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SYMPOSIUM ON CHARLES TILLY'S *Why*?

Why? Charles Tilly's Cabinet of Wonders

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In his umpteenth book *Why?* (2006) Charles Tilly has shifted his focus from large-scale historical processes to both present history and personal history, including the illness and mortality of others and himself.

In his discussions of large-scale processes, Tilly has always provided vivid and telling detail, whether of "malefactors who set off … fireworks" in Dijon in 1642 (Tilly, 1986, p. 2), or of Louis XIV and his finance minister Colbert maneuvering to avoid state bankruptcy, and "to keep smuggling, banditry, bribery, and plunder from getting completely out of hand" (Tilly, 1997b, p. 37). Tilly presents here not an illustrated set of large-scale processes but a very personal cabinet of wonders, stuffed not with crocodile skulls, musical instruments, and deteriorating dice, but with others' writing that has caught his eye, his own acute observations, and appearances by family members, friends, and colleagues.

In a sense, this is not an abrupt departure: we've met various of Tilly's extended family and friends before, in dedications, forewords, acknowledgments, and text, though here Tilly goes further. *Why?* is not only set in the present, but is *about* the present: it opens and closes with how various people have tried to make sense of the shattering attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11. And though Tilly's wide-ranging discussion of his own family and of illness may appear to be about past and future, this too is fundamentally, and movingly, about the present.

Trademark Tilly

There is much trademark Tilly here, including the caveat in the beginning that perhaps he "hadn't thought hard enough about what it usually takes to make a description or explanation comprehensible and credible." (I remember my shock when I first read Tilly's pages of discussion of biases and shortcomings in his edited volume on *The Formation of*

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National States in Western Europe [Tilly, 1975, pp. 48–50]). Of course, we have seen this many times before, fairly recently in Tilly's discussion of his previous "calamitous typology" and in his mea culpa "I have made many mistakes and entered many cul-de-sac." (Tilly, 1997a, pp. 10, 12).

There are other continuities as well: the strong authorial voice; the clear, vivid, and humorous prose; and variations on familiar themes. For example, Tilly has long wrestled with how to integrate analytics with accessible narrative (he often lists to one side or the other; here, they seem in perfect balance). He has long been concerned with the prevalence and error of "dispositional" accounts that emphasize individual understanding and action over social context and unanticipated consequences; with developing relational accounts; and he must have teethed on counterfactuals. Here, as elsewhere, Tilly works with a two dimensional space marked not only by opposition and distinction between categories, though this is often a feature of his spaces, but by the relationships, connections, and movement between categories.

Two × two

Why? is built around just such a two dimensional space, in this case, a straightforward two × two table. From left to right, the columns represent two kinds of coherent schemes of reason giving: first, non-specialized, everyday *popular* accounts that people give for their own and others' actions; second, *specialized* reasons that depend on extensive professional or other training. Going top to bottom, the rows represent two forms of explanation: first, categorical explanations that use *formulas* of one sort or another to match phenomena to categories (in making medical diagnoses for example); second, *cause-effect accounts* that trace processes (p. 19).

Two categories by two categories yield the four compartments of Tilly's curiosity cabinet: the popular formulas of *conventions* ("the subway was a mess"); the popular cause-effect accounts of *stories*; the specialized formulas used in scientific and legal *codes*; and the specialized cause-effect "*technical accounts*" of, for example, the disciplines of history and sociology.

In Tilly's words, "All four kinds of reasons commonly do relational work" between the giver of reasons and the receiver. All forms of reason giving can create relations, confirm relations, negotiate relations, and/or repair damaged relations (pp. 19–20).

Tilly's exposition runs in the order just above, from convention to technical accounts, but I will proceed in a different order, and for a very specific reason: Tilly is most at home with codes and technical accounts and provides enormously stimulating and satisfying insight into each and their relation to each other. Though Tilly describes stories as "a great human invention" (p. 95), and his discussion is rewarding, it is doubtful that a journalist or novelist or playwright would fully recognize his description. Stories for Tilly are what technical accounts are *not*, and he even has a form of story he's most comfortable with, the "superior story": a good translation of a technical account for a non-specialized audience. Conventions is at once perhaps the most underdeveloped and the most suggestive of the categories.

My reading of codes and technical accounts will ask a question Tilly does not explicitly ask, though his text certainly invites: what happens when less skilled or less conventional users provide reasons? My reading of stories and conventional accounts asks the opposite: what happens when more skilled or more manipulative users provide reasons? This will lead us into organizational grotesqueries and conspiracy theories, as

well as into negotiated relationships that include doing deliberate damage and rupturing relations.

White coats and dark codes

I start with Tilly's very powerful argument about codes, illustrated with engaging legal and medical examples (and, later, an example of quantitative coding of crime statistics in the chapter on technical accounts). In Tilly's words, "Asked to justify a decision, adjudicate a dispute, or give advice, skillful users of codes find matches between concrete cases and categories, procedures, and rules already built into the codes" (p. 104).

Tilly has a very nice discussion of codes in bureaucratic context (pp. 103–104). But what happens when skilled developers of codes build into them mismatches—whether deliberate or not—between the codes and the social or physical world? And what happens when possibly less skilled users of these codes provide reasons? We get reification of categories; stories about why categories and procedures make sense when they don't, that is, bureaucratic justificatory nonsense; we get "fantasy documents" such as evacuation plans that cannot possibly be implemented (Clarke, 1999); we get difficult-to-correct procedures; we get injustice—for example, the categorization of air in lower Manhattan as clean after September 11, leading to the classification of the respiratory difficulties of workers on the World Trade Center pile as unrelated to their work (Altman, 2006); and we get human-made disasters and potential disasters such as bridge collapses and military miscalculation (Petroski, 1994; Eden, 2004).

Technical accounts—including the paranormal

Tilly's treatment of technical accounts is terrific. These specialized cause-effect accounts include explanations of particular outcomes or processes that may span millennia and ranges of outcomes under varying conditions. Tilly carefully shows the articulation of specialist technical accounts with codes and differentiates technical accounts from stories, which omit "the incremental, indirect, environmental, simultaneous, and reciprocal effects" of technical accounts (p. 130).

Clearly, not all technical accounts are equally good or beyond dispute—in which case academia would simply grind to a halt—and we can add to this box a class of accounts that includes Steven E. Jones's explanation for the collapse of the World Trade Center. Jones, a full professor of physics and astronomy at Brigham Young University, uses standard scientific method regarding anomalies and elimination of implausible causes, to argue, in the words of John Gravois in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "that the airplanes Americans saw crashing into the twin towers were not sufficient to cause their collapse, and that the towers had to have been brought down in a controlled demolition" of pre-planted thermite. Other academics have extended Jones's argument to conclude that U.S. government was complicit in the attacks (Gravois, 2006).

There are also the technical accounts that nightly fill the airwaves with authorized experts (admittedly their Ph.D.s are in somewhat offbeat areas such as parapsychology), advanced codes and technologies, clear logical argument, and independent corroboration of a wide range of paranormal phenomena, including UFO sightings, astral travel, and Entity Consciousness (Coast to Coast, 2002).

Do such examples not belong here? I don't see why not, and they raise the issue of the criteria for good technical accounts—and whence the sources of authority for such accounts.

Once upon a time . . .

Let us move to the column that Tilly calls popular accounts. Here Tilly tells us wonderful stories about Jerry Falwell's stories, love in San Jose, a turn-of-the-20th-century London thug and his chronicler, sickness, his family, and himself. If codes and technical accounts do their work at some distance from individuals, stories especially are told at specific human scale: they provide cause-effect accounts following the grain of experience. Tilly says stories "help account for puzzling, unexpected, dramatic, problematic, or exemplary events"—all the while doing relational work (p. 93). Still, they frustrate the social science purist in Tilly: stories generally use actors' dispositions to explain outcomes, and they ignore the necessary conditions, unanticipated consequences, indirect effects, competing explanations, etc. emphasized in technical accounts, resulting in "simple plots with absurdly stripped-down causes and effects" (pp. 17, 70).

Tilly is not wrong in his claims, but very skilled stories do much more. Why, for example, do we listen so avidly to horror stories of academia, the jaw dropping stories of sexual harassment or the detailed recounting of denial of tenure? Granted that bad behavior is fascinating—the dispositional aspect of stories that Tilly emphasizes—but one also takes satisfaction in learning from such stories how institutions *really* work, the rules, procedures, and incentives shaping bad behavior. And of course such institutional illumination, explicitly set in time and place, is provided by very good journalism, biography, and fiction. In addition, because skilled stories are told at the level of experience, they excel at enabling us to have some grasp of worlds—institutional and emotional—we could not otherwise imagine. (Read Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* [2001] if you doubt this.) In looking at stories from the vantage point of technical accounts, Tilly has underestimated their strengths in helping us understand reasons why.

Conventions naughty and nice

Unlike the other boxes of Tilly's curiosity cabinet, which invite new stuffings, the very carpentry of this compartment seems incomplete. Like codes, conventions are formulas: (I paraphrase) "I'm a klutz," "You're a slob," and *Post's Etiquette*'s "I'm terribly sorry, but I have some work that I must complete" (pp. 26–27, 32). Tilly refers to conventions as "sloganeering" (p. 22), and basically sees them as following a logic of appropriateness that helps smooth social life (p. 34). But Tilly's treatment of conventions is not as well articulated with codes and stories as it might be; he points to a further argument that he does not quite nail down. I think that argument runs like this: like codes, conventions are typifications; unlike codes, conventions do not "test" matches but assume them. Here, the matches are between types of actors, or sometimes, situations, and implied actions. (Klutzes knock books off the table.) Parallel to the dispositions of stories, these types drive actions, but unlike stories, where a disposition is often particular to a specific character (say, Anna Karenina), conventions are distinctly impersonal. That's what they do: they keep us away from persons and intimate knowledge. ("He resigned to spend more time with his family.")

So, more basic than the logic of appropriateness is that conventions match categorical types with kinds of actions. Given this, it should not be surprising that conventions may as easily rupture and damage relationships as maintain and repair them. Take right-wing radio's Rush Limbaugh's characterization of the "drive-by media"; in case his listeners don't know what is implied by this "type," Limbaugh spells it out: "They pull up to a congested area, they spray a hail of bullets into the crowd. It causes mass hysteria, confusion,

mistakes, and misinterpretation" (Limbaugh, 2006). Similarly, radio talk show host Michael Savage routinely assails the "Islamofascists" who attacked America on September 11 and who are allied, improbably to the uninitiated, with "modern liberalism," a sausage-like "blend of fascist, Communist, and socialist ideologies" (Savage, 2005). And then there is Jewwatch.com's "Rockefeller-Jewish Zionist-Soviet conspiracy" (a typification Limbaugh and Savage do not associate themselves with). Here, then, is a simpler version of conspiracy theory in which the category entails certain kinds of actions.

And, still, Tilly has the last word! For what was President Bush doing when he spoke in mid-August of the "war against Islamic fascists" (Miller, 2006)? Given the solicitousness of the White House toward the constituencies of right-wing radio, we can only infer that in using a variation of a term so closely associated with Michael Savage and other right-wingers, Bush was confirming and possibly repairing relations with them.

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