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Edward Leamer, Economist Who Said Economists Were Doing it Wrong, Dies at 80

Preaching humility, he inspired new levels of transparency in economics and other fields

By [Chris Kornelis](#)

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EDWARD LEAMER IN 2019

One day in elementary school, Edward Leamer noticed that his teacher had written the wrong answer to a math problem on the blackboard, so he stood up and told her so. His teacher took another look and assured him that it was correct. Again he protested, so she asked him to take his seat.

“He refused to sit down,” his brother, the author Laurence Leamer, said in a gathering on Zoom to celebrate his brother last month. “His whole life, he’s refused to sit down.”

Leamer, an economist who died Feb. 25 at the age of 80 from complications stemming from ALS (or Lou Gehrig's disease), was best known for standing up and telling economists that they were doing it wrong. In influential papers like 1983's "[Let's Take the Con Out of Econometrics](#)" and his seminal book, "Specification Searches" (1978), Leamer warned economists that the methods they were using to analyze data produced weak findings that couldn't hold up to scrutiny. He said economists often had a bias toward the results they wanted or that were the kinds of firm conclusions that led to press coverage, funding and policy positions they supported.

SHOW SOME HUMILITY

What's more, Leamer warned economists that they weren't being honest about the strength of their conclusions or transparent about the fact that they had run other tests that showed different results.

Leamer wanted economists to be humble, and to recognize that what they were doing was seeing patterns and telling stories about data, not uncovering definitive truths.

"We're going to make progress," he said [in a podcast interview in 2020](#). "We're going to persuade each other. But we're never going to get to the point where we really know the truthfulness of a complex human system like an economic system."

His shots across the bow didn't always make him popular with his peers, but Edward Miguel, a professor of economics at the University of California, Berkeley, said that in time, he had an enormous influence not just in encouraging transparency among economists, but in other fields as well. The Berkeley Initiative for Transparency in the Social Sciences named an award after Leamer and psychologist Robert Rosenthal, who also advocated for transparency in his field.

"We're meant to be courageous, tell the truth, deal with the consequences," Miguel said. "And in the long run, Ed Leamer was totally vindicated and he really helped change the field for the better."

'THOSE LEAMER BOYS'

Leamer, who was born May 24, 1944, started throwing punches long before he became an economist.

According to Laurence Leamer, the two brothers fought so much when they were children that a neighbor in Binghamton, N.Y., told her priest that "those Leamer boys are going to end up in prison."

Leamer received a master's and Ph.D. in economics from the University of Michigan before joining Harvard University's economics department as an associate professor in. But he left after he was denied tenure—in part, colleagues claim, because his ideas didn't support those of the top economists at Harvard.

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“Ed was going his own way,” said James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist and longtime friend. “And the way that a lot of tenure decisions were made at Harvard—and in fact they’re

made in many schools, it’s one of the sorrows of economics, I’m afraid—is that people get tenure if you can help the master.”

In 1975, Leamer landed at the University of California, Los Angeles; he remained at UCLA until he retired in 2018. His survivors include his wife, Ama Neel, two daughters and a son.

Although he could be a prickly presence in his field, it wasn’t because he believed he always had the answer. In fact, one of the hallmarks of his work was that he knew he didn’t.

“If you look through Ed’s work, you’ll see that he’s talking about how to change your mind,” economist Deirdre McCloskey said in the Zoom gathering last month. “And as a serious scholar—as he certainly is—that’s how you become an important scholar, as he certainly is.”

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