

Charles Tilly's Interdisciplinary Influence

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Sociology without history resembles a Hollywood set: great scenes, sometimes brilliantly painted, with nothing and nobody behind them. Seen only as the science of the present or – worse yet – of the timeless, sociology misses its vocation to fix causation in time. It thereby vitiates its vital influence on historical thinking, its influence as the study of social mechanisms operating continuously in specific times and places (Tilly 2008c: 120).

What Charles Tilly expressed here in an essay on “History and Sociological Imagining”, applies according to him, to social science in general. Tilly's vast work changed in many ways over time, and much of the prefaces or introductions to his over 50 books reads almost like a constant testimony of his own intellectual trajectory and learning process, including accounting in detail for previous errors and insufficiencies. Perhaps, he literally followed his own dictum that “smart people correct their many errors fast and well” (Tilly 1997: 39). But among the continuities of his work, there is probably one feature that stands out, in addition to that relentless practice of reflexivity: his conviction and permanent enterprise that “collaboration across the history/social science boundary will produce superior explanations of social processes” (Tilly 2008c: 202). Tilly's work can be understood as a lifetime of research at the frontiers of history and social science as the path to superior explanations.

His work at this frontier already began with his ground-breaking first book *The Vendée* (Tilly 1964) and soon led to first programmatic formulations, as the co-chair of the History Panel of the Behavioral and Social Sciences Survey Committee between 1967 and 1969, under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the National Academy of Sciences, resulting in the report *History as Social Science* (Landes and Tilly 1971), exploring the “new, social-scientific aspects of the discipline, including explicit formulation of concepts, theories and hypotheses; stand-

ardized measurement and verification; and deliberate comparison over time and space”.

Immediately thereafter, in 1969, Tilly was asked by the SSRC’s Committee on Comparative Politics (CCP), chaired by Gabriel Almond, to bring historians and history into their social science conversation. The CCP had been running for 15 years at that point, and had exercised an enormous influence on the development of comparative research and especially on the challenges of new and newly independent states. It had spurred the development of generalizations, even theory of “nation-building” and the challenges faced by developing states. Tilly’s charge was to lead a group looking at European history to see whether the generalizations held there and whether history might even yield an improvement or two. The result was a path-breaking book, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Tilly 1975). This challenged the reigning developmentalism, pointing out how many states disappeared in European history, how constant were the conflicts and challenges, how central the processes of war. It upended a number of the CCP’s previous generalizations, but not simply in the direction of particularism. Rather it offered new explanations. These centered substantively on the extent to which a struggle for survival amid conflict shaped European states more than domestic nation-building efforts. But the impact was not just substantive. The project helped to create a field of historical social science – or social science history. And for some thirty-five years, Tilly would be one of its handful of leading practitioners.

In the same vein and during the same time period like this path-breaking project, Tilly also started editing a book series called *Studies in Social Discontinuity*, challenging political developmentalism and modernization theory. This series also included his own work *As Sociology Meets History* (Tilly 1981) in which he expressed the wish that the term “historical sociology” had never been invented since it falsely alludes to the existence of a separate field of study. Rather, all sociology and social science should be historical in the sense of attending to social processes (Tilly 1981: 100). He continued his programmatic work for the field of historical social science in *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (Tilly 1984), emphasizing that the analysis of big structures and large processes needs to be concrete in having real times, places and people as their referents, recognizing from the outset that time matters. *When* things happen within a sequence of a process affects *how* they happen and constrain possible outcomes at a later point in time (Tilly 1984: 14f.).

Tilly's research practice shifted in emphasis from the earlier focus on methodology (Calhoun 1996) to grasping social processes in his later work through "analytical narratives" (Tilly 2007: 72), as demonstrated, for example, in his book *Democracy* (Tilly 2007). His programmatic work for historical social science in this last phase is collected in his *Explaining Social Processes* (Tilly 2008c). Tilly did not advocate fusion of history and social science. According to him, most social scientists should continue to analyze particular processes like migration or contentious politics in varied social settings, while most historians should continue to specialize in times and places. But Tilly advocated a closer alliance between history and social science. How time and place affect the operation of social processes should play a major role in both enterprises, producing superior explanations of social processes through this collaboration.

Tilly did historical sociology already at a time when that had not yet become a recognized approach in the discipline. He studied conflict in a field dominated by Parsonsian functionalism and indeed at Harvard where Parsons held center stage and figures like George Homans and Barrington Moore were pushed a bit to the wings. Tilly might have chosen exit. He might have decided he would get a better job as a loyalist. He chose instead what Albert Hirschman clarified for us was always the third option: voice (Hirschman 1970). Tilly's voice changed several fields, remaining impressively clear despite major contention and more than a little conflict. He both studied how voice could matter and exemplified it.

Beside his field-building impact with respect to historical social science in general, Tilly remade fields in many substantive areas. In his work on French history, from his study of the counterrevolution in *The Vendée* (Tilly 1964) to *The Contentious French* (Tilly 1986), Tilly was able to make original contributions to what were traditionally well differentiated literatures on the early-modern, revolutionary, and industrializing epochs in French history. The scope of his analysis allowed him to discover a major historical transformation between two distinct repertoires of collective action. This analysis of French history was later complemented by a major study on *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Tilly 1995).

In his work on state formation and transformation, from *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Tilly 1975), his influential article "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" (Tilly 1985) to *Coercion, Capital and European States* (Tilly 1992), Tilly challenged political developmentalism, emphasizing extraction and control, synthesizing and comparing alternative processes by which states took shape in Europe. In

his last, unfinished book project on *Cities and States in World History*, he took up again his earlier work on state formation and transformation. Tilly's other contributions to the study of European history include *European Revolutions, 1492–1992* (Tilly 1993), analyzing variation in the causes, forms, and incidence of revolutionary situations, and *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650–2000* (Tilly 2004).

Since the late 1970s, in the context of *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Tilly 1978), Tilly developed his systematic approach to repertoires of contention, making it a staple of the field, culminating in *Contentious Performances* (Tilly 2008a). Since he started to theorize contentious politics in the 1990s and later in collaboration with Sidney Tarrow and Doug McAdam (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Aminzade, Goldstone, McAdam, Perry, Sewell Jr., Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006), Tilly literally built the interdisciplinary field of contentious politics (Tarrow 2008). By contentious politics, he meant “collective, public making of claims, that, if realized, would affect the interests of those claim’s objects” (Tilly 2002: 6). This shifted the definition of the problem from the mere explanation of social movements to the explanation of contentious politics in all its forms, including revolutions, ethnic mobilizations, and other cycles of protest. Furthermore, Tilly's approach to contentious politics put the definition of the problem in relation to political regimes, leading eventually to his book *Regimes and Repertoires* (Tilly 2006a), demonstrating that the quality of political contention varies radically by regime organization.

Other major strands of Tilly's work include his work on categorical inequality; democratization; stories, identities and boundaries; and explanation and methodology. In his *Durable Inequality* (Tilly 1998), Tilly provided a new approach to the study of persistent social inequality. He argued that paired and unequal categories such as male-female or white-black consist of asymmetrical relations across a boundary between interpersonal networks, with the usual effect being unequal exclusion of each network from resources controlled by the other. This categorical inequality results from a varying combination of the four mechanisms of exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation and adaptation. As for his work on democratization, Tilly regarded *Democracy* (Tilly 2007) as the culmination and synthesis of all his work on the subject, identifying three general processes causing democratization and de-democratization at a national level across the world over the last few hundred years. These processes are the integration of trust networks into public politics, as developed first in his *Trust and Rule* (Tilly 2005b), the insulation of public politics from categorical

inequality, as conceived first in his *Durable Inequality* (Tilly 1998), and the suppression of autonomous coercive power centers.

In another related line of his work, from *Stories, Identities and Political Change* (Tilly 2002) and *Identities, Boundaries and Social Ties* (Tilly 2005a) to *Why* (Tilly 2006b) and *Credit and Blame* (Tilly 2008b), Tilly analyzed the dynamics of how storytelling, giving reasons, shared understandings and collective identities constrain and shape social interaction and how social interaction in turn changes those phenomena, including by unanticipated consequences, indirect effects, incremental effects, environmental effects and feedback effects. Finally, Tilly's later work on explanation and methodology challenged the prevalent forms of explanation like the covering law model or correlational analysis and variable-based explanations. While, according to Tilly, correlational analyses can serve well to identify what needs to be explained, they cannot provide explanations because they link variable outcomes to variable conditions without specifying the causal chains between them. For Tilly, adequate explanations of social processes require what he called a mechanism-process approach, showing how variable combinations and sequences of invariant mechanisms produce variable outcomes under different conditions (Tilly 2008c).

Tilly's influence is also based on the interdisciplinary network that he built, particularly around a legendary workshop that he organized at the University of Michigan, at the New School for Social Research and at Columbia University, in the last phase called Workshop on Contentious Politics. Not least, Tilly's influence is indicated by the staggering amount of dissertation supervisions and dissertation committee memberships, reaching as far back to the dissertation committee of the prominent sociologist Richard Sennett at Harvard in the late 1960s.

In recognition of his field-transforming work and its enormous breadth, Tilly was awarded the Albert O. Hirschman Prize of the Social Science Research Council in 2008, several weeks before his death. This prize represented a capstone of his extraordinary career and a celebration of his service to social science. Tilly served as a mentor to SSRC dissertation fellows as far back as the 1960s, including to historian Joan Scott in a research training fellowship designed to encourage interdisciplinary training. And Tilly himself was a recipient of a SSRC Dissertation Fellowship for his archival research in France from 1955 to 1956 which led to his first book *The Vendée*.

In the epilogue of his last book on historical social science, methodology and explanation, *Explaining Social Processes* (Tilly 2008c), Tilly expressed his hope that “reading this book will persuade a few ambitious people to straddle the boundary” between history and social science (Tilly 2008c: 203). Charles Tilly was a master in straddling this boundary. In recognition and celebration of his and Louise Tilly’s lifelong contributions, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), in cooperation with the Social Science History Association (SSHA), have created the Charles Tilly and Louise Tilly Fund for Social Science History with the goal of advancing the interdisciplinary field of historical social science to which both of them devoted their careers. Its mission is to carry on Tilly’s interdisciplinary legacy, helping future generations of scholars in straddling the boundary between history and social science and in the quest for superior explanations of social processes.

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