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Greg Shaw

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Greg Shaw, Illinois Wesleyan University, interviewed by Charlie Schlenker, WGLT
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A Central Illinois Scholar is out with a new look at the history of this country's debate over welfare. WGLT's Charlie Schlenker has more....

Charlie Schlenker: Americans have believed in the obligation of society to help the very poor since the early 1600s. Beyond that, there's a lot of disagreement on how to do that. Illinois Wesleyan University political scientist Greg Shaw looks at the choice we've made in his book, *The Welfare Debate*.

Greg Shaw: "From the earliest settlements in Jamestown in Plymouth to the current era of mandated workfare, collective provision for the poor has marked the entirety of American history. These efforts have at times been privately financed instead of relying entirely on public funds. Further relief has come with conditions, with time limits, and with varying levels of generosity and miserliness, and often it has come with a mixture of resentfulness and sanctimoniousness, but these efforts have come. They have persisted in one form or another through boom times and economic depressions, across rural and urban communities, through eras when Americans privileged motherhood and a more recent era when quite the opposite was true, and from preindustrial years to times of rapid urbanization, total war, periods marked by illusions of near-universal effluence, and, of course, grand declarations of war on poverty. Through all these times Americans have funded programs either publicly or privately to provide a way through for the desperately poor among us, sometimes grudgingly or resignedly, sometimes piously, and on rare occasions, even ambitiously."

Charlie Schlenker: Greg Shaw, thank you for reading from the introduction to your book. Are there differences in the rhetoric of the welfare debate now versus a century ago?

Greg Shaw: Charlie, it's first probably interesting to take just a moment to think about the continuities marked by a conversation on one hand about the validity and the importance from a practical perspective and a moral perspective of the Good Samaritan story, of our obligation to our brothers and sisters to help them out, but on the other hand, a deep-seeded fear, concern, anxiety, that giving corrupts the recipient's work ethic, and these two elements, the good Samaritan story and the fear of dependency-building, have marked the welfare debate for—going on 400 years now. Underneath of that of course, we disagree widely on a variety of angles. We've disagreed on the meaning of motherhood, we've disagreed on the relevancy of race to this debate, we've disagreed on the issue of the appropriate role of the government in the market, and we've disagreed on where that aid ought to come from, whether it should be public or private, and if public, whether it should come from the national government or the local government or somewhere in between.

Charlie Schlenker: Why can't we reach some sort of accommodation on the two major tensions between charity and dependency?

Greg Shaw: Right. Most people are somewhat ambivalent. They hold those two ideas, the humanitarianism but also the belief in some version of capitalism, both clearly in mind and neither one is able to completely force out the other and so not only are we deeply divided across people, but we're deeply divided within our own minds on that issue.

Charlie Schlenker: How is race and racism present in how we think about public assistance?

Greg Shaw: Yeah, that has evolved quite a bit. Early on of course, race was a marker for outright exclusion, so Native Americans, African Americans, and so and so forth, even after the Civil War, became a marker for outright exclusion, so when Aid to Dependent Children, the program that was created in 1935, which ultimately became AFDC and is now Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, the nation's foremost welfare program—that program was for white widows and their children, and so race became a marker for outright exclusion. Race today has become something of a ball and chain around the leg of welfare provision in that, yes we provide it, certainly, but in an ironic twist, the program has become one that caters disproportionately to racial minority recipients and so that marker of a different sort runs the program into a politically weak position.

Charlie Schlenker: And that's because of income disparity in the nation?

Greg Shaw: That's right, income and wealth disparities, and those disparities are dramatic. As of 2000, the average non-white household, median non-white household, had a net worth that was ten times that of the median black household, so we—enormous economic disparities.

Charlie Schlenker: Where do we go from here?

Greg Shaw: Hard to know. I would like to be optimistic about the notion that we could build on social-scientific insights about what works and what doesn't and to some extent we can point to the dramatic expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit during the 1990s as a program that rewards those who do participate in the labor market, but at the same time, I'm aware that—I think most Americans look at the 1996 Welfare Reform Law as something that fixed the problem. It led to dramatic caseload decline; it led to a sense among laypeople that the problem had been addressed. Tragically, we have spent many fewer resources tracking what has become of people who have left welfare and so my sense is that the issue, politically, has gone to rest for a bit but it will be back because that roughly 20% poverty rate is still stubbornly out there and at some point we will realize the dramatic inequalities that we have and we will revisit this.

Charlie Schlenker: Greg Shaw is the author of *The Welfare Debate* out from Greenwood Press. The Illinois Wesleyan University political scientist is now working on a history of the healthcare policy debate. I'm Charlie Schlenker, WGLT News.