

**Charles Tilly.****Why?**

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Charles Tilly has a well-deserved reputation as a social scientist capable of making bold theoretical gestures in the context of comparative historical research. His focus on social movements has generated much distinguished but also idiosyncratic research. It is therefore surprising that he has written a book that promotes a standard-issue account of reason-giving in social science. *Why?* could have been written by many other people. Tilly was perhaps advised to downplay theory and let the examples shine in a book clearly aimed at a popular audience. And while lay readers may be illuminated by the account of 9/11 that extends from the beginning to the end of the book, readers of this journal are better served by exploring the limits of an account of reason-giving that has come to be so taken-for-granted in social science.

In the philosophy of social science, reason-giving is normally presented as one of the two main ways to explain social phenomena, the other being a causal analysis of "non-rational" factors. This book is not really about reason-giving in that sense. It is rather concerned with reason-giving as a social practice, in terms of both its constitution and its function. As Tilly early admits, this is how social scientists normally approach reason-giving. For them, lay and technical explanations provide the ingredients for making reasons according to codes and conventions that are appropriate to the contexts in which reasons need to be given. The difference between how the philosopher and the social scientist handles reason-giving is traceable to a difference in pretexts.

Philosophers presume that one normally provides reasons for what happens in the social world unless people's actions deviate substantially from background normative assumptions, in which case one turns to causal accounts that include an explanation for why those norms failed to be upheld. Such a pretext animated Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science*, which, if nothing else, sustained philosophical puzzlement about the exact scope of social science, given that philosophers were already in the business of analysing reasons. In contrast, social scientists presume that the need to give reasons arises only when there is a break in the normal pattern of social life, not least when a social scientist (aka ethnomethodologist) asks a revealing question. The function of reasons, then, is to restore the social order, but the exact means by which that is done reveals much about what C. Wright Mills, following the rhetorical critic Kenneth Burke, called the "motives" of the implicated parties, including not only their overall interests but also their power over each other and relevant societal resources.

Presented with these two accounts of reason-giving, it would be easy to conclude that philosophers see the world as a much more rational place than social scientists do. However, on second thought, the contrary is the case: Philosophers regard reason-giving as normal because they remain haunted by Descartes, who insisted that nothing can be believed unless it is justified. It follows that we lead such normally uneventful lives because we routinely give reasons to each other. In contrast, social scientists recognise that, empirically speaking, the practice of reason-giving is actually quite eventful. It raises the red flag of reparatory work. For the most part, however, our actions pass muster with our fellows without much comment at all, let alone with a need for reasons.

Tilly says many shrewd things about the need for reasons to be given of the right kind, to the right people, in the right order and at the right speed. An especially well-analysed case involves giving

reasons for why a loved one failed to survive surgery. In this respect, Tilly updates Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, a book he clearly has read. But also following Aristotle, Tilly's normative standards are confined to the adequacy of means to ends: An episode of reason-giving works if the reason given enables its intended recipients to resume life as they know it. It is unfortunate, then, that after elaborating the biogenetic migration accounts of human evolution provided by Luigi Cavalli-Sforza and Jared Diamond, Tilly does not consider why – and for whom – their accounts have proved so popular. He simply presumes (rightly) that they have. An opportunity for a take-home lesson for social scientists was lost.

At a more general level, Tilly does not consider that reasons once given may create the need for more reasons to be given in the future. This may be because the reasons given expose discursive or material resources that those receiving the reasons can then turn to their own advantage. For example, a doctor who admits even mild incompetence may unwittingly lay the foundations for a lawsuit. A more abstract version of this problem arises when the reasons given, while temporarily mollifying their recipients, raise doubts about deeper background issues, as when exceptions to a norm are explained so well that one wonders whether they ultimately support or refute norm in question. It would seem that there is a sense in which any reason given is always a hostage to fortune. A deeper account of reason-giving than Tilly's would have probed this implicit "economy" of reason-giving.

While Tilly periodically reminds the reader of his credentials as a historian and supplies some nice historical vignettes, he treats alternative reason-giving approaches to a problem ahistorically, typically as products of discrete disciplinary or ideological traditions. Perhaps Tilly thinks this aids public comprehension but unwittingly it helps justify a kind of epistemological relativism that may not be warranted in particular cases.

For example, Tilly contrasts the attitudes of economists and environmentalists to the problem of "commons management", namely, how best to ensure the integrity of natural resources and public goods. For economists, the "tragedy of the commons" arises because everyone expects everyone else to maintain the commons while they themselves enjoy a free ride. The solution for economists is privatisation, so that everyone has an interest in maintaining their part of the commons. Environmentalists counter that the commons is a human birthright to be upheld by radically altering our default tendencies. These two solutions historically descend from alternative theological strategies for redeeming humanity after its expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Their differences are potentially negotiable once they are focussed on the empirical character of human liabilities on which they are based. In contrast, Tilly leaves the impression that one or the other strategy will dominate, according to circumstance.

Finally, perhaps the most glaring imaginative weakness of *Why?* is its failure to consider what else other than reason-giving might serve the same social function. This question might seem strange to philosophers but sociologists are comfortable with the idea that activities involving the movement of people and things might function just as well as those involving the flow of words. In the case of reason-giving, it seems to me that the obvious substitute is *scapegoating*, whereby a social rupture is blamed on an individual or group who combines the right proportion of plausibility, proximity and vulnerability. Thus, restitution comes from punishment rather than persuasion. The immediate target of redress is different but the overall desired effect is the same. Had Tilly gone down this route, he would have been forced to engage more explicitly with the Durkheimian roots of sociology, say, in the manner of René Girard. It would have also cramped the book's intentionally light style.

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