

# Tilly's Trouble with Stories: The Narrator and the Case of the Missing Disposition

By Lynn Eden

We all know that Chuck had “trouble with stories,” very specific issues that he wrote about in the essay of the same name in a 1999 book edited by Ron Aminzade, and that he also wrote about elsewhere.<sup>i</sup> In what follows, I'll do three things encompassing both exegesis and a somewhat contrary reading.

First, I'll boil down his trouble with stories to two main aspects.

Second, I'll explain why Tilly's trouble is actually somewhat puzzling. To do this, I'll provide a sketch of the range of his writings and locate what I'll term “the missing disposition.” I'll also briefly discuss what a powerful storyteller Tilly was and limn in how Chuck moved toward a more relational/interpersonal perspective.

Finally, I'll suggest how a more dispositional—or, more precisely, actor-centered—account is not inconsistent after all with Tilly's deep orientation, at least not inconsistent with his later writings.

First, what was Tilly's trouble with stories? He had several troubles but I think two were most important.

First, he had a disinclination, or perhaps an allergy, to possessive individualism, which he generally termed dispositional accounts, or hydraulic, or volcanic,

explanations. I can hear Chuck making a terrible pun (actually, all of his puns were terrible): no person is an island, and certainly not a volcanic one. In *From Mobilization to Revolution* in 1978 in addition to slamming Durheim, Tilly slammed Chalmers Johnson's argument that social disequilibrium leads to individual disorientation leads to panic-anxiety-shame-guilt-depression leads to formation of movements of protest; and he slammed Ted Gurr's argument that individual psychological experience leads to a sense of relative deprivation and then cumulates into mass action (pp. 18-23). In Rod Aya's clear description, in the "volcanic model ... civil strife appears to be a periodic eruption of social-psychological tensions that boil up in human groups like lava under the earth's crust."<sup>ii</sup> And Tilly argued against similar ideas in his later work: In "The Trouble with Stories" (1999), he argued against "treat[ing] characters as *independent*, conscious, and self-motivated" (my emphasis). Similarly, in *Credit and Blame*, he said that stories "trot out a few actors whose *dispositions* and actions cause everything that happens within a limited time and place" (my emphasis, p. 21).

This is starting to bleed into Tilly's second main trouble with stories: his antipathy to too-simple cause-effect relationships—in particular, the idea that the actions of individuals or groups of individuals lead *directly* to historical outcomes and, in Chuck's words, "ignore the intricate webs of cause and effect that actually produce human social life" (*Credit and Blame*, p. 21, citing two earlier pieces by himself). Stories "omit a large number of likely causes, necessary conditions, and especially, competing explanations of whatever happened"—in particular omitting "indirect, incremental, interactive, unintended, [and] collective" factors (*Why?* p. 70; "The Trouble with Stories," 1999).<sup>iii</sup> Part of Chuck's enormous insight was to find these kinds of causes and articulate them, including, among many others, brokerage relationships, opportunity hoarding, and changes in repertoires.

On the one hand, there's absolutely nothing puzzling about Chuck's irritation with dispositional accounts and too-simple cause and effect relationships. Chuck was consistent from his earliest work to his last in emphasizing not disposition but collective action in the context of changing and interacting historical processes. To mash up Tilly and Marx—not coincidentally—intentional individuals do not make history just as they please, but complex historical processes—best examined in comparative perspective—make social collectivities that improvise and change.

We see this perspective literally from the first page of *The Vendée* to the last of *Contentious Performances*. On page one of *The Vendée* (1964, 1976), Chuck tells us that he has “reversed the usual recipe, [of] one part background to ten parts military history” and he has done so in order to examine the large historical processes that shaped this great uprising. The processes he will examine—to some degree in comparative perspective—include changing modes of social organization and urbanization (pp. 10-11). And then, exhibiting a sensibility that will run throughout his work, he explains that the various social processes he examines are closely interrelated: “They keep overlapping, intertwining, melting into each other” (p. 1). In Tilly's *Contentious Performances*, though the focus is now on collective micro-actions that are part of and cumulate to changing repertoires, we see no evidence of dispositional accounts. On the contrary, Tilly shows how, in the context of “specific alterations in ... economic, political, and cultural environment,” collective contentious performances formed, changed, and disappeared through a process of innovation and adaptation” (p. 64).

Nonetheless, I find Chuck's trouble with stories puzzling for two reasons.

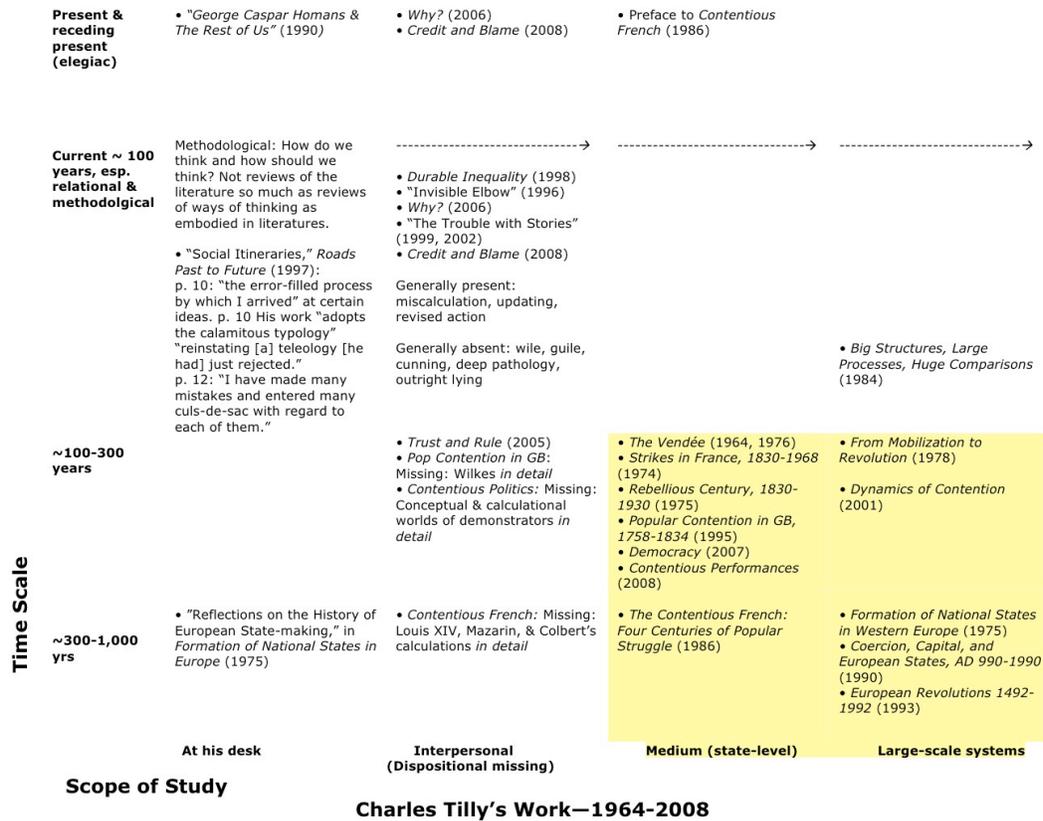
First, he himself was a remarkable storyteller, or at any rate, he had a remarkable authorial voice—one full of disposition. Read his account of George Homans for example for a superb description of himself: “The prose is always crisp, pithy, and

declarative, the argument always laid out with precision. George probably cared as much about how he said things as what he said; he cared greatly about both. In others, he hated fuzzy thought or sloppy writing—I'm not sure in what order.... His students inherited George's distrust of theory for its own sake and theories about theories. George wrote on general theoretical issues, and quite eloquently, but always with concrete applications in mind."<sup>iv</sup> And Chuck was a master narrator and craftsman, so it's not clear why he chose to cartoon the power of stories. I think he would say he was going after the problem of certain kinds of simplified stories—but even his grudging acceptance of what he called “superior stories” indicates a larger trouble. (That said, Chuck not infrequently seemed to have trouble mixing narrative and analysis—for example, in *Popular Contention in Great Britain*, where he actually chunked in several calendars of contention, and not infrequently in other work, for example, “Invisible Elbow,” which moves from homey storytelling to difficult abstraction in an instant.)

Second, Tilly's own movement toward relational arguments, and increasingly his writing about interpersonal interaction contains within it the very model of disposition that I think he could have embraced without much difficulty.

I offer this comment not as a criticism, not at all, but in the spirit of inviting others to build on what Tilly hath wrought, though not necessarily along the lines he might have envisioned. Of course, doing so is entirely consistent with Chuck's ethic. Indeed, his closing line in *Contentious Performances* is, typically Tilly, “If the weakness of [my] approach inspires my readers to invent different and superior methods for investiga[tion], I will cheer them on.”

Okay, let's look at a simplified diagram of Tilly's work in order to locate the missing disposition. Of course, this is not a complete listing of his books, and I list only a few articles.



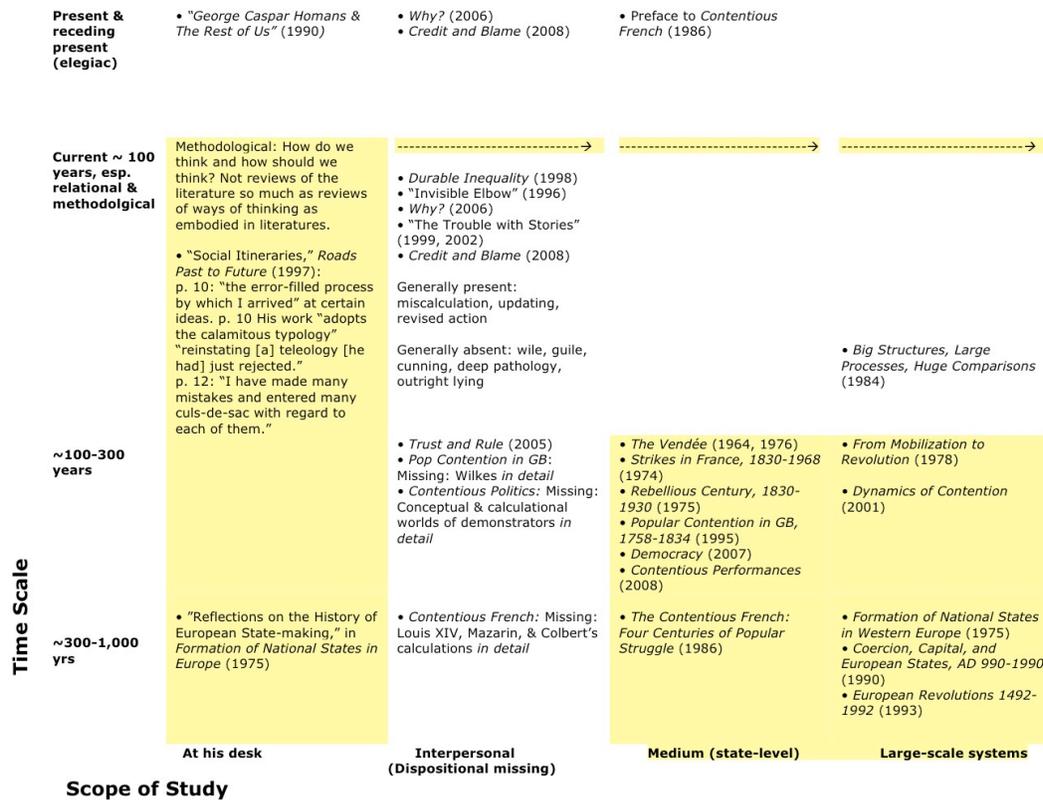
Lynn Eden, "Tilly's Trouble with Stories: The Narrator and the Case of the Missing Disposition," presented at "Contention, Change, and Explanation," A Conference in Honor of Charles Tilly, Social Science Research Council and Columbia University, New York, October 4-5, 2008

In this Tilly-like space, on the horizontal axis is the scope of Tilly's vision, from his study, or desk, as he reflects on how to think about problems and the errors of his ways and others'; to the interactional or relational; to the very familiar Tilly-turf of state-level and system-level phenomena.

On the vertical axis is time-scale: at the bottom, the largest chunk, say social processes from the last few hundred to 1,000 years; then phenomena that fall under the rubric of modern history; then more or less present tense, give or take a hundred years; and finally what I will call a different kind of present tense, let's think of it as

the phenomenological present, or the receding or elegiac present. Not a tense one would ordinarily associate with Chuck, but nonetheless, there it is.

Let me point out just a few features of this space. First, without counting, I think the bulk of his work—here in orange—is at the state and system levels much of it in the modern, early modern, and millennial periods—*The Vendee*, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, *The Contentious French*—one of my favorite of his books, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, etc.



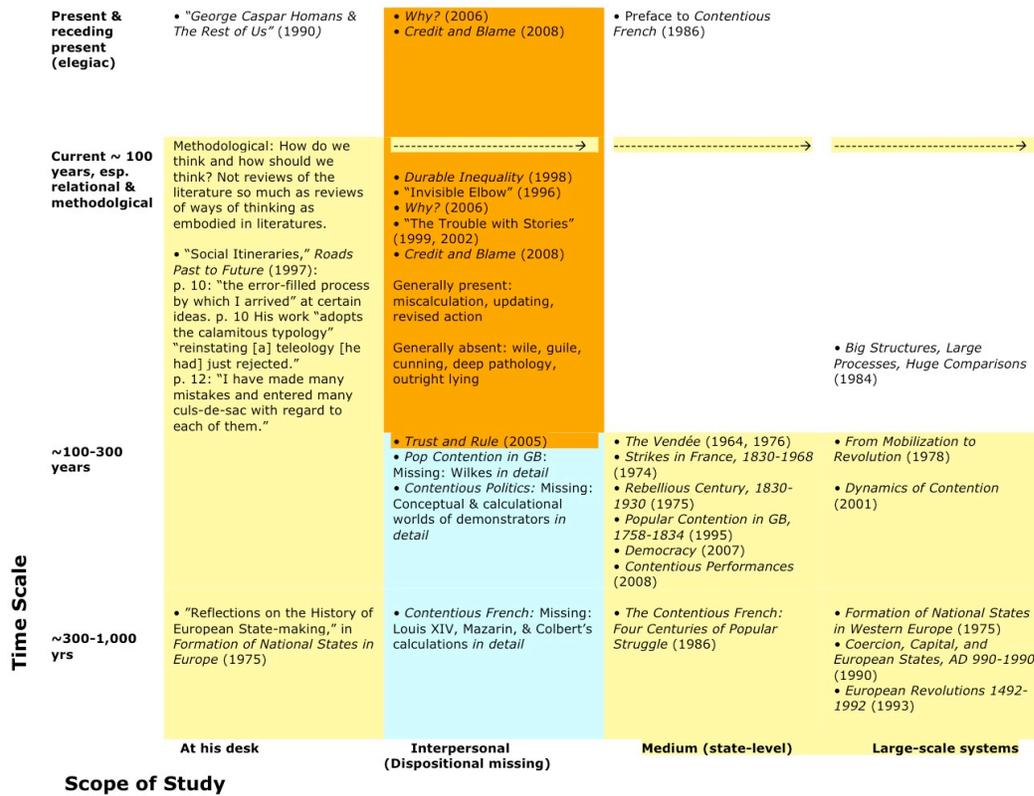
Charles Tilly's Work—1964-2008

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Here's another feature, as Ira Katznelson pointed out in his eloquent remarks in the Hirschman Award Ceremony on October 3: Chuck's remarkable ability to look at

his work in a spirit of dispassionate—or was it gleeful?—self-evaluation. His methodological work asked: how do we think and how should we think? He provided not reviews of the literature so much as reviews of ways of thinking as embodied in various literatures. I have put what I'm loosely calling his methodological work as being located "at his desk," as surely it was. But it spans every scale at which he worked. I remember my shock at reading the introduction to *The Formation of National States in Europe*: I had never seen an author provide a litany of shortcomings in the book to follow. The list in "Social Itineraries," in *Roads Past to Future*, written 20 years later, shows no letup at all. It's actually amusing, and I wonder how much of it Chuck meant to be funny. He writes of "the error-filled process by which I arrived" at certain ideas (p. 10). His work "adopts the calamitous typology ... [chk] reinstating [a] teleology [he had] just rejected" (p. 10). Critics "forced me to recognize three deep flaws" (p. 11) "Surely this formulation will ... turn out to have serious obscurities and weaknesses" and "I have made many mistakes and entered many culs-de-sac with regard to each of them" (p. 12).

Third, in the last decade or so—I first noticed it in "Invisible Elbow," and in *Durable Inequality*—but it probably appeared earlier, Tilly not only wrote about relational analysis but began to present a level of detail that showed a very sensitive and knowing eye—an almost Goffman-like eye—to interaction and micro-process. And then, as he became progressively more ill, his good-spiritedly self-critical authorial voice became infused with something quite different, a sense of presence, or a presence that would pass, a man in an historical era, a man not writing from a Google-earth altitude of a few hundred feet in which many lands can be compared, but—also—writing from life as it is lived, at zero altitude. In *Credit and Blame*, he even rails less against stories: "Stories belong to the relationships at hand," they rework and simplify social processes (uh oh, we've heard that before) but they do this "so that the processes become available for the telling" in memorable ways. And stories are "enormously valuable" for moral evaluation, etc. (all p. 21).



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Here, I've represented the missing disposition in Tilly in blue. This is not the cartoon disposition of relative deprivation or of anxiety culminating or cumulating to social movements, but the disposition born of interaction, of relational analysis, of biology, family history, and later life experience and interaction.

So, if we were to add in such disposition—and we can see I think that it's not so far from Tilly's later writings—what might we get? Not just miscalculation, updating, and revised actions, but, in the political sphere, much more wile, guile, cunning, outright lying, and very deep personal pathologies. We might get more actor-centered accounts in which we learn of Wilkes *in detail*, we might learn about changing repertoires not only as trial and error but in terms of very detailed accounts

of strategizing shaped in part by intellectual styles, personal proclivities, and internal movement alliances and animus. We might be interested in investigating in detail the strategizing, updating, misconceptions—or more dispassionately, the conceptual worlds—of Louis XIV and his ministers. Or we might like to investigate the visions, relationships, and personalities at the highest levels of the Bush administration. This was clearly not Chuck’s project since most of the time he worked at a much higher altitude. And I’m certainly not saying it should have been Chuck’s project. I’m simply saying that as unlikely as it seems, and despite Chuck’s trouble with stories, his work was sufficiently capacious as to be able to incorporate much more classical lines of narrative and story than I think he may have known. And, I’m arguing this can be done, at least in theory, at the same time as one explores and articulates complex mechanisms and processes.

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<sup>i</sup> Tilly, “The Trouble with Stories,” in Aminzade, ed., (1999) and later version in Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (2002).

<sup>ii</sup> Rod Aya, “Theories of Revolution Reconsidered: Contrasting Models of Collective Violence,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (July, 1979), p. 49.

<sup>iii</sup> See also *Why?* p. 65: “In our complex world, causes and effects always join in complicated ways. Simultaneous causation, incremental effects, environmental effects, mistakes, unintended consequences, and feedback make physical, biological, and social processes the devils’ own work—or the Lord’s—to explain in detail (Tilly 1996 [“Invisible Elbow”]) Stories exclude these inconvenient complications.... Even when they convey truths, stories enormously simplify the processes involved. They single out a small number of actors, actions, causes, and effects for easy understanding.”

<sup>iv</sup> Tilly, “George Caspar Homans and the Rest of Us,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (June, 1990), quotes on pp. 263-264.