

On the Practice of Originality*

By Ira Katznelson

I am honored to speak alongside Craig Calhoun and Joan Scott at this bittersweet occasion. I know just how pleased Chuck Tilly was to be the recipient of the Albert Hirschman Prize. The Social Science Research Council is an institution he cherished, and Albert is a person for whom Chuck had almost limitless admiration.

He particularly esteemed the assertive analytical power and intellectual modesty that characterized Hirschman's "Rival Interpretations of Market Society," the brilliant 1982 Marc Bloch lecture that addressed competing interpretations of modern markets, respectively as civilizing, destructive, or feeble. "However incompatible the various theories may be," Albert argued, "each might still have its 'hour of truth' and/or its 'country of truth' as it applies in a given country or group of countries during some stretch of time," and he concluded by asking whether it is "not in the interest of social science to embrace complexity, be it at some sacrifice of its claim to predictive power?" These features, too, were hallmarks of Charles Tilly's audacious originality.

* Remarks on the Occasion of the Award of the Albert O. Hirschman Prize to Charles Tilly, October 3, 2008

From 1983 to 1990, Albert and Chuck served together on the SSRC's Committee on States and Social Structures, perhaps best-known for the effort to 'bring the state back in.' Alongside the other founding members—Peter Evans, Peter Katzenstein, Stephen Krasner, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol—I was privileged to sit with these two special colleagues, and witness how they worked to renew faith in reason and the promise of social knowledge by honing in on fundamental questions, by taking risks at frontiers where disciplines meet, by acts of generous intellectual citizenship, and by a shared commitment to a more decent world.

When Chuck Tilly died just over five months ago, on April 29, the calendar said he was 78 years old, just four weeks shy of the start of his eightieth year. Yet even near the end he had more spunk, more imagination, more life than persons half his age. Each time I met him on the Columbia campus during the long, often grueling period of his recurring battles with lymphoma, he brimmed with ideas, inquired about students we had shared at the New School and Columbia, and asked hard, really hard, questions. He invited unvarnished criticism, and offered nothing less in return. I am not the first, nor will I be the last, to call him an intellectual giant who, in the language Chuck himself used to describe his teacher, Barrington Moore, "towered above ordinary scholars" and "shaped the thinking of an entire generation."

The Memorial event and the two day conference just ahead will offer chances to remember this special person and profound scholar. Together, we will examine and assess the historical social science he powerfully advanced. Here, I should like to

reflect on the practice of originality, on characteristic traits and generative features found in the special craftsmanship of colleagues like Professors Hirschman and Tilly. Standing head and shoulders above the rest of us, such rare scholars permanently shift the vectors of important intellectual conversations, and induce the rest of us to inquire more assiduously, record more truly, analyze more deeply.

I know Chuck would have resisted my saying that he was an unconventional genius, but so he was. He possessed the non-replicable qualities of genius—a gift of nature, the product of daunting aptitude impelled by intellectual biography. But originality in history and the social sciences is not made by genius alone. This is a lesson Chuck taught all of us who were privileged to glimpse how he went about reading, thinking, talking, encouraging, and communicating in seminars and lectures, in working papers, by seemingly endless notes and email messages, and, most of all, in books and articles. “I want to be a great thinker without doing the work,” Norman Mailer, another unconventional genius, wrote in 1957. Chuck Tilly’s model of originality was just the reverse. He did the work. And in so doing, he revealed that he was a great thinker.

Three months after Barrington Moore’s death in October 2005, Tilly admiringly observed that “when Moore worked, he went at it with ferocious energy, never publishing until he had gotten the argument more or less right. For his students, he became a model of intellectual commitment and rigor.” Like Moore’s originality and influence, Tilly’s was the product of an even greater ferocious energy and an

unequaled determination to get things right. He deeply admired how Moore “had displayed intellectual self-abnegation few others would have managed” by “suppressing chapters on Germany and Russia” in *Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* “that had circulated in dittoed, repeatedly rewritten, drafts” because, as Tilly noted, Moore thought, “the chapters were no longer essential to his argument, since other scholars had recently published excellent syntheses concerning the two countries.” Like Moore, Tilly left material unpublished, some of it in working papers, one of his favorite means of expression, because it was no longer central to his argument, or others had moved more quickly. Like Moore, Tilly never offered what he called simplifying models without mastering the history he willfully simplified in order to comprehend social processes, reveal the mechanisms that compose them, and understand how “changing material conditions shape human political action.” His goal, as he put it in *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, my favorite of his brilliant books, was “not to give a ‘complete’ account (whatever that might be), but to get the main connections right.” To do that, he would roam across boundaries and disciplines, starting the work day very early, often ending very late. He read voraciously, more broadly and deeply than any person I have ever met.

And get the connections right he did—in offering a revolutionary coda to the SSRC Committee on Comparative Politics; in refusing crisp distinctions between domestic and international affairs; in showing how war was the engine of state formation, and extraction was the engine of war; in renovating our understanding of the development, morphology, and role of cities; in transforming how we comprehend

mass politics and collective action; in parsing the elements of inequality; in showing where rights and democracy have come from; in illuminating nationalism's character and pathologies.

Native ability and energetic scholarship hardly exhausted Tilly's substantive originality. What he thought about Moore reveals a core feature of his own unflagging quest. Barrington Moore, Tilly wrote, "maintained a fierce commitment to democracy, a contempt for intolerance and injustice, [and] a hatred for tyrannies of all persuasions." For Tilly, as for Moore, the goal was not the production of glittering but aseptic scholarship. From start to finish his stunning writing offered a sustained effort to discern how the analytical parsing of historical experiences might "help us understand" the troubled qualities "of our own time." Moore must have been remarkably proud as he watched how Chuck pursued studies marked by pellucid honesty that were driven by a visceral loathing of despotism, and the wish to advance democracy, promote tolerance, respect human equality, and advance justice.

Chuck's practice of originality was more than the combination of genius, hard work, and ethical commitment. Over the span of a half-century, he sustained research programs and nourished intellectual networks within and across generations. He forged fertile intellectual partnerships, above all with Louise. Especially in the past decade, he stressed how the most fertile unit of analysis is not the individual or the structured whole, but the relationship, emphasizing connections that relationships fashion. That insight marked how he conducted his fabled proseminars and

workshops, how he organized research endeavors, how he supported graduate students, how he lived as a colleague and friend.

There was yet another vital aspect to Chuck Tilly's practice of originality, what might be called reflexive methodology. He had no patience for capital 'M' Methodology, the arcane pursuit of experience-distant ways of working, even when they are dazzling. To that, he preferred bare-bones descriptive history and empirical social science, provided it was well-sourced and coherently argued. But he wanted more. Deeply devoted to rigorous, logical, verifiable, falsifiable, qualitative and quantitative methods as checks on flights of fancy that masquerade as truth, he restlessly searched for the vocabulary, the concepts, the intellectual moves, the sequences, the disciplined imagination that could constitute methods of inquiry that might yield new ways of seeing. Like Cezanne, who taught us that there is more than one way to apprehend a tree, and that each way can reveal a powerful, if partial truth, Tilly painted history from more than one angle with more than one palette, with more than one distance and more than one perspective, but always with the highest level of self-consciousness about what he was doing and why, and with an uncommon awareness of the difference methods can make to what he, and we, can see, and to what he, and we, cannot.

Return with me for a moment to the early pages of *Coercion, Capital, and European States*. There, Chuck patiently conveyed the strategy he had adopted, including its costs. He explained why "I will...resort to metonymy and reification on page after

page” in order to develop a simplifying model. He apologized for dealing “with historical facts like a rock skipping water.” He listed six ways his arguments about state formation might be judged wrong. He detailed the theoretical issues that were at stake.

From the earliest moments of his life as a scholar and teacher, Chuck deployed a reflexive self-consciousness about methods in the broad sense of the term to bring history, theory, and empirical analysis into a creative dialogue. From the start, his practice of originality had a specific intellectual site, a particular and difficult borderland at the junction of history and sociology, a location where archives and the demotic control of primary sources meet social theory and sustained methodological rigor. For most scholars, these two enterprises lie on opposite sides of a border line, each in a trench, ready to fight across a field fraught with obstacles. Chuck insisted on removing those barriers and impediments. He stood ready to resist those who wanted nothing more than to wage a war of the trenches.

We can see this initiative, the underpinning of his originality, in a talk he called “In Defense of Jargon.” It was addressed to the Canadian Historical Association forty-two years ago—three years before his fifteen at Michigan, his twelve at the New School, and his twelve more at Columbia—as he was moving from Harvard to the University of Toronto, already widely admired for *The Vendee*, and well-launched on a massive project to record, codify, and analyze collective action in France. This, in effect, was Chuck’s first fighting statement about his vision of originality.

This was a talk about the treacherous zone where history and social science overlap. Chuck challenged practitioners of both disciplines to transcend more comfortable and less perilous ways of working. He insisted that sociologists respect history's complexity, contingency, and variability. Thus, he counseled, they should stop dipping "into the past for cases to test hypothetical uniformities with no particular historical content," and they should resist the temptation "to indentify uniformities in history, or even general laws of change." Because they often work in this way with historical materials, "the ritual accusations hurled at sociologists have some foundation...the sociologists," he added, "overzealous for useful lessons overlearned, caricature themselves."

But he was equally hard on historians, his audience, for resisting explicit conceptualization, resting content with the implicit use of congested terms like revolution and power and solidarity, "appealing to an unstated common understanding between writer and reader." He criticized their unwillingness to import a clarifying vocabulary that the historical actors themselves did not use in a quest for systematic comparison based on historically-grounded analogies. And he insisted on higher standards of verification, based on systematic recording and coding, a clear identification of units of analysis, and procedures to measure constancy and variation. But he also was mindful of how, "done badly...measurement becomes mere apparatus, the comparison becomes unhistorical analogy, and the conceptualization becomes pitiful jargon."

Reading those sentences, I—we—can hear Chuck Tilly’s witty and urgent voice, the voice of a teacher, the voice of a purposeful scholar, the voice of a practitioner of daring originality. This is a voice that death will not still.