Charles Tilly's Problem Situations: From Class and Revolution to Mechanisms and Contentious Politics

Mark Lichbach

During his long and distinguished career, Charles Tilly addressed the problem situation he inherited from his teacher Barrington Moore, the situation that emerged in the middle of his studies, and the problems that arose later in his life. Moore's core themes were revolutionary classes, revolutionary violence, and the outcomes of revolution. As the 1960s and the 1970s gave way to the 1980s and 1990s, Tilly faced a different world-historical situation. So-called national liberation moments—violent and radical, communist and anti-U.S.—did not always win. And when they did succeed, radical politics was not particularly appealing. Tilly's final challenge involved rational-choice theory's drive for hegemony in explaining all outcomes—political, economic, and social—of macrohistorical change. For example, could a systematic alternative to the major approach to contention and conflict—a bargaining theory of war—be developed? To address these changing problem situations, Tilly fashioned his own unique theories, methods, and domains of inquiry. A truly seminal thinker, he pioneered now standard social-scientific approaches to mechanisms, contentious politics, and state construction. To understand Charles Tilly is therefore to understand the last fifty years of historical and comparative social science.

Why did Charles Tilly's central concerns in *Democracy*—mechanisms, contentious politics, and state building—move beyond Barrington Moore's classic analysis of revolutionary classes, violence, and outcomes?[1] Tilly's work may be understood in terms of the problem situation he inherited from Moore early in his academic career, the situation that emerged in the middle of his studies, and the problems that arose later in his life.

Early Roots

Tilly's great teacher advanced three core themes. First, Moore states early on that "we seek to understand the role of the landed upper classes and the peasants in the bourgeois revolutions leading to capitalist democracy, the abortive bourgeois revolutions leading to fascism, and the peasant revolutions leading to communism. The ways in which the landed upper classes and the peasants reacted to the challenge of commercial agriculture were decisive factors in determining the political outcome."[2] Note how Moore's formulation of the class question—actors had "roles" and they "reacted"—avoids a reification of structure, whether ideal or material, and focuses attention on how commercialization and industrialization unleashed mechanisms and processes engulfing a network of agents and producing stability and change.

Second, Moore was concerned with revolutionary violence. Traditional agricultural structures—and the political forms supporting them—that resisted capitalism and state building were swept away in a forcible transfer of state power that produced major and abrupt cultural, social, economic, and political transformations. Moore wrote:

> For a Western scholar to say a good word on behalf of revolutionary radicalism is not easy because it runs counter to deeply grooved mental reflexes. The assumption that gradual and piecemeal reform has demonstrated its superiority over violent revolution as a way to advance human freedom is so pervasive that even to question such an assumption seems strange. . . . [Yet] [a]s I have reluctantly come to read this evidence, the costs of moderation have been at least as atrocious as those of revolution, perhaps a great deal more[3]

While he qualified this conclusion, briefly noting some of the horrors of Stalinism and Maoism, in general Moore stressed "the limitations on the possibility of peaceful transitions to democracy," and his book "reminds us of the open and violent conflicts that have preceded its establishment."[4] Moore thus titled his first country chapter "England: The Contributions of Violence to Gradualism," included a chapter reminding us of the violence of the American Civil War, and wrote a case study of India to see if "*a revolutionary break with the past*" was necessary for democracy.[5] Moore, the first major social scientist to emphasize that there is no peaceful road to modernity,

Mark Lichbach (mlichbach@gvpt.umd.edu) is professor and chair of the department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland.

doi:10.1017/S1537592710001246

had juxtaposed the "nonviolent" history of England with the "violent" histories of France and China and repeatedly found "violence."

Third, Moore showed how revolutions changed world history. By building state power, the results of revolution are irreversible—permanent advances with lasting legacies. As Karl Marx had said, revolutions were the "midwives" or "locomotives" of history. Changes in individual states were part of a universal, global, world-making historical process. Revolution influenced world politics via the foreign policies of such revolutionary states as France, the Soviet Union, and China. All revolutions are thus world revolutions and world counterrevolutions, that is, international civil wars. Nationalist revolutions lead to internationalism (the spread of new state forms), and internationalism leads to nationalist revolutions (state reactions to status-quo global powers). Domestic stability and international stability, horizontal security and vertical security, are related because modernity produces revolution and revolution produce modernity.

For many, the lesson to be drawn from Moore was that authoritarian revolutions from above and popular revolutions from below battled for domestic and global superiority. During the Cold War, Third World states chose up sides between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary patrons, as both liberal and socialist states tried to spread their messages. While there was a global contest in which rich countries fought poor countries, the force behind political change was national revolutionary struggles that brought the victims of modernity into conscious struggles over national politics. Contending movements, which made incompatible claims on state power, aimed to seize the state and promote the modernization they hoped would overcome their state's backwardness vis-à-vis early industrializers. Revolutions thus occurred neither in undeveloped countries nor in developed countries. To struggle against bourgeois liberalism, revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries mobilized mass-based movements in transitional modernizing countries.

Tilly also started where Moore began—from the crises and contradictions of the uneven but inexorable global development of the capitalist world economy and the modern state system. However, he rejected the teleology of those followers of Moore who understood people's complex aims as simply resisting or remaking the world. His great first book in 1964, *The Vendée,*[6] and his subsequent volume in 1975, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe,*[7] which would demolish the modernization paradigm in comparative politics, refused to reduce popular political strategies to moving history along. Tilly presented no simple story of freedom and liberation through the construction of a national state. He showed that rebellious actions—revolutions and counterrevolutions—were not conscious products made by carriers of programs for historical change. Historical actors, as collective subjects and agents of history, were not social forces that formed classes and parties with ideas and visions, ideologies and ideals, and goals and agendas. Revolutionary and counterrevolutionary outcomes were typically the unintended consequences of the interactions of people pursuing localist agendas. Intended and unintended revolutions and counterrevolutions thus took the form of half-conscious gambles to remake social order. Innovations, surprises, and experiments—radically new forms of economic power and models of state building—resulted. For Tilly, the key to understanding political change was to look closely at these changing faces of popular contention. This history from below would reveal how the politics of the new order differed from the politics of the old regime and from the politics of liberal democracies. He thus famously showed how "repertoires of political contention (arrays of widely available claim-making performances) shift from predominantly parochial, particular, and bifurcated interactions based largely on embedded identities, to predominantly cosmopolitan, modular, and autonomous interactions based largely on detached identities."[8]

Mid-Career Challenges

As the 1960s and 1970s gave way to the 1980s and 1990s, Tilly faced a different world-historical problem situation. So-called national liberation movements—violent and radical, communist and anti-United States—did not always win. And when they did succeed, radical politics was not particularly appealing. By moving from right to left, we can quickly position the reactions: Samuel Huntington championed political order in changing societies;[9] Robert A. Dahl stressed democracy as a conflict-resolution system;[10] Ted Robert Gurr offered the friendly amendment that even in democracies relative deprivation can produce reformist change outside of conventional political processes;[11] and Theda Skocpol retained some of Moore's hopes for states, classes, and social revolutions.[12] Events thus unearthed an ideological divide among social scientists. Many thought that revolution was the great myth of modern politics. Revolution, along with insurrection, armed struggle, popular violence, people power, party discipline, and socialism, were the grand illusions of self-styled progressive politics. As failed gods, they were romantic and utopian, uncritical and uninformed—toy stories of the intellectuals. Totalitarianism, barbarism, and fanaticism, many claimed, had demonstrated the ideological superficiality of revolutionary platitudes. Many social scientists, rethinking the French Revolution of the nineteenth century and the socialist revolutions of the twentieth century, argued that progressive change could be reformist as well as revolutionary. Did not the post-Moore history of India prove that change in the modern world could be accomplished through bourgeoisie-led western liberalism? Modernization theory—the Whig theory of history updated—could not be easily discarded.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710001246 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If India was the chink in Moore's armor, the fate of socialist states was the armor's fatal flaw. Communism ended relatively peacefully in Poland, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, and Czechoslovakia. A nonviolent transition quickly followed in South Africa. Peaceful revolutions occurred subsequently in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), and the Ukraine (2004). These examples of relatively sudden and comprehensive—yet relatively peaceful and democratic—transitions involved carefully crafted constitutions, pacts, agreements, and settlements. Compared to the earlier revolutions that Moore had studied, these revolutions were top-down and elite driven, with the masses relatively demobilized. Radical popular conflict involving the mobilization into politics of class enemies—the rhetoric and reality of political violence—was replaced by the peaceful accoutrements of liberalism—rights, legality, citizenship, and political stability—as middle class revolutionaries sought economic markets, a pluralistic civil society, and electoral democracy.

In the midst of this political ferment and intellectual struggle, Tilly positioned himself brilliantly. Tilly's *Democracy*—along with his collaboration with colleagues Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow[13] —offers three innovations to Moore's framework. First, Tilly replaced Moore's focus on class and class politics—the roles and reactions of landed upper classes and peasantry—with *mechanisms* of contentious politics broadly understood. He thus sought to avoid the structuralist and reductionist political science that derived from Moore. Turning social science into a causal science, Tilly felt, had led academics to focus on a small number of input variables that drive critical outcome variables. Nowhere is this style of research more apparent than in the political sociology or political economy traditions of locating the factors influencing reformist and revolutionary politics. While Skocpol supported her neo-Marxist/neostatist thought with John Stuart Mill's methods of comparison, variable-based theorizers supported their ideas with econometrics. Both sought the cause-and-effect relationships by which political, economic, social, and cultural environments drive state building. Social science thus reduced Huntington to the idea that state strength → revolutionary violence, or Dahl to the idea that democracy → the containment of revolution violence, and modernization theory to the proposition that state strength → democracy → less revolutionary violence.

Against this black-box thinking, Tilly stressed explanatory depth. For him, mechanisms and processes operating across multiple levels are explanatory devices or tools that elaborate hypothesized relationships. Throughout *Democracy* and his other works, Tilly thus explores the "roles" and "reactions"—for example, brokerage, mobilization, certification, and scale shift—of key actors engaged in state construction. These mechanisms and processes, which occur in different combinations with different outcomes, are the short- and intermediate-term statics and dynamics of contention, not the long-run origins or fateful consequences of great social change. As seen by rationalists, they often represent the techniques—strategies and tactics—of contentious politics: military thinking about how to fight internal wars and counterinsurgency thinking about how to battle rebels.

Second, Tilly also broadened Moore's focus on revolutions and revolutionary violence. Recognizing that there was no shortage of reactions to misery and oppression, Tilly saw the theoretical and empirical connections among different sorts of armed and unarmed popular struggles. Terrorism, civil war, liberal political revolutions, military coups, state failure, political Islam, nationalism, ethnic conflict, genocide, and antiglobalization social movements accompanied *late-late* state building.[14] He and his coauthors named the field that studied these connections "contentious politics"—the sum of the "interactions in which actors make claims that bear on someone else's interests"[15] and therefore result in popular political struggles.

There was a danger here: Would the study of the sequences of interactions among challengers, targets, public authorities, and third parties allow researchers to address big questions of revolutionary change? The study of revolutionary politics, which derived from Moore, had been exciting: In attempting to change the world, revolutionary politics had dealt with matters of world-historical importance. Was contentious politics of comparable significance? Or, had the end of theorizing about class-based revolutions, their causes and consequences for modernity, made the study of internal war boring and irrelevant, disconnected from mainstream comparative politics theorizing about alternative state-building strategies? In 1970, Gurr's *Why Men Rebel* had translated the question of revolution into a general concern with the extent and intensity of protest and rebellion. Yet Gurr had been able to ask big questions about relative deprivation and government legitimacy, and about the balances of coercive control and institutional support in states. Could Moore's basic concerns also become part of the new field of contentious politics?

Tilly and his associates would lay out a research program in which postrevolutionary politics remained disorderly and important. Tilly's *Democracy* thus studied civil wars and internal violence in the context of reformist and revolutionary attempts at state building, demonstrating how and why mechanisms of contention matter for the big pictures of world politics. Observing that "all of Europe's historical paths to democracy passed through vigorous political contention,"[16] Tilly's third core theme was that "Almost all of the crucial democracy-promoting causal mechanisms involve popular contention—politically constituted actors making public, collective claims on other actors, including agents of government—as correlates, causes, and effects."[17] Placing political struggle at the core of public politics, Tilly stressed the centrality of conten-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710001246 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tious politics to government institutions—democracy and state capacity—and to public policy—social welfare, war and peace, and international trade and autarchy. His findings are indeed significant. Here is Tilly's Paradox of Democratization: Democracy is a method of nonviolent conflict resolution that comes about through violence. And here is Tilly's Irony of Democratization: "Democratization and de-democratization turn out to have been asymmetrical processes" in which de-democratization "occurs more rapidly and violently" than democratization.[18] Formulations such as these, born of careful historical research, exemplify his unique ability to flesh out and explain the beguiling and frustrating processes whereby history is made.

Last Struggles

Tilly's final problem situation involved the current hegemony of rational-choice thought in political science. The major competing approach to contention and conflict is now a bargaining theory of war[19] that discusses the challenges of collective action.[20] Years before this theory[21] made its way into the discipline, Tilly put the matter simply: "When faced with resistance, dispersed or massive, what did rulers do? They bargained. . . . The core of what we now call 'citizenship,' indeed, consists of multiple bargains hammered out by rulers and ruled in the course of their struggles over the means of state action, especially the making of war."[22] Tilly also put his argument programmatically: "*RULERS AND CITIZENS bargain out a set of understandings concerning possible and effective means of making collective claims within the regime*." And "*THE 'BARGAINING' often involves vigorous, violent struggle, especially in nondemocratic regimes*."[23]

Tilly, moreover, observed that the subordination of citizens to the state followed a common pattern:

> Across a wide range of state transformation, for example, a robust process recurrently shapes state-citizen relations: the extraction-resistance-settlement cycle. In that process:
>
> - Some authority tries to extract resources (e.g., military manpower) to support its own activities from populations living under its jurisdiction.
> - Those resources (e.g., young men's labor) are already committed to competing activities that matter to the subordinate population's survival.
> - Local people resist agents of the authority (e.g., press gangs) who arrive to seize the demanded resources.
> - Struggle ensues.
> - A settlement ends the struggle.[24]

He continues:

> In all cases the settlement casts a significant shadow toward the next encounter between citizens and authorities. The settlement mechanism alters relations between citizens and authorities, locking those relations into place for a time. Over several centuries of European state transformation, authorities commonly won the battle for conscripts, taxes, food, and means of transportation. Yet the settlement of the local struggle implicitly or explicitly sealed a bargain concerning the terms under which the next round of extraction could begin[25]

Tilly thus often theorized about state-citizen negotiations over state-sustaining resources controlled by citizens. The resulting mobilization → repression → state-citizen negotiation cycles subjected the state to public politics and popular influence over public policy, and eventually to democratization. While he often used the terms regime-citizen "struggles" or "contention," the passages cited here demonstrate that he also meant the bargaining and negotiating that ended in what he called "mutually binding consultation" or "protected binding consultation"—agreements and compacts based on consent.[26] In short, Tilly maintained that regimes bargain with ordinary citizens and local power holders over their resources, trading state-defined rights and obligations for citizen-controlled labor and capital. As states bargain over the means of their rule, they expand state activities and public policies. Taxation, administration, and conscription become formalized in representative assemblies and systems of social provision and redistribution. Rulers without internal resources like oil, or without external resources like those supplied by Cold War patrons (the United States or the USSR), were most often involved in such bargaining.

In his books on democracy and the state, bargaining thus played a central role. Bargaining takes place between claim makers and their targets. Tilly thus refers to three types of claims over which bargaining can occur: identity, or claims that the actor exists; standing, or the claim that an actor belongs to a category; and program, or the variety of claims over policy.[27] To increase their bargaining power, social movements build up their WUNC (Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment).[28] The politics of collective violence involves bargaining.[29] Trust networks are involved in bargaining processes, producing the interactions of regimes and repertoires.[30] Bargaining is therefore a crucial collective-choice process by which claims are adjudicated, explaining "how claims produce effects."[31]

While mechanisms and contentious politics are widely recognized themes of Tilly, his emphasis on bargaining has never been similarly appreciated. The reason, I believe, is that in his books on contentious politics, bargaining suddenly disappears. In these synoptic inventories of mechanisms and processes, one can locate many types of interactions—democratization, coalition formation, collective action, mobilization—that produce policy outputs, but bargaining, though perhaps assumed, is nowhere to be found.[32] There is also no index entry for bargaining in his major collaborative work, *Dynamics of Contention*. In its plethora of processes, bargaining is the missing mechanism.

While his arguments about bargaining should sound familiar to students trained in the rational choice tradition of internal wars and state building, Tilly in fact specifically rejected many of the ideas about bargaining found

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710001246 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in this literature. Returning to his early opposition to models of state building featuring intentional historical actors, he offered three critiques of the rationalist perspective on bargaining. First, actors do not necessarily espouse programs for democracy or autocracy. Tilly thus wrote that "Few if any of the participants were self-consciously trying to create democratic institutions."[33] Masses of people do not necessarily demand democracy, he believed, nor are there always blocs of people espousing programs for regimes who bargain with each other over institutions. Democratization sometimes even occurs "at the initiative of power holders, in efforts to maintain their power."[34] He concluded that social scientists should not "look for [subordinate classes and groups] having democratic intentions, seeking to discover how and when they get chances to realize those intentions" during struggles against dominant elites who reject their claims and pressures.[35]

Second, Tilly maintained that elites are not necessarily the critical actors in regime change. While he recognized that democratization "depends fundamentally on the assent, however grudging, of people currently in power" and "[a]lthough democracy does by definition entail a degree of elite assent in the long run, elite assent is not a precondition for democratization."[36] Popular politics, as indicated, plays a crucial role in democratization.

Third, "In watching democratization, we witness an erratic, improvisational, struggle-ridden process in which continuities and cumulative effects arise more from constraints set by widely shared but implicit understandings and existing social relations than from any clairvoyant vision of the future."[37] In short, here is Tilly's Uncertainty of Democratization: Democracy is often the unintended—and often unwanted and unexpected—consequence of political struggle, rather than the intended result of bargaining; and since it emerges contingently from medium-run political struggles, democracy is often incoherent and unstable, that is, prone to de-democratization.

Rather than exploring the general principles behind thin dyadic bargaining, Tilly studied the empirics of thick contentious bargaining, or how an interlinked network of processes and interaction fields forges actors with identities who couple interests to strategies. His transformative democratizing processes thus focused on how "a recurrent set of alterations in power configurations both within states and outside of them produces changes in relations among states, citizens, and public politics, which in turn promotes democratization."[38] In brief, he argued that popular political struggles promote the integration of trust networks into public politics, the insulation of public politics from categorical inequalities, and the subordination of autonomous power centers to public politics, subjecting the state to popular influences that increase the breadth, equality, and protection of mutually binding citizen-state consultations. These wheels within wheels and grillework of gears simultaneously move upstream and downstream: "Everywhere reduction or governmental containment of privately controlled armed force hindered the translation of categorical inequality into public politics and . . . everywhere creation of external guarantees for governmental commitments promoted integration of trust networks into public politics."[39] These processes are driven by the exogenous shocks he called revolution, conquest, confrontation, and colonization, and by the underlying political-economy structures he called coercion, capital, and commitment. Here was no simple bargaining theory, but rather a theory that generalized from class relations to causal mechanisms, and from revolutionary violence to contentious politics, without diluting its world-historical messages.[40]

Early in his career, Tilly defined his problem situation as a battle about paradigms. After he famously called Gurr's *Why Men Rebel* a "sponge,"[41] his early classics designed to counter Gurr's classic—*The Rebellious Century: 1830–1930* and *From Mobilization to Revolution*—distinguished Emile Durkheim, Mills, and Marx as models and foils.[42] Later in his career, while acknowledging that previous analyses of democratization provide inspiration and context for this book," Tilly tired of such intellectual gymnastics.[43] An original thinker, he preferred to develop his own ideas in his own way. For those who "like your books polemical"[44] Tilly engaged paradigms in journal symposia and edited books.[45]

Nevertheless, problem situations in the social sciences, as this essay has shown, are inherently political, that is, practical + intellectual. It is not difficult to see the paradox of Tilly, the academic who called state making "organized crime"[46] years before rational-choice political scientists studied political predation, arguing as a social democrat: "In the long run, increases in governmental capacity and protected consultation reinforce each other; as government expansion generates resistance, bargaining, and provisional settlements, on one side, while on the other side protected consultation encourages demands for expansion of government intervention, which promote increases in capacity."[47] Hence, "If ample governmental capacity does not define democracy, it looks like a nearly necessary condition for democracy on a large scale."[48] As a good social democrat, he battled Marxists doing class analysis and neoclassical political economists doing market analysis. Contentious politics is Charles Tilly's "Third Way" to do historical and comparative social science, complete with its own theories, methods, and domains of inquiry. To the many hard-working social scientists who prefer a study of the structures of capitalism to a study of the microeconomics of markets, an exploration of revolutionary politics to an exploration of electoral politics, an analysis of identity politics as inherent within conflict to an analysis of conflict as contingent on identity, an examination of state capacity to an examination of executive–legislative arrangements, and

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the scrutiny of class inequality to the scrutiny of economic growth—Tilly's appeal is obvious and his legacy secure.

It is interesting to note that Tilly's first book *The Vendée* was dedicated to Pitirim Sorokin and not Barrington Moore. While now almost forgotten, Sorokin was a major mid-twentieth-century sociologist who compiled a millennium-long and multicountry event-data history of wars and revolutions.[49] If a talented young graduate student at Harvard in the 1950s was influenced by Moore's concerns about capitalism and state building and by Sorokin's evidence about historical events, how might his or her career turn out? In the years that followed, much of social science would be content with coupling middle-range structures to middle-range outcomes via a flexible conceptual apparatus. For example, the theory of strategic bargaining under incomplete information might allow one to connect GNP per capita and democracy as input variables to civil war as an output variable. If that bright student liked to drill into how things actually worked, he or she might deepen Sorokin, and collect fine-grained data on contentious human interactions, and broaden Moore, and develop mechanism and process accounts of how social relationships generate conflictual interactions. If that bright student had real genius and much energy, he or she would advance a new problem domain with a research program that codifies these theories and methods and clarifies their historical and comparative significance. Even if such a graduate student wrote feverishly, blossoming into a prolific scholar and then an inspiration to scores of social scientists, he or she would inevitably pass away much too early and leave much to be done.

Notes

1 Tilly 2007.
2 Moore 1966, xvii.
3 Moore 1966, 505.
4 Moore 1966, 426.
5 Moore 1966, 432; emphasis in original.
6 Tilly 1964.
7 Tilly 1975.
8 Tilly 2004a, 8.
9 Huntington 1968.
10 Dahl 1971.
11 Gurr 1970.
12 Skocpol 1979.
13 McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001.
14 In the 17th and 18th centuries, England and France were the first state builders. By the 19th century, Germany and Japan became late state builders. After WWII, India and a score of other countries attempted late-late state building.
15 Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 202.
16 Tilly 2004b, 35
17 Tilly 2007, 78.
18 Tilly 2007, 71.
19 Boix 2003, Acemoglu and Robinson 2006. Also see Bates 2008. For a review, see Lichbach 2009.
20 Lichbach 1995.
21 Fearon 1995.
22 Tilly 1990, 101–102.
23 Tilly 2006a, 213: emphasis in original.
24 Tilly 2006b, 423.
25 Ibid., 423.
26 Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 202.
27 Ibid., 81–82.
28 Tilly 2004b.
29 Tilly 2003.
30 Tilly 2005 and 2006.
31 Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 85.
32 Ibid., 215–216.
33 Tilly 2004b, 9.
34 Tilly 2007, 139
35 Tilly 2004b, 9.
36 Tilly 2007, 139.
37 Tilly 2004b, 26.
38 Tilly 2007, Figure 6.2 on p. 138.
39 Tilly 2004b, 254.
40 Since mechanisms, just like variables, are prone to causal tautology and conceptual fuzziness, they also require carefully delimited research strategies. See Lichbach 2008.
41 Tilly 1971, 416–20.
42 Tilly, Tilly, & Tilly 1975; and Tilly 1978.
43 Tilly 2004b, 9 and 10–13; Tilly 2005, 7–10; Tilly 2006a, 10–14.
44 Tilly 2005, 24.
45 Lichbach 1997; Lichbach 2005; Lichbach 2008.
46 Tilly 1985.
47 Tilly 2004b, 252.
48 Tilly 2006a, 23–24.
49 Sorokin 1962 [1937].

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