

The Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy
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Podcast transcript begins

[Azalia]: Hi everyone this is the podcast of the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy produced at the University at Buffalo. I am your host and producer Azalia Muchransyah. This episode I have Daniel Platt on the phone with me. Daniel is an Assistant Professor of Legal Studies at the University of Illinois Springfield and he was a 2018-2020 post-doctoral fellow at the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy at UB. He is currently revising his book manuscript *The Debt Question in Modern America*. Today he is going to talk to us about his recent published article “The Domestication of Credit.” Daniel can you tell us more about your research and what draws you into this topic?

[Daniel]: So, my research is about the moral politics of personal finance in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I'm interested in how Americans determined when it was appropriate to borrow money and more importantly what rights debtors had when they were unable to repay. These are questions that for centuries were strongly shaded by biblical and church pronouncements on debt but in the period that I examined, stretching from the end of the civil war to the dawn of the new deal, religious concerns were eclipsed by liberal concerns about the debtor's volition and right to self-possession. I look at several moments when these concerns reached a fever pitch such as the outcry over peonage in the post-war south and the crisis of loan sharking in the urban industrial north, and I explore how ideas about race, class, gender, and selfhood shaped the law of debtors' rights. In “The Domestication of Credit” uh an article that draws from this research, that I published in my second year at the Baldy Center, I focus on how women were mobilized in debates surrounding debt and the sanctity of the family. I trace married women's material contributions to household solvency in their labor as bookkeepers, breadwinners and financial advisors, and their symbolic roles particularly in their legal power to permit or forbid home mortgages and their incorporation into the early 20th century discourse of financial service. I argue that far from being an ungendered domain, the law and culture of personal finance in the United States has long been profoundly entangled with ideas about domesticity and the feminine.

So I was initially drawn to this topic because I wanted to understand how the American economy had become so reliant on debt when it seemed like there was so much in American culture that militated against it. Coming out of an American studies graduate program, I was also eager to address a set of questions that called for a truly interdisciplinary archive including law, literature, economic, and moral treatises and personal papers, and then in the midst of my research I also became very motivated by the scholarly criticism of the new history of capitalism particularly the charge that the turn toward political economy had amounted to a turn away from the study of gender,

culture, and difference. As my archive often linked the regulation of debt to the hierarchies of the home and the privileges of whiteness, I became excited by the opportunity to write a history of the financial economy that answered those critiques.

[Azalia]: Your article mentions many southern sources; can you please elaborate on this?

[Daniel]: So I wouldn't say that I set out to write a piece of southern history, but I do think that debt has special significance in the 19th century south for several different reasons. So one is that as a cash-poor agricultural economy the south is dependent on seasonal credit to sustain itself between harvests, so there's just a lot of debt in the history of the south. Additionally, those webs of credit often run to financial institutions in the north which introduces a sectional dimension to financial questions throughout the region and then there's the regional investment in the sanctity of the household that before the Civil War is deeply entwined with the paternalistic defense of slavery and after the war animates a variety of attempts to reconstruct and redeem the region. Debt factors into these attempts both I think in positive ways in the biracial alliances for homestead exemption legislation for example and also deeply reactionary ways as planters try to fend off creditors in order to preserve their elite status so that is kind of the why the south factor is in there.

[Azalia]: In your article you mentioned the role of women's informal network and the shift in narrative of women from being seen as a voracious to virtuous in managing household finances. Do you think that this shift works to benefit capitalist interests and not meant to acknowledge actual female excellence?

[Daniel]: That's a really interesting question. I think what probably could be said is that financial knowledge is always transmitted within both formal networks and informal networks and that when we write only the histories of those formal institutions such as bank lending departments and credit rating bureaus we often end up effacing women's presence in the history of the economy and in the history of finance. You know I think part of the story is that capital or capital interests or capital elites the capital is content to purpose whatever resources it can to enhance its power in American life. So the bankers and kind of banking industry organizations that I discuss in the article are probably frankly ambivalent about women's rights and women's excellence if not deeply suspicious of both they're certainly not deeply supportive of them but those actors those bankers do believe I think that women have uses and that their presence in material ways and in symbolic and discursive ways can help them to attract new customers and also and maybe more importantly, help to insulate their industry against the charge that it is anti-familial, and that it tends to imperil the sanctity of the household. The interesting thing there is that that's not really to dismiss the positive and even emancipatory consequences that that shift may have had for some women, those who found employment in banking for example, or those who developed a sense of autonomy or power through their management of their credit and their families credit and bank customers credit, but it is to acknowledge that capital I think primarily and perhaps even exclusively is interested in securing its own advantage through whatever means it can.

[Azalia]: Reading your piece I wonder if you think that ultimately women have no voice within this capitalist patriarchal world?

[Daniel]: So, there are a lot of different ways to define capitalism and a lot of different ways to define voice and I'm probably not the person who should be putting those two things in absolute opposition to one another. But I would say that the capitalism that we live with in the United States has been nourished and has been shaped by sexism in really countless ways, and that it has displayed no essential aversion to women's exploitation. Historians and economists often have debates about the character of capitalism often in reference to the relationship between capitalism and slavery, and these debates often boil down to whether people are talking about capitalism as it could be or capitalism as it was and has been. My commitments as a historian are to the study of capitalism in practice and in my research, I've found financial markets to have been positively entangled with patriarchy, sexism, and the law of coverture throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

[Azalia]: So, what do you think is the main takeaway of your research?

[Daniel]: So, I think one takeaway from my research and maybe something that I've been thinking about a little bit more lately, is that a functioning debt economy has historically relied on some combination of coercion and discrimination. Either the law is going to force insolvent debtors to pay in some kind of way or lenders must determine who is most likely to pay on their own, which is inherently an act of sorting and discriminating. That means that to appreciate the place of debt in economic life we need to think about what coercion and discrimination has meant within the nation's legal and moral code, and so my research thus urges a focus on political economic culture in the study of finance as well as a focus on money and material institutions.

[Azalia]: That was Daniel Platt and this has been the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy podcast produced at the University at Buffalo. Please visit our website buffalo.edu/baldycenter for more episodes and follow our social media on Facebook and Twitter @baldycenter. Until next time, I'm your host and producer Azalia Muchransyah.