Revisiting Charles Tilly in 2021

‘How can we best understand, deploy and revisit Charles Tilly’s method of repertoires in the Digital Age?’ That is the question that occupied me days before the seminar and, just now, gradually unfolds. Presentations, responses and questions by speakers Katrina Navickas, Maartje Janse, Adriejan van Veen, Antoine Renglet and Martin Schoups sparked my interest for the topic on generally two levels: the theoretical framework as well as the practical possibilities. Especially the former proved relevant due to its potential implications for the fundament of my own research on public health in modern Dutch history.

Katrina Navickas provided an excellent kick off for the event. Navickas’ presentation touched upon what, in my view, is arguably one of the most important affairs: what can we do, in this day, with Tilly’s methodologies – once so provocative and innovative. The linguistic turn and its methods of Close Reading realised a decline in methods of data analysis. But ever since the increasing capabilities of Digital Humanities from the start of this millennium, data analysis became relevant once more. Navickas showed provided great examples of new possibilities using her own research on ‘Democratic Streets’. New tools and instruments have made it possible to gather, visualise and study historical data in new and profound ways.

In the presentation that followed, Maartje Janse not only delved into Tilly’s academic past, but also put forward some interesting comments on his work and methods. Janse explained that he overlooked certain elements such as gender, race and religion – although his methodology did allow academics to integrate different strains of history. It is beneficial to continually discuss, review and revisit Tilly’s methods. For example, Janse showed that the linearity in Tilly’s approach is something we can and should put up for debate and that we should look at ways to extend the notion of repertoires, by embracing e.g. a more transnational narrative.

There was, however, one comment from Janse that stuck with me particularly. At the beginning of her talk, she put forward the seemingly uncontroversial notion that it was not often that a sociologist had made such an impact on historians and their work. Although this might hold true, I wondered, is it not the case that historiography has been strongly affected by non-historians rather frequently? Without a sense of irony, I do believe one could argue that academics from other disciplines (philosophy, sociology, anthropology, literary studies, etc.) have made a tangible and undeniable impact on the discipline of history. This somewhat trivial thought, proved to me that this webinar exceeded its goal. Not only did it inspire me to ponder Tilly’s repertoires, but it made me reflect on the discipline of history all together.

After Janse’s presentation, Van Veen, Renglet and Schoups discussed more empirical cases, showing us how we can employ and adjust Tilly’ (traditional) methods in these controversial and dynamic times. I must admit that, at that point, the limitations of a compressed webinar (contrary to a daylong conference) became palpable. The information density was relatively high, which was amplified by being unable to easily interact in-between and during presentations. This is, of course, not a critique directed at the organisers or speakers, but a consequence of the circumstances. In the end, it should not distract from the fact that ‘Rethinking repertoires: popular politics in the long nineteenth century’ was an inspiring and fruitful webinar.