser evil.*

**Piven:** Well, all right, look, multi-lateral relations. That's clearly important. It's not that the United States wasn't an imperial power when we had decent relations with other countries. But, this kind of militaristic intervention is worse and more dangerous. We did military intervention before too, but not on a big scale, not blowing up thousands and thousands of people, at least not since Vietnam.

Also, if Bush wins, they will have succeeded in eradicating the so-called Vietnam syndrome.

*Q: Which is...*

**Piven:** Which is what the right has been very distressed about. The unwillingness of either the American army or the American people to go to war because the war in Vietnam turned out so badly. And the American army is willing to go to Grenada but that isn't exactly a big test of military power. And even now there's a lot of disagreement in the military about this war. So they want to stamp out with a great military victory a middling sized country—the Vietnam syndrome is simply the unwillingness of Americans to use military power against peoples elsewhere. And I would like to see the Vietnam syndrome revived. And that's in a way what's at stake here. Because if it is revived, that means then it's going to be very hard for future American governments to use this scale of military power abroad.

Then also the civil liberties issues are real, they are real. And they're going to be, it's going to get much, much worse if Bush wins. The Bush administration and the Congressional Republicans have responded to the 9/11 report's recommendations with another Patriot Act, and making this one much more draconian. And this kind of stuff is very serious.

*Q: So would it be too much to characterize all of this—as some others on the left have of late—as a kind of neo-fascism emerging on the horizon?*

**Piven:** Well, I prefer the term “authoritarian populism,” because I think fascist regimes are really total institutions where everything is monitored. But I would predict that you and I would be able to jabber on through a second Bush administration. You'll be able to publish *Logos*, I'll be able to teach my classes, we'll be indignant, dadadadada, because it's the kind of regime that can tolerate a fair amount of insignificant dissent.

And I think the neo-cons are in trouble if he wins. The neo-cons are actually in trouble already because they're fervent arguments for aggression were stupid, so I think that people like Richard Pearl are in some trouble. But on the other hand, you know, the neo-cons have been serving an important function for the American military. They do have that base.

*Q: Let's talk about social movements again for a minute. Do you see any kind of new strategies for social movements? Are the movements of the 1960s still the model of today? If not what are the new strategies?*

**Piven:** Well, there really is a huge difference and a big change and I think it's clearest in the infrastructure of the movement. The internal organization of the movement is completely different. Now, some of what we see now was beginning in the 1960s but people didn't recognize it, and they often always argued against it, they scorned it. And that is, a much more horizontal, laterally organized, but roughly coordinated action. They still, and even though that was what was happening with some of the movements in the 1960s or was beginning to happen, people still thought in terms of the 1960s organizational model. But now, none of the movements, excepting the ones that are really just organizations, none of the movements employ that model. I think that this is a huge advantage, this flexibility and the methods of horizontal coordination that have thrived along, of course, with the new mode of communication, which is the internet. But the idea that movements should be organized this way preceded the Internet, actually. A lot of what was going on in SDS where people would sit around for hours, nights, days because they didn't want a hierarchical decision making process. A lot of it, I think, was people trying to figure out new organizational models for the movement. But the arrival of the Internet gave it a really big boost.

*Q: So what do you see as the most important salient issues that the left has to put on the table after this election, irrespective of the way this works out. What are the most important things that the left in general, not just social movements, but intellectuals and activists, what are the most important things confronting the left?*

**Piven:** American militarism; or you can put it another way, saying there needs to be a restoration of some kind of legal world order; and inequality in the United States. I think those are the two big, overarching issues.

*Q: What do you see as being the most important issue when it comes to the domestic impact of the war on terror and its seemingly unending status?*

**Piven:** Well, I suppose the stupid faction of the American electorate. The people are afraid and they're voting for this cowboy who says grunt-like things and it's a very serious problem.

*Q: Well this brings us to another question, which is that Karl Rove has said that, he's changing strategies with the Bush campaign: he has said that they will not reach out for the middle five percent but rather mobilize the conservative base. If that's what the Right is doing, what are the democrats doing to mobilize their base?*

**Piven:** Well, the democrats are saying that too—or some democrats are anyway—that we're going to mobilize the base. And maybe they are, it's very hard to tell. Because they've said it before, and the Republicans have said it before. They're talking about mobilizing their base but they have for twenty-five years been claiming that they have mobilized their base. That they have done voter registration in every fundamentalist church, and every little church has their voter guides and they've been saying that they've done this already and now they're saying that they're going to do it, which suggests that they didn't do it so well before.

The democrats also have the—not so much the Democratic Party—but the sort of broad left, has also worked to mobilize the base before. In 1984 there was a big voter registration effort and they did have a definite impact on turnout—turnout was up in 1984 but not nearly as much as you would think if you listened to the claims that all the different groups that were working it and doing it made and you would think that. Now, the *New York Times* reported recently about how voter registration is really surging, especially in battleground states. Now that's based in looking at the statewide voter databases. So, probably, something is happening. That's very encouraging. If Kerry wins by the way, that's how he's going to win. He is not going to win with the swing voters. The Bush people, I think will succeed there—they're much more skilled at propaganda, at dirty propaganda, than the Democrats are and the Bush people I think will succeed with the swing voters, in that contest. But in the contest for the base it's possible that Kerry could win.

*Q: But is the Democratic base mobilized at all?*

**Piven:** Well if they've been registered to vote, that's one level of mobilization. It's not very intense, which is what your question implies. I think they'll probably go out to vote though, especially because the voter registration efforts are always parallel or partnered with "get out the vote" efforts. But you know in Florida, in 2000, the surge in black turnout was enormous because African Americans were so angry at Jeb Bush because of the affirmative action positions that he took. And the Republican machine really did keep them away from the polls. Every which way, the felon list, but also the roadblocks.

*Q: Will Ohio become another Florida, will they do that there this time around too?*

**Piven:** They can do it anywhere. There are a number of other states in which Republican Secretaries of State have assumed positions in the Bush campaign as Katherine Harris did in Florida. And, you know, we have a tendency—political scientists do this—but I think a lot of people do this as well: we know that there are a lot of problems in the electoral process, but nobody likes the uncertainty and disorientating confusion that acknowledging all of those flaws in the electoral process creates. So we tend to treat it as always marginal. Well it's not necessarily marginal. In a closely divided electorate such as we have today, these multiple forms of fraud against voters—it shouldn't be called "voter fraud" by the way, because almost no voters want to commit fraud. They don't even want to vote once, much less twice. Fraud against voters can really matter; they can really turn an election. And the fact that we now have computer voting without any verifiable audit makes it worse.

*Q: I want to ask you a question about something that came up before when you spoke about republicans mobilizing their base. And I'm thinking of people like Richard Viguerie here—were there right wing social movements of this grassroots type that were reacting to liberalism or the left legacy of the 60s and what was their significance?*

**Piven:** Yes, I think there were a series of right wing movements or you could call it all one movement. There were serious movements in the 1960s. It's much more illuminating to refer to the anti-war movement and the black movement, and the poverty movement, and the women's movement. In a similar way, I think you can distinguish between the

different movements that energized the right and they were largely business oriented. And those movements include the sex movements that are always so important in American politics. And so, the Pro-Life movement, and the anti-gay movement, and the movements to bring God into American life in a very close way, directing what we do. And, what else, the anti-black movement which has sort of calmed down. But remember proposition 187, and then there's going to be—I suppose they're really already is—a lot of popular agitation on the right about the war. To defend our troops, defend our boys, defend our flag, and their crusade to stamp out evil.

But it really does have a popular base, that's why I call it "authoritarian populism." German fascism was like this too. The German cartels were very, very, important and very, very influential; they always got what they wanted from the Nazi regime. But the Nazis didn't mobilize popular enthusiasm around the cartels; they mobilized popular enthusiasm around the flag, and against all the different "deviants" in German society.

*Q: So is there an emerging or ever present culture war between these populist, nationalist, conservative social movements and their ideas and beliefs and those on the left? They've definitely won a lot in American cultural and political life.*

**Piven:** Oh, an enormous amount, and you know when you asked what's the big problem in the United States, I said inequality and militarism and the international problem, but I shouldn't have skipped over the environmental threat that the Bush administration has really accelerated, it's much more threatening now. There are environmental initiatives, most of them under the radar, most of them not in the form of legislation—although some of them are in the form of legislation—are enormous and really scribble. I mean the ruling class usually wants to live and have it's children live and have it's grandchildren live; but these guys are very predatory but with no consciousness of the future. It's very strange.

In culture, well, maybe, but I think it will all calm down too. It's been said that it's wrong to think that what the Nazis did was mobilize people by looking backward. What they really did was mobilize people who really were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the peasants. But you know white people have

gotten remarkably accustomed to having black actors sell them detergent or rental cars, I mean, it's really okay. So maybe not.

*Q: So from your perspective, let me ask you the classic question: what is to be done?*

**Piven:** Well, you know, from now until November 2<sup>nd</sup> we work on the election. I think people are doing that. At least my friends are doing that. They're going into Pennsylvania and wherever. But then I think that we don't work with Kerry if he wins. We work with the social movements to put pressure on Kerry. Because there never has been political leadership in the United States that could be relied on to work for its mass constituency. Unless that constituency creates real threats. What really brings the pressure is the threat of ungovernability. So until the election we work with Kerry, and after the election we work with the movements.