

## EGC Voices in Development Podcast, Episode 7: Gerald Jaynes

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**Cheney:** Why do some countries advance while others fall behind? Who benefits from economic growth and who doesn't? How do inequality and climate change affect people, especially the most marginalized? And what role can data play in answering questions like these and informing policies that promote economic justice? Let's find out on Voices in Development.

Hello and welcome to our podcast. I'm your host, Catherine Cheney. We're coming to you from the Economic Growth Center at Yale University, which is focused on economics and data-driven insights for equitable development. Today we're joined by Gerald Jaynes, A. Whitney Griswold Professor of Economics, African American Studies and Urban Studies at Yale University. We'll learn about his research, of course, but also some of the experiences that shaped his perspective and led him to where he is today.

Gerald is an expert on race relations and the economic conditions of African Americans. His career spans academic disciplines, and he's combined disciplines to tackle big questions that simple economic models can't answer. Gerald also helped to develop Yale's combined doctoral degree in African American studies and a wide range of other departments. While much of his work focuses on the United States, the learnings are, of course, global. Gerald will discuss some of the implications of his research for low- and middle-income countries, where we tend to focus our attention on voices and development. Now on to the conversation.

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**Cheney:** Gerald, thanks so much for joining us.

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**Jaynes:** My pleasure.

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**Cheney:** So, before we get to your research, I want to hear more about the path that led you to this work. And I know that some of that has to do with your military experience. You knew from a young age that you were going to college, but first you spent three years in the Army. Can you tell us more about your military service and how that experience shaped your perspective and ultimately your path?

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**Jaynes:** One of them was simply being in the military and meeting all of the different people – my fellow soldiers who came from all walks of life in different parts of the country – forced me to shed some of my biases against the white southerners, for example. Because I went into the military in 1966 and it was still kind of desegregating. The other thing is, of course, I traveled out of the country, spent a year in Vietnam, and that was impactful in two particular ways. The first would simply be that I learned not to take things at face value that I was hearing from authority figures. One morning when I was riding shotgun with an M-16 in my hand going down highway one and we stopped to get a coke at a roadside stand. I got into a conversation with the with this young woman and it came up that her

husband was fighting with the Viet Cong on the other side, our opponents, while her oldest brother was fighting with the North Vietnamese regulars.

It struck me that it's a civil war, and why are we here interfering in it? So that was a very illuminating thing, which taught me a lot. The other thing would simply be meeting people, looking at the geography of the country. And for the first time in my life, really sort of going through villages where you see people who are working in agriculture and people whose poverty is really obvious to see. That struck me pretty powerfully as well. And it never left me.

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**Cheney:** Now, you mentioned that the military was still desegregating and that was something we might return to. But I'd actually just love to go ahead and ask you about that and how that affected your experience.

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**Jaynes:** The military had been officially desegregated about 18 years when I entered. Harry Truman desegregated it in 1948 officially. But one has to keep in mind, it was 1966 when I went in. Even today, southerners in the United States are disproportionately in the military, and it was certainly true back then. So if you think about who the non-commissioned officers and the officers were in 1966, this is going to be men who primarily would be in the age range from, let's say, 25, 30 to 55.

So these were people who had been socialized in southern states in the 1920s and 30s and 40s. And so their viewpoint and my viewpoint as a Black who was fourth generation Illinoisan – and Northern Illinois at that – really didn't mesh well. So, there was a lot of racial strife going on in the military. The military is very different today. It has overcome much of that.

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**Cheney:** After those three years in the military. And I believe you were 21 when you were about to start your freshman year of college? You had sort of a pivotal moment. And as I understand it from a story I've read, it has to do with an unexpected snowstorm. So can you tell us a little bit more about that?

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**Jaynes:** Yes, because ultimately, maybe I would have become an economist anyway, but this is sort of what led me into taking econ classes. When I returned from Vietnam, I still had 13 months left in my three-year term of service, and I was stationed at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, which is about 30, 35 miles from Boston. And about a month before I got out of the service, I was going to Chicago for a weekend trip, and I arrived at Logan Airport in Boston and it was a Friday afternoon.

Unbeknownst to me, it was December, and it was the weekend that the American Economic Association (AEA) was having its annual meetings in Chicago. So when I got on the plane, pretty much everybody else on that plane was a Boston area economist. The plane took off and we didn't have the weather forecasting capabilities in 1968 – which is when this was – that we have today. So mid-air the airport in Chicago O'Hare shut down because of a snowstorm and we were diverted first to Cleveland, where we spent the night, and then to Omaha, Nebraska.

I ended up arriving in Chicago on Sunday morning from that Friday afternoon take off by train. But I spent the entire weekend with economists, some of them on both the train and the plane, and economists were proselytizing how great economics is. And they learned that I was about to get out of the military and I was going to be going to college. So of course, they said, 'oh, you got to take an econ class'. And so I promised several of them that I would take an econ class, and I did so and I liked it. And so that's one of the pathways that took me into doing economics. That connected with the fact that economics allowed you to use mathematics and still be talking about people.

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**Cheney:** So you did ultimately go on to pursue economics with a Ph.D. after college and long career to follow it. I want to hear about another pivotal turning point in your career when you were considering graduate school and ultimately decided on economics. You picked up a copy of the American Economic Review and it had a picture of a certain influential economist that led you to think differently. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

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**Jaynes:** When I graduated, I had graduated with a degree in philosophy. I took a year to work at the Illinois State Senate, where I was involved with people like Harold Washington, who became the first Black mayor of the city of Chicago. But at that time, he was a legislator in Springfield, the capital of Illinois, and Cecil Partee, who was also from Chicago, a Black legislator who was the Democratic majority leader.

And those individuals also helped shape my thinking. I was 24 at the time and I was trying to decide that year what I was going to do. I knew I didn't want to go to Law School like I had thought I was going to do, and I was thinking about grad school. And I had a couple disciplines that I thought maybe would make sense for me. And I happened to be in the library and picked up a copy of the American Economic Association, and it just happened to be a copy that was celebrating W. Arthur Lewis on the inside cover as a distinguished fellow. And there was this beautiful Black face smiling, looking at me. And I sort of thought, you know, oh, maybe this is a sign – since I was sitting on a fence – that I should go ahead and do economics.

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**Cheney:** You often hear about the importance of diversity and representation in fields like economics and that's a very clear example of why that matters. Actually, the way you and I first got to know each other was working together on the EGC's Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Economic Justice Symposium. And you mentioned some of the challenges that you faced as an African American economist in the 70s, and I wonder if you can expand on some of those challenges.

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**Jaynes:** Those challenges had something to do with what brought me to Yale in the first place, actually. Because my first position as an assistant professor was in the Econ Department at the University of Pennsylvania, which was a fine place, and I had some good mentors there. But, I was a theorist at the time, and I was starting to have ideas about taking on research projects that for me required being interdisciplinary. And I mean interdisciplinary in a real way, not simply someone who reads a couple of papers written by sociologists or historians or anthropologists or something and maybe utilizes that, but it's not doing things much different from any other economists might do them.

And I was experiencing thoughts about race relations and the structure of society and things like that, that I felt weren't really going to work too well in the economics profession. And this is the mid-1970s, like 1976. And the profession has come a long way since 1976 in that respect – still has a long way to go though – but anyone who knows economics does know that there's a strong chauvinistic streak among economists with respect to what are the right methods and what has to be utilized, the most relevant up to date econometric tools or modeling that are being used in whatever subfield that you might be using.

And for me, the question that I was interested in always came first, not what tools I had. And once I formulated the question then I'd ask myself, what are the proper methods, tools that I might need to try to get an answer to that question and it wasn't always economics. I was trained as an economist, so that always would play an important role. But I knew that operating out of the University of Pennsylvania Econ Department in 1976, if I were to start writing the kinds of things that I was thinking about that wasn't going to really go over all that well.

So luckily for me, I was sitting in my office one afternoon and the phone rings. It's someone at the Yale Econ Department asking me if I might be interested in coming. So, I ended up going there giving a talk to the economics department, but also giving a talk to what was then Afro-American studies – this is 1977 when I gave that talk – and it was just a great fit. And the whole idea of having this joint appointment made me think that, okay, I can do some economic things, but I can also do things that the people over in Black Studies would like to see and I'm probably not going to get penalized as heavily as I would have if I were in a straight Econ Department.

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**Cheney:** When you talk about part of what was so exciting to you about joining Yale, this ability to pursue what was then Afro-American studies and economics in this interdisciplinary way, what does that unlock? Like, what are the kinds of research questions and projects you could pursue because of the ability to be involved?

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**Jaynes:** My first book would be an example, *Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882* which is really the following question: What were the factors that led to the development of sharecropping and the reorganization of the labor system in the American South during the reconstruction period after the Civil War? That was really the question that I was looking at. And I had been asked to teach a joint course over in African American Studies, and it's the first course in African American studies I taught at here at Yale, but I taught it with some other social scientists.

I was trying to figure out what could I do because, you know, this was going to be a course with freshmen and sophomores, maybe a couple of juniors were in that course. They weren't going to know very much economics. There may have been one or two students who had ever even taken 'Intro to Econ', and it turned out that the name of the course was Patterns of Social Change. It was introduction to the social sciences in Black Studies. So I thought, okay, social change patterns. So what are the most important things that happen to Black Americans with respect to social change? And that turns out to be obvious. It's middle passage and slavery, it's the end of slavery and reconstruction, and then the great migrations of World War I and post-World War II.

So, I decided that the weeks when I was teaching, I would focus on those four things. And I started reading what economic historians had to say about those. In particular, when I started to read the relevant literature on sharecropping, I didn't believe it. I thought that the answers that were being given couldn't quite be right. And so I started thinking about that and that's what led to that first book. And I kind of put forth a reinterpretation of the origins of sharecropping in American South, which I think has stood the test of time as that's the way most people think about what I had to say these days. The main point that was going on there was that the movement from the gang labor system that had operated during the slavery system to family-based sharecropping of small farms did not happen instantaneously, like the research in econ was saying. It took 10 to 15 years to fully work itself out.

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**Cheney:** Much of your work focuses on the US i.e. focuses domestically. But between this book and maybe some of your other research, what's the connection to be drawn to low- and middle-income countries and related challenges there?

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**Jaynes:** Even in that first book, I took great pains whenever I was describing things that were occurring to give it a comparative perspective. Some obvious things, like emancipation in the Caribbean, which took place about 30 years earlier, and the transition problems they had there. But I also took some pains to talk about the development of different forms of agricultural tenancy in places like India and other parts of the world, because I thought that some of the events that are happening

aren't strictly and solely because we're looking at former slave holders faced off against their former slaves.

And so it's just a matter of race is driving all the outcomes. Well, if these outcomes are if structurally very similar to what's going on in these other countries, some of which did have a racial or ethnic component and some of which didn't, that's helping us learn something.

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**Cheney:** So you've advised economists to seek out problems and methods that allow them to bring something unique to their work. How have you modeled that in your own career?

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**Jaynes:** So I can give an example of that. The latest paper I have, which I'm now doing a rewrite for publication, is tackling the following question. In the United States, one of the most important social issues for social scientists and a lot of people has been the fragmentation of the husband-wife family among Black Americans that showed up post-1960.

Now, if you take census data and graph the proportion of Black children in one parent families from 1880 to today, what you find is that from 1880 to 1960, that proportion hovers in a very small band of around 20%. Then all of a sudden in 1960, it bursts. It increases so much that it doubles from 20% to 41% between 1960 and 1980.

So literally, every person, social scientists or otherwise, who looks at this says, 'oh, well, then obviously whatever the answer to why this happened, it must be post-1960.' Well, turns out I argue, no, it's not that. In fact, what's going on is that there are very different child socialization processes that lead to different identities and behaviors or agencies that are taken on by Black children who had been raised as children in southern rural areas versus urban areas north or south.

I argue that the proportion of Black children who were in one parent families was always a constant or pretty much a constant in rural areas at about 10%. But it's at about 40% if you looked at cities, and only looked at the subpopulation of Blacks who had actually been raised in a city or town. That graph that I talked about a minute ago is simply an average of those two subpopulation groups in urban areas.

And so what my paper does is it again uses this interdisciplinary approach. I confirmed my hypothesis, and I'm also able to rule out some alternative hypotheses of that data with the way that I design the logistic regression model. But then I go into what you might call an economic anthropology perspective. This is using historical sources, autobiographical sources and ethnography to talk about what are the specific features of the rural south and urban areas – whether it's Atlanta or Boston – that lead to this different socialization processes that would lead to having these the fragmentation of husband-wife families in the urban areas.

And so the paper does those two things. Now, think if you think about that, what's going on? This gets back to the whole idea where I think my somewhat unique set of research experiences allowed me to do this. Because one, I knew something about the rural south and the agricultural system. Two, I know quite a bit about African American history and labor markets in urban areas. But three, I literally as a child observed the Black post-World War II migration. And one of my earliest observations, my grandmother, maternal grandmother, lived a couple of blocks from the train station in our small town. I literally sat on her front porch and I could see Black people getting off the train who were coming from Mississippi, the Memphis area. And so I grew up with some of those people and I immediately by the time I hit age eight or nine, started noticing very distinct differences in the Black people in town who had been born there and those who had migrated in.

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**Cheney:** You've been at Yale since 1977, I believe, is when you joined. You've said before that your greatest achievement other than your children – which would, of course be your immediate answer – was your role in creating the combined doctoral program with African American Studies and other departments at Yale. You've spoken in this interview about the interdisciplinary nature of your work, but can you tell us more about that achievement and why it's so meaningful to you?

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**Jaynes:** When I came to Yale, there was there was this Afro-American Studies program, it wasn't a department yet, and we only taught undergraduates. We subsequently started a master's program. Actually, the idea for that master's program had started even before I arrived because the first class was accepted the following year after I arrived. I became Chair of African American Studies in January of 1990, and I became aware that the stipends that were going to the master's students that we had were lower than the stipends that were going to students in PhD programs and thought, okay, that's problematic but it was really problematic in the following sense. I still had a program in 1989, when we first started thinking about this 1990, and I had the department registrar go through every student we'd ever had to come into the master's program. And it turned out that three quarters of the students who entered our master's program over what would have been a 13-year period had received Ph.D.'s, and two thirds of those were Ph.D.'s at Yale in some department that was offering Ph.D.'s.

So then I said, well, the conclusion here is, although we're formally a master's program, we're really a doctoral program. So I then wrote a letter to the dean of the graduate school and said, using this argument that it was discrimination. Even though there wasn't any intent to cause this, master's programs we're just automatically getting smaller stipends than Ph.D.'s, but that we de facto were a Ph.D. program. And as a consequence, we were discriminating against the students who were coming into the program. And since these students were about three quarters people of color, that was going to be really embarrassing to the institution and that if we couldn't get the same stipends, we were just going to abolish the master's program because our faculty had decided we wouldn't be part of this.

So of course, what really happened was they immediately increased the stipends that went to our master's program. But then I started thinking, well, if we in fact were doing a PhD program anyway, and all that's happening is that a typical student of ours might have come in to do a master's degree in English and African American Studies, or French and African American studies, or history or political science and African American Studies, and when they had been here two years and gotten their master's, they just went into the history department at Yale and ended up getting a Ph.D. So we said, well, why should we let them just capture all of that?

I had a couple of talks with the dean of the graduate school and he said, 'go ahead, let's write up a proposal.' So I put a committee together and we made a proposal. I like to always put my ducks in a row so we wrote up this very careful proposal, and then this was the payoff because our program always had people enjoying appointments. We had professors who were jointly in African American studies, in English history, political science. So we just sent those people over to their departments and had them discuss with the faculty over there whether they'd like to do a joint degree with us. And of course all of them said yes. And we then put together ten separate agreements as to what these joint PhDs would look like. So there was a lot of work involved.

But yeah, I was one of obviously one of the instrumental people in putting that program together. Today it is world renowned as the best African American studies department in in the world. And you can't go to any Black studies department or program, certainly in the United States but in other places as well, and not find some of our people. So, yeah, I'm very proud of that.

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**Cheney:** So, Gerald, you've accomplished so much and we've really just begun to scratch the surface. But I do want to look ahead and ask what are some of the big questions you want to explore moving forward or that you want to see other economists take on?

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**Jaynes:** Right now, I'm hoping this summer to finish a book I've been working on woefully too long, over 20 years. But it's really putting together all of these ideas, trying to understand Black agency. And if we look at all these major events that have occurred, just like I talk about that fragmentation of the Black family once Blacks start to urbanize, if we utilize that kind of framework in thinking about the idea of identity and the fact that people try to verify an acceptable identity that they have, and often that is not reflected back to them by how they're treated, what are going to be their responses to that?

And one of the key ways of thinking about that is, I argue that too much research is done. And I'm going to generalize this because this is going to be true whether we're in India or Pakistan or Saudi Arabia or other places across the globe. If we're looking at people who are in minority groups, oftentimes social science literature looks at those people and they judge them and make assumptions about their behavior that makes sense if they were members of the majority group in their society, but don't make sense given that they are members of this group that may be a pariah group or certainly maybe a group that's heavily discriminated.

History matters. There's a cultural experience going on and there are going to be behaviors and agencies which come into play in their responses to their society. And once one makes that kind of assumption, just like in my fragmentation of the Black family outline, one starts to think differently about labor market behavior, about, say, if you took the United States, I have a whole different interpretation than the ones that people see as to why there were the urban uprisings of the 1960s and a whole host of questions like that.

So that book I'm hoping to finish this summer, all this a lot of administrative and committee work has slowed me down, or I could have over the last 3 or 4 years where I might have been able to finish that. But then secondly, about five years ago, I decided that education is an important question that I'd like to take a look at. And just like with that discrimination case, I decided that the best way to try to do that would be to just develop a course on education policy and start teaching it.

And so I've been doing that. And now I'm putting myself in the position where I'm now starting to do some basic research on education. And I think this is really an important think outside the box area that I'd like to see more economists tackling.

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**Cheney:** Absolutely. Well, looking forward to following your work on that and other important topics. Gerald, thank you so much for taking the time to join us.

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**Jaynes:** Thank you very much, Catherine.

00:33:31:11 - 00:34:07:10

**Cheney:** That's all we have time for in this episode of Voices in Development. Thank you to everyone who helped to make it happen, including our guests who joined us at the Yale Broadcast Studio and several members of the Economic Growth Center team, including Communications and Policy Associate Zahrah Abdulrauf, Vestal McIntyre, Communications Director at EGC and Production Intern Bomi Okuyiga. If you'd like to learn more about the Economic Growth Center, visit the website

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