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REVIEW ESSAYS

Charles Tilly Takes Three Giant Steps from Structure Toward Process: Mechanisms for Deconstructing Political Process

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On the patio strategically located between the bar and the swimming pool at an otherwise respectable beachfront hotel on the Island of Crete, a group of Charles Tilly's collaborators, coauthors, followers, and former students began a conversation that might yet lead to a defensive (or reactive) mobilization in response to a clear and present danger—the threat of an academic challenge. At that point, in October of 2002, the voice of protest was muted, but the perception of threat was clear: “What do they expect us to do? Forget everything that we have been doing and start all over again?” As a nonparticipating observer in this study of micro-mobilization, I asked the participants what they were talking about. “They” it turns out were Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly (2001). What they were doing to us was clear to everyone but me. “Read *Dynamics of Contention*,” the ring leader exhorted. “Then you can see for yourself.”

So I did, and I discovered that it was true. “They” (later identified as “McTeam.” See Tilly forthcoming) make no effort to conceal their challenge (see Polletta 2002). In reply to critics, they proclaim their goal: “to persuade students of political struggle, especially postgraduate students, that they could do better descriptive and explanatory work by attending to causal analogies between the phenomena they were examining and other sorts of contentious politics” (Tilly forthcoming). Clearly, they wish to steal our students (yours and mine) and, together with their collaborators, to sound the death knell of resource mobilization and political process theories. They have already succeeded in convincing Jeff Goodwin (Associate Professor) and Julie Stewart (graduate student), who declare, a bit too eagerly, “Today, political process theory is dead” (Goodwin and Stewart 2003:351).

We, the aging advocates of resource mobilization and political process approach-

Stories, Identities, and Political Change, by **Charles Tilly**. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. 255 pp. \$79.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-74251-8817. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 0-74251-8825.

The Politics of Collective Violence, by **Charles Tilly**. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 276 pp. \$65.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-521-82428-1. \$23.00 paper. ISBN: 0-521-53145-4.

Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650–2000, by **Charles Tilly**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 320 pp. \$60.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-521-83008-7. \$22.00 paper. ISBN: 0-521-53713-4.

es to the study of social movements and social change, are being challenged by our leaders, most particularly, by Charles Tilly, whose last three books he frames for me as follows, “Revisiting problems I was dealing with in structurally reductionist ways when you were a student [1975–1982]: (1) Where do political actors come from?; (2) What causes violent conflict?; (3) What is the relationship between struggle and democratization?; (4) How do state transformations and the development of capitalism affect all of the above?” (personal communication, 19 July 2003).

Leaving aside the question of whether his early works are, in fact, plagued by structural determinism, here we shall consider how effectively Tilly resolves these four issues in his latest works, and how these efforts might provide opportunities and threats, particularly to those of us interested in the analysis of social movements and social change. Briefly, I will suggest that Tilly answers the first question in *Stories, Identities, and Political Change*: political actors emerge from social

relationships. He addresses the second issue in *The Politics of Collective Violence*: violent conflict stems from relationships that may or may not be primarily violent. Tilly answers the third question in *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650–2000*: the relationship between struggle and democracy is interactive, contingent, and indeterminant. The fourth question lurks in the background of all three books. It is fairly clear that the relationship is interactive, reciprocal, and contingent, but the nature of those contingent relationships, mechanisms, and processes changes as Tilly shifts attention from identities to violence to democracy.

Stories, Identities, and Political Change (Tilly 2002) is a collection of previously published papers that were adapted and supplemented with opening and closing remarks to produce a general response to philosophical and disciplinary challenges associated with “the cultural turn” or “the postmodern moment” or the virulent anti-empiricist, anti-structuralist, or anti-positivist ravings in opposition to Social Science History and its step-child, the Cliometricians.

Here, Tilly deals with the larger philosophical issues of ontology (the unbearable metaphysics of being) and epistemology (getting to know U.) that even we teachers of theory tend to ignore in practice. To avoid intellectual nosebleed, he frames this discussion in stories and in the problem that we social scientists face in confronting the standard stories that derelict students, aspiring revolutionaries, successful journalists, and even historians offer. After dispensing with reductionists, deconstructionists, and structural determinists, Tilly champions relational analyses. “At least in principle, they offer the promise of treating standard stories not as descriptions or explanations of social processes but as changing, contingent *products* of social interaction” (Tilly 2002:34, emphasis in original). Thus Tilly concedes that reality is socially constructed and emergent. “Most social processes involve cause-effect relations that are indirect, incremental, unintended, collective, and/or mediated by the nonhuman environment” (ibid., 35).

Ultimately, Tilly suggests that we should enlighten our nonprofessional (especially undergraduate) students with “superior stories” that might prepare them to critically evaluate the conventional wisdom. For our

professional (graduate student) audience, however, we should focus on “nonstory processes . . . in which intentions, awareness, and deliberated action take place in tight interdependence with social processes that are not immediately visible to social movement participants” (ibid., 41). Thus, we need to move beyond stories into the analysis of processes and the relationships and mechanisms that constitute these processes. And so, Tilly turns to political identities and contention, both viewed as relationships, that interact “in tight interdependence with social processes” that constitute political change.

Identities are socially constructed. Out of routine social transactions, accumulated expectations and obligations yield ties, and networks emerge from tied triads. Categories that are socially salient to the point where they entail ties (obligations) and engender networks become groups. Although Tilly suggests that transactions beget ties and networks, while categories beget groups, he does not impose a strict developmental model. Instead, he explains, “An identity is simply the social experience of one of these elements, coupled with public representation of that experience” (ibid., 49). One of the things that social movement organizers do is to construct political identities and mobilize people so identified to engage in collective action. As Tilly explains, “A *political identity* is an actor’s experience of a shared social relation in which at least one of the parties—including third parties—is an individual or organization controlling concentrated means of coercion” (ibid., 61, emphasis in original).

These political identities are emergent and contested. As Tilly explains:

- (1) Political identities are relational and collective;
- (2) they therefore alter as political networks, opportunities, and strategies shift;
- (3) the validation of political identities depends on contingent performances to which other parties’ acceptance or rejection of asserted claims is crucial;
- (4) their validation both constrains and facilitates collective action by those who share the identity; and
- (5) deep differences separate political identities embedded in routine social life from those that appear chiefly in public life. (ibid., 66–77)

In “Contentious Voices” and “Political Change” (parts III and IV), Tilly develops preliminary sketches of the analyses of violence, contention, and democracy that clearly build on earlier work but also point toward the future.

The Politics of Collective Violence (Tilly 2003b) is, as Tilly describes it, “a fairly straightforward application of the DOC [*Dynamics of Contention*] analytical program” (personal communication, 19 July 2003). Tilly explains that this work marks a major change from his earlier efforts, first, because he concedes that violence specialists, such as armies, militias, bandits, gangs, gangsters, and warlords, play a much larger part in collective violence than his early work allowed. Second, and most important for the evaluation of the “DOC analytical program,” Tilly softens his stance against causal models.

Although I still deny the existence of general laws from which we can deduce all particular cases of collective violence, I now believe that a fairly small number of causal mechanisms and process recur throughout the whole range of collective violence—with different initial conditions, combinations, and sequences producing systematic variation from time to time and setting to setting in the character, intensity, and incidence of collective violence. (Tilly 2003b:xi)

Briefly, Tilly offers a classification of types of collective violence distinguished by “salience” and “social organization.” “Broken negotiations” and “scattered attacks,” which were the focus in Tilly’s earlier work, represent the most organized but least salient forms of collective violence. “Salience” refers to the extent to which the damage or violence inflicted is the essence of the relationship between the antagonists and not simply a violent episode in an otherwise nonviolent relationship. Here, Tilly recognizes that much collective violence is of the highly salient variety, ranging from highly organized “violent rituals” (lynching) through “coordinated destruction” (war), “opportunism” (looting), and “brawls” (barroom fights), that mark the limit between individual aggression (fist fights) and collective violence.

Tilly also identifies a set of mechanisms, including “boundary activation” (creating an

identity/antagonist) and “brokerage” (establishing new connections between actors), which combine to effect processes, such as “polarization,” that tend to produce waves of collective violence. The analysis of these mechanisms is, however, only half the story. Tilly also distinguishes regimes by government capacity and democracy—concepts that will be considered in more detail in the next book. Then, Tilly is able to explain, first, why collective violence is greatest in low capacity undemocratic regimes, and second, how increases in the salience of violence tends to be explained by *activation-suppression* mechanisms that activate or extinguish antagonistic identities, while the social organization of violence tends to be explained by mechanisms of *incorporation-separation* through which actors/identities become polity members or are expelled or denied membership. In short, high-capacity regimes are better able to manage political brokers and violence specialists in order to contain the activation efforts of entrepreneurs and control the suppression efforts of violence specialists. The democratic regimes, on the other hand, are better able to incorporate new challengers by using the mechanism of “certification.”

Here then, Tilly provides the general outline of a polity model, not unlike, in some ways, the model offered in *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Tilly 1978). Collective violence is rooted in relationships that may or may not be fundamentally violent. These relationships may provide the base for emerging political identities and escalating collective violence fostered by political entrepreneurs who activate and broker interests, thereby increasing salience and organization. The emerging and escalating violence challenges and is challenged by the violence specialists, who suppress and separate that which the entrepreneurs activate and aggregate. The critical contingencies within which these political struggles ebb and flow are the social, economic, and political organization of the people and the government. This critical piece of the puzzle is most clearly articulated in the next book.

Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650–2000 (Tilly 2003a), according to Tilly, “tries to do a better job with the democratization-contention nexus than I was able to manage in Contentious French and

Contentious Brits, and again to show how relational dynamics improves on individual propensity accounts" (personal communication, 19 July 2003). Ultimately, democratization and de-democratization are conceptualized not in cultural icons (Declarations of Self-Evident Truths) or structural features (secret ballots) but in changing relations between citizens (or polity members) and government agents.

Democratization means increases in the breadth and equality of relations between government agents and members of the government's subject population, in binding consultation of a government's subject population with respect to governmental personnel, resources, and policy, and in protection of that population (especially minorities within it) from arbitrary action by government agents. (Tilly 2003a: 13–14)

Tilly offers what appears to be a causal model in which revolutions, conquest, confrontation, and colonization affect contentious claim making, which in turn, engenders changes in categorical inequality, trust networks, and public politics. These in turn affect changes in citizen-agent relations. In painstaking detail, Tilly enumerates 24 mechanisms that combine in various concatenations to constitute "eight crucial processes" necessary for democratization. First, the segregation of public politics from categorical inequality requires either the equalization of categories (diminished gender inequality) or simply buffering politics from categorical inequality (granting women citizenship rights). The integration of trust networks into public politics requires either the destruction of insulated (private) networks or the creation of politically integrated (public) networks. Thus familial or ethnic patronage networks might be destroyed or simply accompanied by civil service or partisan patronage. Along with at least two of these four processes, democratization requires alteration in public politics that includes broadening and equalizing participation, enhancing collective control, and inhibiting arbitrary power.

Thus armed, Tilly proceeds to explain how states follow contingent yet more or less idiosyncratic paths toward or away from

democracy, as government capacity and protective consultation increase or decrease relatively independently. Effective democratization involves a steep increase in governing capacity followed by a dramatic increase in protective consultation that ultimately is accompanied by a decline in state capacity once states establish democratic citizenship. In comparing the paths of relatively strong states (Great Britain and France) in which state building precedes protective consultation and authoritarianism precedes democracy, to the paths of weaker states (Switzerland) where capacity lags far behind consultation, it becomes clear that there is no steady progress, no stages, and no equilibrium point. Instead, states and citizens experience varying degrees of success in achieving power in the course of collective political struggle. As already noted, "difference initial conditions, combinations, and sequences" (Tilly 2003b:xi) affect how democratization unfolds in countries as diverse as Spain, Holland, France, and Switzerland.

Few sociologists will be prepared to challenge Tilly's reinterpretation of the relationship between contention and democracy in Europe, but we may wish to quibble with his refusal to accept structural determinants of the economic or cultural persuasion. Marxists might ask, for example, why Barrington Moore's (1966) three paths to the modern world have been blurred in a model in which, presumably, Germany and France follow similar (strong state) paths, and only Switzerland (as opposed to Russia, for example) seems to fit the weak state model. Functional or evolutionary theorists, on the other hand, might complain that there is too much attention to individual variation—the idiosyncratic paths of France and Great Britain, for example—that blur the distinctive paths of democratic and totalitarian nations. One might also wish to impose a structural component upon the definition of revolutionary outcome—not just power, but power relations (or modes of production), must change, otherwise we do not appreciate the difference between a palace coup and a bourgeois revolt. Of course, Tilly wants to argue that Marx was not totally correct (or was, perhaps, not completely serious) when he argued that a bourgeois monarchy could only be followed by a bourgeois republic.

Presumably, there are mechanisms through which the contraction of citizen rights might be sustained in some sort of revolution from above. In fact, it seems that the standard path to democracy is through state making that at least borders on authoritarianism. At the same time, however, citizen rights are not offered by authoritarian states. Instead, they are demanded by an organized, contentious, and potentially violent populace. It seems then that looting is not the first step toward freedom. In fact, after the coordinated destruction of the Iraq regime, the opportunistic looting would seem to represent political disintegration (or disorganization). The scattered attacks of the "terrorists" suggest a more promising path toward broken negotiations that might ultimately lead toward citizenship rights.

Tilly's turn toward mechanisms and processes is a major challenge to his aging students and fellow travelers who might prefer to rest on their laurels after effectively defeating the politics of mass society in the Seventies and weathering the storm of post-modern and critical discourse in the Nineties. Tilly is no longer challenging the Durkheimians, and even his meta-theoretical foray is unlikely to affect the post-toasties. No, here it is clear that Tilly is challenging his followers to think outside the box (or the diagram). Would the United States follow the strong state path? How might waves of political challenges associated with the ebb and flow of citizen rights (slaves', immigrants', farmers', workers', women's, civil, gay, etc.) be analyzed using the mechanisms and processes that Tilly details? And finally, if contention is necessary for democracy and if democracy diminishes and generally tames contention, then isn't democracy ultimately a barrier to social justice? Is this Weber's iron cage, or Gramsci's hegemony? Is this the end of the dialectical struggle between republicanism

and capitalism? Is democracy the means or the end?

There are so many questions and so little time. I guess that is why Tilly has so many students but still never enough. So I guess I can see where he might be threatening his more established students. Those of us who wandered into academia from the streets and back alleys of the Sixties, however, have always enjoyed challenging authorities. Of course, mentors like Tilly are both authorities and challengers. My challenge is to finish this review before he publishes another book, because, among other things, Tilly has this annoying habit of writing faster than I read.

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