
SPOTLIGHT: Historicism, theory, and method

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Abstract Is historicism for Tilly a fact or a framework—the fact of history’s “contingent complexity” or the framework of his social thought? And how does he explain social and historical facts? With models whose elements are people trying to make the best of their situation as they see it? Or with causal mechanisms different from rational choice under specified situational constraints? Does his rejection of rational choice and methodological individualism contradict his own theoretical method? Or does it reflect a creative tension between historical explanation and sociological theory? These questions provoke an intense but amicable debate between kindred spirits who studied with Tilly yet have divergent opinions on theory and method.

Argument is risky and unpredictable, therefore educational.

—Christopher Lasch (1995, pp. 170–171)

The argument here is a critical but cordial dialogue between two old friends about Charles Tilly’s historicism and issues of theory and method it raises. Our format is like history as Tilly views it: unscripted, unrehearsed, interactive, open-ended, and cumulative. Where the argument will lead, we do not know—and will not know until we get there. Argument is volatile not only because it can be lost through errors of fact and logic, but also because it can arrive at surprise

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conclusions and change minds. In a Platonic dialogue, the author works the speakers as a ventriloquist works puppets. In this one, the authors are the speakers and speak for themselves: each tries to persuade the other, and both risk being persuaded in turn.

RA: To preclude misunderstanding, I think we should say what we mean by historicism, then say what issues of theory and method we will discuss.

LE: It's your party—you roped me into this . . .

RA: *Historicism* for Tilly means the opposite of what it means for Popper. For Tilly, historicism is a fact—the “uniqueness of sequences, unrepeatable in their contingent complexity” (Gould 2002, p. 102). He invokes Gould in an interview he gave Daniel Little five months before dying.¹ For Popper, historicism is a theory—the “fraudulent theory of historical prediction” whereby supposed laws of history or social development warrant prophecy of “what the future will bring” (Popper 1998, p. 57). Martin Jay—great man, nice guy—says Popper’s terminology is passé.² He is probably right about academic discourse. Look what happened to *essentialism*, Popper’s word for Platonic realism.³ But prophecy—especially self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968, pp. 475–490)—is rampant in world politics today.

LE: I hate to be disagreeable so soon into our discussion, but I disagree. I don’t think it’s a correct reading of Tilly to say that for him historicism is a *fact*. What were facts for Tilly? Tilly was entirely consistent in his stance: historians aren’t allowed to—and other social scientists certainly should not, though they are somewhat prone to—“make up” facts, to construct them as they please.

Tilly was a realist, but he never thought that his vast interpretive apparatus was “fact.” For him, all interpretation is subject to revision, as we discover new archives or other new sources, or devise new methods, or, most important, change our minds because further investigation and thinking is likely to lead—if one is as open-minded as Tilly—to a different understanding of causal mechanisms and processes at play. The Tilly of *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978) with its interest-based economic style of analysis is not exactly the Tilly who later emphasized relational analysis, the importance of mechanisms, the role of trust, and the trouble with and importance of stories.

We can summarize Tilly’s prefaces and introductions to his many books as: when I wrote this, I did not fully understand *x*, and therefore overemphasized *y*, and understated the importance of *z*. In the interview with Little, Tilly explains his many “errors” in *The Vendée* (1964) and his several changes of mind since he first thought about the French counterrevolution. Tilly did this throughout his intellectual life.

So, I’m arguing that for Tilly, historicism is not a fact; it’s a framework that drives the questions to which he sought answers. Tilly was committed to it because of its

¹ Go to www.changingsociety.org and click interviews.

² E-mail to RA, 26 November 2009.

³ “*Realism* . . . is the Platonic doctrine that universals or abstract entities have being independently of the mind; the mind may discover them but cannot create them” (Quine 1980, p. 14).

efficacy in addressing the range of problems and processes he studied. You invoke Tilly's quotation of Gould as evidence that for Tilly, historicism is fact. I have a hunch that Gould, and Tilly, are working with the idea of historicism as approach, not as fact. Tilly was extracting from Gould's fuller statement: "History presents two special problems: (1) frequent absence of evidence, given imperfections of preservation; and (2) the uniqueness of sequences, unrepeatable in their contingent complexity, and thereby distancing the data of history from such standard concepts as prediction, and experimentation" (Gould 2002, p. 102). *However*, if someone convincingly demonstrated that some sequences were repeatable, then Tilly would have taken that on board. He would still have been a historicist, but he would have revised his understanding of history and historical process.

RA: If you prefer to give Tilly's interpretive framework the label historicism and to give complex, unique, contingent, unrepeatable sequences another label (say, historicity) be my guest. The labels do not matter if they do not confuse. But the distinction between historicism-as-theory and historicism-as-fact (or historicity) does matter. Tilly's take on the history of state-making (1975, 1990, 2006) refutes modernization and political development theory, that is, American historicism (in Popper's sense) devised to answer Marxist-Leninist historicism. Tilly is an anti-historicist historicist in that sense.

For the rest, you describe Tilly as the ideal-untypical scientist. I cannot disagree: I never met anyone so willing (even eager) to revise own ideas in view of evidence. He hewed to the code implicit in these four questions:

Are conclusions to be consistent with premises (maybe even follow from them)? Do facts matter? Or can we string together thoughts as we like, calling it an "argument," and make up facts as we please, taking one story to be as good as another? (Chomsky 1992, p. 52)

Tilly answered the first two questions yes, the last two no. "Consistency and responsibility to fact" (Chomsky 1992, p. 52) were his ground rules. You are right about his intellectual attitude.

LE: But, Rod, even your description of Tilly contra modernization and political development theory—an attack by him on too-neatly repeatable sequences, or "stages"—can at least as easily be read as historicism as approach or framework, not as "fact." You refer to Tilly's "take" and modernization "theory." What are takes and theories if not frameworks of interpretation of historical process? Anyway, why don't we move on? What issues of theory and method are you getting at anyway?

RA: In the same interview that cites Gould, Tilly also cites Stinchcombe—in particular his book on how social theory explains history (1978). Tilly ran that book in the Social Discontinuity series, commends it in print (1981, pp. 7–12), and laments its neglect by colleagues in the interview with Little. Stinchcombe says history's "infinitely branching tree of causal sequences" (historicism-as-fact) "looks queer" from a "generalizing social science theory" point of view, though social theorists (as a rule) do theory best when they explain history—not when they theorize abstractly—and they all explain history the same way: they break it up into "theoretically

understandable bits,” that is, social actions; they explain social actions by “what people want and what they think they have to do to get it,” that is, motivating reasons; and they recombine understood actions into a “cumulative causal model” (1978, pp. 2, 13, 17, 64, 119). A historical explanation is a model whose elements are people trying to make the best of their situation as they see it over time.

Stinchcombe on historical explanation describes the “*méthode des modèles*” (Boudon 1992, pp. 229–230) ruling social science and historiography since classical antiquity.⁴ This theoretical method involves figuring out “what is to be done” in the situation people face on the rationality principle that they do what they think will get what they want—the result they prefer among the likely results of feasible actions. On that principle, which is the (usually tacit) major premise of explanatory argument, people’s situational constraints—the actions they think they can take, the results they think these actions will have, and the result they think they will like best—are the reasons that motivate their choice of action.

Concluding by invitation a book of Tilly’s essays in the sociological explanation of social history, Stinchcombe says, “Tilly’s key proposition about history” is “people are intentional and calculating animals, who build history out of their pictures of the future,” which are “always wrong,” thereby making historians indispensable (1997, p. 387). Tilly says Stinchcombe not only “has it right” but “has done it again,” expounding theory “more effectively than the author” (1997, pp. 12–13).⁵ Tilly also called Stinchcombe “one of the two living geniuses in sociology.”⁶ But Stinchcombe’s argument on historicism, theory, and method, which Tilly accepts, assumes rational choice and methodological individualism, which Tilly rejects (1997, pp. 7–9).⁷

LE: Ha! That’s interesting. So, we could accept this and say that Tilly’s caught up in a very bad contradiction. Or we could say that Tilly’s work embodies a tension between two sensibilities, which is manifest in his foci and even his styles of writing: he *did* see contingency, in which people work to make the best of their situations, *and* he did want to generalize, and he did so very powerfully.

However, just because Tilly, not surprisingly, had a very high regard for Stinchcombe does not mean that Stinchcombe has fully characterized Tilly’s thinking as a historian-social scientist. I think it’s more accurate to say that Tilly’s view of human intention, building history out of frequent error is only part of what Tilly saw. The other part that Tilly saw, and tried to account for, was enduring structures and their effects. This “structural Chuck,” the historian as engineer (who usually saw three possible answers for every question), focused on the enduring and large-scale social institutions built over time by collectivities of people which greatly affected the range of choice available—social structures or institutions such as states, economies, revolutions, social protests, and wars.

It is true that Tilly often emphasized how such enduring institutions constrained. As quoted by Michael Hanagan and Chris Tilly in the introduction to this book,

⁴ The argument is sketched elsewhere (Aya 2001, 2005, 2006, 2009).

⁵ He adds, “Read Stinchcombe to learn how uncertain representations of the future derived from past experience constrain present social interaction” (1997, p. 13).

⁶ Table talk in Amsterdam, 3 June 2006.

⁷ Homans spotlights the assumption of rational choice in a brilliant review (1983).

Tilly in 1996 argued that “past social relations . . . —material, ideological, and otherwise—*constrain* present social relations, and consequently *constrain* their products as well” (emphasis added).

At the same time, for Tilly, structure does not only constrain. For him, structure is *process*, iterated and reiterated interactions over time that both provide stability and are subject to both gradual and, in some cases, rapid discontinuous change. By this logic, so-called structure is as enabling as constraining—enabling by opening new avenues of calculation, action, and sensibility. For Tilly, as for Stinchcome and, of course, Marx, people make their own history—if inadvertently and by often or always reading the future wrongly. But, as important, for Tilly, and of course, Marx, is that people do not make history just as they please. And yet, the circumstances in which history is made, shaped by both the past and present, do not simply constrain, but equally enable by providing social connections, resources, repertoires, and the stuff of changing sensibilities.

So, we can see Tilly as caught in a serious contradiction. Or we can see him as more capacious, and to see his accounts of human action, big structures, and large processes as both constraining *and* enabling.

RA: The contradiction is between the theoretical method Tilly deploys when explaining social facts and social history, namely, the “*méthode des modèles*,” and his rejection of rational choice and methodological individualism, which the “*méthode*” entails.⁸ The tension is between the “explanation of a particular case and the search for generalizations” (Moore 1966, p. xvii). Contradiction and tension are not the same thing. The contradiction shows when Tilly insists on causal mechanisms and the primacy of social relationships, but the causal mechanisms are just rational choice under different situational constraints, and relationalism (as he calls it) is just exchange theory or transactionalism—to use labels from sociology and anthropology in the 1960s.⁹ The tension is the logical difference between explanation and generalization—between explaining facts and discovering theories (Popper 2002, pp. 540–541). Stinchcombe says social theorists usually explain better than they generalize, and the theory they actually use—the one that animates the explanatory model—is often different from the one they propound.

As for social action constituting social structures and structures constraining action, I quote an old friend: “Structures are only persons *doing* structure” (Gouldner 1980, p. 102). Terminate the rewards and punishments that constrain people to keep “doing structure,” and structures vanish like snow on a warm spring day. Constraint (as defined above) and enablement are two words for the same thing: I agree with what you say.

LE: I like what you say about tension, but I’m hesitant to agree with what you say about contradiction, particularly as you quote Moore. I think the problem lies in your statement that “causal mechanisms are *just* rational choice under different situational constraints” (emphasis added). What is “just” rational choice? For Tilly, “rational choice,” or better, choice, is best understood as a *social* phenomenon, shaped not

⁸ The “*méthode*” stipulates (1) “considérer tout phénomène collectif comme le produit d’actions individuelles” and (2) “interpréter l’action individuelle comme rationnelle” (Boudon 1992, pp. 282–283).

⁹ The then-standard authors (Homans 1974; Barth 1981) both rejected these labels as misleading.

only by constraints but by repertoires, past and present, and by future opportunities. I think you're squeezing Tilly's understanding of the primacy of the social into a box of individuals maximizing interests.

So, we're left with either a lack of clarity and/or a disagreement on how to characterize historicism in Tilly's work; a more serious disagreement on the degree to which Tilly was, or was not, engaged in methods of rational choice that cut against his emphasis on the social; and we are in entire agreement on what a beautiful mind Tilly had.

RA: One last shot at clarity. Let me try some synonyms. Nisbet prefers to call historicism-as-theory developmentalism (1969). Stinchcombe prefers to call it grand theory of history or epochal theory, and calls for "tossing out the epochal garbage to get at the causal core" (1978, p. 13). Tilly does that throughout his oeuvre, which is why Stinchcombe takes up "one of Tilly's masterpieces," and says studying masterpieces teaches most about the "integration of theory and research that constitutes methodology" (1997, p. 408).

Historicism-as-fact occasions another Gould one-liner: "The law of gravity tells us how an apple falls, but not why that apple fell at that moment, and why Newton happened to be sitting there, ripe for inspiration" (1989, p. 278). If you prefer to call Tilly's explanatory models historicism, go right ahead. But historicism-as-fact is what the models explain. The only logical difference between sociological and historical explanation is chronology.

To many, rational choice and methodological individualism appear absurd or obscene because of a big mistake—the "ungeheure Mißverständnis" of confusing them with rationalism and individualism as political ideologies (Weber 1968, pp. 557–558). There is nothing unsocial about rational choice or methodological individualism. To say Tilly's causal mechanisms are "just" rational choice under different situational constraints is to say his explanatory models have no other animating principle. Tilly (like everyone else who makes good sense of society and history) cannot help but be a rational-choice theorist and methodological individualist. You are too in your Merton Award-winning book—Tilly called it a classic—on official underestimation of the devastation nuclear war would cause (Eden 2004).

Repertoires and opportunities are situational constraints, as defined above. Maximizing interests? Better to say satisfying interests—take Simon's Nobel Prize-winning point (1997). But consider that "interests and passions" may coincide (Smith 1981, p. 630).

A beautiful mind? Absolutely. Powerful, acute, lucid, creative, and erudite. Despite his gigantic talent and awesome oeuvre, however, Tilly was disarmingly modest. Unpretentious and devoid of envy, he treated students and colleagues as equals: he never tried to overawe them in argument, much less pull rank, though he could not abide a prima donna. Immensely generous with intellectual and practical assistance, he enjoyed intellectual camaraderie, but disliked cliques. Typically, when he named sociology's other living genius, it was not himself. Bismarck said the measure of a person is intelligence minus vanity (Brenan 1975, p. 269). By that standard, Tilly was off the charts. He had only two proud boasts: he never gave his books subtitles, and he never was chairman of a university department or president of an academic professional association.

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