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*Under Attack: Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States.* Mimi Abramovitz.

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## Book Notes

Mimi Abramovitz, *Under Attack: Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996. \$26.00 hardcover, \$13.00 papercover.

The idea that governments have a responsibility to promote the well-being of their citizens through extensive social programs has been under sustained attack since the early 1980s. The attack has perhaps been most vigorous in the United States where significant retrenchments in the nation's welfare system have taken place. Although less dramatic changes have occurred in other countries, developments in the United States are currently influencing policy decisions in these nations, and it is clear that the fundamental principles on which the welfare state have been based are being undermined.

These trends have evoked different responses. While some are pessimistic believing that little can be done to counteract the anti-welfare tide, others are more sanguine rejecting the idea that the welfare state is facing a serious crisis. Despite recent retrenchments, they believe that the welfare state has not been significantly altered. Yet others contend that new ideas which can invigorate social welfare debates are required. They point out that altruistic appeals to the electorate and political leaders are being ignored because people no longer believe in the welfare system. New proposals, suited to the needs of a post-industrial economy, are needed.

Mimi Abramovitz rejects these ideas and injects a new urgency into discussions on the future of the welfare state. She argues that the attack on the welfare state is essentially an attack on poor women waged in an increasingly polarized classist and racist society. It is an attack which must be counteracted not by esoteric academic discussions but by a renewed activism in which women themselves fight back. Abramovitz points out that activism among middle class women played a critical role in the creation of the welfare state in the early decades of this century. During the 1970s, women welfare recipients organized effectively through the welfare rights movement to make the system work for them. Today, a similar approach is needed to resist the attack

on welfare. Revealing an impressive knowledge of the history of welfare organizing, Abramovitz argues that various women's and welfare organizations are already challenging the attack on the welfare state. They need to be supported and joined by progressives everywhere to ensure that the needy and most vulnerable are protected.

This lively and informative book deserves to be widely read. It provides an excellent history of AFDC and the activities of various women's groups who have campaigned hard over the years for improvements in services to the poor. While it remains to be seen whether popular movements can indeed resist the powerful anti-welfare forces at work in American society, the book's message is a powerful one.

Vic George and Peter Taylor-Gooby (Eds.), *European Welfare Policy: Squaring the Circle*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. \$49.95 hardcover.

There is much more recognition today of the complex interactions that take place between social welfare and the economy. While social policy analysis previously paid little attention to economic issues, the dramatic changes which have taken place in the Western industrial nations over the last few decades demand a new analysis of the way social policy decisions affect and are affected by economic events. A discussion of this kind is needed everywhere but especially in Europe where high rates of unemployment, increased global competition and disagreements about the economic implications of a single currency require extensive debate and new perspectives.

In their introduction to this book, the editors emphasize the need for a proper understanding of the way economic and social policy concerns relate to each other. However, the book does not succeed in providing an incisive analysis of the issues or in presenting any significant new ideas. Rather, it offers country case studies of social welfare in seven European countries. In addition to the usual emphasis which is placed in comparative studies on Britain, France, Sweden and Germany, there are informative accounts of developments in Italy, Greece and Spain. While these accounts do touch on the costs of social programs, taxation and increasing demands for efficiency, the book could have addressed