

**The transcripts of an Interview with Dr. Peter Dreier, E.P. Clapp
Distinguished Professor of Politics at Occidental College, the keynote speaker
at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Urban Studies Forum (Spring
2012) with Patricia Najera, PhD student in Urban Studies.**

When you first got your PhD, what were your hopes?

I tell my students that if they don't know what they want to do with the rest of their lives at 18 years of age, this is ok. My career has been like a pinball machine, all over the place. My undergraduate degree was in journalism; I was a newspaper reporter for a while, a community organizer, government official (Assistant to the Mayor of Boston), a researcher for policy think tanks, and a college professor.

My becoming a college professor happened by accident. I went to graduate school to recharge my intellectual batteries, took some courses; I liked it and got my PhD. I wasn't planning on becoming a professor. My PhD is related to work I was doing before; I was at the University of Chicago in the Sociology Department. When I was in Chicago, there was a movement mostly among young journalists to get their newspapers to be more sensitive to issues of race and social justice. They started a magazine called the *Chicago Journalism Review* and they got organized to give reporters a stronger voice in the newsroom. Some young reporters got more involved in the union, the Newspaper Guild. I call this movement the "newsroom democracy" movement. The same thing was happening in other professions, like city planning, social work, and others, where younger activists sought to "democratize" their professions, in part by organizing "radical caucuses" within professional associations and within their work places. Journalists are supposed to be "objective" in their reporting, but that their newspapers were often biased with regard to class, race, and gender issues, and they wanted to change the ways their papers covered urban issues. I wrote my dissertation about the "newsroom democracy" movement. I did "field work" on Chicago's two major daily papers, the Chicago Tribune and Sun-Times. The Tribune had long been a right-wing newspaper in the 40s, 50s, 60s, and even the 70s. The Sun-Times was started in the 1940s by Marshall Field as a liberal, Democratic pro-New Deal and pro-union paper. By the 1970s, when I moved to Chicago, the two papers were basically the same in terms of how they covered the news. I wanted to learn how that happened. I discovered that earlier in the 1900s, Chicago had about 10 daily newspapers; then (in the 1970) the number was reduced to four (although with only two owners, each of whom owned a morning and an afternoon newspaper). Now there are only two daily papers left². My dissertation looked at how the newspaper industry had changed and how the journalism profession had changed.

Do you still stay in touch with newspapers today?

I stay in touch with the media in two ways. I do a lot of free-lance writing, including op-ed columns for newspapers like the LA Times and occasionally the New York Times and Washington Post, and political analysis for publications like The Nation, The Huffington Post, Commonweal, and American Prospect. I also do scholarly research about the media, much of it debunking the myth of a "liberal" bias in the mainstream media, by looking at how they cover different issues. I'm working on a report now about

how the media covers the claims by business groups that government regulations “kill” jobs. From what I’ve learned so far, the media generally accept this notion as if it were true without trying to verify it. About a year ago, I wrote an article about how the media misreported the controversy over ACORN, the community organizing group that Republicans, business groups, and conservative accused of being engaged in widespread “voter fraud.” It turns out that ACORN was not involved in any voter fraud but the mainstream media reported the accusations against ACORN without seeking to verify them. My coauthor and I issued our findings as a report, and then published it in a political science journal. When the report was released, it got a lot of media attention, mostly among liberal columnists and bloggers. .

Was there any backlash on the report?

After I was on Rachel Maddow show to talk about the report, I got lots of emails; many of them “hate” mail. I read them but deleted them. These were not regular emails, the right wing blogosphere was pretty well –organized, and it was clear that the “hate” emails were orchestrated. It got attacked on FOX news, by the right-wing blogger Andrew Breitbart, on the WorldNet daily website (a white supremacist right-wing site whose publisher was the keynote speaker for the Tea Party Convention). These right-wing fantasists are pretty well organized – very impressive. There are conservative fanatics who get up every morning and monitor the news, identify what they consider to be “liberal” bias in the news, and blast it out through the right-wing blogosphere. Often they are just transmitting what they hear on Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Bill O’Reilly shows. While I was doing a lot of writing, TV and radio interviews defending ACORN, the right-wing columnists and bloggers kept repeating the myth that I was being paid by ACORN. I was never paid by ACORN, but they keep repeating it anyway. There are even a bunch of books out there, written by some of these conservative pundits, that say that I had an influence on Obama in his younger days, that he heard me speak at a conference in New York, or that he read some things I wrote, and that helped persuade him to become a community organizer, or even persuaded him to become a “socialist.” This is nonsense. There’s absolutely no evidence for it. But you can find it in some of these right-wing books and then it gets repeated on the conservative blogosphere. If you repeat a lie often enough, some people will believe it.

Were you ever an advisor to the Obama Administration?

In 2008, I actually supported John Edwards before he dropped out, but then I eventually I did support Obama and did some training at Camp Obama for their campaign organizers – field operations. They had these training camps for volunteers, organized by Marshall Ganz (a long-time organizer and now a professor at Harvard) who developed the curriculum and I did some of the training. Also, I was on the Obama campaign Urban Affairs Task Force, although we never actually met. All communication was via email. We vetted ideas about housing and other urban issues, but I don’t think any of it was used in the campaign as part of Obama’s platform. We were never in the same room with Obama.

When did your passion for cities begin?

I grew up in Plainfield, New Jersey, which is outside Newark. Both cities had riots in 1967. There was a lot of racial discrimination and segregation in the city, at my high school, and in the way the police dealt with the city's black population. So, I was aware pretty early in life about the racial injustice around me.

What kinds of things did you see?

The city was racially segregated, in terms of where people lived. I played baseball in high school and many of the players on the team were black, and became my friends. Plainfield had two black ghettos – a lower-income ghetto and a middle-income ghetto. So, it was pretty obvious that the city was segregated. Even before high school, I played on a neighborhood team and kids were mostly white, Jewish, and Italian, the others were mostly black. In high school, I was active in my Reform synagogue youth group. The synagogue was very liberal, worked on civil rights issues; our Rabbi was involved in civil rights in various ways. In the synagogue youth group, we used to do charity work at local black settlement house in the black ghetto of the town. In retrospect, it was charity but when I was 15-16 years old, I did not see it this way. When I was in high school, Michael Harrington came to speak at my temple. He wrote the book, *The Other America*, about poverty in America, in 1962. President Kennedy and President Johnson read it (or at least their top staff people read it), and this book inspired the War on Poverty; and it became a best seller, a book that everyone read. Harrington was a brilliant speaker; I later became friends with him. He came to speak at my temple, when I was 15 or 16 years old. He said that poverty was part of America, part of the economic system that some people benefit from the existence of poverty. He presented a structural analysis and pointed out that to address poverty we need policies and a movement that promotes social justice. He was a socialist; he did not talk about socialism. He talked about social justice. He opened my eyes. I read the book in high school. When I got to college, I majored in sociology and journalism and wanted to change the world, and got involved in a variety of activist causes, including working with the poor in the ghetto adjacent to the Syracuse campus, and the anti-war movement.

So once you obtained your PhD, what was your first job?

I received my PhD at the University of Chicago in 1977. But before I finished the dissertation, I moved to California in 1975 to be a visiting professor at UC-Santa Barbara and to work on Tom Hayden's campaign for the U.S. Senate. He was one of the first 60s radicals who decided to run for political office. He ran against the incumbent Democrat, Senator John Tunney. His campaign was about "economic democracy," about building on the movements for the environment, tenant's rights, workers' rights, and other issues. Tom ran a great campaign and got almost 40% of the vote. Tunney won the Democratic primary but lost the run-off to a conservative Republican. Tom Hayden was eventually elected to the California legislature and had a big impact. I got my PhD in 1977 and moved to Boston to take a teaching job at Tufts University. It taught there until 1983. While teaching at Tufts, I got involved in a lot of community organizing and public interest projects. Every few years I took a year off, to do some organizing work to not lose touch. I helped start a statewide tenant rights organization in Massachusetts. I worked with the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group, one of the networks

of PIRG groups started by Ralph Nader. I did some work with a community-organizing group called Massachusetts Fair Share.

It is great that you would go back to the community to do organizing work.

Staying engaged in the real world of politics and organizing helps my teaching and my writing. It connects me to things that are happening. If you don't do this, your teaching gets stale. You are teaching without doing. I'm concerned that there are a lot of so-called "radical" professors on campus today who have no clue about the real world of social activism and reform. This is especially true among scholars who are most of the "post modern" movement. This is really one of my pet peeves. They think they are radical talking about economic injustice, gender injustice, and racial injustice. But when students question faculty and say "ok, you say how screwed up the world is, but should we be doing about it," these so-called "radical" faculty say some version of: "I don't know and it's not my job. I just tell you how bad things are." Students feel awful. Students get depressed and demoralized. I've come across faculty who teach about racial issues who claim that things are as bad as now as fifty or sixty years ago, during the Jim Crow era. That is ridiculous, and factually incorrect, but many students, who have no other historical perspective, hear this and believe it. Saying this means that they think that the Civil Rights movement had no impact whatsoever, which is demoralizing and untrue. If you believe that – if you believe that progressive movements haven't improved our society in different ways, then why get up in the morning and do anything? Of course, there is still racism and sexism and pollution, and so on. But that doesn't mean that the civil rights movement, feminist movement, environmental movement didn't make a big difference in our everyday lives, in public policy, in how we think about things. There is an attack on Planned Parenthood right now. Why? Because thanks to the women's movement, women now have the right to an abortion. When I was growing up, abortions were illegal. It's important that faculty get involved in what is going on to give students a sense of hope.

I am lucky that I teach at a college that allows me the freedom to get students engaged. I teach a course in community organizing, where all students do internships with community groups, unions, environmental justice groups, women's rights groups, and others. We started a program called Campaign Semester that allows our students to spend an entire semester off campus working on a political campaign and getting a full-semester credit for it. Next fall (2012) we'll have 32 students working all over the country, in battleground races, learning about the real world of political campaigns. I'm on the board of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy; I work with tenants' rights groups and community groups like the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE). I started a parent-organizing group in public school system in Pasadena, where most of the students come from low income, immigrant's families. This involvement makes me a better teacher, connects me with students, helps me help them get jobs and internships in LA, or Boston, New York, DC and elsewhere.

How did you transition from the Academy to government?

I started teaching at Tufts University, outside Boston. There were a lot of tenants' rights groups working on battles for rent control in Boston, Somerville, Cambridge, and other cities. But the real estate

industry was really powerful and tried to get the state legislature to pre-empt the ability of local cities to adopt rent control and laws protecting tenants from unfair evictions and skyrocketing rents and condominium conversions. But there was no statewide advocacy or lobbying group at the state level. So, I took a year off during a sabbatical, and with a few other activists, I raised some money, approached some foundations, and started a statewide tenant rights group called the Massachusetts Tenants Organization. It played an important role in changing the balance of power around housing issues in the state.

This is no small feat.

The Massachusetts Tenants Organization didn't organize tenants in their buildings. That was the job of local tenants groups. We were an umbrella group that worked on statewide issues or helped strengthen local groups. But we also engaged in politics. We created a Massachusetts Tenants PAC (political action committee). We started endorsing pro-tenant candidates for office and mobilizing tenants to register to vote, educate them about who is running for office and how the real estate lobbyist was taking their rent money and throwing it to politicians who were evicting them and raising their rent. This was straightforward.

I had some of my students working on a research project for MTO that taught them research skills but also showed them how to use research in grassroots campaigns. We identified the biggest landlords and developers in Boston and figured out which candidates and politicians got their campaign contributions. Then we researched how the City Council members voted on tenants' rights issues like rent control, not surprisingly, the politicians with the biggest campaign contributions from the real estate industry had the worst voting records on tenants' right issues. We gave our report to the Boston Globe and the Boston Herald. This ended up on the front page and generated a lot of attention and controversy. The students were proud to have worked on the project. Students felt like they were making a difference. One of the guys we supported was Ray Flynn, city councilor from South Boston, a working class neighborhood. Flynn was the biggest ally of tenant's movement, so he got our endorsement for council, had the most votes citywide. Back then all the city council members were elected at large, he won. A few years later, he decided to for mayor. I worked on his campaign. When he won in 1983, he asked me to come work for him at City Hall. So, that was my next so-called "career" move.

During the campaign, I worked on policy issues, wrote speeches, and press releases, and helped get tenants groups to work in his campaign. He was elected Mayor in 1983. It was a huge shock, because he didn't have much money, and people didn't think he had a chance to win. There were eight people running and the two candidates with the most votes got into the run-off. So, Flynn and Mel King, an African American radical, wound up in the run-off. Most of the academic radicals in Boston supported King, while most of the community organizing groups and unions supported Flynn. When Flynn won, he asked me if I wanted to work for him. My only experience in City Hall was either protesting outside or testifying at a Council Chamber meeting on behalf of rent control. I didn't know how government actually worked, but I learned quickly.

Was it uncomfortable?

It was uncomfortable at first. Until then, I never looked at the city's budget. Now I tell my students you have to know what is in the budget, and where the money comes from, and how much discretionary funding a city has. You also have to know what kind of legal authority a city has, or can have, on various issues. Everyone knows that cities are involved in zoning issues, or police and fire protection, or distributing federal funds like Community Development Block Grants. But progressives need to know how to push the boundaries of what cities can do. For example, in Boston we adopted a tax, or actually a fee, on developers, which was put into a housing trust fund. This was called "linkage" policy. The developers claimed that the city didn't have the legal authority to do it. They challenge it in court, but we won. In 1994, Baltimore was the first city to adopt a "living wage" law. Nobody had tried that before. Now more than 100 cities have it. This is an assignment I now use in my Urban Politics class. I ask students to write a memo to the Mayor and make recommendations on different issues. Students have to know what a city, county or state government can and cannot do. When I went to work for Flynn in City Hall, I did not know any of that. I ended up being one of the mayors' Public Policy advisors and (on an informal basis) his ambassador to progressive groups. For example, he worked closely with groups in Boston working on bank redlining, and then we worked with national groups like ACORN to change the federal laws involving lending discrimination. Because Flynn was the president of the US Conference of Mayors at one point, he had a lot of national visibility and influence. . It was a joy to work for him; he was very progressive, and willing to take risks to move an agenda. He thought like an organizer, not just like a politician.

What was his tenure?

He was elected three times, and then President Clinton appointed him to be the ambassador to the Vatican, because Flynn was very religious Catholic, very pro-life.

Flynn was the Ambassador to the Vatican for a couple of years and came back wanting to run for Governor but in Massachusetts you cannot win the Democratic primary if you are Pro-life. So, he figured out that he could not win the Democratic nomination and decided not to run. I don't agree with his views on abortion but he never imposed his views on Boston's municipal hospital. He never tried to stop abortions at the city hospital. On Issues like homelessness, housing, poverty, rent control, unions, he was great. His second inaugural party was supposed to take place at a union hotel. Right before the inaugural event was supposed to take place, the hotel management imposed a policy requiring the housekeepers to use a short handle broom for cleaning. Basically, they would have to be on their hands and knees to clean the floors. The union complained about this and told the management that this was unfair. To show his support for the union, Mayor Flynn cancelled his Inauguration party at the hotel in protest. This was a lot of money. They were embarrassed and they changed their policy. He would do stuff like that. He was very principled about things like this. I think part of the reason was that his

mother had been a housekeeper, cleaning the floors in Boston's downtown office buildings, and he never forgot his roots in the working class.

How much influence did you have on the Mayor?

Flynn was predisposed to hire progressives, including people with both policy expertise and community organizing experience. But was also like FDR. He hired people with very different views, so he could listen to a spectrum of views, and decide which one to support. He liked to listen to his top aides argue about something while he was in the room. It helped him get a perspective. Soon after Flynn took office, the Boston Herald (conservative paper in town), said there were two wings in the Flynn Administration – they called them the “Sandinistas” and the “Americans.” I was considered one of the Sandinistas. On most policy issues, Flynn took the progressive side. When he learned that Boston’s banks were engaged in widespread redlining (mortgage lending discrimination), he agreed to wage a campaign to hold the banks accountable and reinvest in the city’s neglected neighborhoods, with loans for affordable housing, new bank branches, and so on. Some of his more conservative advisors warned him to steer clear of this controversy, but Flynn embraced it. So, I hired an academic researcher to do a report on redlining at the city. Fortunately, because of the federal Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (passed in 1975), banks were required to make public a lot of information about the race, gender, income, and address of everyone who applied for a mortgage, and whether or not the bank rejected or accepted their application. Because I was in charge of Housing Policy and in contact with community groups and nonprofit community development corporations, I knew that they were having a hard time getting bank loans, but the HMDA study provided it with hard data. It showed that black and Hispanic people with the same income were turned down for loans more often than whites, and that minority neighborhoods were being ignored by banks. We knew that the banks would not be happy when the results of the study were released. And they would be upset with the mayor. He knew it too, but he was willing to take the heat. By then, the Boston Federal Reserve had done a HMDA study of its own and came to the same conclusion. We issued our report and it was on the front page of the paper for weeks. Congressmen Joe Kennedy and Barney Frank were on the House Banking committee, and they came to Boston held hearings about this issue, did a study. This became a national issue and was in the New York Times. Flynn loved this. He liked sticking up for ordinary people against powerful business groups – banks, landlords, developers, and others. But part of my job was to make his job easier by making sure that activists community groups, tenants groups, and others were out there beating up on the banks and protesting redlining, so Flynn could help negotiate a settlement. It wasn’t quite good cop/bad cop, but something like that. It was kind of an “inside/outside” game.

The mayor had a second office in a municipal building, where he would sometimes do work to get away from City Hall. We had a meeting with a group of CEOs of Boston’s largest banks. I remember Flynn said to them something like: I can be your worst enemy or your best friend. The banks were being hammered by every activist group and media. I put together a plan that we wanted the bank to invest \$800 million dollars over 5 years, new housing loans, new branches, hire more people of color. Flynn liked the plan. Some of the community groups did not think it was big enough. They wanted twice as much. That was a great dynamic. Flynn got to look “reasonable.” After all this hammering in the media,

by members of Congress, by activist groups, and by Mayor Flynn, the major banks got together and agreed on a plan. They agreed to create branches in poor and black neighborhoods, hire people of color for tellers and loan officer positions, expand mortgage loans in minority and low-income areas for affordable housing, and generally change the way they did business. It was very dramatic. Flynn loved it. He governed like an organizer. He was generally a progressive Mayor, generally he gave me a long leash, liked the drama. He had a real fire in the belly; he really cared about the poor. He would often go to homeless shelters, talk with people, and serve food, on his own, without the media there. He had a good heart.

What was your greatest accomplishment during your tenure? On the flipside, is there anything you wish to have done differently?

I think the highlight was the bank redlining campaign that I just described. It really made a difference in the lives of people in Boston. It helped nurture the many nonprofit community development organizations in Boston that were involved in improving neighborhoods. It helped bridge the racial gap, which was a big deal in Boston, because the city had gone through the ugly “busing wars” of the 1970s. It was very violent, contentious, and Boston was very divided along class and race and neighborhood lines. Flynn came into office wanting to be a racial healer, as well as an economic healer, and I think he succeeded in many ways. He also had a national platform as President of the US Conference of Mayors, as spokesperson for America’s cities, and he used that platform to attack the reactionary policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations, particularly toward the poor. One of my proudest accomplishments was a line I wrote for Flynn that he used when he appeared on “Meet the Press” while George H.W. Bush was president. It was around 1989 or 1990. The economy was in a tailspin and people were losing their jobs, and Bush wasn’t doing anything about it. Flynn said: “What President Bush doesn’t understand is that the biggest problem facing American families today is not the ‘red menace’ but the ‘pink slip.’” That line got into Newsweek the following week as one of the best quotes of the week.

I enjoyed working in City Hall, but I was lucky to work for a mayor who was progressive. I don’t think I could work for a politician who wasn’t progressive. I wish I knew back then what I know now. I would have been more effective. I worked for Flynn from 1984 until 1992. We accomplished a lot, but we could have done more if we -- the progressives in City Hall – had been better organized. I was pretty outspoken and sometimes became the subject of controversy, which didn’t help Flynn. One time I called a landlord a “slumlord” in a newspaper story and the landlord sued me. He was a slumlord, and he didn’t win the suit, but it was a diversion. There were times like that that the Mayor could have fired me, but he didn’t. I forgot that I was speaking on behalf of the Mayor; I was representing the Mayor when I spoke. It turned out fine. He could have fired me over that but he did not.

When I was working in City Hall, I always knew that I would eventually go back and teach college, but I was in no hurry to do so. In 1992, I got a call from a friend of mine who taught at Occidental College in Los Angeles. They had just gotten an endowed chair in political science and he was recruiting me to see if I was interested. I scheduled to come to Los Angeles for an interview. My interview took place a week after the April 1992 “Rodney King” riots. My friend drove me all over LA. There were National Guards

carrying rifles in open jeeps. You could still smell the smoke from the fires. I figured that LA would be an interesting city, a real laboratory for urban reform. . If I was ever going to teach on urban politics, then I knew this could be a place. So, I decided to take the job. I was lucky because Flynn quit six months later to become Clinton's Ambassador to the Vatican. The next Mayor would not have kept me on, and I would have been out of work. So, fortunately, I jumped ship at the right time and went back to academia in 1993.

Since you have been at Occidental College, you teach courses and write articles. Why do you do this? What audience are you trying to reach?

I have a job that provides access to lots of information-time to write. I also have tenure, so I don't have to worry about job security. Since joining the Occidental faculty, I've written or co written four books and lots of academic articles, but mostly what I write is for a broader audience, in newspapers, magazines, and websites. I think it is important to translate ideas and come out of academia for the general public. I want my work to have an influence in shaping public opinion and public policy, in part by working with unions, environmental groups, and community groups, or working with progressive politicians. For example, I write a lot of op-ed columns for the Los Angeles Times. And I've written reports, on my own and with some of my colleagues, on various issues, on behalf of various nonprofit advocacy groups. We often hire students to help us with the research, which gives them real hands-on experience and helps them see how the real world of policy and politics works. I've worked with the LA Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), ACCE, the hotel workers union, and others. I've been on the board of the United Way, on several City Council task forces, and worked with the Catholic Archdiocese on housing and homeless issues. I think it is important, that Professors have an audience beyond academia. It helps to have a Dr. in front of your name and a PhD at the end of your name. It gives you credibility. You can have an audience beyond academia. When Rachel Maddow interviewed me on her TV show, she was able to say that my research about media coverage of ACORN was done by an academic and published in an academic journal. This sounds better than a report by an advocacy watchdog group. It means it was vetted by academics. Publishing helps with tenure and legitimizes your work for the general public.

I like to write to general audiences, I want to write what people can understand. My latest book is a book of popular history, "The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame," which profiles activists, artists, academics, politicians, musicians, and others who have been involved in the great social justice movements. At some colleges, it is hard to get tenure unless you write academic stuff, jump through the academic hoops, and even if nobody reads what you write. More and more colleges and universities are now recognizing that "applied" research is important, too, and are counting it as a standard for tenure and promotion. At Oxy, we are trying to create a situation where faculty to get recognized for research in the community.

What are the most pressing issues facing students today?

Debt is the most pressing issue facing students today. Most students come out of college burdened with debt that takes years to pay off. It is the biggest burden facing many working class and middle class families. It means that our government isn't investing enough in financial aid for students. That is really shortsighted. College The price of college is going up faster than family income. The percentage of tuition covered by the Pell grants and other forms of financial aid is declining. Obama did a good thing by eliminating private lenders processing student loans profiting from this practice. In France, students go to college free, tuition is supported by the government. In California, 30-40 years ago, it used to be free. Now it's very expensive, not as expensive as private college. We have to pay to go to college.

What do you tell students who cannot get jobs?

For students who major in Urban Environmental Policy, there are lots of jobs. Our students tend to go to graduate school in urban planning, or public health, or public policy, or social work. A lot of them want to work with advocacy groups, unions, and community organizing groups. The labor movement has a lot of jobs. Unions generally pay reasonably well. They are always looking for organizers, researchers, even communications folks. I don't mind using my connections to help students get jobs. I see that as part of my job as a teacher. The problem right now is that Republicans changing the law on reducing interest rate on student loans.