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Contentious Performances

How can we get inside popular collective struggles and explain how they work? *Contentious Performances* presents a distinctive approach to analyzing such struggles, drawing especially on incomparably rich evidence from Great Britain between 1758 and 1834.

The book accomplishes three main objectives. First, it presents a logic and method for describing contentious events, occasions on which people publicly make consequential claims on each other. Second, it shows how that logic yields superior explanations of the dynamics in such events, both individually and in the aggregate. Third, it illustrates its methods and arguments by means of detailed analyses of contentious events in Great Britain from 1758 to 1834.

Charles Tilly (1929–2008), who was Joseph L. Bottenwieser Professor of Social Science, Columbia University, authored, co-authored, edited, or co-edited more than fifty published books and monographs. He also published between six hundred and seven hundred scholarly articles, reviews, review essays, comments, chapters in edited collections, and prefaces, not counting reprints, translations, and working papers. His most recently published books are *Trust and Rule* (2005); *Why?* (2006); *Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (co-authored and co-edited with Robert Goodin, 2006); *Contentious Politics* (co-authored with Sidney Tarrow, 2006); *Democracy* (2007); *Explaining Social Processes* (2008); and *Credit and Blame* (2008). He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the Ordre des Palmes Académiques. He received numerous international prizes and honorary degrees.

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Preface

For me, the ideas in this book began to crystallize three decades ago. Looking at the history of popular contention in France from the 17th to the 20th centuries, I couldn't help noticing two related anomalies. First, although ordinary people found vigorously vital ways of making their voices heard in the midst of repressive regimes, they clung to the same few forms of collective expression and modified those forms only slowly. Seizure of high-priced food, assaults on tax collectors, and resistance to unjustified rent increases followed the same routines year after year during the 17th century, just as street demonstrations and mass meetings repeated themselves almost stereotypically during the 20th century. Given the richness and particularism of French popular culture, one might have expected an almost infinite variety of contentious performances.

Second, ordinary people never engaged in a wide variety of technically feasible ways of making collective claims that ordinary people elsewhere and in other times had readily employed. Those 17th-century French villagers did not strike, picket, or strip themselves naked in public protest. Nor did their 20th-century successors engage in suicide bombing, coups d'état, or ecstatic religious rituals. It occurred to me that in general participants in uprisings and local struggles followed available scripts, adapted those scripts, but only changed them bit by bit. A metaphor came readily to mind: like troupes of street musicians, those French people drew their claim-making performances from standardized, limited repertoires. I first published the idea in 1977.¹

¹ Charles Tilly, "Getting It Together in Burgundy, 1675–1975," *Theory and Society* 4 (1977): 479–504.

To my surprise and delight, the metaphor caught on. Analysts of contention began using the notion of repertoire widely. Then I began to recognize the drawbacks of success. I had developed the repertoire notion in the course of retrieving and cataloging thousands of “contentious gatherings” that occurred in one or another of five French regions between 1600 and 1975. I could easily document the repetitions, the transformations, and the absences from my catalogs of episodes. Although I was reasonably confident that it described my evidence well, I meant the term “repertoire” to present a provocative hypothesis for other analysts of contention to test on their own systematic catalogs. After all, in a public debate we held around that time, influential collective action theorist Mancur Olson responded to my presentation of repertoires by calling them a “dangerous idea.” But by and large analysts of popular struggles who did not share Olson’s collective action persuasion simply adopted the term to signal the repetitive character of claim making without thinking through what evidence would confirm or deny that repertoires actually facilitated and channeled claim making in the manner of theatrical scripts and standard jazz tunes.

Despite my repeated calls for empirical verification, modification, or falsification of the repertoire idea,² no one responded with evidence in hand. I reluctantly decided I would have to undertake the testing myself. The result is this book, an extended effort to explicate, verify, and refine the twinned concepts of performance and repertoire. As their originator, I am not the ideal judge of the ideas’ validity. But my effort will, I hope, spur more skeptical analysts of contentious politics to bring their own evidence and procedures to bear on performances and repertoires. The study of contentious politics can only benefit from the crossfire.

Students of popular struggle will immediately recognize this book as a product of an explanatory program that Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and I started advocating during the 1990s.³ Our collaboration on the

² E.g., Charles Tilly, “Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758–1834,” *Social Science History* 17 (1993): 253–280.

³ E.g., Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, “To Map Contentious Politics,” *Mobilization* 1 (1996): 17–34; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. For a sample of works in the Dynamics of Contention tradition, broadly defined, see the later volumes of the Cambridge (University Press) Studies in Contentious Politics series: Ronald R. Aminzade et al., *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (2001); Jack A. Goldstone, ed., *States, Parties, and Social Movements* (2003); Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (2003); Charles Tilly, *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650–2000* (2004); Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational*

subject began in conversations at a 1995 Amsterdam meeting designed to ease me into retirement. The meeting failed in that regard, but succeeded famously in initiating new connections among students of contentious politics.⁴

The Dynamics of Contention (DOC) Program had several distinctive features: identification of “contentious politics,” rather than collective action, protest, or conflict, as the object of study; insistence on a dynamic, relational understanding of contention; preference for the systematic and comparative study of multiple contentious episodes; and employment of mechanisms and processes – environmental, dispositional, and relational – as fundamental explanations. The program stirred up a good deal of controversy, but eventually took its place as a major alternative to the covering law and dispositional accounts of contention that had hitherto prevailed. For fear that too much complexity would discourage my readers, I have suppressed the specification of mechanisms and processes that underlies every analysis in the book and have radically limited references to parallel work in the DOC tradition. In compensation, the book clearly identifies contentious politics as its object of explanation, offers a deeply dynamic and relational account of contention, and rejoices in the systematic and comparative study of multiple contentious episodes.

With some regret, I decided not to engage the vast, chaotic, sparsely connected literature on performance as an organizing aspect of social life.⁵ The close study of contentious performances has important lessons to teach that literature and can benefit from sorting out the competing

Activism (2005); Charles D. Brockett, *Political Movements and Violence in Central America* (2005); Deborah J. Yashar, *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America* (2005); Gerald F. Davis, Doug McAdam, W. Richard Scott, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Social Movements and Organization Theory* (2005); Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion* (2005); Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (2006); Javier Auyero, *Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina* (2007); Stuart A. Wright, *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (2007); and Silvia Pedraza, *Political Disaffection in Cuba's Revolution and Exodus* (2007).

⁴ Papers from the meeting appeared in Michael P. Hanagan, Leslie Page Moch, and Wayne te Brake, eds., *Challenging Authority: The Historical Study of Contentious Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

⁵ See, e.g., Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast, eds., *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Peter Burke, “Performing History: The Importance of Occasions,” *Rethinking History* 9 (2005): 35–52; Michel Callon, ed., *The Laws of the Markets*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998; and R. Keith Sawyer, *Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003.

theoretical perspectives that have arisen within the literature. But again I concluded that sustained discussions of performance as a general feature of social life would greatly complicate the book without advancing its main arguments significantly.

When I have already written on precisely one point or another, I have not hesitated to lift material from my earlier publications. Perhaps 10 percent of this book's text adapts paragraphs previously published in my *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995; revised paperback edition Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), my *Social Movements 1768–2004* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), my *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), or in Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

For advice, information, criticism, and encouragement, I am grateful to Mark Beissinger, Ernesto Castañeda, Sam Clark, Roberto Franzosi, Roy Licklider, Clark McPhail, Nicholas Toloudis, Takeshi Wada, Elisabeth Wood, Lesley Wood, Viviana Zelizer, an anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press, and the many students at the University of Michigan and the New School for Social Research who worked on the Great Britain Study. Once again, Sidney Tarrow made demands for revision that I could not fulfill. One of my fondest hopes is that some day I'll write a book of which Sid approves.

* * *

Charles Tilly died on April 29, 2008, after a lengthy battle with cancer and shortly after he finished writing *Contentious Performances*. Cambridge University Press is most grateful to both Chris Tilly of the University of Massachusetts and Sidney Tarrow of Cornell University, who read the page proofs, and to Sidney Tarrow who also reviewed the copyedited manuscript.

Lewis Bateman, Senior Editor
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