Book Review of *Durable Inequality* (by Charles Tilly)

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In the postwar period, sociologists of the Parsonian persuasion assumed that inequalities of race, gender, and class background were all forms of ascription that would together wither away under the market pressures of capitalism and the rationalizing logic of modernity. The obvious effect of such theorizing, and not an altogether unintended one, was to reduce class analysis to the study of "background effects," thereby subsuming it under a putatively more general theory of ascription. The subsequent rise of neo-Marxian scholarship restored class analysis to a central position; indeed, by treating categorical forms of inequality as mere hindrances to the grand showdown between competing classes, it was effectively assumed that class-based loyalties were in the end fundamental. In recent decades, the discipline has clearly turned full circle, with the class-centered stories of the neo-Marxian past giving way to new multidimensionalist accounts emphasizing the distinct interests and subcultures formed by the "intersection" of race, class, and gender categories. Against this intellectual backdrop, Charles Tilly has sought to provide a unified framework with which to understand all forms of inequality, thus sharing with Talcott Parsons and other postwar theorists the conviction that ascriptive processes must be studied of a piece but breaking with the complementary view that they are mere residues of our *gemeinshaftlich* past.

The core claim of Tilly is that categorical forms of inequality assist in solving common organizational problems and are therefore durable and entrenched rather than functionless vestiges. There are four related processes at work here:

1. The extraction of surplus value from subordinate workers within a firm is rendered more legitimate and defensible insofar as these workers are drawn from subpopulations that, in the wider social system, are correspondingly subordinate (e.g., females, blacks, immigrants). In effect, such staffing practices press

pre-existing relational structures with wider institutional backing into service for the organization, thereby avoiding the potentially high cost of developing new structures and legitimating ideologies from scratch.

2. The same line of argumentation accounts for the well-known tendency of immigrants, women, and other categorically-defined groups to dominate particular occupational niches in firms or the labor market more broadly. This form of social closure, which Tilly dubs "opportunity hoarding," emerges because (a) information about job openings travels through networks that are categorically segregated, and (b) managers choose to rely on such informal networks because it is cheaper to harness pre-existing organization than to devise it afresh.

3. There is good reason to doubt that managers have independently discovered in firm after firm the efficiency of deploying categorical inequality for the purposes of exploitation and recruitment. To the contrary, Tilly argues that such organizational isomorphism proceeds in part from simple emulation, whereby firms end up defaulting to widely-disseminated routines and models (e.g., the female sex-typing of secretarial work) rather than experimenting with new ones.

4. The durability of the resulting arrangements can be understood, finally, as arising from the elaboration of social routines and relations (e.g., on-the-job friendships) that most workers, even those who are exploited, come to value and hence strive to maintain.

Although the preceding processes are perhaps revealed most obviously in work organizations, the great contribution of Tilly is to demonstrate that categorical inequality operates under similar principles in all organizational contexts. We are thus treated to masterful interpretations of the South African system of exploitation, the Catholic Emancipation in Great Britain, the development of market niches for Italian emigrants, and the emergence and maintenance of occupational sex segregation in the United States. The resulting book is a tour de force that works equally as a general treatise on the sources of inequality and a substantive study of the more spectacular forms of existing inequality.

It is nonetheless possible to manufacture the requisite criticism. In this regard, stylistic problems loom large, most notably the decision by Tilly to position his work as yet another attack on individualistic approaches to inequality. While the rhetoric of anti-individualism is a tried and true formula, it would have been intellectually more valuable had Tilly sought to defend his approach against other relational approaches that emerged either before or after the heyday of methodological individualism. As hinted above, closure theory may be the most obvious competitor here, emphasizing as it does precisely those Weberian forms of monopoly control that Tilly relabels as opportunity hoarding. The principal distinction, it would seem, is that closure theorists conventionally emphasize the simple facts of exclusive control over property and occupational niches (equating these with exploitation per se), whereas Tilly suggests that exploitation is often best realized by coupling such control with categorical forms of inequality. It is unclear, however, why an entirely new language is needed to represent this elaboration, all the more so because it appeared long ago in simpler form in the neo-functionalist work of Leon Mayhew ("Ascription in Modern Societies," The Logic of Social Hierarchies, edited by Edward O. Laumann, Paul M. Siegel, and Robert W. Hodge. [Markham Publishing Company, 1970]). That is, Mayhew argues that the staying power of ascription is attributable to its cheapness, with firms thus saving much in organizational costs by opting for "existent pre-established structure … rather than creating a new specialized structure for the same purpose" (p. 313). If Tilly is thus anticipated by Mayhew, he also parts way in assuming that the savings generated by ascription are captured by organizational elites rather than more broadly distributed; and, in this limited sense, Durable Inequality may be seen as a case of Mayhew meeting Marxism. The key question is, of course, whether this synthesis is empirically sustainable, since it is at least plausible that subordinate workers will themselves profit from their own subordination. Indeed, if a great many organizations find it advantageous to hire categorically subordinate workers, then the accordingly heavy demand should drive up wages and allow these workers to recapture some of the exploitative transfer.

The foregoing all goes to show that, in characteristic fashion, Tilly has opened up fascinating new lines of inquiry. It is always cause for celebration when Tilly publishes a book, but the present one is especially important because it outlines a general theory of inequality that may well reshape the field. This is classic Tilly; and surely we can ask for nothing more.