

A Durable Question

Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, fourteen-year old boys from the families of London's unemployed measured ten inches shorter than their aristocratic and gentry counterparts. Stature, as Charles Tilly remarks in beginning *Durable Inequality*, was in part a product of childhood health and nutrition and also a mark of body strength and the capacity for work; it predicted morbidity and mortality (2-3). The costs of inequality, of having too little, like the benefits of consuming more, were and continue to be visible as people pass in the streets and crowds.

In measuring height and in foretelling life opportunities, the difference between short and tall is relational. As an illustration of inequality, its example reveals some of the strengths and limitations of Charles Tilly's important study of inequality, first presented as the 1995 Irene Flecknoe Ross Lectures at the University of California, Los Angeles, and revised for publication as *Durable Inequality*. For Tilly, not only are the outcomes of inequalities relational, but so too are their creation and perpetuation.

His study, carefully framed, is a theoretical inquiry into the organizational practices that produce inequalities. Tilly does not question the origins of inequality generally. Instead, he asks about the causes, processes, and consequences of durable inequalities, those persisting over lifetimes and organizational histories, that distinguish the relations of different socially defined categories of people. Such inequalities, he argues, arise from and are reproduced by the dichotomous categorical distinctions between social groups – white/black, male/female, citizen/foreigner, Muslim/Jew, and so on – that people who control access to value producing resources impose to solve organizational problems. Categorical definitions of social groups along various and at times overlapping criteria secure entitlement and exercise control; they permit some to benefit more from social resources than others (6-8).

Inequalities are made durable, and so persist, because of the continuing utility of categories for organizations in facilitating exploitation and because advantaged and disadvantaged groups strategically hoard what opportunities they can secure within systems of unequally distributed resources and rewards. As well, examples of success teach other organizations the categories that are effective and thereby promote their spread through emulation. However reluctantly, consciously or unconsciously, groups and individuals adapt their daily lives and practices to the inequalities from which they benefit or suffer. Once in place, inequalities and the mechanisms of exploitation, opportunity hoard-

ing, emulation, and adaptation that sustain them are difficult to remedy because the transaction costs of finding new, effective criteria for decision-making can be high in economic, social, and emotional terms. Categorical definitions become cost-effective with repeated use.

Durable Inequality is a detailed conceptualization of the mechanisms whereby organizations employ categorical distinctions to structure and reproduce unequal relations. The platform for this is Tilly's argument that long-lasting inequalities are relational, the consequence of organizational decisions and not the sum of the differential contributions of individuals to the production of value or the disparities in the amount and worth of the human capital that individuals bring to their employment. Nor do they necessarily derive from prejudices (21-5). Some might cavil about the difficulty of his abstract classification of social relations, or "network configurations," (as chains, hierarchies, triads, organizations, or categorical pairs), which are held together by bonds (strong or weak), and which engage participants (whose actions vary from shallow or deep improvisation to thin or intense ritual depending upon the degree of localized common knowledge and the availability of scripting) in transactions of three possible kinds (gifts, entitlements, or compensation).¹ This precision in dissecting social relations does not always carry through the subsequent discussion and, Tilly admits, even though organizations are designed to structure relations along these lines, "people make incessant mistakes" and do not follow the rules (47-53). But complex as this model is, it does define the universe of possibilities (and counterfactuals) from which decision-makers can create organizations that capture valuable resources, lower transaction costs, and secure opportunities from outside organizations that permit it to realize material gain from those resources. Hierarchies, when combined with paired categories, structure the asymmetrical relations that produce durable inequality (62-4).

By imputing qualitative differences between people on opposing sides of definitional boundaries, categories provide justifications, and hence organizational stability, for greater or lesser rewards for contributions to the production of value. Categories can either be interior to an organization's structure, distinguishing between management and workers, for example. Or, they can be exterior, conforming to widely recognized criteria such as race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, and class. The coherence of interior categories with exterior ones reinforces inequality at the same time as it reduces the organization's cost of maintaining boundaries: "It borrows potent scripts and common knowledge" (76). Categorical boundaries, then, separate the beneficiaries of exploitation from those suffer it. They also make it possible for non-elite members to hoard opportunities and to exclude the even more disadvantaged.

South African apartheid provides an example of the coherence of interior and exterior categorical boundaries in exploitative relations, from which Tilly

generalizes exploitation within capitalist forms and labour markets. That analysis draws upon Marxist theory, in particular the power of those who own the means of production to appropriate the surplus value produced by those who must work for them to subsist (87). The importance placed on this materialist conception of exploitation and on a labour theory of value has persuaded Erik Olin Wright that, despite Tilly's desire to bridge Marx and Weber (7), he remains "much closer to the core logic of classical Marxism than he seems prepared to acknowledge."² The resemblance suffers, however, as Michael Mann has observed, from a reluctance to analyze in any depth capitalist exploitation, particularly when it is not entwined with some other system of exploitation.³ In fairness, Tilly has explained in various places⁴ that *Durable Inequality* is a companion to the more empirical study, *Work Under Capitalism*, co-authored with Chris Tilly, in which such issues are more fully engaged (x). However, Tilly does seem reluctant to theorize class, in capitalism or other modes of production, or explicitly to give it priority among other social relations – race, ethnicity, citizenship, and gender – that establish boundaries across which one group exploits another. Nor does he speculate about the ways that exploitation occurs within other relations, such as gender or race.⁵ So much recent scholarship has demonstrated the significance of systems of power other than capitalism in exploitative relations that the challenge to incorporate such arguments goes beyond Tilly's acknowledgement of the concatenation of unequal categorical differences in durable inequality. To say that emulation and adaptation of other forms of categorical inequalities inspire application in other circumstances does not satisfactorily explain the process, as important as that observation is and as bountiful as the examples are.⁶

A more robust Marxist theorization of exploitation might acknowledge that historically capitalist class relations have not constituted a totalizing or homogenous social system. Even though growing numbers of people have become committed to exchanges of labour power for wages, capitalism has adapted to, accommodated itself with, and promoted other forms of productive relations, value exchanges, and systems of exploitation. Such a theory must be historical, rather than draw upon historicized illustrations; that is it needs to explain capitalist exploitation as a relational process, sequential and globalizing in its absorption and transformation of other systems of exploitation. It should also consider that exploitation does not stop at the point of production, where surplus value is produced and appropriated. Rather, it continues with the circulation of commodities through which the value of that surplus labour is realized in a form that can benefit the exploiters and other powerholders who claim their share along the way.

Tilly does not explicitly theorize the importance of circulation mechanisms. Nor does he conceptualize the role of other indirect mechanisms and effects in any detail. He does acknowledge that "indirect effects matter" (100),

but his argument is that individual differences in human capital are largely “categorical experiences compounded and transmitted” (101). But he does not incorporate the connections from exploitation of generations of parents at the point of production through the daily and generational reproduction of labour in oppressed families and degraded neighborhoods into the model of “basic causal relationships in categorical inequality” as more than dotted lines (115). This is the limitation of his reference to the height (and health) differential of working-class and upper-class youths in early nineteenth-century Europe; an illustration, no matter how compelling, is not evidence of an importance social process. In this regard, as Barbara Laslett has suggested, more attention ought to be paid to the family and schools, two organizations in which exploitation and inequality are experienced, learned, and perpetuated directly and indirectly from generation to generation.⁷

Tilly’s elaboration of opportunity hoarding does suggest one way in which direct and indirect effects are related. Drawing upon Max Weber’s notion of social closure, he argues that non-elite groups attempt to exercise what limited control they have over access to productive resources to exclude outsiders from their enjoyment.⁸ Unlike Weber, however, Tilly maintains that the categorical boundaries constructed to privilege insiders are ever more difficult to enforce the more complex an organization becomes and the more distant their range is extended (6-7). Thus, opportunity hoarding frequently is manifest, for example, in localized immigrant niches and the consequent categorical identity that is created in one place but not another. Tilly explains that Italian migrants from Roccasecca to Lyon, France, before the First World War found factory employment and over the next generation became distinguished from others in the French working class by little more than their names. Their *paesani* who migrated to Mamaroneck, New York, secured a near monopoly in landscape gardening and, with businesses and jobs gained through family connection, they maintained a strong identification with Italy and a sense of themselves as Italian-Americans (147-54). Regrettably, Tilly does not elaborate on the reasons for one group of Italian migrants to feel the need for group boundaries and the extent to which exploiters created limited niches for them (189). As Aldon Morris has added, such situations are not always benign, and racism should be considered as a virulent factor in what Morris terms “superexploitation.” Blacks in the United States, he contends, “were denied the opportunity to sustain a black enclave” and enclave building has had a “nasty, bloody, brutish, and racist” history.⁹ Still, Tilly’s point, that successful opportunity hoarding may enable one non-elite group to exploit a less eligible one, does help to explain why some exploited groups develop an interest in the perpetuation of the system of inequality that favours it in relative terms (93).

Emulation and adaptation fix inequalities in place once they are effectively created and also facilitate their reproduction. Familiar organizational forms

are implemented more cheaply, and “lower transaction costs favor the reproduction of existing organizational models, whatever their origins” (96). Moreover, the emulation of a model of exploitation, by making the inequality that it promotes appear ubiquitous, contributes to the stability of the original and its replications. To the extent that people perceive the given nature of inequality so imparted, believe reluctantly that they cannot change it, and adjust their routines and expectations in ways that permit sufficient satisfaction, their adaptations become personal investments in the perpetuation of systems of inequality (191). Tilly’s example of these processes, nation building and health care, may seem disparate. However, in each illustration exploiters developed and emulated organizational models (the nation state; state sanctioned professionalization), which permitted room for opportunity hoarding for some of the more privileged of the exploited (autonomous regions within the nation; nurses). Others (citizens; patients) adapted and developed interests in the system.

Intervention to reduce inequalities, then, encounters resistance. Hortatory calls for altruism or increasing individual human capital through education does not address the transactional nature of durable inequalities secured through categorical differences. More egalitarian structures require not just the redistribution of control over resources and the returns accruing from that control, but also the replacement of organizational forms creating inequality with new and easily adopted alternate forms. Even for these to be possible, the transition costs must be lower than the costs of enforcement of categorical boundaries or piecemeal amelioration within existing structures (192).

Government, too, impedes initiatives for change since the ruling classes use the state to promote exploitation and hoard opportunities. Politics, then, is another dimension of the general operation of inequality. In understanding the politics of inequality, “the big question” for Tilly is “who belongs to the ruling classes and how [do] they dispose of surplus value” (193). As well, the issue of politics leads Tilly to his most direct discussion of agency and identity, a theme less effectively articulated in other sections of his conceptualization.

Again, however, Tilly’s approach to class raises questions. Political participation and influence over the state’s promotion of inequality appear to define class membership. As he elaborates, “democrats prefer democracy because large parts of the citizenry join the ruling classes” (193) and because democracies “provide more regular channels for movement from exclusion to inclusion” than tyrannies or oligarchies. But this definition confuses the methods whereby some, no matter how inclusive, secure property rights with the property relationship itself as the basis for class membership. Inclusion promotes complicity in decision-making, not necessarily power over decisions. Some tribute might be given to participants in the form of various entitlements, but, in Tilly’s own terms, these only serve to increase the transition costs of altering inequalities created and legitimated by the political process. Citizenship is not class.¹⁰

This definitional difficulty over class and its relationship to citizenship is unfortunate because Tilly's conceptualization of politics provides an otherwise perceptive consideration of the role of government in creating and sustaining unequal categories, the place of inequality as an issue and force in politics, and the ability of political action to change inequality. Questions of citizenship are inherently categorical definitions of inclusion and exclusion, who qualifies for benefits and participates in governance and who does not – Jim Crow legislation, veterans benefits, refugee status, alien internment, and so on are all clear examples. The movement for Catholic Emancipation in Great Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries provides Tilly with an example of the way political action can remove exclusion (204-12). Social movements deliberately emphasize the “unjust treatment” of worthy, united, numerous, and committed groups and threaten governments with the withdrawal of support of a potentially disruptive constituency, willing to aid the government's domestic critics and foreign enemies, even to the point of direct action and rebellion. Successful movements construct categorical political identities through a process of mystification, which exaggerates the group's strength and worthiness and claims a history for it beyond its protest (214-5).

His discussion of political identities brings Tilly closest to a historical (or metahistorical) theorization of one aspect of inequality. Social movements, he argues, like other examples of political entrepreneurship, engage in contentious politics by deploying disjoined collective identities. Unlike embedded identities (race, gender, class, ethnicity, locality, and such), which inform the routine social lives of people, disjoined identities “rarely or never govern everyday social activities” (219). Instead, they invoke associational, legal, or national affinities across such distances or abstractions that they require organizational mediation. The major historical trend in early nineteenth-century European politics was away from local contention, which derived from embedded identities, to national social movements, which formed disjoined identities.¹¹ How this relates theoretically to other historical trends, such as the maturing of industrial capitalism, the removal of feudal vestiges, the democratization of government, and changes in patterns of durable inequality, is not elaborated – but it should be. Have campaigns for citizenship rights, one wonders, rather than for class justice come to be more common as social movements fighting inequality under liberal capitalism?

As impressive as Tilly's conceptualization of durable inequality is, his claim that it explains “persistent social inequality whenever and wherever it occurs,”¹² is a historical theory only in a limited sense. He means that “recurrent causal mechanisms (– that is, exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation – have been) behind multifarious forms of durable inequality” for millennia (230). Change, to the extent that it is placed in this model, is organizational change, because organizational forces determine the creation

and use of categorical inequality. Elsewhere, Tilly has explained that his conceptualization of the mechanisms of inequality rests on a “weak functionalist argument”. Unlike strong functionalist arguments, which risk being teleological and unfalsifiable in explaining social phenomena by the organizational necessity of their outcomes, weak arguments contend that decision makers evaluate the effectiveness of various possible means and adopt those which best achieve their goals, while reproducing the relationships within which decisions are made.¹³

Tilly’s argument might also be described as weakly structuralist; Erik Olin Wright has labeled it “combinatorial structuralism,” since combinations or concatenations of organizational forms and decisions create structures of inequality.¹⁴ For Barbara Laslett, this concentration on organizations and categories, like other forms of structuralism, renders the model insensitive to human agency, and without agency, no place is given to intention, emotion, and consciousness in driving change. The absence of consciousness or any internal contradictions as dynamics for change in theory has led her to conclude that Tilly falls much closer to the more pessimistic versions of Weber’s bureaucratic “iron cages” than to Marx.¹⁵ Tilly’s response that “*Durable Inequality* scintillates with human agency” is an exaggeration, while his contention that “interacting people produce all of its cause-effect relations” is a simplification of the relationship that he sees between structure and agency.¹⁶

Weakly structuralist seems appropriate. A structural force, the organizational imperative to reduce transaction costs, is a constant. But his rejection of agency, culture, and mentalities as realms autonomous from structure does not mean that he thinks that interests, intentions, and agencies can be interpreted directly from structures. Rather they are informed by the various repertoires or scripts that people learn collectively through historical interaction (24). Thus, action is not free or individualistic, but constrained by what people collectively have come to know historically and culturally from the structures within which they live.¹⁷

As developed in *Durable Inequality*, this functionalist and structuralist argument does not easily develop explanations of social change. Without a theorization of how modes of exploitation occur and are organized within modes of production, there can be no historical theorization of how inequalities change as modes of production change, either internally through their maturation and decay or in relation to other modes of production within a social formation or in an imperialist system of uneven development. To do so would develop a more thorough Marxist theorization of exploitation – which, after all, must be a theory of history and change.

In conclusion, historians may encounter some difficulties engaging *Durable Inequality*. They may object to the abstraction of its argument, its use of references to the past as illustrations rather than evidence, and the underde-

velopment of historical change in its model. As Michael Hanagan has observed, “adapting these arguments to historical research will not be easy.”¹⁸ But it should prove worth the effort. Tilly’s emphasis on the relational nature of categorical inequality and his precision in conceptualizing the role of organizational mechanisms of exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation ought to provide a fruitful foundation for analyzing inequalities in all variety of cultural and historical contexts. With studies of this sort, perhaps, a clearer understanding of inequality in historical time will be possible.

David G. Burley
University of Winnipeg

¹ See for example: Mark Traugott, review of *Durable Inequality* in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 30 (1999), 302-3; Marjorie Morgan, review of *Durable Inequality* in *Historian* 62 (Winter, 2000), 474-5.

² Erik Olin Wright, “Metatheoretical Foundations of Charles Tilly’s *Durable Inequalities*” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (April, 2000), 458.

³ Michael Mann, “The History of all Previous Society is the History of Durable Dichotomies” in *Contemporary Sociology* 28 (January, 1999), 29. Similarly, Mike Savage has suggested that apartheid is an “easy, obvious” example from which to discuss exploitation and Tilly ought to have considered more complex relations. (review of *Durable Inequality* in *Sociological Research Online*, <<http://socresonline.org.uk/3/2/savage.html>> [accessed 27 July, 2001].

⁴ Charles Tilly, “Errors, Durable and Otherwise” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (April 2000), 487; Bruce M. Stave, “A Conversation with Charles Tilly” in *Journal of Urban History* 24 (January 1998), 184-225. In *Work Under Capitalism* (Boulder CO, 1998), Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly broadly conceptualize work to encompass paid, unpaid, informal, and self-employed work in the production of use values. At any time, so many productive relations, each with its own history, social context, and cultural practice, engage people that no single transaction, such as the wage labour contract between the capitalist firm and its workers, can explain the experience and significance of work. Over time the monetization, that is payment in money for measurable amounts of work, and time discipline have come to characterize work.

⁵ Patricia A. Roos, “Revisiting Inequality” in *Contemporary Sociology* 28 (January, 1999): 28.

⁶ For example, to observe that the contemporary exploitation of Congolese miners of coltan, the heavy mud from which tantalum is refined for use in the electronics industry, and of the sex trade workers, who service them, resembles

in many ways King Leopold II's rubber colony does not explain why and how this should come to be. In both situations, mature capitalist manufacturing industry, based on wage labour exploitation, connected with resource production located in a space with ill-defined private property rights. The absence of property rights encouraged forced labour in the first instance and self-employed labour in the second rather than waged employment. In the past and in the present, a rudimentary state apparatus that thrived on theft and violence supported exploitation. Clearly the two regimes are connected (through Mobutu Sese Seko among other ways). But to conclude, following Tilly's argument, that the effectiveness of the first regime promoted emulation and adaptation through to the contemporary regime, really offers a weak explanation. How that occurred, what conditions permitted its reproduction, and the reasons resistance did not prevent it, all require answers in historical interpretation, as well as the conceptualization of exploitation. On the Congo, see Blaine Harden, "The Dirt in the New Machine" in *The New York Times Magazine*, 12 August, 2001, 35-9, and Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. (New York, 1998).

⁷ Barbara Laslett, "The Poverty of (Monocausal) Theory: A Comment on Charles Tilly's *Durable Inequality*" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (April, 2000), 478-9.

⁸ David Grusky has observed a similar approach to social closure in an earlier work not cited by Tilly; that is Leon Mayhew's "Ascription in Modern Society" in E.O. Laumann, D.M. Siegel and R.W. Hodge, eds., *Logic of Social Hierarchies*. Unlike Mayhew, Tilly does not consider that savings from ascription are broadly shared. Grusky, review of *Durable Inequality* in *American Journal of Sociology* 104 (May, 1999), 1825.

⁹ Aldon Morris, "Building Blocks of Social Inequality: A Critique of *Durable Inequality*" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (April, 2000), 485.

¹⁰ Also consider Tilly's other work on citizenship: "Citizenship Identity, and Social History" and "The Emergence of Citizenship in France and Elsewhere" in *International Review of Social History* 40 (1995), 1-17 and 223-36.

¹¹ Tilly draws here on his earlier work on contentious politics; see: "Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758-1834" in *Social Science History* 17 (1993), 253-80; *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834* (Cambridge MA, 1995); "Parliamentarization of Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834" in *Theory and Society* 26 (April-June, 1997), 245-73.

¹² Charles Tilly, "Relational Studies of Inequality" in *Contemporary Sociology* 29 (November, 2000), 782.

¹³ Tilly, "Errors, Durable and Otherwise," 487-8.

¹⁴ Wright, "Metatheoretical Foundations," 460. Others have commented on Tilly's structuralism, a term he does not himself use. See: Roos, "Revisiting

Inequality," 28; Michael Mann, "The History of all Previous Society," 29.

¹⁵ Laslett, "The Poverty of (Monocausal) Theory," 475-6.

¹⁶ Tilly, "Errors, Durable and Otherwise," 492.

¹⁷ Tilly has elaborated upon his understanding of agency in an interview with Stave and described himself as in many ways a Thompsonian. Elsewhere he has defended Thompson's relational notion of class, not as "an individual state of mind, not even the collective mentality of a single group, but a dynamic, contested relationship among sets of people." His may resemble Thompson's understanding of agency, although Thompson's stunted offsprings of the working class were more clearly actors than Tilly's illustrations. The difference between the two is in understanding structure and structural change, at least as Tilly represents his position in *Durable Inequality*. Stave, "A Conversation," 184-225; Charles Tilly, "Softcore Solipsism" in *Labour/Le travail* 34 (Fall, 1994): 263.

¹⁸ Hanagan has regretted that "the timeless cast of his argument shifts attention from his radical new reinterpretations of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and early modern state formation." One does wish that Tilly had made these more apparent to his readers. Hanagan, review of *Durable Inequality* in *Journal of Social History* 34 (2000), 184.

Bryan D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

Every so often a work of history comes along whose ambition and originality take one aback. Such a book captures a certain spirit of the times, engaging with contemporary trends across the broadest of fronts, while summoning the best of older traditions to manage them. It exercises breathtaking powers of synthesis – over a wide array of experiences and developments, over different types of knowledge in disparate fields, over theories and controversies, over wide scatterings of scholarship, over unexpected insights, over what has long been familiar and what is new. It pulls things together. It navigates a path through an otherwise disabling field of disagreements and partisanship. It takes the measure of powerful new theories, while calling them to classical account. It is passionately and eloquently written.

Bryan Palmer's book does all of this and more. Writing from inside the contemporary crucible of intellectual and political uncertainty we know by that "hybrid melange of analyses" bearing the prefix of the "post" ("postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postfeminism, *posthistoire*"), Palmer sets out to explore the marginal and hidden places where "transgressive" lives are made (3) – where worlds are lived and imagined differently from