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Review of *They Say Cut Back, We Say Fight Back!*  
*Welfare Activism in an Era of Retrenchment*, by Ellen  
Reese

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As is the case with all fruitful research, this book provides a solid foundation for asking further questions. I will take a cue from its broadly comparative intentions. Contentious politics has not only become a fixture on the political landscape but has also grown diverse in China. It is worth asking if the mass-line and the xinfang system have an equally important influence on the environmental movement, women's movement, religion-based protests, and collective action by well-to-do homeowners. After all, collective petitioning tends to be small-scale, informally organized, oriented toward a specific grievance, and quick to invite public aversion rather than sympathy. The book concludes with the provocative notion that authoritarian regimes that are elastic—a quality indicated by how well they accommodate and facilitate protests—tend to be stable. However, it could be that state institutions in China have remained as inimical to organized challenge as before, and thus unintentionally made room for the collective-petitioning type of social protests. The *danwei* system has faded as an actual socioeconomic and political organization, but its institutional culture of authority was palpable in the official-to-official and official-petitioner relations reported in the book. Would contentious authoritarianism ever come to an end, and if so, how? Any credible answer will have to take this book's important and stimulating insights seriously.

*They Say Cut Back, We Say Fight Back! Welfare Activism in an Era of Retrenchment.* By Ellen Reese. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2012. Pp. xvi+286. \$42.50.

Sanford F. Schram  
*Bryn Mawr College*

Ellen Reese has written another excellent book. I read and reviewed her first book, *Backlash against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present* (University of California Press, 2005). What I said about that book also applies to *They Say Cut Back, We Say Fight Back*. Once again, Reese has written an important book that unnecessarily goes out of its way to criticize the work of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward. Each of Reese's two books stakes its claim early on to providing a distinctive contribution to the literature by arguing in part that while important, Piven and Cloward's scholarship elides key issues. In her first book, Reese says they overemphasized issues of class in ways that failed to address issues of race and gender in their study of welfare rights politics in the 1960s. In her new book, Reese says that Piven and Cloward's emphasis on protest by the poor overlooks the role of allied groups in helping get positive change.

Reese's first book was a well-written and thorough analysis of how welfare reform of the 1990s replayed retrenchment politics from an earlier era and was once again an assault on the well-being of low-income single mothers fueled by racial and sexist stereotypes. Reese's new book is a com-

parative case analysis of welfare rights campaigns in California and Wisconsin, showing that while elites in Washington, D.C., imposed draconian welfare reform policies from the top down, cross race coalitions of welfare mothers worked with others from the bottom up to resist state implementation of some of the worst changes. Both books are important additions to welfare scholarship that incorrectly mischaracterize Piven and Cloward's arguments. Reese's work is distinctive enough without this overreach. Last time, her mixed-methods approach highlighted the troubling role that race and gender played in fueling support for welfare retrenchment in the 1990s, just as had happened in the 1950s. This time, her bottom-up analysis of welfare rights activism in the states shows how such efforts complicated state plans to impose some of the worst features of welfare reform.

Reese's early framing of the analysis in her new book appropriately notes that too much welfare scholarship is done from the top down; such work emphasizes the role of elites in making social welfare policy. She also insightfully highlights the fact that while elites in Washington may get to set national policy, welfare activists in states and communities can work to bend implementation of those policies to be more sensitive the concerns of the mothers most directly affected. Further, her analysis suggests that coalitions increase their effectiveness by reaching across race, gender, and class lines.

Reese bases her analysis on a long-term, mixed-methods field study in two states, stretching from 1998 to 2008, that includes in-depth interviews with 110 informants. Reese examines four issues that activists addressed, comparing what happened in California with what happened in Wisconsin. First, she looks at the campaigns to restore benefits to legal immigrants cut off from assistance by the national 1996 welfare reform law. Next, she examines the fight against privatization of welfare-to-work services. Third, she studies efforts to win welfare-to-work program participants rights as paid workers. And last, she looks at local efforts to improve access to child care. Each comparative case analysis provides rich detail demonstrating the vitality of the welfare rights movement at the state and local levels. Further, her analyses are chock-full of compelling factual evidence of how welfare mothers thought and acted, highlighting their activism, their strategic thinking, and their willingness to work with others across race, class, and gender lines to build coalitions to try to beat back some of the worst features of welfare reform. The story is inspiring, and it doesn't just highlight the ways in which policy implementation is an important stage for influencing the effects of policy on program clients. It is also a poignant record of how welfare mothers are real people too—people who do not conform to racist and sexist stereotypes.

Reese's study shows that when we look from the bottom up we see that program clients (most often very low-income single mothers of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds) are involved in a very different policy process than the one depicted in top-down analyses of how elites in Washington enacted welfare reform into law. Policy implementation is policy making by another means and it is a stage in the process where clients groups are most likely to get to have a say, especially when they form broad-based coalitions and forge

alliances with others, including unions and even middle-class groups. In fact, Reese's analysis of the four campaigns in the two states shows that results can vary widely. For instance, the campaign for restoring benefits for legal immigrants had successes in both California and Wisconsin, while the effort against privatization was more dramatic in California than in Wisconsin, where it hardly seemed to get off the ground.

These sorts of variations raise two important questions for Reese that we all should ponder. The first she does not dwell on enough. While policy implementation is policy making by other means and represents a stage in the process at which client groups can intervene, do the analyses reported in this book suggest that clients' groups fighting welfare reform are likely to be very successful in reshaping this policy that is increasing immiseration among the poor? The answer is not clear, and it raises the additional question of how to go forward. Here Reese is on very strong ground, concluding the book with a sustained and detailed examination of the state of welfare reform today and how broad-based coalitions that include welfare recipients, immigrants, and workers (unionized and not), and even reaching even into the middle class and across race and gender lines, are what is needed today to retake the social policy agenda. I do not see this as inconsistent with Piven and Cloward's nuanced view that protest politics is a vital part of broader social change campaigns. On that basis, and in light of the positive energy coming from the very diverse Occupy Wall Street protest movement, I am totally comfortable agreeing with the excellent conclusion to this very good book.

*Taxing the Poor: Doing Damage to the Truly Disadvantaged.* By Katherine S. Newman and Rourke L. O'Brien. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011. Pp. xlviii+212. \$55.00 (cloth); \$21.95 (paper).

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Don't judge *Taxing the Poor* by its length. This is an impressive volume that makes a straightforward, compelling, and well-documented point: Southern poor people are burdened by highly regressive state taxes that have many deleterious consequences. The unfairness comes mostly from the imposition of burdensome state and local sales taxes on the purchase of everyday necessities, like food, clothing, and medicine. And the harmful consequences are revealed in poorer health, more crime, and underfunded and underperforming schools.

Some conservative politicians and pundits have latched on to the Tax Policy Center's recent claim that 47% of American households don't pay any *federal* taxes, but usually drop the word federal to achieve maximum political effect. As Katherine Newman and Rourke O'Brien show in *Taxing the Poor*, the tax liability imposed by the federal government on the poor has indeed declined over the past three decades. The Earned Income Tax