

Interviewee: Frances Fox Piven
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Video: 19536

[DH] [Inaudible] you met Howard as he went to BU, did you know him before?

[FFP] No I had seen him speak at Columbia University, he came and spoke once, uh, during the - or shortly after the building takeovers in 1968, so I had seen him speak and I knew who he was, but I didn't get to know him till I went to BU, and getting to know him was great, uh, I was very happy when I went to BU, because they seemed to be such lively people around. I had come from the Columbia University school [of] social work where there were not so many lively people, so, it was great, and I got to know him and I got to know Roz and all -- we would have supper together fairly often, and we were always planning things and doing things together. [00:01:00.957] Howard, Mary Levin and I are -- wrote an answer to Silber, this is shortly after I got there, it was published in, uh, BU News, I think, and, it was an answer to Silber's public statements that he wanted to make BU into and [aliet?] university, and we said "we don't want this to be an aliet university, uh, we want this to be a university in which ordinary people, uh, to which ordinary people come, come in large numbers, and, we don't necessarily want to glorify the academic traditions that are glorified at places like Harvard or MIT, we wanna be critical and spirited," and, so, we three collaborated on that, uh, on that answer to Silber and that was really a few months after I got there and I think you can find that in the files, it must be there. And then, very shortly after that, I guess Silber brought the [?ROTC?] to campus, the recruiters to campus, and he stationed them in the castle -- you know that building at BU? It's called the castle and looks like a fake castle and it was across the street from the political science department, and we decided, a small group of faculty decided that we would block access to the recruiters, instead of the students doing it. Uh, our reasoning was that it would be safer, for the students, if we blocked access, I mean you could also reason that we had jobs at stake and the students didn't, but we did and, uh, so we did some things like that together my first year there and then I went on leave, I went on -- I had a sabbatical promised to me by BU and when I came back, uh, I think the union drive had begun, maybe not, that was 74, 75, 76 through 77, maybe it began the following year, so, uh. [sigh] Howard and I and Mary Levin had offices in one corner of the third floor 232 Bay Street and the offices were adjacent, the doors faced each other, so we always felt, or I always felt not that I was at John Silber's university, but that I was at our university, cause when I came to work I saw my friends and there were always a lot of students sitting around on the floor and uh-these were the people I talked to and every once in a while Silber did something that sort of banged you on the head and made you realize that he was running the university, but day-to-day we didn't have Silber to deal with. [00:04:16.120]

[DH] Did Silber try to destroy the department, in -- ? [00:04:20.525]

[FFP] Well the department was in ill favor because the senior faculty, or a s-substantial number of the senior faculty, we were all full professors, uh, were critics of the administration, so, uh, the-those particular people didn't get raises, uh, and the department itself, uh, didn't get new op-new lines or, uh, wasn't treated generously. Excepting when, under several occassions when Silber tried to put his own people in command of the department, so, in a sense there was a

certain amount of irritation with us and the department because we weren't doing good for the department, uh, by being publicly known as opponents of Silber and supporting the student protestors -- that's true. [00:05:25.825]

[DH] He-he -- Silber wouldn't give Howard teaching assistants, in some, in classes-- ? [00:05:33.948]

[FFP] Well he did sometimes and not other times, I don't know the -- I don't know the facts on that, Howard would remember that better than I, I do know that he didn't give Howard a raise, and at one point, I think my se-the year that I came back, so it was really only my second year there, I fully proposed to the department that my raise be [as?]signed to Howard, and, uh, the administration refused to do that. [00:06:11.850]

[DH] Why do you think Silber disliked him so much and there was so much antagonism as we talked about previously? [00:06:20.092]

[FFP] Oh because he stood up to Silber, he confronted him, he wasn't cowed by Silber, he, uh, had tremendous support among the students, and I think that as the contest went on between -- it was significantly a contest between John Silber and Howard Zinn, although lots of others of us were involved, as the contest went on, it became completely out of control, I mean it was emotional it was intense it was hate. [00:07:01.912] And, that also happens in these political events. I regretted the whole development in a certain way because it meant that, my friends were spending all of their time fighting John Silber and I didn't think that was the most important kind of politics to do and I didn't want to do that kind of politics. I was working with other groups on other kinds of issues and I didn't want to just spend my time, uh, in battles which, in the end, seemed small and petty and silly and narrow-minded, but eventually it became so extreme, particularly after the strike, the faculty strike, and after Silber's effort to bring five faculty members, including Howard and Mary, up on charges for conducting their classes off campus, when that happened I felt that I had to sort of plunge in, uh, full-time, so to speak because it had become so gross and these were my friends. [00:08:19.247]

[DH] What do you think -- I have a, hm. I think that maybe might've Howard -- tell me what you think about that, [you can?] agree or disagree -- I think maybe, you know, our Howard has like an iron will, doesn't he, sort of? That if, um, an-an-an-and maybe coming from his background in like a working class background and what he saw in the South and all that, you think that that relates, it helps it relate to -- or maybe it doesn't -- that struggle? [00:08:52.773]

[FFP] Well, he's a person whos, uh, whos politics are really central to his life, his political and principled commitments are central to his life. I wouldn't say that he has an iron will. Howard compromises, uh, and, which is usually what you mean by an iron will, but -- and life is full of compromises, you know. Nobody could do politics if they didn't compromise, you take the best deal that you can get, but what, but what he doesn't do is give up his political struggle, uh, give up his political effort. He doesn't turn away from and decide "well, I'm tired now," or, uh, "it's time that I gotta raise," or, uh -- because that's his life. [00:09:50.325] And I think that has something to do with his background, not necessarily his working class background, lots of people have working class backgrounds, including me, but, he-the pers-the way his personality

was formed around [mubmles] political commitment, uh not commitment, uh, of-of conscience rather than, to a political organization. [00:10:17.262]

[DH] Do people see, they have like, I think Marilyn Young said that [WHAT?!?] when you're ... great, like, leaps ... what is your social status ... there's anything else to, to say about that, I mean there are two ways you can go with it, you can say that my, my, my, my isn't this a wonderful country and look at who-what have we [00:10:41.860] [WHATTTTTT?!??] Can you talk a little bit about how, like, or, what you think of, like, the beginnings of a working class background have in connection with one's politics in relation to how --

[FFP] I don't, I don't think it's just a working class background, you know, it has to be something more than that, it has to be a working class background combined with a political culture in the community and the family from which you came, that was concious of class, and that treated class as the basis for politics, uh, political effort, and a lot of working class people don't have that experience in the United States, uh, so, [pause] Howard grew up in New York, he grew up in Brooklyn. [00:11:45.045] He, as a very young man, he was involved in the political struggles of the 1930s, I'm sure you've heard all of that, and, uh, he was a millitant in that period. Now a lot of people grow out of that sort of thing, it's a shame for them, not only for the country, it's a shame for them, because I think Howard always realized that a political life was a good life. You know, the notion that, "well, I've done my best, I'm burned out, I've put in," you know, "a summer and winter" or something like that, "and now it's somebody elses turn," is such a mistake, uh, because a life of political engagement is so much more interesting and so much more joyful and [comrad?] than a life of private disengagement and private consumption. And Howard knows that. [00:12:59.618]

[DH] And, what -- Roz were--

[FFP] Roz knows it too.

[DH] Right.

[FFP] And Howard is very, they're very lucky they have each other cause I think that they have - - they're very giving to each other, and they have a lot of empathy for each others perspectives. I don't think Roz is as political as Howard is, but she, she does share the broad orientation and the broad commitments, there's no question about that. [00:13:35.180]

[DH] And she's an important part of -- so many people have said "don't leave her out of this story -- "

[FFP] Don't leave her out of the story. [00:13:44.317]

[DH] Yea, and in knowing her, in-in, oh, [HUH?!?]

[FFP] Well, Roz has been Howard's partner. [00:13:56.657] If she had not been a partner in all of his endeavours, I don't think that he could have accomplished them and I don't think he could've done what he did with the kind of fullsomeness, with the kind of joy that he did. It was because

Roz was so supportive and so much a partner that he was able to be a political person with his whole life, with his WHOLE life, not just going to a club meeting every once a week. And Howard listened to Roz, you know, there was a point at Boston University when, uh, John Silber had publicly charged Howard with arson -- right? -- and everybody was buzzing about that and trying to goat Howard into taking a law suit against John Silber. Howard didn't do it because Roz said no. She was afraid of Silber, she was afraid of the kind of vengeance of which he was capable. And she might've been smarter than the rest of us, in that respect. So, I don't think you should under-think of Roz just as a helpmate, I think she was a partner, and had a lot of influence over Howard, and still does. [\[00:15:23.797\]](#)

[DH] What was that story? It-it-it, arson. I've heard that, but it-but I've heard it on periphery -- [\[00:15:31.047\]](#)

[FFP] Well I think some of the students at one of the demonstrations, [mumble] I wasn't there then and I only heard the stories so this is, you know, fourthhand, but some of the students did torch a building or something like that after a demonstration and John Silber accused Howard of doing it or instigating it or something, that's right.

[DH] Okay. Um, are you a colleague of his when he's like, writing A People's History? [\[00:15:56.205\]](#)

[FFP] Mmhmm, I was.

[DH] Yea, can you explain, kind of, the, you know, [HUH?!] spoke of-of his book, you know, you were [HUH] you were very, very good friends with him and, kind of the problems and perspectives he was going over, I mean he's talked to me about it in interviews but someone else -- [\[00:16:17.848\]](#)

[FFP] He talked about it some but he did not do, I don't -- he-he never gave me drafts to read. I didn't read it till it was finished, uh, and [pause] I, I think that he really is a solo guy. [\[00:16:39.760\]](#)

[DH] Getting back to, like, just Silber a little bit and the strike of -- like we were talking about, how difficult it is for faculty people [stutter] to go on strike because they don't really see themselves as working people. I spoke to a guy named John [Long?] at, um, [Rider?] University years ago and he was like, he teaches there and I think it's History, and- and he said... he does union organizing too.. faculty had told me about him ... spoke with before... [\[00:17:12.528\]](#)

[FFP] Yea, well, uh, it took exceptional conditions for the faculty at BU to decide to form a union, and those exceptional conditions, I think, were the goating, the aggravation, the outlandish provocations of the Silber administration, uh, which had continued for a number of years and the disrespect that Silber showed the faculty -- the insult, uh, until finally the-the only options that the faculty had were-was the option of unionization, so they did it under pressure. They did it reluctantly. They didn't mean that they suddenly identified with the working class, that was the furthest thought from their minds, but still, it was admirable in its way, because these very proper people who had always thought of themselves as professionals, as people whos dignity and

station in life was due to their individual merit, accomplishments, nevertheless did-you know, they voted union, they formed a pickett line, uh, they did what they felt they had to do but it wasn't easy and it wasn't tough, it wasn't tough enough. Uh, there were a handful of faculty, I remember, I used to get up at five o'clock with a colleague of mine, a young woman, and we would go to the student union at 5AM to block the delivery trucks com-this was during the strike. [00:19:02.005] It was so thrilling I thought it was hilarious. I mean, neither of us were very big, uh, and we would stand there with our pickett signs and these [teensters?] would see the pickett signs, pull back, turn around, and drive off, it was wonderful. But most of the faculty didn't take joy in that kind of event, uh, and didn't take pleasure in the temporary alliance that we struck with the clerical workers because they were status preoccupied, and that's understandable, you know, that's the way people are, and they were also afraid. Now, when I took my classes off campus, because the clerical workers -- the faculty union had signed a contract but the clerical workers were still out -- when I took my classes off campus, one of my classes, the students were disparaging that the faculty who had gone back onto the campus, and I said to them, "well, don't be so harsh, there are, you know, a lot of faculty who are middle-aged, they're specialists in Islamic painting or something like that, they can't get another job on the dime, and the contract says that they cannot respect this pickett line," uh, and then I said to them "well, you wanna continue the strike, you're not really continuing the strike by coming and taking your class at Hillel house or Newman house, " wherever I was giving the class, "this is really just, symbolic. If you really wanna continue the strike, then you'll have to request that I not turn your grades in this semester. That's a strike. How many want me to do that? I will do it." [00:21:12.392] And of course not one student raised their hand, so, you know, people, ya-I think you have to have someone [who's] standing in empathy for the particular circumstances and particular cherished achievements that people try to protect. The faculty did quite a bit, they didn't do as much as they could have, but they did quite a bit. And when they didn't persist in the strike it was because they felt very much under threat.

[DH] In many ways Boston sounds like a micro-micro-I don't know why I can't pro-pronounce the word correctly, micro-

[FFP] Microcosm. [00:21:57.480]

[DH] Thank you. Of-How strikes and events happen, acts of repression, force people to take stances that they no idea that they were going to before-is it-would that be an accurate...

[FFP] Yes, I think that would be accurate. That would be accurate. Acts of repression, or aggravations, or some kind of goating, uh, style, and policy on the part of the administration. Stripping faculty of the kind of dignity that they thought they had, uh, and doing it willfully, that was John Silber's way. [00:22:40.192]

[DH] Let's talk a little about political science and-and-and get away from like the Silber-

[FFP] Silber, Silber, Silber! [laugh] [00:22:47.570]

[DH] Right, right, right, right, I think we've-we've covered that. Both you and Howard have a strong belief of, um, change, happens from below, and could you maybe, as we were talking how in the 1890s and 1920s and bring it up to today-- [\[00:23:04.582\]](#)

[FFP] Well, yes-I believe that important reforms in the United States have only been won from below when poor and working class people mobilize, but I would say something in addition to that, that important reforms have only been won when lower strata people have posed an important threat to American institutions and the elites who sit at the peak of these institutions. So, I don't think that people win anything significant if they follow the route of conventional politics. If they form political organizations and they write letters to their congressmen or their state legislature-legislator, or, you know, they dutifully go from door to door and call on people to vote for their candidate, nothing against those activities, but, they are not effective in American politics. [\[00:24:08.373\]](#) They're certainly not effective now with money drowning the system and advertising taking the place of political talk, but I don't think they ever were effective, uh, but ordinary people, poor people, working class people were ever effective if they stayed within the boundaries of conventional politics. If you look at the big moments in American history when important concessions, which humanized our society and indeed even made it into a democratic society were one, these were moments when people were threatening. In the post revolutionary period, uh, it was Shay's Rebellion and the threat posed by a still armed population that forced the founding fathers in Philadelphia to be concerned about granting at least a partial right to vote for some of the members of the new federal government, new national government that they were constructing. [\[00:25:09.428\]](#) In the, uh, mid-nineteenth century, at a time when southerners were-southern bourbon, southern plantation elites were the dominant group in American national government, the abolitionists organized, the crazy radical abolitionists organized, and forced the issue of childhood slavery onto the national agenda in a way that split apart the American political parties, they were alliances of North and South, split apart the American political parties, uh, set the stage for the Civil War, and eventually created the conditions which forced Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. [\[00:25:59.722\]](#) Or in the late nineteenth century, the beginnings of the progressive period and the regulation of the railroads, uh, and ultimately the regulation of the meatpacking industry, uh, the regulation of, uh, big monopoly corporations, that was the consequence, also, of a movement that began with radical farmers, but also, was joined by the great armies of strikers in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century. They were the force that gave the pro-that made the progressive era progressive! Uh, that did-uh, lead to the initiation of the first significant federal presence in the regulation of the American economy. Or in the 1930s, FDR took office intending to restore- revive and restore capitalism. He didn't have a program. The New Deal program was a response to insurgency from below! [\[00:27:08.065\]](#) To the movement first of the unemployed, the movement of farmers being dispossessed, and finally the movement of striking workers. It is when people are on the move, and when being on the move, the kinds of actions that they undertake are definant and threatening, that American politics works in a democratic way, and I think we can say the same thing about the 1960s, about the Civil Rights movement and the anti-war movement. And, the great thing about this moment in American political history is that it really does seem that we were on the cusp of a new period of popular insurgency, and it's important to always to remember that everybody's gonna say, they do-whenver people take to the streets or occupy the factories, there are always well-meaning people who say [\[00:28:05.685\]](#) "we agree with your goals but not with your methods, if you really want change why don't you

work for change in a peaceful, regular way." And it-it's important to remember these historical lessons. Their argument is wrong. You don't win change in the United States by working in a peaceful, conventional way.

[DH] Do you think the system is set up that way? That if the-

[FFP] Well the system was never set up in that sense, I mean it was put together, pieced together and changed every time, and yes, it was developed, the American political institutions were developed incrementally, as your word, over time in ways that gave as little as possible to popular demands for influence in power, and that privileged, advantaged elites, of course. That's the way systems get set up. [00:29:08.605]

[DH] Do you think the astonishing sort of success of A People's History Of The United States is related to people s-I don't know, my theory is that people sort of see themselves and see possibilities in that book although it talks about some horrible things that have happened. [00:29:27.448]

[FFP] Well I think that the success of A People's History is in part a commentary on most American history books, especially history books that are accessible to undergraduate and high school students. They tell, uh, well-cooked, uh, story about American development that is not-that, that's false, that's distorted but it's also boring. Uh, you know, it's not interesting, I mean I can remember the way I was taught American history, first in grade school then in high school then in college, every time they'd begin at the beginning and repeat it. It's like, trying to engrave it, etch it into your mind. I mean it was a-first it was a history of elites, you were supposed to remember the names of the American presidents and stuff. It was a history of what they did, what they said, and it was a history without tension, without drama, and without any connection with my own experience with what I could see going on all around me. A People's History of the United States has some connection with the experience of ordinary people. [00:30:49.902] I regret only one thing about People's History, I said this to Howard right after he finished it, and that is that in a way People's History is very dower. I mean he talks about these great struggles, and people are always losing, and you know, I don't think that's true. They lose, but they also win something. And, it's like, uh, E.P. Thompson's account, The Making of the English Working Class. E.P. Thompson's several books on history of the English working class or the history of the agrarian working class in England, he always, uh, they're always accounts of people who were defeated, they were massacred, they were bloodied and bludgened and sent to Australia or whatever, but they also won something. [00:31:50.120] And, in fact, people have won something in American history. I don't think this-I don't think People's History is [nice?] and celebratory enough.

[DH] What about the whole concept of like the, uh, well, maybe I shouldn't go into it, but pop-with the politics of history that, you know, Howard talks about that really from the, uh, you know, from the elite point of view.

[FFP] Right, sure.

[DH] And, that, and I 'm not, I just, like, you know, thought of this thing that -- the history and political scientist to act from a point of view-- [[00:32:24.263](#)]

[FFP] They're taught from the top down, yes. Now Howard is part of a much larger movement that began, I think, in the 1960s and when historians in England and the United States are kind of "history from below" movement. An effort to tell the history of ordinary people. Uh, the work, not only of E.P. Thompson, but Eric [?], George Rudé, uh, the [cough] this kind of history was a remarkable effort to reconstruct, and it's hard to reconstruct because the archives are not about these people. You often had to go to the police records to find out what the ordinary people said and what they did and what was done to them to reconstruct the history of the crowd, to reconstruct the history of the mobs that were trying to enter politics and make their voices heard. [[00:33:23.872](#)] So, Howard is part of that great movement among historians.

[DH] I think, is there anything I forgot, or maybe, [inaudible] what was it like to have Howard as a colleague?

[FFP] Oh my gosh!

[DH] [inaudible] ...friendly kind of--

[FFP] I love Howard, and I love Roz, and they are my dear friends, and they make my life better than it would otherwise be. And I-I told Howard this, but, um, I always take my political opinions with Howard. [[00:34:01.285](#)] He often disagrees, [laugh] but, the disagreements are not fundamental which is why I can go to him when something new happens, you know, what-what-what're your thoughts about, uh, Bosnia or what about Nader and you can always, I-it's always important to me to know what Howard thinks because I trust his moral commitments and I respect his intelligence and a lot of people are fooled, I think, because Howard writes straightforwardly and speaks straightforwardly into thinking, "he isn't as smart as he really is," he's a smart guy, and I always wanna know what he thinks.

[DH] He wrote an article, um, he talked about glob-globalization. He wrote an article that, um, was in the Progressive and on ZNet after the Seattle--

[FFP] I don't think I read it [[00:35:08.787](#)]

[DH] Huh, okay, [mumble] let's see if I can re-re-remember it. And he talked about how in a time of, you know, maybe thinking that there's not a lot of hope in media [mumble] at one point, all of a sudden, out of, I think I know where I'm going now, all of a sudden out of nowhere, maybe not nowhere but these are my words, not his, all of a sudden here becomes like a beginning of a social movement, and he talks about this with [inaudible] he says many things in his lectures that you never know when a social movement-- [[00:35:44.093](#)]

[FFP] You never know and tha-that's true and sociologists and political scientists develop all these theories which presume to predict social movements and not one of them is ever predicted or real-world social movement. Uh, you never know, and that's because people do have the extraordinary capacity to invent, to intrude themselves into politics in innovative ways, on one

hand. On the other hand, it was time that Americans joined the protests against globaliazation and, you know, liberalism, which had, after all, been very important in Europe since at least 1994, 1995, and in Canada, so there were precursors of Seattle it's just that we, most of us, were not paying attention. [00:36:38.025]

[DH] The rest of the world sees globalization kind of as Americanization, is that--

[FFP] Yes, the rest of the world sees glo- rightly so, because globalization is, uh, significantly promoted not only by American corporations, American based multi-national corporations, but also by these super national organizations like the INF and the WTO which are so much under the thumb of American, uh, national political influence, the American government is an important actor in globalization. [00:37:21.347] So, the populist sense around the world, that globalization is Americanization, is well founded. [00:37:30.433]

[DH] Alright, okay, I think-I think that's fine.

[DE] Yeah, I had a couple of questions.

[DH] Sure.

[DE] I'm wondering, one, just what-what do you-what do you envision as the legacy of Howard Zinn? [00:37:40.550]

[FFP] Well I'm not much into thinking about legacies, uh, one legacy will be the people who knew him and who loved him, but I think that his, in a sense, important written legacy will be People's History of the United States because that will turn out to be the first and most comprehensive and accessible study of American history from the bottom up. [00:38:16.603]

[DE] And the second question is that, how do you respond, or how-how can one respond to the criticism of Zinn, that he doesn't use, um, that he doesn't maintain academic standards, that he's not using footnotes, that he's not, uh, you know, that he-that he speaks in a- in-actually it's that accessibility that actually brings the criticism-- [00:38:40.405]

[FFP] Well, uh, you know, most of that is part of the ritual that academics design in order to, in a way, protect their discipline from easy access to the outside and also protect it from the disrespect that it might get if people actually understood what they were saying, uh, the, so the, it's sort of the-it's a status ritual, [much of?] that, on the one hand, on the other hand, uh, the-Howard doesn't aim to be an academic. It's not an appropriate criticism. [00:39:26.068] He doesn't wanna be remembered as an academic, he couldn't care less. I remember. some time ago, I was co-chair of the program of American Political Science Association, they have an annual program where papers are given and so forth, and, uh, one of the plenaries I was arranging, I had invited Samuel Huntington, and W.W. Rostow, and Howard, and somebody else, I can't remember off the top of my head. Getting Howard to come was really hard. I mean, I thought it would be hilarious, a riot, a circus, why not! Come on Howard! [00:40:12.788] I got him to come, and I told him it would irritate John Silber a great deal if John Silber knew he was invited

to be a plenary speaker at the American Political Science Association -- maybe that's why he came. Probably came 'cause I pestered him so much, but he was not interested in that.

[DH] [inaudible] Bob Moses described -- I thought this was, like, interesting he said he was almost, like, not almost, he said he reminded him of Pete Seeger, movement. [00:40:47.942]

[FFP] He can't sing or play the banjo to the best of my knowledge, uh, just cause he's lanky, I suppose, and also good-humored.

[DH] Yeah.

[FFP] They're both good humored.

[DH] Okay.

[FFP] I don't think that's-I think that's as far as it goes.

[DH] Yeah. That's like, Bob's, like, interpretation too.

[FFP] Right. No he doesn't remind me of Pete Seeger at all. [laugh]

[DE] Oh c'mon making of the American folk hero.

[laughter]

[DH] Okay, I just [mumble] throw that in there. [00:41:27.015] Okay, I'm fine.