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Chambliss, William J.: Power, Conflict, and Crime

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A pioneer of conflict theory, William J. Chambliss's career spans 50 years of research on the problems and patterns of power in society. Through his studies of organized crime figures, opium farmers, gang members, pirates, and corrupt politicians, Chambliss demonstrated that conflict between social classes is the basic social process in a capitalist society—and the key to understanding criminal justice procedures and structures. Chambliss's primary contribution to conflict theory was to advance knowledge about who makes laws, how and why they are enforced, and the relationship between those who have power and those who do not. In an early work on the role that power plays in determining what people are the targets of law enforcement, Chambliss wrote: “Those people are arrested, tried and sentenced who can offer the fewest rewards for non-enforcement of the laws and who can be processed without creating any undue strain for the organizations which comprise the legal system” (1969, p. 84). Chambliss's power paradigm laid the groundwork for research on selective enforcement of laws, inspiring numerous studies of drugs, gangs, corporate wrongdoing, and state-organized crime.

Theoretical Foundation

Chambliss began his career in 1951 under the direction of Donald Cressey at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). In a 1983 interview with criminologist John Laub, Cressey remembered Chambliss as one of his “sociological children—people who drifted into my UCLA undergraduate classes in the 1950s and got turned on to sociology” (Laub, 1983, p. 163). Cressey had been Edwin Sutherland's graduate student at Indiana University and was an early advocate of differential association theory. As Cressey observed, “Sutherland said basically that, as a consequence of the industrial revolution, modern society is characterized by normative conflict” and individual reactions to that conflict are “shaped by culture” (Laub, 1983, p. 139). According to the differential association perspective, then, criminal behavior is learned through interpersonal contact with criminals—a social learning process that is modulated by the cultural context in which the associations occur.

Chambliss graduated from UCLA in 1955 and spent the next year working as a migratory farm laborer, hitchhiking from one labor camp to the next. Along the way, he

became familiar with America's skid rows and the down-and-outers who lived there. In 1957, acting on Cressey's advice to give up menial labor, Chambliss enrolled as a graduate student in the Sociology Department at Indiana University (IU).

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In his first year at Indiana, Chambliss took a class on the sociology of deviance taught by Alfred R. Lindesmith. During the post-war years, Lindesmith and Sutherland were symbolic interactionists without peer. Included among their graduate students were three future winners of the Sutherland Award, the American Society of Criminology's most coveted prize: Cressey (in 1967), Lloyd Ohlin (in 1969), and Albert Cohen (in 1993). (Lindesmith won the award in 1970.) Alfred Lindesmith is best known for his courageous research on opiate addiction. During the mid-1940s, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics waged a campaign to fire Lindesmith from Indiana University because the sociologist held views that were considered unpatriotic. By the time Chambliss became his student, Lindesmith had spent two decades fighting the government's drug-control policies. Lindesmith predicted that America's prohibition against narcotics would ultimately reinforce an illicit drug market, turning cities into war zones, creating overcrowded prisons, destroying millions of lives and costing the American public billions of dollars every year (Keys & Galliher, 2000).

"Lindesmith interviewed known opium addicts and searched an extensive literature for biographical and autobiographical accounts of opium addicts," Chambliss recalled in 1988. "Lindesmith researched questions implied by the conflict perspective, namely, why was the taking of heroin (and other such drugs) criminal? His research led him to conclude that anti-opium laws emerged as a result of political power struggles, bureaucratic machinations, and legislative attempts to raise taxes and supervise imports" (Chambliss, 1988, p. 166).

During his second year at Indiana University, Chambliss took the required graduate research methods course, also taught by Lindesmith. Chambliss later described the class as "very provocative, organized as it was around the philosophy of science. It dealt with the philosophy and logic of science and how you can avoid tautology in constructing theory, using George Herbert Mead and social psychology" (quoted in Keys & Galliher, 2000, p. 29). With Lindesmith serving as advisor, Chambliss's

master's thesis represented a sort of David versus Goliath sociology that questioned the administrative measures used to control automobile parking by faculty members on the IU campus. Why, Chambliss asked, did faculty members enjoy special parking privileges while students—who paid faculty salaries through tuition—were treated as second-class citizens? This questioning of why institutions are organized as they are, and why law has developed as it has, would become a trademark of Chambliss's research in the years ahead.

Yet Chambliss inherited an equally important research strategy from Lindesmith—namely, the predisposition to value personal contact, interchange, and argument with those he studied. This grounded theory approach is evident in Chambliss's doctoral dissertation, *The Selection of Friends*. Although his interests would vary in the coming years, Chambliss would never lose touch with the persons, faces, stories, and lives he came across in the pursuit of theory.

Early Work

Chambliss received his Ph.D. in 1962 and took a position in sociology at the University of Washington in Seattle. His early research interests concentrated on the dual themes of conflict theory and symbolic interactionism. An article in *Social Problems* on the history of vagrancy laws in England and the United States would establish the 31-year-old sociologist as a leading voice of conflict theory. In this article, Chambliss showed how vagrancy laws constituted a legislative innovation designed to provide an abundance of cheap labor to England's ruling class during a period when serfdom was breaking down and the pool of available labor was diminishing. The enforcement of vagrancy statutes was also one of the many ways criminal law was used to force ex-slaves to provide cheap labor for the agricultural, mining and industrial sectors of the U.S. Southern economy following the Civil War.

It was also in Seattle that Chambliss undertook a project that would take him far from the cloistered halls of academe. Posing as a truck driver, he began making nightly sojourns to Seattle's skid-row bars and gambling rooms where he interviewed bookmakers, drug dealers, prostitutes, heroin addicts, corrupt policemen, and well-

appointed bankers and city officials. These interviews would ultimately provide the basis for a series of groundbreaking works on vice and political corruption.

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Conflict Theory and Social Turbulence

By 1967, Cressey had moved to the University of California at Santa Barbara, where he became Dean of the College of Arts and Letters. Chambliss followed him there the same year and became an associate professor of sociology. These were tumultuous times marked by assassinations, urban riots, protests against the Vietnam War, rampant drug use, and cultural rebellion. It was also the heyday of the Black Power movement. In Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party called for militant resistance to racism and police brutality. Heavily influenced by the post-colonial philosopher Frantz Fanon, the Black Panthers held that ordinary blacks—"the brothers off the block," as Panther founder Huey P. Newton called them—were as important to the Panthers as the lumpen proletariat was to Karl Marx.

Conflict theory strongly reflected these social syncopations of the 1960s. Back in Indiana, Lindesmith was riding a wave of success brought on by *The Addict and the Law*, the crowning work of his career, thereby transforming himself into a public intellectual who attracted the attention of such countercultural lions as Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg (Keys & Galliher, 2000). In Santa Barbara, Chambliss was doing his thing by moving beyond the traditional conflict explanation of class to take on the issue of race. In his first book, *Crime and the Legal Process*, Chambliss argued that criminal transgressions of blacks are much more visible than those of white middle-class persons, thereby accounting for disproportionate arrest rates among African Americans. Despite his authorship of what was then considered an anti-establishment viewpoint on street crime, during this period Chambliss was appointed to President Richard M. Nixon's Commission on Violence.

This was followed by Chambliss's seminal text with Robert Seidman, *Law, Order, and Power*. It begins on this disquieting note:

We live on the edge of the abyss. Rarely in recent memory has society seemed to teeter so close to disaster. The economy roars out of control; international affairs threaten to overwhelm us; bureaucracy clasps us in its clammy embrace; politics becomes a theater of the absurd, and politicians, clowns. (Chambliss & Seidman, 1971, p. 1)

Impressive not only for its breadth of coverage—the authors covered topics ranging from state and stateless societies, semiotics, criminal and corporate law, to the application of Marxist dialectics to everyday problem solving—but *Law, Order, and Power* presented a challenge to the domain assumptions of law and social science. In so doing, Chambliss and Seidman advanced the conflict perspective beyond a Marxian discussion of law formation (i.e., laws reflect the interests of those who own and control the means of production) to an examination of the processes by which the interests of the rich and powerful are actually translated into law and administration.

Chambliss gave greater articulation to these ideas in four subsequent books published during his Santa Barbara years (Chambliss, 1973a, 1974, 1975; Chambliss & Ryther, 1975). He also brought to print his classic ethnographic study of street gangs: “The Saints and the Roughnecks.” In this often-cited work, Chambliss (1973b) unpacked the connections between social structure, perceptions of deviance, and the effect of labeling as a self-fulfilling prophesy. Chambliss concluded that “the impact on a person's life of labeling, stigma, and negative self-image is a powerful force in determining who we are and what we become. One lesson is inescapable: The less the intervention in the minor crimes of juveniles the better off they and society will be” (p. 31).

The first of his Seattle research came with *Boxman: A Professional Thief's Journal*, a book cut from the cloth of Sutherland's path-breaking work, *The Professional Thief*. Indeed, each edition of Sutherland and Cressey's *Criminology* published from 1974 onward would cite *The Professional Thief* and *Boxman* as the discipline's premier studies of professional theft.

By this point in his career, Chambliss had become a criminologist of international stature. In 1969 and 1970, he was a visiting professor of sociology at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. In 1970 and 1971, he was a visiting professor at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, the London School of Economics, and the University of Oslo

in Norway. Chambliss also returned to Seattle's skid row during these years, where he witnessed a fundamental change in the city's heroin market and the racketeering enterprises that supported it. In search of the story behind this change, in 1974 [p. 144 ↓] Chambliss visited Thailand where he interrogated the ways in which opium was being produced and trafficked from the Golden Triangle, through Asia, and into the United States.

On the Take

In the early 1970s, American popular culture discovered a new obsession: the gangster. This was due primarily to Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, based on Mario Puzo's novel of the same name. Released in 1972 to universal acclaim, the movie was rewarded with several Academy Awards, introduced into the American lexicon such unforgettable catchphrases as "I'll make him an offer he can't refuse," and established itself as the de facto gangster film to which all other applications of the genre would be compared. "Certainly there was immorality in the Mafia," reflected Marlon Brando, the film's legendary leading character. "But at heart it was a business.... It didn't operate much differently from certain multinational corporations. The Mafia may kill a lot of people, but while we were making the movie, CIA representatives were dealing drugs in the Golden Triangle, torturing people for information and assassinating them with far more efficiency than the Mob" (quoted in Kanfer, 2008, p. 248).

Chambliss would arrive at a similar conclusion. In 1975, he retreated to a cabin in the woods near Oslo, Norway, where he synthesized the Seattle research into a manuscript on organized crime. *On the Take: From Petty Criminals to Presidents* would be his most controversial work.

On the Take begins where Cressey's landmark *Theft of the Nation* leaves off. Yet Chambliss would distinguish himself from his former mentor in two important ways. First, he employed a different methodological approach. Whereas Cressey based his research on a deductive model of scientific inference, Chambliss approached the organized crime problem from an inductive perspective. "Going to the streets of the city rather than the records [Cressey's primary data source]," he speculated, "may bring the role of corruption and complicity between political, economic, and

criminal interests into sharp relief” (Chambliss, 1978, pp. 5–6). Second, *On the Take* is distinguished by its theoretical import. Following Cressey, Chambliss wrote that he was “prepared to find that [organized] crime was understandable in terms of people ... differentially associated with criminal behavior patterns” (1978, p. 7), yet he concluded that differential association theory was “shallow and unfruitful.” Instead, Chambliss argued that organized crime “is a political phenomenon which takes its character from the economic institutions that exist at a particular point in time” (1978, p. 8).

On the Take explores an intricate world of high-stakes poker games, secret meetings with major figures in the organized crime industry, midnight confessions of murder, and stories of bribery, sex for hire, and white slavery. Kilos of heroin pass through *On the Take* like coins through a slot machine. At one point, Chambliss travels to Florida where he interviews the notorious crime boss Meyer Lansky, who together with Charles “Lucky” Luciano was largely responsible for the Mafia's development of Las Vegas. At another point, Chambliss witnesses a police killing of a well-known heroin dealer and the disappearance of his cash and drug supply. At another, he fends off threats from wealthy members of the criminal underworld who have grown concerned that a “professor” was inquiring into things that were “none of his damn business.” And at still another point Chambliss is traipsing through the Golden Triangle interviewing CIA agents, Thai officials, poppy growers, and heroin smugglers.

Through his analysis of the international heroin distribution network, Chambliss made a major contribution to the organized crime literature. Cressey described organized crime leaders as part of an Italian-American Cosa Nostra who were socially segregated from mainstream society because they “do not have the social background and social graces which would make them eligible to participate [in the mainstream]” (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978, p. 270). Chambliss argued that the “Cosa Nostra” or the “Mafia” was simply a smokescreen for a more complex set of circumstances. He expanded Cressey's definitional envelope by differentiating between local, national, and international crime syndicates that are composed of people—from various ethnic backgrounds—who are actually resplendent with “social graces” and deeply integrated into legitimate social institutions. These people included financiers, businessmen, politicians, policemen and (in some respects [p. 145 ↓] least importantly) racketeers. In the end, Chambliss concluded that “a symbiotic relationship between politics, law enforcement, legitimate business, and organized crime [is] absolutely necessary for

organized crime to survive and flourish as it does in America” (Chambliss, 1978, p. 154).

State-Organized Crime

Chambliss returned to the United States in 1976 and became a professor of sociology at the University of Delaware. Recognizing a deficiency in the academy's outlets for critical scholarship, he became the founder and editor of *Contemporary Crises*. He also published two influential books on organized crime: *Organizing Crime* (coauthored with Alan Block) and *Whose Law? What Order?* (coauthored with Milton Mankoff). In addition to publishing dozens of book chapters and articles in journals throughout North America, Europe, India, and Africa, he also accepted visiting professorships at the University of Stockholm in Sweden, the Vienna Institute for Advanced Studies in Austria, and Columbia University in New York.

Yet the defining work of Chambliss's Delaware period was “On Lawmaking,” published by the *British Journal of Law and Society* in 1979. Here, Chambliss maintained that laws serve as temporary resolutions to conflicts that are rooted in structural contradictions. These contradictions, in turn, lead to visible and concrete disputes between groups, especially social classes. Political elites then face a dilemma in deciding how best to contain and diffuse the conflicts.

In search of historical examples of these structural contradictions, Chambliss went to London where he spent months poring over books and unpublished manuscripts at the British Museum, some of which dated back to the 16th century. This exercise led Chambliss to a study of pirating. Among his case studies, Chambliss discovered that in 1572 England's most famous pirate, Sir Francis Drake, sailed to Spain in a ship outfitted by wealthy businessmen seeking a return on their investment. Over the next 2 years, Drake attacked small ships and villages along the Spanish Main, ransacking supplies of gold and silver. He then joined forces with French pirates and ambushed a train carrying silver. After taking his cut of the bounty, Drake returned to England with enough gold and silver to support the government and all its expenses for a period of 7 years. The Spanish complained to the Queen about Drake's exploits, yet little was done to punish

him. Instead, Drake was rewarded with knighthood, wealth, and power (Chambliss, 1988).

Chambliss called this phenomenon *state-organized crime*—defined as “crimes committed by state or government officials in the pursuit of their job as representatives of the government” (1988, p. 327)—and broadened the list of illustrations to include government-sponsored death squads, illegal incarceration, and police brutality. Arguing that these types of crime are as essential to the study of criminology as mugging, robbery and white-collar crime, Chambliss inspired investigations into such state-organized crimes as air piracy by the Israeli government (Georges-Abeyie, 1991), government complicity in the U.S. savings and loan embezzlement scandal (Calavita et al., 1997), torture, human rights violations, and joint efforts between the CIA and organized crime to assassinate a world leader (Hamm, 1993, 1995, 2007).

The Drug War and the Ghetto Poor

In 1986, Chambliss took a post as professor and chair of the Sociology Department at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Two years later he became president of the American Society of Criminology. True to his iconoclastic style, Chambliss christened the annual ASC meeting “Crimes By and Against the State.” He opened his presidential address (see Chambliss, 1993) with a moment of silence for the victims of the Jewish Holocaust, an entirely appropriate act given that the date of his address was November 10, 1988—the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass. Chambliss set forth his theory of state-organized crime through lively discussions of pirates, opium smugglers, assassins, and Lt. Colonel Oliver North—who would soon be indicted on 16 felony counts related to his participation in the Iran-Contra scandal.

In 1989, Chambliss was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship and returned to Africa where he taught in the school of law at the University of Lusaka in Zambia. A city with serious water problems and epidemic rates of HIV/AIDS, Lusaka is home to one of the poorest populations on Earth. According [p. 146 ↓] to a 2007 United Nations report, half of Lusaka's 120,000 residents live on less than \$1 a day. Yet Chambliss discovered a special richness living in this afflictive environment. He became an avid collector of

wooden carvings made by the indigenous Bantu tribesmen and inspired scores of young impoverished law school students to pursue careers in community betterment.

Upon his return to Washington in 1991, Chambliss redirected his research interests toward the ghetto poor. The research moved along two fronts. First he began conducting an ethnographic study of police practices in D.C.'s poorest neighborhoods, participating in ride-alongs with a specialized riot squad called the Rapid Deployment Unit, or RDU. Within the Washington police force the RDU was known as the “Dirty Harrys” or as “very bad-ass individuals” (Chambliss, 1999, p. 64). Second, he began to amass census, crime, and prison population data, eventually gathering dozens of statistical tables. Chambliss introduced this research in his 1993 Presidential Address before the Society for the Study of Social Problems at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami, once a favored vacation retreat for Mob figures like Meyer Lansky, Lucky Luciano, and Sam Giancana. The irony of the location was not lost on the SSSP president.

Six years later the study was published in Chambliss's 15th book, *Power, Politics, and Crime*, described by Noam Chomsky on the book's flyleaf as “a wake-up call that is badly needed, offering insight and guidelines for people who care about their society, its serious flaws, and what it could become if citizens were to take the real issues into their own hands.” Drawing on his tables, Chambliss demonstrated to great effect how the panic over crime—especially the teenage “superpredatory” phenomenon—had been manufactured by the media, police officials, and the private prison industry. At the center of this campaign was inner-city African Americans who had become grist for the crime control industry. Moving to the human story behind his statistics, Chambliss presented results of the ethnographic study, offering such harrowing accounts of police brutality as this:

It is 10:25 at night when an undercover agent purchases \$50.00 of crack cocaine from a young black male.... We go immediately to the apartment [where the suspect lived], the police enter without warning with their guns drawn. Small children begin to scream and cry. The adults in the apartment are thrown to the floor, the police are shouting, the three women in the apartment are swearing and shouting, “You can't just barge in here like this.... Where's your goddamn warrant?” The suspect is caught and brought outside. [He] is sixteen years old.

[O]ne policeman says, “I should kick your little black ass for dealing that shit. You are a worthless scumbag, do you realize that?” Another officer asks, “What’s your mother’s name, son? My mistake ... she’s probably a whore and you are just a ghetto bastard. Am I right?” (1999, pp. 65–66)

Chambliss argued that such heavy-handed practices were caused by the over-policing of ghetto streets brought on by the war on drugs. He wrote that these practices are “the major factors contributing to the ghettoization of the African American community and the creation of an intractable class of abjectly poor.” Any chance for black families to achieve a normal life “is destroyed as the heart of the community is ripped out by the humiliation and degradation that law and law enforcement practices inflict on its young men and women” (1999, p. 76). Leaving no quarter, Chambliss concluded that the war on drugs has been a spectacular failure.

Summary

In 2004, Chambliss won the Sutherland Award for his research on conflict theory, making him the fifth Sutherland Award winner to come from IU's Sociology Department. In 2008, Chambliss was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Sociological Association—an award that has only been given to one other scholar. When asked if he had any advice for criminologists in a 2004 interview for the ASC's *Oral History Project*, Chambliss replied that criminologists should simply “scratch where it itches.”

Chambliss has certainly done that over the course of his long and distinguished career. Whether it was his analysis of race and crime, organized crime, state-organized crime, or the war on drugs, Chambliss's research was forged in the fires of [p. 147 ↓] prevailing social problems. In Cressey's words, Chambliss's work has always been “shaped by culture.”

A critical retrospective of that work may reveal a dual legacy, however. On one hand, Chambliss's research may be considered anachronistic—a throwback, if you will, to the Vietnam/Watergate era when politics was personal. These days, few criminologists

study organized crime, heroin smuggling, vice, political corruption, or professional theft. Drug policies are rarely challenged. Institutional Review Boards have made ethnographic research on criminal subcultures almost impossible to conduct. The ethical dilemmas raised by this type of research are typically perceived as too risky or potentially harmful in today's climate. In particular, ethnographic research that necessitates a researcher concealing one's true identity (as a researcher) is usually considered overly deceptive. In addition, ethnographers, by design, get "close" to the data, immersing themselves in the lives of their subjects. While this yields incredibly rich information, ethical questions can arise in terms of how deeply the ethnographer should become involved in the activities of the group they are studying. These activities are, after all, sometimes illegal. It has been years since advancements were made in the core principles of conflict theory. For better or worse, conflict theory has been subsumed by feminist, left realist, and cultural criminological perspectives.

But on the other hand, there is no doubt that Chambliss was remarkably prescient in his identification of double standards in the application of law and justice in capitalist societies. Today, as drug warriors continue to incarcerate thousands of poor African Americans each year, professional thieves on Wall Street ravage financial institutions with impunity, creating a worldwide economic catastrophe in the process. Meanwhile, opium smuggling in U.S.-occupied Afghanistan has reached record levels; stories of pirates pillaging maritime vessels off the coast of Somalia appear in the news with astonishing regularity; and gangs like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), the Bloods, and the Aryan Brotherhood are now investigated by the FBI as organized crime networks. More than ever, it seems, criminology may benefit from an interest in those people who make laws, how and why their laws are enforced, and the relationship between those who have power and those who do not.

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See also

- [Chambliss, William J.: The Saints and the Roughnecks](#)
- [Michalowski, Raymond J., and Ronald C. Kramer: State-Corporate Crime](#)

- [Pontell, Henry N., and Kitty Calavita: Explaining the Savings and Loan Scandal](#)
- [Sutherland, Edwin H.: The Professional Thief](#)
- [Turk, Austin T.: The Criminalization Process](#)

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