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Grandpa and Grandma

by **Charles Tilly**

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GRANDPA AND GRANDMA

Address to the Fall Convocation, New School for Social Research

5 September 1985

Charles Tilly

New School for Social Research

Thorstein Veblen, the great American social theorist, helped found the New School. The crusty old Midwesterner had little patience for academic ceremonies like our convocation. In 1918, not long before he started teaching at the New School, Veblen packed many acid comments on the subject into his wry, wise book, The Higher Learning in America. Although he was often ponderous and ironic, he was never gentle. Especially when it came to academic piety.

Standing before you in a gaudy gown, I can hardly think of Veblen's book without wincing. "These genteel solemnities, of course," he says, "have a cultural significance . . . both as occasions of rehearsal in all matters of polite conformity and as a stimulus to greater refinement and proficiency in expenditure on seemly dress and equipage. They may also be believed to have some remote, but presumably salutary, bearing on the higher learning." Ouch!

Veblen goes on to look for real-world analogies to academic ceremonies. Do they resemble religious rituals, courtly and military routines, popular amusements, circus parades? No, he concludes, none of these quite fits; he finds a greater similarity between academic festivities and department store grand openings. Now, there's a comparison that should interest all of us, since the New School's building at 65 Fifth Avenue used to be a department store! Academic festivities, comments Veblen, "are designed to put the patrons of the house on a footing of good-humoured familiarity with the plant and its resources, with the customs of the house, the personnel and the stock of wares in hand, and before all to arrest the attention and enlist the interest of those classes that may be induced to buy . . . Like their analogues in academic life these ceremonials of trade are expensive, edifying, enticing, and surrounded with a solicitous regard for publicity; and it will be seen that they are, all and several, expedients of advertising." Touche!

All right, then: my job is to advertise the New School's wares. Since many of our wares concern connections between past and present, I especially want to tell you why we pay so much attention to things long past, to old events and old fogies, to people like Thorstein Veblen and the times in which they lived.

Veblen was born in 1857, early in a great wave of migration to the United States. His parents had emigrated from Norway ten years earlier, and his father never learned English. Thorstein grew up in a Norwegian community speaking Norwegian, which probably helps explain the Baroque eccentricities of his English prose. When Veblen was born, about 20 percent of the American population had come from another country; since the figure includes infants and children, it probably means that in a third or more of all households, as in Thorstein Veblen's, both parents were foreign born.

By the time Veblen was teaching at the New School, the proportion foreign-born in the population as a whole had declined to 14 percent -- but that still represented about 14 million Americans born outside the United States. Many of those people were our ancestors.

In 1980, the last time U.S. census-takers came around and asked, only 6 percent of the American population was foreign born, but something like half

of all Americans had at least one grandparent who was born outside the continental United States. Grandparents born in the United States, furthermore, had typically made major moves within the country, as had their children after them. And the vast majority of Americans had grandparents born before the days of jet planes, quick-frozen vegetables, television, OPEC, the Beatles, computers, gene-splicing, Trivial Pursuits, expensive oil, cheap transistors, Punk Rock, Communist China, Socialist Poland, independent Kenya, the atomic bomb. Within their own families, almost all Americans have seen enormous changes in the apparatus of everyday life.

Let's say the average man or woman entering the New School for the first time this fall was born in 1962. The way American generations have been running, that means the average grandparent of the average entering student -- with all these averages, you can see we're drifting into abstractions -- was born around 1910. The 75 years since 1910 cover a lot of change, far more than the arrival of jet planes, quick-frozen vegetables, and the like.

My grandparents were, obviously, born earlier, well back into the nineteenth century. On my father's side were Emil Tilly and Elizabeth Hapke, who were born near Danzig, or Gdansk, which then belonged to Prussia. On my mother's, Anne Thomas and Hugh Stott, both born in Wales. The German peasants, forced off the land, migrated as youngsters to German-speaking farm towns in western Michigan, and spent the rest of their lives in the Midwest. The decline of Welsh mining in the 1920s forced my widowed grandfather, his schoolteacher second wife Eva Clark, and his five daughters to pack up for a move to the Chicago area, where Hugh's locomotive-driver brother Chris, Chris' wife May and their three children had already settled.

For years, those grandparents meant to me little more than exotic accents, distinctive foods, unwanted chores, and tales of the old country. The lusty singing at Welsh family gatherings was welcome, as was my German grandmother's cinnamon-topped Kuchen, hot from the oven. But it took years to appreciate the vast network of cooperation that brought my four grandparents and many of their kin from Europe to America, and to regret my failure to question them about the whole turbulent experience of migration. If your grandparents are still around, wherever they were born, rush to interview them!

The New School has something in common with all our grandparents: started by crusty rebels such as Thorstein Veblen, renewed by the migration of European scholars, long a point of entry for ideas and people from outside the United States, still distinctive in accent, the New School is here to be interrogated.

But about what? Aside from sheer sentimentality, why should we care what happened to grandma and grandpa? In a world of OPEC, Trivial Pursuits, and nuclear warheads, hasn't their whole experience become obsolete? When you get right down to it, why pay attention to old people, old experiences, old ideas?

Since universities serve, among other things, as storehouses for old people, old experiences, and old ideas, the question deserves attention here, as students and faculty begin a year of learning together. In our

curriculum you'll find many intellectual equivalents of grandparents: old things, at least slightly exotic, that demand to be taken seriously. You will find courses that assume it is worthwhile to learn about eighteenth-century China, books that claim it is valuable to understand how sixteenth-century Italians reasoned about political life, teachers who take for granted that Greeks who wrote more than two thousand years ago said something applicable to life in 1985.

Counter-arguments come easily to mind: that rapid advances in science and technology are making all of the past, and much of the present obsolete; that we have arrived in a totally new post-industrial, post-modern era; that such monstrous events as the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima have driven an unmovable iron wedge between past and present experience.

Yet let's think for a moment about just one version of the argument, about the claim that nuclear weapons have rendered lessons of previous wars irrelevant to today's concerns. At first glance, the point is very persuasive. No previous weapon gave anyone the capacity to obliterate all civilized life in a few hours. Without a doubt, the likely outcome of a nuclear war differs fundamentally from that of any previous war. (An optimist, these days, says that half the population of the United States would survive a major nuclear attack -- which means, to a pessimist, that half the population would die.) The stakes of war have changed drastically for the worse since 1945.

But reflect again; does that change make the past irrelevant? Even if it is true that the terrible consequences likely to issue from a nuclear exchange set off our own time from all previous history, it does not follow that the conditions under which war, nuclear or otherwise, will break out have altered fundamentally. To find that alteration self-evident requires a profound faith in the calculating rationality of warmakers, in the comforting thought that statesmen usually ponder the human impact of war before they start a fight. Since people are still debating the rationality of twentieth-century wars initiated by Hitler, Mussolini, Khomeini, and other zealots, that faith needs some testing before we can take today's rationality for a fact.

However it comes out, the testing will necessarily take us back to grandpa and grandma. Literally and figuratively. The hypothetical grandparents of our hypothetical entering student were about 35 years old in 1945, and probably had been strongly involved in World War II, as warriors, victims, or civilian support. One version of our question, then, is whether grandma and grandpa's experiences through age 35 are irrelevant to the causes or consequences of war today.

We might approach the problem by examining the many wars that have occurred somewhere in the world since 1945: almost ten new wars a year, if we include every sustained conflict of arms, about one new war every two years, if we exclude civil wars, guerrilla struggles, and armed conflicts causing fewer than 1,000 deaths in battle. The longer interstate wars have become a bit more frequent since 1945 than they had been over the previous century. Since the onset of the nuclear threat, have the involvements of citizens in non-nuclear wars, and the conditions in which those wars occur, altered fundamentally? If so, how? If not, why not? Either way, we will

find ourselves comparing experiences before and after 1945 -- doing history, consulting grandparents.

Figuratively, we have to consult our intellectual grandparents. It is vital to determine whether the same conditions that favored war or peace before 1945 still apply. We can't settle for a straightforward analysis of U.S. - Soviet relations, because of three crucial facts:

1. Increasingly since 1945 destructive wars have not involved two or more major powers directly, but instead have pitted a major power against a secondary one, or two secondary powers against each other.
2. In the same period the international flow of arms and military expertise has shifted decisively from an exchange that occurred mainly among western powers to an export industry by which the U.S., the U.S.S.R., and a few other countries supply the Third World.
3. More and more countries have their fingers on nuclear buttons, either because they have developed their own atomic capacity or because the great powers have armed them.

People are not only thinking about war, but preparing for it, and actually waging it. In the nuclear age, all forms of war have clearly not become unthinkable, and the theoretical possibility of a nuclear catastrophe triggered by a small-power confrontation is increasing.

Has the whole warmaking system changed since 1945? Only a painstaking before-and-after comparison of threats, alliances, diplomatic signals, and outright wars will tell. Simple historical analogies will do more harm than good; we will gain nothing from asking whether the world situation in 1985 resembles the world situation in 1921, 1933, 1939, or 1945. Yet a proper comparison of international conflict before and after the bomb makes history vitally relevant. It involves asking how the dynamics of wars and of the international system work, and how they change. It takes us back to grandpa and grandma.

The same principle holds for many other sweeping changes of the contemporary world: the rapid population growth of poor countries, the acuteness of African famines, the rising importance of military regimes and coups d'etat in the Third World, the vast shifts of manufacturing jobs out of rich industrial countries, and so on. No use looking for strict analogies in the past. Much use for systematic, historically-grounded comparisons. The least that can come of the effort is a clearer specification of the ways in which the present does represent a sharp break with the past. Ask your grandparents.

Some things, furthermore, change very slowly or not at all. On those things, grandparents (biological and intellectual) bring a great deal of experience to bear. That is especially true for the perennial questions: How can we recognize true love? What do citizens owe to states, and vice versa? How effective is self-interest in achieving shared advantages? What separates humans from non-humans? Where does evil come from? Feel free to add your own perennial questions to the list.

These sorts of questions endure, even as our answers to them change. Our grandparents, intellectual and biological, asked them insistently. We should therefore consult them for more than one reason: because some statements of the questions are clearer, more compelling, more effective than others, and are therefore worth imitating or improving; because some recurrent answers to the questions are more defective than others, and are therefore worth avoiding; because sometimes exactly the answers we were looking for occurred to someone very bright a long time ago. (One of my teachers, the great Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, would occasionally greet what I thought was a brilliant, fresh insight by pausing, smiling, and then rumbling, "A very good idea, Mr. Tilly . . . but Plato said it better.")

Now, in the New School's chief domain, the social and behavioral sciences, I think that some of the answers we can now give to big questions about social life are better than those of past thinkers -- clearer, more falsifiable, yielding more accurate predictions of cases we haven't yet examined, leading more easily to other valuable ideas. Not all of our answers, by any means, but some of our new answers are better than the old ones. We know more than ever, for example, about why populations change, how people think, under what conditions people act collectively. We at the New School are here, in fact, to teach those answers, to test them, and to improve on them.

Not everyone agrees with me, even at the New School: some of my colleagues feel that the knowledge I regard as new and valuable is neither one. There are a number of areas -- such as the conditions for stable democracy -- where our usual answers differ from Plato's or Aristotle's, but are not demonstrably superior. Alas, we also disagree about which areas those are. (It reminds me of the dean of the Harvard Medical School who is supposed to have announced to an entering class of aspiring doctors, "Ladies and gentlemen, half of what we plan to teach you over the next four years is utter nonsense. Unfortunately, we don't know which half.") Debate on that sort of issue occurs more at the New School than at most other places, and makes it more enjoyable, if less comfortable, to be here. Whatever position you take, however, the old questions and answers are still worth studying. Why? Because the old-timers made many tries to answer perennial questions, and accumulated a record that reveals the characteristic difficulties and connections surrounding a basic question.

Thinker after thinker has, for example, tried to account for the world's social evils -- madness, crime, even war -- as a consequence of social change that runs too fast for the fragile social controls humans impose on each other. That line of argument is, so far as I can tell, usually wrong when it is not simply tautological. It is not generally true that migrants are more disorganized than stay-at-homes, that periods of rapid economic growth produce more crime than periods of stability, that the loosening of social ties generates rebellion, and so on through the empirical implications of the basic principle. Yet a review of the many moments at which people have invented and reinvented that sort of answer to questions about social evils reveals both its tie to elitist, conservative thinking and its surface plausibility, once one defines all sorts of disapproved behavior as alternative forms of "disorder". Studying the misapplication of such an idea will help us avoid it the next time we want to deal with social problems. Even when she's wrong, grandma is worth questioning.

My grandparents are gone. Some of yours are gone as well. For most of them, we can only consult memories, old photos, perhaps a handful of letters. But Plato remains, waiting to be consulted, to be criticized, perhaps even to be improved. So do Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber. So does Thorstein Veblen. They are our intellectual grandparents, and cry out for our attention. The worlds in which they lived also deserve investigation, both as settings for their thought and as origins of our own complex world. Join us in questioning them.

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NEW SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH
64 UNIVERSITY PLACE, SUITE 400
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10003

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