

The ACORN Conspiracy, Continued

PETER DREIER MARCH 23, 2010

Right-wingers remain convinced that ACORN is part of a nefarious plot to destroy America, and they'll use any means they can to prove it.

activism. So when Kyle Olson phoned her in January and told her he was a college student in Michigan who wanted to videotape an interview with her about her recent book *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America*, Piven agreed. Temporarily housebound and recovering from a car accident, the 77-year-old Piven invited Olson to her New York apartment. On Feb. 1, Olson and a friend arrived from Michigan with a video camera. She offered them something to drink. Then, for about an hour, Piven and Olson sat around her dining room table and talked about everything from the Founding Fathers to Fox News while the friend taped them.

Two weeks later, Piven, a professor at the City University of New York and former president of the American Sociological Association, learned that about eight minutes of the taped interview had appeared in three segments on Big Government, Andrew Breitbart's conservative news Web site. The outlet achieved national prominence when it published James O'Keefe and Hannah Giles' highly edited but hugely destructive hidden-camera recordings of Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) employees. And the Web site became infamous when O'Keefe was arrested for allegedly trying to tamper with Sen. Mary Landrieu's phone system as part of another "investigation," while on Breitbart's payroll. Now, Olson has employed these same "gotcha" tactics on Piven, all while advancing a damaging mythology of Barack Obama that depends on a strained interpretation of an article Piven co-authored decades ago.

Olson is not a college student. He is a 31-year-old Republican Party operative and commentator. He runs a Michigan-based conservative advocacy organization, the Education Action Group, which primarily attacks teachers' unions. Olson has also paid for billboards in Michigan that attack pro-choice candidates, developed an **anti-ACORN Web site**, and written articles blasting liberal leaders like Obama and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) President Andy Stern.

The real reason for Olson's interview with Piven was a 1966 *Nation* article she co-authored with Richard Cloward. "A Strategy to End Poverty" has become the centerpiece of a right-wing conspiracy theory -- the blueprint for a radical takeover of American society. The 6,327-word piece proposed organizing the poor to demand the welfare benefits for which they were eligible in order to pressure the federal government to expand the nation's social safety net and establish a guaranteed national income. To that end, Cloward and Piven helped create the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), which had some success in increasing participation in the federal Aid to Families with Dependent Children program through organized protests and political advocacy.


One of NWRO's lasting legacies is birthing the national community-organizing group ACORN. In 1970, NWRO organizer Wade Rathke moved to Arkansas to start ACORN, which he hoped would build a broader multiracial movement for economic justice. Cloward, who died in 2001, and Piven also served as unofficial advisers to the group. During the Reagan years, the duo concluded that a successful anti-poverty movement had to combine grass-roots protest with electoral politics. In their book *Why Americans Don't Vote*, they examined deliberate efforts throughout the 20th century to deny the franchise to immigrants, minorities, and the poor. Their work ultimately led to the National Voter Registration Act, usually called the "motor voter" law, which conservatives feared would lead to widespread voting among the poor, which could keep liberals perpetually in power.

However, the interview segments that Olson posted on Big Government featured no major revelations about an imminent uprising of the American proletariat. 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. She explains that if "millions of people refuse to go along with foreclosure procedures and refuse to pay off those mortgages that are underwater," political leaders would have to respond by making it harder for banks to evict families, as occurred 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 **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?", Piven responds. She calls Beck's efforts to find an easy "scapegoat" for the country's troubles typical of "right-wing ideologues."

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These same right-wing ideologues have cast Piven and her late collaborator as Marxist Machiavellis whose ideas have spawned a radical movement intent on destroying capitalism and capable of advancing Obama's "socialist" agenda. Conservatives have attacked Cloward and Piven for decades, but the demonization of the duo has escalated since Obama's election. Since March of last year, Beck has mentioned the Cloward-Piven strategy 33 times on his Fox News program. On Sept. 18, he **used** his trademark chalkboard to connect Cloward and Piven to Woodrow Wilson, Che Guevara, Bill Ayers, ACORN, the SEIU, George Soros, Van Jones, the Apollo Alliance, the Tides Foundation, Valerie Jarrett, and of course Obama -- some of the right's favorite villains. 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."

Conservative radio jockeys Rush Limbaugh and Mark Levin have, on multiple occasions, warned their listeners that what they call the "Cloward-Piven strategy" will destroy America. Stanley Kurtz, a frequent *National Review* contributor and anti-ACORN crusader, has been digging into Piven's papers, according to Smith College's library. FrontPage editor David Horowitz called Cloward and Piven the "architects" of "radical change." *The American Spectator*, *The Washington Times*, the *American Thinker*, Free Republic, NewsMax, and WorldNetDaily have all warned their audiences that the Cloward-Piven strategy has infected society like a dangerous left-wing virus.

At February's Tea Party convention, WorldNetDaily editor Joseph Farah devoted eight minutes of his **speech** to the Cloward-Piven strategy. He told the crowd that Cloward and Piven's ideas have influenced Democratic Party prescriptions since George McGovern's 1972 presidential candidacy. Farah also credited the sociologists with ACORN's rise, the community-organizing group's strategy of expanding voter registration, and Obama's work with Project Vote in Chicago. "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."

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 resentment. 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 Ed Meese, Karl Rove, Pat Buchanan and Frank Luntz -- have perfected the art of linking liberal Democrats to communists, socialists, radicals, subversives, "welfare queens," and terrorists.

It is this world of right-wing opinion-shapers to which Olson aspires. Using similar tactics to James O'Keefe, Olson deceived Piven with the goal of filming something sensational. But unlike O'Keefe, Olson has not succeeded in generating any mainstream controversy with his tapes. 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, and only an outraged and organized movement for change among the poor and the middle class is likely to bring about significant reform.

Piven admits to being "unnerved" by Olson's alleged misrepresentation in order to get her to agree to the 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."

