

Barry Wellman, Review of Charles Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries & Social Ties*. Boulder, CO and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2005. 269 pp. Published in *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 113, issue 5, March 2008

I once asked Charles Tilly how I could return a kindness. He replied, “Don’t do that: just pass it on to your students.” As Tilly’s sparring partner, European historian Eugen Weber once said, “I don’t think you can be a scholar without the wild desire to want to pass on [what you’ve learned]” (*Toronto Star*, March 14, 1999).

There comes a time in every person’s life when he wants to pass on his lore and knowledge. This is the pass-it-on book of the 2005 winner of the American Sociological Association’s Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award.

The book’s sixteen essays gather, systemize and present Tilly’s most salient ideas in one handy location. They contain major schemas about political processes, especially how these processes link to establishing, maintaining and crossing boundaries. For those of you who cannot keep up with Tilly’s copious writing, the essays crystallize tight, clear statements, distilled from his many years of experience and wisdom in thinking about contentious politics and societies. And implicitly, the essays provide a guide on how to do social science Tilly-style: integrating theoretical schemas about recurrent mechanism with systematic evidence. Indeed, it would be a useful exercise just to trace the development of his thoughts on social movements, collective violence and contentious politics from the 1960s until now.

Charles Tilly has always respected – and crossed – boundaries. When I first met him in 1964, he was at the interdisciplinary Joint Center for Urban Studies that linked Harvard and MIT, as well as sociology, political science, etc. That was not the only boundary: Tilly was in the most interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations that tried to meld sociology with social anthropology, social psychology and clinical psychology. Perhaps it was negotiating these boundary crossings that has led Tilly to emphasize relational analyses (social movements arising out of connectivity) and comparative studies when individualistic analyses (social pathologies) and single case studies were in vogue.

In contrast to the idiographic bent of much contemporary social science, Tilly has always had a bent to developing broader schemas as a way of understanding what he has observed and pushing himself and others to evaluate these schemas with new observations. In Tilly’s schemas, transactions and relationships come first, as he deals systematically with intergroup inequality and boundaries, both social and political.

At least since his 1960s’ *The Vendée* and his J-curve critique for the Kerner Commission on U.S. violence, Tilly has argued against seeing boundaries and contentions arising out of individual predilections. In this book, he makes a strong case for seeing such boundaries as the result of groups forging boundaries and then operating within and across them. Keen to tie together his many studies (and those of others such as Douglas McAdam and Eric Wolf); his essays generalize about mechanisms and processes. Although Tilly does not say, to my mind he takes a leaf from Harrison White’s 1960s schema of “catnets”: focusing on unequal categories (social classes, for example) as well as relations within and across categorical boundaries. The book repeatedly makes the points that:

- (a) Boundaries and categories make each other – they are a duality.

- (b) Boundaries inherently mean boundary crossing, such as French King Louis XIV's imposition of French boundaries in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Roussillon: "When people put a political boundary in place, they also organize social relations on each side of the boundary, relations across the boundary, and stories about the whole ensemble" (p. 182).

Each reader will pluck different schemas and pithy insights from this compilation whose scope ranges across continents and centuries. For me, these included discussions of ethnic cleansing and of "opportunity hoarding" in Italian-American chain migration. Continuing his early research interest, Chapter 10 does a fine job of showing how migration ties and boundaries intersect with ethnic/occupational boundaries. And a handy summary of his *Durable Inequality* book gave me new insights.

The book is Tilly's version of what science-fiction authors call a "fix-up": a somewhat integrated whole created from often-related shorter pieces that have been published previously. I wish it had been more tightly edited. There is some repetition and unneeded residues of lectures (as in "my presentation," p. 73). I also would have appreciated additional stories to flesh out the many schemas for Tilly is a master storyteller: smart, pithy, original and insightful. In its distilled form, the essays lead readers to Tilly's books to seek documentation and validation of the mechanisms he describes.

Tilly always has been generous with where he has put things – specialized journals, book chapters, invited lectures – so this compilation of essays, originally written between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, allows many ideas to reach wider audiences. Tilly steals from himself: he confesses to "self-plagiarism" in the second paragraph of the book. But as choreographer Martha Graham once said, "We all steal ideas, dear, but in the end we are judged on who we stole them from and what we did with them" (quoted in John Fraser, "The Essence of Courage," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, February 23, 1981: A8). In this collection, you can see Tilly continuously revising his work using his "Invisible Elbow" approach to forging a scholarly path (*Sociological Forum* 11 [1996]: 589-601).

For nearly fifty years, Tilly has always been a step ahead on the path. In 1964, he handed me a cigar, the second time we had met. "We just had a baby!" he said. "You're first," I smiled indulgently. "Our fourth," young Chuck said. Young and old, Tilly finishes what he starts: the preface tells of his driving hundreds of miles through blizzards to give a talk at Cornell in 1995, far above Cayuga's icy waters.

Like *Two Buck Chuck*, this book is great value and of mixed vintage, even if you must get it from Amazon rather than Trader Joe's.