Chuck Tilly, Conversationalist Extraordinaire

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I have been asked to write this homage to Chuck Tilly as an introduction to this special issue of *Sociologie and Societes* which is devoted to a critique of the conception of power and the state articulated in the political process model with which Chuck is so closely identified. At first blush it might seem odd—perhaps even disrespectful--to combine tribute with critique in this way, but knowing Chuck, nothing could be more fitting. For no one was more committed to ongoing, freewheeling, academic debate—to the notion of scholarship as an unpredictable journey—than Chuck. In 1997 he described his own evolution as a scholar as an "erratic itinerary," marked by "sequences of trial, error, critique, correction and reformulation" (Tilly 1997: 12). Quite simply, he saw the scholarly enterprise as a continuous, spirited conversation, marked by provisional ideas, recurring clarification, and at best, tentative conclusions. Given this perspective, he would be pleased to know that his work is helping to stimulate and sustain the conversation, even if he didn't agree with all the claims made by parties to that conversation.

I am of the same mind. I have always seen my work—even the best of that work—as but a crude approximation to a much more complex underlying reality. For that reason, even the critical attention paid to the political process perspective has always felt affirming. If nothing else it meant that my ideas were at least worthy of conversation. In the same spirit, I've agreed with a good bit of the criticism leveled at the theory over the years and sought to modify my own views in response to critique (2004). Chuck was perhaps more vociferous in his defense of the perspective (2004a, 2004b), but reflecting his abiding commitment to the ongoing conversation, also far more receptive to

alternative views than his strident defense at times might suggest. Consider just one example of Chuck's openness to change through conversation. Once an ardent structuralist, and an avowed critic of culturalist perspectives, through spirited exchanges with the likes of Bill Sewell, Jim Jasper, Ann Mische, and many others, Chuck can be seen as tacking away from the former and ever closer to a form of the latter during the last 10-15 years of his extraordinary career. In his stress on "contentious performances," on contention as something enacted through sustained interaction, on repertoires as the "took kit" of struggle, on the "jazzy," improvisational nature of conflict, Tilly's understanding of contentious politics was increasingly "cultural," in both the ideational and dramaturgic sense.

Given Chuck's capacity for intellectual exchange, reflection and modification, how might he respond to the central critique on offer here, the claim that "the political process model assumes that domination is organized by and around one source of power" (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008: 74)? I can't be sure of course, but based on our shared affinity with the perspective, I will offer a mild protest, a general assent, and a strong challenge on his behalf. I begin with the protest. Strictly speaking, I think the Armstrong/Bernstein charge is, at the very least, overstated. The actual empirical analyses of contention carried out by proponents of the model is, as my dad would say, "lousy" (read: densely populated) with actors, possessing variable amounts of power and/or authority. Read *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834* (1995) or any of Chuck's other major works and you will be introduced to a dizzying array of collective actors, interacting with one another in complicated and constantly changing ways. The amounts of power they wield in relation to each other is highly variable as well. And one

final point, as important as it is obvious. There is no single source of power in Chuck's account of the contentious Brits. Indeed, the tug-of-war *between* the Crown and Parliament is one of the defining dynamics of the period in question. Moreover, as powerful as they are, even the Crown and Parliament are subject to the constraints of others: a prickly aristocracy, restive colonies, powerful economic interests (e.g. The East India Company), the Church of England, and by the end of the period, an emergent and increasingly self-conscious working class.

Similarly my account of the emergence and development of the civil rights movement (1999[1982]) involved shifting power relations between a host of actors. And again, I'll be damned if I can find a single source of power in the account. The "Negro" question was effectively "organized out" of American politics, not by any one actor, but by an agreement between the Republican presidential candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, and Democratic congressmen. Hayes agreed to withdraw Federal troops from the South--effectively bringing Reconstruction to an end--in exchange for Southern Democratic votes in the House that swung the deadlocked 1876 election to Hayes. In turn, this Federal/Southern "understanding" on race held for better than 75 years, reflecting a consensual calculus by any number of actors—the two major parties, economic interests, Federal, state and local officials, virtually all unions, etc.—that the "Negro question" was better left unaddressed. Similarly, it took pressure from a number of sources—reform voices within the Democratic Party, the Warren Court, Soviet propaganda, Branch Rickey and the desegregation of baseball—to undermine the segregationist consensus and renationalize the issue of race in the immediate post World War II period.

At a more theoretical level, divisions among previously consensual elites have long been identified by political process theorists as among the most common and promising sources of "political opportunities" for challenging groups (McAdam 1996, Tarrow 1998). To speak of "elite divisions" is of course to acknowledge multiple sources of power and influence. Still, and here comes the "general assent," there is more than a grain of truth to the Armstrong/Bernstein critique of the conception of power articulated in the formative theoretical statements of political process theory. The theory—and here I'll speak only of my 1982 version of it—is guilty as charged, on two counts; first in its *exclusive focus on state power* and general neglect of other sources of authority and influence, and second in its stylized depiction of contention as generally involving *a single institutionalized "incumbent" arrayed against a unified outside "challenger."* That the analysis which informed the 1982 book was far richer empirically than the stylized theory itself is, in the end, not a sufficient defense against this second Armstrong/Bernstein critique. I think it fair to say that the stark, stylized image of a single incumbent authority (e.g. *the* state) confronting a unified movement challenger has generally defined work in this tradition. By contrast, the "multi-institutional politics approach" advocated by Armstrong and Bernstein seems more in keeping with theoretical intuition and an increasing body of empirical evidence produced by scholars working at the intersection of social movement and organizational studies (Greve, Pozner and Rao 2006; Davis et al., 2005; Rao, Monin and Durand, 2003; Schneiberg, King and Smith 2008). I am generally, in sympathy with this richer conceptualization of power and think Chuck would have been as well. Indeed, I think we intuitively employed it in most of the empirical work we have done.

But, as promised, I close, as Chuck almost always did when he gave me comments on my work, with a challenge. Even as I embrace the need to consider multiple actors and sources of power and influence other than the state, I am concerned about the increasing narrowness of social movement scholarship. In a forthcoming *Annual Review of Sociology* article, Andrew Walder also characterizes the field of social movement studies as "narrow." The narrowness that troubles Walder is the field's almost singular preoccupation with the causes and dynamics of movement mobilization. But this preoccupation implies another narrowness that concerns me more, and that I know concerned Chuck. Inevitably the emphasis on mobilization has made *those who mobilize* the center of analytic attention. In short, the field has become decidedly "movement-centric" in its focus. We lavish attention on the creative "framing strategies" of "insurgents" and the consequential "emotion work" of movement activists. But by focusing so much attention on movement actors, to the neglect of other parties to the conflict, we run the decided risk of exaggerating the agency embodied in the movement. Ironically, this narrowness runs afoul of both the "multi-institutional" perspective of Armstrong and Bernstein *and* the predominant, if not exclusive, focus on the power and significance of state actors by political process theorists. Although most of the critical attention devoted to *Dynamics of Contention* (the book I co-authored with Chuck and Sid Tarrow), has focused on the hoary issue of "mechanisms," the primary motivation in writing the book was to blur the typological boundaries between different forms of contention (e.g. social movements, revolution, episodes of democratization, peasant revolts, strikes) *and* to remind movement scholars in particular that the outcome of any given "episode of contention" often has more to do with the power and strategic decisions

of non-movement actors than insurgents. To put it more starkly, we feared that

movement scholars were so identified with the (generally progressive left) movements

they studied, that they were losing perspective on the complex environmental dynamics

that generally shape the outcome of the broader episodes of contention in which

movements are embedded. Notwithstanding the recent Armstrong/Bernstein piece, most

recent work in the field has done little to allay this fear. In short, as scholars of

contentious politics, we focus narrowly on movements and ignore other

actors—*especially state actors*—at our own peril. Let the conversation continue, even if

Chuck's absence makes it far less edifying and fun!

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