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Book review: as sociology meets history by Charles Tilly

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As Sociology Meets History by Charles Tilly

Review by: Craig Calhoun

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latter have been revised to “focus attention upon broad historical problems” rather than the books originally under review. Nonetheless they often retain their initial sparkiness. There is a useful survey of Macfarlane and Thomas on magic and witchcraft and a sharp critique of Trevor-Roper’s elderly paper on the European witchcraze (though more recent research has tended to substantiate some of Trevor-Roper’s points). The statistical gullibility of crime historians is observed and condemned. And there are some trenchant attacks on E. P. Thompson’s view of the polarization of English society in the eighteenth century between patricians and plebs: Stone argues persuasively for the important rise of professional and other middling groups in England after the Restoration which provided some of the economic and social adhesive helping to keep the political system more or less sticking together. The review of Kearney’s work on the universities is a masterpiece of erudition and critical attack, easily outgunning the opposition. At the same time several of the contributions have clearly lost some of their initial impact through age and quite a few have been overtaken by events. The piece on “Court and Country,” for instance, reads strangely in the context of the great wealth of studies which have appeared in the last decade on the English provinces. References to the lack of industrial growth or consumer demand in the post-Restoration period have been shown to be mistaken by the research of Joan Thrisk, Alan Everitt, and others.

While these pieces still have a whiff of cordite about them, of engagements past, the historiographical essays have a different tone, more in the nature of a full-dress review of the fleet. “History and the Social Sciences” surveys the rise of history as a humanistic discipline and its fragmentation under the impact of Max Weber, the *Annales* school, the psycho-historians, econometricians, and so on. The new specialisms are generally attacked, sometimes a little intemperately (is it really true to say “the habit of crunching historical explanation into a single one-way hierarchy of causation . . . is now becoming the hallmark of much modern French scholarship”?). More optimistic, there is a good account of the problems and value of the prosopographical approach. Finally “The Revival of Narrative” returns to the theme of the life and times of the profession in the last half century, describing the retreat by historians from quantitative, *Annales*-type dissection to a new stress on telling a story, which Stone sees as marking the end of the attempt to produce a coherent and “scientific” explanation of change in the past. The picture here seems too schematic, exaggerating the decline of the narrative approach in the first place and giving undue weight to its reappearance.

The collection then is not vintage Stone. It is a pity perhaps that some of his older and more perdurable articles on Elizabethan trade, social mobility, and education have not been included. But there is much to keep one alert, not infrequently bristling over ideas, always delighting in the prose. Perhaps we should think of this volume as a refitting exercise, scraping off the barnacles of former voyages. Before the next circumnavigation of English society.

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As Sociology Meets History. By *Charles Tilly*.
New York: Academic Press, 1981. Pp. xvi + 237. \$25.00

Charles Tilly is history’s sociologist and sociology’s historian. His prestige in each field is based largely on his crossing of the boundary, bearing esoteric

knowledge from foreign lands. In this, he is unlike his former teacher George Homans, who successfully pursued both historical scholarship and sociological theory, but who did each within its discipline and brought them into minimal juncture. Juncture is precisely what Tilly is about, and in the current collection of essays, it is his major task to introduce history to sociology.

The essays are an odd mix, however, of the casual and the serious, the long and the short, the good and the bad. They begin with a sociologist's overview of what history is (not failed sociology, but rather an object lesson for sociologists on the importance of time and place), and follow with notes and comments on the use of computers in historical research, the virtues of George Homans, the lack of virtues of Emile Durkheim, seventeenth-century France, nineteenth-century Britain, and the overall processes of state-building and proletarianization. Few of the essays have been properly published before, though most have been available as papers of the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Social Organization. The essays offer insights into Tilly's thought and method, but readers should dismiss the hope that he has pulled together a coherent statement of theoretical approach.

Contrary to widespread impression among historians, Tilly is not really a social theorist. Most of his writings on theories of collective action are quite casual—summary statements at the textbook level. His theoretical comments are complements to his methodological notes; they are, it would appear, more intended as part of a manual for his impressive army of graduate students than as serious independent statements. This is particularly the case with this volume. It does not have a clear orientation to any body of professional historians or sociologists, but would be of considerable help to any student about to begin working with Tilly.

Tilly's attack on Durkheim is a good example of the way in which he treats serious social theory. It is more a clever dismissal than a sustained rebuttal. The essay is thirteen pages long, and Durkheim doesn't make his appearance until the sixth page. In fact, Tilly doesn't confront Durkheim's social theory in any cohesive way (as one might expect from the title of the essay) but only attacks the use of Durkheim's notion of anomie to explain protest. There are several problems with this attack. In the first place, it is really aimed at 1950s functionalism of the Parsons/Smelser variety, not at Durkheim. Here is Tilly: "Durkheim indicates that short-run disruptions of the balance between morality and organizational structure result from rapid change, accelerated economic growth, or industrial crisis and likewise incite disorder in the groups most affected by them. In our historical material, we might reasonably expect to find rapid rural-to-urban migration, massive industrialization, and major economic fluctuations producing exceptionally high levels of conflict and protest" (p. 104). In fact, Durkheim had very little to say about "conflict" and "protest"; his account of anomie was applied primarily to the explanation of suicide, with only casual asides on crowds. It is certainly true that his work fits into a long line of work treating popular protest as a sign of psychological disturbance, the argument of which Smelser is the foremost contemporary exponent. But Tilly's critique, surely, should be aimed at the failure to realize how much organization protest takes, and thus how much solidarity must exist among members of protesting groups. Suicide, by contrast, requires very little collective mobilization. One might, in fact, use some of Durkheim's account of how groups are knit together to explain the social organization underpinning protest and conflict. This has been done. Indeed, Durkheim is a traceable ancestor of "resource mobilization theory," an approach

to the analysis of collective action with which Tilly himself has been identified. But Tilly settles for the cheap shot. The fact that this is unfair to Durkheim is less important than the fact that it inhibits historical scholarship and theory building. It leaves Tilly knocking over straw men, rather than building strong new theories.

Tilly is at his best, as well as sometimes his worst, when he teases an hypothesis out of previous work and sets out to devise ingenious ways of testing it. He is a master of the art of methodological adaptation, refusing to surrender to mere description just because the most advanced techniques of causal analysis are hard to use with historical data. Since most of the historical essays in this book are not real research reports, however, but attempts to exemplify particular sorts of approaches, the book itself is unfair to Tilly. It fails to convey any sense of really serious historical analysis, though elsewhere Tilly has produced a good deal of this. Here we get mainly generalities; particular cases appear not as evidence but as examples.

Three more or less serious historical essays are included. The first, on war and peasant rebellion in seventeenth-century France, shows that excessive focus on issues of land use and tenure can mislead the student of peasant rebellions. Resistance to commercialization and taxation—especially military exactions—needs to be taken into account. This is a familiar and sound Tilly argument. A second essay, “How (And to Some Extent, Why) to Study British Contention,” is more of a hodgepodge. It contains a very brief and casual review of the popular politics of 1828–34, a much more sustained account of how the Tilly group is conducting research into “contentious gatherings” during the period (primarily by an elaborate coding of newspaper accounts for the computer) and a few paragraphs about where the analysis seems to be going. The project sounds very interesting from this preview, and one will look forward to research results; perhaps this article originated as a successful grant proposal or application for renewal. The conclusions, however, are at the level of “The contentious gatherings of 1828–1834, then, were not only meaningful in their own terms. They help us understand the political changes that were going on in Britain as a whole in ways that parliamentary speeches and the correspondence of leaders cannot” (p. 178). In other words, Tilly is still arguing in favor of creating the Social Science History Association, or promoting the “new social history” with its study of “history from the bottom up.” In “States, Taxes, and Proletarianization,” Tilly makes two points which, again, will not shock the reader. First, “natural increase, not social mobility, played the major part in the growth of the proletariat since 1500 and, especially, after 1800” (p. 199). Second, the costs of state formation and war-making both led statemakers to promote and protect the accumulation of capital, and promoted the commercialization of labor and commodity production.

A concluding oddity. While Tilly periodically praises Marx as a counterpart (along with Homans) to his vilifications of Durkheim, he doesn’t seem to take Marx very seriously, or to see the role of Marxist theory in history as much more than an exhortation to look to the development of capitalism and the conflict among classes as central to the explanation of historical change. I am not sure where this leaves his relationship to Marxism, except that it leaves him neither a follower nor a serious critic.

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