
CHARLES TILLY



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ON 29 APRIL 2008, Charles Tilly—“Chuck,” as he preferred to be called—died of lymphoma in New York City. Born in 1929, Tilly was one of the most prolific and influential social scientists of the twentieth century. His name is on the spine of some fifty-one books, mostly as the sole author. He published more than five hundred articles. Teaching in Cambridge (Massachusetts), Delaware, Toronto, Michigan, and New York City, he trained hundreds of students, influenced thousands of colleagues. As a sociologist and historian, he helped create, or else radically reshaped, half a dozen different fields of social inquiry. He was awarded numerous prizes and accolades, including, as his last, the Albert O. Hirschman prize, the highest award of the Social Science Research Council.¹ His prodigious energies and focus are the stuff of academic legend. All who knew him cherished his unflagging good cheer and generosity. It is no exaggeration to say he was, and will in years to come be widely recognized to have been, the founding father of twenty-first-century sociology. He is sorely missed.

The core idea at the heart of Tilly’s intellectual enterprise, an idea he came to articulate with ever greater clarity, force, and urgency throughout his long career, is the claim that the elemental unit of human social life is the social relation—a repeated interaction between two or more persons. This notion, which grounded an approach to social science Tilly called “relational realism,” stood in contradistinction to the methodological individualism, often taken for granted, of most social science, emphasizing as it does the dispositions, motives, and calculations of individual actors. Relational realism, as performed by Tilly, also rejects the quest for governing laws to explain large social processes such as war, revolution, urbanization, class formation, and the formation of national states. Instead, Tilly advocated careful analysis of social relations, empirical examination of the chains of connections linking persons through time and space in larger compounds of relations. He sought to uncover the elemental logic of interactions; the causal mechanisms that recur time and again in different contexts with different results, which, he argued, could explain the dynamics of social change. Relational realism enables the social scientist to connect the actions of individuals, each constituted in relations with others, with the large processes and big structures that seem to govern their existence. Charles Tilly’s advocacy and practice of relational realism as a social scientist emerged not from some metaphysical commitment or abstract theorizing, but from

¹For a list of his publications and achievements, see the “Biographical Information 2005” on the Columbia Department of Sociology’s Web site (www.sociology.columbia.edu/pdf-files/tilly.pdf). In the three years between the last updating of this document and his death, however, he published another four books.

a conviction that that was the way to build better explanations of real social phenomena. The son of a clerical worker from the suburbs of Chicago, he remained a practical, Midwestern, sort of guy. Chuck.

I am but one of thousands who called Chuck Tilly a friend, a mentor, a colleague. He was not only a student of human social relations, but also a master at forming and nurturing social bonds. He fostered an enormous network of scholars who remain, despite his absence, bonded to each other and in conversation with him. In some respects, this is his most remarkable achievement, all the more so since he was far from being a social gadfly and was extremely judicious in his use of time. He was not an institution builder, and loved to boast of having never chaired a university department or presided over a professional organization—though he was an exemplary citizen of the academic community, serving on countless committees and boards whenever called upon, which was often. He was a superb research director. He directed the Center for Research on Social Organization at the University of Michigan and the Center for Studies of Social Change at the New School for Social Research. Of these institutions, however, little endures today other than the traces of intellectual energy inscribed in myriad publications and in the memories of scholars whom he inspired. When he moved to Columbia in 1996 he decided not to direct a research center, a decision he sometimes regretted. Instead, he was instrumental in creating a vibrant network of scholars, in New York and beyond, working on contentious politics.

The primary mode of social interaction he both nurtured and cherished was the conversation—written as well as verbal. His friends and students love recounting tales of enjoying a good dinner with him, full of lively conversation about ideas and life, spiced with stories crafted in the service of laughter, only to realize, with dismay, that when the dishes were cleared away, Chuck would be heading back to work. Everyone, too, has stories of sending him a paper to read and receiving within hours a detailed critique. He was always willing to read others' work, though I do have, somewhere on my hard drive, an email exchange with an eminent sociologist whom Chuck berated, tongue-in-cheek, for sending a bunch of us three long papers to read at once. For twenty years he read just about everything I wrote, and I'm not alone. When he died, he left behind fifty-seven filing cabinets, stored in a basement at Columbia University. I hadn't seen his files for more than a decade before he died, but I have no doubt that they were still meticulously organized and annotated, containing publications and drafts of publications that had been written by him, sent to him, and collected by him in the course of half a century. I trust the university will preserve them intact for future historians of twentieth-century social science.

In writing about him now I find myself torn between the need to describe his place in the larger social networks in which he would see himself as being formed, and my desire to write only of what I know of the man himself, meager though that be, and of my own relations with him. In taking the latter course, I can perhaps be excused by noting that in his later years, Chuck gave a number of interviews in which he spoke eloquently of his life and work, most accessibly in a video interview with Daniel Little of the University of Michigan, Dearborn. In his writings he was always situating himself in conversation with others whose ideas shaped his work. Foremost among these was his wife of some four decades, Louise. For those who do not know his work, I can only say, read the books (start with the last, and work your way back to his landmark study of counterrevolution in France, *The Vendée*). In the months since his death, particularly since the Social Science Research Council organized a conference in his memory in October of 2008, a growing number of scholars have written of their relations with Charles Tilly. In the spirit of relational realism, then, I shall add my two cents' worth here.

I first met Charles Tilly in January 1988, in his office at the Center for Studies of Social Change in the New School for Social Research, where he was the director. Upstairs from the D'Agostino supermarket on University Place at Tenth Street in New York, the room, lined with books, had no windows. A long desk of plain board supported by filing cabinets at either end was covered with neatly arrayed stacks of paper. He was typing at a computer. Classical music was playing on a stereo. He smiled broadly and greeted me, turning down the volume. We talked that morning about the work I would do while at the Center—I wanted to finish revising my dissertation for publication as a book. He told me about the work he and others were doing, about the mammoth study of contentious gatherings in Great Britain that he was leading and about his work on state formation. He loaded me with a stack of occasional papers to read, most of them written by him. But mostly he listened to my half-formed ideas, making me feel they were worth taking seriously. In half an hour I was on my way, inspired. I've heard people who encountered him decades earlier, as well as those who were his students during his last years at Columbia, describe their interactions in the same way. For Chuck, it was simple professional courtesy.

Chuck Tilly was a working man. One of his greatest fears was to be stuck on a plane or a train or in a doctor's waiting room with no work at hand. He always seemed to be lugging around a backpack laden with someone's dissertation and half a dozen books he wanted to read—not to mention the book or three he was in the process of writing. He always carried several pens in his shirt pocket, like the clerical worker's

son he was. When I questioned him once about why he worked so much, he answered me simply: Because I enjoy it. He adopted a frenetic pace as a graduate student at Harvard, he told me, and never stopped. He served in the navy in the 1950s as a payroll clerk and was always proud of his blue-collar job experience. A 2005 résumé, entitled “Biographical Information,” lists “newsboy, grocery clerk, office boy, factory hand, construction laborer, janitor, night watchman, camp counselor, and psychiatric-hospital researcher” among thirty pages detailing scholarly service, prestigious honors, and prodigious publication.

I came to be in his office that January morning in 1988 because I had written to him out of the blue some months earlier inquiring about prospects for a postdoctoral fellowship at the New School. I can’t recall now why I had thought to write to him, only that, having recently finished my doctoral thesis, I was eager to leave Australia and had written to every person in America that I could think of who might be able to help. He was the only one who replied. He replied promptly, saying that I was welcome to join his center as a visitor for the summer. They would not, unfortunately, be able to provide any financial support. A year or so later, however, after I’d been welcomed into the family there at the New School and found myself unemployed, Chuck figured out a way to find some funding to keep me going.

He was an extraordinary mentor, never stinting in support of students’ and colleagues’ efforts to secure the material means of existence. A few weeks before he died I received an email from him asking for a copy of my c.v. “in case something comes up.” He didn’t mention what he had in mind, and I knew him well enough to know that he would not make any promises, or anything that seemed like a promise, until he knew he could deliver. I’m still awed by his ability to think of others while facing death. For Chuck, however, such support was the most ordinary duty of citizenship in the community of scholars. Whenever people expressed gratitude for his support he would enjoin them to hold their thanks. “Just do the same for your students,” he would say.

Though his generosity and supportiveness were legendary, not everyone got off lightly in interactions with Professor Tilly. Sometime in the early 1990s, for example, he and I traveled together to a conference somewhere far to the west of New York City. We were both invited to comment on the keynote speaker’s lecture. I imagine the organizers set the event up with a “good cop, bad cop” scenario in mind. The keynote speaker was a well-known postmodernist theorist of international relations. I was a junior scholar sympathetic to postmodern theory. Charles Tilly was not. I no longer recall the speaker’s name. But I will never forget Chuck’s commentary. We had been sent the keynote speaker’s lecture beforehand. I read it, as quickly as I could, and groaned. While

generally in support of the approach, I could see that the paper was garbage—so I resolved to make a few comments to the effect of “could do better,” and suggest why it was important to do so.

The lecture took place in one of those grand rooms fashioned in the style so beloved by universities, one that earnestly attempts to signify with classical columns and oak panels the presence of weighty ideas and lofty thoughts. I delivered my response first, and was glad to be done with it. Chuck followed. “This paper,” he said, reading from a prepared text, “reminds me of a man who carefully plans a hunting trip. After a long journey to his cabin in the woods, he takes down his beloved rifle from its place above the fire, carefully dismantles it, lovingly oils every part, painstakingly reassembles it, loads it, raises it, takes aim . . . and shoots himself in the foot.” He went on to suggest that, if the speaker’s approach had not been so flawed, he might have been able to do something with that rifle, and proceeded to demonstrate in virtuoso fashion how it should be done.

On our way home, I expressed to Chuck my trepidation at the thought of ever being subjected to similar treatment. He assured me that he would never do such a thing to a junior colleague. He’d seen others do it, but considered it fundamentally immoral. For a grown-up, however, no holds were barred. “So how much time did you spend on that paper?” I asked. “Eight hours,” he replied. I had, grudgingly, devoted less than a quarter of that. For me, that is a true measure of the generosity of the man.

At the time I met him, Tilly was working on the book that came to be published as *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Blackwell, 1990). This book takes up, and substantially revises, a theme he had explored in a famous book he and a group of collaborators published in 1975, called *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, 1975). The earlier book was a challenge to those who assumed that “political development” was a singular, unilinear, process whereby all states would recapitulate some version of the model of national state laid down originally in Western Europe. Tilly and his collaborators showed just how contingent the history of Western European states was, particularly as it was driven by modes of making war. In the later book he expanded the analysis to show how relations between those controlling capital and those controlling the means of coercion in Europe varied over the course of a millennium, producing a variety of paths to the sorts of national state we now take for granted. Underlying this work was the recognition that political democracy, which he cherished, was a human achievement that was neither inevitable nor eternal.

I remember one day catching Chuck as he came to make coffee in

the kitchen at the Center for Studies of Social Change and engaging him in a discussion of the draft of *Coercion*, which I'd just read. One of his proudest achievements in creating the Center—where the security code for the alarm at the front door was 1-7-8-9, a number, apparently, with some historical resonance—was devising a layout for the office space that encouraged random interactions among scholars in the course of the working day. In his case, the working day started well before most of us were contemplating breakfast and ended after we'd gone to sleep. I had moved into an office next to the kitchen, the nodal point. I can vividly remember how excited I was by the new book. Sure, I said, it explains processes of state formation. But, and I can see Chuck's grin as I told him this, it also provides a framework for thinking about so much else: the ways ordinary people over vast spaces and time make, and remake, their lives and the world in the process of making these national states. In a word: culture.

Charles Tilly was a poet. Well, he wrote poems. Only after knowing him several years did I realize that the diligent note-taker in the seminar room with the endless supply of yellow legal pads was often scribbling verses. He was not inclined to inflict these on others, so we can safely deem the habit harmless. On the one occasion he and I discussed this pastime, in a plane delayed on the tarmac when we were returning from a conference, he told me he enjoyed the discipline of writing verse, exploring rhyme and rhythm, searching for unexpected analogies and metaphors. Though he resisted what became known as the "literary turn" in the social sciences, with its disavowal of the possibilities of explanation, he loved drawing examples from novels, plays, and poems; music, too. And his work is brimful of analogies and metaphors. Perhaps the most enduring is his use of the theatrical metaphor "repertoire," as in "repertoires of collective action," which debuted in a 1977 paper on contentious gatherings in Burgundy and which frames his final book, *Contentious Performances*, published six months after his death. His choice of metaphor was always shaped by a careful assessment of the consonance between the logic of the metaphor, and the logic of the relations he sought to explain. When it did not quite fit, though remaining serviceable, he was careful to point out the limitations. Many social theorists use metaphor to animate abstractions and then fail to notice that they have endowed mere abstractions with agency and let them loose on the page imagining they also act in the world. But his use of metaphor was always grounded in an appreciation of the phenomenon itself, the real processes and relations needing explanation.

He was an indefatigable schematizer. Throughout his vast body of writing, though I can't attest to the poems, you will find countless lists,

grids, matrixes, and tables summarizing enormous amounts of information into neat sets of logical possibilities. His great strength as a thinker and writer was an extraordinary clarity, an ability to frame complex patterns of social interaction over vast sweeps of time and space in tidy schemes. Consider this scheme, drawn at random from a book that happens to be open on my desk: "Provisional nominees for the basic set [of 'network configurations'] include the chain, the hierarchy, the triad, the organization, and the categorical pair" (*Durable Inequality*, 47). Tucked into the list, barely visible to the naked eye, is an opening for wonder. A parenthetical definition of "social sites," the elemental entities in these sets of "network configurations," includes "persons, groups, identities, networks, or something else." Something else? Indeed.

Chuck Tilly was never at a loss to find an encompassing schema to organize an explanation. In my conversations with him, though, it often seemed as if explorations of the "something else" excited him most. Perhaps that was because I was always a "something else" kind of guy and Chuck, for some reason, was fond of me. I was never drawn to applying his schemes in my own work; he didn't mind. I concluded that once Chuck had figured out the relevant schema, I was free to think about something else. Few have the brains or energy sufficient to force a revision of one of Tilly's organizing schemes, though he always invited correction. I did not bother trying. I remember many occasions when, as I struggled to articulate vague ideas about the implications of witchcraft for the fight to create a democratic state in post-apartheid South Africa, he would summarize my thoughts into a neat scheme and leave me scratching my head, wondering, "Is that what I meant?" Often, it was not what I meant at all. But the encounter would always force me to seek greater clarity about what I did mean to say. And when I did move toward treating as "social sites" entities such as invisible beings (also known as ancestors, spirits, and gods) and much else besides, Chuck was one of the first to applaud the outlandish move.

He came to visit me in Soweto in the early 1990s when I was doing fieldwork there. In one of his later books he says it was in 1990, but it was later. The man had an extraordinary grasp of empirical detail, but he was not infallible. I was living with a family in the township at the time, trying to understand the dynamics of everyday life in a context of dramatic political change. Because he was such an eminent visitor to South Africa, the university where he lectured granted us the use of a minivan for the weekend so that I could drive him to the airport at the end of his stay in Soweto. We loaded up that van with "comrades" and toured the townships. Chuck bought the beers and plied the comrades with questions about their experiences of the struggle, the ongoing war with Inkatha, and their hopes for the future. The kids in my neighbor-

hood were convinced he was my father. For months after, he was referred to as *ntate wa Mr. Adams*, Adam's father. The children long remembered driving around and around the block crammed into his van.

Charles Tilly was a democrat, egalitarian to the core. At the Center in the New School, and I don't doubt in his center at Michigan, too, everyone shared equally in the work of cleaning the kitchen. In the pro-seminar on state formation, he insisted on the rule that senior scholars hold their peace until at least three students had been given a chance to ask questions of the presenter. He wrote major works on democracy, inequality, and revolution. He was a scholar, rather than an activist, but his work never loses sight of the fact that since people create their worlds, albeit under circumstances not of their own choosing, they can change them. His great aversion as a scholar was to teleology, to explanations premised on the assumption that the way things are is the way things inevitably must be. He always sought out prospective analyses, seeking to understand the choices people made when they made history and the ways things could have been different. He was convinced that unless we can explain how things have come to be the way they are, activists would never succeed in changing them for the better. And better, in Tilly's view, meant more democratic, more equal. He argued ceaselessly that scholars have an obligation both to explain the social world, and to produce what he called "superior stories," accounts that serve to connect these deeper, more systematic, complex explanations with the sorts of stories about agents, motives, and outcomes that actually motivate people to act in the world. For example, in his book *Durable Inequality*, he identifies the "recurrent causal mechanisms behind the multifarious forms of durable inequality" (230) and concludes with a plan for "three crucial steps towards equality of opportunity" (246), which I shall summarize simply by listing the verbs he uses to motivate action: analyze, construct, verify, and thwart. Precisely.

Physics, the science of the twentieth century, was the lodestone for explanatory discourse in much of twentieth-century social science. The desire of social scientists to emulate forms of explanation modeled on the laws of physics produced a drive to derive the laws of motion of social life. In the end, the enterprise proved futile, though many labor at it still. Biology, or so the biologists tell me, is the science of the twenty-first century. It is certainly having a profound influence on the social sciences. In recent decades, advances in biology, in neuroscience and genetics particularly, have produced a flurry of excitement about techniques for revealing the apparent sources of human behavior lurking in individual brains and genomes. If the rapid pace of advance in these fields continues, many branches of social science will simply go out of business.

Charles Tilly is a sociologist for the twenty-first century. He was a thinker who saw the power of biological models for thinking about social life without reducing social life to a function of the biology of individuals. His great gift to future sociologists derives from his ability to marshal a mass of empirical detail to demonstrate how deceptively simple logics of human interaction can produce enormously complex structures and patterns of social life. By placing the analysis of transactions at the center of the study of social processes, and by inspiring others to follow suit, Tilly has left an intellectual legacy that will make it possible for future social scientists not only to incorporate insights and models from biology into their work, but also to shape the broader scientific terrain of which human sociality is a part.

In the long term, I suspect, Charles Tilly's legacy will be shaped as much by his mode of work as by the particular subjects with which he engaged, though they were many. For in his rigorous and unflinching insistence on the centrality of the social relation as the ontological foundation of social analysis, he demonstrated the possibilities of a new way of doing social science—not that he would have claimed, or wished to be considered, alone in this. He was part of a network, a movement if you will. Because he was so good at it, I have no hesitation in calling him the founding father of twenty-first-century sociology.

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