

# Always—and Uniquely—Chuck Tilly

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No matter what he did, and when, Chuck Tilly was Chuck Tilly. His modus operandi and accomplishments were unique, and these were evident throughout his long and productive career. We suspect that Tilly's virtues have been evident to many contributors and readers of this journal. Therefore, we focus on the continuity of these virtues, as we experienced them early and often in his career.

What qualifies us for this take on Charles Tilly? The senior author was his first doctoral student and served as his teaching assistant in urban sociology, just after Tilly's arrival in 1963 as a lecturer at Harvard University. The slightly less senior author also met Tilly that year, followed as a teaching assistant in the same course, and worked closely with Tilly on his dissertation. Both of us came to the University of Toronto in the mid-1960s as a function of Tilly's initiatives in conjunction with his own move north of the border. Toronto is where we have remained and where Tilly has always resided in our lives and work.

What was unique about Tilly, right from that beginning?

## Indefatigability

When Chuck had his recruitment visit at the University of Toronto, his first request was to see the campus swimming pool, as this was a vital cog in his long and intensive work day. Once appointed, he swam laps daily between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m. He would be in the department—teaching and available to colleagues and students—from an early hour until beyond midnight, poring over his research. We despaired of emulating his diet of 5 hours of sleep, but his energy level never flagged.

## Enthusiastic Innovation

Chuck Tilly brought with him an aura of enthusiastic innovation. In those formal days, his tieless attire, green book bag, and bicycling were visceral signs of a new man in motion. He fostered scholarly enthusiasm. One day he excitedly showed us the new calculator he had bought for the department. "It does square roots!"

## **Interdisciplinarity**

Chuck Tilly was a master of sociological thinking and methodology. But he was sufficiently concerned about getting to the heart and dynamics of questions and topics that he never permitted the blinkers of disciplinary orthodoxy to stand in his way. He fit well in a Harvard context in which sociology was part of an interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations, and he came to the appointment in connection with the interdisciplinary Harvard-M.I.T. Joint Center for Urban Studies. His urban sociology course was structured to examine the diverse perspectives pertinent to understanding cities, a format later realized in print in his splendid book, *An Urban World* (1974). He was already beyond the future spectacles of academic wars among urban sociologists espousing singular views of the subject such as human ecology, neo-Marxism, postmodernism, and culturalism.

Although we first knew Tilly as an urban sociologist, it was no contradiction that he had already delved deeply into historical themes and perspectives and would do so persistently in the future. It didn't matter what he was tackling at any time; it was how he did so—integrating the diverse strands needed to explain and understand a topic. He contributed to knowledge by making original, in-depth, and integrated takes on longstanding questions and issues.

The key to Tilly's approach was to look for interpersonal and interinstitutional relationships. In thinking about cities, he urged us to discover how people were connected in cities to confront the myth of the loss of community. In thinking about political contentions, he urged us to realize that riotous situations arose out of the everyday associations of participants—and not out of the psychodynamics of alienation.

## **Judicious Choices of Methods and Data**

Just as Charles Tilly was not bound by disciplinary blinkers, he did not restrict himself to conventional methods and data. He advocated nonreactive observational means of understanding urban neighborhoods alongside more traditional ecological statistics in urban sociology (see Tilly, 1967). On the other hand, he advocated the empirical examination of systematic behavioral records as he dealt with historical topics (see Tilly, 1970).

## **Stimulating New Generations of Original Thinkers and Researchers**

Just as Charles Tilly insinuated his thought processes into the reconceptualization and thorough examination of timeless research questions, so too did he urge his

students to delve into the issues that interested them personally. However much we respected and admired our mentor's research, we were encouraged to develop our own research agendas and projects—with his inestimable guidance and manifest respect. He was there to help us expand in every possible direction. As he told his students, "By the time you finish your dissertation, you will be the world's expert on your subject."

To the extent that we thereby sailed into new harbors (environment-behavior studies, and network analysis in our respective cases), he was always there to provide stimulation and support. Often with only minimal lead time for feedback, he always saw more in our thinking and formulations than we did ourselves at any moment, leading to the most fruitful cyclical effects possible. We would walk into his office with exciting, inchoate ideas. He would share our excitement and say, "That's great. What you are proposing to do is the following: first: . . . , second: . . . ," and so on. And he would feed back to us a structured set of testable research questions and data sources. He always knew more facts and arguments than anyone could—be it the micro-politics of 19th-century Switzerland or the left hand of Oscar Peterson's piano playing.

When thanked, Tilly reacted with a characteristic reply, "Don't thank me. Pass it on to your students." Despite his modesty, the University of Toronto honored him in 1995 with both an honorary doctorate and a "Tillyfest."

### Explicit and to the Point

Charles Tilly cut to the chase. We've tried here to follow his example of writing clearly, concisely, promptly, and with verve. We learned from him to always start our work with a good story and a clear formulation—and then to get on with it.

Rather than adding more words ourselves, we refer readers to Charles Tilly's masterful essay, called simply "How I Work" (n.d.).

### References

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