

Obituary: William J. Chambliss (1933-2014). A Fierce Fighter for Justice Who Knew Few Boundaries

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A Fierce Fighter for Justice who Knew few Boundaries

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William (Bill) Chambliss, a fierce fighter for justice and a towering figure in sociology, died on Feb 21, 2014. He was diagnosed with cancer seven years ago but that did not stop him to conduct research and write influential scholarly articles. He was a brilliant iconoclast that knew few boundaries in his thinking. During the course of a very productive 50-year career, Bill authored or co-authored nearly two-dozen monographs and edited books, along with countless chapters and journal articles. His work and way of thinking remains a model for young scholars wishing to think against the grain.

While studying criminology at the University of Leuven in Belgium in the early 2000s, I developed a great passion for qualitative and ethnographic research, and the field of organized crime. It was there that I met Bill, who gave a guest lecture on his paradigm-changing book *On the Take: From Petty Criminals to Presidents* (1978) based on his Seattle research about white-collar crime and corruption. He noted: "Going to the streets of the city, rather than the records, may bring the role of corruption and complicity between political, economic, and criminal interests into sharp relief." His talk was an inspiration to many of us – young and confused scholars who wanted to make a difference in this world.

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In a beautifully written and unsurprisingly controversial account, Bill argued that organized crime was not a transplanted sinister entity of Italian origin (the Mafia/La Cosa Nostra). The testimony of Joseph Valachi, the first organized crime insider (Kefauver 1950s and McClellan 1960s Committees), was the basis for this rational bureaucratic alien conspiracy model of organized crime. Criminologist Donald Cressey (1969), a member of the 1967 Presidential Task Force, also

claimed that organized crime in the U.S. was composed of a nationwide alliance of tightly-knit, hierarchically structured, criminal Mafia families of Italian descent. But Bill argued that organized crime was rather a political phenomenon and a local (domestic) problem. He became known for his arguments that organized crime is central to politics, and the only way to study it is by going to the streets of the city. This way, as Bill argued, we can observe the thin line that divides corruption, politics, economy, and criminal interests. Bill (1987) also was candid about the relationship between his theoretical perspective and his life experiences:

After I graduate from UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], I hitchhiked across the country again to see my father. It was 1955, and in short order I was drifted into the army and sent to Korea with the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC). I learned a lot about crime during that period. American and Korean soldiers raped, stole, assaulted, intimidated, and generally terrorized the Koreans. Because they had the power, nothing was done about it...How could crime be understood from the paradigms I learned in psychology and sociology? (pp.5-6).

So I came to know Bill as an inspiring, critical scholar who hung out with organized crime figures, as well as drug dealers and petty criminals in a search for a better and more holistic understanding of crime and criminal behavior. He had a gift for seeking out those who were on the receiving end of an exploitive social system. So although the standard mode of answering sociological and criminological questions is to conduct a public and widespread survey, just like Bill, I also wanted to meet the people I was writing about – and talk to some, when possible – in order to understand better why certain things were done. Bill is one of the scholars who truly inspired me as a student. And when I began with my academic journey (conducting research on Albanian and Balkan organized crime groups), he was there to give me advice and to support me.

Bill continued to publish, teach and travel extensively until the very end. He was a fierce critic of short-sighted “get tough” on crime policies and paid close attention to the ongoing struggles between individuals and groups in terms of power differentials. For this reason, the organizing team of the ECPR SGOE Summer Schools on Organized Crime (2009-2011), of which I was a part, invited Bill to give a seminar to a group of graduate and postgraduate students in Catania, Italy in the summer of 2009.

Twenty international scholars working on organized crime issues were enthusiastically listening to Bill's fascinating lectures. Bill talked about the Crime and the Legal Process (1969), the first major monograph to set forth his brilliant ideas. He explained to the students how lower-class black crime was rendered more visible than middle-class white crime, resulting in much higher rates of criminalization among blacks. He also spoke about his “ride-alongs” with the Washington Police Department's Rapid Deployment Unit, in order to better understand how policing affected the crime statistics. Referring to his highly influential book Power, Politics, & Crime (1999), Bill explained to the students why the “war against drugs” was a failure. I vividly remember our heated discussion on the decriminalization of drugs and petty crime. And after his lectures, Bill, the unafraid and curious man he was, went on the streets of Catania, to explore the city and the

neighbourhoods. The next day he would tell us more about his observations in the city. Bill was unafraid and full of energy. And as his very good friend Richard P. Appelbaum (University of California at Santa Barbara) wrote, Bill was never afraid of living, but also, he was not afraid of dying.

Bill earned his sociology B.A. in 1955 at UCLA, and then he got his sociology Ph.D. in 1962 at the University of Indiana where he studied deviance. Then Bill accepted an Assistant Professor Position at the University of Washington in Seattle. Bill began to develop his own approach, helping to shape the newly emerging theoretical framework termed conflict theory. This approach traced its origins to Karl Marx's emphasis on the universality of social conflict in class-based societies and argued that societies are best understood in terms of structurally embedded conflicts between social groups. No doubt that criminological conflict theory has had notable consequences in terms of subsequent theorizing and rethinking within mainstream criminology.

In 1967 Bill moved to UC Santa Barbara as a tenured Associate Professor. During this period he wrote several books that significantly impacted criminology and the sociology of law. At this time period he also wrote his famous article "The Saints and the Roughnecks" (1984[1973]). This is a widely cited classic that I personally use in all of my classes today. It is about the effects of labels on the lives of a group of underprivileged high school students. As Bill argued the nature of labelling depends on differences between those labelled and those doing the labelling. Through his work Bill gave voice to those on the receiving end of the criminal justice system. He spoke for them loud and clear.

The University of Delaware hired Bill in 1976, where he published the book that was to establish him in the forefront of his field, *On the Take: From Petty Criminals to Presidents* (1978). In 1986 Bill relocated to the Sociology Department at George Washington University, where he remained until his death.

One of Bill's latest contributions to the study on organized crime is a chapter he wrote, together with Elizabeth Williams, for Felia Allum and Stan Gilmour's *Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime* (2012). Taking a critical and postmodern approach, Bill argued that the media has a heavy hand in shaping language and rhetoric used to understand (or misunderstand) what organized crime usually is and how it actually works. He concludes once again that modern transnational crime operations are not highly structured: "the characterization of transnational organized crime as centralized, hierarchical entities not only undermines law enforcement strategies, but further confuses an already complex subject" (Chambliss and Williams 2011: 62).

Professor William Chambliss was a legend in our profession, a brilliant theorist as well as activist. He was the leading light of an intellectual movement inspired by the radical political currents of the 1960s that questioned conventional ways of thinking about crime and its control. Bill will be greatly missed by many but I feel privileged to have known such a brilliant mind. His work will no doubt live forever and will continue to inspire many young scholars.

William J. Chambliss (born 1933, died 22 February 2014), criminologist and Professor of Sociology at George Washington University, US.

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