

Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States, by Mimi Abramovitz. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996. Paper, \$13.00. Pp. 160.

It is difficult to imagine a more timely occasion for release of Mimi Abramovitz's *Under Attack, Fighting Back*. Given the recent assault on welfare recipients by Washington and the mainstream media, culminating in President Clinton's signing of the welfare bill, the book's relevance is beyond dispute. The author challenges some of the common misconceptions that have led to this ideological shift against welfare recipients. Her primary intent is to offer a perspective on the issue of public spending for poor women and children that is an alternative to ideas — liberal as well as conservative — typically advanced by the mainstream press.

Her critique is, for the most part, very effective. To begin with, she argues convincingly that the media-perpetrated attacks on the poor, rather than being a recent phenomenon, are rooted deep in the earlier history of this country. She devotes an entire chapter to tracing the historical development of social programs, as well as the history of backlash against their beneficiaries. In all periods of our history, poverty has been a consequence of irregular work and low wages. While it may appear that in recent years the proliferation of single-parent families is a major cause of worsening poverty, Abramovitz debunks this myth by presenting evidence that these households are in the minority of all those in poverty, and that growing job insecurity and continually falling wages continue to be the foremost determinants of what is for many families a worsening economic situation.

Abramovitz's thorough research no doubt contributes to the effectiveness of her arguments. For instance, her analysis of the fact that so many are misled into associating single mothers with poverty is quite revealing. She separates this belief into all of its component misconceptions — single women on welfare are lazy, they typically stay on welfare, welfare breaks up families, single mothers on welfare continue to have children for the money, etc. — and smashes them one by one with the statistical evidence she has uncovered. Abramovitz is particularly persuasive in her criticism of the anti-welfare (or market-biased) policy framework, arguing that critics of welfare tend to downplay the difficulty of balancing work and family, simply because "household production" has no market exchange-value. She reminds us that, contrary to what the neoclassical model would predict, only half of *all* mothers in the United States with young children participate in the labor market.

Abramovitz also provides a convincing explanation for the uphill battle faced by defenders of the current welfare system in their fight against the critics of welfare on the right. She notes that most welfare advocates take the position that, since society is responsible for the well-being of all its

members, the social “safety net” is a suitable correction for the imperfections of an otherwise functional system (the “liberal” view). Many liberals also see the scapegoating of poor, single women as unacceptable, a view they share with Abramovitz. Nonetheless, she takes them to task for missing the forest for the trees. Eliciting sympathy for the recipients is counterproductive if it is the sole basis for defending the current welfare system. She notes that radicals (or Marxists) take a broader view of the problem. They see that poverty is an inevitable consequence of the profit imperative of capitalism. As a result, many Marxists tend to view social programs as a tool of the right, exercised in order to forestall the social upheaval that might otherwise result from unfettered exploitation.

Abramovitz maintains, however, that this profit imperative is inseparable from the right’s need to blame welfare mothers for the nation’s economic ills. Since the bottom lines of the insurance, pharmaceutical, and military-based industries (to name a few) would suffer if their inefficiencies were blamed for the weakening economy (because they might lose subsidies or face harsher government regulations), they must use their influence on the media to redirect the finger of blame away from themselves. However, blaming the poor in general does not suffice. There are too many “have nots” for a media campaign against them to be credible. Targeting the blame on a narrower group, namely single mothers, achieves the goal of diverting attention from the private sector and presenting the majority of the middle and working classes with a viable, if defenseless, villain.

If the book has a weakness, it is its lack of concrete policy alternatives. Although she presents some policy approaches offered by feminist scholars in the third chapter, Abramovitz never makes clear which side of the debate she is on. Is she, after all, in favor of preserving the current welfare system? Or might she favor scrapping it in favor of a more progressive negative income tax? This is not readily apparent. The book also has a few analytical shortcomings. For instance, Abramovitz notes, importantly, that about half of single women who rely on welfare have no other recourse because they are battered women escaping their abusive husbands. But she does not emphasize sufficiently the role of the patriarchal system in reinforcing such behavior in families and in the condemnation of single women in general. Also, the book lacks sufficient analysis of within-gender class conflict, such as the ongoing discord between the National Organization of Women and the National Welfare Rights Organization.

These weaknesses, however, do not undermine the informative, persuasive, and, most important, timely nature of Abramovitz’s book. Her final chapter reporting on recent work by several grassroots organizations, while perhaps a bit optimistic, nevertheless sends an important message that relevant change, if it is to occur, will have to come from these popu-

lar, democratic movements. As an analytical tool to help effect that change, Abramovitz's work is highly significant.

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The Deng Xiaoping Era: An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese Socialism 1978–1994, by Maurice Meisner. New York: Hill and Wang, 1996. \$30.00. Pp. xiv, 544.

Meisner dismisses as illusion the conviction of some foreign commentators that the turn to capitalism is certain to have a loosening, even liberalizing effect on China's hard politics. In his view, Chinese capitalism requires a political dictatorship prepared to be brutal. He observes that the bureaucracy has become the essence of the new bourgeoisie, its capital seized by corruption; that China's chief asset in competing in the global market, and in particular with other Asian economies, is cheaper labor; and that cheaper labor is necessary also to maximize the surplus extracted from it which provides most of the capital needed to maintain the heady growth rate. The regime has to hone its coercive capabilities. So Meisner calls the Chinese present bureaucratic capitalism.

He cites supporting evidence in the past, in particular the 1989 events. What began that summer as a student protest movement was soon joined by scores of thousands of Beijing workers, some of them organized into three new unions that challenged the Party-run unions. Delegations from the major factories marched with the students and one of the new unions had a headquarters tent at Tiananmen, but the underreported outpouring of workers took on the temporarily successful task, away from the square and the television crews, of constructing barricades at intersections to keep troops from penetrating a city in revolt. What took place in Beijing had smaller replications elsewhere in China. The regime was seized by what Meisner calls "the Polish fear," and that is what decided Deng Xiaoping to crush the movement with live bullets. Tanks moving against a relative handful of students singing the Internationale in the square crushed the headquarters tent of the Workers' Autonomous Union, killing 20 inside. The greatest slaughter, of workers, took place away from the square. Meisner estimates that