

Publications

Europeanists Abroad

by Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly

Like most scholarly conferences, the meeting on "structure, identity, and power" held in Amsterdam in June 1995 created its own mixture of failure and success. Organized to anticipate Tilly's retirement (that effort failed) and review his contributions to the study of contentious politics in Europe (that effort succeeded), the conference attracted the elite of European and American scholarship on historical collective action, occasioned a lively debate, fostered a vivid sendup of Tilly's work, and led to a valuable conference volume. 1 But it was the conference's side-product that led us into an adventure well beyond the boundaries of Europe; during an interval in the meeting, we two Europeanists met with Americanist Doug McAdam to exchange complaints about recent trends in our common field of contentious politics, notably:

- hyper-specialization of analysts in single forms of action: war, revolution, social movement, industrial conflict, nationalist mobilization, or something else
- consequent failure of broadly applicable insights (or, for that matter, recognitions of error) to diffuse across subfields
- the almost total absence of a common vocabulary and explicit comparison among episodes of American and European contention and between contention in Europe and the rest of the world.

Before long the Amsterdam gripe session had permuted into a plan for joint action to study collective action both in Europe and elsewhere. With help from Robert Scott, Associate Director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (Stanford, California), McAdam convinced the Mellon Foundation to support a three-year plan that would involve seven faculty members plus fifteen graduate students from around the country in our efforts.

We settled on three main programs:

collaborative inquiry and writing on what we began to call "contentious politics",

enlistment of other scholars in a search for superior ways to describe and explain political contention, and

venturing beyond our own culture areas to carry out a program of vigorous, rigorously controlled comparison of major contentious episodes.

By contentious politics, we came to mean episodic, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants. Such a definition excluded most routine and bureaucratic political life, but included almost everything that scholars

ordinarily call revolution, rebellion, social movement, industrial conflict, war, ethno-religious mobilization, and related terms. Across that range, we sought causal analogies among mechanisms and processes that operated similarly despite occurring in very different settings.

Our initial decision meant, first, that we would need to broaden what has come to be called "the classical social movement paradigm" to embrace the study of all sorts of contention. Second, in doing so, we would be forced to move beyond our common European intellectual home. It was one thing to compare Europe and America (McAdam never let a session go by without invoking the relevance of the American Civil Rights movement to whatever episode of contention we happened to be discussing). It was quite another to identify common properties across the broader forms of contention enumerated above. To do so, we would need to examine contention in parts of the world far beyond Western Europe. The result was our forthcoming book, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge UP, 2001).

For the book, we assembled analytical narratives of eighteen contentious episodes drawn from a wide variety of places and periods since 1800. These included three "touchstone" cases that one or the other of us had studied in the past: the US civil rights movement, the Italian protest cycle of the 1960s, and the French revolution of 1789-94. To these we added four more Western European and American cases, as well as eleven others from around the world.

Let us not claim too much: the point of these analytical narratives was neither to provide comprehensive explanations of the events in question nor to subsume them all under some general model of contention. It was instead to identify recurrent mechanisms and processes within them that would help to explain critical features of those episodes. In the long run, we hope our work will contribute to closer examination of such mechanisms and processes in an even wider variety of times and places. We also hope that it will promote systematic comparative-historical study of episodes both within Europe and beyond it for such categories as civil wars, nationalist mobilizations, democratization, and transnational contention.

Dynamics was only one of several linked efforts. To widen the inquiry, we recruited other scholars for discussion, criticism, and collaboration. Leaving aside the dozens of specialists who offered their specialized knowledge to drafts and oral presentations of that book, we and our four other colleagues created three complementary projects: an "Invisible College" of Contentious Politics that met at the Center for three years for discussions of a variety of new and challenging themes of contentious politics²; a five-week summer institute – also held at the Center – for recent PhDs in anthropology, geography, history, political science, and sociology³; a publication series under the imprimatur of Cambridge University Press.⁴

Only our readers can ultimately decide what our efforts have wrought. But two preliminary encounters encourage us to think that our work over the past five years has not been in vain. In March 2000, historian Bo Strath of the European University Institute convened an informal workshop of historians and social scientists to read and analyze a draft of *Dynamics of Contention*. Out of that meeting came revisions in the final manuscript and the belief that History and the Social Sciences still (pace the cultural turn!) have much to say to each other. Building on that claim, Strath and Tarrow – with Tilly in the role

of kibitzer – are convening a workshop in May 2001 on the contributions of macrohistory to the dialogue between Europeanist historians and social scientists.

Second, in October 2000, two of our colleagues from the "invisible college", Ronald Aminzade and Elizabeth Perry, convened a conference at Harvard on contentious politics in the developing world. The meeting took up common themes and unsolved problems outside the West, looking critically at ideas about contentious politics formulated by specialists in Europe and North America, including ourselves. Publications and collaborations issuing from that conference will surely advance the discussion, leading to revisions of Europe-based concepts, descriptions, and explanations.

The longterm outcome of our efforts will only become clear as Europeanists, Americanists and others – perhaps following our strategy of structured, paired comparison of unlike cases, but perhaps not – work together to fashion a comparative body of work on contentious politics. If the program goes well, Europeanists should find themselves making new, fruitful comparisons of Europe's contention and struggles elsewhere without in the least denying the historical and cultural distinctness of European experience. On the contrary, the program should make it easier to establish what is distinctive, and what very general, about European political processes.

Notes

1 Michael P. Hanagan, Leslie Page Moch & Wayne te Brake, eds., *Challenging Authority. The Historical Study of Contentious Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

2 The invisible college relied especially on seven faculty members (Ronald Aminzade, Jack Goldstone, Elizabeth Perry, William H. Sewell Jr., plus McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly). Over three years the faculty eventually recruited fourteen dissertation writers (mostly not their own students: Lissa Bell, Pamela Burke, Jorge Cadena-Roa, David Cunningham, Manali Desai, Robyn Eckhardt, John Glenn, Debbie Gould, Hyojoung Kim, Joseph Luders, Heidi Swarts, Nella Van Dyke, Heather Williams, and Kim Williams) from across the United States who were studying different aspects and varieties of contention. Together, the college's twenty one members organized nine conferences taking up different aspects of contentious politics and drawing in outside experts on those aspects.

3 Kenneth Andrews, Joe Bandy, Neal Carter, David Cunningham, Christian Davenport, Bob Edwards, Gautam Ghosh, John Guidry, Frederick Harris, Peter Houtzager, Jason Kaufman, Deborah Martin, Byron Miller, S. Mara Pérez-Godoy, Kurt Schock, Paul Silverstein, Jackie Smith, David Stone, and Deborah Yashar participated in discussions large and small of each other's work as well as that of McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly.

4 Two books are currently in production: Ronald Aminzade et al., *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (critical essays by members of the invisible college faculty on knotty analytical problems) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*. A third and fourth are under discussion.