

Thinking About James Q. Wilson: Examining the Intellectual Contributions of One of the Greatest Criminal Justice Scholars

Brian Forst¹ Interviewed by Robert M. Worley²

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RW: Most criminologists know of James Q. Wilson as a controversial, conservative figure, and co-author (with George Kelling) of the infamous "Broken Windows" theory. Are they wrong to think of him that way?

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BF: No, they're not wrong. Wilson's work was indeed controversial – largely because of his strong conservative ideology. And his Broken Windows theory was far and away his most widely cited work, infamous especially among the community of criminologists. His work was controversial largely because it stood outside of conventional criminological thought, and far outside of liberal political orthodoxy. He was a political scientist by training, not a criminologist. Still, most of his research on policing was foundational. A serious scholar on law enforcement cannot ignore Wilson's research on the varieties of police behavior.

RW: I have always been intrigued by Wilson's discussion of the night watchman who would patrol the working-class neighborhoods but wouldn't really intervene unless it was absolutely necessary. Wilson was an amazing scholar of policing.

BF: But he was much more – arguably the most influential criminal justice scholar of the 20th century. He was a renowned public intellectual and prolific author of several best-selling books, including the classic textbook, *American Government* (now in its 17th edition), and hundreds of essays, which appealed more to a wide audience of practitioners and conservatives than to scholars, which only added to the controversy. His writings on styles of policing in the 1960s and on police bureaucracies in the 1970s established him as a preeminent scholar on law enforcement. His 1974 essay, "Crime and the Criminologists," on how criminologists discuss crime, was not just controversial, but game changing. Although it can't be proven, that essay -- which was later expanded into the book, *Thinking About Crime* -- may have contributed to the blossoming of much more academically diverse criminal justice programs in colleges and universities throughout the United States. His writings on the biological aspects of crime, on the moral sense, and the development of character were much more controversial still, receiving acclaim from the ideological right and even more ridicule from mainstream scholars and the left. His influence was felt in the several major commissions and panels on crime and justice on which he served.

RW: I agree.

BF: Less controversially, he was among the first scholars of the criminal justice system to stimulate field experimentation in criminal justice research. And he was an enthusiastic mentor and friend to many

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criminologists. He was president of the American Political Science Association in 1991-92, and was recognized for his extraordinary contributions to scholarship and public service in receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2003. And he wrote, against the grain of conservative orthodoxy, that research on crime and justice was a legitimate and effective public good, deserving of substantial federal funding, with results disseminated to practitioners.

RW: How did you come to know Wilson? What was your impression of him?

BF: I had read Wilson's work on policing and admired his lucid writing and outside-conventional-norms thinking. So, I was a fan when I first met him in the late 1970s. He joined the research advisory board of a large federal sentencing research project I was directing, under supervision of the Department of Justice, with criminologist Charles Wellford serving as project monitor. It was an amazing board, and Jim's insights and advice were extremely helpful. Along with Wilson were criminologists Don Gottfredson, Norval Morris, and Leslie Wilkins, legal scholars Alan Dershowitz and Marvin Frankel, and federal judges Harold Tyler and James Burns (Frankel was also a federal judge). As chairman of the board of the Police Foundation, Wilson was instrumental in my becoming research director of the Police Foundation in 1985. His editorial suggestions on my draft chapters on prosecution in each of his books on crime and public policy (1983, 1995, 2002, 2011) were always thoughtful, substantive, and generous. I found his curiosity and boyish enthusiasm to be highly contagious.

RW: That so cool to be able to have him influence and critique your academic work.

BF: Jim and I shared more than common interests in crime and justice. We both grew up in blue-collar Southern California homes, and my first awareness of him was a spot-on anthropological essay he had written for *Harpers* (December 1969) on the culture of high school life in North Long Beach. I grew up in the same culture just a few miles to the north, in Inglewood, and while he was on the faculties of UCLA and then Pepperdine, he lived in the hills above Zuma Beach, where I had been a lifeguard in the early 1960s. He was the son of an auto repair shop owner, and I was son of the foreman of a meatpacking plant. So, when I

drove him to the airport, we had more to talk about than just sentencing and policing.

When I wrote to congratulate him on receiving the Medal of Freedom award, he responded that the best part for him was the honor and good fortune of sitting on the stage next to the revered UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden.

RW: What did this research project on sentencing reveal?

BF: The Department of Justice commissioned the Institute for Law and Social Research to conduct a study to establish the need for federal sentencing guidelines and provide a foundation for their development. We found substantial variation in sentencing philosophies and practices among the 264 federal judges studied. At one end, 25% of the judges considered rehabilitation to be "extremely" important, while at the other end 19% regarded rehabilitation to be no more than "slightly" important, and the latter group tended to give much tougher sentences than the former group. The research made a strong case for sentencing guidelines both to reduce unwarranted variation in sentences and to more effectively serve the primary purposes of sentencing: justice and protection of the community. It also speaks to an issue raised in the recent confirmation hearings of Ketanji Brown Jackson: judicial philosophy really does affect judicial decision making.

RW: Interesting. What was your impression of Wilson's approach to scholarly inquiry?

BF: Well, his experience as a two-time national college debate champion helped him to frame issues in a direct, often provocative, and usually compelling way. His doctoral studies at the University of Chicago under Edward Banfield, teaching at Harvard and UCLA, and associations with top scholars everywhere exposed him to a wide range of ideas. But I think that his hands-on approach is what made him such a remarkable scholar. He was no ordinary political scientist. He was cut more in the eclectic mold of the German sociologist-historian-jurist-political economist, Max Weber, whose path-breaking research on bureaucracy paved the way for Wilson and others. Wilson encouraged researchers at the Police Foundation to conduct field experiments on policing: proactive vs reactive patrol strategies in Kansas City, foot patrols and other forms of community policing in Newark and Houston, and the police response to domestic violence cases in Minneapolis. He loved

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talking to cops in ride-alongs to better understand policing directly and experientially. He worked to educate the public on the essentials of the criminal justice system and policy, as exemplified by his 38-episode "Crime File" series, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice in the mid-1980s.

RW: Some social conservative criminologists tend to claim James Q. Wilson as one of their own. Yet, there seems to be much more to him than being merely a conservative ideologue. What are your thoughts?

BF: Wilson was on the editorial boards of the conservative journals, *Commentary* and *The Public Interest*, and a frequent contributor to both. He describes his conversion from having voted for John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Hubert Humphrey in the 1960s to conservative thinking not long afterward in a *Wall Street Journal* tribute to Irving Kristol, founder of *The Public Interest*, after Kristol's death. He writes that Kristol's concern about the unintended consequences of social policy was especially influential. Thus, Wilson argued in 1985 that the strong unemployment-crime association does not imply the need for a jobs program to reduce crime, that employment policy should be independent of criminal justice policy. (Cook & Wilson, 1985)

RW: Aww, sounds like he may have been pretty conservative.

BF: But he was much more than a conservative ideologue. He was an extraordinarily scholar, an avid reader, unusually broad thinker, collaborator, and prolific writer. He's best known for his research on policing and the epistemology of crime, but he's written much more on crime and justice. The year after his research on unemployment and crime with Phil Cook, he published a book with criminologists David Farrington and Lloyd Ohlin proposing a research strategy of understanding offender behavior through longitudinal analysis. (Farrington, Ohlin & Wilson, 1986) His *City Politics*, coauthored with his mentor, Edward Banfield, was a tour de force, describing urban politics as a system driven primarily by informal influence rather than official process – a cultural conflict between those interested in efficiency and impartiality and those favoring influence and self-interest. There is much more. To get a more comprehensive view of Wilson's work on crime and justice, the interested reader might check out "James Q. Wilson" in the *Oxford Bibliographies on Criminology* (2013).

RW: Interesting.

BF: Yes. Wilson's long-time Harvard colleague and later Democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynahan once took Wilson to the Nixon White House and said, "Mr. President, James Q. Wilson is the smartest man in the United States. The president of the United States should pay attention to what he has to say." (George Will, 2012)

RW: Do you have a sense that his conservatism got the better of his scholarly objectivity?

BF: For the most part, no. He asked tough questions, especially when findings went against prevailing conservative thought, but in my experience he always accepted such findings in his edited volumes. I heard the same from others, occasionally in print (e.g., Sherman, 2012). In his later years, his conservative ideology may have trumped his objectivity, as when he wrote a sharply worded dissent to a National Academy of Sciences commission on firearms and violence: "In sum, the evidence presented by Lott and his supporters suggests that Right to Carry laws do in fact help drive down the murder rate, though their effect on other crimes is ambiguous." The other members of the commission reviewed the same evidence and concluded that Lott's research was seriously flawed, and no systematic evidence of such a relationship existed. (NAS, 2005)

RW: Could you speak a bit more about James Q. Wilson's 1974 essay -- its significance and why it was controversial? Has it aged well?

BF: In that essay, Wilson criticized the way criminologists thought about crime, arguing that their approach was unscientific, unsupported either by coherent theory of systematic evidence, and of little or no value to criminal justice practitioners. Over the decades that followed, criminology became more rigorous, thanks largely to an abundance of data, vastly greater computing power, and the use of more sophisticated empirical tools. So, no, it would be hard to make the same case today that Wilson made nearly 50 years ago.

RW: You say his book, *Thinking About Crime*, contributed to more academically eclectic criminal justice programs. How so? Can you give us examples?

BF: His "Thinking About Crime" essay, a chapter in his book with the same title, was about the epistemology of crime, not about crime itself. It

sharply criticized the sociological orientation of criminology of the time. Wilson was no fan of sociology, characterizing it as an echo chamber of leftist dogma, devoid of rigorous scientific information or practical relevance for the criminal justice system. In the essay, he argued that economists had been using more theoretically coherent, empirically supported, and policy-relevant models for dealing with crime, mostly following theories of rational incentives and deterrence, and community protection through incapacitation. His characterizations of sociologists and economists were grossly cartoonish -- much of traditional criminology is both rigorous and useful, and much of the economics of crime has been ideologically driven and has not held up to rigorous scrutiny -- but not totally off base. I think it was no mere coincidence that in the years that followed criminology and criminal justice programs throughout the land broadened their faculties to include economists, psychologists, statisticians, engineers, and scholars of public administration and industrial organization. Criminology curricula that had traditionally been nestled exclusively in sociology departments expanded during the 1980s and '90s into schools of criminal justice, public administration, and public affairs. I say this as a trained statistician who joined a school of public affairs in 1992 and served 25 years there. This change might have eventually happened on its own, but there can be little question that Wilson's essay and book on how to think about crime accelerated the evolution.

RW: What do you think Wilson's position would be on our current state of affairs?

BF: One can only speculate, as Jim can't speak from the grave. But all of his writings, even the most doctrinaire, revealed first and foremost his strong moral sense, love of democracy, respect for good government, and passion for public policies informed by the best available scientific evidence. He wrote compellingly of the four pillars of the moral sense: sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty. Not loyalty. Not fealty to a person. There can be no question that Wilson today would be aligned with former Republicans and never-Trumpers. His sense of decency, integrity, and principled action would have put him in about the same place as Michael Gerson and Lincoln Project founders Steve Schmidt and Rick Wilson. I am very sorry that he is not here to speak out for himself on today's threats to democracy, both at home and abroad. We could use his clear and convincing voice in these dark and turbulent times.