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BOOK REVIEWS

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BOOK REVIEWS

Creating an opportunity society, by Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2009, 347 pp., US\$26.05 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8157-0322-8

How can the United States create more economic and social mobility for families who are at the bottom of the income and wealth distribution? This is the question that Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill address in *Creating an Opportunity Society* – a book in which they discuss the lack of opportunity and its causes as well as a pragmatic approach to creating an opportunity society that acknowledges the role of government in helping people make responsible life choices. The authors present specific policy recommendations in the areas of education, employment, and family life with persuasive arguments that build on impressive research evidence to provide a concrete vision of feasible policy steps that could bring the country closer to an American opportunity society.

In the area of education, the authors propose expanding educational opportunities for disadvantaged families at the pre-elementary, elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels; expanding home visiting programs; improving the quality of teaching and promoting high-achieving inner-city schools; establishing effective programs that prepare disadvantaged students for college; and simplifying the maze of financial aid programs.

In the area of employment, they suggest enhancing the current work support system and strengthening work requirements. Other work-related supports include providing more money for childcare; restructuring housing assistance; and permanently expanding the Child Tax Credit for low-wage workers. The authors also recommend policies that would encourage disadvantaged, young men to work more and contribute more to their families.

Strengthening families is the book's third pillar of proposed opportunity policies, and consists of policies that encourage the formation of two-parent families. Pointing to research evidence that suggests a comparative lack of opportunities for children in single-parent families, the authors suggest that government should focus on reducing teenage pregnancies and non-marital births through public initiatives that would help foster a culture that encourages increased marriage rates. Such initiatives might also help individuals follow a life trajectory that includes completing one's education, working a stable, well-paying job, followed by marriage and children.

So, how would the government pay for these policies, which the authors estimate would result in a net cost of about \$20 billion annually? Scaling back and restructuring existing social programs is one way. They also suggest introducing a new intergenerational contract between the elderly and the non-elderly that would lead the country to invest more heavily in young people who could thereby make higher incomes and be better able to save for retirement.

While this may seem like a contradiction in terms, this book does achieve a formidable synthesis of Liberal and Conservative views on social and economic mobility. Readers on the political left may certainly cringe at the book's implication that people in poverty – and not the wealthy – be subjected to welfare state paternalism instead of arguing for the fundamental restructuring of the economy in ways that would allow workers to obtain higher wages. Meanwhile, readers on the political right may certainly scoff at the authors' suggestion that a lack of jobs and low wages are related to poverty (in addition to other factors) and are also likely to rebuff the recommendation for continued government support of people in poverty. Still, the authors manage to transcend the political divide and the academic divide on the causes of poverty by focusing on policies that are cost-effective *and* have the support of the American public. Their message to policy makers is crystal clear: it is not only imperative but possible to create an American opportunity society – let's do it!

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Boosting paychecks: the politics of supporting America's working poor, by Daniel P. Gitterman, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2010, 180 pp., US\$22.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8157-0308-2

In his new book, Daniel Gitterman takes on the formidable challenge of explaining how the political negotiations of the past century have produced the basic features of our federal income tax and minimum wage policies and their consequences for low-income working households. And he does so in a way that passes the 'grandma test,' which is, 'to write simply enough for your grandma to understand your argument' (p. x). Despite such a dense and complicated topic Gitterman succeeds in delivering his message in a clear and readable style, and for that feat alone, this book deserves high praise.

Gitterman poses one basic question: How have these two sets of policies contributed toward boosting the paychecks of low-income working households? To answer this question, Gitterman follows the path of policy compromises that US Democrats and Republicans have made to produce current policy. The bulk of the book looks at the last four presidential administrations, from Reagan to (W.) Bush, and ends with the Obama White House. Gitterman's historical map of these political maneuverings contains plenty of detail, but not too much.

The substance of the book tilts heavily toward describing the politics that form federal income tax and minimum wage policies yet does not adequately consider their welfare consequences in the terms that introduce the book, 'self-sufficiency' (p. 1). Gitterman's closing remarks illustrate this uneven treatment. He makes two observations on political process but none on welfare outcomes. First, we can expect tax policy to remain central to providing work supports; and second, past experience indicates that political moderates will author future policy. Absent from the author's reflections are thoughts on whether these policies will eventually raise the paychecks of low-income households enough to achieve some approximation of self-sufficiency. Further, rather than accepting the federal poverty income threshold rule of thumb, to

help balance the book, Gitterman should have considered the question of what these policies need to offer to actually make work pay. In fact, one could argue strongly that the official poverty line, widely recognized by poverty experts as marking a truly severe level of deprivation, is irrelevant to the question of self-sufficiency.

The book would also benefit readers more if it considered how these policies interact within the wider economic context. Gitterman makes one incisive, but unfortunately inaccurate statement on this: 'Declining demand has pulled down the wages of the less skilled, both men and women, so employment often does not lead to economic self-sufficiency' (p. 19). In fact, once we enter into improved economic times, employment in occupations requiring few educational credentials can be expected to grow at a healthy clip, according to the US Labor Department's most recent employment projections. Gitterman's analysis should also consider how other economic forces, such as a decline in labor unions, could help explain the erosion of the earnings of workers in such jobs. Presenting this wider economic context would likely have invited a greater consideration of what other policy responses, aside from work supports, may make work pay.

Nonetheless, the book's great strength is how it methodically reveals the way US social and economic policy results from an on-going tug-of-war between the contesting ideological views of the country's two main political parties. A key lesson for this economist is that this tug-of-war is never won decisively and that economic models tend to characterize policy changes as 'yes/no' variables that ignore how they have been wrestled from compromise. For that reason, in particular, economists studying income tax and minimum wage policies should read this book.

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The war on welfare: family, poverty, and politics in modern America, by Marisa Chappell, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, 352 pp., US\$45 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-8122-4204-1

Marisa Chappell offers an excellent, if dispiriting, account of the erosion of political support for the federal Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program from the 1960s through the 1980s. In an examination of the periodic efforts to 'reform' the program, Chappell emphasizes above all the central importance of ideas about the impact of welfare on recipients' family structure. As she convincingly argues, even sympathetic reform efforts focused on including welfare families in a 'family wage system,' built around a male head of household who was able to support the family on a single income. The possibility of a family wage, however, was growing more and more remote at the very time welfare reform was being articulated, while criticism of the impact of welfare on families ultimately played into the hands of anti-welfare conservatives.

This overlap between liberal and conservative critiques of welfare is the most striking observation of Chappell's work. While by the 1980s assumptions about AFDC's negative impact on families (presumably encouraging single mothers to remain single) were a commonplace of welfare reform efforts, she shows how this

argument was most forcefully advanced by *liberals* in the 1960s. Reformers pointed to the perceived failures of welfare in an effort to broaden and reshape the social safety net – in particular, through programs of full employment that would improve the earnings prospects of black fathers, and thereby create the conditions for more stable two-parent families. While the Moynihan Report of 1965 was attacked by some for its conclusions about the pathologies of black families, Chappell reminds us that his rhetoric and his recommendations (increased federal investment in job and income programs for African Americans, particularly men) were at ‘the center of the 1960s anti-poverty coalition’ (p. 37). The alleged incentive that AFDC provided for men to desert their families informed even some of the most revolutionary proposals for a guaranteed family income in the late 1960s.

Subsequent efforts to re-engineer the federal social safety net for low-income families were predicated on similar assumptions. Both President Nixon’s proposed Family Assistance Program and President Carter’s unrealized Program for Better Jobs and Income envisioned replacing AFDC with some version of a broader guaranteed income favoring the ‘working poor’ – though both proposals short-changed the African American mothers who had become the public face of AFDC. But as enthusiasm for expanded federal assistance died, all that was left of liberal and moderate efforts at welfare reform was the criticism of the (usually black) welfare family – a point seized upon by anti-welfare conservatives and at the heart of the rollback of welfare in the 1980s and 1990s.

What hope there was for an alternative path lay with the handful of advocates (largely feminists and welfare rights activists) in the 1960s and 1970s who understood that industrial decline and low-paying service jobs made the ‘family wage’ an untenable ideal for many Americans, and in particular the African American families at the heart of the welfare debate. They proposed to support wage earning by poor women (including flexible work hours, stronger affirmative action in higher-income, male-dominated fields, and more robust provision of child care); but by then, the focus on family structure combined with a more conservative political climate had sharply narrowed the policy options.

As Chappell astutely notes, the end of AFDC coincided with the end of the political and economic era that had made the ideal of a single-earner family wage seem like a workable model; if there is any bright spot in her story, it is that with the demise of AFDC, the slate may now be clean for creating a more progressive, gender-neutral approach to sustaining poor families.

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Mothers’ work and children’s lives: low-income families after welfare reform, by Rucker C. Johnson, Ariel Kalil and Rachel E. Dunifon with Barbara Ray, Kalamazoo, MI, W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2010, 147 pp., US\$40.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-88099-356-2

How do poor mothers balance work and family in ways that benefit children? Focusing on the context in which this work occurs, authors Rucker C. Johnson,

Ariel Kalil, and Rachel E. Dunifon use data from the five waves of the Women's Employment Study (WES) to parcel out how low-income families are faring after welfare reform.

This readable and well-structured book begins with a summary of specific factors involved in framing the issue: workforce, economy, and ideology. First, the authors provide a detailed background of the 1996 welfare reform, highlighting the initial assumptions made by policymakers; specifically, that by moving poor mothers into the workforce, children would benefit. The authors present the context of the welfare bill, the ideologies surrounding the development and implementation of the bill, and an overview of the literature on the relationship between mother's work and child development.

The authors then outline a convincing argument for the use of data from the WES, a five-wave survey of 753 low-income single mothers in Michigan from 1997 to 2003 that allows for a post-welfare analysis of both maternal employment and child well-being. While the WES data provide both qualitative and quantitative data, the authors focus on the quantitative results using qualitative examples to underscore points. The authors also provide a detailed overview of the context in which the data were collected and employ a very thorough empirical strategy in language that is clear and readable for all audiences. Analyses include four multiple measures of child outcomes: (1) an externalizing behavior problems scale, (2) an internalizing behavior problems scale, (3) a total behavioral problems scale, and (4) a measure of disruptive and/or disobedience in school.

A bivariate analysis of maternal employment patterns and child behavior outcomes is presented first, followed by more detailed analyses of work context. The authors combine the available quantitative and qualitative data to present results and show that children whose mothers have stable employment do fare better than children whose mothers do not work. However, the authors also point out that the types of work mothers do matters. Specifically, the stability of the work is an important factor in maintaining positive outcomes for children. Given that low-income mothers are typically employed in unstable work, the authors conclude that the welfare policies have 'imposed some risks to children's development' (p. 86).

The book concludes with recommendations for areas of future research and specific policy recommendations that (at least) merit further attention, including enhancing stability of work schedules, improving job retention, improving wage growth prospects, and strengthening the safety net.

In all, this work offers a clear discussion of the effects of employment on multiple child outcomes and as the authors note, is 'among the most comprehensive to date on the topic' (p. 84) of life after welfare and its effects on children.

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