

## TRANSCRIPT

### The Work Goes On

**Guest:** Barry Chiswick

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#### **Barry Chiswick:**

A major problem for the United States in terms of immigration policy is we've not had a serious conversation as to what we want our immigration policy to accomplish. And unless you know what you want your policy to accomplish, it's very difficult to come up with a consensus on policy.

#### **Orley Ashenfelter:**

Welcome to [The Work Goes On](#), a podcast from the [Industrial Relations Section at Princeton University](#). I'm your host, [Orley Ashenfelter](#), the Joseph Douglas Green 1895 Professor of Economics at [Princeton University](#).

In this podcast series of conversations with leading thinkers and practitioners, we are creating an oral history of an entire generation of industrial relations experts and labor economists whose contributions to their fields have been absolutely extraordinary.

Our guest today is [Barry Chiswick](#), Professor of Economics at the [George Washington University](#), and formerly an emeritus Professor of Economics at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is an expert in labor economics, but especially in the economic analysis of migration and those aspects associated with ethnicity. Barry, welcome to [The Work Goes On](#).

#### **Barry Chiswick:**

Thank you very much. I'm really very pleased to be part of this podcast.

#### **Orley Ashenfelter:**

Let's begin the discussion by talking about your background. Where did you grow up?

#### **Barry Chiswick:**

I grew up in Brooklyn in a neighborhood that's called Crown Heights. Came from a blue collar family, but my parents were very concerned about the education of their children. We didn't have much in the way of resources, but there was a wonderful institution, Brooklyn College, and Brooklyn College had high admission standards based on your high school grade point average, and I well-exceeded that. And Brooklyn College was essentially a free institution. They charged 10 dollars per semester, not per credit, but per semester. And when they raised it to 28 dollars and 50 cents per semester, the students protested violently.

But I got a wonderful education there, and that's really where I got introduced to economics. I had taken a course in economics in high school and thought it was totally irrelevant, useless. The course focused on why farmers hedged, weren't any farms left in Brooklyn, and on how to read the stock market page, which was irrelevant for, certainly my family. But I couldn't fill out my schedule because all the classes were closed and there were openings in economics. So, I figured, all right, it was a dumb experience in

high school, but I'll try it in college, and it was wonderful. It was a great course. It was so enlightening. I just took to it.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Do you remember who taught it?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Well, his name was Thomas Birkenhead, and nobody in the economics profession other than former students at Brooklyn College would know him. He was an off-Broadway actor, director, and producer, as well as teaching economics at Brooklyn College. And maybe it was his acting skills that got me enthusiastic about economics. But in any case, I took his principal's course and it was great. And then the next semester he was teaching intermediate micro-theory and I took that, and that was even greater, so I got hooked.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

I'm curious about one thing. Were your parents migrants?

**Barry Chiswick:**

My father was an immigrant. My mother was born in the United States, but all four of my grandparents were immigrants from Eastern Europe – Poland and Lithuania.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

I'm just curious because we'll come back to your work on migration, and I wondered about whether there was some connection. Now I know that Brooklyn College wasn't the end of the story, and of course it was fabled in that day. Incidentally, you're one of several people who've been on this podcast ranging from Bob Solow and Claudia Goldin who were born in Brooklyn.

I know you ended up, you went to Columbia. Now you had to get, I imagine... Today, I suspect it's still hard job on the subway to get from Brooklyn to Columbia on the Upper East Side way far away, or West Side, rather.

**Barry Chiswick:**

West, Upper West Side.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Yeah, Upper West Side. How did it happen that you went to Columbia?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Well, I had very attractive financial offers from University of Michigan and Columbia, and my father had just passed away, and so for family reasons I decided to go to Columbia rather than Michigan. I had an offer to be Dan Suits' RA at Michigan, and I went to Columbia and my first year was an incredible experience. I had Becker for theory, and Mincer for statistics, econometrics, and that was mind-blowing.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Fable, it was a fabled moment at Columbia, there's no question about it.

**Barry Chiswick:**

It was an entirely new world as far as I was concerned. And as a New Yorker, I was accustomed to taking the subway, so taking the subway wasn't bad. And after the first year though, I got an apartment near Columbia, and that made my commuting much easier. It was just an exciting experience at Columbia.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Do you remember? It was quite a fabled moment. We talked to Bob Willis, who was not Columbia, but he was connected because of the National Bureau of Economic Research. And I gather you became active with the NBER when it was in New York right away too.

**Barry Chiswick:**

Yes, when I started working on my dissertation under Gary Becker, he got me office space at the Bureau, and so I became a regular at the Bureau lunches and the Bureau seminars, and I was physically doing my dissertation at the Bureau with support staff from the Bureau. So, that was incredible experience also.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

What was your dissertation?

**Barry Chiswick:**

It was using a human capital model to explain regional differences in the inequality of earnings, and it focused on inequality of schooling and rates of return from schooling. And so, I use the schooling earnings function to calculate rates of return from schooling for all the states of the United States and the provinces of Canada. The schooling earnings model was published in my paper coauthored with Gary in the *American Economic Review*, and that was the first published analysis of using log earnings as a dependent variable and a human capital measure expressed in terms of time equivalent on the right-hand side. So, I worked closely with Gary and Jacob on developing what later became known as the human capital earnings function.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Yes, I point to that as being one of the... Today it's probably considered one of the most uniformly reliable empirical relationships worldwide, not just in the United States or in various states.

**Barry Chiswick:**

Absolutely, and it's accepted by the legal system in the United States, by the courts as a tool for analyzing earnings.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

It is used in some court cases, not always without controversy, of course. So, you started off in New York, and then I know you left. Where did you first go?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Well, I first went to UCLA.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Well, that's the other big American city, of course, but it must have been quite a shock.

**Barry Chiswick:**

It was a shock, and I think I never really adjusted to living in LA and the California lifestyle. And after three years there, Gary and Jacob were going to create a human capital research center at Columbia University, and they brought both Bill Landes and myself back to Columbia to work in this center. But my first year there, Gary took a leave of absence to the University of Chicago and he never came back, and so the center really never took off.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

So, you went from UCLA back to Columbia, have I got that right?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Yes, yes.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

I see.

**Barry Chiswick:**

I was a tenured associate at UCLA, but I decided to stay in New York. And then I was at a conference in Woods Hole and a fellow former graduate student, June O'Neill, was also at the conference. And so, I asked her what she was doing, and she said she was working on the staff of the Council of Economic Advisers. So, I said, "boy, that sounds interesting. What do you do there?" And she told me, and I said, "well, that really sounds interesting." Several months later, I get a call from June saying that Herb Stein, the chairman of the Council, would like to invite me to have an interview in Washington about joining the staff of the council. And I figured a free trip to Washington, who can turn it down? So, I went and met with Herb Stein and then a few weeks later I got an offer, and it sounded really great.

So, I went to the Council, and I frequently described it as my second Ph.D. education. It was an incredible experience. I learned a lot. I learned how to write. I learned how to write in various formats. My first task was to my first day at the staff of the council, Herb asked me to write a memo for the White House on a proposal to increase the minimum wage. And I knew it had to be short. I worked hard, and I wrote on a 15-page memo, and he said, "Wonderful. Send it to a journal, now write it up as one and a half pages." So, I learned how to write policy memos on one page as well as research papers on many pages.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Barry, what years were you at the Council of Economic Advisers?

**Barry Chiswick:**

I went in August of 1973, and I left in January of 1977.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

So, this was the second Nixon administration, I guess?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Yes. Well, last year of Nixon and all of the Ford Administration. So I was there for four annual reports, three and a half years, and it was an incredibly exciting learning experience and learning about public policy. I'd always been interested in public policy, but in my academic work I really didn't get involved in it.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Where did you go after the Council?

**Barry Chiswick:**

After the Council, I went to the Hoover Institution for a year and a half, and then to University of Illinois, Chicago where I was there for, I don't know, 33-some odd years, but taking sabbaticals at various places during that time period.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

At the time that you wrote about immigration early on, you're one of the early people. In fact, your [IZA Labor Economics Award](#) cites your work on immigration, along with George Borjas. At the time you wrote about it wasn't such a popular topic in economics. There were a few papers, but not many. How did you get motivated to work on it?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Against my will. I was on the staff of the Council and President Ford had asked the Attorney General Ed Levy to establish a task force to study the issue. And when Levy asked the various agencies to send people, he realized there was no economist among them. So, he called the Council and asked them to send somebody, and they sent me.

And I was reluctant because I had a lot of things on my plate. I didn't want an extra task force, but I went, being a dutiful staff member, and I realized that a) nobody there not only was not an economist, but nobody there knew any economics or cared about economics. And it seemed to me that this was a void not only in the broader area of literature on immigration, but including the economics profession. So, I started thinking about how would an economist go about approaching this question?

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Yes, you're right about that. And I edited the first with Richard Layard, the first handbook of labor economics. And if you look at it, one of the most noticeable absences is there's no chapter on immigration.

**Barry Chiswick:**

Well, the last significant paper on immigration to the United States before my 1978 paper in the JPE was a paper by Paul Douglas published in the *Journal of the American Statistical Association* in 1919. So, there was a long gap in interest by economists in the economics of immigration. So, I worked on it for the task force and had a chapter in the task force report on both the earnings of immigrants and the impact of immigrants on the national economy.

And then afterwards when I left the Council, two very fortunate things happened. I got a call from Ellen Sehgal at the Employment and Training Administration, essentially begging me to accept a grant to continue my research on immigration, which I graciously accepted. It was very generous. And the other was William Fellner, who was a member of the Council, and that's how I got to know him. And when he

left the council, he went to American Enterprise Institute and created a series, "Contemporary Economic Problems." And for several years I was included in that project, and I did several papers on immigration. So, those were the two forces that encouraged me.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

I wasn't aware of that, and I appreciate your explaining it. Let me ask you this, it's hard to summarize all the work you've done in this area. I looked at some of the work, which in fact really is historical, and I wanted to ask you, what are a couple of things that you think are the primary takeaways from your own work on immigration?

**Barry Chiswick:**

I think the issue of international transferability of skills is very important in terms of who migrates and where they go, and how well they do in the destination, and how their skills get translated to the next generation, to the children of immigrants.

Second, is that I think a major problem for the United States in terms of immigration policy is we've not had a serious conversation as to what we want our immigration policy to accomplish. And unless you know what you want your policy to accomplish, it's very difficult to come up with a consensus on policy.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

The Canadians seem to have done a better job with this. And in fact, one Canadian, Craig Riddell, I asked him about this topic, and he basically said he thought the Canadians had done what you just described, the US hasn't and had a more serious conversation about the primary purpose for immigration. I... Go ahead.

**Barry Chiswick:**

I was about to say, I think the Canadians, the Australians, the New Zealanders, they all changed their immigration policies around the same time we did in 1965, and they all went to a skilled-based approach, and we went to a kinship-tie approach. And I think even though for most immigrants, the US is the country of first choice, we are heavily subsidizing Canada and Australia and New Zealand by not accepting the best and the brightest who want to come and live and work in our country.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Now, I looked through your Vita, you sent it to me. It's extremely long, by the way, it goes on for pages and pages and pages. But I was struck by a few things on it that I had not been aware of. In particular, your work on religion and especially the economic background of Jews in the United States. For example, I just learned from your Vita really about the Dillingham Commission. Can you tell us what that was?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Yes. Dillingham was a senator from Vermont who chaired a commission that put out its report in 1912, I believe, and it was a 41-volume report and I was able to actually read them at the Northwestern University Library, not all 41 volumes. But what was interesting about it, it was really two reports.

There was volume one, which was the policy report written by Dillingham, which was as hostile to immigrants as one could be. And then there were the other reports which were the statistical analysis. The Dillingham Commission did extensive surveys of immigrant and native populations, and they didn't

have econometrics or sophisticated statistics, but they had a great deal of tables. And volumes two through 41 were really well-written. And although they didn't know about sampling theory, they clearly understood sampling, and they clearly intuitively understood the issue of statistical significance.

These were very sophisticated reports, and totally contrary to volume one, which was penned by Dillingham and his anti-immigrant perspective, his racist perspective. The view at the time... Eugenics was very much in vogue, and the view at the time was that these people that are coming in from Southern and Eastern Europe, they're probably genetically inferior. And that was a view that was contradicted by the statistical analysis in volumes two through 41.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

I know you wrote two or three papers that showed up in economic history journals, and I think that's, I excuse myself for not knowing about them because of that, since I don't follow them. At least one was about the success. By the way, I think when you say the code word, South European and East Europe, probably meant in many cases Greeks and Italians and Poles and Czechs, and especially Eastern European Jews. But this paper I did read was about Jewish prosperity, or I should say how Jews did in the United States. And I think that got you onto writing about religion as a general matter. Isn't that right?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Yes. There was a time in which there was a lot of writing being done on African Americans and their labor market and the discrimination against them, and there were a lot of people working on that. And I actually prefer working on subjects in which there's not a great deal of literature. And it seemed to me that we were missing a boat that, okay, we study a particular group that's not been successful in the American economy, the American labor market, but maybe we can learn things from groups that have been successful in the American labor market.

And so I had my paper on Asian Americans, and then I started working on American Jews. And the work on American Jews, which in a sense culminated in my book [“Jews at Work,”](#) which was published in 2020. I started working on that as a sideline, as a hobby, wasn't my main focus, but there was one paper after another paper and with the passage of time, I realized that I had done a whole bunch of studies looking at the American Jewish experience from 1890 to the present, and I put them all together and did some additional chapters, and that's what came out as my book from Springer, “Jews at Work.”

And I think there are lessons for all ethnic groups from the American Jewish experience. I think our profession would've done better in understanding minority group experiences if we had focused on very successful groups as well as on the less successful.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

What would you say are the lessons you learned from that?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Well, I think that the issue of the trade-off between quantity and quality of children is very important, meaning number of children versus parental investment in the rearing of children. And the successful groups in the United States in general tend to have small families, and a great deal of parental time investment as well as financial investment in the human capital of their children.

For example, American Jewish women have a different labor force participation pattern than other women. They're more likely to work before they're married and before they have children. They are less

likely to work when they have young children, elementary school aged children, but when their children are college age or nearing college age, American Jewish women have a higher labor force participation rate than other women. It is as if they are allocating their time for maximum investment in children -- spending time with children when children are time-intensive, and spending time in the labor market before children and when children are goods-intensive, college tuition.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Yeah, there are a lot of different reasons why groups are successful, at least in part, African Americans who didn't actually choose to come, whereas most are signing up to get in. Not quite the same anymore. Oh, you're Jewish too, I suppose, are you?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Yes, I am.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

I thought we should at least ask that, make sure.

**Barry Chiswick:**

Yeah, no, and I'm very proud of it, and I'm active in my synagogue and in Jewish community organizations.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Interesting. There's one last thing I would like to talk to you about though, and that's something that I think it's preoccupied you for a very long period of time, and that seems to be connections with other groups.

For example, I noticed that while you were in Illinois, you associated with Germanic studies program. Is it the case that you've tried to reach out? First of all, what in the world was that about? Is it the case you've tried to reach out in many situations to incorporate other groups into what you're doing?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Well, the Germanic Studies Department at University of Illinois at Chicago had several faculty members who were very much interested in the German Jewish experience. And we got to meet them, and Carmela and I were both doing work on Judaism, either American Jews in my case and Carmela in the case of economics of religion, more properly speaking. And so, we sort of formed a little group with the faculty in the Germanic Studies Department. It was an unusual arrangement, but it was one that I very much enjoyed. I found it very interesting.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

I know, yeah. I can't help but remark about something that you must have noticed in our own profession, which is when I first started, it seemed to me an extremely high fraction of economists that hung out with were Jewish, and that has changed, so that's no longer quite the case. Do you have an explanation for that?

**Barry Chiswick:**

Yes. I actually have a paper on the rise and fall of the American Jewish Ph.D.



**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Is that right? I missed it.

**Barry Chiswick:**

It's on my Vita.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Well, as I said, your Vita is really long. Go ahead.

**Barry Chiswick:**

Well, let's think in terms of a simple discrimination model. Jews were discriminated against in higher education. It was very difficult to get into major universities, and then that goes down after World War II, but it goes down more in the universities than it goes down in major law firms or in the corporate sector. So, we have a discrimination model in which initially post-World War II, the decline in antisemitism is greater in universities, so Jews flocked into university, and they could get jobs in universities more readily than they could get jobs in the major law firms or in the corporate sector.

What's happened over time is that antisemitism in other sectors of the economy has gone down, and so now you see a much wider dispersion in the occupations and industries that Jews are engaged in as antisemitism in hiring and antisemitism in the society has gone down. Now recently seeing a resurgence of antisemitism, but I don't think it's affecting the labor market, but time will tell. Anyway, I recommend that paper. It's a neat application of Becker's discrimination model.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Where is it for our listeners? Where is it published?

**Barry Chiswick:**

The rise and fall? You know, I just don't remember. Oh, no, I do remember, I do remember. I got an award from the Association for the Scientific Study of Jewry. They have an annual award, and I was the first economist to get this award, and they published a journal called [Contemporary Jewry](#), and my lecture for the award was [this paper](#), and so it was published in *Contemporary Jewry*.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Okay. Now you can forgive me now for my not knowing where it was.

**Barry Chiswick:**

Well, I will forgive you. I'll forgive you. It's readily accessible, and one of my complaints about the discrimination literature is that we spent a lot of time talking about estimating differences between group A and group B, but we don't really spend much time working on testing models of discrimination, testing hypotheses regarding discrimination, whether it's based on gender or race or sexual preference or whatever. I've done a couple of papers testing models. One of them is this ["Rise and Fall of the American Jewish Ph.D."](#) and another one was my paper published in the JPE on testing several hypotheses about racial discrimination.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Barry, it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you today. Our guest has been [Barry Chiswick](#) today, Professor of Economics at [George Washington University](#), and one of the most active researchers in the economics of ethnic issues, as you've just heard. Please join us again for the next episode of [The Work Goes On: an Oral History of Industrial Relations and Labor Economics](#) from the [Industrial Relations Section at Princeton University](#). I'm your host, Orley Ashenfelter. Thanks for listening.

**Announcer:**

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