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The Right's Conspiracy Theory Attack on Frances

Sociologist Frances Fox Piven often gets requests from students who want to interview her about activism. So when Kyle Olson phoned her in January, told her he was a college student in Michigan videotape an interview with her about her recent book *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People* agreed.

Temporarily housebound and recovering from a auto accident, the 77-year old Piven invited Olson to On February 1, Olson and a friend arrived from Michigan with a video camera. Piven offered them so about an hour, she and Olson sat at her round dining room table and talked about everything from t News, while the friend taped them.

After Olson and his friend left her apartment, Piven didn't think much about the interview. "This was later, "that it didn't strike me as especially important." She recalled thinking that, "Students these d term papers. It didn't seem unusual that he wanted to use a video."

Two weeks later, Piven, a professor at the City University of New York and former president of Association, learned that about eight minutes of the taped interview appeared in three segments on Breitbart's conservative news website. The same outlet achieved national prominence last year O'Keefe and Hannah Giles' highly edited but hugely destructive hidden-camera recordings of AC same website became infamous when O'Keefe was arrested in January for allegedly trying to tamper Sen. Mary Landrieu's New Orleans office as part of another "investigation," while on Breitbart's Breitbart have employed these same "gotcha" tactics on Piven.

Olson is not a college student. He is a 31-year-old Republican Party operative, conservative activist. He runs a Michigan-based conservative advocacy organization, the [Education Action Group](#) (EAG) teachers unions.

The real reason for Olson's interview with Piven was a 1966 article in *The Nation* magazine that she co-authored with Richard Cloward, "A Strategy to End Poverty," which has become the centerpiece of a right-wing conspiracy theory. Olson no doubt hoped to trap Piven into saying something outrageous to confirm the Right's view that the article is the blueprint for a radical takeover of American society.


The segments of Olson's video interview with Piven posted on BigGovernment featured no major revelations about America's imminent mass socialist uprising. In [one snippet](#), Piven remarks that Thomas Jefferson "would be stunned by the oligarchical character of American society." She also comments that when wealth and power become too concentrated, society needs a "corrective period of people rising," as they did during the Depression and the 1960s.

In [another segment](#), Piven remarks that the current wave of foreclosures could trigger mass protest. Most families facing foreclosure and eviction leave their homes, Piven explains, but if "millions of people refuse to go along with foreclosure procedures and refuse to pay off those mortgages that are under water," and do it with "pride and audacity," political leaders would have to respond by making it harder for banks to evict families, as happened during the Depression. Spliced between Piven's observations is footage of ACORN activists removing locks from a foreclosed home and moving the evicted family back in.


In the [third video clip](#), Olson asks Piven about Glenn Beck's persistent attacks on her Nation article, which the Fox News host regularly blames for many of America's problems, including the current financial crisis. "Can you think of anything sillier than to attribute the financial crisis to an article in a low-circulation magazine in 1966?" She calls Beck's efforts to find an easy "scapegoat" for the country's troubles typical of "right-wing ideologues."

In their 6,327-word Nation article, Cloward (a professor at the Columbia University School of Social Work at the time) and Piven (an anti-poverty researcher and activist who joined the Columbia faculty later that year), proposed organizing the poor to demand welfare benefits in order to pressure the federal government to expand the nation's social safety net and establish a guaranteed national income. To put their strategy into practice, Cloward and Piven worked with George Wiley to create the National Welfare Rights Organization, which at its peak in the late 1960s had affiliates in 60 cities and had some success increasing participation in the federal Aid to Families with Dependent Children program by organizing protests at welfare offices and pressuring politicians and welfare administrators to change the rules.

Because it focused exclusively on welfare recipients, however, NWRO's narrow constituency base guaranteed that it would remain a marginal force in the nation's politics. In 1970, NWRO organizer Wade Rathke moved to Arkansas to start ACORN, which he hoped would build a broader multi-racial movement for economic justice. In its early days, Cloward (who died in 2001)



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and Piven served as unofficial advisers to the group. ACORN eventually grew into the nation's largest community organizing group, with chapters in 103 cities in 37 states.

Cloward and Piven soon concluded that a successful anti-poverty movement had to combine grassroots protest with electoral politics. During the Reagan years in the early 1980s, they wrote a widely-read book, *Why Americans Don't Vote*, which examined deliberate efforts throughout the 20th century to deny the franchise to immigrants, the poor, and African Americans. They also used their contacts among unions, community groups, and social workers to help build a movement to expand voting among the poor. Their idea led to the National Voter Registration Act, usually called the "motor voter" law, which President Clinton signed in 1993, at a White House ceremony at which Piven spoke and received one of the president's pens.

Cloward and Piven were obviously committed to combining scholarship and activism. Not surprisingly, conservatives have been attacking their ideas for decades. But the demonization of the couple by the extreme Right has escalated since Obama's election.

A few weeks after Obama's victory, James Simpson penned an article for the right-wing *American Thinker* entitled, "Cloward-Piven Government," describing their "malevolent strategy for destroying our economy and our system of government." The right-wing echo chamber has transformed the duo into Marxist Machiavellis whose ideas have not only spawned an interlocking radical movement dedicated to destroying modern-day capitalism but also, in their minds at least, almost succeeded, as evidenced by what they consider Obama's "socialist" agenda

Conservative radio jockeys Rush Limbaugh and Mark Levin have, on multiple occasions, warned their listeners about the nefarious sociologists. "The Cloward-Piven strategy is essentially what Obama and a number of these people are following," Limbaugh told his listeners on December 18, "and its ultimate objective is to have everybody in the country on welfare, by destroying it."

Conservative journalist Stanley Kurtz has been digging into Piven's papers, held at Smith College, looking to connect the dots between the prolific professor and left-wing movements. His articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Review*, and the *New York Post* fed anti-ACORN talking points to the right-wing echo chamber and the McCain campaign, including the absurd notion that ACORN's advocacy to make banks more socially responsible, and its support for the Community Reinvestment Act, led to the nation's financial crisis.

FrontPage editor David Horowitz called Cloward and Piven the "architects" of "radical change." Other right-wing outlets, including *American Spectator*, *The Washington Times*, *The American Thinker*, Free Republic, NewsMax, and WorldNetDaily, have all educated their audiences about how the Cloward-Piven has infected society like a dangerous left-wing virus.

Beck first mentioned the so-called "Cloward-Piven Strategy" in March 2009, three months after he began his nightly Fox News show, and 32 times since. On [September 18](#), he used his trademark chalkboard to connect Cloward and Piven to Woodrow Wilson, Che Guevara, Bill Ayers, ACORN, the SEIU, the Apollo Alliance, the Tides Foundation, George Soros, Van Jones, Valerie Jarrett, and Obama -- some of the right's favorite villains.

Beck, like his right-wing colleagues, view Cloward and Piven as dangerous radicals masquerading as reformers. Earlier this month, Beck claimed that SDS, the 1960s radical student group, believed the road to change was "Let's blow things up," but Cloward and Piven counseled, "No, no, no, let's try to just collapse the system."

[Last Thursday](#), Beck said that Obama's health care proposal followed the Cloward-Piven strategy to "melt the system down and have it collapse into a new system."

At February's Tea Party convention, WorldNetDaily editor Joseph Farah devoted eight minutes of his 38-minute [keynote speech](#) to fulminating about what he called Cloward and Piven's "manifesto."

The duo's work with NWRO led to increasing welfare costs that "brought New York City to its knees" in the 1970s," Farah said. He correctly linked Cloward and Piven's ideas to various efforts to get more poor people to vote. Then he drew a direct line between the couple and one such effort, Project Vote in Chicago, which once hired a young law school graduate named Obama. Farah also repeated the inaccurate canard that ACORN was involved in widespread voter fraud. He told the Tea Party crowd that Cloward and Piven's ideas have influenced Democratic Party prescriptions since George McGovern's 1972 presidential candidacy.

Obama's purpose, Farah said, is to "increase misery and create crises." That, according to Farah, is an "old trick" that was "codified by a Marxist Columbia professor and his research assistant" [sic] -- a strategy of "orchestrated crises."

"Obama is still employing the Cloward-Piven strategy, not as a community organizer but today as the community organizer in chief," Farah explained. "He's still creating crises as a means of empowerment" -- right out of the Cloward-Piven playbook.

"Nothing's changed" since Cloward and Piven first penned their article, Farah said. "With Obama, everything is a crisis. Carbon dioxide levels. The banking industry. The automobile industry. The health care system. And especially the economy. He's going to fix all of them, he promises. How? By turning make-believe crises into real crises."

"The goal remains the same as when it was first outlined in 1966," Farah said. "It is, as the Marxists of the 1960s and early 1970s explained, to heighten the contradictions of capitalism. Bring the system to its knees, and ultimately to collapse."

It isn't clear whether these conservative rabble-rousers actually believe what they preach about the Cloward-Piven strategy, or simply use it to whip up their followers' anger and resentments. What's obvious is that this tactic is intended to discredit Obama's liberal policy agenda and to destroy the progressive movement that pushes the president and the Democratic Party to be bolder, as they did in the recent health-care battle.

This maneuver is hardly new. As far back as Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon, Republican politicians and hired strategists -- like Murray Chotiner, Ed Meese, Michael Deaver, Karl Rove, Pat Buchanan and Frank Luntz -- have perfected the art of linking liberal Democrats to communists, socialists, radicals, subversives, "welfare queens," and terrorists. These ideas might

seem crazy, but they are, like Roger Ailes, the communications guru for Nixon, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, and now Glenn Beck's boss, crazy like Fox News.

It is this world of right-wing opinion-shapers to which Olson aspires. After graduating from Michigan State University in 2001, Olson worked as a lobbyist for the Michigan Association of Realtors, and then served as district director and campaign manager for a Republican state Senator. In 2006, Olson lost his own campaign for a seat on the Muskegon County Board of Commissioners. He was also a member of Michigan's Republican State Committee.

Olson's family is in the right-wing propaganda business. His brother Ryan was the Director of Education Policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, one of the earliest state-level conservative advocacy groups, funded by right-wing businesses and foundations.

Kyle joined the family business in 2007 when he and another conservative activist started EAG. It originally served as a platform for Olson to write op-ed columns and get quoted in the Michigan media for his crusade against the Michigan Education Association as well as the nation's two largest teachers' unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. One of its ploys was to put up billboards across Michigan that identified MEA staff members and their salaries. But Olson soon revealed his broader conservative agenda. For example, EAG's political arm (the Education Action Fund) recently paid for a billboard that attacked Rep. Mary Valentine, a Democratic candidate for the state Senate, as a supporter of partial-birth abortions.

Being anti-union and anti-abortion are mainstay positions for Republican Party activists like Olson. But Olson has branched out beyond the conservative GOP mainstream. He's joined the lunatic fringe, using his camera and computer to sniff out the left-wing Marxist conspiracy. Indeed, Greg Steimel, a researcher for the Michigan Education Association who has [followed Olson's career](#), calls him a "Glenn Beck wannabe."

On his own website, Olson brags that he appeared on Beck's program on July 29, 2009 "to discuss his rare (if not first-ever) video interview with ACORN founder Wade Rathke and the SEIU/ACORN connection to the proposed government takeover of health care." Olson created ACORNcracked, one of several right-wing anti-ACORN websites that has emerged in recent years to fulminate against the community organizing group. His website also proudly declares that "Glenn Beck cited Kyle's work on both December 11, 2009 and December 14, 2009 regarding political consultant Robert Creamer and his influence over health care reform." Olson has contributed seven pieces on Breitbart's BigGovernment website, ranting about ACORN, SEIU president Andy Stern, and Obama.

Olson manipulated his way into Piven's home hoping to entrap her into saying something outrageous that he could use to further his own career. Clearly he aspired to be the next James O'Keefe, who became a right-wing celebrity for his anti-ACORN videos, but whose recent arrest in New Orleans for breaking into Sen. Mary Landrieu's office has destroyed his own credibility.

Unlike O'Keefe, however, Olson's Piven tapes have thus far produced no mainstream controversy. That's because, watching Piven answer his questions, most viewers would be hard-pressed to disagree with her basic analysis of America's current condition. Big corporations have too much power. The concentration of wealth has gotten out of hand. Only an outraged and organized movement for change among the poor and the middle class is likely to bring about the reforms we need.

Piven admits to being "unnerved" by what she now realizes was Olson's lying in order to get her to agree to the interview.

"He made no impression on me. He didn't say anything about himself -- and I didn't ask. Maybe I should have been more curious. Perhaps I should have wondered why he'd drive all the way from Michigan, just for an interview."

"He interviewed me under false pretenses," Piven says. "If I'd known he was a right-wing operative, I wouldn't have let him into my apartment. I might have talked to him in my office or over the phone."

Contacted by phone at his Michigan office, Olson hung up as soon as he was asked about his interview with Piven. When called again for comment, his colleague, Steve Gunn, answered for him. "He doesn't have any interest in talking with you. He doesn't care anything about you," Gunn said. "If you call again, I'll call 911. You have a miserable day."

A [shorter version](#) of this article appeared in the *American Prospect* magazine.

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