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## Megan Burke

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Megan Burke Interviewed by Charlie Schlenker , WGLT  
February 16, 2015

(Opening music)

- **McCurdy:** This is Sound Ideas, I'm Mike McCurdy. Illinois Wesleyan University sociologist Meghan Burke studies the way people talk and think about race. She has always been interested in how that shapes their desire to get involved in their communities. Her first book looked at that question among people in liberal diverse communities in the Chicago area. She has now focused on TEA party people in Illinois and neighboring states. The book is Race, Gender, and Class in the TEA Party. She tells GLT's Charlie Schlenker that the movement reflects much of America on these issues.
- **Burke:** What I try to explore are the ways that people are acting to change their worlds on the basis of what they know and experience, but also on what they think they know and experience, and that's where some of my criticism comes in, in terms of their reliance on, you know, entertainment media, such as cable news.
- **Schlenker:** Is there a commonality between the TEA party and say north shore liberals and how they view race in America?
- **Burke:** You know, there is and I think that's something that would surprise a lot of people. Our partisan frameworks in this country want to tell us that there's one side that has it right or wrong and also that we're very very different from each other. While their goals, their political goals, are very different, they're thinking about the problems that we see in our communities and their understanding of race in this country isn't all that different than I think we might expect.
- **Schlenker:** In what way? How do they view race?
- **Burke:** So, the language that we use for this in my discipline and many others as well is that of what we call, "color blindness", or "color blind racism". What that means is that most people in this country tend to think that racism is a problem of the past, we tend to look at movements, like the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and think that this has really fixed and addressed any problems of racism and most people actually don't realize the extent to which racial inequality has grown in recent decades, to the point where it's now rivaling the levels at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Because we had an important movement that fixed laws to try to secure equality and equal opportunity in this country, we tend to think that it then just falls on individuals or our sort of fuzzy understanding of cultures to explain the segregation and inequality that we see around us. And that's really a problem because what it fails to recognize is both the generational legacy of inequality, how what my parents were able to provide for me was contingent, in part, upon what their parents were able to provide for them and it also tends to rely on what are still some pretty strong racial stereotypes that we have about one another, which are easy to believe in a segregated society where we primarily learn about each other through media.
- **Schlenker:** Well there have been studies that show that class mobility in the U.S. is on a par with the way it is in Great Britain, that it takes concerted effort over a period of about 150 years for a family line to actually change its class convincingly.
- **Burke:** Well that certainly is true, but I think there are two important things to recognize connected to that. One is that our rhetoric doesn't include 150 year range. Our rhetoric says, "You work hard today and it should pay off today or tomorrow". And so most folks

aren't thinking about the long range in their families, we're controlling what we can, which in our own immediate efforts and what they're able to glean for us.

- **Schlenker:** The Horatio Alger myth of American opportunity.
- **Burke:** That's absolutely right. And so I think that's not at all the way that we think about race.
- **Schlenker:** Well how do we think about race? You mention in the book about several myths that TEA party adherents use as political mobilizers. Do liberals use the same myths?
- **Burke:** You know, in my first book, which again studied these stably racially diverse communities in Chicago, communities that are very proud of their racial diversity and really claim that as part of their identity, along with their liberal politics. I was hearing a lot of the same coded racism; we don't have specific racial epitaphs in this country as often. What we tend to say instead is that we are worried about the gangsters and the thugs and the imbeciles hanging out on the corner and all of that is really both racially coded and loaded. So that talk was-
- **Schlenker:** The people on the west side of Bloomington.
- **Burke:** That's exactly right. So it's that kind of discourse, that way of talking and thinking about race that really flags for us, deeply racialized meanings and I found that to be just as pervasive on the left, as I do on the TEA party. So I'm very critical of that, but it's not just the TEA party who is doing it.
- **Schlenker:** So how do we get beyond that in both camps?
- **Burke:** You know I think that that is in some ways the million dollar question. Perhaps because I'm a professor, I'm hopeful that education can help us really learn and look carefully how and why we have such persistent segregation and how we have such deep myths about each other and our notions about culture. We tend to think culture somehow explains it, and yet even there, study after study shows that our cultural values are pretty much shared in this country. Most people don't know that. I think we need more education, I also think we need better media and to be willing to tune into media that isn't about entertainment for profit, but rather is really going to help us make sense of the word around us.
- **Schlenker:** You're right of an odd conjunction of effects, amplifying racism and empowering women.
- **Burke:** Right.
- **Schlenker:** Let's talk about the amplification of racism; we've already started on that road so let's continue there with what you found out about how TEA party rhetoric actually makes things more fraught.
- **Burke:** Yeah I think that that in some ways can be double sided. One is in, again the reality that most TEA party folks totally embody this color blindness. I talked to folks who very sincerely shared with me that they were excited to see a black family in the White House, that they thought that was important for this country, some of them were initially not so opposed to Obama, and just about everyone says, you know, "I don't see race and I don't think that anyone should be judged by the color of their skin." Folks were really dismissive of the overt racism in the movement, but that overt racism was much less common, so that color blindness helps to uphold this idea that racism isn't a problem in contemporary life. With that, there was also this coded racism. In particular, around policy talk about welfare, immigration, and national security. Those are three

policy areas and areas of concern for TEA party members, where there was rarely explicit racist talk, but with which those myths that we have about welfare, those myths that we have about immigration, and the way that that's connected to national security, Islamophobia, you know, all of these things were very very sharp and pervasive, and that's another way that it is not helping us when it comes to problems of racism in our society.

- **Schlenker:** So welfare queens shiftless immigrants and radical Muslims.
- **Burke:** That's exactly right.
- **Schlenker:** And focusing on those tropes prevents discussion of the actual, structural problems in the economy and society.
- **Burke:** And that's right and it's really a shame because if you talk to TEA party folks and that's what I did in my research for this book, folks I think are rightly concerned about the very realities, speaking again about this Horatio Alger myth that's so prevalent in our society. Where they're working hard, they're seeing their kids working hard, and yet our economies are really struggling. You know, I always call to mind an interview with a woman here in Illinois who was talking about going to Wal-Mart and seeing a man in his seventies, who they have known their whole lives, who should be enjoying his retirement years, instead having to work as a greeter for income so that he can survive and she just talks about how heartbreaking that is, and I agree! It is heartbreaking. The trouble is that that gets connected through the conservative media system into a framework that says that it is because our tax dollars are going toward these shiftless lazy welfare queens who, folks are certain, are laughing at them because they get to live off of our dime. That's not at all how welfare works, that's not how people feel about being on welfare, when they do have to survive that way, but because people don't know that, there's a way in which it does make sense. That's not to excuse it, but I think understanding how TEA party folks are understanding their own worlds is crucial for being able to cut through some of those tropes and better understand what's going on in our society.
- **Schlenker:** And how do TEA party beliefs empower women?
- **Burke:** You know, that was something that I didn't at all expect to be focusing on and now I devote a whole chapter to it in my book. I very quickly began to notice when I was arranging interviews and just to say my strategy for the book and in my research was to reach out to the active organizers in communities throughout the state of Illinois. So my thinking was that there's been all sorts of opinion polls about people who are TEA party supporters who might like to vote, or be motivated to vote in ways that the TEA party suggests and they're going to be, they're going to consider themselves, perhaps, TEA partiers. I wanted instead to look at the people who are actively organizing in their communities both because they're going to be folks who are especially passionate about the movement and are going to help me answer my question of how and why the TEA party became this platform for people, as well as connecting up to state and national networks. And what I quickly saw was that it was mostly women that I was sitting down and having these conversations with. In some ways, that's not terribly surprising. Social movement scholars have long pointed out that it's often women who are doing the daily organizing work to make movements happen, even though the super stars are sometimes men. I hesitate to overstate this, but I came to think of it as a women's movement. It was

women talking about their families and their communities, who were really finding empowerment in the TEA party.

- **Schlenker:** And yet there are tropes among more conservative people about hearth and home and women's roles that would make you think that wouldn't be the case.
- **Burke:** That's exactly right and I think had I started with those assumptions, I might not have even bothered to look into this or to notice that. I mean, again, like the question of race, one of these paradoxes where the color blindness is actually not helpful with regard to racial progress in this country. For women, we are seeing progress. These are women who are finding a voice in their homes and their communities, many for the first time in their lives, and that's incredibly inspiring, and yet they're doing so by drawing upon these very traditional ideas about gender, which is this notion that men and women are really fundamentally different, that women's place is going to be in the home and our concerns are primarily with children and all these other kinds of things. The interesting thing, and there's been other folks who have studied this as well, is that that actually serves as an avenue for women to claim legitimacy within the movement and that has really helped the TEA party movement.
- **Schlenker:** But it tends to cut against other kinds of research in political science that indicates that women tend to be more socially moderate, these are not socially moderate women.
- **Burke:** Well the TEA party is not socially moderate and I think it's also important to recognize that TEA party folks themselves, some are very much the fiscal conservatives, some are very much motivated by social conservatism and there's a lot of diversity within the movement in that regard. The women that I spoke to really **ran the full gown up**, many of them were focused on that fiscal policy than they were on the social conservatism and really used then these ideas about concern for children, even if it wasn't connected to traditional notions about family or marriage or sexuality or things like that, but rather about things like, welfare spending or concerns about immigration and national security, so it was really blended in that way.
- **Schlenker:** So what are some of the commonalities and beliefs across the political spectrum?
- **Burke:** I think that there are a number of commonalities across the political spectrum that we might not realize when we're focusing on those partisan differences. One is that TEA party folks are very critical of the influence of money in politics. You know, they are disappointed that lobbies, for example, hold so much influence over our elected officials and really, in part for that reason, but also for others who really don't feel as their being represented by our elected officials. I think that many of us feel that way, even though we may feel very differently about what those policies should be. And I also think that they really represent a craving for this democracy that we have tried to create in this country and that many argue left and right we're getting away from.
- **Schlenker:** Would you read a passage that you find particularly appropriate for the talk that we're having?
- **Burke:** Alright this is the beginning of the book: " 'Okay', began Bob, a white retiree wearing a farm company hat, as he read aloud a passage he had written about his awakening to TEA party politics. We started to wake up when we finally realized that George W. Bush's compassionate conservatism was reeling a creeping drift toward socialism. We rejoin to the wake, when Bush's snail pace became Obama's all-out sprint

and our president surrounding himself with far-left ideologues, socialists, and even self-described communists. He looked at me plainly, as if to ask, ‘Any questions?’, so went many of my conversations with TEA party members in Illinois, where I interviewed organizers all over the state about what brought them to the movement and how it had spoken to issues that matter in their lives. As we sat around in their kitchen tables, or in lobbies of hotels, where I have traveled to meet them, they discussed socialism, their frustration about the irresponsibility inherent in our rising national debt and the resentment that they feel in having to pay for those whom they sincerely believe are living off their hard-earned dollar. Such viewpoints provoke fierce debate, from the floors of congress to the walls of Facebook, and despite several proclamations declaring the movement dead, the TEA party’s influence persists. Something important is happening in the United States and that something seems to be intimately bound up with our notions about class and race. But how? Are the TEA party folks right? Have we dug ourselves so deeply into a budgetary hole that it’s going to take a radical revision of government to climb out? Or are they on to something? After all, Americans of all races and social classes tend to strongly favor the principles of hard work, family, personal responsibility and faith. The financial crisis of 2008 has put a strain on all of us. We have watched our communities suffer. Our national conversation has attempted to understand why. For many, the TEA party has offered a compelling answer.”

- **Schlenker:** Megan burke of Illinois Wesleyan University is the author of Race, Gender, and Class in the TEA Party. Thanks so much for joining us.
- **Burke:** Thank you for having me.
- **Schlenker:** I’m Charlie Shlanker.