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Subject: Tilly's Rules of (seminar) Engagement, 1.0
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I think we all agree that the seminar/workshop that Chuck created and ran was a remarkable phenomenon. It might be useful to compile its rules in the hope that they might be helpful to others trying to do similar things. Of course, the rules were never written down, and one of the issues with unwritten constitutions is that people often disagree about their content (unlike, say, written constitutions, but that's another story).

Anyway, I thought I would put down my version, and everybody else can explain where I got it wrong. I've put brackets around my comments and specific illustrations from my own experience.

The overriding purpose is to improve a piece of research. Critics are not supposed to show how smart they are by humiliating the author [there was no point to it anyway since Tilly was smarter than anyone else in the room]. A good comment doesn't just point out a weakness in the project; it also suggests what should be done to make it better (constructive criticism).

There is no overriding topic or theme. Basically it is all about how to do good social science research. [The final title was Workshop in Contentious Politics, and there isn't much that couldn't be included under that heading. The lack of a topic made it different from most other seminars and, especially at Columbia, made it difficult to attract members who would keep coming back; Tilly's reputation helped a lot, and some of us became infatuated with the whole approach, but as noted below this became a problem.]

Within the seminar everyone is treated as an equal. First names are used by everyone for everyone. Everyone is an author and a critic; every regular member of the seminar is expected to present (ideally once a year, although that may not be possible) and to comment on everyone else's work every week. Specialized knowledge on the topic is useful but not necessary, and often the best comments and questions come from people who know nothing at all about the topic.

Papers are never presented; they are written and distributed a week ahead of the session. There is a reciprocal arrangement; authors limit themselves to fifty pages or less, and all members read the papers in advance. [Chuck once said it was okay if you didn't read the paper, but you couldn't say so and then make a comment.] The paper should include an introductory page putting the research in context and explaining its audience (is this a dissertation, a potential article or book, a conference paper, etc.).

At the beginning of the session the author is allowed but not encouraged to say a few sentences, usually about the context of the research (which should be covered in the introductory page but sometimes isn't). But the session really starts with extensive comments by two preselected critics, at least one of whom does not have a Ph.D. [In recent years these comments were often written in advance and read aloud, with a copy going to the author either before (my preference) or after the oral presentation. This allows the author to not have to worry about taking notes and facilitates discussion. Chuck and I disagreed about reading the comments; I felt that, at least for native speakers of English, people should talk about the comments rather than reading them, which would be good practice for conferences and teaching classes.]

After the two critics have made their remarks, the author is given a substantial amount of time to respond.

The floor is then open to comments and questions. Members attract the attention of the leader by raising their hand (one-finger question); the leader keeps a queue of names and calls on them in the order in which they have been seen, except that the first three comments after the critics must be made by people without Ph.D.s. It's okay for an individual to raise several separate questions at once. A second kind of intervention is the two-finger question--it must be directly on the point under discussion and thirty seconds or less. Asking a two-finger question does not change your position in the regular queue.

In addition to oral comments, members are encouraged to submit written comments. These fulfill at least two different functions: (1) they communicate specialized knowledge, bibliography, etc. which would not be of general interest to the group and (2) by repeating the oral questions or points, they again free the author from trying to take notes while answering a barrage of very different questions and issues and give them a record of the discussion which will be useful later when trying to recall what went on. [I have actually tape recorded several sessions where I was the author for the same reason. I learned from Chuck to try to keep my own comments until late in the session; with any luck others would make the points on their own and learn more from the experience than if we led the discussion.] Repeating a point made earlier, it is a firm rule that, no matter how wrong-headed the paper is [and there were some dillies], discussion is courteous, friendly, respectful, and directed at improving the project at hand rather than showing that the commentator is brilliant or that the author is insane or dangerous (although all of these may be true). Ideally the author is presented with several different ways in which the paper can be further developed, often contradictory ones which gave some choice.

After the seminar (which is scheduled for two hours), everyone is invited to go out to dinner somewhere nearby (it obviously helps if the seminar is scheduled late in the afternoon). The check is shared, but the author doesn't pay. [I used to explain that they had provided the entertainment. This may not be haute cuisine; Chuck would alternate between two inexpensive restaurants (usually ethnic). He justified this by saying he wanted to encourage graduate students to come by keeping it cheap. When he didn't attend during the last semester, the seminar went somewhere else to eat, although not to a much more expensive place, so maybe he was on to something. Once, when only faculty showed up, we went to a better restaurant. Occasionally, if he had gotten a nice check (as he would put it), he would pay the whole bill himself.

I think he regarded the dinner as the high point of the experience, and certainly many of us did. I made a point not to sit next to him to give graduate students a shot at him; at Columbia they were sometimes a little shy, but they soon got over it.]

[The size of the group varied a lot, from ten to maybe fifty. One of the keys to success was the continuing group of members who had been socialized into the seminar's norms; people who came in only for a paper or two depending on the topic were usually less helpful in discussions.

At the New School members were faculty (junior and senior) from various institutions, visitors (often foreigners) who were there for a year or two, and graduate students. At Columbia there were fewer faculty, more graduate students, and fewer core members. For a year or so they

tried making it a regular course in order to encourage graduate students to attend regularly, but that didn't work very well; I think the fact that there was no topic and that it didn't fulfill any requirements told against it. Increasingly we were working with authors who were not really members of the seminar. My own feeling was that it worked better with more core members, but of course it was less useful to the broader community; as usual there is a tradeoff.]

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