

# Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT)

## Aims:

- To critically assess the role played by resources and formal organization in protest
- To explore different strategies of protest employed by different social groups
- To consider whether theories of protest can have political consequences

## Key Reading:

Piven, F. F. And Cloward, R. A. (1977) 'The Structuring of Protest', chapter 1 in *Poor People's Movements: Why they Succeed and How they Fail*, New York: Vintage Books.

## Does formal organization help or hinder protest?

In this workshop we explore Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's critique of Resource Mobilization theory. They argue that formal organization *hinders* protest attempts rather than helps them (because for example, organizations cut deals, sell out, become interested in their own survival). They researched Poor People's Movements in America to challenge the importance of formal organization. As poor people have few resources at their disposal the most effective way they can protest is by disrupting the institutions that rely upon their conformity. Their work - despite being decades old - has sparked recent controversy in the US as Frances Fox Piven has become the target of attack for the journalist Glenn Beck.

### What you need to do:

In class, watch the interview with Frances Fox Piven defending her work against the attack by Glenn Beck. In groups, discuss the following questions:

- Do you think that people have the power to change the society in which they live? All the time? If not, under what conditions is protest possible?
- Do formal organizations help or hinder protest?
- What do you make of Piven and Cloward's argument that the only way for (poor) people to change things is to disrupt the institutions of which they are a part (i.e. withdraw their conformity to the social order)?
- Can social theories have political consequences?



## Instructor notes

Use the interview with Frances Fox Piven defending her work against the attack by Glenn Beck (available on YouTube) to stimulate discussion about:

Different strategies of protest

Why groups who are resource-poor may need to rely upon disruption of institutions rather than formally organized protest

Why certain theories of protest come under scrutiny

Whether theories of protest can have political consequences