Abstract Is historicism for Tilly a fact or a framework—the fact of history’s “contingent complexity” or the framework of his social thought? And how does he explain social and historical facts? With models whose elements are people trying to make the best of their situation as they see it? Or with causal mechanisms different from rational choice under specified situational constraints? Does his rejection of rational choice and methodological individualism contradict his own theoretical method? Or does it reflect a creative tension between historical explanation and sociological theory? These questions provoke an intense but amicable debate between kindred spirits who studied with Tilly yet have divergent opinions on theory and method.

Argument is risky and unpredictable, therefore educational.


The argument here is a critical but cordial dialogue between two old friends about Charles Tilly’s historicism and issues of theory and method it raises. Our format is like history as Tilly views it: unscripted, unrehearsed, interactive, open-ended, and cumulative. Where the argument will lead, we do not know—and will not know until we get there. Argument is volatile not only because it can be lost through errors of fact and logic, but also because it can arrive at surprise

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conclusions and change minds. In a Platonic dialogue, the author works the
speakers as a ventriloquist works puppets. In this one, the authors are the speakers
and speak for themselves: each tries to persuade the other, and both risk being
persuaded in turn.

RA: To preclude misunderstanding, I think we should say what we mean by
historicism, then say what issues of theory and method we will discuss.

LE: It’s your party—you roped me into this . . .

RA: Historicism for Tilly means the opposite of what it means for Popper. For Tilly,
historicism is a fact—the “uniqueness of sequences, unrepeatable in their contingent
complexity” (Gould 2002, p. 102). He invokes Gould in an interview he gave
Daniel Little five months before dying. For Popper, historicism is a theory—the
“fraudulent theory of historical prediction” whereby supposed laws of history or
social development warrant prophecy of “what the future will bring” (Popper 1998,
p. 57). Martin Jay—great man, nice guy—says Popper’s terminology is passé. He
is probably right about academic discourse. Look what happened to essentialism,
Popper’s word for Platonic realism. But prophecy—especially self-fulfilling
prophecy (Merton 1968, pp. 475–490)—is rampant in world politics today.

LE: I hate to be disagreeable so soon into our discussion, but I disagree. I don’t
think it’s a correct reading of Tilly to say that for him historicism is a fact. What
were facts for Tilly? Tilly was entirely consistent in his stance: historians aren’t
allowed to—and other social scientists certainly should not, though they are
somewhat prone to—“make up” facts, to construct them as they please.

Tilly was a realist, but he never thought that his vast interpretive apparatus was
“fact.” For him, all interpretation is subject to revision, as we discover new archives
or other new sources, or devise new methods, or, most important, change our minds
because further investigation and thinking is likely to lead—if one is as open-
minded as Tilly—to a different understanding of causal mechanisms and processes
at play. The Tilly of From Mobilization to Revolution (1978) with its interest-based
economic style of analysis is not exactly the Tilly who later emphasized relational
analysis, the importance of mechanisms, the role of trust, and the trouble with and
importance of stories.

We can summarize Tilly’s prefaces and introductions to his many books as: when
I wrote this, I did not fully understand x, and therefore overemphasized y, and
understated the importance of z. In the interview with Little, Tilly explains his many
“errors” in The Vendée (1964) and his several changes of mind since he first thought
about the French counterrevolution. Tilly did this throughout his intellectual life.

So, I’m arguing that for Tilly, historicism is not a fact; it’s a framework that drives
the questions to which he sought answers. Tilly was committed to it because of its

1 Go to www.changingsociety.org and click interviews.
2 E-mail to RA, 26 November 2009.
3 “Realism . . . is the Platonic doctrine that universals or abstract entities have being independently of the
mind; the mind may discover them but cannot create them” (Quine 1980, p. 14).