Scholar and activist Frances Fox Piven speaks Monday, April 30

By Jennifer McNulty

Internationally known scholar and political activist Frances Fox Piven sees "signs of stirring" on college campuses around the country, where issues of economic justice and democracy are unifying audiences and energizing activists in ways she hasn't seen since the 1960s.

Piven, an internationally known sociologist and political scientist, will discuss "Popular Power in a Global Economy," during a free public lecture tonight (Monday, April 30), at 7 p.m. in the Kresge Town Hall. Piven will discuss how citizens and workers can pursue an agenda for democratic reform in the context of increasing globalization.

"In American history, every period of reform has been fueled by social movements, by popular unrest, and even disruption," Piven said during an interview from her home in New York. "I will talk about how movements well up from the bottom of society, sometimes affect electoral politics, and find their grievances translated into policy."

Piven's study of contemporary social movements focuses on labor power and student power. "I want to debunk the dominant view that globalization drains labor of its traditional power, which is to go on strike," she said. "There's this idea today that capital can flee from organized labor by relocating to Malaysia, or the border with
Mexico. But there are also features of today's 'new economy' that make business very vulnerable to labor power."

Specifically, she said, corporate reliance on technology makes business vulnerable to disruption, such as that seen when supporters of Mexico's Zapatista rebels used the Internet to jam the Mexican government's computers. The Internet is also a valuable tool for organizers of large demonstrations, such as the one during the recent Western Hemisphere trade talks in Quebec and similar actions in Seattle and Prague.

"I think even George Bush has begun to feel the heat on the issue of economic democracy," said Piven. Although Bush's election was a setback for progressives, Piven dismissed the Democratic Party as "useless" and placed her hope for political reform on grassroots movements.

"Remember, Lyndon Baines Johnson was a southern segregationist his entire career until two things happened: He set his eye on the presidency, and the civil rights movement was born," said Piven. "Those two things made him a left-liberal by today's measure."

The origin of today's student focus on economic justice and economic democracy is unclear, said Piven, adding that students themselves are "certainly not hard hit--they're better off" because of policies that have broadened the gap between the rich and poor. "I'm not sure where it comes from," she added thoughtfully. "It seems like it is a moral movement."

Piven is the author and coauthor of numerous books, including the landmark Regulating the Poor and The New Class War. In Why Americans Don't Vote (1988; updated in 2000 as Why Americans Still Don't Vote), she and coauthor Richard Cloward analyzed the role of electoral laws and practices in disenfranchising large numbers of working-class and poor citizens and the impact of disenfranchisement on party development. Piven is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Sociology in the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. She was awarded the American Sociological Association's Distinguished Career Award for the Practice of Sociology in 2000.

Piven's talk is being presented as the Anne Neufeld Levin Spring
Lecture by the UCSC Center for Justice, Tolerance, and Community (CJTC). Cosponsors include the Center for Cultural Studies; the Center for Global, International, and Regional Studies; Colleges Nine and Ten; the Departments of Community Studies, Education, History of Consciousness, Latin American and Latino Studies, Politics, Psychology, Sociology, and Women's Studies; and Kresge College. For more information, call the CJTC at (831) 459-5743.

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