

Charles Crothers: A Tribute

Cluny Macpherson*

Charles Crothers was a gentleman, in all senses of the word, and a productive scholar. He was also fortunate. Early in life, he became fascinated by human society and, at about the same time, found a discipline which allowed him to explore and teach about human society. Those interests kept him engaged and passionate until the end of his life. Unlike many whose interest and any passion for work ends with their last salary payment, Charles was still thinking, writing, and planning new projects the week he died.

He discovered sociology as an undergraduate at Victoria University in Wellington where he completed an honours degree and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in 1978, while working as a junior lecturer. Apart from a brief period at the Town and Country Planning Division of the Ministry of Works, he spent the rest of his life in academic roles around the world. He joined sociology at the University of Auckland in 1982 and spent 13 years there as a lecturer and senior lecturer, he spent six years as Professor at the University of Natal in Durban, South Africa and 19 years as a Professor at the Auckland University of Technology from which he retired as Emeritus Professor in 2019. In between these appointments, he held visiting appointments at universities in Oregon in the United States of America, Graz in Austria, Sussex in the United Kingdom, and the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. Even after retiring as Emeritus Professor, he was invited to visit universities and was giving seminars in Milan, Italy earlier this year.

He was a prodigious scholar and published four books on Robert K. Merton, whose work had impressed him during his undergraduate studies; one on social structure, which he believed was essential to any reasonable understanding of society and one on sociology in New Zealand, for which he was a passionate advocate. He wrote for and edited 11 special issues of journals in a determined attempt to bring research material together and stimulate debate and dialogue around issues which he considered important.

Charles authored and co-authored 109 articles in local and international journals. However, unlike many scholars who confine their research and publication to a narrow area, Charles published on issues in development, political science, medicine, psychology, psychiatry, law, the history and sociology of science, methodology, and intercultural education. Who else but Charles could boast a CV which contained articles on *The frequency and incidence of low back pain/sciatica in an urban population of New Zealand*, to *Subjugation of bodies: The historical sociology of total institutions in New Zealand*. While New Zealand society was his passion, it did not constrain him: his CV also contains journal articles on the state of Austrian sociology and on justice, pollution, inequality, and its consequences in South Africa.

He also wrote 45 chapters in books and encyclopaedias on a similarly wide range of topics from the very esoteric *Sztompka's analysis of Merton's writings: A description and some criticisms* to the very grounded *Parameters of community development in New Zealand: An Auckland case study*.

* Cluny Macpherson is Professor Emeritus at Massey University, School of People, Environment and Planning.
Email: themacphersons@gmail.com

Despite this impressive record, Charles recently mentioned that he wished he had started earlier and had covered more issues than he had. I had to remind him that he might well have published more had he not stopped to help every community group that ever came to his office and asked him for help with a social survey. As long as groups were trying to better understand their community and how they could bring about change, Charles was there for them. I remember working with him on various research projects and planning meetings only to find that Charles had to rush off to help some play group gather and analyse information for an overdue application for funding. As often as not, he then wrote their reports and helped with their funding applications!

But if he was concerned about the significance of his work, he should not have been. It has been translated into Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, French and German. He was appointed to the boards of national and international sociological associations and to editorial boards of both local and international journals within the discipline. Perhaps the most significant recognition of his work came, fortunately, earlier this year when he was awarded the Robert K. Merton Medal by the International Sociological Association at its annual meeting. At the same time, he received a heartfelt message from Merton's colleague and widow, Harriet Merton, whom Charles respected, thanking him for all his work on extending understanding and appreciation of her husband's work.

In 2021, in what passed for retirement, and after a period editing the Royal Society's *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences*, Charles decided that there was a gap in the publication of certain sorts of research in Aotearoa and instead of moaning and moving motions at AGMs, he simply went ahead and launched his own journal *Aotearoa/New Zealand Journal of Social Issues* and became its founding editor.

One of Charles' most significant contributions to the academy was the energy which he invested in his students: he took on any project which promised a better understanding of society. When Charles took students on, non-completion was not an option. His advice was always frank, and his editing was not always the most patient or tactful, but his perseverance was legendary.

Another contribution was Charles' collegiality. His preference for cooperation over confrontation led him to spend a lot of time looking for solutions and compromises in departmental and university matters in which no one was hurt unnecessarily. He was generous with support for colleagues. Many of us recall Charles' ability to locate and copy or, more recently, forward links to anything that he thought might help us in our own work. He was always willing to read and comment on drafts and was the first to congratulate colleagues when their work was published, or their achievements were recognised. All of those students and colleagues who went to Charles for advice know that his frankness, and occasional impatience, was only ever intended to get the best from those who sought his help.

While his record of research, teaching and publication is broad ranging, it is bound together by, and reflects his lifelong commitment to four things: an empirically driven analysis of society, to exposing the consequences of social and economic inequality, a commitment to social justice, and concern with the betterment of humanity. His contribution to scholarship is much greater than he believed and will endure longer than he may have anticipated.