

Sylvia Bashevkin.

Welfare Hot Buttons: Women, Work, and Social Policy Reform.

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Over the last two decades, welfare reforms restructured systems of social provision across North America and much of Europe. In response, a new welfare reform industry has emerged to document and analyze the effects of these shifts. A wide range of researchers now work in this crowded arena—from policy-oriented to theoretically-inclined social scientists. And while their methodological, analytical, and political perspectives vary, most welfare state researchers tend to focus on a particular national context. Although most make reference to policy shifts occurring in neighboring countries, they refrain from analyzing fully the development of welfare reform across time and space.

Sylvia Bashevkin's book, *Welfare Hot Buttons: Women, Work, and Social Policy Reform*, is unique in its cross-national approach. Instead of limiting herself to Canada—or even North America—Bashevkin provides a systematic comparison of reform politics and policies in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. These three cases are comparable not only because they are often classified as “liberal” welfare regimes, but also due to the influence of “third way” politicians in the 1990s. Bashevkin's comparative approach results in a fascinating story of the convergences and divergences in the political discourse and policy outcomes in these three cases.

The book is guided by three main questions, which are reflected nicely in the book's overall organization. The first two chapters describe the political legacies of the 1980s and the ways third way politicians used these conservative ideals. Here Bashevkin does an excellent job exposing the overlaps among the welfare visions of Reagan, Mulroney, and Thatcher: All three lamented the social ill of “dependency”; they argued for a welfare system targeted at the truly needy; and they introduced a regime of fiscalism based on “fostering achieving, enterprising individuals in an open marketplace...” (p. 41). Rather than rejecting this conservative legacy, Bashevkin shows how the new generation of politicians that emerged in the 1990s actually appropriated many of its tenets, while still promising more balanced and level-headed welfare reforms. Interestingly, these third way leaders ended up with quite similar diagnoses of the ills of welfare: from Clinton to Chrétien to Blair, the focus turned to instilling a work ethic and norms of self sufficiency in the welfare population. From Clinton's call to “make work pay” to Chrétien's mantra of “investing in people” to Blair's insistence on “self improvement,” a neoliberal commitment to personal responsibility and duty began to reign rhetorically.

When Bashevkin moves from the discourse to the policies of third way politicians in Chapter 4, we see a bit more variation across these cases. In part, this variation is due to the different welfare systems these politicians inherited, particularly in the areas of child care and universal income supports and family benefits. Another key difference seemed to be the level of fiscal pressure constraining these leaders, with Clinton and Chrétien facing more serious debt crises than Blair. As a result, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the Canadian Health and Social Transfer (CHST) overlapped in several respects: they cut spending for

cash benefits; they moved to block grant systems that awarded locales more control of policy formulation and implementation; and they stripped what was left of national entitlements to income support. In Britain, on the other hand, the Blair government actually committed to spending more on its reform program, at least initially. Despite its neoliberal rhetoric of self sufficiency and entrepreneurialism, Blair's New Deal program infused new funds into the welfare system. So, at this level, the concrete policies of reform varied in terms of relative and absolute expenditures. Yet Bashevkin also makes a strong case for their underlying parallels. She argues that, in all three cases, social citizenship came under attack as income-support schemes became increasingly temporary, transitional, and conditional. She points out how the logic of wage labor and pro-market principles structured the social provisions of the Clinton, Chrétien, and Blair governments. And she convincingly demonstrates that the introduction of work-tested benefits and tax credits helped to move questions of social need into the taxified arenas of finance and labor.

Perhaps these parallels are what underlie the similar outcomes of reform Bashevkin outlines in Chapter 5. The commonalities are really quite striking: in all three countries, welfare caseloads dropped dramatically. In the U.S. and Canada, they declined by as much as 60%. Correspondingly, employment rates for sole mothers rose significantly—from 50% in Great Britain to 70% in the U.S. With defederalization in the U.S. and Canada, many national guidelines were gutted and local-level variation intensified. In addition to these redistributive trends, Bashevkin exposes similarities in the political and discursive consequences of reform, particularly in the U.S. and Canada. Drawing on interviews with welfare activists and policymakers, Bashevkin argues that reform was accompanied by a backlash against poor women and the demonization of welfare-reliant mothers. Thus, those opposed to reform were put on the political defensive and left unable to launch an effective challenge to reform policies. In many ways, the silencing of alternative political voices is one of the most significant and long-lasting effects of reform in these cases.

There is much for social scientists and researchers to consider and learn from this book. Despite differences in the “nuts and bolts” of reform, the overall direction and principles underlying these reform movements are strikingly similar. As Bashevkin lays out in the concluding chapter, these reform processes are giving rise to a new state form that is no longer based on a reciprocal social contract between the state and society. Instead, the new “duty state” is based on citizens' obligations, obsessed with personal responsibility, and oriented toward market exchange. In effect, Bashevkin offers a powerful analysis of how these states are moving toward a common endpoint. And her prognosis of what is to come is quite alarming: a welfare model premised on the primacy of wage labor, the erasure of social rights, and a strong emphasis on behavioral modification and control.

While *Welfare Hot Buttons* provides a stunning descriptive account of U.S., Canadian and British reform routes and outcomes, few issues remain undeveloped. These issues revolve around the explanatory and theoretical dimensions of the analysis. When it comes to accounting for these policy developments, the analysis often falters: many of its generalizations apply to only one or two cases and are thus unconvincing. In part, this may be due to the organization of the analysis—in all of the chapters, each national case is described separately, with only a brief concluding section to compare them. This organization frequently undermined the power of the comparison and a clear explanation for political and policy trends. A more conceptual and less descriptive organization would have allowed for a fuller comparative analysis. It also would have led to clearer explications of the

theoretical implications of the analysis. Bashevkin does not ground her analysis fully in the existing scholarship on gender and welfare reform. Nor does she make use of other studies that have compared these three cases—most notably, Orloff, O'Connor, and Shaver's (1999) *States, Markets, and Families: Gender, Liberalism, and Social Policy in Australia, Canada, Great Britain and the United States*. This missed opportunity left many of the conceptual and theoretical possibilities of the analysis untapped. Of course, this gap does not negate the book's importance. Quite the opposite: *Welfare Hot Buttons* lays the empirical groundwork that other scholars can now build on to elaborate and theorize the convergences and divergences among these cases.

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Lynne Haney's 2002 book *Inventing the Needy: Gender and the Politics of Welfare in Hungary* was reviewed in *CJS Online* in July 2003.

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