



Barbara R. Bergmann. *In Defense of Affirmative Action.* New York: Basic Books, 1996. ix + 213 pp. \$23.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-09833-0.



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In Defense of Affirmative Action

Barbara Bergmann, an economist who teaches at American University, has added another book to the several she has published that make sense of the relationship between intellectual work and everyday life. Affirmative action is not a new topic for Bergmann. Her facility for handling the contentious debates related to affirmative action comes from years of engaging the reasonable but ill-informed, the shamelessly rude, and undeservedly arrogant opponents. This is a compact, straight forward, unapologetic defense of affirmative action. Bergmann provides a surprisingly reserved defense, only occasionally resorting to the tone of indignation that her clear support of affirmative action might compel—particularly in the current climate filled with hostility towards affirmative action.

She is aware of poll data that reveals widespread opposition to affirmative action. However, Bergmann notes that the framing of questions biases measures of the extent of opposition or approval (pp. 32, 159). As with most public policy issues, there is probably more public ambiguity about affirmative action than is revealed in the bifurcated rhetoric and reporting of opponents and pro-

ponents, often because those who are running for public office are trying to maximize the impact of sound bites. Certainly more needs to be done to ascertain the “‘true’ state of public opinion“ (p. 159). More important, we need to understand the basis of support and opposition. That is the central purpose of this book: to illuminate the positions for the purpose of defending affirmative action.

The number of books devoted to discussing affirmative action is mind-numbing. One could easily wonder if yet another book could possibly have anything new to add to a debate that has raged since the implementation of affirmative action policies began in the 1960s. Clearly, what Bergmann offers is a plea to reason. The book is surprisingly thin on data, especially for an economist! In the eight chapters and one hundred eighty pages of text, there are eight tables, one chart, and one photograph. However, Bergmann’s bibliographic notes provide ample sources. She incorporates selective and important data into the text and includes some anecdotes, personal stories, and results of research she conducted. There is a somewhat eclectic blend of methodologies that would rattle the methodological cages of most economists; how-

ever, this book is more an exploration of arguments than of data or history. Consequently, the absence of extensive data is consistent with the thrust of the book—it is designed to engage arguments, to consider reasons offered in defense of or opposition to affirmative action, and to tease out the underlying assumptions of the debate.

There are seven questions Bergmann aspires to answer in this book: One, are African American women and men and white women in our society badly hobbled by continuing discrimination practiced against them? Two, does the discrimination against them that currently exists justify a remedy like affirmative action? Three, could other remedies be substituted? Four, is it unfair to use affirmative action to exclude the whites and men who would normally be chosen to be hired? Five, are the benefits of affirmative action worth the costs? Six, are numerical goals and timetables the same thing as quotas? Seven, are goals and timetables indispensable? (pp. 30-31) Although reasonable answers require considering some empirical data, Bergmann wants the reader to take as given that the United States is a long way from the kind of social equality for women and African Americans that would make a book like this anachronistic. Bergmann refuses to quibble over figures. What, she asks, can get us to where we want to be? What price are we willing to pay?

According to Bergmann, there are “three motives for affirmative action.” These are: One, the need to make systematic efforts to fight discrimination that still exists..., two, the desire for integration, and three, the desire to reduce poverty of certain groups marked out by race and gender“ (pp. 9-10). Debate turns on whether or not one supports the use of government to achieve egalitarian or social justice goals and whether or not one considers affirmative action a way to achieve or undermine these goals. Some critics are simply opposed to the goals of affirmative action, others doubt its capacity to achieve them, and still others consider the costs or strategies prohibitive or just ‘wrong.’

What makes discussion of the topic so difficult is that embedded in all of the discussion are troubling assumptions about race and gender—according to opponents and proponents. For instance, opponents claim (in a tone that presumes egalitarian concerns) that affirmative action insinuates that women and blacks are incapable of ‘making it’ based on merit. (Is there a genetic presumption somewhere in there?) Proponents argue that ‘merit’ often camouflages race and gender biases that ‘prefer’ whites and males. The capacity for ‘making it’ is deter-

mined by the attitude and behavior of those who control the standards, not the performance or abilities of the applicants. According to Bergmann, several arguments against affirmative action are grounded in generalizations about the impact of affirmative action that have not been adequately researched (reducing the self-esteem of African Americans), that are inconsistent with or disproved by data (systematic or significant displacement of white males) or are inappropriately linked, causally, to ‘consequences’ (creating hostile work environments). These capricious uses and interpretations of data certainly raise a red flag about the methods and motives of opponents.

Bergmann explores several ‘alternatives’ that have been proposed to replace affirmative action. They range from providing “help to the disadvantaged,” to lawsuits, education and training, testing “used to diagnose the extent of discrimination in the labor market” (p. 178), and—believe it or not—prayer. The author does present summaries of a couple of important legal cases (pp. 48-50, pp. 113-18) but does so primarily to dramatize the limitations of legal suits to remedy discrimination. These are cryptic summaries that invite the reader to review the cases in their entirety. Bergmann acknowledges the strengths of each of the alternative proposals as complements to affirmative action but argues, convincingly, that the alternatives do not have the capacity to achieve the goals for which affirmative action was designed. Indeed, several of the proposals are likely to “leave much discrimination-caused segregation intact” (p. 168).

This is an extremely accessible, well-organized, easy read. Bergmann is straightforward and unpretentious. She simply offers justifications for affirmative action, and examines and responds to opposing arguments. The book is organized in a format that makes it particularly useful for undergraduate courses in which students are, generally, accustomed to textbook highlighting. The author raises questions, provides several answers, and assesses each answer in light of the goals of affirmative action and the credibility of the arguments. The value of Bergmann’s style is that it helps students work their way through the ethical and philosophical considerations that are often obscured by an emphasis on legal considerations. Bergmann traces the arguments of opponents to their most basic logic. For instance, what, she asks, is the logic behind opposition to affirmative action that presumes ‘merit’ to be the only or single most important consideration for employment or college admission when there are clear instances of social acceptance of preferences that have little to do with ‘merit’? Bergmann

also attempts to expose those rituals of fairness, like tossing a coin to determine which teacher should have been fired in the famous Piscataway case (p. 110), that serve to maintain existing inequalities.

This is a useful supplementary book for a course on affirmative action with a section on ethical or philosophical controversies about affirmative action. Students would need to read other books and journal articles that provide background and historical information to gain a better sense of the reasons for the development of affirmative action programs and the contemporary retreat from those policies. Additionally, students would need to read about social and political movements, presidential orders, and the many judicial rulings that have shaped discourse and positions.[1] Bergmann clearly does not provide the important background information that places the debates about affirmative action in context. Absent this information, the book is still a welcome addition in the current discourse which gives distorted weight to opponents' positions. However, to appreciate that the disagreements over affirmative action are not the simple consequence of high-level philosophical disagreements, more advanced students will need to read Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back—The Retreat from*

Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy. Steinberg's definitive social, political, and intellectual history of affirmative action provides the meat to which Bergmann's work alludes.

Note

[1]. The most valuable and insightful history of affirmative action is presented in Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back—The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995.) An informative edited volume that includes primary sources and pro and con perspectives is George E. Curry, ed., *The Affirmative Action Debate* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996.) The perspective of the Clinton administration appears in Christopher Edley, Jr. *Not All Black and White—Affirmative Action, Race, and American Values* (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1996.) Opposing arguments are represented in various books, articles and essays written by Nathan Glazer, Michael Katz, Glen Loury, Thomas Sowell, or Terry Eastland.

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