

Charles Tilly (1929-2008)

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The first time I knocked on his door, in 1998, I had only a vague idea of who he was. From his vast office at Columbia University emerged two very vivid blue eyes framed by a shock of white hair. "Professor Tilly?" I asked, intimidated. I hadn't brought an introductory letter or any other credentials besides the fact that I was a Brazilian student. "Call me Chuck," he responded, breaking into his wide and captivating smile. In his classes, to which I was rapidly admitted, I soon learned that informality was the most visible aspect of his egalitarianism. Students from throughout the world, uninformed about the issues that he analyzed, were invited to offer their opinions on the books that he was writing. I soon perceived that his was a privileged intellect -- grounding the unendingly intangible notion of genius -- with astounding erudition and command of all debates in sociology, history and political science. All this was imparted through colloquial, short, precise and brilliant lectures that were both enlightening and illuminating.

I witnessed the same dynamics in the seminar he had created at the University of Michigan (when it was called "Think, then drink"), and which he took along to the New School for Social Research and from there to Columbia. In its over thirty years of existence, "Contentious Politics" included under the conductor's baton - since he loved jazz and classical music - from PhD students to recognized academics writing on three to four centuries and all the regions of the world, on one of the many subjects that Tilly studied: inequality, the formation of the national state, urbanization, social movements, and sociological explanation.

Hundreds of papers passed through his seminar, including many of the nearly 600 articles and 51 books that Tilly published. Some of them were classics at birth, including *The Vendée: a sociological analysis of the counter-revolution of 1793* (1964); *From mobilization to revolution* (1978); *As sociology meets history* (1981); *Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons* (1984); *The contentious french* (1983); *European revolutions 1492-1992* (1993); *Cities and the rise of States in Europe: A.D. 1000 to 1800* (1994); *Durable inequality* (1998); *Dynamics of contention* (2001); *Social movements 1768-2004* (2004); *Trust and rule* (2005); *Why?* (2006). His books were translated to various languages (only *Coertion, Capital and European States, 900-1900* has been translated to Portuguese) and earned him awards and academic honors, such as the American Sociological Association's Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award in 2005, and invitations to teach at prestigious universities throughout the world.

In his writings, Tilly combined, with rigor and elegance, theory and empirical research, historical and conjunctural analysis, and qualitative as well as quantitative data. Taking Europe over the past four centuries as his major empirical reference, Tilly

privileged a macro-historical approach, which led to repeated critiques citing an excessive structuralism. In response to these, he began to construct an approach more open to agency and to the cultural dimensions of social life. This shift is evident in *Identities, boundaries and social ties* (2006) and promises to be the core of his still unedited *Credit and blame*. That inflection in his work is one example of his anti-dogmatism: he was always ready to listen to critics and to learn from them.

Tilly still found time to regularly advise research designs, to read and comment on books, and to discuss theses and papers from anyone who requested it. He never left anyone without an answer. He was always kind and generous, such as when *Tempo Social* requested an interview and he accepted, also joining its Editorial Committee and sending articles at a time when cancer had already weakened him.

The avalanche of moving emails that followed his death, on April 29th, attest to this generosity, and have been flooding the discussion list he maintained with ex-students and collaborators. One of them once reviewed one of Tilly's books in verse. Among the various disagreements, he called Tilly a giant of the social sciences. In the response, which took the format of a sonnet, Tilly offered his shoulders so that the critic could build a new theory on top of them. The offer was not rhetorical. Tilly in fact helped Jeff Goodwin and dozens of others to, like me, write their books based on their own ideas. Goodwin's "giant" was not merely metaphorical. The monumentality and quality of Tilly's work attests to this; he has already impacted four generations of sociologists, which in itself constitutes a type of immortality.

Charles Tilly's ideas are alive and strong. But Chuck will be greatly missed by those who had the honor and pleasure of knowing him.