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Jane L. Collins and Victoria Mayer

Both Hands Tied: Welfare Reform and the Race to the Bottom of the Low-Wage Labor Market

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010, US\$ 22.50, (ISBN: 978-0-226-11406-4) 264pp

Reviewed by SCOTT BURROWS, *UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG*

Jane L. Collins and Victoria Mayer's book, "Both Hands Tied: Welfare Reform and the Race to the Bottom of the Low-Wage Labor Market" provides a timely analysis on the state of contemporary welfare reform in the United States with a focus on the lives of thirty-three women in Milwaukee and Racine, Wisconsin. As the book notes, these areas were formerly manufacturing centres but in recent years have experienced deindustrialisation and an emergent service based economy that continues to have quite dramatic effects on the lives of low-wage workers.

The book commences with an overview of important developments in the history of welfare provision commencing in the 1930s with the rationale that the state's primary role was to manage aggregate employment levels through institutional compromises between capital and labour. This approach mediated productivity, profits and a welfare guarantee until the 1970s. In 1973 the culmination of the oil crisis, and its direct effects on international and national economies, led to recession and stagflation. Legislators and policymakers in the United States scaled back welfare provision and encouraged employers to do the same.

The authors clearly argue that, during the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal philosophies and practices reached their peak with the introduction of the Family Support Act in 1988 (Reagan) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (Clinton) in 1996. These laws provided the main impetus towards welfare reform in the United States, removing the supposed restrictions of government and strengthening the centrality of the market in delivering social policies. Under the guise of such reforms, draconian measures were introduced that dismantled the statutory right to welfare benefits (and the associated social rights of citizenship) that were established in the last century.

In chapter three, the authors meticulously weave fascinating case material into their account of welfare reform, highlighting the 'real' social conditions and 'lived' experiences of these women. The inclusion of photographs within chapter three illuminates this historical, geographical and social world, providing specific images of neoliberal place and space.

Indeed, this fascinating case material highlights in chapter four, the precarious location these women and their families are placed in the social structure, as well as their real disconnection from the labour market. These personal stories cut through the rhetoric of neoliberalism, positioning these ideologies and

practices for what they really are: the denial of the basic rights of societal participation.

The book engages these important issues in detail in chapter five, and it was interesting to note the connections made with economic citizenship and waged work. The jobs in the labour market with better pay and conditions are the prerequisites for economic citizenship while the jobs at the bottom of the labour market, with poorer pay and conditions, effectively disenfranchise these women. The support mechanisms, designed to assist them, often resulted in a worse rather than a better employment situation. Indeed, some of the case material highlighted that many women, who held decent and respectable positions in the past, experienced relative labour market disadvantage following these changes.

Implicit throughout the book is the overall narrative of the low-wage labour market. As the market has become more precarious in recent years, neoliberal policies have shifted the regulatory frameworks of welfare provision, supposedly arguing that the welfare state is a burden. However, the book's engagement with everyday practice reveals greater social control by the state in the lives of welfare recipients than ever before. The requirements set out by service providers highlights the paternal approaches that constitute welfare support for recipients.

The book concludes by putting forward further case material and ideas for possible policies that could assist woman in the low-wage labor market. Some of these include paid medical and family leave, raising the minimum wage, unemployment insurance or such legislation as the recent health care reforms passed by the U.S Congress.

The problematic political climate however, may render a very difficult road ahead for many welfare recipients given the deep ideological affiliation with neoliberalism in the United States amongst economists and politicians. This is unfortunate considering the effects of the global financial crisis. This major calamity should represent an opportunity to re-shape and re-think, labour market and welfare policies that can improve the very deep and gendered marginalisation of women. Whether or not a paradigm shift occurs in these areas in the future will depend on both challenging the hegemony of neoliberalism, and successful attempts to provide an alternative.

This book is bold, ambitious and scholarly, and paints an alarming picture of disadvantage and marginalisation of a group of women in the 21st century. I warmly recommend this important and ground-breaking work.