

Episode 36 - Dr. Claude Welch: Spotlight on Human Rights: Economic Rights in the United States

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to tell you about a new feature of living proof. In addition to listening subscribing to and sharing podcast you can now rate and write a review of each episode of Living Proof rate or write a review of a podcast. Just go to our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu forward slash podcast and click on that create your own review button. We look forward to hearing from you. Hi and welcome to living proof the podcast series at the University of Buffalo's school of social work. I'm your host Peter Sobota here at the School of Social Work We have recently revised our master's curriculum to reflect our commitment to the promotion of social justice and the protection of human rights. In addition we have embraced the trauma informed perspective that views trauma as both a cause and effect of structural oppression. Power differentials and disproportionate distribution of material and social capital. In this podcast we like to focus on human rights and to acknowledge that typical discussions of human rights tend to focus on individuals and individual cases and not on underlying conditions. We would also like to honor social works long history of interdisciplinary collaboration by exploring political scientists analysis of this topic.

[00:01:52] Our guest today is UB's own Dr. Claude Welch Professor Welch uses his book economic rights in Canada and the United States as a context to move beyond conventional discussions of civil and political human rights and focuses on economic rights and the structural aspects of our society that maintain the status quo for problems like huge income disparities poverty and the lack of quality low income housing in the latter part of our discussion Professor Welch suggests practical actions for those concerned with the protection of economic human rights. Claude Welch Ph.D. is distinguished service professor and Professor of Political Science at the University of Buffalo where he has enthralled students for 45 years. He's the author of numerous publications in the form of 14 books many book chapters and articles in scholarly journals a full description of his CV would require a separate podcast. Professor Welches current research and writing interests include the impacts of non-governmental organizations notably on human rights civil military relations and democratization following off Ontarian rule. Please join me as I discuss economic human rights in the United States with Professor Claude Welch. We join the conversation as we were discussing his book. The book is entitled economic rights in Canada and the United States. And it grew from recognition that we are two countries that have hosted the interconnections we share the same colonial background British rule. We have trade each day well in excess of 1 billion dollars and yet we have some very intriguing differences. One of the most important of these comes in the area of economic rights and in this respect there is an international document known as called the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights.

[00:03:52] It's been around basically since the end of World War II came into effect in 1966. Canada ratified it immediately. The United States has not done so and indeed for many of the intervening 33 years American rhetoric has been one to say all right for the United States our concern is much more for Civil and Political Rights. We are not as interested in or concerned with economic social and cultural rights. The reasons for that in the background of our society when we achieve independence. And I think the nature of the capitalist system that we have which exists in somewhat more modified form in Canada in which it has taken a different format in the social democracies of Western Europe in particular. So that's the context for your book. We were very interested in having you join our podcast series because our audience are largely social workers and

we are concerned with many of the things that you talk about in your book but what I've as we were talking before we started today when many people talk about human rights and economic rights abuses we tend to talk about other countries. We talk about either perfect people or groups. Yet what I liked about your book and I think many people it is that you make the point that there are structural aspects whether they're created deliberately or not contribute to especially economic human rights abuses. Could you say a little bit more about that. I'd be glad to do so. And let me say a few things as a political scientist since this is my background right. It took a constitutional amendment for the United States to get an income tax.

[00:05:36] The 16th Amendment because according to the original draft of 1787 it was only on imported duties basically that the federal government financed itself the end of the 19th century was a time of incredible inequalities widespread strikes because unions did not have the right to be recognized who to organize people. There was significant government repression. There were huge contrasts between what the lowest paid worker received and what the higher plutocrat did. And in a sense these are the same kind of times as we live in now because the income inequality in the United States as of 2009 is as great as it was in 1899. So how we progress yes you know trade unions and they are about their percentage of populace that's covered has diminished dramatically perhaps 12 to 13 14 percent and lives in the public sector. American manufacturing is down 47 million Americans lack health insurance a huge contrast with Canada where one of the points of great pride in having a national scheme of health protection that is highly regarded. So how about the number of homeless. At one point the coeditor and I thought about calling this book sleeping under bridges. And that comes from a writer whose pen name was Anatole France. And he said the effect the great joys of the capitalist system is that it gives rich and poor an equal right to sleep under the bridges at night. So when you think of this combination of poverty of absence of housing nutritional LAX you know that may exist moderate income inequalities in Canada ten to one in the United States 14 to 1 or higher. These are recipes for social unrest.

[00:07:40] You can be and has been manifested at times and the U.S. has been accused maybe rightly so of seeing itself as unique and different from less developed countries. But you've already dressed that. Could I pick up something that you said the U.S. accused the United States is proud of that. Yeah sure and we've long since said OK we are the country said on the Hill. We experienced the first anti colonial revolution. No we set forth a standard of equality and justice that sure meant well off landed white males until the Civil Rights Act 1964. But you know the point was taken that United States was to be based on a representative democracy which was distinctive in the world at that time. So that example did have an impact in the Western Hemisphere to some extent in France and France throughout many parts of Europe. So I think it's fair to say that the United States started out in a distinctive fashion and because of our economic and later military success we assumed that we had this God given right in effect to assume our ideas were correct and therefore the rest of the world should fall in line behind us. The best way to achieve civil and political rights let's say in Afghanistan. Let's introduce elections right hand doesn't do it. And you cannot our rights and so forth. Well it's a poor country but you know let's get a political system in order first and everything will follow. Like so many other countries have followed a different path. So my attempt to sugarcoat the earlier statement has been corrected quite well thank you.

[00:09:29] Could you even be more specific about how you think capitalism as a system is really just built to foster inequality. Well I think it can be built so that it allows inequality to exist unless conscious steps are taken against it. For example let's take the notions from Adam Smith and art that purchasers will look for the lowest price. Why is Wal-Mart the most successful going off all retail chains in the world. It's because it offers the lower price very definitely and consumers recognize that and go to it. Adam Smith used the example of those who manufactured him. And it's a very simple thing you seem to manufacture a simple pen but know there are ways of shaving costs. Well let's imagine that somebody invents the better mousetrap the better P.N. or the better

software operating system and achieves a monopoly or an oligopoly. In that respect you can have fabulous fortunes built whether it's the Andrew Carnegie's of a century ago the Bill Gates of the present time the Steve Jobs and so forth. So under these circumstances unless there are ways of ensuring some spreading out of those benefits inequalities can multiply. Now what are the ways of mitigating those inequalities. The income tax that I spoke about would be one major step. And that came right at the time of World War II when there were great revenue needs and when the glaring inequalities had become the subject of a lot of exposé journalism long overdue journalism I would say that can be mitigated by federal laws that cover an entire country that do speak to the rights of groups that are lower in society. Immigrants for example people of different ethnic backgrounds women people with disabilities of various sorts.

[00:11:33] Those who have been perhaps traumatized by service in war. All of these are examples. Now there is a complication. Both Canada and the United States are federal countries so that in Canada there are provinces in the United States. There are states and each can have its own laws. In Canada there is a tradition whereby the provinces have somewhat greater latitude so that let's say Alberta with its oil and natural gas resources a bit akin to Texas it has its own source and will go its own way there is Quebec you know with its unique status as a Francophone heritage in the United States. I think we all agree that there's a huge contrast between let's say a liberal state like much of New York contrasts with a very conservative state such as Idaho. Let's recognize that and in the United States then different jurisdictions different ideas whose responsibility is to take care of those who say illegal immigrants but California and Florida and Texas and some states along the northern boundary this is a major question very indeed. Well all the things that you mentioned in terms of people who are disabled and women racial and ethnic minorities they don't tend to be the folks who have economic power but they do tend to have numbers on their side. However there doesn't seem to be a social structure that brings those people together anymore that organizes them so that they can spend the capital they have which is the large numbers of people will say yes and no in the following respect. And again we're speaking USARS person in social welfare and we're right and I'm speaking as a political scientist.

[00:13:26] That's why we have first of all you know they are not coherent groups. The people who are poor are deeply concerned about next days meal or maybe even the next meal. What about the rent. Where am I going to sleep tonight. Do they have time to register to vote. That is fundamental and I think this is where the political science side can enter into what groups are effective. Oh AARP. Well no. Let's take a look at senior citizens. You know there are a lot of them and they are very well organized. They vote unlike youth youth who are very affected by let's say the cuts in funding for public higher education just as those younger in the educational ladder and primary and secondary are being affected by reductions in state assistance or by local funding and many many other places. I would say it's not a question just of whether they are organized or not. It is whether that organization is then used for political objectives for voting for getting the candidates and that will pass legislation that will help these aims to be achieved. I'm going to read you a sentence if I could. And I'm not sure where it's source so I'm not even sure that it's a word for it but if you could just react to it. Society tends to restrict their indignation or anger to human rights abuses that can be lessened without risk to fundamental economic relationships. Very interesting. All right. Let's try and follow the way. There certainly is a tendency to react to the mutilated child a group that's been incredibly effective over many years as Amnesty International.

[00:15:20] It has selected certain people who are prisoners of conscience or who are symbols of repression civil war or whatever. And these individuals make it possible to say Ah here is someone or some situation with which I can identify. Now in terms of economics yes it costs a great deal to enforce rights. Let me take an example. We all should agree that there are basic human rights. I've talked about food housing health reasonable health. But I would also add the need to security now security can be very expensive but it can be some very much more expensive to have three strikes

and you're out system of locking people up for life when you may have had three minor infractions and cost far more for programs of that sort. That is the case for sending them to a very high cost university. Now economics well people can be very affected by looking at starving orphans in another country. But let's suppose these are children of illegal immigrants in the United States. I think that there are many areas in this country where say why are they here. They shouldn't be. Right. Send them back. I've heard that. OK. All right. A in your hometown we will not ahead of you. You may feel that you've already addressed this but I'll ask it directly in case you elaborate. How does a country like the United States kind of posture credibility on human rights and economic human rights when we really have as you describe very well a lot to look into them. We don't talk about economic human rights. We don't know that's. You're right.

[00:17:23] What we do is that it was civil and political rights. Let me give you some examples of it. Since the 1970s the U.S. Department of State has published an annual report on human rights practices in every country in the world. This is an incredibly detailed and helpful document with respect to recall the rights of the person personal integrity such as freedom from torture. You can get a great deal of information about the death penalty and how it is carried out but there is far less attention given to economic social and cultural rights. Indeed they are put under the general areas called labor rights and the like right. So there is a way in which American perceptions are carried out through Wallendbeen this congressional mandate of the mid 1970s. It's a fascinating document read it's readily available on the State Department website comes out every march and governments will react to it very strongly when they are criticized regularly. U.S. State Department gets blasted by China and Israel are the two countries that have been the most consistent and Germany has also been very much concerned because of the way the United States has criticised its treatment of the church. And putting that in quotes of Scientology. We began by talking about the United States and Canada. It appears that you know we both have a lot of things that we could do better as countries it seems to me that Canada seems to be much more responsive to either criticism or proclamations from international bodies than the United States has. That's correct. That is correct right. Canada for example has been a consistent participant in U.N. peacekeeping forces its famous leader Lester Pearson took an active role in UN matters.

[00:19:32] There's a document known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in December 1948. One of its main authors was a Canadian named John Humphrey. And indeed he wrote the first draft of it. So there is this involvement over time that has been consistent. I think it's part and parcel of Canada's international outlook. It's one of a few countries that is officially bilingual. It has a vast land area as the second largest in the world. It is a state that has a kind of lower level military profile but it's caught between two superpowers at least two superpowers right. In many ways what you're making an argument for I think is for change at least in part the United States for re-examination. I think that's fundamental right and that reexamination itself can I hope lead to change but it's going to be gradual. And certainly there are some areas in which change has started but the evidence of major progress is scanty. What do you think the costs of would be to the United States I guess as a way of talking about barriers. If the United States protected economic human rights to a much larger degree you know well that's it impossible question answered. And it's the issue of it is you know how far do you go. Let me take the area of health care. The most costly part of healthcare comes in terminal weeks. Now is this something to be brutally honest that it is worth spending money on. My first wife died of breast cancer.

[00:21:18] And there is no question that in the last couple of weeks of her life that there were huge costs. These were in the days before hospice which would have been a far more humane way for her to die than in a bed in Roswell Park. So this is you know one area we've got to make a fundamental decision there. Another would have to do with food itself. We spend huge amounts in agricultural subsidies and yet one effect of this subsidy has been to produce too damn much corn which is then

turned into fructose high sugar content serum which then goes into food which contributes to obesity which is a really severe public health threat. So consider that issue there's a political problem because of the distribution of power within the United States Congress. Take the area of the fact that the poor generally speaking don't vote. Who's there and organized for them. You know rabble rousers who want to upset the system. And what's been run by the lobbyists and the middle class and upper middle class you know for a long period of time. So change itself has got to be gradual. The United States is a country of reform rather than revolution. Despite 1776 a Civil War and Civil War was a revolution. Tim think that's would be important to say. And we have had social transformations but most of them have been gradual. What do you think the practical implications are of the ideas spoken about today. For academics students or really anybody who cares about economic human rights and their impacts not only here in the United States but around the world what can individual people do.

[00:23:15] Well there's a very simple matters in the following sense. Make your voice heard. That could be simple things such as write letters whether it's to the media whether it's to Representatives and Congress take stands on specific bills that may be important. Show up at meetings that may deal with these questions even at the local level. Go and vote if you can do so financially support particular worthwhile causes. With checks take time. That's your baby possible and do some volunteer work take a serious look at your own kitchen pantry. There may be stuff there that you know still has reached the expiration date and you said why did I buy that I don't need some smoked oysters. But you know stuff that you don't really would be need to know at the food pantry. So there's little steps like that. This doesn't take any money at all. But for those people who can log onto the Internet you can go to a place called the Hunger Site dot org. I think it is the Hunger Site all one word dot org. Or go to the breast cancer site dough or to find a series of organizations that are linked that do good things click on that. Something is given every day at no cost. Corporate sponsors Starbucks the world and so forth. Another one free rice dot org. Now that gives you a vocabulary test how well do you know English it's a great way of teaching your high schoolers for the S.A.T. but it's also fun to see how far you can get in terms of some increasingly obscure English words every time you get an answer right.

[00:25:03] Some grains of rice are given to who need needed. So that's a practice that many practical steps and I really was thinking when you were talking about what can happen on the local level when you said that I immediately thought about local school board and the school district and many of the things and issues social political economic things are talked about in a concentrated area there and people largely are not involved. Grains are a great opportunity. I wanted to thank you very much for taking the time. I know you have nothing else to do so I have a good strong sense that this you made time for us today and for sharing your expertise. And as always it was fun. Well I will put in a plug if anybody wants to purchase the book or recommend it to the library. Once again it's called economic rights in Canada and the United States. It's an edited book and it has chapters that deal with such things as quotes and titles welfare racism and human rights movement to end poverty in the United States. International Labor Rights the issue of disability particularly in Canada. Another comparison between the rights of immigrant workers and a wonderful chapter that deals with comparative healthcare between the two countries published by University of Pennsylvania Press paperback edition appeared in this month. Economic rights in Canada and the United States edited by me Claude Welch Jr and a very distinguished Canadian woman scholar. Thank you. Thanks again. My pleasure. You've been listening to Claude Welch discuss economic human rights and living proof a podcast series at the University of Buffalo's school of social work.

[00:26:57] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we're living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.

