

Charles Tilly's Relational Approach to Terrorism*

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Charles Tilly did not write as voluminously about terrorism as about many other issues that interested him during his long and distinguished career. However, collective political violence was one of his long-standing concerns, and he did produce a significant and extremely interesting body of work on terrorism after the attacks of 9/11. Terrorism is a recurrent theme in his important 2003 book, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, which concludes with a discussion of the topic. And two of Tilly's last articles dealt with the subject: "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," which appeared in a special issue of *Sociological Theory* (2004) on terrorism (and was reprinted in Tilly's *Explaining Social Processes* [2008]), and "Terror as Strategy and Relational Process," which appeared in the *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* (2005a). The title of this last article nicely captures Tilly's general approach to terrorism, as I will explain below. (Many of the ideas in Tilly's two articles on terrorism reappear in his 2006 book, *Regimes and Repertoires*.)

How did Tilly conceptualize and propose to explain terrorism? And how useful and persuasive are his ideas on this topic? After summarizing Tilly's main claims about terrorism, including his call for a "relational approach" to terrorism, I will discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of his ideas.

Tilly on Terror

Tilly makes six main claims, or sets of claims, about terrorism:

1. *Terrorism is a political strategy that has been employed by a wide range of political actors with a variety of motives.* "Terror is a strategy, not a creed" (2004: 11). Terrorism is not the product "of a uniform mentality," writes Tilly, "but a strategy employed by a wide array of actors whose motives, means, and organization vary greatly" (2005a: 21). "As a general rule," in fact, "the attribution of terrorism to extremism, fundamentalism, or delusion makes little sense" (2003: 175).

2. *The strategy of terrorism entails the use of violence and threats by a much weaker actor against a much stronger actor (or vice versa).* The strategy of terrorism is defined by Tilly as the "assymetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies using means that fall outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within some current regime" (2004: 5). Thus, terrorism "is one-sided, often pitting either relatively powerless people against very powerful enemies, or vice versa: powerful people, especially armies or governments, against the powerless" (2005a: 27). It encompasses "a wide variety of violent interactions," including "spectacular exemplary punishment in some regimes, assassination of political leaders in others, attacks on citizens at large in still others" (2003: 175). Tilly describes terrorism, as he defines it, as a "recurrent strategy of intimidation" that "corresponds approximately to what many people mean by terror" in common discourse (2005a: 22).

3. *Terrorism cannot be explained by a single, invariant theory.* Given that a "remarkable array of actors sometimes adopt terror as a strategy," Tilly emphasizes, "no coherent set of cause-effect propositions can explain terrorism as a whole" (2004: 11). "Terrorism is

not a single causally coherent phenomenon" (2004: 12). Terrorism "consists of a single party's conflict strategy rather than a causally coherent category of collective violence" (2003: 233). Not surprisingly, then, Tilly never attempts to formulate any "cause-effect propositions" about terrorism as such.

4. *"Terrorists" commit only a small share of terrorist violence.* So-called terrorists ("political actors who commit their whole lives to terror") "perform only a small share of all terrorist acts" (2005a: 21). "It is a serious but common error," Tilly claims, "to assume that a class of people called terrorists, motivated by ideological extremism, perform most acts of terror" (2003: 237). In fact, state agents have been responsible for many more terrorist acts than "terrorists."

5. *Most "terrorists" also employ other political strategies—they are rarely simply "terrorists."* "The overwhelming majority of terrorists also engage in other sorts of politics, on non-politics, simultaneously, earlier, and/or later" (2005a: 21). In fact, writes Tilly, "Most uses of terror actually occur as complements or as byproducts of struggles in which participants—often including the so-called terrorists—are engaging simultaneously or successively in other more routine varieties of political claim making" (2004: 6).

6. *Terrorism arises from the dynamic interactions and relations among political actors—and so must be explained "relationally."* "If we do not go relational," Tilly writes, "we will not explain terror" (2005a: 21). "All this amounts to saying that terror is a strategy, that the strategy involves interactions among political actors, and that to explain the adoption of such a strategy we have no choice but to analyze it as part of a political process" (2005a: 21). Such an approach requires, among other things, that analysts

“connect the strategy [of terror] systematically to other forms of political struggle proceeding in the same settings and population” (2005a: 21).

Tilly’s Insights

Tilly's ideas about terrorism, as one would expect, include several striking insights. Especially helpful is the idea that terrorism refers to a strategy that can and has been employed by a wide range of actors, including states; terrorism does *not* usefully designate, by contrast, a particular type of group, state, or individual. Tilly points out, as have many others, that most terrorism has been perpetrated by states.

This idea frees scholars from (or at least forces them to justify) a unfortunate tendency to focus on a relatively narrow and unrepresentative range of actors who employ violence—typically, small nongovernmental organizations or networks. It also frees analysts from the assumption that such nongovernmental actors employ violence in ways that are somehow unique. The presumed uniqueness of terrorism, in fact, has been used to legitimate both a separate field of “terrorism studies” and the search for a discrete theory of terrorism—both of which are quite misconceived from Tilly's perspective.

Tilly helpfully warns us, in fact, that the chase for an invariant, universal theory of terrorism is chimerical given the wide range of actors, with varying motives and forms of association, who sometimes employ terrorism. Moreover, Tilly rightly suggests that the labeling of such actors *as* "terrorists" may blind us to the fact that they typically employ diverse political strategies, not all of them violent. As we have noted, terrorists are rarely *just* terrorists for Tilly. The label "terrorist" (at least when applied to organizations or networks) is thus a kind of reification—an essentializing device, so to

speak—that obscures the complex and variable nature of actors' political strategies. The label may be quite effective at stigmatizing a political group, but it is quite problematic, analytically, if we want to understand what they are doing.

Responding to this problem, one scholar has suggested that “if the *primary* tactic of an organization is deliberately to target civilians, it deserves to be called a terrorist group, irrespective of the political context in which it operates or the legitimacy of the goals it seeks to achieve” (Richardson 2006: 6; emphasis added). This seems reasonable, but some political groups do not always employ a single primary tactic, and some change their primary tactic from one year (or one month) to the next. Using this rule, the Palestinian group Hamas might have been a “terrorist” group in 2002, but it certainly was not in 2007. I am persuaded by Tilly that it makes more sense simply never to apply the label “terrorist” to groups (or to states or individuals) but to a particular political strategy.

Tilly is rightly worried, then, that analysts will simplify and thereby misconstrue the strategy of terrorism by failing to consider the full range of actors who employ it and the full range of strategies (including routine and nonviolent strategies) these actors employ in addition to terrorism. But more than this, Tilly is especially worried that analysts will decontextualize and thereby misunderstand the adoption and use of this strategy by focusing too intently on the characteristics of the actors who employ it (be they individuals or groups) *to the exclusion of their dynamic relations with other actors*.

Tilly fears, we might say, an overly "internalist" approach to terrorism—and to other forms of strategic action, violent and nonviolent—that is, an approach that focuses on the characteristics of the groups and individuals who employ this strategy. Such characteristics might include what Tilly terms their “dispositions” (ideas, ideology,

habits, and emotions), their roles or functions within a larger social system, or their demographic characteristics (class, ethnicity, age, gender, etc.). Tilly is especially insistent that common “dispositional,” including “idea-based,” explanations of terrorism do not take us very far, especially accounts that emphasize the alleged ideological extremism (or anger or humiliation) of actors who employ terrorism.

For Tilly, an actor’s turn to terrorist violence arises not so much from ideas or hatred *per se* as from the ways in which that actor relates to and interacts with other actors over time—hence the need for an "externalist" or "relational" approach to terrorism (and to strategic action more generally). Indeed, the "internal" characteristics of groups and individuals are powerfully shaped by their dynamic "external" relations. Tilly insists, for example, perhaps too emphatically (see below), “on the importance of social interaction in the generation, diffusion, and implementation of violence-producing ideas” (2003: 8). As we have seen, in fact, Tilly believes that terrorism is commonly employed as a complement or byproduct of certain ongoing political conflicts in which actors have employed a range of strategies against opponents, including routine strategies—but have presumably found these wanting.

Critique

Despite these insights, Tilly's ideas about terrorism are not without their problems and ambiguities. Here, I will focus on two issues: Tilly’s definition of terrorism and his distinction between “relational” and “dispositional” approaches to terrorism and strategic action more generally.

First, Tilly's definition of terrorism is unusually and, in my view, unhelpfully broad. His definition of terrorism does not isolate a *single* political strategy, as he implies, but packs together a number of distinct strategies that ought to be (and commonly are) disaggregated.

Recall that Tilly defines terrorism as a strategy that entails "asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies using means that fall outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within some current regime" (2004: 5). Notice what this definition includes: violence against property (sabotage); threats and nonlethal violence (e.g., blackmail, kidnapping, "knee-capping," and torture); violence against state or state-sponsored armed actors by nongovernmental actors (e.g., guerrilla warfare); violence against state officials or politicians by nongovernmental actors (e.g., assassinations); state or state-sponsored violence against nongovernmental armed actors (e.g., counterinsurgent tactics, from arrests to massacres); and state or state-sponsored violence against noncombatants (including assassinations, massacres, and even genocide). I cannot agree with Tilly that *all* these forms of violence amount to a single strategy that "corresponds approximately to what many people mean by terror" (2005a: 22). On the contrary, these forms of violence typically have different causes, different purposes, and different effects.

In fact, many if not most analysts, including myself (Goodwin 2006; also Richardson 2006), reserve the label "terrorism" exclusively for violence against noncombatants, a designation that has a basis in international law in the form of the doctrine of "noncombatant immunity." Terrorism in this sense would not include sabotage, guerrilla warfare, or counterinsurgency directed exclusively at armed rebels.

Terrorism may be further differentiated between violence targeted at *specific* noncombatants (e.g., politicians, political leaders, judges, and journalists) and "indiscriminate" violence directed at *whole categories* of noncombatants (e.g., ethnic groups, nationalities, social classes). Conflating these two forms of terrorism is generally unhelpful for understanding the violence that occurs in specific conflicts, and subsuming them among an even broader array of violent strategies, as Tilly's definition of terrorism does, is even more problematic. Such strategies are not only causally heterogeneous and employed by very different actors, as Tilly himself emphasizes, but they also have very different goals, both short- and longer-term. Accordingly, the sum of these myriad forms of violence is neither a causally nor an ontologically coherent phenomenon. It simply is not clear what is gained, descriptively or analytically, by throwing together so many forms of violence under one label—and a politically charged label at that.

Tilly's definition of terrorism is problematic for yet another reason. The "asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies" only counts as terrorism according to his definition when it involves tactics or "means that fall outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within some current regime." It follows that "routine terrorism" must be an oxymoron for Tilly. But why? Many armed political groups, especially states, as Tilly well understood, routinely attack and threaten perceived enemies. And many conflicts involve the routinized practice of terrorism by both states and their opponents, or some of them (e.g., the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). Should we not label such violence "terrorism" when, by some measure, it has become regular or routine? Tilly implies as much. But surely it would be simpler and more satisfactory to

recognize that terrorism and other types of violence may be *either* routine or non-routine forms of political conflict within given polities.

Tilly's distinction between "relational" and "dispositional" approaches to terrorism (and strategic action generally)—and his decided preference for the former—is also extremely problematic.¹ This distinction and preference is, I would argue, a more general problem in the voluminous writings of Tilly's last years, in which his call for "relational" (or "transactional") explanations in the social sciences became something of a mantra. Tilly also wrote, more briefly, about "systemic" explanations—that is, functionalist explanations, by and large—but he saw dispositional approaches as the main alternative to relational accounts, lamenting the fact that dispositional accounts of collective violence (and of democratization) "prevail these days" (Tilly 2005b: 15). Tilly came to describe his "ontology" as "relational realism"—"the doctrine that transactions, interactions, social ties, and conversations constitute the central stuff of social life" (2008: 7).

To be sure, Tilly sometimes emphasizes the complex ways in which both relational and dispositional (e.g., "cognitive") mechanisms interact and mutually determine streams of action. He writes, for example, that ideas are the "means" and "media" as well as the products of social interaction and that collective violence itself "amounts to a kind of conversation" among actors (Tilly 2003: 6). Tilly certainly did not dismiss completely the role of culture in social life in general or in collective violence in particular. He writes, for example, that "Ideas about proper and improper uses of violent means, about differences among social categories, and about justice or injustice

¹1. For overviews of Tilly's "relational" thinking, see Diani (2007) and Tarrow (2008). For a critique of Tilly's derogation of dispositions, see Eden (2008).

undoubtedly shape people's participation or nonparticipation in collective violence" (2003: 6). He also recognizes that "anger, fear, lust, gratification, and empathy . . . often dominate the feelings of participants in collective violence" (2003: 7). And of course Tilly's well known concept of "repertoires of contention" is an "eminently cultural notion" (quoted in Stave 1998: 203), referring to a group's practical knowledge about the ways and means of collectively contesting authority.

But Tilly typically emphasizes that motivating ideas, habits, and emotions are themselves the *product* of social relations and interactions. As we have seen, he insists "on the importance of social interaction in the generation, diffusion, and implementation of violence-producing ideas" (2003: 8). And he argues that "for all their grounding in individual predispositions, strong emotions arise from social interactions and respond to changes in social settings" (2003: 7). In a similar vein, Tilly summarizes his perspective thusly:

My own preferred descriptions and explanations of social processes avoid systems and assign a fundamental place to transactions. But they also recognize that transactions endow social sites, including persons, groups, and social ties, with information, codes, resources, and energies *that shape the participation of those sites in subsequent transactions*. (Tilly 2005b: 15; emphasis added)

But if ideas, rules, and emotions in fact shape the "subsequent transactions" of actors—which can only mean *all* action since Adam met Eve—then Tilly could very well have summarized his views thusly:

My own preferred descriptions and explanations of social processes avoid systems

and assign a fundamental place to dispositions. But they also recognize that the dispositions of social sites, including persons, groups, and social ties, endow transactions with qualities that shape the subsequent dispositions of these sites. This is a one-sided formulation, but is it any more (or less) one-sided than Tilly's?

In short, while Tilly's *interactional account of dispositions* is compelling, as far as it goes, he never fully complements and balances it, dialectically, with a *dispositional account of interactions*. That is, he essentially ignores the reality that social interactions are themselves motivated and shaped by cultural beliefs, habits, and "structures of feelings" (Williams 1978: Pt. II).

We need to question, furthermore, the way that Tilly conceptually differentiates interactions and dispositions. The idea that interactions somehow take place outside of culture—and then give rise to it—is clearly untenable (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). Tilly views social relations and interactions as “hard,” structural, and “objective” *reality*, whereas “dispositions,” as the term suggests, are for him subjective mental states. (It is telling that he labels his approach “relational *realism*.”) Tilly’s concept of “dispositions” thus *subjectivizes* (and lumps together) a range of cultural factors—ideas, ideologies, beliefs, habits, emotions—that include intersubjective or structural realities that are every bit as “hard,” persistent, and causally significant—every bit as *real*—as his “relations” and “transactions.” Moreover, Tilly’s concept of “relations” *objectifies* (and lumps together) a range of social interactions that are constituted in part by subjective mental states. Tilly’s distinction between objective “relations” and subjective “dispositions,” in short, is not theoretically helpful. Indeed, I consider it a pernicious dualism whose terms

lump together—and misspecify—a number of important concepts that need to be carefully disaggregated.

How might Tilly have responded to these criticisms? With intelligence and wit, of course. He might even persuade us that they are far off the mark. It is a shame that he can no longer join the conversations he did so much to deepen and enliven. Charles Tilly will be missed.

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