
Walter E. Williams

Scholar, Teacher, and Public Intellectual

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ABIGAIL R. HALL

Walter E. Williams, distinguished economist, professor, and prolific commentator passed away in December 2020 at the age of eighty-four, leaving a hole in the Economics Department at George Mason University and in the economics profession as a whole. His passing is a profound loss for his colleagues, his students, and all who champion individual liberty.

Williams's life is a remarkable story. His earliest years and experiences would shape the research for which he would become so well known and informed the worldview he so masterfully articulated. Born in 1936, he spent his early life with his sister and mother in one of the first federally funded housing projects in Philadelphia. Although he didn't care much for formal schooling, he was always interested in earning money. As a young man, he worked many jobs, including in a women's hat factory, where he taught himself to sew. It was while working as a cab driver that he met his future wife, Connie Taylor.

He was drafted into the army in 1959. Throughout his military tenure, Williams illustrated his characteristic wit, his commitment to liberal ideals, as well as a penchant for pushing the buttons of government establishment. While stationed in the southern United States, he made it a point to fight against racism and Jim Crow in whatever way he could. He made a habit of purposefully angering his white counterparts with inflammatory statements. In one such instance, he drew the ire of his fellow soldiers when

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he stated that he had seen his white girlfriend on *American Bandstand*. He was less than popular with his military superiors as well. When instructed to paint the entirety of a 2.5-ton truck, Williams obliged and painted not only the vehicle body but the mirrors and windows as well. He wasn't stopped until he began painting the tires. Angered by these and other instances of Williams's rebelliousness, an officer filed a bogus court-martial against him. The young Williams argued his own defense—and won.

He was then deployed to Korea, where he again found himself in hot water. Upon his arrival to the peninsula, he marked "Caucasian" for his race on a personnel form. When asked why he had not selected "Black," Williams replied that such an action would have resulted in being assigned the worst jobs. From Korea, Williams wrote to President John Kennedy, questioning the treatment of Blacks by the military and U.S. government. In the letter, those familiar with Williams's work can see the clear thinking and commitment to liberty for which he became so well known. "Should Negroes be relieved of their service obligation or continue defending and dying for empty promises of freedom and equality?" he wrote. "Or should we demand human rights as our Founding Fathers did. . . . I contend that we relieve ourselves of oppression in a manner that is in keeping with the great heritage of our nation" (qtd. in Root 2011).

After his time in the army, Williams turned to his education and earned his BA in economics from California State College. He then entered graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles, studying under such economic thinkers as Armen Alchian and James Buchanan. What he learned at UCLA would shape him as an economist and a teacher. It was here that Williams was introduced to price theory. He learned to analyze economic problems by analyzing the role that relative prices play in decision making and the institutional structures in which exchanges take place. Policies are not implemented in a vacuum, nor do actors make choices in an institutionally antiseptic arena. Instead, policies are enacted and individuals choose within the broader context of complex social, legal, political, and other institutions. It was this way of thinking that he would carry forward throughout his career. He completed his doctoral work in 1972 and accepted an academic appointment at Temple University.

Williams's academic work consistently applied the tools of price theory to a number of questions related to labor policy. He critically examined policies primarily aimed at minority communities, like the one in which he had grown up. In his first and perhaps his most well-known book, *The State against Blacks* (1982), he utilized sound economic reasoning and careful data to argue that policies such as labor union protections, occupational licensing, minimum-wage laws, and rent controls not only failed to help minority communities but brought them significant harm. Jobs like the ones he had found in his youth were no longer available to young people—particular young Black men. He would go on to write ten more books and dozens of academic papers during his career.

Although his academic work is undoubtedly important, any reflection of his life would be incomplete without discussing Walter Williams as a public intellectual. He possessed a true gift for distilling economic ideas and presenting them in a way the

layperson could understand and, importantly, apply. His radio appearances and weekly columns are how many people came to know his work, know economics, and know how to better articulate the ideas of a free society.

In these pieces, Williams proved a staunch advocate for individual rights and was quick to offer, in words both memorable and provocative, careful criticism of attempts to curtail those rights. One of his most often quoted statements illustrates this quite clearly: “Let me offer you my definition of social justice: I keep what I earn and you keep what you earn. Do you disagree? Well then tell me how much of what I earn belongs to you and why” (Williams 1987, 62). Throughout his work, he always began with a respect for self-ownership. The essence of human flourishing, according to Williams, stemmed from this fundamental principle. It is through self-ownership and private-property rights that individuals are able to exchange and become wealthier. It is through self-ownership that individuals face the incentive to serve their fellow man as opposed to plundering their neighbor’s wealth. Williams used self-ownership as a sort of yardstick with which to determine the morality of any action. Policies that preserve and advance self-ownership can claim to be moral, whereas those that curtail self-ownership cannot. This view often stood in direct opposition to policy proposals. Williams was quick to point out that good intentions do not equate to good outcomes. “[I]f someone is pushed off a building,” he wrote, “it’s not the intention of the pusher that determines how he falls, it’s the law of gravity. It’s the same with economic laws” (Williams 2003).

In addition to his academic output and work as an ambassador of economic ideas, Williams was a remarkable teacher. Joining the faculty at George Mason University in 1980, Williams was a pillar of the Economics Department for forty years. He taught both Ph.D. students as well as undergraduates. His undergraduate course, offered every spring, began at 7:30 a.m. His classroom was so engaging, his delivery so skilled that he accomplished a remarkable feat: he got undergrads out of bed, willingly, to take an economics class before 8:00 a.m.

It was in the classroom that I and so many other students met Walter Williams. In 2011, I was a first-semester graduate student in GMU’s Ph.D. program, where I had the privilege of learning price theory from Dr. Williams. It’s a course I will never forget, not only for the content but also for what Walter Williams taught me about being an economist and a professor.

To a crop of hopeful Ph.D. students, Williams could be remarkably intimidating. Physically, he towered over nearly everyone. Academically, he was an intellectual giant. You knew you were being asked questions by someone you would never rival. You knew that no semantics, no flowery presentation, would save you from sloppy thinking. He would press students for answers. Occasionally he would offer monetary incentives for correct responses (a particularly welcome prospect for poor graduate students).

Despite any anxieties we might have felt, his classes were rigorous, engaging, and fun. In a semester that is often very challenging for students, his class was an undeniable highlight. He had a joyful sense of humor that he graciously shared with all of us. He signed my midterm exam so I could give it to my father—someone who regularly

listened to Williams on the radio. He drew a graph illustrating the gains from trade for another student, so the student could have it tattooed on his bicep.

Many of us expressed that Professor William's price theory course was like our reward for getting through the rest of the week. We didn't *have* to go to his class. We *got* to go to his class. His examples were often funny, frequently colorful, and *always* provocative. For example, when discussing statistical discrimination, Williams used the example of walking out of the room and encountering a grown tiger. He asked us if we, not wanting to appear prejudiced against tigers, would check our immediate reaction to flee and instead approach the tiger and attempt to learn its life story and its intentions. "No," he said, "you'll run." He followed this example with another. Turning to the board, he wrote out, "5 white males, 5 black males, 5 white females, 5 black females." He then asked one of my classmates, a young white woman, to pick the winning basketball team. Everyone waited anxiously. When she selected the five black males, he asked her to explain her choice, then commenting, "All those white men could be Larry Bird!" He had made his point, and all of us understood—discrimination is not necessarily an issue of tastes but one of efficiency. This then led to a discussion of housing and labor policies.

Williams's classroom was replete with such interesting and entertaining examples, but all of them had clear links to and serious implications for policy. Many of his former students, me included, have used his examples in our own classrooms and have used his work to have challenging conversations with our students. When discussing the implications of minimum-wage or rent-control policies, I use Williams's work as part of the lesson to show students that good intentions do not promise good outcomes.

His classroom was a place not only where his Ph.D. students learned the price theory that Williams had mastered at UCLA but also where we learned valuable lessons on how to teach—even if we weren't aware we were receiving the lesson. One particular assignment in the course involved each student presenting a well-known economics paper to the rest of the class. It was the first time many of us had presented in front of a classroom. In the time since then, many of his former students have reflected upon and discussed these presentations—and how poorly we performed. But in every case Williams offered careful, cool, and needed correction.

During my presentation, I turned to write on the board. I heard (or at least I thought I heard) Williams say from the back of the room, "You shouldn't have dead hair when you teach." Confused about why he would care about my hair, I said the first thing that came to mind: "I'd be happy to put it in a ponytail." He looked at me, gave a very slight smile, and said, "*Air*. You shouldn't have dead *air* when you teach." After it occurred to me what had just happened and how absurd I must have sounded, I started laughing. Of course, everyone else laughed, too. I then continued with my presentation, making sure to talk while writing. (I did opt to keep my hair up.)

That assignment, particularly my blunder in his classroom, offered me an invaluable lesson about teaching. There will be times in the classroom when you err. That is given. But you can choose how to respond. You can let it throw off the rest of your

lecture, or you can choose to laugh at yourself and move forward. I have since then made mistakes in the classroom. Every time I think of Williams and my “dead hair,” I’m grateful he gave me the opportunity to make that silly mistake. Other former students describe this assignment as a formative moment in their teaching. Admittedly cocky students found themselves humbled when Williams asked them questions and quickly identified their insufficiencies. The lesson they learned—don’t be cocky; don’t oversell your knowledge; someone who knows better will humble you. Anxious students, terrified to present the material, were coaxed from their anxiety with careful and thoughtful inquiries. The lesson they learned—be confident; you know more than you think.

Even after completing Williams’s price theory course, his students could count on him to continue to push them. In the time since his passing, his former students have recounted how he would email them after they received a new academic appointment, published a manuscript, or started a new venture. He would congratulate them but also challenge them to push further, to be better.

Just as there was no such thing as a perfect answer in his classroom, he reminded us there is always more to learn, more to do, more to accomplish. There is always room to improve.

The world has truly suffered a great loss at the passing of Walter Williams. He was an extraordinary economist. He was a gifted public intellectual who skillfully articulated and defended the ideas of a free society. He was a master teacher. His legacy is difficult to understate. Without a doubt, his research will continue to intrigue and spark inquiry. His academic and popular writings on policy and his defenses of freedom will inspire individuals to embrace the tenets of a free society. The students he taught will continue to use the lessons we learned in our own classrooms and research. We will be careful in our reasoning. We will work to defend the insights of economic reasoning even if they are unpopular. We will always push to be better. In this way, we will thank and honor a man who gave us so much of himself. We will carry his legacy forward.

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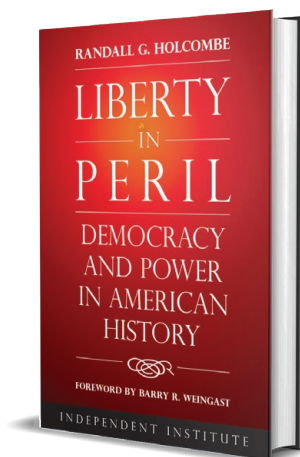
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