

The Poverty of (Monocausal) Theory: A Comment on Charles Tilly's *Durable Inequality*

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Durable Inequality is a very ambitious work of social theory by one of our foremost sociologists. In many ways, it builds upon the grand master theorists of the nineteenth century through a language of the present. It is like the more structuralist versions of Marx. For Marx, however, class relations and class inequality have different dynamics and different characteristics, depending on historically variable modes of production. For Tilly, inequality refers to relations between paired and unequal categories that have differential access to value-producing resources. And for Tilly, again in contrast to Marx, categorical inequality is perpetuated—is durable—in large measure because of various specified organizational properties and dynamics. There are no contradictions for Tilly, no dynamics of change that are internal to his model or vary by the specific historical conditions that one is attempting to analyze. This is, indeed, surprising for a scholar so identified with historical sociology. In Tilly's formulation, the characteristics and dynamics through which categorical inequality creates durable inequality appears transhistorical. It is not inequality under capitalism that seems to be Tilly's focus, but, rather, a universal theory of inequality across time.

Another similarity between Tilly and Marx is their common concern with and attention to social relationships, rather than individuals. Unlike Marx, however, Tilly focuses on relationships between categories within organizations, arguing that too much attention has already been given to individuals in research on inequality. "Durable inequality depends heavily," Tilly writes, "on the institutionalization of categorical pairs" (8). He denies that people who occupy and activate organizational categories can cause social inequality, or that policies oriented toward social change can substantially affect it. As a consequence, he rejects the idea that the actual people who occupy these categories and whose practices construct them under concrete historical, cultural and organizational conditions are relevant to his theoretical model.

It is for this reason that I also see *Durable Inequality* as resembling the more pessimist versions of Weber, in which the structures of unequal, categorical

relationships are perpetuated by organizational forms that both frustrate creativity and foster inequality. Bureaucracies for Weber, and organizations more generally for Tilly (although in their hierarchical structure Tilly's organizations look very much like Weber's bureaucracies), are the iron cages of social inequality. And despite the relational focus of Tilly's theory, *Durable Inequality* is written in the language of a cost-benefit analysis, the same discourse that is used in rational choice theory and microeconomics, a discourse of opportunity costs and exchange values, exploitation and opportunity hoarding, which become the mechanisms by which inequalities are made durable. It is through these processes, conceptualized in these terms, that organizations become the central actors in Tilly's theory of inequality. Intra- and interorganizational relationships are thus the primary objects of his attention.

The arguments in *Durable Inequality* are welcomingly clear. That very clarity can make critique easier, however, for it is easy to see not only what Tilly's theory contains, but also what it does not. First, in Tilly's exclusive emphasis on organizations and on categorical relationships, the actor—the human agent—is lost from sight. And since there are no actors, consciousness and intention is, at most, incidental and ephemeral in his model. Tilly is, therefore, unable to address the question of how inequalities can be ameliorated—his personal preference, as he makes clear throughout the volume. Tilly might well respond, in line with arguments articulated in his book, that it is not by error or oversight that actors are missing from his theoretical formulation, but rather that it is his intention to do so. His contention is that the individual has already gotten too much attention in other theoretical accounts of inequality, and that when the empirical evidence is properly understood, it is not individual differences that explain inequality, but rather the unequal categorical relationships within and between organizations.

My reaction is that Tilly's distinction between individuals, relationships, and organizations is too sharply drawn. Individuals may be units of observation without necessarily being the *only* units of analysis. And, indeed, if empirical materials are collected in ways that permit one to observe individual characteristics *and* social relationships simultaneously (as is the case, for instance, in life histories [the focus of my own current research; see Laslett, 1999]), then Tilly's objection to their examination can be overcome (see also Bertaux, 1997). Tilly himself demonstrates this capacity in the story he tells of how several generations of the Bossi family (Italian immigrants to the United States beginning at the end of the nineteenth century) ended up in Mamaroneck, N.Y. But if family and individual life histories foster the analysis and understanding of social inequality, then why is it necessary to limit one's focus to individuals, relationships between them, or organizations? Individuals live their lives in social relationships—indeed, they would not survive if this was not the case. And in the contemporary world, much of their lives is lived in formal organizations of the type Tilly describes: firms, schools, governments. Why can we not consider

all of these dimensions of social experience? Why limit ourselves to organizations as the single level or unit of analysis?

By eliminating the individual, the social actor, from his model, Tilly lets important insights about agency and inequality, durable and otherwise, go unaddressed. Analyses of the emotional, psychological, and cultural dimensions of human motivation, intention, and meaning are, I believe, necessary for understanding both the perpetuation of inequality and the possibilities for its transformation. I have suggested in some of my own work that emotion—and the psychological processes and meanings to which emotion is attached—are necessary components in the analysis of human action (Laslett 1990, 1991, 1999, Laslett and Thorne, 1997). For Tilly, at least in *Durable Inequality*, human action and agency are simply irrelevant, despite an occasional nod to the contrary. In his discussion of the possible futures of inequality, he writes, “This book’s analyses leads to no firm unitary predictions, precisely because they treat inequality as a historical product, deeply subject to human agency” (242). Yet, the very thrust of his analysis argues to the contrary—categorical inequality is universal and ahistorical, and human agency can do little or nothing to change it.

Tilly suggests four possible scenarios for the future of inequality, after demonstrating the ways in which it has increased over the twentieth century. He calls these scenarios “More of the Same” (no change); “Balkanization” (in which “the world segments increasingly into partly insulated clusters of producers-consumers whose exchanges equalize them to some degree but which become vulnerable to invasion and attack from members of other clusters . . .” (242)); “Material Equalization” (which can occur through “authoritative intervention” by actors—governments, for instance—seeking to reduce categorical inequality: affirmative action programs would be one such example); and “New Categories,” by which he means the formation of “new categorical pairs,” or the increasing salience of existing pairs. Ethnicities can become nations, citizens and non-citizens become increasingly differentiated, and so on. But whether these events lead to a future of inequality that is different from the past will depend on “whether these sorts of mobilizations disrupt, capture, or coincide with previously existing control of surplus-generating resources, i.e., whether they really can disrupt the existing patterns of inequality” (248).

While seeming to provide alternative scenarios, and stating a preference for material equalization through “authoritative intervention” in institutions that currently cause inequality, he nevertheless asserts “that in the future, as in the past, the same sorts of causal mechanisms will continue to generate forms and degrees of inequality” (243). Organizational interventions, however, can move toward the material equalization that Tilly prefers. Yet his unwillingness to attend to the social actor, the human agent, makes it very difficult for him to contemplate why any person or any groups of persons would attempt such interventions. The cost-benefit, the economic unit of Tilly’s analysis, makes it impossible for him to consider that people have ideas, beliefs, and feelings that

might make inequality abhorrent to them, and might make it worth the effort to reduce material inequality, even in the face of possible individual loss. A belief in social justice and the emotional energy to work for changes in organizational and categorical relations of inequality, would, I believe, be enhanced by understanding the psychological mechanisms and meanings that can shape its personal significance. To do so requires the individual to be part of the analysis. Without the actor, can we really say we understand how categorical inequality can be reduced?

My second response to *Durable Inequality* is connected to the first by the fact that it also has to do with Tilly's focus on firms and work processes as exemplars of the categorical relations of durable inequality. While agreeing that paid labor is one central arena for the creation and perpetuation of inequality, labor can also be an arena for the reduction of inequality, as through the collective action of trade unions. But organizations that engage workers and pay them, however unequally, for their labor are not alone in the complex question of durable inequalities. Nor is economic inequality the only kind of inequality that need concern analysts. By using paid labor and the firm as the focus of his analysis, Tilly perpetuates a distinction that I had hoped, obviously incorrectly, was on its way to the dustbin of sociological thinking—the categorical distinction between public and private lives, relationships, and behaviors. Tilly is silent on this subject. He never uses the terms “public” or “private,” so unless one was looking for them, their absence might not be noticed. Yet this is an important omission in at least two ways: it ignores inequalities that exist outside of formal organizations and institutional structures, and, in so doing, overlooks private lives and personal meanings as sites of resistance to, or perpetuation of, inequality.

I want to refer, briefly, to two social locations that are not firms, one of which is part of Tilly's theory, the other of which is not. These are schools and families, respectively. In Tilly's model, schools are organizations that foster inequality. Through their sorting mechanisms, they slot people into categories of inequality within firms, but do not change categorical inequality itself. By ignoring human experiences, practices, and capacities for changes in consciousness, however, Tilly overlooks the ways in which knowledge and meanings within particular life histories can provide a basis for the legitimacy of, and indeed a passion for, resistance (cf. Laslett, 1999). Education is a means of perpetuating inequality and is also one of the routes (through social mobility) by which the social composition of organizational categories can be changed, and, perhaps, the future of categorical inequalities reduced, if not necessarily eliminated.

Let me give one example from the reading I have been doing as part of my current project on the uses of personal narratives in the social sciences. It is from the life story of Charles Ogletree, a professor in the Harvard Law School, and an African-American raised in a very poor family of agricultural workers

in Merced, California. Ogletree's life story is recounted in Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's *I've Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation* (1995). Charles Ogletree described to Lawrence-Lightfoot the continual struggle he feels between his teaching and his work as a legal advocate. Both activities are motivated by the same values—"working for social justice." Harvard Law School and the courts, especially the highest court where Ogletree has pled cases, would seem important sites from which the institutional changes that Tilly believes will be most effective—if anything can be—in ameliorating social inequality will occur. But would we fully understand Ogletree's values and actions without also understanding where he came from, the family relations and friendships that characterized his early relationships, and continue to this day? I am not naïve. I know quite well that there are probably more upwardly mobile poor people who do not work for social justice than who do. But understanding those who do is crucial, in my view, to understanding how social justice happens. Institutions may be the conduits through which categorical inequality is perpetuated and can be ameliorated, but by themselves they are just structures. It is the human agent, the social actor, who makes them work. It is necessary to understand individual lives in order to analyze social inequalities—their creation, their institutionalization, and their transformation.

Ogletree's story provides a smooth transition to the second institution that I want to examine: families. While not formal organizations in the sense that interests Tilly, families are nevertheless key to understanding how and why people act as they do. Contrary to some versions of psychoanalytic theory, I would not argue that families are the only ground for engendering emotion or meaning, or that other locations, experiences, and relationships are not also important to shaping beliefs and actions. Yet families are crucial sites where values are learned and powerful feelings are engendered—feelings that construct meaning, as Nancy Chodorow has argued (1995, 1999). Can we really understand social inequalities without taking these dynamics into account?

Family life is the first location and occasion for the learning of inequality. And that experience can either be permanently debilitating, or can provide the emotional capacity to overcome inequality. Katie Cannon is another of the participants in Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's study of the life stories of middle-class African Americans. Cannon tells us about how her family was an impetus to change—in the sense that she sought to get away from them—and about dimensions of social inequality, other than economic, which were linked to her capacity to do so. Cannon speaks about the darkness of her skin color, and how that affected her sense of self. She also speaks of her efforts, through education, to escape the suffocating environment of her family and the small Southern town in which she grew up. She put it this way: "I was too dark to be top in my class. Dark-complected kids were always in the slow group." Lawrence-Lightfoot continues: "For Katie, school became a place to prove herself worthy *despite her* despicable dark skin. If she could succeed and excel in school, then

she might be able to overcome the shadows of darkness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1995: 52, 53).

Both Katie Cannon and Charles Ogletree appear to be admirable people, who have made a difference, but that is not the reason why I have called forth their stories. The reason is, rather, that in each case we learn how their feelings, often stemming from early family experiences, shaped meanings, molded intentions, and engendered the emotional energy they needed to become social actors. Neither Ogletree nor Cannon simply swallowed whole the American culture of individual success, perhaps in part because as African-Americans this culture of success was less available to them. Yet that explanation alone does not account for activist anti-racist whites who have joined with African-Americans to reduce inequalities in the US or with black South Africans, as Temma Kaplan describes in her recent book, *Crazy for Democracy* (1997). We need to ask Tilly why the occupants of his social categories are always fighting to retain their privileges, or, for those who do not have many privileges, why they fight to accumulate and hoard those that they do possess. Why do some people work for social justice while others work primarily for themselves? To me, this is a crucial question for any theory of inequality, and it is one that *Durable Inequalities* does not even attempt to address.

By insisting on the importance of organizations as his one unit of observation and analysis, Tilly weakens the theory he has so carefully constructed. Organizations need to be seen within varying macrohistorical contexts; we may live in a world capitalist system, but it is not the only possible one. The counterfactual logic that Tilly proposes as a way to test his model needs to be applied, as well, to other types of social systems. We may not know what alternative systems will emerge in the future, but we do know something about what they have been in the past. With this knowledge we can study the limits, scope, and conditions of Tilly’s organizational analysis. Similarly, we must also consider the people who occupy the categorical positions that Tilly sees as so central to the maintenance of inequality. It is their actions that reproduce or alter inequalities. But people, as individuals and as members of the same categories, are not all the same, nor do they only or always follow the logic of capitalist accumulation.

It is not the case that economic inequality is the only type that matters for understanding how inequality develops and why it is reproduced or changed. We need to know about actors, both individual and collective, about organizations, *and* about the macrohistorical and local cultures and contexts within which lives are lived and inequalities exist. A complex and multicausal understanding depends not on our unit of analysis but on understanding how and why people act as they do, how and why they become agents of social change, how and why they are or are not successful. The study of organizational dynamics and categorical relations provide important but only partial answers to a theory of inequality.

A multicausal theory, not a monocausal one, is necessary to understand such a widespread, complex, and variable social phenomenon as inequality. And social actors are central to such a theory.

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