



## TRANSCRIPT

### The Work Goes On

**Guest Host: Gavin Wright**

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#### Gavin Wright:

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#### 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, Emeritus 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 [Gavin Wright](#), who is William Robertson Coe Professor of American Economic History, Emeritus at [Stanford University](#). He is renowned for his work in economic history and especially the history of the labor market of the American South and the effect of the Civil Rights Revolution there. Gavin, welcome to [The Work Goes On](#).

#### Gavin Wright:

Thank you. It's very good of you to have me on a series featuring labor economics since I never identified myself that way, but it's good to have a big umbrella for that definition.

#### Orley Ashenfelter:

We'll come back to that. We'll come back to that point, but let's begin the discussion by talking about your background. Where did you grow up?

#### Gavin Wright:

Well, I was born in New Haven, Connecticut, but only stayed there two years, so I have no memories of that early time. My family then moved to Flushing, New York. Both my parents were social workers and this was... they were moving around during the Great Depression and the war years. Then at the age of 10, the end of 1953, we moved to Minneapolis, and so I became a Minnesotan and I'm still a Minnesotan, even though I have not lived there for many decades now.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Well, it's what they say. You could take the kid out of Minnesota, but you can't take the Minnesota out of the kid.

**Gavin Wright:**

Very, very true.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Well, I lived for a short time in North Dakota, and I have the same... It's hard to get that out of your system. That's an unusual place. Very, very cold in the winter.

**Gavin Wright:**

Have you ever discussed that with Heidi Williams, who comes from Williston, North Dakota?

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

I have not. Good for her. It could be a tough place in the winter.

**Gavin Wright:**

Yes.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Did you go to high school in Minnesota?

**Gavin Wright:**

That's right. Washburn High School in Minneapolis.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

And I know you went to Swarthmore because I've had two podcast guests recently who were in classes near to yours at Swarthmore. How in the world did you get from Minneapolis to Swarthmore?

**Gavin Wright:**

Well, you asked about my background. The only one thing I left out is I come from a Quaker family.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Oh, do you?

**Gavin Wright:**

So, I am actually, even though this term is obsolete, I'm a birthright Quaker because both my parents were Quakers at the time I was born, and so that really was the connection. I wanted a place with high academic standards, but something with an element of social conscience. And even though this was true for my wife who came from Detroit, both of us went there without ever having set foot on that campus until we arrived as arriving freshmen. Yeah, nowadays, high school seniors, juniors and seniors go and visit all kinds of campuses, but we didn't do that. Somehow Ivy League, I never even considered. I just

had a kind of image of what they were like and kind of elitist and not for me. So, Swarthmore seemed like the right combination, even though the truth is I knew relatively little about it.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Even though it's obviously a very fine college and I guess this name keeps popping up all the time. Frank Pierson. Did you know him too?

**Gavin Wright:**

Well yes. He taught macroeconomics. I would say even more influential there was Joe Conard, C-O-N-A-R-D. Well, I'll drop a couple of other names. My very first economics teacher, introductory economics, was Willis Weatherford, and that was interesting. I was expecting to go to college and hear people from all over the world with all kinds of different accents. I didn't expect my first economics teacher to have a southern twang. Willis Weatherford came from Kentucky and his father Willis Duke Weatherford was a kind of leading southern liberal back in the days of segregation, and Willis himself went on to be president of Berea College for many years afterwards. So, that was one influence, but really, Joe Conard was also a Quaker, and he taught the theory class. That was the first one you took in the honors program, and really people were terrified by that class. It was considered a very tough class. Indeed, it was. Compared to Conard, Frank Pierson was much more easygoing, and yet I had a good college education. I do recall finishing my comps at Yale in grad school and telling myself most of these answers. I was basing it on my Swarthmore education as much as I was my Yale education.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

So, I know you went to Yale. I know you were sort of close and classmates to Heidi Hartmann, who we've done a podcast with, in fact just dropped. How did you end up at Yale?

**Gavin Wright:**

Well, it was no better informed than my decision about going to college. For grad school and economics, as you know, it's more of a handful of leading candidates. I think I applied to Michigan at that time as a chance that there might be trouble getting in, but somehow between Yale and Harvard, I think it might've been some influence of Bill Brown who was another of my Swarthmore teachers, and he was a Yale. But really it was almost a flip of a coin. It's true. A few years in there, I became something of a political activist, and as I knocked on doors, I would often say I was born right here in this very ward, which was true, but of course not the whole truth.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

That is so interesting. At Princeton, we think of Yale as a four-letter word. I can't resist saying that by the way. It's kind of a silly comment.

**Gavin Wright:**

We tennis players say that about golf as well.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Right? Yes, of course. That's actually a good example as well. I read your book on... I got it right here in fact, it's called ["Sharing the Prize,"](#) and one of the things that struck me at the very beginning, we'll come back to it, but one of the things that struck me in the very beginning is how you explain sort of the

genesis and history of this book, but you conclude by also saying that you had decided while you were in graduate school that maybe economics and the way economists do their work wasn't exactly what you wanted to do, and so you turned to economic history. Is that about right?

**Gavin Wright:**

That is about right. I tell that narrative often, and I think it's a true narrative. As in any branch of history. If you have a tidy history in which everything fits together, you're not telling the whole story. But I still think that is the essence and what you're referring to is the way I spent my summer of 1963, and that was on a voting registration project in a remote area of North Carolina, Warren County, which happens to be a Black majority county in the old tobacco belt. And we knew what we were doing trying to ready people up for the coming voter registration campaign. But of course, as you do in those kinds of activities, we asked ourselves, what are we really accomplishing here and what is the purpose? And so on. I recall our leader asking the question, doesn't this really trace back to slavery?

And the first thing he said was... He was an ordained minister. Do you consider that slavery was evil? And everyone around the room said, yeah, slavery was evil. How could you disagree that slavery was evil? But then he said, but weren't there also elements of historical chance the intersection of Western European civilization with African? And as soon as he said that, I realized that I was defeated, that if you're going to take a kind of scientific or even a loosely scientific approach, you're not going to settle for the simple statement that slavery was evil. We want to understand it better historically. And so, I knew at that moment that's what I wanted to do, but I did not have that understanding at that time.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Was this part of your Quaker upbringing to go down and do a voter registration project?

**Gavin Wright:**

Well, it was connected. I had spent the previous summer back in Minneapolis working on construction to help defray some of the costs of my education. And so, I had saved up some money and I said, I want to do something more interesting the following summer. And so, through Quaker channels, I was familiar with the American Friends Service Committee, and actually the element of chance is I didn't particularly sign up to go and register voters. In fact, I had signed up to work on a project with California farm workers. That project was cancelled, and so a consolation prize, they sent me to North Carolina. So, there was a Quaker connection, but in truth, obviously we were all aware of the civil rights movement at that time, but still, it was a very remote thing to me. I'd never been in the south before, but it really was a kind of turning point for me. I didn't realize as of that summer that it would be a lifelong research interest, but ah...

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Let's turn to that because I want to come back to your book on the Civil Rights Revolution. I think it's extremely interesting and it's definitely hardcore labor economics, whether you think so or not. But first, let's talk about your dissertation. What was that about?

**Gavin Wright:**

Well, what decided me, settled the matter on terms of what I would work on, was not my dissatisfaction with the state of the economics of discrimination. It was the fact that I took the required economic history course from Bill Parker my first year at Yale. At the end of it, he mentioned that he was part of a project with Bob Gallman at the North Carolina, which was to create a large matched sample from the

1860 census where they were matching observations from the population census, the slaveholder census, and the census of slavery. And would I be interested in perhaps working on that project? Well, if you're a graduate student in economics and somebody hands you a brand new untouched dataset and says, can you see if you can do something with this? The matter was settled. And it's true. I was interested. If I were totally uninterested, of course I wouldn't have accepted the offer. But I did take that summer of 1966, newly married, my wife and I went down, and it wasn't the greatest summer, and I didn't accomplish much because computer problems, whatnot, the sample wasn't really ready to work that summer. But it did give me both the dissertation topic and the raw material to use with it.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

And what the census... There was a census of slaves also?

**Gavin Wright:**

There was. You often hear that slaves were not counted. They were counted, but not named. So, it's deeply frustrating and why it took quite a bit of effort to match those slaveholding observations to the owners. We think we did pretty well. I didn't really work on that nitty gritty part of it, but yeah, that's what is unique in that Parker-Gallman sample is still, even in this age of big data and matching algorithms, it's still the most frequently used sample for people who want to study the slave economy of 1860. Ultimately, it will be replaced and superseded because that's what happens in scientific disciplines but it is quite remarkable.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

It is remarkable. And what was your dissertation about?

**Gavin Wright:**

I had trouble... Despite this gift to me, I had trouble defining exactly what questions would be interesting. The Parker-Gallman sample was collected with the idea of testing Douglas North's inter-regional trade model of American industrialization. He had the idea that it was the boom in the cotton south that triggered economic growth in both the northeast and the northwest. And I think both Parker and Gallman had the idea that he was wrong about that. Part of the upshot was to show... that's defined the sample. It really is the cotton producing counties. It's a landmark paper by Bob Gallman, which showed that most southern farms were in fact self-sufficient in foodstuff corn and hogs being the two staples of the diet. They were not relying on grains coming in from the northwest.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

I still think of North Carolina as the home of pulled pork, one of my favorite sandwiches. We should explain too, for others, I happen to know this because I read your work on this that by the northwest you don't mean what nowadays we call the northwest, Seattle. So, you mean Ohio, Michigan, that's what you call the northwest.

**Gavin Wright:**

Often called the Old Northwest. It was the Northwest Territories, but yes, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois. I had one student from Texas who after taking a course for your... I think I finally have the I states straight, by which she meant Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. And as I mentioned, she was from Texas. But I think maybe a better way for me to respond was I would not recommend reading my dissertation. It really doesn't have a clear-cut issue. Instead, that field of study was defined for me by the appearance in 1974 of a

book called [“Time on the Cross,”](#) written by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, which took a very provocative position on the economics of slavery. It said that slavery was extremely efficient as measured by total factory productivity, and it fostered high rates of economic growth in the south as well as the north. And furthermore, conditions under slavery were not nearly as bad as many have thought. Look, for example, at the high rates of fertility, natural population growth among the slaves. Well, that book was explosive in 1974, but Bob Fogel kind of framed it as “well we are the scientific economists. I'm telling you what this new subfield of cliometrics has come up with, and you other guys are just sentimentalists or moralists, and you can't really believe that an immoral institution could have been efficient.” Well, a group of us within the field led by Paul David and Peter Temin, but we also had Richard Sutch, and we got Herb Gutman, who's a labor historian, put together a counter volume, came out in 1976 called [“Reckoning with Slavery.”](#) I think I was the only one in the group who actually had a sustained research interest in slavery as a topic but it was a real opportunity for me, and it helped me to define the issues which were productivity and growth. And I came to a very different set of conclusions than Fogel and Engerman.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

I gather that's right from what I've read of what you've done. Of course, Fogel, I gather his Nobel Prize then is... Maybe the Swedish Academy should rethink that.

**Gavin Wright:**

Well, obviously I'm not going to revive these old issues. There was... Fogel at that time went from Chicago to Harvard, and there actually was a lot of second guessing on the part of Harvard. Ultimately, I'm pleased that they decided not to rescind their offer, but that was... It certainly split the field of economic history.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Well, I'll tell you one of the reasons it's interesting to me is that when I was a graduate student, one of the topics you might've considered as a graduate student would be that great giant mystery of the North-South wage differential.

**Gavin Wright:**

Yes.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Which still existed long, long after slavery.

**Gavin Wright:**

Yes.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

Some of your research really deliberately goes to the discussion of why that existed and why it doesn't exist so much anymore.

**Gavin Wright:**

Yes, it does. And this is really saying... Once the dust had settled on the slavery debate, I really thought, and this certainly does trace back to that summer in North Carolina, we shouldn't just be studying the performance of the slave economy. We should be studying the aftermath. We should be studying the legacy. In other words, I should be taking a longer view of the southern economy. I was not the only one doing that. Richard Sutch, Ransom and Sutch had a big project on the reconstruction period. But that kind of defined my next book project, and it's as though it just came to me as a kind of a synthesis on what view of this would pull it all together and make sense of what I was seeing. And that was this idea that you had a separate regional labor market in the north and in the south because the older view, one other way to pull it together is, well, slavery was abolished in principle, but not in reality, that in reality, southern farm workers, especially Black farm workers, were really held in a kind of peonage condition, which is to say they weren't free to move around.

It was kind of slavery under a different name. And that is a very popular view. It seems so plausible. It's a way to put it together. I think it's a losing proposition on my part to kind of convince the general public that it's not valid, but it's not valid. There were actually very high rates of labor mobility for Black as well as white southerners. The thing is those high rates of mobility were within the South. They moved from the low wage areas like North Carolina to what were then the higher wage areas of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Now, I have a new junior colleague, [Lukas Althoff](#) (Princeton \*23), who's actually done research on this very topic, and I keep urging him, you should write a paper called "Can You Move to Opportunity", which would be about the advances that were made by Black freed men in moving from the southeast to the southwest of that time.

The first time I mentioned that to Lukas, he said, oh, that was the title of a paper written by one of my advisors. Indeed. That's why I was suggesting it to him, referring here to [Ellora Derenoncourt](#). So, the point is, I think that finding of high rates of geographic mobility has been used by revisionists to say, well, the post-slavery southern economy wasn't that bad. And one popular formulation is to say, well, the markets were working. Their problem was not the labor market. Their problem was politics, that is intervention in the labor market in the form of anti-enticement laws and these other kinds... So, that's another synthesis. But in the end, I came to view, you really shouldn't be separating political processes from economic processes in that way because there's a lot of feedback from the labor market when it comes to the race issue.

And only years later did I learn this was an application of the Arrow model as of discrimination as distinct from the Becker model and the idea that, yeah, you can move around in the unskilled labor market in many ways. You might say it was an efficient functioning market, but trying to move up the ladder to the higher paying jobs and trying to get an education for them, there were all kinds of setbacks or roadblocks or difficulties in doing that. So much so that you could even characterize it as a kind of equilibrium in which the workers didn't get education because nobody thought they would be accepted in those higher paying jobs that they might've wanted to have. And I really think that simple model, any simple model does some violence to the richness of history. But in a way that's part of our task as economic historians is trying to come up with those relatively simple models that capture a large part of the historical message.

### **Orley Ashenfelter:**

Let's talk about ["Sharing the Prize."](#) I think it's an impressive book. It may be more popular than some economics books that get out there, so it maybe gets read a little bit more, and I understand you've already explained the reason why you eventually came to write it. The hypothesis in it, however, is quite striking. See if I'm correct, you seem to think or actually show that the Civil Rights Revolution, which is really essentially a period around 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, led actually to a real change in the southern economy. Is that right?

**Gavin Wright:**

Yes, I would say so. You can find elements of continuity between say the 50s and the 60s. In the 50s you had rapid growth in the South, so it would not be accurate to say that the acceleration of southern growth and convergence toward national norms, that didn't begin with a Civil Rights Revolution of the 60s. In many ways, it began with World War II, and there's a kind of small debate about, was it partly beginning even in the 30s? But anyway, it's back there. However, the civil rights forces had a lot of leverage because although the southern economy was booming, there was a lot of competition between one city and another to get those plants, to get those investments as well as to get government money. So, you have a case like a city, case of Little Rock, where the dispute over desegregation of the schools was so intense that they actually shut down the public school system.

Well, after that Little Rock, which had received several plants coming in every year throughout the 50s, they got no more plants for the next decade or so because who wants to take your firm into a place where they shut down the schools? So, it was the growth process that really gave a lot of leverage to civil rights forces, and which ultimately brought business interests around to first acquiescing in it and then supporting in the various parts of the Civil Rights Revolution. The case I featured with was public accommodations. People think of public accommodations as the easy issue. Why after all, should anyone really object to allowing a Black person to sit down at the lunch counter in Woolworths? Well, after the fact, it was pretty easy. Before the fact it was the hot button issue that split the nation. And there again, economists tend to want to explain away these things.

They're saying, well, sure, it was segregation laws. That was the case of politics, trying to fight against economic forces. No, it was not. Yeah. Why would a profit seeking business turn away paying customers? Well, because they thought if they accepted Black customers, it would turn away their white customers, and they had legitimate reasons for feeling that. So, you got one of those rapid historical changes going almost overnight from total opposition to acquiescence, and then acceptance, because they came to realize, at least some wiser heads among the business leadership, that if you're going to make this change, you don't want to do it partway. You don't want to have a mixed-up quilt between partly segregated and totally segregated and desegregated places. It's better to have a simple blue line that says every place that's open to the public has to be open to everybody. That way you're not at a competitive disadvantage when you do it. And when they did this, and within a few years, not only did it go relatively smoothly, but it actually underscored a revival of prosperity for almost all of the southern cities that went through this. So, that created a lot of converts, certainly converts to the rhetoric of tolerance and acceptance and opens it. So only after the fact this public accommodations look like the easy case.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

It's interesting. I noticed in your book you have several examples of cities that have grown in the sense of having many more Black-owned businesses, and obviously it's the case. I noticed that the last time the American Economic Association met in Atlanta, most of the high-end workers are actually Black in that city. I wondered whether the people who visited there who weren't from the U.S. appreciated it as much as I did. It was quite interesting to see that it's a highly, highly skilled people, lawyers and everything else in that place.

**Gavin Wright:**

No, for sure. People go there and they think this is normal, but I notice it every time. You think there is a Black presence in this region and in this city that you just do not see in other parts of the country.



**Orley Ashenfelter:**

And you document this in Birmingham, I guess, some other places too. Absolutely fascinating. We're going towards the end of our podcast, by the way, and I do think that you've covered most of the things that I wanted to talk about, but at the end of the book, you do have a section about some things that are bad as a result of the civil rights movement. You mentioned those, and I wonder if you could comment on them and whether any of those are relevant for what's going on today.

**Gavin Wright:**

Well, certainly there's a fair amount of lamentation, I think that used to be stronger, but you still hear it without the south, lamentation among Black speakers and commentators of nostalgia for the old segregated economy. I don't think any of them would've wanted to bring back all of the features of it but what they have in mind was that there was a strong sense of Black community.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

The Harlem Renaissance is, I guess...

**Gavin Wright:**

The Harlem Renaissance, for sure. But southern cities had their Black districts too, and they argue that a lot of those were undermined, indeed correctly. They were undermined by the Civil Rights Revolution, but it was not just that. It was by the construction of interstate highways that gave particular damage to black neighborhoods and so on. That's something I could have paid more attention to in the book but did not. What I did try to say, and I think this is true, is that with the prosperity in southern cities, and in particular with the return migration, so-called return migration of Black people from all other parts of the country into the south, you have a re-creation of new business communities and new business enterprises in most of these southern cities. So, you can look at a city like Charlotte, North Carolina, and year after year, it comes in the polls as one of the best places to live for middle class Black people in this day and age.

So, I think it's encouraging. As you were saying, my book is written in a more popular style, and yet I was trying to address the economics, a knowledgeable economics readership. So, it's encouraging when some of the ideas that are in there are developed by others or that illustrate what is really happening now, because that pattern has most certainly continued. And the interesting thing is that migration pattern has continued even through the political shift within the South towards conservative Republican, mostly white leadership in all the Southern states except Virginia, and yet the Black presence there is still a significant factor. Yeah, there's a lot of talk about reversal of the gains of the Civil Rights Revolution, and there's certainly people who are trying to move in that direction. I don't think they will be able to reverse it fully because I think both the Black community and other affected groups are not going to accept it. But even so, it's a case where understanding the history more fully can help, at least to address the issues we're dealing with today.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

It's fascinating. Everything you've said about this is something people have a tendency to forget, because you and I have been around long enough to remember 1964, but a lot of people don't.

**Gavin Wright:**

Yep, that's right.

**Orley Ashenfelter:**

It's been such a pleasure to have you with us today. Our guest today has been [Gavin Wright](#), Professor of American Economic History, Emeritus at [Stanford University](#). 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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