Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Mimi Abramovitz the Bertha Capen Reynolds Professor of Social Policy teaches at the Silberman school of Social Work Hunter College and at the Graduate Center, CUNY. She is published widely on issues related to women, poverty, human rights, the US welfare state and the impact public policy has on nonprofit human service agencies, all through the lens of race, class, and gender. Widely published in social work and social science journals, and often interviewed by the print and broadcast media Dr. Abramovitz is the author of more than 80 articles and five books, including Regulating the Lives, Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Time to the Present, Rutledge, third edition 2018. Welcome to the Thought Project, Dr. Abramovitz.

Mimi Abramovitz:

Thank you. I'm so delighted to be here and have a chance to talk with you.

Tanya Domi:

So as you know, discussed during the COVID pandemic, it has become apparent to policy makers and social work, and in other fields as well that the existing structural inequalities of social welfare systems in the United States are simply unable to meet the demands and needs of people across the country who are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, advanced mortality, financial and economic loss. In this context, we're talking today with you, Dr. Abramovitz, who is not only a scholar, but a policy expert in the social welfare field.

Mimi Abramovitz:

Yes. Well, there's so much to talk about in terms of the impact of COVID. And I'll begin by talking about how we got to where we are today. If I could step back in history, just for about two minutes or less, for the past 40 years, we've been in a period that's been called Reaganomics and COVID arose during toward the tail end of this period. This was a period of very conservative social policies, cutbacks on the welfare state and so on. But prior to this, there was a period of more progressive social policies from let's say, 1940 to 1970, when the taxes were going up, there was more money for social spending, the social welfare system expanded. And guess what? Poverty went down, inequality down, but the standard of living went up.

Then in the mid '70s, we had a financial crisis, up comes Reaganomics. Some people call it neo-liberalism and we started to do the opposite. We reduced taxes, we reduced spending, we privatized the public sector instead of expanding it. And guess what? Poverty went up, inequality went up and the private sector expanded, the public sector contracted. So that is the context in which COVID then exposes all the weaknesses, and if I may say, failures of what some people call the safety net, I call the welfare state or a social welfare system, the failures that were the product of 40 years of dismantling the program and attacking all the social movements that had those victories that helped build the welfare state and more humane social policies over the years.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, and you wrote about this in the American Prospect recently, where you call for social security for all, and you wrote, and I want to share this with our listeners, "The time is right for one of those epochal revolutions in American social policy, where we start over and build anew." And so you're proposing expanding social security. In your view, how will this fill the gap that you're talking about? Because this is a gaping wound, is it not?

Mimi Abramovitz:

Well, yes. Well, COVID exposed a couple of things that I mentioned then add in and explain how social security for all is a bold new idea. So, as I mentioned before, we've had about 40 years of dismantling the welfare state. And what COVID revealed is what the poor who use these programs always knew, the problems that expanded to the working class and the middle class who now needed these programs, which were piecemeal, which were a tattered safety net. And also, I just want to add that what COVID also exposed what the people who use social programs always knew, was that the welfare state had a lot of sexism and racism built into its programs. That was quietly known by scholars and so on, but all of a sudden it became apparent with the help of Black Lives Matter and other social movements of this period exposed this.

And so the problems that the poor and mostly those who use public assistance, but also social security, now became something that the working class and the middle class had to deal with. And this raises a new kind of public outrage when our social problems extend from the poor to the middle-class. And the other point to realize about these problems, they were not accidental. The social safety net was constructed in a certain way. It helped poor people a lot. It certainly did. We're better off with it than without, but it was really designed in a way that kept people poor. And the idea was that if you gave people social benefits, they wouldn't go to work.

Tanya Domi:

Right. You and two of your coauthors talk about these structural problems in the nation. You wrote about this saying that it's really a situation where it's a structural problem throughout, and that these unequal systems are just not able to provide even minimal relief. You also suggest, and you assert, that this is really on the level right now of the Great Depression. This is 70, well actually more than, almost 80 years later, Americans are in a terrible situation where the middle class can't even make it during COVID because not all jobs can be done working from home. And we're in an economic crisis that's unprecedented.

Mimi Abramovitz:

Totally unprecedented. If you watch the news at all, or even in the newspapers, you'll see pictures of cars, miles and miles long of people waiting for food.

Tanya Domi:

People are in their cars [crosstalk 00:07:17] in line to get food.

Mimi Abramovitz:

Yes. Now, if you ever saw a photograph from the Great Depression, they weren't in cars, they were standing on the sidewalk lined up to get food, but these are totally the same thing. This is why people say this is like the Great Depression. There are many different factors and many different differences, different differences, but the outcome is the same. And if I could add that part of what's contributing to

this, is that the lack of a new stimulus package. The depression was basically a huge stimulus package. Government put money in, bailed out farmers, businessman, and the average person. We had a stimulus package under Obama when there was a huge recession. He gave us a stimulus package. So when the pandemic arose, we had a temporary stimulus package, which has basically come to an end. You remember that $1,200 check that President Trump signed. The bailed out mostly corporations, but they also bailed out small businesses. They gave the average person money so they could pay their rent and buy food. And so on that money has run out.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, because Mr. McConnell he's asserted, the bill's not going to move. The HEROES Act that was passed and the house was approaching $2.5 trillion in the Senate. They said about 500 million, which is just utterly ridiculous. But we're also talking about an ideology, I think I'm just going to call it out and ideology of meanness. They really don't care. It seems apparent to me that they really don't care about the average American, including people who support them in the Republican party in this case. They just don't care. As you suggested, people are in car lines to get food. It's like over 105, I don't know, I can't recall the numbers now. We are a country that's hungry now. People are going to bed hungry because they cannot buy groceries.

Mimi Abramovitz:

Exactly. And it's not just that they don't care. I think it's a little more economic and political. It goes beyond it [crosstalk 00:09:34]

Tanya Domi:

It's ideological. It's ideology around economics, is it not?

Mimi Abramovitz:

Exactly. And the idea is it goes back to the colonial [inaudible 00:09:43] laws, which if you give people money, they won't go to work. And so they talk about work incentives. And if you listen to what Mitch McConnell and his buddies said when proposals were made to be extend the stimulus package, he said, people won't go to work. They don't need it. They were jobless, but of course all the businesses are closing. So I don't know where they got the idea they wouldn't go. But it's really important to understand this idea is to provide low paid workers to businesses that the welfare state has played that role throughout history since colonial times. Today, they call it work incentives. But the idea is they channel people from welfare to work. So that there'll be a larger supply of low wage workers. And what does that do? That allows employers to keep wages down and profits up.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. One of the other things they were saying is regarding the blue states is that none of this money was going to go to troubled retirement accounts in this generic state, blue state out there, that somehow that money is going to be used to prop up retirement funds. We're talking about, as you have said, there's no federal stimulus. It's coming. The day's coming. It's not very far off. New York Times did an excellent overview on this in Upshot, but we're going to talk about wholesale, public employee layoffs throughout this country. And it's going to happen in red states too. And what are they going to do without teachers, without police officers, without firefighters, without people running local government? Local and state government cannot print money, they cannot print money. Only the federal government can do that. And what are your thoughts on that? It will get worse.

Mimi Abramovitz:

Well, it will get worse. Hopefully the Biden administration will be able to do something, but I'm frankly very worried that the dynamics with Mitch McConnell and Obama is going to repeat itself now and that everything will be stalled. It's horrific to think about that as a possibility. You can't find words. I mean, even the anchors on television say they're speechless. They can't find words. It's unprecedented that the richest country in the world would leave so many people-

Tanya Domi:

Destitute.

Mimi Abramovitz:

... desperate, destitute desperate. And I think they're going to start to fear social protest because it's bound to happen. That's what happened during the Depression also in the '30s, it's happened in the '40s and '50s. So people are going to finally say, "Enough already," and we'll see. Right now, people are just trying to keep their heads above water, but.

Tanya Domi:

Well, yes, the whole Democratic agenda really rests on what happens in Georgia on January 5th. And that's really quite something, is it not? But in this vein, you've also done research on public housing and I know it's broader than public housing, but at this time when so many people are housing insecure, there is public housing. And probably one of the largest investments in public housing appears to still be in existence in New York. But you have asserted in your studies that while public housing was intended for the poor, it has seemed to become very racialized and segregated and it hasn't improved over the years, even with the Fair Housing Act that was passed in 1965.

Mimi Abramovitz:

Oh, absolutely. We did a study, we used a measure of segregation at the census department uses an index as one of its measures of segregation, the top 20 great migration cities, the cities where black, Southern blacks, moved to the north. And we measured the levels of segregation from 1940 to 2010, which is when the last census data was available. And we looked at the mortgage, interest, tax deduction and public housing, two major federal housing policies. And basically our major findings for looking at both of those, was that residential segregation by race in these 20 cities was higher in 2010, than in 1940. And if I could just say I was totally surprised because, remember at the beginning, I said something about the liberal post-war period and then the neo-liberal or conservative period. My hypothesis for this study was that in that post-war period, when poverty was going down and inequality was getting less, that residential segregation would reduce, would get less, but lo and behold, it was steadily up, but never, never got less during those years in those cities. It sort of peaked in early 2000s and it has stayed high since the Reagan period. So we have considerable residential segregation.

And what happened with public housing in particular was, it was segregated in the beginning. It was begun during the Depression. It expanded during the war for some returning soldiers and the working class, the white working class loved it in the beginning. And it was very decent housing. It's hard to imagine that now because of what we know about it. But over the years, as the highway system allowed whites to escape the cities into suburban areas, the cities became more occupied by people of color and public housing got filled by people of color. And then the idea of public housing got demonized. After all, this was government supported, government finance housing. And we're in a

period when government is the root of all evil. So it was very easy to convince the public that public housing had to go and it's not that it disappeared, but it was neglected. And this was reinforced by the racial stereotypes that were used to discredit this.

Tanya Domi:

Like the welfare queen [crosstalk 00:15:48]

Mimi Abramovitz:

Well, welfare queen, [inaudible 00:15:49] Section 8 [crosstalk 00:15:52] for housing policies. So this racialization that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement today is very, very apparent in public housing. And then after disinvesting in public housing for years and years and years, well, the housing wasn't so good anymore. So they [crosstalk 00:16:11]

Tanya Domi:

It's in disrepair. There hasn't been a lot of capitalization money spent on it.

Mimi Abramovitz:

Exactly. So they started tearing them down. And the ones that sort of remained or that were fixed up, you still have to see more housing for the elderly, but not for the mostly single mothers who were in public housing. And so the fact that single mothers were using it also contributed to the demonization and the stigmatization. So we may have a little more public housing, but it's for a very different population. And so now today, the people who are being evicted and not the people in public housing. Today, the middle class is going to be looking for another place to live and there'll be no rent subsidies, there will be no public housing. They will be on the streets and in the shelters. So we have food lines, we have shelters, what else? Okay. [crosstalk 00:17:02]

Tanya Domi:

Really extraordinary. And then to just, I suppose, add insult, you, and this is no reflection on you, Dr. Abramovitz, because you're writing about the creeping managerialism in the administration of social welfare. And you say this is not an exclusive phenomenon to the United States, it's global. Can you talk about how it presents itself and what is happening in terms of how social welfare is managed?

Mimi Abramovitz:

So managerialism is the word most of our listeners probably never heard of, but it, when it refers to, and if you work in a nonprofit or public sector social service program, you're very familiar with what it refers to, which is bringing the business model into the delivery of social services. It's called managerialism. That word came from somewhere. I don't really know and it doesn't really matter. I mean, the business model, which means an emphasis on productivity, speed up, efficiency, save money, accountability, count everything. Everything has to be quantified. If it can't be quantified, it doesn't count. And then [inaudible 00:18:08] of standardization where everything is digitalized, entered into the computer. And so the practice, which in social work is meant to be based on developing interpersonal relationships with the people you work with. But that option is secondary.

Tanya Domi:

Secondary.

Mimi Abramovitz:

Secondary and less possible if you spend your time with the computer. Now I, myself, when I go to the doctor, the doctor doesn't look at me.

Tanya Domi:

That's right.

Mimi Abramovitz:

The doctor looks at the computer and they try to talk to you and they're typing in.

Tanya Domi:

They're entering everything into the computer while you're in the office, but you're right. There's no eye contact.

Mimi Abramovitz:

So this is a real deterioration. It's affected quality of services. It's affected working conditions. Workers feel they're under surveillance. They're being monitored. They're having to work too fast, their case loads are too big. It's much more paperwork on and on and on. And it affects the wellbeing of workers. We have data on declining health, declining wellbeing, increasing stress, increasing burnout, people quitting their jobs, high turnover, which is a disaster for nonprofit agencies. To put it in the context of this larger discussion we're having, these are the agencies which we go to when we need help, not the cash. For cash we go to the public sector cash programs, social security, public assistance. But when, when we're sick-

Tanya Domi:

Veterans.

Mimi Abramovitz:

[crosstalk 00:19:31] When we have psychological problems, we go to these non-profit agencies. Not only have they, the budget's been cut and the staff's reduced and programs closed, but they can't provide the same quality services that they once were able to. And it was far from perfect to begin with because of the requirements by funders, both state and private funders, the outcomes have to be measured and all the things I just mentioned.

Tanya Domi:

We didn't talk about this, but I'm going to ask this as a last question, because I'm looking at the enormity, the enormity of what is facing American society. It's not just poor people now we're talking about, we're talking about the whole spectrum, except maybe the well-off. If you were to talk to Joe Biden in Washington, the transition team, besides that stimulus, which is very, very important, and that's macro level important for the entire country, what would you say to him about social welfare in this time of incredible need? What would you say about maybe a new New Deal in social welfare?

Mimi Abramovitz:

So the two things. One is I would suggest he raised taxes to where they were before. They're very low now. Replenish all these programs with the money they need. But then I like to go back to this proposal. So social security for all [crosstalk 00:20:55] which we went on to other topics. But social security for all is like a new New Deal. It's a bold proposal. It would take time to implement, but it's modeled on the idea of Medicare For All. And the underlying idea of social security for all is that delinks getting these benefits from your job. Right now, you have to have worked 10 years before you even can qualify for social security. And so it's totally tied to work for all the reasons that I mentioned earlier, that work incentives and so on. So if you can delink it from work and make it available regardless of age, you have what some people call like a basic income.

It's a little different than the universal basic. One of the reasons that it's different is everybody loves social security. It's a beloved system. It's very efficient and it's already in place. We could just modify the rules a little bit or a lot actually, and say social security for all. And obviously people don't say that you can't do that, but you could start it slowly. People with Medicare for All, okay, let's lower the age of 55 and then to 45. So you could do this over time.

The principle thing is to delink it from work, because number one, work is disappearing. If you don't have a job, you don't get social security. You can't work for 10 years. So where are you going to get cash income? So this would provide an underlying source of income to deal with the problem of the robots are coming. The jobs are disappearing and people don't have money [crosstalk 00:22:25] So it's an economic, it's a longterm economic stimulus. And so I think ideas like that and others that I'm sure other people have, are I'm hopeful that the by the administration will open itself to that. Obviously we're dealing with a tension between the progressive agenda and the moderate agenda within the Democratic party. That's another whole story. We can save that for another.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, let's save that for another conversation. But what a timely conversation, Dr. Abramovitz. This is a terrible time in our country. And so your scholarship and your policy expertise has illuminated, I believe, us all today, and I hope it will to our listeners who will tune in. So thank you so much for being here today.

Mimi Abramovitz:

And thank you for the invitation to share my work. I really appreciate it.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Professor Mimi Abramovitz of the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.