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The Contentious Social Interactionism of Charles Tilly

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Charles Tilly, who died in 2008 just before reaching the age of 79, was one of the great historical sociologists of the last half century. Along with Theda Skocpol, Michael Mann, and a few others, he carried out a revolution in our understanding of social movements, revolutions, the rise and effects of the modern state, and social conflict or public contention generally. Here I will focus on how Tilly, especially in his later work, converged with modern microsociology. Tilly's emphasis on identities, performances, and repertoires resembles a much more historically rooted Goffman; Tilly's concern for the mechanisms and dynamics of contention shows us a world as processual and as interactionally constructed as that of latter-day symbolic interactionists, although rather more conflictual.

This was not how he started out. As a student of Pitirim Sorokin and George Homans at Harvard in the 1950s, Tilly steered clear both of the Durkheim-and-Weber synthesis coming from Talcott Parsons, and of the symbolic interactionists, who at that time were associated with Chicago and the West. Tilly reminisces that his major influence was neo-Marxist "history from below," especially Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, and George Rudé digging up traditional pre-1789 forms of rebellion and the formation of modern working-class culture. From the 1960s onward, Tilly and a growing movement of historical sociologists have dug deeply into many countries' historical archives; but instead of fragmenting into specializations, as have so many scholarly fields, social movement research has consistently made comparisons and theoretical syntheses of its results. Social movements has been one of the most successful fields of the past 40 years, moving the

theoretical front several times, from resource mobilization theory in the 1970s, through political opportunity structure in the 1990s, to a current emphasis on culture, process, and action. Following Tilly's lead, the field has burst its boundaries and become a general theory encompassing revolution, democratization, nationalism, and other forms of state-centered conflict.

Social movements might be regarded as meso-level sociology, but Tilly has made it a crucial vantage point both upward into a theory of the state, and downward into a micro-level of performances in contentious encounters. I will skimp on the state theory, only noting the key point that modern state penetration into society had the effect that protest from below became shaped by the new structure of centralized politics at the top. In the period between 1760 and 1830, both in England, and more intermittently in France, the modern social movement was invented. Whereas protests in traditional society were local, spasmodic, and short-lived, state penetration and centralization created a new target for popular demands, and new resources for mobilizing to achieve them. State apparatus at the national level increasingly became the target for movements which carried out long-term campaigns, based on their own special-purpose organizations, and mounting collective drives from around the country aimed at influencing or even overthrowing and taking control of the center for their own purposes. This would not have been possible in a traditional regime; there simply was not enough of a center that could do anything for them, and the infrastructure of communications and transportation was not yet in place for a national protest organization to operate.

Marx and Engels famously said that the capitalist system was creating its own gravediggers, by assembling workers in factories where they could organize. This proved to be only partially true; analogously, Tilly argues that the centralizing, society-penetrating state created its own gravediggers, by generating the means through which movements could be mobilized to contest control of the state.

Much of the research has been on the meso- and micro-levels. Tilly and his research groups have assembled collections of thousands of episodes, drawing on contemporary accounts, during the transition to the modern social movement. Contemporaries called them "riots" or "disturbances," but Tilly and his colleagues have rejected the terms as vague and biased; he eventually came to call them "contentious gatherings," and their larger dynamics make up a field called "contentious politics." On the micro-level, these are performances, very much in keeping with Goffman's dramaturgy of everyday life, a point I will expand on below.

One sees evidence of this performative character because for a given historical period, contentious gatherings have a standard repertoire, recognized both by the protesters and by their targets and audiences (Tilly 2002, 2005, 2006). Thus in England around 1760 (and in the rebellious American colonies) the repertoire featured seizing food during shortages from allegedly hoarding or overpricing merchants; looting or destroying the houses of offensive individuals, including local officials; breaking windows; fighting with authorities such as customs collectors who attempted to stop smugglers, or military recruiters, or gamekeepers; liberating prisoners from jails and public executions; tarring and feathering and donkeying (riding on a rail or sawhorse) an individual while pelting him with garbage (the reader may remember instances of this on the nineteenth century American frontier in *Huckleberry Finn*). Although often violent, these performances were limited in scope, and differed greatly from the repertoires of twentieth century riots

(such as looting and burning a commercial district, suicide bombings, or self-immolation). These early performances were largely communicative, a means of giving voice to well-understood demands, even if those demands were rejected. Street theatre was prominent, in the form of hanging an opponent in effigy, often in symbolic and allusive form (such as hanging a boot to represent Lord Bute, the secretary of state). Demonstrations in favor of a popular hero involved illuminating the windows of a town by putting up candles, under the penalty of having one's windows broken if one did not join in, plus ceremonies displaying colors, ribbons, flowers, or planting liberty trees. The point was to make one's point; the authorities usually got it, and made their countermove accordingly.

Communicative performances continued into the 1820s and 30s, but they were becoming organized into a recognizable version of the modern social movement. Instead of local episodes, there was now a campaign, a coordinated series of episodes making similar collective claims, planned by special-purpose organizations. The standard repertoire included public meetings, announced for a particular time and place, thus challenging the authorities and providing a focal point for rallying farflung supporters; petition drives, culminating in a procession to present the long list of names to the authorities; street demonstrations, marches, and vigils. The central message of a demonstration, Tilly holds, is to communicate what he calls WUNC: that is to say, the movement designs its performances to display that it is Worthy (good, decorous, deserving people), Unified (displaying the same colors, badges, slogans, marching in ranks, singing together), Numerous (displaying how large is the group they represent by sheer mass of participants, numbers of signatures), and Committed (showing their resolve by the hardships they are willing to undergo). This organizational structure, with its somewhat shifting repertoire of performances, has remained constant from the 1820s through today, as it has been adapted to many

different causes and spread around the world. Throughout this period, the underlying motifs are always to display WUNC. Thus the social movement, although it may resort to various forms of coercion and threat, is basically an effort at moral suasion: by showing WUNC it both appeals to others to join and support it, and legitimates itself in the eyes of the authorities who are expected to turn the state apparatus to fulfilling its aims.

On the whole, Tilly argues, the social movement form spread because it is a successful and effective mode of modern politics. Tilly acknowledges that the effectiveness of social movements is hard to measure; large numbers of demonstrations over long periods of time may take place before a goal is reached (such as the goal of ending slavery, one of the earliest social movement aims, beginning in the 1760s), and some goals are never reached (such as establishing socialism). Researchers concentrate on enumerating contentious gathering events and charting their changing repertoires, because that is a much more doable task than calculating the conditions for movement success and failure. Tilly takes the middle ground between narrative history and the quantitative demographics of large data collections. He incorporates both but places the emphasis on mechanisms which are visible on the interactional level—the dynamics of contentious gatherings. Participants in social movements tell narratives about themselves (as worthy, oppressed, defenders of long-standing ideals) and their opponents (representatives of long-standing evils). But Tilly stresses the importance of not getting trapped in participants' rhetoric; although a movement, for instance in the Chiapas region of Mexico in the 1990s, may claim to continue indigenous resistance against colonialism going back to the time of the Spanish *conquistadors*, the narrative itself is produced by Spanish-descent students from the elite national university, using fundraising techniques that draw on international support, and leading up to a successful march to meet oppositional government politicians in the capital city. Tilly (2002) points out that the

narrative is from a repertoire that became standardized in England around 1820—not in the conquest of Mexico in the 1500s—and that the aim is largely to present WUNC rather than carry out traditional modes of local rebellion.

Narrative is a Goffmanian performance engaging in impression management. Narratives are simplistic, a record of the doings of good guys and bad guys, moving onward to victory or defeat. In social reality, Tilly notes, most processes have unanticipated consequences, cumulative and indirect effects, and the borderline between one movement and others is less a matter of clear-cut identities than an ongoing construction of boundaries for tactical purposes of the moment.

Epistemologically and methodologically, Tilly situates himself on a middle ground between phenomenological individualism—the meanings that individuals carry in their heads—and holistic analysis of social structures. Social reality is relational, he emphasizes; performances are carried not by individuals but by groups, and the repertoire itself shapes what they can choose to do at any given moment, indeed shapes both the protesting and their targets' responses. This is not so much a matter of cultural imperatives, norms, or codes, but the way people act pragmatically in situations: a controversy arises, there are certain forms by which this has been handled in the past, and whatever innovations are made are chained to the repertoires coming down from the past. Tilly's approach sounds like that of Dewey and other pragmatists, including symbolic interactionists, although these are not Tilly's intellectual ties and he converges more than explicitly allies with them. At one point, he and his coauthors (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) criticized their own prior theory of political opportunity structures which facilitate movements mobilizing from below, on the grounds that threats and opportunities do not exist objectively but depend on how people collectively interpret and respond to them. The words could have been written by Blumer, and resonate with the Thomas Theorem on the definition of the situation.

There is virtually never any explicit reference to symbolic interactionism or other microsociology, except for an occasional mention of discourse analysis, perhaps because that is closer to the “cultural turn” which became prominent in historical sociology in recent decades. As a pragmatist of intellectual life, I say there is little use in getting into the ritualism of priority claims; different intellectual networks may well find their way to a similar position by different paths, and backward-looking quarrels over “who said it first” are less desirable than forward-looking efforts of “where do we go from here?”

Notice what has converged and what has not: Tilly’s camp has come around to a very strong emphasis on the interactional or relational quality of contentious politics, and on process and the fluid construction of all apparent entities or actors. What they have not converged with is the micro-level of analysis and research, nor with the recent concern for emotional and embodied action. We see the difference, and the opportunity for further cooperation on this front, in Tilly et al.’s recent concern for mechanisms.

Tilly and colleagues (McAdam et al. 2001) reject the argument, made prominent by post-modernist skepticism, that everything is irreducibly local and particular and can only be told as a narrative of events. Instead, since there is no uniform path that social movements follow on the macro-level, theoretical regularities must be found on the level of mechanisms, not grand narratives of the direction of history. Movements which start out the same can turn out very differently; some grow while others fragment; some turn violent while others are only mildly transgressive or stay contained in institutionalized formulas; some shift to the extremes while others converge on the moderate middle. Tilly et al. want a theory of turning points. Hence the previous theoretical repertoire of social movement theory must be reconstructed; larger processes such as mobilization are to be taken apart into component processes on a more interactional level of analysis. The authors locate a number of

“robust” mechanisms, i.e., recurring processes found in a wide variety of conflicts, including polarization, scale shift from local to generalized and interlinked action, network brokerage, shift in objects of attack, and certification or decertification of actors as legitimate or illegitimate. The crucial mechanism among these is that which brings about emergent identities—actor construction or category formation.

Here the theoretical language becomes positively Goffmanian. Actors take action in contentious politics in the name of identities; they “put on a performance of mutual public claim making by paired identities” (McAdam et al. 2001:137). In this explicitly theatrical view, actors rely both on past repertoires and situational improvisation. Moreover, WUNC itself is not only a performance but a deliberate illusion: “contingent assemblages of social networks manage to create the illusion of determined, unified, self-motivated political actors, then...act publicly as if they believed that illusion” (McAdam et al. 2001:159).

Would we get anything out of pushing the connection to Goffmanian microsociology explicitly? I suggest three lines of development. First, classic Goffmanian analysis tells us where to look for the mechanisms which affect successful or unsuccessful impression management: teams, region behavior, discrepant roles, communication out of character, the microtechniques of impression management, or face-work. To be sure, Goffman was mainly concerned with individuals and very small group relations, where solidarity is signaled and enacted often by subtle tie-signs; enacting collective identity is much more blatant, much less subtle. Both individuals and movements have backstages that facilitate their frontstages; for an institutionalized social movement, their backstage is the social movement organization. This has mainly been analyzed in terms of a material resource base for sustaining the movement. Adding a Goffman angle brings out a possible difference: whereas on the individual level of everyday life many or most persons during their backstage moments feel some disjunction from their frontstage selves, social

movements become so attached to their idealized frontstage identities that they rarely have moments of self-reflection on the myth they are creating. This may be a reason why full-time movement politicians take on a brittle character of seeming not-quite-real, except in the eyes of their dedicated partisans. Individuals (at least modern ones) tend to identify their sense of self much more with their backstage; social movements appear to identify almost entirely with the frontstage (although Bolshevik organizational tactics may have made this more complicated through multi-level manipulation of stages [Selznick 1960]). Maybe the successful movements are the unreflective ones, and the precedence of backstage in a movement's consciousness is a sign, or cause, of failure. These are researchable points.

Second, given Goffman's concern with rankings across status and class, his analysis of the micro-mechanisms of deference and demeanor may become less important in situations of collective conflict, especially rebellious ones. But what some kinds of contentious movements dramatize is precisely the breaking of previous signs of deference, and thus there is a whole dimension of the symbolic repertoire which does not merely claim WUNC but has more of the quality of middle-finger-in-your-face challenges. These kinds of non-WUNC performances appear to have become more prominent in the movement repertoire in recent decades, which raises the question of the conditions under which the idealized WUNC movement identity is performed rather than something else.

Third, for Tilly the motivation of WUNC is strategic. It is the most reasonable way that movement self-performances should be made if they are to win or at least prosper. Here his work seems to me overly rationalistic and cognitive in its underlying assumptions. Like the broad trajectory of modern social movement researchers, Tilly does not like to see collective action as "expressive" or even as emotional, and solidarity itself is rejected as an explanation of what movements do (McAdam et al. 2001:147;

for the rationalistic side, cf. 139). But Tilly's concern for turning points so far has begged the question of what actually happens at a turning point; broad mechanisms like brokerage or polarization, which do or do not move toward greater growth or greater militancy, etc., point to where the crucial processes are taking place, but leave blank what actually happens there. Here I would argue that very micro interactions make the difference. A key feature of interaction ritual theory are the micro-conditions that determine whether an interaction ritual succeeds or fails in generating solidarity, energy, and commitment to collective symbols; and this happens above all as an emotional process which either takes off or peters out (Collins 2004). Extremely detailed micro research can help here; for instance Klusemann (forthcoming) shows by use of video recordings that micro-interactional moves constitute the turning point in whether an ethnic cleansing massacre happens or not.

All this is only to say that the interactionist tendency in Tilly's intellectual trajectory still has much potential for the future. His life is a triumph of work linking macro and meso levels of analysis; the micro link is still to come.

Tilly wrote 50 books and hundreds of articles. Inevitably, there is a certain amount of repetition and overlap. What would I recommend for those who want the quintessential Tilly? The best statement of his theory of the state arena creating the conditions for the social movement is *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (1995), especially if read along with Mann's *Sources of Social Power*, volume 2 (1993). A good theoretical summary from a collection of Tilly's papers is *Stories, Identities and Political Change* (2002). For the sheer pleasure of seeing Tilly the social historian at work with his colorful writing and entertaining detail: *The Contentious French* (1986). And for his best micro-interactional performance: *Contentious Performances* (2008). Tilly died shortly after finishing the draft of this book. That, surely, is going out at the top.

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