

***Contention and Democracy in Europe , 1650-2000* By Charles Tilly**

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Systematic reflection on the transition to democracy - on the problem of how democratic institutions can be built and sustained - came relatively late in the history of democracy. Beginning with Plato, Thucydides and others, intellectual energy was mostly invested in attacking democracy by demonstrating its self-paralysing and politically destructive effects.

The outlines of an alternative approach first appeared in the 19th century, when democratic theory became self-reflexive, for instance, in the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, whose wide-ranging interests in America, Algeria and Switzerland highlighted some preconditions of power-sharing forms of government.

In the past half-generation, spurred on by the global resistance to dictatorship and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a whole new field of "transitology" (Philippe Schmitter) has sprung up. So much research has been conducted and so many books and commentaries published that, for the first time in the history of democracy, acute awareness of its precious contingency has become systematic.



Charles Tilly's latest book is best understood from this perspective. He attempts a new explanatory account of European processes of democratisation, and even casts an eye over global trends. His introductory survey of the different types of explanation of the processes that promote, stifle or undo democratisation is most helpful. He makes clear his differences with those classic works, like the *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, written by his teacher Barrington Moore Jr, that move teleologically from outcome to origin when trying to explain why democracy takes root. Tilly also rejects sequence explanations of the advance of democracy, for instance approaches (such as those of Georg Sørensen and Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan) that postulate the importance of distinct, causally interdependent stages, such as background preconditions, the exit from authoritarianism, transition to democracy, and democratic consolidation.

According to Tilly, there are no standard sequences, only many

different paths that can lead to democracy. He also rejects

explanations that rely on lists of variables, the kind of approach displayed in Samuel Huntington's *The Third Wave*. It tries to show that waves of democratisation can be

explained by such variables as global economic growth, the malfunctioning of authoritarian regimes, the political reform of the Catholic Church, the foreign policy of the US and the spiralling "demonstration effects" of democratic changes themselves. Tilly points out, convincingly, that the history of democracy is not like that. There are no timeless or exhaustive sets of sufficient conditions governing the rise or fall of democracy. So can the birth and death of democracies be explained? Tilly thinks so.

Although he could profitably have drawn from older authorities, ranging from Aristotle and Thucydides to Nahum Capen and James Bryce, he concentrates on developing a hybrid approach, one that highlights democracy's necessary conditions and their tendency to cluster in particular times and places. This approach leads him to compare democracies to lakes, and to say that explanations of the rise and fall of democracy are indeed possible, but only for single clusters of conditions structured by such events as revolutions, conquest, and colonisation. There are no necessary "laws" that underpin democracy. Conversely, since there are no meta-historical guarantees of the survival of democracy - its destruction is always and everywhere possible.

All of this is worthwhile and Tilly is to be congratulated for his brave grasp of a vast sociological literature that illuminates many important historical details. His treatment of the vital role played by the Low Countries in the history of democracy in Europe is especially good. The book is nevertheless disappointing. Why? Partly because there is a permanent tension between its awkward theoretical language of familiar concepts re-wrapped in unnecessary neologisms and sociologese, and the rather well written and informative, country-by-country historical narratives. Some of the book's guiding arguments are also derivative, or excessively general. The central thesis - that democracy is a path-dependent outcome that results from, mobilises and reshapes "popular contention" - is arguably trite. Given Tilly's deservedly praised earlier work on the history of conflict and violence, his new emphasis on the interdependence of contention and democratisation is certainly welcome.

Tilly's thesis amounts to the claim that sufficient conditions, stages of history, variables and the like never produce democracy - that no democracy was ever created or defended or overthrown without the active intervention of people. That claim is self-evidently true. Who would deny that the mobbing of tax collectors, public meetings, strikes, rock throwing and the creation of local militias and armed cells have played a great part in the history of democracy, and its destruction? The key problem is that this thesis sits badly with Tilly's rigidly Schumpeterian, state-centred definition of democracy as a system of binding consultation between states and their subject population. Especially since the last years of the 19th century, contention has ensured that the power-monitoring and power-sharing methods of democracy have been diffused, spread "downwards" into civil societies and "outwards" to relations among states. As de Tocqueville and others predicted, democracy has come to be redefined as a heavily contested "whole way of life", whose rules can be applied not only to government, but also to the bedroom, boardroom and battlefield.

The state-centred definition of democracy used by Tilly is too narrow to grasp either this "osmosis" of democracy or the corresponding (unfinished) history of great controversies about its meaning and desirability. Tilly's definition is also too rigid to grasp a more fundamental problem: that contention-ridden processes of democratisation (and de-democratisation) are so thoroughly contingent in character that in principle no comprehensive explanation of democracy will ever be possible.

Not only (as Tilly says) does democracy take root in highly contingent circumstances, it is also a highly contingent way of life that heightens people's sense of the uncertainty of things. This sensitivity to contingency is part of its deep appeal, which is why surveys of democratisation need to incorporate a strong sense of contingency into their own methods - in order better to highlight the point that because democracy is radically inexplicable it thrives on interpretations.