

Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow.**Contentious Politics.**

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When my son was ten years old, he decided he wanted to learn to play Yu-Gi-Oh, a fantasy card game that was originally designed for kids who had outgrown Pokémon. Together, we had learned to play Pokémon from an online, interactive training manual, so we turned to the Internet again to learn the new game. We soon discovered Yu-Gi-Oh was no Pokémon: pages and pages of information described what seemed like hundreds of characters, powers, and moves, all of which could be combined and manipulated in different ways to achieve all sorts of different outcomes. After an hour of trying to keep straight the possibilities, we gave up, and my son contented himself with collecting the cards.

I could not help but recall our Yu-Gi-Oh experience while reading Sidney Tarrow's and Charles Tilly's *Contentious Politics*. This book is a training guide to doing contention research, à la Tarrow and Tilly (T&T). In it, the authors identify key variables that can combine in numerous ways to result in a variety of outcomes. And while I was tempted several times to abandon the process of learning this game as well, I plugged away, partly because I had committed to reviewing the book, but also because I knew there was a huge crowd out there – children and adults – that had grasped the complex rules of Yu-Gi-Oh and played it regularly, intensely, and with great creative satisfaction. Perhaps *Contentious Politics* contained the same potential for a student of contention, once I got the hang of it.

I will let you know how it turned out, but first a word about the book's content. *Contentious Politics* is T&T's response to criticisms leveled at one of their last efforts (with Doug McAdam), *The Dynamics of Contention*. The unspoken but implicit promise of *Dynamics* to deliver a sort of "theory of everything" around contention was compromised, acknowledge T&T in the introduction to the new volume, by a lack of clarity surrounding the concepts and methods they identified, and a predilection to "revel in complications, asides and illustrations" (xi) rather than provide a straightforward application of their approach. *Contentious Politics* seeks to refine the original model to help researchers make use of its possibilities in their analyses of contention.

Contentious Politics thus shares a number of themes with *Dynamics*. Like the latter volume, it tries to make sense of "contentious politics," actions involving collective and coordinated claims making in which governments in some way participate. Its subject matter is broadly conceived to capture a wide array of events that are usually analyzed separately, including ethnic conflicts, social movements, and revolutions. And like *Dynamics*, its intent is not to determine necessary and sufficient conditions for mobilization, but to identify common and recurring features of contentious politics that combine in different ways in different settings to result in different outcomes.

What separates *Contentious Politics* from the previous work, however, is that it seeks not only to inform the reader of these mechanisms and processes but clearly to instruct her in their use as well: it lays out a methodology that students of contention can follow to analyse instances of contentious politics in a systematic fashion. To that end, T&T provide the reader with the "tools" to systematically disaggregate instances of contentious politics to figure out how they work and how they compare to each other.

And many tools there are. T&T warn the reader that the “array of concepts” may be “daunting” to the first time reader, but even someone accustomed to T&T’s penchant for model making may be taken aback by the sheer volume of terms – some new, many familiar – that comprise their framework. To be sure, the authors take great pains throughout the book to define terms, describe their applications, and specify their links. Appendices at the back of the book summarize concepts and relationships helpfully. But the account still contains some hair-raising moments:

On the Gaza movement:

By demonstrating at the Wailing Wall, and incorporating the imagery of the Holocaust, “they were *innovating in the repertoire of contention*. As their differences from ... Sharon sharpened, they *activated a new boundary* between religious and realist conservative Zionism. They sought *certification* for their cause ... *brokered* the settlers’ alliance with far right elements in Israeli politics ... [and resistance] *shifted upward in scale...*” (168, emphases in original)

On the internationalization of the Pinochet case:

Internationalization triggered a “whole array of mechanisms and processes” including *diffusion, brokerage, boundary activation* and *scale shift, mobilization*, the forming of *coalitions*, and the *deactivation* and *activation of boundaries* (177, emphases in original).

On the Greensboro student sit in:

“...students constituted themselves as *political actors* and assumed *political identities* ... their action became a political *performance*, one with a pedigree in the *repertoire of contention* [but that exhibited *innovation*]. As they did so, they engaged with public *institutions* ... [and] involved themselves ... in the American political *regime*” (187-188, emphases in original).

T&T are, perhaps not surprisingly, most comfortable when talking about structure. Political opportunity structures figure large in their account, but even factors such as culture, emotion and identity are handled within a largely structural framework. Students of contention who are concerned with these issues may be disappointed that identity is only discussed within the context of boundaries, claims making, and (strategic) self-representation; culture does not even show up in the index. Sometimes, this structural emphasis leads the authors to draw conclusions that seem remarkably one-dimensional. The relative absence of deadly ethnic and religious conflicts in “high-capacity” (roughly, infrastructurally powerful) democratic regimes, for example, stems from the ability of these regimes to “*simply manage* to reduce the scale and armament [of such conflicts] ... and move them in the direction of [less lethal] social movements” (145, emphases added).

But back to my son and Yu-Gi-Oh: is it worth spending the time to learn this game? There is a part of me that rebels because of the bloodless nature of the whole schema. The book is brimming with examples of contentious politics, yet all the episodes seem stripped of their passion, illustrating *boundary activation* here, or *upward scale shift* there, but devoid of the strong sentiments that drive them. But this is perhaps forgivable as long as we accept *Contentious Politics* as a methods text: certainly we do not expect explanations of ethnomethodological research methods to pulse with the same emotional intensity that they have been designed to measure. They simply provide the frameworks with which we can examine these expressions systematically.

The other problem I have is the faintly authoritative tone of the book. Throughout, but particularly in their final chapter, T&T press the reader to adopt their methodology: “Early in the process, sort your

description into the elements this book has taught you ... Instead of trying to explain everything about a contentious episode, close in on its most surprising, interesting or consequential features ... Use comparisons to single out similarities and differences” (197). In their appendices, they make clear the kinds of studies the reader should emulate, including A-listers Mark Beissinger, Hanspeter Kreisi, Margarita Lòpez Maya, and Sarah Soule. But maybe my discomfort stems from the fact that political sociologists are seldom confronted with such direct instruction.

I have to admit there is something enticing about what T&T have done here, the possibility that contentious politics in its many forms has, like the human genome, now been mapped, the common variables identified and their relationships revealed. I have of course exaggerated the authors’ claims for effect, but my “human genome” analogy is not far from the mark: T&T make an explicit comparison of their work to that of evolutionary biologists. They see their approach to contentious politics as akin to the approach of biologists who study species reproduction, for example, who break the process apart into its component mechanisms and compare these across species to study their outcomes.

Fighting my inclination to dismiss biological comparisons, I am compelled to allow that there might be something to this. Most of us get involved in collective behaviour research not because we wish to demonstrate the futility of activism. We do it to explore its dimensions to discover how and when it happens so that we can better understand how to initiate change. If, by analyzing episodes of contentious politics across time and space using common concepts, we could produce a stock of knowledge from which the components of change might be drawn – well, what is wrong with that?

In the end, it is because it holds out this possibility that I must conclude that we should take the time to learn the rules of *Contentious Politics*. While the book certainly contains a rich assortment of methodological tools that individual researchers can take up in their studies of political contention, it holds the prospect – however improbable – for a community of researchers to work toward a larger “political contention project” of the kind Tarrow and Tilly envision. Which I suppose in a way coincides with the difference between actually playing Yu-Gi-Oh with other gamers, and just collecting the cards. I think I’ll ask my son if he wants to give that online training manual another go.

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