

INTERVIEW WITH MIMI ABRAMOVITZ, DSW, HUNTER COLLEGE, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

*In August, 2004, I sat down with Mimi Abramovitz, DSW, at the Policy Conference in Charleston, South Carolina, where she had delivered the keynote address. My interview with her covered a wide range of themes, beginning with the childhood influences that helped form her commitment to social justice which has guided her career as an activist, academic, and researcher. My first introduction to Professor Abramovitz was through the seminal article published in **Social Work** in 1983, "Everyone's on Welfare: The Role of Redistribution in Social Policy." Her insights were revelatory for a beginning social policy teacher and profoundly influenced a generation of academics and activists. Her analysis was updated in 2001 and appeared in **Social Work** as "Everyone is Still on Welfare." In between these articles Professor Abramovitz developed powerful and nuanced analyses of the impact of the welfare state on women in two books: **Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present**, published in 1996, and **Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States**, published in 2000. She has published many other articles analyzing the family ethic in welfare policy. She is a national leader in the debate over welfare reform and the relationship between gender and poverty. In examining the welfare state through a gender lens, Mimi Abramovitz has made a significant contribution not only to social work, but also to women's studies, social history and sociology. She continues to be active in welfare rights organizations in New York City, where she lives and teaches at Hunter College, CUNY. A hero of mine since I began teaching social policy, Mimi Abramovitz offered a moving and passionate account of a life spent committed to social activism.*

Jillian Jimenez, Ph.D.

JJ: When you look at your background, what do you think were important influences that shaped your professional identity?



Professor Abramovitz, 2004

MA: I came from a family that did not have a lot of money, and from third grade on I grew up in a very wealthy community. Living there I always felt different from the people I went to school with. My parents explained the differences by saying that our family had different values, that we were not materialistic. I think they were trying to make me feel better, and to ease the difference between my orlon sweaters and the cashmere sweaters of my peers. So that sense of being different, of having less and of knowing it, well, I guess that has shaped my professional identity, given that I ended up in social work and writing about poor women.

JJ: Anything else?

MA: I think another event that shaped my thinking over the years was that when I was in second grade, the house that I was living in was "highway" removed. I lived on



Mimi Abramovitz, 1944

the first floor of a two-story, wood-framed house. The family living above us was headed by a male factory worker and his wife and their 12 kids. They were struggling a lot just to make ends meet—and I saw that. But it turned out that the house was in the path of a new expressway that was being built. So the small two-story house along with many others in the Queens New York neighborhood was “highway removed.” The state literally lifted the whole house off of its foundation, put it on a flat bed truck, and set it down in a new location—also in Queens.

JJ: That was quite a dislocation, wasn't it?

MA: Yes, and the house was never the same after that. And it was relocated next to a swamp-like marsh. That's when my family left Queens. We moved out to that rich Long Island town that I mentioned. My parents rented one of four small apartments in an attached building. We had 4 and 1/2 rooms. I have one sister so there were 4 of us in these four rooms. Although I went to school with very rich kids, our building was not in the wealthy section of town. We were not on “the other side of the tracks” but there was a real economic difference that could not be missed. It was disruptive to be moved like that and then to be surrounded by so many large homes and people with so many other advantages. I think the contrast between my family's circumstances and the affluence of those around me gave me a (self) consciousness of class.

JJ: It was a *deus ex machina* that pulled you out of Queens and into a privileged neighborhood.

MA: Right. Then four or five years later my parents had moved up economically, but not a whole bunch. But they could afford to buy a small one family house. That my mother was also working I am sure made this possible. I was about to enter junior high school. But that reality also made me feel different—none of my school friends had working mothers and I was self conscious of that.

JJ: Did religion play a big part in your childhood and early life?

MA: Yes and no. I grew up in a Jewish working class family. My family wasn't very religious, they were rather ecumenical. For example, we always invited a non-Jewish friend to our Seder, and the Seder focused more on the fight for freedom than on religion per se. My parents were liberals. They infused us with humanitarian values, a set of beliefs that I think also laid the foundation for my later progressive values. My parents were not very religious in the traditional sense, but they imbued me with respect for the values of social justice that is part of the Jewish religion.

JJ: What about politics?

MA: When I was in high school my mother marched with SANE, against the atomic bomb. When I got to college the civil rights movement was erupting. I now know the difference between being politically formulated and not being formulated. I guess I had these values from my family and had been exposed to some social movements, but I really had not put the ideas together for myself in any coherent way.

JJ: Why did you want to leave New York and your family and go to Michigan to college?

MA: My family always expected me to go to college, but they wanted me to go to a local school—Queens College—which they felt that they could afford. It was a public college and was probably free at the time. The idea was that I would live at home and they would buy me a car, and what 18 year old did not want a car? But something in me—I cannot say what—knew I did not want to do that. I knew I wanted to go away. I really didn't know where I wanted to go. I heard about the University of Michigan from friends of my parents. I applied for early admission and I got accepted in November. It was a simple as that. It was a big school and I guess I felt I could find what I wanted when I got clearer, so I was more comfortable at a big school than at a small school. Even though I knew you could get "lost" in the bigness, I think it seemed safer to me.

JJ: Getting back to politics, you didn't have a political ideology when you started college?

MA: That's right. I had a value system that lead me into the burgeoning civil rights movement on campus. It was a heady time, the rebirth of the student movement too. The Northern students were trying to support the effort to desegregate the lunch counters and the Woolworth's Department store was the target. So I spent a lot of time picketing Woolworths in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This was the time that Tom Hayden was the editor of the college newspaper (*The Michigan Daily*) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was forming on campus. Hayden is probably better known as the California politician he later became. So another major influence on my thinking was the student movement that surrounded me on the campus and then the civil rights movement.

It furthered the development of my political consciousness.

JJ: What did you do when you graduated from College?

MA: I was married for a year by the time I was graduated from the University of Michigan. We moved to New Haven so that my husband, Bob, could take a psychiatric residency at the Yale Child Study Center. I took a job at the Connecticut State Welfare Department, but we both continued to do civil rights work in New Haven. The major group that was active in New Haven at the time was a local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). I spent a good amount of time in the civil rights movement, dealing mostly with local housing issues. During this time, the war in Vietnam was also brewing as the US was becoming more involved. A group of Yale faculty and students formed the Yale Committee Against the War in Vietnam. Some Yale and some community people became involved. I became active in the anti-war movement.

JJ: You were at Yale the same time Kerry was?

MA: Yes, I guess so and Bush too; but we did not hang out together. (smile)

JJ: So your first work after college included political action?

MA: Not my job. I was working for the state welfare department as a case-worker with families receiving Aid To Families With Dependent Children (AFDC). I worked there for two years before I went back for my MSW. But at the same time I got involved in the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement in New Haven, Later I also became

active in New Haven's women's movement, which grew out of women's discontent with how they were treated in the other movements of the time. So I was one of the founders in New Haven of what became the local women's movement.

JJ: Did you experience discrimination working in those movements, as Sara Evans talked about in her book, *Personal Politics*¹?

MA: Yes I think we all did—we didn't have words for it then, but it happened to every woman—doing the "housework" of the organization. I'm not sure we knew what was happening until afterwards. You need to label these things, and the women's movement put some labels on these practices.

JJ: They seemed like normal, but annoying activities.

MA: Yes, exactly. I was also organizing anti war marches. A group of women from the women's movement organized buses down to Washington to protest the war in addition to the other activities of the women's movement.

JJ: The "sixties" had a big influence on you, didn't it?

MA: In many ways I was a child of the 60's. I feel that I was at the right place at the right time. I feel very fortunate growing up when I did. I think this was a wonderful period, a dynamic, hopeful period and I guess that living through it has shaped my personal, political and professional self. It shows up in my dissertation; it shows up in how I teach now; it shows up in my research.

JJ: How did you get into social work?

MA: In college [at University of Michigan] I was a sociology major. I did not know what I wanted to do career wise. After college with my BA, I worked in New Haven for 2 years as a welfare worker, doing eligibility investigations in the AFDC program. It was a period when the welfare department was being liberalized so you could be a bit more responsive and generous. You could actually get resources for people. But not everyone was of this mind. The first day I got there, this guy who was a schoolteacher and who worked at the welfare department to make extra money during the summer said "Oh, you're new here," I said, "Yes" and he said, "You too will find out they're all whores." That was my introduction to the welfare department! What a thing to say to a new worker -or to anyone for that matter. I was there for two years with a huge caseload of at least 90 families. But in some parts of the neighborhood, I had the same caseload for most of the time. The families in the tightly packed blocks in which I did the home visits got to know me, my black state car and my black notebook—the standard welfare department worker's "equipment." I did my best to help the families that I worked with. That's also where I began to learn how to use departmental manuals full of "do's and don'ts" to help my clients.

My work at the welfare department was one of the events in my life that led me to go to social work school. I was still living in New Haven, so I began commuting to Columbia School of Social Work in New York City.

JJ: What did social work school do for you?

MA: Social work school gave me words, labels, and explanations for what I had been seeing in my work with women on

welfare. It also put the whole public assistance program in some kind of historical context, which I loved, and which influenced my work to this day.

JJ: What did you do in your MSW program?

MA: Originally, I was going to be a psychiatric social worker, in part because that is what I thought social work was all about. But during the summer before I entered the program, I met a Columbia graduate who told me about a new program called C.O. (community organizing). It was all new to me. But given what I had been doing in the civil rights and other movements, C.O. seemed to be right up my alley. So when I got to Columbia I took a double major—casework and community organizing. Of course it turns out that I really was a C.O. person. And the C.O. program was going through some changes at the time; it was becoming what it was for the next 20 years, moving from staffing social agencies and federations to organizing “the people.” C.O. was deeply influenced by the then new war on poverty—which had a huge impact on social work too, especially the idea of “maximum feasible participation,” the mantra of the anti-poverty program—and clearly echoed the fundamental social work values of self-determination.

JJ: What kinds of things did you do as a C.O. student then?

MA: There was a convergence of a lot of things. In my second placement I was in a new community mental health center in New Haven. My job was to organize an advisory board for the neighborhood field station, which I did. Then the chickens came home to roost. Five years later my husband was being considered for a job at the Yale Child Study Center. The job was

as a psychiatrist in the Hill Health Center—a federally funded neighborhood health center that was in conjunction with the Yale Child Study Center. So Bob was interviewed by the Hill Health Center’s community advisory board; and believe it or not, some of the women that I had organized a few years earlier were now the leaders and they interviewed him.

JJ: What about your first year placement?

MA: My first year’s placement was in a public housing project doing tenant organizing. That was an interesting time. One of the biggest problems in the lives of the tenants was arbitrary rules, surveillance, and intimidation by the public housing authority. I thought, wow, this would be an important issue to organize around. But the tenants were terrified to do anything to confront the situation for fear that they would lose their housing—and they were probably right. My field placement was in the office of the anti-poverty program located near to the project. I don’t think the poverty program people wanted me to touch the housing authority issue either. In the end, the tenants decided to deal with the fact that the books in the local school only depicted white people, while most of the kids in the school were Black and Latino.

JJ: They say Johnson was horrified when he found out that the money that he had paternalistically given (for the War on Poverty) was being used to fund advocacy programs like welfare rights and legal aid.

MA: That may be true, but who knows? And then I graduated from Columbia School of Social Work and went to work in New Haven. I didn’t do traditional social work however. I went into union organizing. The unions were organizing the

clerical and technical staff at Yale University. The local women's movement, of which I was a part, became involved with the union drive—virtually all the 3000 clerical and technical employees were women—a mix of student wives and local women. The union began as an independent effort but then affiliated with District 65, a union from New York City. The women's movement was becoming a bigger part of my life while I was union organizing, so it all fit together: organizing women workers to improve their wages and working conditions.

JJ: How did the University react to that?

MA: They fought us tooth and nail. Once we began to make some headway they put professionals up against us. The University talked about us as outside agitators—they used all the tools. But we got enough workers to sign union cards so that we were able to hold an election. We lost, but it was by the smallest margin of several university union elections at the time. Much to my surprise, shortly after the union drive ended, I got a job in the Office of the Dean at the Yale Medical school. It was in the special projects division of the Dean's office that was supposed to develop links between the medical school and the community. Among other things, a colleague and I were assigned to find out about the use of paraprofessionals in the community mental health field. And since we were both in the women's movement they let us pursue a project about the history of women doctors in Connecticut. My colleague and I had stumbled upon some interesting information about this, and the office let us make it part of our work. We left before the project was completed, but I think someone else picked it up and finished the research.

JJ: What made you leave?

MA: The federal and state funding that had supported these community-oriented projects in the medical school ended. This turn of events led me back to graduate school—I had lost my job and was in limbo. I heard about a third-year certificate program that Columbia School of Social Work was offering and thought I'd go back and see what's what. I had been out of school for about seven years. I spoke with Professor Carol Meyer, who had been one of my teachers. I was rather surprised (and pleased) that she remembered me. She said, "You know, I'm still using one of your papers in my class." I was very flattered. It was about interracial adoptions. So she said that the third-year certificate program was really not materializing, so how about a doctoral program? They had a whole new area called "World of Work," and that was being spearheaded by Professor Hy Weiner who had ties to the Amalgamated Worker's Union. It was ideal. I could combine my union work with my professional work! So I went home and sat in the Yale library and wrote my application, and this was March! They took me in right away. In orientation the following fall, I learned that what you did with a doctorate was teach, research, or administration, but mostly teach and research and I thought, oh that's interesting.

So my entry into academia wasn't exactly deliberately planned. But it was the perfect place for me. I enjoyed my doctoral program, and then I got hired to teach at Hunter School of Social Work, and the rest is history.

JJ: Speaking of history, how did you first become interested in historical analysis?

MA: First, I have to say that I hated history in high school. But then I developed a passion for historical analysis, because it



is so interesting and also because it explains so much about modern times. Professor Al Kahn taught the history and philosophy of social welfare in the Columbia master's program. I had been a case worker at Connecticut State welfare department before I entered the master's program. This course allowed me to see the historical roots of the public assistance program (AFDC) that I was working in and all that bias about the deserving and undeserving poor. History explained so much about what I had picked up as to how the public viewed poor women relying on welfare benefits and why the government gave them so little. Then there was the history of the two-tiered welfare state—one set of programs for the middle class, another for the poor. This was powerful stuff for me as it put my job, but also wider society, into a different perspective. Dr. Kahn also taught the doctoral version of this course, so I got another historical review when I returned to school. Vera Shlakman, an economist teaching in the Doctoral Program, also loved history and so I picked that up from her too. Interestingly, Vera lives in my neighborhood now—very near Columbia School of Social Work—so I have stayed in touch with her over these years.

JJ: Did your dissertation look at history?

MA: Not surprisingly, my dissertation took a historical twist. It was about the role of business in the campaigns for worker's compensation and health insurance during the Progressive era. I looked at three theories of the state: pluralism, power elite, and structural analysis, and found that all three of them helped explain what was going on in the battle to enact worker's compensation and health insurance before World War I. I found that these theories explained different layers: pluralism ex-

plained the interest group competition; the power elite explained the role of the powers-that-be; and the structural theory explained the role of the market and the role of the state. Even since, I have used these theories in my social policy classes. They explain so much. Aren't I fortunate that my dissertation continued to have such relevance for my post-dissertation work!

JJ: When did you begin writing about feminist issues?

MA: I didn't do anything really feminist in academia until I started teaching at Hunter School of Social Work in 1981. This was the start of the Reagan era and a new paradigm was taking hold in the real world. Everything I learned about the history and development of the welfare state was in question. I had to figure out how to teach this new story. So I started using my theories of the state with an ideological grid showing that there were different ideologies embedded in those theories, and that Reagan's or the conservative social policy model reflected a different set of assumptions and values than the liberal social policy that had government for the prior 40 years. I also wanted to break out of the notion that there are only two sides to every story—so I included radical and then feminist theories of the welfare state as well.

I was able to teach the feminist perspective because I was trying to link feminism to social work. In reading about the welfare state I noticed how little was said about women. I decided that the literature needed to be looked at through a gender lens. Around this time, I came up with this concept of the "family ethic," which refers to the idea that women's place is in the home. So much of welfare state policy was about how the welfare state should and did enforce the work ethic. But this sole emphasis on work issues failed to

capture the experience of women. As a counterpoint to the work ethic, I began to ask how does the welfare state enforce the family ethic: What does it do about women's gender roles? I had to figure out why it was that the same welfare programs that encouraged middle-class women to stay home, forced poor women on public assistance to work outside the home. I started to write some articles and they were published early on in *Social Service Review*—"The Family Ethic and the Female Pauper" was one.

JJ: Would you say that the relationship between feminism and the welfare state is the central theme of your work?

MA: Yes, that led to my book, *Regulating the Lives of Women*.² In it I traced how, since colonial times in American social policy—Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, Public Assistance and other welfare state programs enforced the family ethic—i.e. gender roles. That book was first published in 1988, the year that Reagan passed the first welfare reform legislation: the Family Support Act. I was really enjoying what I was doing with the convergence of welfare policy and my feminist background.

I am happy to say that in 1996, the book came out in a second edition.

JJ: Other scholars like Linda Gordon were writing at that time, unbundling or uncovering the assumptions behind public policies and showing that they were gender based.

MA: Yes. Along the way I discovered the feminist scholars—mostly outside of social work at the time—who were doing fascinating historical research about women and the welfare state. This included the historian Linda Gordon³, then at the Univer-

sity of Wisconsin in Madison and Alice Kessler-Harris⁴, then a professor of history at Hofstra University in New York.

JJ: You really changed the paradigm in social work in terms of looking at welfare and the welfare state. Even though people knew these programs were directed at women, they wrote as though they were directed at men. They were more struck by the fact that the policies excluded able bodied men than by the fact that they focused on women and gender roles.

MA: Yes, the rules and regulations of most social welfare programs rewarded and penalized people based on their work records—but this did not make sense for women who, at the time, it was assumed belonged in the home—full time. Even when they worked for wages, women had the main responsibility for the home, so they moved (and still move) in and out of the workforce in response to family needs. While useful to the family and wider society, this movement in and out of the labor market still disadvantages women on the job.

But it also reduces women's Social Security and Unemployment Insurance benefits. The Social Security program rewards work by providing higher benefits to people with longer work histories and higher wages - a rule that did/does not favor women. Women tend to work in low paid positions and have uneven work histories for the reason I just explained. The family ethic idea also helped to explain the treatment of single mothers. There were/are so many negative assumptions about single motherhood and the AFDC/TANF program was designed originally to help single mothers stay home with their children. But the low benefits always ensured that poor women on welfare had to work. They never had a real chance to live out the family

ethic. They rules of AFDC punished them for departing from prescribed wife and mother roles.

JJ: That was a tremendous contribution—to view the entire welfare state through a gender lens. And it hasn't changed at all, it's only gotten more so.

MA: Actually, in some ways things have gone backward. There was an awareness of the gender issues in social welfare policy for a while, but now we are living through a backlash. A focus in "family values" has replaced gender equity concerns.

JJ: One of the problems is that social workers often are not part of the larger community of scholars.

MA: That's right, but we need to work in these areas. I was very flattered when Linda Gordon mentioned my work in her edited collection called *Women, The State and Welfare*⁵. In the introduction she referred to "Regulating The Lives of Women" as the first full length feminist discussion that put a gender lens on the welfare state. I felt frustrated that I had not been exposed to all the feminist scholarship that was being done at the same time that I was writing *Regulating the Lives*. But when I did discover the work of Alice Kessler-Harris and Linda Gordon it deeply influenced my work and their research gave me the courage to continue with a similar kind of analysis.

JJ: Your work has crossed over into other academic areas hasn't it?

MA: My work has crossed over into sociology, history and women's studies, and I am really pleased about this. And though I have gotten to know many of the feminist

scholars in these areas since overtime, I think it might have been easier or more fruitful or more interesting if I had been in discourse with them earlier on in my career. I was working by myself, often felt isolated, and did not have the benefit of the wider collective feminist discourse. I think it would have emboldened me even more.

JJ: On the other hand, you did it by yourself that's something to be proud of. I want to ask you about the article "Everyone is on Welfare⁶," which is central to my social policy class and to others elsewhere. How did you come up with the corporate welfare idea?

MA: I guess reading Titmuss while in the doctoral program at Columbia influenced me.⁷ He wrote an article on the role of redistribution in social policy in the late 1960s. He talked about social welfare being the tip of the iceberg of social provision. Hidden beneath the surface was the occupational and fiscal welfare system. I drew on and expanded this to talk about corporate welfare. At the time that I wrote the first version of this article there was not all that much data readily available on corporate welfare, and no "google" to help me find it.

JJ: It was hard to find out about wealth, wasn't it, because there were no statistics about wealth.

MA: Yes, I was clipping things out of *The New York Times*! But now there are organizations that track this kind of information, and it's all built into federal budget as the tax expenditures. I think it was in 1974 that they started recording tax expenditures. But it was hard to find—there wasn't an internet. I patched enough of it together so that it was accepted in *Social Work*, which

was a thrill because I was just starting out in my second year of teaching.

JJ: It was a profoundly important article, especially compared with most of what is published. And then when you did it again in 2001, many of us were very happy.

MA: Thank you. Actually, the first article has been reprinted in quite a few anthologies. I meet people at conferences and they say, "I use your work all the time," and I say, "Oh, really," thinking they are talking about *Regulating The Lives of Women* or my second book, *Under Attack and Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States*.⁸ Instead they say that article! So I slowly realized that it made a big impact. Twenty years later I wanted to redo it. The data was stronger and there was an even stronger need for it, so I submitted it *Social Work*. They reviewed it and published it.⁹

JJ: You received the 2004 CSWE award for Distinguished Contributions to Social Work Education. What are you most proud of in terms of your work?

MA: Well, intellectually I think I'm proud of bringing the gender lens into the history of the welfare state within social work. The work is used widely in social work and outside. I feel like that was a real intellectual insight for me and I was able to translate it into an historical analysis and I feel very proud about this and that so many other people found it useful. I know that you have focused on similar issues in your own work, so that you can understand how interesting these issues are, especially the history.

JJ: When they introduced you at the CSWE Award Session, they spoke of your

activism as well.

MA: Yes. I'm proud that when I am introduced at meetings and so on, they describe me as "a scholar and an activist." I'm proud that I didn't just write for the development of knowledge. I think the development of knowledge is very important, don't get me wrong. But I also enjoy using my knowledge and commitments outside the academe. For example, I have worked with the welfare rights groups, both national and local. I have also enjoyed writing for the popular press such as the *Women's Review of Books*, *The Nation*, and even an op ed in the *New York Times*.

JJ: And you consistently focus on low-income women.

MA: It's interesting that my concern about welfare and poor women has been with me throughout my professional life—from my first job as a welfare worker, to my feminist writing on the welfare state, to my involvement in the welfare reform debate in 1988, and again in 1996 as welfare reform once again became a hot policy issue. I got very active in that debate, was often invited to speak on television and radio shows and to the print media. I guess I became what some refer to as a public scholar. I also worked with welfare rights groups locally, first in New Haven, when I worked for the welfare department, and then in New York at Hunter, which is part of the City University of New York (CUNY). I co-founded the Welfare Rights Initiative (WRI), a student-led organization located at Hunter College that focuses on the educational options for students who are on public assistance. When it was founded several years ago, the New York City administration required women in college to leave school to participate in the City's massive and punitive workfare

program. From 28,000 students on public assistance at CUNY, the number plummeted to 18,000, then to 10,000. Since the 1996 welfare reform legislation, the numbers are even less.

WRI is continuing to fight the good fight; they played a lead role in getting state and city legislation passed to make it possible for welfare recipients to stay in school. They also trained a lot of students to become activists. I'm working with them now; they want to do some research on the impact of their program, and I so I'm helping them. So, somehow somewhere since I left College until today welfare has been an issue that...

JJ: ...captured you.

MA: Yes. My interest in public policy, my interest in women, my interest in low income women in particular and welfare reform becoming a hot policy issue—I was really able to use myself on all those levels.

JJ: You were relevant all throughout your career in a public sphere. You have a larger public identity than most academics, especially in social work.

MA: Well, I don't know about more than most. I do know that there are many other social work academics that do the same kind of thing, including yourself. Many of us think of it as a professional commitment to work for social justice, and this is one way to do it.

JJ: I guess you're proud of the fact that you didn't become a university scholar, an ivory tower type just spinning off theories. You always connected your theories to the ground.

MA: Yes, but this is not to say that I don't like theory. Actually I think theory is very important. Ask any of my doctoral students! By I also think it makes sense to use theory to understand real life. In my case, I was writing about unpopular groups, like low income women on welfare, and then I tried to apply what I had learned about economics and feminist theories of the state to everyday life. So the theoretical and praxis were combined. And I still do that. The research I have been doing in the past few years is about the history of activism among black and white poor and working class women in 20th century America. My thinking here is that I want to show how low-income activist women—not just the middle class reformers who have been well researched—but how activist working class women shaped the welfare state. My earlier work was on how the welfare state programs shaped women. One of the self criticisms I have of my earlier work is that it really left the clients out. So I've been drawing on case studies of local activism to fill out the picture.

JJ: It completes the picture for you.

MA: Yes, it documents how and why low-income women had agency in the process.

JJ: And that's where the second wave of feminist scholarship went. After the first wave looked at all the bad things that have been done to women and all the institutions that have oppressed them, the second wave looked at women's agency.

MA: I was influenced by that discussion. It was easier to study middle class reformers, because they left a paper trail. But research on working class women is more difficult because of the sources that people had to use, like newspaper articles.

There were no diaries, no letters, and few organizational records. But scholars have written case studies and I am drawing on them to look at a longer time frame. For example, one study reported on the Jewish immigrant women in the lower east side of New York City who protested the rising price of meat at the turn of the 20th century. They were so angry that they could not feed their families that they went into the streets and pushed the meat carts over. The press called it a kosher meat market riot! In the 1930s, in the depth of the Great Depression, housewives were marching in the streets to protest the high cost of living. I never knew about this. All these protests were women led. Once you see that you just can't stop seeing that. It's a completely untold story—the trajectory of low-income women's activism!

JJ: What will you do with the case studies?

MA: I have gathered lots and lots of case studies of all kinds of activism and am working to put it together to see what happened in the 20th century. Right now I am thinking of calling the book "Gendered Obligations," because the women became active - not to gain equal right with men, but to be able to fulfill community defined roles for women which emphasized caregiving and managing consumption. Naturally there is a debate as to whether or not this kind of activism—so tied to women's prescribed role—is feminist or not. To my mind, it is. In the book I will also try to contextualize the activism and its relationship to the welfare state which changed with the changing times. The activism actually began before we even had a welfare state and continues to this day, with women fighting to defend the welfare state against retrenchment.

JJ: You're very excited about this.

MA: I am excited. It's very uplifting to read this history. And in the early twentieth century, the women's demands for food, housing and income actually prefigured the welfare state. Then once the welfare state was formed, they tried to expand its reach, and then when the programs they relied on came under attack in the 1980s, these women defended their right to survive. It's very interesting that the people that write the case studies that I draw on for this research, scholars from history, urban studies, sociology and labor studies—few, if any, link the workplace or community activism directly to the development of the welfare state. Yet so many of the demands of the activists are for greater economic security to be provided by the state. So I almost want to call it social welfare activism; their demands were consistently made first to local and state, and then to the federal government to do something about the issues they were concerned about. You can tell a whole story about this social welfare activism. And that's the way I want to put the story together.

JJ: You can tell this story the way no one else can.

What do you see as the major issues facing social work today?

MA: From the policy perspective, which is what I know best, we have to deal with the attack on the welfare state. A paradigm shift took place around 1980—actually it was already in the air in the late 1970s. At this time, with the election of Ronald Reagan, neo-liberalism took hold.

JJ: What do you mean by neo-liberalism?

MA: Neo-liberalism represents the revival of 19th century economic thinking

that rejects active government intervention in the economy. It's better known today as laissez-faire economics. Anyway, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, for a host of complicated reasons, business and government concluded that economic growth required, among other things, a weaker federal government and a smaller welfare state.

JJ: How do you see this affecting social workers?

MA: Since the advent of neo-liberalism, social workers have had to work in a social service environment that is unfriendly to our work and hard on our clients. Welfare reform is one of the harshest examples. But two decades of tax cuts have starved many social service programs. The effort to shift federal responsibility for social welfare to the states (called devolution by policy wonks) has weakened social programs. The states have more control over some parts of the program than they did before, but they often lack enough federal funding to achieve their goals. As a result the states often fall into a deficit. And since most states are required by their constitutions to balance the budget, they end up cutting social programs.

JJ: And when they pick which programs to cut, you can be sure the most vulnerable groups lose out; especially if they are regarded as not among the active voters.

MA: That's exactly how I see it. And another feature of neo-liberalism is privatization or the transfer of responsibility for social programs from the public to the private sector. Social workers are also significantly affected by this effort to weaken the welfare state. That's what education vouchers, and the proposal to

privatize Social Security and Medicare are all about. Another way to discredit the public sector is to under fund its programs, making them so inferior that only those without any recourse will use them. Urban public education in some cities may be a case in point here.

JJ: We have been hearing a lot about family values during the past twenty or so years. How does "family values" fit into all of this?

MA: At the same time that the welfare state came under attack by regular conservatives, the religious right got a strong hold on government policy. They were upset by the gains made by women, people of color, lesbians and gays, abortion rights and other social movements. The Right Wing sees the victories by these groups as a threat to the so-called traditional family. So along with the other conservatives, they too want to dismantle the welfare state and go back to policies that foster patriarchal social arrangements and a color-blind society.

JJ: How do you see this move toward family values impacting social work?

MA: Such a program does a disservice to the social work profession that employs so many women and persons of color. Even more important it stigmatizes our clients and deprives them of both needed services and deserved dignity. I think social work has to take on these policy issues even more than we already do. If not us, then who?

JJ: What role do social movements play in all of this?

MA: Social movements have been very important. The trade unions, civil rights, women's liberation, gay and lesbian rights and the disability movement - they all have



played major roles in the expansion of the welfare state. Historically they have always been a strong political force and their victories, especially in the 1930s and 1960s, helped to improve life for so many of us. But since the 1990s when Reagan broke the air controller's strike (as federal employees he was their boss), there has been a distinct effort to weaken the political influence of the social movements. Why? Because they were best positioned to resist the neo-liberal attack on social provision. The movements have been placed on the defensive, but never disappeared. Many people became active on the less visible state and local level, and in the last year the peace movement seems to be gaining some new steam. Many social workers are also active in state and local politics—it's a good area for building a progressive base. The conservatives are way ahead of us on this front. Having built a strong local base they now have many of their people in elected state and city office. But there is no time like the present.

JJ: To write the article on welfare reform, I read all the hearings on the 1996 Personal Responsibility Act and I noticed that there were very few people speaking out against the effort to discipline and punish the welfare mothers. The only one group that went on record was the Children's Defense Fund. You didn't see social work groups, like NASW, testifying against the proposed bill.

MA: That's interesting because I know that both NASW and the National Organization for Women (NOW) did take a stand on at least some of the punitive features of welfare reform. I don't know if they testified at the hearings, but in the mid-1990s, I believe that they were making some noise about the draconian welfare reform bill.

But it is also the case that during the Clinton years, many liberal advocacy groups that took up welfare "reform" moved to the center of the political spectrum. They may have become less confrontational, hoping to secure or maintain access to a seemingly more receptive legislators and the White House. This left militancy to the less resourced welfare rights movement, which also grew and remained active during this period.

JJ: What is happening with welfare reform today, some seven years since the implementation of TANF?

MA: Unfortunately, the program known as welfare reform has become institutionalized, so today the legislative fight is very different. Instead of fighting to prevent the passage of such a punitive law or trying to repeal the one we have, most of the advocacy effort is targeted to what I call "damage control." Given the political configuration of Congress and the White House, few in the advocacy community think that they can accomplish much more. And they may be right. So I guess our job is to try and educate the public about the need for a solid income support system that everyone can benefit from, and then maybe the politicians will take a different stand.

JJ: I wanted to ask you about the idea of "starving the beast"—that there was a deliberate attempt to drive up the deficit through tax cuts and military spending to make sure there would be no money for social programs. Do you think that is what happened?

MA: Well, it goes back to the Reagan years. David Stockman, who was the Budget Director under Reagan, wrote an op ed in *The New York Times* saying that they knew in 1980 that if they lowered taxes

and increased military spending, the budget deficit could be used as a hammer, or should I say an ax, on social programs. The deficit would justify the budget cuts. The strategy was no secret. And it's been going on ever since. First, under Reagan, conservatives and liberals too called for balancing the budget. To balance the budget you have either to raise taxes or limit spending; and since no one will dare raise taxes, it always boils down to cutting social programs. And then when under Clinton, the Treasury actually had a budget surplus, instead of restoring spending, the White House and Congress mostly called for new tax cuts! Within a year after Clinton left office the surplus had disappeared. We blinked and it was gone! And now we have a record high deficit. Interest payments on the resulting debt are the second or third largest item in the federal government. Instead of funding programs that help people in need, the Treasury is making interest payments to the foreign governments, large corporations, and wealthy individuals that loaned the United States government money to help pay its bills. These groups are making out ok.

JJ: Tax cuts play a key role in all of this don't they?

MA: I think that the taxes are a major issue that social work could address. Social work advocacy does not often focus on this side of government programs. But I think individual social workers and the profession as a whole need to become more tax literate. I am in the middle of writing a report for the National Council on Research for Women (NCRW) called "Taxes ARE a Women's Issue." In it I trace the declining progressivity of the tax code. Many people do not know about this history. While the tax cuts have been the coup de gras, in fact the tax code has become less and less

progressive since the end of World War II. As recently as 1978, there were 25 tax brackets, and the highest income bracket was taxed at 91 percent. Now there are 5 or 6 tax brackets and the top tax rate is 35 percent. So much for collecting taxes on one's ability to pay.

JJ: Talk of taxes may seem dry and boring, but social workers need to pay heed.

MA: Yes. If we do not expose the unfairness of the tax system, the people with less will continue to pay more, and in the long run there will be no money to fund our programs. This affects not only poor people but it affects people across the economic spectrum, because in fact we all depend on government spending for one thing or another. What about transportation, what about libraries? All the other public sector services and infrastructure that we take for granted. My neighborhood library used to be open all day, but now it is open only half of each day. This makes it much harder for me to return books on time without getting a fine. The middle class loses amenities like library services. But the poor and working poor lose their survival income.

And it's not getting any better. Just this week, President Bush put out a feeler—to replace the still mildly progressive income taxes with a regressive flat tax.

JJ: The tax cuts are extremely popular politically, which is another reason why they are passed.

MA: This is where I think the race card comes into the picture. The welfare state has been racialized so that many people wrongly believe that only or mostly people of color receive government benefits. The welfare state opponents have used the race card to turn people against government

programs that in fact benefit the middle class as well as the poor by asking them: "Why should you pay for them?" During the heat of the welfare reform debate I was often invited to speak on radio and television shows - you know, the kind that had different viewpoints. The other speakers typically supported welfare reform as did many of the call-ins. Inevitably, the question was asked: "Why should we pay for them?" It was asked over and over again.

JJ: Like in your article, "Everyone's Still On Welfare." No one seemed to realize that many middle class people receive "welfare benefits" through entitlement programs like Social Security, Medicare and Unemployment Insurance, but even more so from tax credits, deductions and exemptions.

MA: Right. And what homeowner has not received a housing subsidy from the tax deduction for their mortgage interest payment? These tax savings help address basic needs, just as direct spending on social programs does. The tax benefits also deplete the U.S. Treasury because they represent taxes not collected. And it is not just housing. Throughout the tax code the middle class gains access to income support, child care, retirement and health care benefits. In some cases the value of these benefits—that is the "tax expenditures"—is greater than the amount of direct spending on the poor and working poor. Just compare total taxes lost to the mortgage interest deduction with the total amount the government spends on low-income housing in any one year.

JJ: We were talking about why women on welfare are hated so much, and you said that you think race is the real reason.

MA: I don't know if it is the only reason but it is important. No doubt misogyny and hostility to the poor kicks in. But racial stereotypes are very powerful. The public has learned to think that people on welfare are lazy, unmotivated and immoral; characterizations that mirror standard racial stereotypes. Most mainstream discussions of policy today focus on individual values and behavior and ignore the systemic, the underlying or the root causes of poverty such as low wages, high unemployment race and sex discrimination, to name only a few. It is also the case that employers would not like it if there was no unemployment, since unemployment helps to press wages down.

JJ: From my early days in social work, when people would come up to me at parties and say, "What do you say about people on welfare?" I always had to defend welfare. I could see that most people had a racial analysis of welfare. Even correcting them with demographics of the welfare population didn't sink in.

MA: It's a very powerful stereotype; it's going to take a lot to undo it. And now that welfare reform is pushing women off the program, we are finding that white people are leaving the welfare rolls faster than people of color. Once again, labor market discrimination is at play.

JJ: What are you hopeful about?

MA: Deep down, underneath my critique, I am very hopeful about human nature. I do think if the average person has access to accurate information about the causes of social problems, the need for government spending, and the fact that we all depend on government programs of one kind or another, he or she would be less likely to vote against their own interests. I

think it's very hard for people to get information given how concentrated and conservative the mass media has become. But I am still an optimist in that regard. I think people can and will see the light in terms of their own interests. If you don't believe that, you can't be an organizer.

Social workers can play a role in putting out correctives. We work with many people in families and communities. When appropriate we can, and I think we should, use our professional selves to offer some correctives to the misinformation that is out there. Academics can certainly do it. Like you, I try to do this in my teaching and writing by exposing students to all points of view.

JJ: It seems that there is a rising critical consciousness. I think Americans have an affinity for the concept of fairness and if you can put things in terms of not being fair, people will respond. I think we see ourselves as fair because of the belief that we have no social classes.

MA: That's right. We are taught that everybody has equal opportunity in the United States. We should at least try to live up to the ideal. Equal opportunity is the American definition of equality. It's not a bad definition, but it only goes so far. A stronger one would focus on equality of result.

JJ: Yes, and even though we have not yet ensured equal opportunity for all, I think you can appeal to people based on the concept of fairness and move toward a progressive agenda.

MA: Yes, I think that is absolutely right. I'm also optimistic about this election. Usually electoral politics don't make me feel too optimistic because I feel we are always picking the lesser of two evils. And

while I think that's still the case, there seems to some kind of awakening. The veils are coming down. I just marched with 500,000 people in New York City, at the outset of the Republican National Convention. I don't know whether the awakening will translate into electoral votes. I don't want to go overboard, but I sense a new momentum and that change may be more possible now than it has in a long time.

JJ: I want to thank you very much for taking the time to reflect on your life with *Reflections*' readers. I have enjoyed talking with you a great deal and know that this interview will impact our readers deeply.



Mimi Abramovitz in 1973



Books By Mimi Abramovitz

Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy From Colonial Times to the Present. Boston: South End Press, 1996
2nd rev ed

Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States. New York, Monthly Review Press, 2000 (2nd rev ed.)

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Footnotes

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⁶ Abramovitz, Mimi (1983) "Everyone is on Welfare: 'The Role of Redistribution in Social Policy' Revisited." *Social Work*, 28 (6) (November/ December) : 441-445.

⁷ R.M. Titmuss (1965) "The Role of Redistribution in social policy," *Social Security Bulletin*, 39 (June), 14-20.

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⁹ Abramovitz, Mimi (2001) "Everyone is Still On Welfare: The Role of Redistribution in Social Policy." *Social Work*, 46 (October), 297-308.

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