



IN MEMORIAM

Harold L. Wilensky
Professor of Political Science, Emeritus
UC Berkeley
1923 – 2011

Harold L. Wilensky passed away peacefully, at the age of 88, in his home in Berkeley on October 30, 2011. Born in New Rochelle, New York on March 3, 1923, Wilensky was reared in a liberal family, and that orientation remained with him throughout life. His undergraduate years (1942 and 1945-47) were spent at Antioch College at a time when that institution was noted for its intellectual and social innovation. His collegiate years were interrupted by a term of service in the United States Air Force; he missed by an eyelash being assigned to the European Theater as a bomber pilot, whose survival rate was one of three. Ultimately, he received his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Chicago in 1955 under the G.I. Bill. While at Antioch he worked in and around the labor movement and the Democratic Party as Midwest field director for the Voters Research Institute, then research assistant at the Detroit headquarters of the UAW when Walter Reuther was president, then assistant to the chief lobbyist at the Ohio C.I.O. Council, and later for three years at the University of Chicago Union Leadership Project. Over a period of 60 years of productive scholarship in the social sciences, he remained steadfastly fair and sensible politically, committed but critical of both right and left extremes.

Wilensky reached easily into sociology, political science, economics, and policy analysis. His academic career included 28 years on the sociology faculties of the University of Michigan and the University of California, Berkeley, and the political science faculty at Berkeley from 1982 until his retirement in 1991.

Wilensky produced a remarkable body of research – 75 articles and 13 books – that is interdisciplinary, innovative, rigorous, substantively rich, and focused on important real-world issues. He routinely engaged a wide audience, enlivening his work with a crisp, economical writing style. He made major contributions to understanding the impact of industrial transformation on the structure, culture, and politics of modern society. He was a pioneer in the study of the welfare state and social policy, with such works as *Industrial Society and Social Welfare* (1958) and *The Welfare State and Equality* (1975). He charted new ground in the study of intellectual life in *Intellectuals in Labor Unions* (1956). His prize-winning book on *Organizational Intelligence* (1967) focused on the structural and ideological roots of intelligence failures in government and industry. Among his dozens of contributions to scholarly journals, two, both published in 1964, stand out as classics with continuing relevance and influence: “The Professionalization of Everyone?” and “Mass Society and Mass Culture: Interdependence or Independence?”

Wilensky drew together decades of research and insight in *Rich Democracies* (2002), a master work of more than 900 pages of comprehensive data collection and analysis that is relevant, lucid and persuasive in its policy implications. He offers a powerful rebuttal to those who argue that more taxing and spending

undermines economic performance, based on research on 19 countries over 50 years. To the contrary, he finds that the high tax/ spend countries achieve far better social performance and equal or better economic performance more narrowly defined. The book systematically analyzes the effects of national differences in taxing, spending, and public policies on economic performance, political legitimacy, equality, job security, safety and risk, real health, poverty reduction, environmental threats, and the effectiveness and fairness of regulatory regimes. Wilensky discussed and elaborated on his findings in this book in 56 public lectures in the United States, Europe, and Asia.

At the time of his death, Wilensky had completed yet another book, *American Political Economy in Global Perspective* (2012). In fact, he sent off the final page- proofs to Cambridge University Press on October 21, 2011, only nine days before his passing. This book concludes a 40- year project on the comparative political economy of advanced industrial countries, devoting special attention to the past 15 years of crisis and to contemporary American policies and politics. In an endorsement of the book, Jennifer Granholm, the former Governor of Michigan, proclaims: “[Wilensky] shreds the notion that creating a healthy economy or citizenry requires that government shrink itself into oblivion; indeed, quite the opposite. The most successful countries with the highest quality- of- life, the most robust economies and healthiest democracies are ones that have an efficient but active government armed with smart economic and social policies.”

Wilensky recounted his intellectual development in “A Journey Through the Social Sciences” (in *Comparative European Politics: The Story of a Profession*, Hans Daalder, ed., 1997.) At the University of Chicago, he visited the office of the graduate advisor, none other than Milton Friedman, who asked him what he had been reading at Antioch that qualified him as an economist. Wilensky mentioned Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, J.S. Mill, and Joseph Schumpeter, among others. Friedman promptly told Wilensky that he was a sociologist and not an economist, and sent him upstairs where, with same list of books, he was awarded full support for his Ph.D. studies under the G.I. Bill. Friedman’s advice seemed right, but in the process economics lost a promising scholar.

Wilensky was a public intellectual in the best sense. He was rigorous in his scholarship, yet he was also unafraid to put his findings to work as a tireless advocate of New Deal policies and more recently for Medicare for all. He sought to chart a more inclusive, socially just course for U.S. policy makers. In his view, the United States does not have to sacrifice prosperity and employment in order to be more inclusive and egalitarian. On the contrary, the United States could improve its economic performance if policy makers pursued a more progressive agenda.

Wilensky taught a wide range of courses on comparative political economy; the sociology of work, leisure, and mass communications; knowledge and intellectuals; complex organizations; the welfare state; and public policy. His former graduate students include many prominent figures in the fields of sociology and political science today.

Wilensky was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and was twice a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

At Berkeley, he was a research project director at the Institute for International Studies. He served on the executive committees of the Institute of Industrial Relations and the Survey Research Center; and the faculty committees for the Mass Communications Group and the Political Economy of Industrial Societies majors. He was on the editorial boards of the *American Sociological Review*, *Industrial Relations*, the *Journal of Human Resources*, and *Social Problems*. He consulted for the OECD, various national and state governments, corporations, and labor unions.

Colleagues and students will remember Wilensky’s distinctive personal style as one that combined the highest intellectual integrity, unrelenting doggedness, indefatigability, and appreciation of telling humor. He was also a fine athlete. He skied until he was 83, and he won a bronze in a Nastar slalom race. He was a life- long lover of music, especially jazz, and played the trumpet and the piano.

He is survived by his partner of 32 years, Mary Roth Sharman; his sons, Stephen David Wilensky of Glencoe, California; Michael Alan Wilensky of Piedmont, California; Daniel Lewis Wilensky of Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey; and four granddaughters.

Neil Smelser
Steven Vogel