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Rachel Hatch

Illinois Wesleyan University

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New Book Shines Insight on Welfare Debate

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Capitalism produces a lot of wealth, but also a significant amount of poverty, writes Illinois Wesleyan University Associate Professor of Political Science Greg Shaw in his new book, *The Welfare Debate*. The controversy over how to help poor people has lingered in the United States for centuries. In his book, Shaw examines the history and rhetoric that have led a stalemate in the discussion of welfare in America.

“Much of the debate over public assistance boils down to the tension between the rhetoric of the ‘good Samaritan’ – helping out one’s brothers and sisters – and that of creating dependency and being a corrupting influence on society,” said Shaw.

An instructor with IWU since 1998, Shaw has been examining the welfare system in America since his graduate days at Columbia University, where he earned his master’s degree and doctorate in political science in 1993 and 1998, respectively. He notes that while the sides of the welfare debate are marked by some enduring continuities, some important issues have evolved over time.

In *The Welfare Debate*, Shaw looks at several issues, including contention over the source of relief for the poor. “There’s always been the belief that poor people should be offered help,” said Shaw, “but one of the debated questions is whether the source of that relief should come from public or private means.” Shaw points out that throughout its history, the United States has journeyed from private funding of welfare to public, back to private and to public again. “The debate has not progressed in a linear fashion,” he said.

Race is another evolving issue affecting the welfare debate, according to Shaw. “You cannot ignore the inequality of wealth along race lines,” he said, noting in 2000, the U. S. Census Bureau reported the median household net worth for non-Hispanic white families was \$75,000, while for black families it was approximately \$7,500. “It’s a 10-to-1 difference. Race and racism are very much with us in the way that Americans think and act about issues, including public assistance,” he said. In the book, Shaw also tackles the changing ideologies of the government’s role in the marketplace and attitudes toward motherhood.

In researching *The Welfare Debate*, Shaw said he enjoyed gathering the different perspectives on the debate. “To really tap into the rhetoric of the debate was intriguing – pulling from government publications, elite media such as the *New Republic*, mass media and historical perspectives of people living in poverty from social work interviews,” said Shaw.

Though the book offers no solutions for welfare, Shaw said he hopes to bring the debate to a wider audience. “It would be helpful for people to see the similarities of the arguments we’ve had, whether it was the early 1800s, the early 1900s or a year ago,” he said, “and how we still seem to be banging our heads against the rhetoric that is hundreds of years old.”

Periodically the welfare debate resurfaces, usually resulting in an apparent policy fix, said Shaw. “Every 30 to 40 years, something happens that makes us rediscover poverty as if it were new,” he said. According to Shaw, the latest fix was the 1996 welfare act, renewed in 2006, that has been heralded as ending welfare as we know it. “That law sent a powerful message that the welfare problem has been addressed. Yet for at least 150 years, since the ranks of the poor have been measured, some 20 percent of Americans have lived in poverty, talking about the pre-transfer poverty rate. Unless people want to argue one out of five people are lazy, then Americans have to recognize that our economy poses structural obstacles to economic advancement for many. The debate will return.”

Shaw will follow the book, published under Greenwood Press’ *Historical Guides to Controversial Issues* series, with another book on the topic of healthcare.



Greg Shaw