

Derailing the Bush Crazy Train: An Interview with Frances Fox Piven

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Frances Fox Piven

In the buildup to the 2000 presidential election many people disparaged candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore as "tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum," claiming that there weren't many differences between the two. Four years later we have learned just how wrong that assessment was. The extent of the attacks George W. Bush has launched on impoverished, nearly defenseless countries, on reproductive rights, the working class, the environment, education, multilateralism, and the English language would have been nearly unimaginable four years ago. It doesn't take a crystal ball for us to imagine what Bush has in store if he and his puppet masters manage four more years in office. His tenure must be stopped, now.

Frances Fox Piven is a scholar-activist who works at the City University of New York Graduate Center in Manhattan. She has written numerous books, including *Regulating the Poor*, *Poor People's Movements*, *The Breaking of the American Social Compact*, and *Why Americans Don't Vote* (reissued in 2000 as *Why Americans Still Don't Vote*). She was instrumental in Human SERVE, an organization whose influence helped to bring about the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, also known as the motor voter bill. The Republican National Convention is coming to town and I wanted to ask Professor Piven a few questions about what social movements could expect from the upcoming election and what role they can play to help derail the Bush "crazy train" (apologies to Ozzy Osbourne).

John Kerry says he isn't going to bring the troops home from Iraq anytime soon. So why should we vote for him?

I think there are two reasons to vote for Kerry. One is that the Bush crowd is very dangerous. It's not only that they're right-wingers. It's not only that they're pro-military and closely tied to the military-industrial establishment. It's also that they're incompetent and reckless. If we elect Kerry and that's all there is to it, we will also have an American imperialist in charge. But at least he'll be one who is more cautious about maintaining our multilateral relations, one who is less provocative, less likely to spur an era of barbaric conflict across the globe. These are the things I think the Bush crowd is doing. That's the first set of reasons.

The second set of reasons is that Kerry, even though he is a fairly conservative Democrat, is nevertheless much more vulnerable to movements of the left than is Bush. Bush is vulnerable to movements from the right. The populist right has a lot of influence over him. Some of it through his *innards*, through his soul, because he *is* one of them. But some of it is in the form of outright pressure. Movements have a greater influence on what you might call their "home political party." That's the political party that they threaten in a way, because they raise issues that that party is afraid of as those issues can cause divisions within the party. In other words, simply because Kerry's supporters include people who are closer to the left movements, he has to attend to the demands of the left movement much more than Bush does.

When George W. Bush became president, I hoped his policies would galvanize a reinvigorated left. Four years later, how does it look to you?

I think this relates to the second part of the answer I gave to the Kerry question. Often we think that the left is invigorated when things get worse, when right-wingers are in power, when autocrats are in power. But I think that movements are invigorated when they see a chance of having influence, when their hopes are nourished. George Bush didn't nourish our hopes. He didn't give us any reason to think that we could have influence. It's very hard to expect movements to grow when the vanguard just bats its head against the door so to speak.

Is the government stamp of approval necessary for progressive social movements to succeed? For example, the labor movement in the 1930s felt legitimized by the passage of New Deal legislation such as the Wagner Act.

The labor movement didn't exactly get a stamp of approval from the government. What it got was a kind of rhetorical message, a message that said, "You may have power now." And the form that that took was the introduction of a clause into the National Industrial Recovery Act giving labor the right to organize. But it didn't *really* give labor the right to organize. Yet the very fact that the new Democratic administration was worried about appeasing labor served as a kind of communication, a communication about the vulnerability of the new New Deal administration. That's very important to movements. I think you can say the same thing about Harry Truman's platform in 1948, calling for important Civil Rights advances -- he never intended to push for those Civil Rights Advances. Nevertheless, this did communicate to African Americans in the south that maybe they had power with this administration.

When and why did progressive movements "go wrong"? For example, the labor movement was growing in the 1930s. It was strong and had widespread support. But the last few decades appear to be marked by a fragmented left.

Look, the left doesn't have a board of directors. It includes many diverse interests. Inevitably it's going to be fragmented to a greater or lesser degree. The left isn't particularly fragmented right now. The various factions are not at war with one another. They're vaguely supportive of each other. And that's probably as good as it gets. I think it's misleading to say that the labor movement "went wrong" in the 1930s.

I think it's more like this: when movements are powerful -- and the labor movement was powerful in the 1930s; it threatened economic recovery by shutting down factories, *that* was power -- when movements are powerful they set in motion forces that overtake those movements. They get politicians and business elites working on the measures that will channel that movement into more regular forms of politics. In a way you can't avoid that.

I think contemporary movements like the global justice movement and the environmental movement go as far towards avoiding that as is possible, just by eschewing internal hierarchy and those kinds of things. But the effort to regain control over workers and labor was one in which politicians and business leaders worked together. To do that they made many important concessions to labor. The price of those concessions was re-regulation of the labor movement. It would be hard, I think to say, from the outside and with historical perspective, that those workers made a mistake to accept those concessions. I don't think so. I think you have to take what you can get and figure out how to fight another day. But you always have to take what you can get.

One of the books you co-authored with Richard Cloward was Why Americans Don't Vote. Evangelical Christians vote. Why, and what can the left learn from them?

Evangelical Christians don't vote as much as they claim they vote. They've been boasting about voter campaign registrations that they've been doing for twenty-five years. It would be a good thing if we could expand the active electorate to include many more low-income Americans. The ratio of voters above the median income to voters below the median income is about two to one. To the extent that voting power matters, it's very unbalanced in the United States.

Now it's not an accident that it's unbalanced. It took over a century of the introduction of barriers, of onerous procedures into registration, into voting, to accomplish that, coupled with the turning away by the political parties from their lower income constituencies. This was easier when voter turnout fell among the immigrant working class or among African Americans in the south. Why does that matter? It matters in its own right but it also matters because social movements ultimately succeed when they cause disagreements, dissensions, divisions in the electorate. If lower income people, working people, are underrepresented in the electorate then the impact of social movements that deal with the issues of these groups is reduced.

You've mentioned the Russell Banks novel Cloudsplitter before.

Yes, I love that novel.

John Brown is a figure I view somewhat ambiguously. On the one hand, he was a religious fanatic who thought he was doing God's work. On the other, he championed a cause [abolition] that the left considers a positive thing. Is the evangelical-right necessarily our foe? Might there be a shared common ground progressives can build upon with them?

There is probably some common ground, in principle, yes. But given the historical trajectory that that movement has taken and that left movements have taken, *no*. I say no due to the preoccupation with sexual norms that the evangelicals have demonstrated. Once this kind of obsession becomes paramount, it's hard to brush it aside. Certainly the left can't try and deal with that by becoming obsessive prudes themselves.

In Spain, terrorist bombings of commuter trains days before national elections helped drive a pro-Bush administration from power. What effect do you think a terrorist attack within the United States shortly before November 4 would have on the Bush Administration?

I'm afraid that it could well strengthen the Bush Administration.

What is it about America that our response might be to rally behind the administration rather than hold its policies accountable (in part) for such an attack?

We have a different political culture. We don't have the wisdom that came from the Franco years, the years of struggle in Spain, the strong left parties. I think that Americans would react with intense xenophobic fear that could well work to benefit the Bush administration. Maybe they're [the current administration] even thinking about that too.

One of the things that disturbs me about certain segments of the left is the sentiment that Ralph Nader should not run for president, as his campaign would siphon potential Kerry votes. This bothers me because I feel it reveals contempt for the reasoning capacity of the average man or woman to figure out these issues for themselves and choose accordingly. What do you think?

I think *contempt* is too strong a word. There are many moments when you can well feel contempt for the way in which the public interprets issues: us against them, evildoers, that sort of thing. But the decision to vote for Kerry or to vote for Nader is a subtle and difficult decision. I don't have contempt for the people who vote for Nader. I may tear my hair because of the results, but I don't have contempt for them. I don't think the fear that they'll vote for Nader reveals contempt.

There seems to be a faith in some quarters that if a future American president were female -- say, Hilary Clinton -- that America would be a better place.

I don't think so. Look at the abusers at Abu Ghraib. A lot of them were women. One of the people in charge was a woman. Women, under the right conditions, can be as bad as men.

You work in New York City, which is hosting the Republican National Convention at the end of August. Do you have any inside information as to what we can expect from social movements around the big event?

(laughs) No, I don't have any inside information. I wish I knew more about what will happen. I'm inclined to think that the organizers ought to exert themselves *not to do* exactly what is expected.

What do you mean? What is expected from social movements come August?

A parade around mid-town with as many cops as there are marchers; a fight over whether they can use the meadow in Central Park. Maybe they ought to be at the bridges and tunnels going into Manhattan instead of doing the expected.

The election is only months away. Any final thoughts?

This is a very dangerous moment in American history. I do think that the 2004 election is very, very important because the people in charge seem to be so short sighted and so extremely greedy. It's as though they don't really feel as responsible for the country, for the nation, as they do for themselves. They seem to be extremely narrowly focused about what their conception of the national interest is-it's their interest. They're very reckless. For that reason alone, I think it's important to get them out of power in 2004. At the same time, there is this other reason, namely that reform in the United States has always depended on the power of social movements to raise issues, to communicate those issues and to give people hope. It has always depended on the power of social movements to threaten the normal functioning of major American institutions, to shut it down. A Democratic administration will be a better environment for social movements.