

amity shlaes the forgotten man

Amity Shlaes and The Forgotten Man: Revisiting America's Economic History

amity shlaes the forgotten man is a phrase that draws attention to a significant work by Amity Shlaes, a prominent economic historian and author. Her book, **The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression**, offers a fresh perspective on one of the most tumultuous periods in American history. Shlaes challenges many conventional narratives about the Great Depression and the New Deal, providing readers with a nuanced understanding of the economic policies and their effects on everyday Americans. This article delves into the key themes of Amity Shlaes' work, her interpretation of the forgotten man concept, and the broader implications for economic thought and policy.

Understanding Amity Shlaes and Her Approach

Amity Shlaes is well-known for her incisive commentary on economic history, blending detailed research with engaging storytelling. In **The Forgotten Man**, she revisits the Great Depression with a critical eye toward the government's role and the unintended consequences of interventionist policies. Unlike many traditional accounts that emphasize the heroic nature of the New Deal programs, Shlaes argues that some policies prolonged the economic downturn and hampered recovery efforts.

Her approach is rooted in a deep analysis of economic data, historical records, and the voices of individuals often overlooked in mainstream histories. By focusing on the experiences of business owners, workers, and taxpayers—the so-called "forgotten men"—Shlaes highlights the complexity of economic recovery and the impact of policy decisions on real people.

The Forgotten Man: Origins and Meaning

The term "forgotten man" originally comes from a 1932 speech by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, where he referred to those at the bottom of the economic ladder needing government support. However, Amity Shlaes flips this concept, borrowing from economist William Graham Sumner's earlier use of the term to describe the average citizen burdened by the demands of special interest groups and government intervention.

Sumner's Forgotten Man vs. Roosevelt's Forgotten Man

Sumner's forgotten man is the individual taxpayer or worker who ends up paying the cost of social programs and economic experiments without direct benefit or voice. Roosevelt's version, on the other hand, focuses on the unemployed and impoverished who require assistance from the government. Shlaes argues that the policies aimed at helping the latter often overlooked or disadvantaged the former, creating a complex dynamic of winners and losers during the Depression.

Implications of the Forgotten Man Concept

This shift in perspective encourages readers to consider the economic impact of policy beyond immediate relief. It underscores the importance of balancing social welfare with economic incentives and the preservation of individual enterprise. Shlaes' analysis invites a critical examination of how government actions can unintentionally suppress the very economic vitality they seek to stimulate.

Key Themes in The Forgotten Man by Amity Shlaes

Several central themes run through Shlaes' book, offering valuable insights into the economic and political atmosphere of the 1930s.

The Role of Government Intervention

Shlaes scrutinizes the New Deal programs, arguing that while well-intentioned, many interventions disrupted market mechanisms and extended the Depression. She discusses policies such as wage and price controls, labor regulations, and agricultural adjustments, highlighting their often counterproductive effects on businesses and employment.

Economic Recovery and Entrepreneurship

Another important theme is the resilience of entrepreneurs and small business owners during the Depression. Shlaes pays special attention to their struggles under increased taxation and regulation, portraying them as vital drivers of recovery who were frequently hampered by government policies.

The Power of Narrative in History

Shlaes also emphasizes how dominant historical narratives shape public perception and policy debates. By challenging the prevailing New Deal mythology, she encourages readers to rethink economic lessons and consider alternative viewpoints that may better explain historical outcomes.

Why Amity Shlaes' Perspective Matters Today

The debate about the role of government in economic crises remains highly relevant, especially in light of recent global financial turmoil and government stimulus efforts. Shlaes' work provides a cautionary tale about the complexity of economic recovery and the potential pitfalls of interventionist policies.

Lessons for Modern Economic Policy

Policymakers today can draw lessons from **The Forgotten Man** by recognizing the need to balance immediate relief measures with long-term economic health. Understanding how excessive regulation or poorly designed programs can stifle growth helps inform more effective and sustainable policy decisions.

Encouraging Critical Thinking About History

Shlaes' book exemplifies the importance of revisiting historical events with fresh eyes and questioning established interpretations. This approach fosters a more nuanced understanding of economic cycles and the human impact of policy, encouraging readers and scholars to explore diverse perspectives.

Exploring Related Works and Further Reading

For those interested in Amity Shlaes' views or economic history in general, several related books and resources can deepen understanding:

- **Coolidge** by Amity Shlaes – A biography focusing on President Calvin Coolidge's economic policies and philosophy.
- **The Great Depression and the New Deal** by Robert S. McElvaine – Offers a more traditional view of the era for comparison.
- **Economics in One Lesson** by Henry Hazlitt – A classic introduction to free-market economics, echoing some of Shlaes' critiques.
- **New Deal or Raw Deal?** by Burton W. Folsom Jr. – Another critical look at New Deal policies and their economic effects.

These works complement **The Forgotten Man** by providing various angles on economic history, government policy, and the delicate balance between intervention and freedom.

Understanding the Broader Impact of Amity Shlaes' Work

Beyond historical interest, **The Forgotten Man** has influenced debates in economics, politics, and education. It has sparked discussions about how history is taught and the narratives we accept about government and markets. Shlaes' rigorous scholarship and engaging prose make complex topics

accessible, helping readers appreciate the intricate interplay between policy decisions and individual lives.

Her perspective encourages ongoing dialogue about how societies should respond to economic crises, emphasizing the importance of considering all stakeholders, including the often-overlooked forgotten men who bear the costs of policy choices.

Through her work, Amity Shlaes invites us to look beyond slogans and simplified stories, urging a deeper understanding of history's lessons to better navigate today's economic challenges.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is Amity Shlaes, the author of 'The Forgotten Man'?

Amity Shlaes is an American author and columnist known for her work on economic history and policy, particularly focusing on the Great Depression and the New Deal era.

What is the main theme of Amity Shlaes' book 'The Forgotten Man'?

The main theme of 'The Forgotten Man' is an analysis and critique of the New Deal policies during the Great Depression, arguing that these policies often harmed the very people they intended to help.

When was 'The Forgotten Man' by Amity Shlaes published?

'The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression' was published in 2007.

What perspective does Amity Shlaes take in 'The Forgotten Man'?

Amity Shlaes takes a critical perspective on the New Deal, suggesting that government intervention prolonged the Great Depression and that free-market solutions would have been more effective.

How does 'The Forgotten Man' challenge traditional views of the Great Depression?

The book challenges the traditional view that the New Deal saved the economy by presenting evidence that these policies delayed economic recovery and negatively impacted individual entrepreneurs and workers.

What historical period does 'The Forgotten Man' focus on?

'The Forgotten Man' focuses on the Great Depression era in the United States during the 1930s.

What is the significance of the term 'Forgotten Man' in Amity Shlaes' book?

The term 'Forgotten Man' refers to the average American citizen whose interests and struggles were overlooked or harmed by government policies during the Great Depression.

Has 'The Forgotten Man' influenced economic or political discussions?

Yes, 'The Forgotten Man' has influenced debates on government intervention in the economy, especially among conservatives and libertarians who argue for limited government and free markets.

What sources does Amity Shlaes use in 'The Forgotten Man'?

Amity Shlaes uses a variety of historical documents, personal stories, economic data, and contemporary accounts to build her argument about the impact of New Deal policies.

Are there any criticisms of Amity Shlaes' 'The Forgotten Man'?

Critics of the book argue that Shlaes downplays the positive impacts of the New Deal and oversimplifies complex economic factors, while supporters praise its revisionist perspective on the Great Depression.

Additional Resources

Amity Shlaes' *'The Forgotten Man': Revisiting the Great Depression Through a New Lens*

amity shlaes the forgotten man is a phrase that immediately draws attention to a provocative reinterpretation of the Great Depression era. In her book *'The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression'*, Amity Shlaes challenges conventional narratives surrounding the 1930s economic crisis, questioning the efficacy of New Deal policies and shedding light on overlooked aspects of this pivotal period in American history. Her work has sparked considerable debate among historians, economists, and political analysts, making it a significant subject for anyone interested in the complexities of economic recovery, government intervention, and the shaping of modern America.

Unpacking Amity Shlaes' Perspective on the Great Depression

Amity Shlaes approaches the Great Depression not just as a catastrophic economic downturn but as an episode marked by policy mistakes and unintended consequences. Central to her argument is the identification of the "forgotten man," a term originally coined by William Graham Sumner to describe the average citizen burdened by government intervention. Shlaes uses this concept to critique the New Deal policies implemented under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, suggesting that these measures, rather than alleviating economic hardship, may have prolonged and deepened the

crisis.

Her thesis disputes the traditional view that the New Deal was an unequivocal success in combating the Depression. Instead, Shlaes argues that excessive government spending, regulatory overreach, and interventionist policies disrupted the natural recovery mechanisms of the free market. By emphasizing the voices and experiences of businessmen, entrepreneurs, and ordinary citizens often sidelined in mainstream histories, she paints a more nuanced and, at times, controversial portrait of this era.

Shlaes' Critique of New Deal Policies

A critical component of **The Forgotten Man** is its detailed examination of specific New Deal programs and their economic impacts. Shlaes scrutinizes initiatives such as:

- **The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA):** Shlaes contends that NIRA's attempt to control prices and wages disrupted business incentives, leading to increased unemployment and stifled production.
- **Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA):** While intended to stabilize farm prices, Shlaes argues that the AAA's policies often hurt small farmers and tenants, exacerbating rural poverty.
- **Social Security Act:** Although a landmark social welfare reform, Shlaes questions its long-term economic sustainability and its role in expanding federal government reach.

By closely analyzing these policies, Shlaes highlights how well-intentioned government programs can yield unintended economic distortions. She supports her claims with economic data and historical records, suggesting that the New Deal's regulatory framework created uncertainty that inhibited investment and job creation.

The Forgotten Man: A Reexamination of Economic Actors

Amity Shlaes' choice to center the narrative around the "forgotten man" shifts focus from political leaders and large-scale policy debates to the everyday individuals whose lives were most affected by the Depression and subsequent government actions. This perspective emphasizes the complexity of economic recovery by acknowledging the diversity of experiences during the 1930s.

Shlaes argues that entrepreneurs and small business owners, often overlooked in traditional histories, played a crucial role in economic resilience. Their struggles against regulatory burdens and taxation policies underscore the tension between government intervention and private enterprise. By giving voice to these economic actors, **The Forgotten Man** challenges the monolithic portrayal of the 1930s as solely a time of widespread victimhood, instead revealing a landscape marked by both hardship and entrepreneurial spirit.

Historical Reception and Scholarly Debate

Since its publication, **The Forgotten Man** has generated extensive discussion within academic and public spheres. Supporters praise Shlaes for her meticulous research and for providing a counterbalance to the dominant pro-New Deal narrative. Her work is often cited in debates about the role of government in economic crises, particularly in discussions about fiscal policy and regulatory reform.

However, critics argue that Shlaes' interpretation may understate the severity of the Great Depression and overemphasize the negative effects of New Deal policies. Some historians point to empirical evidence showing that many New Deal programs helped alleviate poverty, stabilize the banking system, and restore public confidence. Furthermore, detractors caution against viewing the Great Depression purely through a free-market lens, highlighting the complexities of economic recovery that involve both government action and private sector dynamics.

The polarized responses to **The Forgotten Man** underscore its importance as a catalyst for reexamining established historical narratives. Whether one agrees with Shlaes' conclusions or not, her work compels readers to consider the multifaceted nature of economic crises and the consequences of public policy decisions.

Comparative Analysis: Shlaes' Work and Traditional Histories

Comparing **The Forgotten Man** with traditional histories of the Great Depression reveals significant divergences in interpretation and emphasis:

- **Traditional View:** Emphasizes the New Deal as a necessary and largely successful intervention that provided relief, recovery, and reform during a time of unparalleled economic distress.
- **Shlaes' Perspective:** Suggests that the New Deal's interventionist policies hindered recovery, burdened ordinary citizens, and expanded government powers in ways that were ultimately counterproductive.

This contrast extends to the depiction of figures such as Franklin D. Roosevelt. While many historians praise FDR's leadership, Shlaes critiques his administration's policies as well-intentioned but flawed. This critical lens encourages a more skeptical and analytical approach to understanding the government's role during economic downturns.

The Broader Implications of Amity Shlaes' Thesis

Beyond its historical analysis, **The Forgotten Man** resonates with contemporary debates on economic policy, government intervention, and fiscal responsibility. Shlaes' arguments inform discussions about how best to respond to financial crises, such as the 2008 recession and the

economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Her emphasis on the risks of overregulation and excessive government spending provides a cautionary framework for policymakers. It invites questions about the balance between necessary public support and preserving market incentives. Moreover, Shlaes' focus on the "forgotten man" highlights the importance of considering the impact of policy decisions on all societal segments, particularly small businesses and middle-class citizens.

Key Takeaways for Modern Economic Policy

- **Economic Recovery Requires Balance:** Policymakers must weigh the benefits of intervention against potential unintended consequences that could stifle growth.
- **Entrepreneurship Matters:** Supporting small businesses and fostering innovation are critical components of a resilient economy.
- **Historical Lessons Inform Future Actions:** Understanding past mistakes and successes can guide more effective responses to economic downturns.

These lessons from *The Forgotten Man* reinforce the ongoing relevance of Shlaes' work in shaping economic discourse.

Amity Shlaes' *The Forgotten Man* remains a compelling and thought-provoking contribution to the historiography of the Great Depression. By challenging prevailing narratives and illuminating the experiences of those often marginalized in history, Shlaes invites readers to reconsider the complexities of economic policy and the human dimension of financial crises. Her book continues to influence discussions on the role of government, the power of entrepreneurship, and the lessons history can teach about managing economic adversity.

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