

James Q. Wilson's Practical Humanity

By Peter Moskos March 03, 2012

James Q. Wilson made me a cop, even though I never met the man. I think I heard him give a conference talk once. Many say that Wilson, who died Friday at 80 after a battle with leukemia, was a kind and nurturing soul. Indeed, I hope he was. But to me his compassionate nature was exemplified by his commitment to broader society. More so than any other academic, and over the course of many decades, Wilson influenced intelligent American public discourse inside and outside academe.

I cannot be the only one who finds it difficult to comprehend the intellectual world as I know it without Wilson's ideas. I knew him primarily through his contributions to policing, but his legacy spans political science, criminology, sociology, philosophy, and economics. Most impressively, that intellectual breadth did not limit his contributions to each field. Quite the contrary. Wilson was able to use the methods and nomenclature of various fields without succumbing to the intellectual blinders that so compartmentalize academic research. Compared with you and me, Wilson, who taught at Harvard, the University of California at Los Angeles, and Pepperdine University, simply had more tools in his toolbox. And boy did he know how to use them.

While many, myself included, may disagree with some of Wilson's more politically conservative leanings, one cannot question the intellectually honesty from which they came. Undoubtedly a few will be quick, too quick, to dismiss or embrace Wilson as some conservative warrior in the Great American Culture Wars. The label doesn't stick.

Inasmuch as Wilson was conservative, he represented a more genteel, even old-fashioned type of conservatism much lacking among those who claim the mantle today. Wilson was driven to his beliefs by a deep-felt desire to help society's less fortunate. In a career of superlatives, one should note the impressive list of authors, who span a broad spectrum of theoretical and ideological beliefs, in volumes edited by Wilson.

Yes, he believed in the power of culture, and he was a brave and all too rare academic willing to buck ideological trends. But he was not a paternalistic finger-waver. And he was never an ideologue. When Wilson wrote about culture, he went against the grain of many entrenched beliefs. Most recently, he wrote in *The Washington Post*: "The problem facing the poor is not too little money, but too few skills and opportunities to advance

themselves." Implicit in that controversial statement is the assumption that economists alone cannot identify, much less solve, the problems facing America's most needy.

I know Wilson's work primarily through his writings on policing and what he may be most remembered for, his Broken Windows theory: that aggressive police enforcement of community standards could help neighborhoods rise from a spiral of fear, crime, and despair. When I entered graduate school in 1995, the great American crime drop was well underway, at least in New York City, where a 50-percent reduction in homicides over six years accounted for more than half of the nation's otherwise modest 8-percent decline. And yet the party line within the ivory tower remained stubbornly fixated on "root causes." Crime would not go down, it was said, and said repeatedly, until we first address the social and environmental causes like poverty, racism, bad housing, poor education, inequality, etc. Many people with far more distinguished careers than mine wrote (and some continue to do so) about the basic irrelevance of police vis-à-vis crime prevention.

In the preceding decades, police were quick to latch on to the "root causes" theory of crime. That's ironic—since police generally hate the idea—but not surprising. During a time of rising crime, academics were basically absolving police departments from their primary duty to prevent crime. Police patrol became a matter of staying out of trouble and answering the radio. Those criminals on the corner? "Society must have messed them up," police would say, sounding every bit as sarcastic as the Officer Krupke song in *West Side Story*. They're depraved on account of being deprived. They're sociologically sick. Policing was reduced to little more than picking up the pieces of broken windows, and lives. Wilson's ideas turned that around.

In graduate school I took a class from George Kelling, Wilson's Broken Windows co-author. It was the first and (please, don't tell my students) only criminology class I ever took. Like so many before and since, I was thunderstruck not just at the idea's lucid profundity, but by its contrarian force and real world grit. "Now this," I said, "is worth studying." A couple of years later I was a Ph.D.-research-gathering uniformed police officer patrolling the streets of Baltimore. Thank you, Professors Wilson and Kelling.

The goal of Broken Windows policing is to allow a neighborhood to police itself and reduce crime. The role of police is to reduce fear through foot patrol, maintaining order, and the judicious use of officers' discretion. As Wilson and Kelling ask, "How can the police strengthen the informal social-control mechanisms of natural communities in order to minimize fear in public places?" The foundation of Broken Windows is neither conservative nor liberal; it is certainly not "zero tolerance" (which remains the antithesis of Broken Windows, despite what somewhat intellectually dishonest critics often say). In truth, Broken Windows rests primarily on little more than the stout shoulders of Jane Jacobs's urban concepts of eyes on the street, diversity of public use, and identifying and encouraging what makes a neighborhood work. The goal, and this is Jacobs's word, is to keep the "barbarians" from winning.

As a criminological theory, Broken Windows came from left field. And yet when so many were saying crime couldn't go down, wouldn't go down, practitioners who liked Broken Windows got their hands dirty, and, guess what, crime went down. While one must never assume that correlation equals causation, if it wasn't the latter, then a few very chosen people have an amazing ability to be in the right place at the right time. Regardless of the fundamental efficacy of Broken Windows, the concept at the least got police back in the crime-prevention game. That was a seismic shift, nothing short of a law-enforcement Scientific Revolution.

Wilson loved good hard data, but was never a slave to quantitative analysis. He understood that certain problems in American society—particularly problems of race, poverty, and crime—go beyond our crude ability to regress statistically significant correlations. Through lucid prose and an ideal that academics can and must serve both the academy and society, he advanced policing in America, and America itself. Wilson saved lives, and isn't that the essence of humanity?

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