

Interview with Charles Tilly

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1. Choices in intellectual and institutional carriers.

AA & NAG: When you engaged in academic life Marxism was under revision; during this process new theories on social changes under capitalism in general and on revolution in particular came about. However, parsonianism was still hegemonic in the mainstream of American social science. Why did you choose the first path instead of the second one?

CT: I did most of my undergraduate and graduate work at Harvard when Talcott Parsons ruled the roost there. Naturally, I joined the opposition.

2. Sociology and history.

AA & NAG: You have always been fascinated by studying processes in the "longue durée"; besides, you have also been concerned with the relationship between sociology and history in many of your writings - such as *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*. To what extension have those interests been consequences of your background, especially of Barrington Moore's influence?

CT: Growing up during the Depression and World War II helped. At Harvard, not only Barrington Moore but also Pitirim Sorokin, Samuel Beer and (more surprisingly) George Homans encouraged systematic historical analysis.

3. Intellectual background: European and American intellectual influences

AA & NAG: You did part of your academic training outside American academic institutions; actually even your first studies have located you in the heart of French academy. Was this double affiliation influential on your scholarship? We mean particularly in your emphasis on comparative studies as well as your attempts to connect structural and process analysis.

CT: My extensive involvement in French academia meant that I could take greater distance from the American academic establishment. It also situated me as a leftist member of the *Annales* gang -- an easier thing to be in the 60s and 70s than later. Because I actually showed up for meetings and did my assignments on time, I also got to help organize many international activities at the *École des Hautes Etudes*, which further encouraged my interest in comparative and historical studies.

4. Themes and carrier

AA & NAG: In your long carrier as a researcher as well as a professor, you belonged to many institutions and wrote about 50 books. Looking at your whole trajectory, is it correct to differentiate it into phases, with specific thematic concerns and/or emphasis? Or, rather, would you characterize your carrier as the obsessive study of *contentious politics*?

CT: As Richard Hogan recently pointed out in *Contemporary Sociology*, one story you can tell about my career is a long, difficult escape from structural reductionism into relational realism. But contentious politics has only been one of my foci. I have been

studying state transformations since the 1970s, and have also poured plenty of energy into cities, urbanization, historical demography, and the logic of explanation.

5. Mobilization theory

AA & NAG: Since *From Mobilization to Revolution*, from the 70's, until *Social Movements, 1768-2004*, just launched, you have been building up a middle range theory to explain collective mobilizations. Would it be correct to say that your analytical approach changed gradually in order to include the mobilizations' cultural dimensions in a more effective way? In case you agree, was it an answer to the new social movements' theories?

CT: In truth, I never developed a "theory" of collective mobilizations, but I have worked on explaining them over my entire career. I wouldn't describe my recent modifications as incorporation of cultural dimensions. I would say instead that I have been paying more attention to relational dynamics at multiple scales.

6. Polemics

AA & NAG: Since your criticisms to the theory of modernization up to your contemporary debates with the new social movements' theoreticians, it is possible to identify a flavour of polemic throughout your whole career. Do you think your writings were fed by the theoretical struggles you have been involved with?

CT: I have tried to divide my work between polemics and attempts to explain. My last ten books or so have downplayed polemics in favor of saying clearly what they are supposed to explain. That effort does, of course, often require saying what explanations you'll have to reject if you accept mine. Meanwhile, other people

frequently engage me in polemics either as an invited critic or as a respondent to criticism.

7. Sociology and Economic.

AA & NAG: In the last years, a so-called "new economic sociology" grew up, aiming to renew the dialogue between sociology and economy. Do you see any novelty in this debate? Have those new approaches been influential on the analysis of long run processes? As someone involved in intense dialogue with both European and American academies, do you see relevant differences in styles of scholarship between French and American socioeconomics?

CT: I draw repeatedly on economic sociology in my work on social and political change. My most substantial involvement in the field came in the book with my son, *Work Under Capitalism*, which alas had almost no impact on the field. Yes, on the average European students of economic processes, including economists, more frequently define their subject as political economy, and therefore link their studies to larger scale structures and processes. North American economic sociologists mostly attempt to get the attention and respect of North American economists, who work much more comfortably with comparative statics. The result is an economic sociology that mainly works in the shadow of a static economics.

As for economic sociology, it has an interesting history. Richard Swedberg has made himself the field's historian, so we can follow the field's twists and turns even better now than before.

Such sociological founders as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Georg Simmel all lavished attention on economic processes. Indeed, you might think of sociology as owing its separate existence to efforts to explain

industrialization and to trace its effects on social life. The rise of formal economics around the end of the 19th century, however, exerted two powerful effects on economic analysis within sociology. First, it fostered the idea that proper economic analysis consisted of formal treatments of prices, markets, and decision-making rather than the explanation of economic change. Second, sociologists retreated toward grand analyses of societal succession, on one side, and detailed studies of living conditions, on the other.

As a result, economic processes as such occupied very little sociological attention during the first half of the 20th century. As economists began creating development economics after World War II, however, demographers and sociologists began bidding for their place by staking out claims to the study of demographic transitions, social development, modernization, and related questions. A kind of economic sociology devoted to the comparative study of whole economies emerged. Talcott Parsons and Neil Smelser made bold attempts to reclaim the whole of economic processes for sociology, but their efforts failed to convince the economists. The rise of dependency theories gave a new stimulus to sociologists, but again the program faded away.

Economic sociology as North Americans now define it formed as a dual effort: a) to extend existing economic models into such areas as religious organization, social movements, and organizational processes; James Coleman pioneered the effort; b) to specify how social context -- especially interpersonal networks, power structures, and local culture -- constrained economic processes and actions; Mark Granovetter pioneered the network portion of the effort, but Harrison White stood behind many of the major participants in the effort. Slowly and subtly true alternatives to standard economic analyses began to emerge. With his work on markets, Harrison White did the most extensive formalizations of these alternatives. With her work on life insurance, children's value, and uses of money, Viviana Zelizer led the formulation

of cultural alternatives. At present all three tendencies -- which Zelizer herself calls Extension, Context, and Alternative -- have strong advocates and wide-ranging programs of work. I regard myself as an alternatives person, with *Work Under Capitalism* and *Durable Inequality* as my most extensive contributions to the genre.

8. Studies on contemporary societies.

AA & NAG: In last decades, sociological attempts to explain contemporary societies appeared as revisions of theories of modernity - such as Habermas and Giddens writings - and even as refusing them - like post-modernists did. How do you see this debate? Do you believe we can expect good tools to understand contemporary societies emerging from it?

CT: I hope we will all abandon the sterile modernity-postmodernity debate in favor of analyses bearing on large-scale social processes wherever and whenever they occur.

9. Latin America's specificities

AA & NAG: It is commonly said among Latin America's intellectuals that "colonial legacy" would have provided a particular character to our societies, economies, cultures and political institutions. Hence, Latin American societies would have a special path, very diverse from European and American ones. What is your opinion about this?

CT: Although historically subjection to Spanish, Portuguese, English, and US forms of domination strongly affected Latin American experience, the idea of explaining Latin American experience -- not to mention its diversity -- as postcolonial strikes me as a bad intellectual strategy. Centeno & Lopez-Alves' *The Other Mirror* shows us

that students of Latin America have far superior intellectual resources at their disposal.

10. Professorship.

AA & NAG: You are a regular professor in undergraduate courses and you are also an intellectual broker, putting together a large number of researchers and students in your Contentions Politics seminar. How do you see the relation between teaching and researching?

CT: You must distinguish between undergraduate and graduate teaching. Because good undergraduate teaching requires radical simplification of the subject matter, it helps research very little except for clarifying which ideas are easy or difficult for an educated public to grasp. Graduate teaching is entirely different, since you're trying to initiate young people into your own craft. When it works well, the graduates start raising questions, pursuing problems, and getting results that significantly affect your own work.

11. Poetry.

AA & NAG: You are known as an affectionate lector, not only of scientific books but also of literature. By the way, you do poetry as a hobby. Does poetry (and the literature in general), help your process of academic production - as a source of insights, for instance?

CT: Just as my regular morning exercise helps me notice how much effort it takes to climb stairs or dodge taxis later in the day, my regular writing of poetry helps me shape the rhythm and impact of my prose -- and even to help my students write more

clearly. As for insights, poetry builds on metaphor, and therefore sensitizes you (or at least me) to unexpected analogies that help communicate complex or unfamiliar ideas.

Dialogues on the interview

The interview was conducted by e-mail on June 15th 2004. Since he gave us very short answers, we exhorted him to write a few more words. He then sent, on October 25th, a new comment on Economic Sociology, which we included as a last paragraph in his answer on this topic. He then also wrote:

In case you need (stylized) facts to accompany the interview, I'm attaching my curriculum vitae. It will also tip you off as to my current work. I would be glad to see the Portuguese version of the interview when you produce it.

Chuck

This "stylized facts" were used to prepare an introduction on his carrier and work for the Brazilian readers.

Later, he sent new comments on the translation into Portuguese:

Thanks for the text, which looks good. My Portuguese isn't good enough for me to correct yours. On Talcott Parsons, why not substitute something like "he was the dominant figure" -- less colorful, but also less derogatory [answering to the difficulty to translate "Talcott Parsons ruled the roost there" to Portuguese]. And of course you can stay away from "gang" if it will mislead readers [replying to the information that a literal translation of "gang" can have a depreciatory sense in Portuguese]. I'm attaching a few unpublished texts [He attached

Itineraries of Social Analysis; Historical Perspectives On Inequality, 23 June 2003, a draft chapter for Mary Romero and Eric Margolis, editors, *Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities and Why Read the Classics?*, 10 August 2003, prepared for a session on the value of classical sociological theory, American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, 18 August 2003] *from which you can feel free to steal, even adding to the answers I gave you in the interview.*

Is this what you needed?

Chuck

We then published two complementary pieces following the interview: *Itineraries of Social Analysis* and a comprehensive and updated list of Charles Tilly publications.

Later, we asked him whether we could translate *Historical Perspectives On Inequality* for a *Tempo Social* special issue on inequalities. He replied that this article had already been published elsewhere and then sent us the *Unequal access to scientific knowledge*, which came to be published in *Tempo Social*, vol.18, no.2, p.47-63, October/November 2006.