

Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650-2000

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Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650-2000. By Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xiv plus 305 pp.).

This magnificent book draws on a large literature including the author's own research to make a plausible case for some big, unconventional, and striking theses about several centuries of democratization in Europe. Although it always keeps its central arguments in view, there is scarcely a page that doesn't have some fascinating sub-argument, illuminating comparison, provocative conjecture, or telling datum. A busy reader who felt she/he got the main ideas after a couple of chapters and skipped to the conclusions would be missing much but by the time you get through the second chapter you see how proposition-rich this book is and aren't much inclined to leap ahead.

Tilly's opening chapter announces no fewer than thirteen "guiding arguments" that he plans to elaborate, each of which turns out to contain multiple assertions. Here's my own sketch of some of Contention and Democracy's distinctive claims:

- * The history of democracy and the history of contention are deeply intertwined. Democracy only advanced, when it did advance, through social processes significantly set in motion or accelerated by contention (including civil warfare, multiple forms of popular resistance to state actions, claims-making social movements, and much else besides). Democratization, in turn, reshaped patterns of contention.

Democratization is one profoundly contingent outcome of conflict and episodes of de-democratization are quite common in the histories of even those countries most commonly regarded as secure democracies today.

- * Democracy at the national level was not for the most part an expansion of previously existing semidemocratic institutions at village, town, or regional levels. Even where such structures existed, authoritative and generally authoritarian states that overrode such institutions usually preceded the democratization of those states. In European history states usually got stronger before they got more democratic. But before we conclude that strong states are indispensable, nineteenth-century Swiss history provides a striking instance of a weak-state path.

- * The history of democratization at the national level is so multifarious that it is unlikely that there are many robust comparative macro-level generalizations, at least not where many others look for them. Particularly unpromising are the sorts of things others look at under the rubric of political culture. Far more promising is the identification of democracy-producing mechanisms (or the very important inverse, democracy-destroying mechanisms) that in interaction with each other move democracy forward (or backward). For example, in all the national cases considered, democratization doesn't get very far unless public politics is in some way insulated from "categorical inequalities", that is, the sorts of inequalities in which some broad categories of people have significantly greater access to all sorts of desired resources than other categories do.

- * But democracy-advancing mechanisms and processes generally don't go very far without a lot of conflict, often induced by wars, revolutions, or other big shocks, and almost always involving a great deal of popular contention. Warfare is important not

just because the fortunes of battle are consequential but also because of the many kinds of conflict induced by state-led mobilizations of resources. In exploring such shocks, it is essential to be careful about the time scale. Tilly's cases show with considerable frequency that revolutionary upheavals often generate authoritarian political orders, but, in his analysis, they also push forward the processes that over the longer run lay the foundations on which more democratic structures can be constructed.

Tilly develops these large arguments through the development of abstract models of the dynamic interconnections among social processes. But far from stopping with a series of abstract diagrams, we are presented with a series of chapters on European national trajectories that show those processes in action across three and a half turbulent centuries. (I thought the Swiss chapter in particular a real gem.) And in the improbable event that anyone thinks the temporal and geographic scope not already extremely broadly conceived, a final chapter, no less imaginative than the rest, draws on the theoretical ideas developed in European contexts to reflect on recent political history in the world beyond Europe. That recent, postcolonial history underlines the degree to which national processes of democratic advance and retreat are affected by transnational arenas. In particular, the global diffusion of models of democracy derived from the experience of what Tilly, following Guillermo O'Donnell, calls the world's "Northwest" suggests the role of transnational pressure more than repeated national rediscovery of inherently superior institutions.

By boldly expanding the geography beyond Europe, the argument invites some new large questions of its own. If transnational patterns of domination made the democratic institutions of the Northwest into a template for the rest, to what degree were those three and a half centuries of European contention unfolding in relation to their own template(s) and to what degree was that contentious history a series of improvisations in response to immediate challenges? At most of the many twists and turns of this book's accounts of Europe's national trajectories improvisation and contingency seem very weighty. What role did any templates play, whether drawn from some European neighbor's experience or from local institutions in one's own state? Tilly is particularly insistent that experience with local democratic or semidemocratic institutions in village and town were not directly transferred to the state in the forging of European democracy. But if so, to what degree if at all did patterns of local government in Britain or France or elsewhere play in the construction of national democratic orders? And through what mechanisms? Tilly is able to argue that the Northwest's institutions became a template in the colonial and postcolonial zone at least in part through imposition, but what are the mechanisms--if any--through which democratic institutions diffused within Europe?

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