

Metatheoretical Foundations of Charles Tilly's, *Durable Inequality*

by

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One of the great virtues of Charles Tilly's *Durable Inequality* is that it might be wrong. So often attempts at constructing grand theories in sociology turn out, on close inspection, to consist largely of tautologies and vacuous propositions – conceptual frameworks that are so flexible and indeterminate that no empirical observations of the world would ever count as surprising. This is not the case for the central arguments in this book. Consider, for example, a claim Tilly makes early in the book about the relatively limited significance of beliefs in the explanation of durable inequality:

“Mistaken beliefs reinforce exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation and adaptation but exercise little independent influence on their initiation.....It follows that the reduction or intensification of racist, sexist, or xenophobic attitudes will have relatively little impact on durable inequality, whereas the introduction of new organizational forms....will have great impact” (15)

This is a forthright statement about the relative explanatory importance of different sorts of causes: beliefs, attitudes, and other discursive elements of culture may contribute to stabilizing inequalities, but they are of less causal importance in explaining such inequality than are the organizational structures in which inequality becomes embedded. Many people will object to such claims, either because they believe that in the explanation of inequality culture in general should be accorded greater weight than such processes as the organizational bases for exploitation, or because they object in principle to any broad, transhistorical claims about the relative importance of different sorts of causes. Of course, it may be very difficult to give empirical precision to claims about one cluster of causes being more important than another cluster of causes in a complex, multicausal system. Nevertheless, it is a strength of Tilly's book that he does not pull his punches in advancing such bold and provocative claims.

If the strength of the book lies in the boldness of the substantive propositions that map out a positive research agenda, its weakness, in my judgement, occurs in many of the more abstract discussions of concepts and methods, particularly when these involve criticisms of alternative views and approaches, where many of the arguments seem quite imprecise, confusing, or even inaccurate. The result, I think, is that, because of dissatisfaction with his treatment of many of these more abstract conceptual issues, many people will reject the arguments of the book without really engaging Tilly's positive proposals for what he calls "an organizational perspective of inequality".

In these remarks I will try to clarify both parts of this general assessment of *Durable Inequality*. In part I, I will lay out the core arguments of Tilly's theory of by examining some of the metatheoretical foundations for his arguments and then elaborating what I see to be a series of nested functional explanations at the core of his theory. I will argue that the basic underlying structure of these functional explanations brings Tilly's overall argument much closer to core logic of classical Marxism than he seems prepared to acknowledge. I will then take one element of this theory -- the argument about how categorical inequality works within organizations -- and try to represent this as a set of specific empirical hypotheses. In part II I will examine some of the conceptual problems I see in his treatment of a number of theoretical debates and ideas.

I. The argument

1. The explanandum

The title of Tilly's book announces its explanandum: *durable inequalities*, "those that last from one social interaction to the next, [especially] those that persist over whole careers, lifetimes and organizational histories." (p.6) The central, overarching thesis of the book is that such durable inequalities almost always are built around categorical distinctions among people rather than around gradient attributes of individuals:

"Large, significant inequalities in advantages among human beings correspond mainly to categorical differences such as black/white, male/female, citizen/foreigner, or Muslim/Jew rather than to individual differences in attributes, propensities or performances" (p7)

The theoretical task, then, is to explain why this should be the case. I will first elaborate some of the central metatheoretical foundations that underpin Tilly's approach to this problem, then show that his theory of such categorical inequalities is built around a series of functional explanations, and finally explore in more detail one central piece of his argument in order to develop somewhat more formal hypotheses.

2. Metatheoretical foundations

Tilly's approach is built on two metatheoretical foundations: *anti-individualism* and what might be termed *combinatory structuralism*. Throughout the book Tilly continually emphasizes the differences between his approach to social inequality and what he characterizes as individualist approaches. In individualist approaches, he argues, the central causes of social inequality are seen

as operating through the attributes of individuals. Poverty is explained by the attributes of poor people, not by the relations of exploitation within which poor people live; gender inequality is explained by sexist attitudes, not by organizational structures which underwrite the hoarding of various kinds of opportunities by men. Tilly relentlessly attacks such views, seeing them as the main intellectual obstacle to a proper understanding of social inequality not only within mainstream social science but in many strands of radical social theory as well. Many feminist analyses of gender inequality, he argues, are grounded in essentially individualist accounts of sexist discrimination. In contrast, Tilly insists that explanations of inequality must be at their core *social relational*: to the extent individual attributes are explanatory of inequalities, they are explanatory by virtue of the nature of the social relations within which those individual attributes operate. The starting point of the analysis, therefore, must be the investigation of the relations themselves.

How, then, should one approach the investigation of social relations? While Tilly does not himself lay out methodological principles for relational analysis, his style of theory building can be described as “combinatorial structuralism.” The basic idea is, for whatever problem one is considering, to begin by mapping out what might be termed a menu of elementary forms. All more complex structural configurations, then, are analyzed as specific forms of combination of these elementary forms. This menu is basically the equivalent of the periodic table of elements in chemistry which provides the building blocks for the investigation of compounds.

In durable inequality, Tilly elaborates two such basic menus: one is a menu of *types of social relations* and the second is a menu of *inequality-generating mechanisms*. The menu of

relations he refers to as “building blocks” which define “basic social configurations.” Five of these are highlighted: chain, hierarchy, triad, organization, and categorical pair.¹ Of these five elementary forms of social relations, the most pivotal for the study of durable inequality, Tilly argues, is organizations. The centerpiece of the analysis of durable inequalities, then, is the claim that these are, above all, constructed within and through organizations. It is for this reason that he dubs his approach an “organizational view of inequality-generating mechanisms.” (p9)

The second menu is an inventory of causal mechanisms through which categorical inequality is generated and sustained by organizations. These Tilly labels *exploitation*, *opportunity hoarding*, *emulation*, and *adaptation*. He advances the singularly bold claim that these four mechanisms account for virtually of durable inequality in all times and places:

“Categorical inequality in general results from varying intersections of exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation and adaptation.....Although historical accumulations of institutions, social relations and shared understandings produce differences in the day-to-day operation of various sorts of categories (gender, race, citizenship, and so on) as well as differences in various sorts of outcomes (eg landed wealth versus cash income), ultimately interactions of exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation and adaptation explain them all”. (p13-14)

Let us now turn to the substantive of the explanatory argument within which these causal mechanisms are deployed.

3. *The explanatory strategy*

The basic explanatory strategy Tilly adopts is a variety of *functional explanation*. That is, throughout the book Tilly argues that certain kinds of social structural relations are *solutions to problems* generated within social systems. This does not mean that he argues for a smooth,

homeostatic kind of functionalism in which all social relations organically fit together in fully integrated social systems. The functional explanations in Tilly's arguments allow for struggles and contradictions. Nevertheless, his arguments rely on functional explanations insofar as at crucial steps of the analysis he poses a problem generated by a set of social relations and then treats the demonstration that a particular social form is a solution to the problem as the core of the explanation of that social form.

The theory is built up through a sequence of three nested problems-to-be-solved and their associated solutions.

Problem #1: How to secure and enhance rewards from the resources to which one has access.

Resources are essential for production and acquisition of all sorts of values, especially, but not merely, material goods. But resources are scarce and competition to control them pervasive. The problem people then face, both individually and collectively, is how to secure their stable their access to such resources and how to enhance the advantages which they have by virtue of such access.

Solution to problem #1: Opportunity hoarding and exploitation. Two mechanisms are particularly important in stabilizing and enhancing the advantages people derive from access to value-generating resources: *opportunity hoarding*, and *exploitation*. The first of these implies that those in control of the resource are able to systematically exclude other people from having access to the resources in question; exploitation additionally implies that the returns on the use of the

resources are enhanced by the ways in which those resources enable exploiters to control the effort of others in ways which prevent the exploited from receiving the “full value added by that effort.” Of these two mechanisms, Tilly generally accords exploitation a more fundamental role in the overall social production of durable inequality because of its centrality in underwriting the power and privileges of elites. Opportunity hoarding, he argues “complements exploitation” by creating sustainable advantages for various nonelite categories. Broadly, he claims that

“a correlation, but not an equation, exists between elite positions and exploitation, between nonelite position and opportunity hoarding. Elites typically become elites and maintain themselves as elites by controlling valuable resources and engaging the effort of less favored others in generating returns from those resources, whereas nonelites commonly have to settle for the identification of niches not already fully exploited by elites. (94)

Like Marxists, Tilly argues that at the most fundamental level of analysis, exploitation is the pivotal mechanism for the generation of durable forms of deep inequality.

Problem #2: How to sustain and deepen exploitation and opportunity hoarding. It is all very well and good to say that exploitation and opportunity hoarding confer advantages on those who control resources. But since both of these mechanisms impose harms on others, they immediately pose a range of problems for would-be exploiters and opportunity hoarders. Above all they face what Tilly calls “organizational problems” of creating solidarity, trust, interlocking expectations and reliable forms of enforcement *among those with stakes in hoarding and exploitation.*

Solution to problem #2: Categorical inequality. The creation of categorical forms of inequality

helps solve this organizational problem. Tilly writes:

“Durable inequality among categories *arises* because people who control access to value producing resources solve organizational problems by means of categorical distinctions. Inadvertently or otherwise, those people set up systems of social closure, exclusion and control. Multiple parties — not all of them powerful, some of them even victims of exploitation — then acquire stakes in these solutions” (8)

In the absence of durable, categorical distinctions, exploiters and opportunity hoarders would face constant difficulty in identifying their allies, in knowing who to trust and who to exclude, in being able to reliably protect their monopolies and enforce subordination. Durable, categorical distinctions make all of this easier. As Tilly puts it: “organizational improvisations lead to durable categorical inequality. In all these cases, but with variable weight, exploitation and opportunity hoarding favor the installation of categorical inequality...”

This explanation has a distinctly functionalist structure, although Tilly does not characterize the explanation in these terms, and indeed explicitly rejects what he calls “teleological reasoning” (which is often identified with functional explanations). In summarizing the basic argument (p.85), he distills the core explanation of categorical inequality to three positions:

1. “Organizationally installed categorical inequality facilitates exploitation”. This is a claim about the effects of categorical inequality on exploitation: the former facilitates the latter.
2. “Organizations whose survival depends on exploitation therefore tend to adopt categorical inequality.” This is a selection argument: the functional trait – categorical inequality – is adopted because it is functional.
3. “Because organizations adopting categorical inequality deliver greater returns to their dominant members and because a portion of those returns goes to organizational maintenance, such organizations tend to crowd out other types of organizations.” This is, in effect, a quasi-Darwinian selection explanation which explains why the functional traits generalize.

This sequence of claims constitutes a classic functional explanation. What is more, as in standard functional explanations, Tilly explicitly argues that the functional arrangements need not be created by design when he states “Inadvertently or otherwise, those people set up systems of social closure, exclusion and control.” What matters is that certain traits – categorical inequalities in this case – become stable features of organization because they enhance the survival of organizations that have such traits, and that as a result over time organizations with such traits predominate. The adoption of the organizational trait in question may be a conscious strategy intentionally designed to enhance exploitation and opportunity hoarding, but equally it may result from quite haphazard trail and error.

Problem #3. How to stabilize and reproduce categorical inequalities? While categorical inequalities may facilitate exploitation and opportunity hoarding, they also pose new challenges to organizations since they potentially constitute the bases for solidarities and networks opposed to the dominant categories. On the one hand, they reduce the transaction costs for sustaining exploitation and opportunity hoarding by solving a variety of information and trust problems for elites; on the other hand, they also potentially reduce transaction costs for collective struggles by subordinates. Categorical inequality, in short, sets in motion a pattern of contradictory effects.

Solution to problem #3: Emulation and adaptation. To the extent a given form of categorical inequality can be diffused throughout a society (“emulation”) so that it appears ubiquitous and thus inevitable, and to the extent people living within these relations of categorical inequality

elaborate daily routines (“adaptation”) which enable them to adapt to the conditions they face, then the categorical inequalities themselves will be stabilized. This is what emulation and adaptation accomplish: “Emulation and adaptation lock such distinctions into place, making them habitual and sometimes even essential to exploiters and exploited alike.” (p.11) The result is that the exploited and excluded groups along the axes of categorical inequality are less likely to form the kinds of oppositional solidarities that pose a serious threat to the beneficiaries of exploitation and opportunity hoarding.

Taken together, therefore, categorical inequality is explained by a complex of mechanisms clustered into three intersecting functional explanations: exploitation and opportunity hoarding are functionally explained by the problem of sustaining and augmenting advantages from control over resources; categorical inequalities are functionally explained by the problem of stabilizing exploitation and opportunity hoarding, and emulation and adaptation are functionally explained by the problem of stabilizing categorical inequality.

This interconnected explanatory structure can be clarified using a diagrammatic representation of functional explanation developed by Arthur Stinchcombe (1968). The basic structure of Stinchcombe’s representation of functional explanation is given in Figure 1. The pivot of the explanation is a problem-in-need-of-a-solution. This problem is itself generated by a causal process referred to by Stinchcombe as a “tension” in the system. Through some kind of selection mechanism – the “black box” of functional explanations – the problem stimulates the production of a solution, which in turn dampens the problem. At some point an equilibrium may be reached

in which the negative effects of the solution on the problem counterbalance the positive effects of the problem stimulating the solution. This “feedback loop” constitutes the core of the functional explanation.

Tilly’s model of durable inequality consists of a series of interlocking functional explanations of this type as illustrated in Figure 2. The distinctive feature of this model is the way in which the functional solution to one problem becomes, in turn, a source of systemic tension which generates a new system-problem and corresponding functional solution.

– Figure 2 about here –

4. The Underlying Marxist Logic

Figure 2 is obviously a stripped down version of Tilly’s theory of categorical inequality, but it does, I believe, capture the essential explanatory structure of the argument. The theoretical tradition in social science which comes closest to this general framework is Marxism, although except in passing Tilly makes almost no reference to Marxist theory in the book. In one of the few explicit discussions of the theoretical pedigree of his approach, Tilly characterizes it as a kind of synthesis of Marxist and Weberian ideas: the analysis, he writes “builds a bridge from Max Weber on social closure to Karl Marx on exploitation and back.” (7) In fact, if the representation of the argument in Figure 2 is roughly correct, Tilly’s analysis is much closer to the logical core of Marx’s theory than of Weber’s.² Rather than treating Tilly’s theoretical framework as a *fusion* of Marx and Weber, therefore, I think it is more appropriate to see Tilly as importing some Weberian ideas and insights into the Marxist tradition. The result is an enrichment of an essentially Marxist form of class analysis by extending that analysis to include forms of categorical inequality that are

not systematically discussed by Marx.

There are a number of reasons for affirming this close conceptual affinity between Tilly's approach and classical Marxism:

1. Exploitation is the centerpiece of Marx's theory of class as it is of Tilly's theory of categorical inequality. Class relations in Marxism are social relations within which exploiters appropriate labor effort of the exploited by virtue of their control over pivotal economic resources. This is virtually the same as Tilly's formulation. And both Marx and Tilly accord exploitation central importance for basically the same reason: Exploitation not only creates advantages for exploiters by excluding others from access to resources – this much is true of opportunity hoarding more generally. Because it involves appropriation of value-producing effort, exploitation allows elites to accumulate resources which they can use to buttress their power in all sorts of ways.

2. Forms of categorical inequality emerge and are sustained in Tilly's analysis above all because of the ways these help stabilize exploitation and secondarily because of the ways they facilitate opportunity hoarding. Marx certainly believed that class categories emerge for this same reason: they make possible a stable reproduction of exploitation to a far greater extent than would be possible if exploitation existed simply on the basis of fluid relations between individuals.

3. Tilly treats the relevance of culture and beliefs for inequality almost entirely in terms of

the ways they help reproduce categorical inequality, but not as autonomous, powerful causal forces in their own right. This is much closer to Marx's materialism, specifically his functionalist theory of the relationship between the economic base and ideological superstructure, than to Weber's view of the relationship between culture and social structure.³

4. As G.A. Cohen (1978) has pointed out, the use of functional explanations plays a central role in classical historical materialism. They play at most a marginal role in Weber's social theory. In Marxism, class relations are functionally explained by the level of development of the forces of production, and superstructures are functionally explained by the necessary conditions for stabilizing and reproducing class relations. While Tilly's analysis does not directly contain an analysis of forces and relations of production, the functional relation between categorical inequality on the one hand and emulation and adaptation on the other is quite parallel to the functional explanation of ideological superstructures in Marxism.

5. In classical historical materialism, class relations are thought to endure and remain stable so long as the forces of production continue to develop, and those class relations become vulnerable once the forces of production are fettered. The underlying rationale for this claim is that the costs of sustaining class relation rise precipitously when the forces of production stagnate. Again, there is nothing in Tilly's analysis that directly concerns the

specific argument about forces of production, but he does argue that the central condition for the erosion of systems of categorical inequality is the rising transaction costs for maintaining existing relations and the lowered costs of an alternative:

“Existing social arrangements have enduring advantages because their theoretical alternatives always entail the costs of movement away from the present situation; change therefore occurs under conditions that reduce the returns from existing arrangements, raise their current operating costs, lower the costs of transition to alternative arrangements or (much more rarely) increase expected returns from alternative arrangements sufficiently to overcome transition costs” (p192)

“In broadest terms, they [conditions for successful challenge to categorical inequality] occur when the benefits from exploitation and opportunity hoarding decline and/or costs of exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation and adaptation increase. In those circumstances, the beneficiaries of categorical inequality tend to split, with some of them becoming available as the underdogs’ allies against other exploiters and hoarders.....When the altered structural position of a subordinated population increases its leverage or internal connectedness....eventually the costs of controlling that population expand, along with the capacity to resist control.....” 225

This closely parallels classical Marxist views of the conditions for qualitative transformations in the relations of production: the old relations of production become very costly to maintain; new alternative relations become historically feasible; and agents capable of executing the transformation become sufficiently strong to overcome transition costs. Nothing remotely like this formulation occurs in Weber’s account of social change and inequality.

These deep parallels with the Marxist tradition of class analysis do not imply that Tilly’s

arguments are simply recapitulations of Marxist themes in a new language. Tilly's attempt to subsume gender, race, nationality and every other form of inequality under a unitary conceptual framework goes well beyond Marx; his differentiation of opportunity hoarding from exploitation is largely absent from most varieties Marxist class analysis⁴; and his elaboration of emulation and adaptation as mechanisms for stabilizing categorical inequality introduces concepts that are not explicitly present in Marxist discussions of similar themes. Nevertheless, if my characterization of Tilly's argument is on track, the work should be regarded as much more deeply linked to the Marxist tradition of social theory than any other.

So far we have examined and reconstructed in more formal terms the broad contours of Tilly's argument. In the next section I want to look in more detail at one piece of this argument and try to formulate a set of more formalized hypotheses about the formation and reproduction categorical inequality.

5. Generating Categorical Inequality through organizations: hypotheses

In order to develop a more fine-grained account of the ways in which categories are used by organizations to enhance exploitation and opportunity hoarding, Tilly proposes a four fold typology of the different ways categorical distinctions *within* organizations (eg. between managers and workers) can be linked to categorical distinctions *external* to organizations (eg. black and white, male and female):

1. *Gradients*: a situation in which there exist internal inequalities across individuals but without any categorical divisions.

2. *Local frontiers*: internal categorical divisions alone, unlinked to any exterior categories.
3. *Imported frontiers*: externally-based categorical divisions alone, not matched to any internal organizational divisions.
4. *Reinforced inequality*: a situation in which there is “matching interior and exterior categories”.

While all four of these may exist, Tilly argues that there will be a general tendency for inequalities to move to the fourth of these types except under the special condition that “surplus extraction is already operating efficiently by means of gradients or local frontiers”. If exploitation occurs efficiently without categorical inequality, then in Tilly’s words, “those who control the crucial resources rarely incorporate exterior categories” since there would be little incentive for them to do so. Since, however, exploitation is rarely efficient and sustainable in the absence of categorical inequality, organizations will tend to move towards a system in which exterior categories are matched with interior ones.

The argument hinges on claims about the relative transaction costs required to maintain a given level of stability of inequality within the organization across these four configurations. Organizations will tend to move towards “reinforced inequality” because in general, Tilly argues, this is the cheapest way of sustaining a given level of inequality within organizations: “matching interior and exterior categories lowers transaction costs and increases stability.” (p80). A system of inequality based exclusively on gradients would in general be the least stable and the most costly to maintain because, he writes, “Without strong incentives to endure short-term injustice in the expectation of long-term mobility or other rewards, turnover and small-scale conflict make

gradients unstable arrangements”. Inequality based on local frontiers, in Tilly’s judgement, would be the second most stable: “For the same difference in rewards, inequality that depends on organizationally defined categorical differences alone (local frontiers) is more stable than gradients or imported frontiers....”. Taking these observations together generates a rather complex general hypothesis for what might be called the “production functions for stabilizing inequalities within organizations”. This hypothesis is pictured in Figure 3.

As in many of the claims of this book, this is a bold hypothesis. And there are, undoubtedly, many empirical contexts in which these claims are plausible. It is less clear, however, why we should believe that this specific rank-ordering of the costs required to produce stability associated with different configurations of categorical inequalities should be a universal tendency. Why, for example, should we believe that as a broad generalization across societies with different cultures, different technologies, different political systems, it will be the case that “for the same difference in rewards, inequality that depends on organizationally defined categories alone.....is more stable than either gradients or imported frontiers”? What are the general mechanisms which imply that, for any given level of inequality, the stability-effects of categorical inequalities imported from the society at large will have a transhistorical tendency to be weaker than the stability-effects of internally-generated categorical inequality? Similarly, while it is certainly plausible that in many situations tightly matching internal and external categories might be the cheapest way of stabilizing a system of exploitation, it is much less clear why this should be a transhistorical universal.

In spite of these questions and the need for a more sustained argument for the universality

of the tendencies in these propositions, Figure 3 represents a challenging and suggestive agenda for research.

II. Conceptual Imprecision

When *Durable Inequality* is elaborating its positive agenda it is on its firmest and most interesting ground. When it engages in debates with other perspectives or tries to clarify a range of abstract conceptual and methodological issues, it frequently becomes in my judgement much less satisfactory. In what follows I will review some of these problems.

1. Problematic Anti-essentialism

In his effort to demarcate the distinctiveness of his approach to inequality, Tilly draws a sharp contrast between views which assume “essences” of various social entities and views which assume “bonds”. “Most people seeking to explain any sort of social process,” he writes, “...presume the existence and centrality of self-propelling essences (individuals, groups, or societies).” (p17). In contrast, Tilly advocates “a possibility of assuming not essences but bonds: *relational* models of social life beginning with interpersonal transactions or ties.” (p.18).

The contrast between “essences” and “bonds” or “relations” seems to me quite misleading. A “bond” is not the opposite of an “essence”. A theorist can just as easily be an “essentialist” *about* bonds or interpersonal transactions or ties as about the entities bonded together, the persons interacting or the things that are tied together. Indeed, I think it reasonable to say that Tilly himself is a committed essentialist about social relations. He sees exploitation, opportunity

hoarding, emulation and adaptation as having certain “essential” features which are sufficiently invariant across contexts that he is prepared to make very general transhistorical propositions using these relational terms.

The central issue in essentialism vs anti-essentialism is the issue of whether or not there are any salient properties of the elements that figure in our social theories that are stable and invariant across radically different contexts. One can thus be an essentialist or an antiessentialist both about social relations and about the relata within those relations. Many scholars who in Tilly’s terms focus on individuals and their mental states can well be nonessentialists about those individual attributes: they could see those attributes as entirely contingent upon specific cultural constructions rather than inherent in the human individual.

I have no objections at all to Tilly’s insistence on the general importance of relations in social theory, or about the centrality of relations in the explanation of the specific phenomena he is studying. And I have no objection to his claim that many social scientists tend to pay less systematic attention to relations than to nonrelational attributes on individuals or groups (although I am skeptical that this sin characterizes “most people seeking to explain social processes” as he claims). But it confuses rather than clarifies this issue to couch these metatheoretical commitments in terms of a generic critique of essentialism.

2. Conflating methodological individualism with atomism.

Throughout the book the main theoretical target for Tilly’s critiques is what he terms “individualist” explanations in social science. For Tilly,

“*methodological individualism* presumes that social life results chiefly or exclusively from the actions of self-motivated, interest-seeking persons.” (p.17)

Methodological individualists who seek to explain social inequality have so far faced an insurmountable obstacle. Their causal mechanisms consist of mental events: decisions.” (p20)

These analyses fail...to the extent that essential causal business takes place not inside individual heads but within social relations among persons and sets of persons.” (p.33)

This characterization of methodological individualism collapses the distinction between individualistic and atomistic social theories.⁵ Methodological *atomism*, to be sure, completely marginalizes relational properties, but this is generally not the case for methodological individualists. One of the most articulate spokesmen for methodological individualism, Jon Elster (1985: 5-6), insists that methodological individualism includes an account of all sorts of relational properties of individuals, especially power. And those relational properties are certainly treated as causal and explanatory. What Elster rejects is methodological *collectivism*, not relational analysis. Methodological collectivism posits collective entities like classes as actors. Elster vehemently objects to statements of the form “the working class had no choice but to fight”, since “classes” are not the sorts of entities that “make choices”.

Even the methodological individualists of neoclassical economics and game theory do not universally fit the description of atomized methodological individualism offered by Tilly. Tilly insists that methodological individualists see causes as operating “inside of individual heads” with causal mechanisms consisting only of “mental events.” But the actors in neoclassical economics face budget constraints (dependent upon access to resources); they have endowments, including

endowments in external assets; they produce with production functions determined by technologies; and they interact in markets governed by specific rules. Neoclassical economists, for example, recognize that when firms have monopoly power markets behave differently, not because anyone's preferences or mental states are different, but because monopolies have the power to extract rents through exchange relations. None of these are "mental events". In game theory actors face pay-offs from alternative strategies, and, depending upon the nature of the game, the outcome is determined not just by the choices of a given actor but by the iterated unintended effects of the combined interacting choices of many actors. Payoffs and joint outcomes depend upon the "rules of the game" which define the nature of the inter-actions of players. These are also not "mental events", but at their core, "relations". To be sure, neither game theorists nor most neoclassical economists characteristically use a language of "social relations", and some neoclassical economists like to play with models in which they can pretend that actors act entirely atomistically (the purely competitive market with perfect information, etc.). Nevertheless, as a general matter social relations are implicit in both of these intellectual traditions.

What distinguishes methodological individualism, then, is not a rejection of relations as relevant to social explanations nor a stipulation that all causes are reducible to mental events, but an insistence on the primacy of micro-level analyses over macro-level analysis. Methodological individualism is committed to *microfoundationalism*, and perhaps even, as Jon Elster argues, to micro-reductionism, but not atomism. Relations are therefore explanatory for methodological individualists, but these are restricted to relations among individual persons.

Tilly's work therefore does constitute a potential criticism of methodological individualism, but not because of their rejection of relations or (as stated earlier) their essentialism. Rather, at the core of Tilly's analysis are a set of claims about the effects of macro-structures and relations. While micro-relations among individuals in the form of inter-person networks of various sorts are certainly important in Tilly's analysis, at least part of the explanatory work is done by relations-among-relations, not simply relations-among-individuals.

3. Misplaced metatheoretical criticism

One of the examples Tilly uses throughout the book to highlight the difference between his approach to inequality and the approach of most other social scientists is "discrimination" against women and racial minorities. He characterizes conventional analyses as individualistic in the following way:

"Despite disagreements in other regards, analysts of wage inequality generally accept the conventional definition of discrimination as the remainder after taking account of human capital and effort....Neoclassical economists commonly give strong weight to the interaction of human capital and effort, whereas radical feminists often assign the fundamental causal role to discrimination in one form or another. All sides invoke an essentially individualist explanation of inequality." p133

"...we should reverse the conventional procedure for analyzing discrimination: instead of treating it residual difference between categories once all possible sources of individual variation are taken into account, treat it as the portion of inequality that corresponds to locally relevant categories, and then see how much of the residual can be explained by variation in human capital, effort, and similar individual-level factors"

I believe this criticism is largely misplaced. The specification of discrimination as the "residual" after difference between categories after individual attributes have been accounted for is the result

of pragmatic methodological considerations, not the result of any substantive priority given to individual attributes over structural causes of inequality. The idea is basically this: the total empirically observed differences in earnings between two categories – say men and women – can in principle be partitioned into two main components: (1) a component that is the direct result of systematic, structural discrimination of various sorts, ranging from job exclusions to glass ceilings in promotion to unequal treatment within given jobs; (2) a component that is a direct result of human capital, effort and other variables under the immediate control of the individual.¹ This is not to reject the claim that these individual attributes might themselves also be caused by structural discrimination of various sorts, but simply to argue that at the time of employment itself a decomposition of intergroup differences can be made between a component tied to individual attributes and a component tied to categorical discrimination. So, the pragmatic question becomes: what is the best way to make estimates of these two components? One could try to get direct measures of each component, or one could try to measure quite accurately one and then attribute the remainder of the variance to the other. For pragmatic reasons, the latter strategy is generally adopted because of the difficulty obtaining good measures directly about the effects of discrimination. Discrimination is not inherently treated as a *substantive* residual in such a study, but simply a *methodological* residual.

Beyond this pragmatic point, I think Tilly misdescribes a great deal of work on gender inequality by both feminists and mainstream sociologists when he characterizes the logic of their

4. There is a third component that enters empirical investigations of these issues: a component that is the result of the interaction between structural effects and individual attributes.

inquiries as strongly individualist, claiming that they reduce gender inequality to the attributes of individuals and the causal processes to mental events of actors. Much analysis of gender inequality has placed considerable emphasis on such things as social networks, especially the “old boys network”, struggles over the family wage and the male breadwinner model, union rules of exclusion, marriage bars, and so forth. In the more Marxian currents of gender analysis, gender inequality in labor markets is seen as a mechanism of super-exploitation, of securing a stable supply of cheap labor, and of divide and conquer to undermine class solidarity. None of these processes is properly characterized as “essentially individualist.”

Tilly’s great concern to denounce individualistic explanation sometimes leads him to reject certain kinds of causal claims simply on the grounds that they smack of individualism, thus turning what is rightfully a substantive debate about causes in the world into a metatheoretical debate about what sorts of explanations are legitimate. One of the standard explanations for discrimination among economists is what is termed “statistical discrimination.” Statistical discrimination occurs when an employer makes a hiring decision not on the basis of inter-individual differences in attributes, but on the basis of the average attributes of members of some category. The idea here is that the employer in question would like to hire people on the basis strictly of individual attributes, but that it is too costly to get accurate information on those individual attributes, so as a rough proxy the employer imputes group average attributes to individuals. Tilly rejects such explanations as *in principle* illegitimate. He writes:

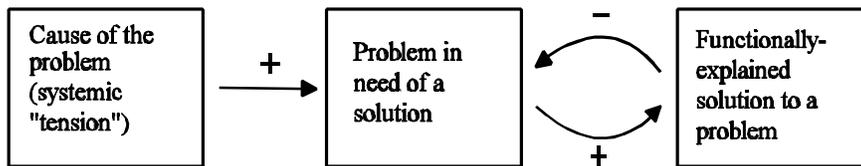
“...the ideas of ‘statistical discrimination’ individualizes a collective process radically: it portrays an employer who avoids hiring members of a whole category on the basis of beliefs or information – however well founded – that on average workers belonging to the

category contribute less to productivity than their counterparts from outside the category”
p31

While Tilly may be correct that statistical discrimination is an unsatisfactory explanation for discriminatory hiring decisions, it seems to me that this is fundamentally an empirical matter subject to empirical adjudication. If statistical discrimination were the main operative process, this would imply that if the costs of acquiring high quality information of individual-level attributes declined, then the apparent discrimination would also decline. In the limiting case of a system of pure statistical discrimination, state policies which would fully subsidize information costs would eliminate the associated categorical inequality. I personally would predict that solving the information problem would only have a minor effect on the relevant kinds of categorical inequalities, but this is an empirical prediction, not one derived from an a priori rejection of hypotheses simply because they place individual decisionmaking at the center of a causal process. Tilly, in contrast, rejects the hypothesis on meta-theoretical grounds.

Conclusion

Durable Inequality is an incredibly ambitious book. Whether or not one agrees with its arguments, its core substantive ideas are distinctive and provocative. Particularly if one works within the broadly defined Marxist tradition of social theory, Tilly’s reconfiguration of the concept of exploitation as part of a general theory of categorical inequality could provide interesting ways of framing a wide range of empirical projects. These ideas are more likely to play such a provocative and constructive role, I feel, if they are disengaged from many of the more abstract methodological and metatheoretical themes in which the arguments are currently embedded.



Source: based on models in Stinchcombe (1968)

Figure 1. Basic form of a Functional Explanation

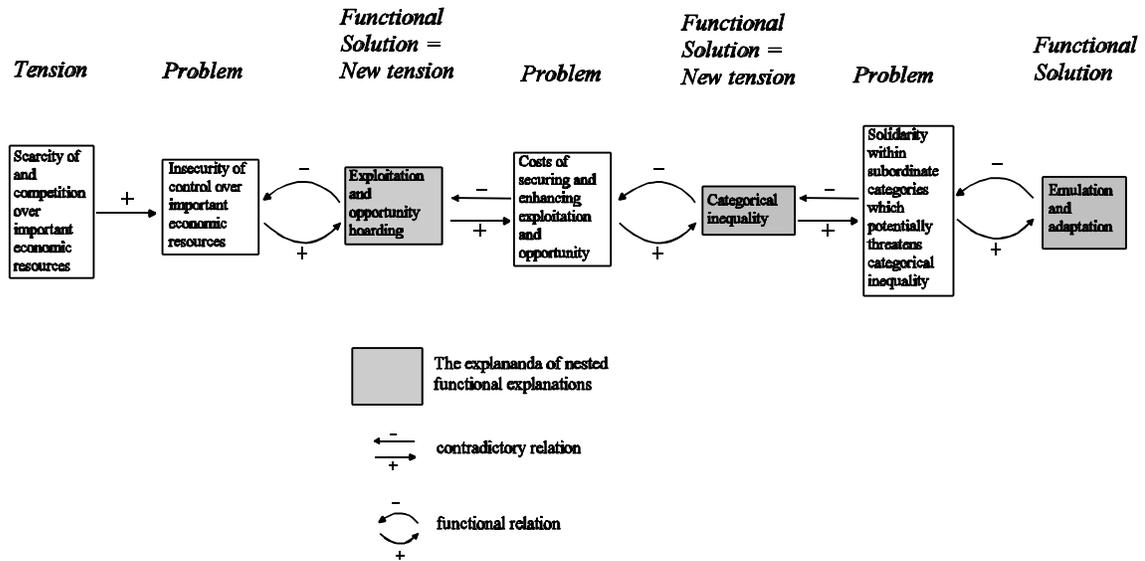
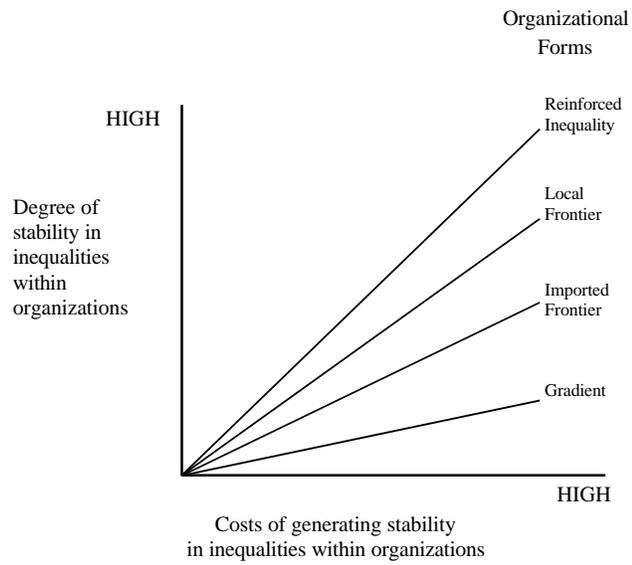


Figure 2. The Underlying Functional Logic of *Durable Inequality*



Definitions of Alternative Organizational forms

Reinforced inequality	matching of exterior and interior forms of categorical inequality
Local frontier	interior categorical inequality alone
Imported frontier	exterior categorical inequality alone
Gradient	no categorical inequality

Figure 3. Production Functions for Stabilizing Inequalities within Organizations

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Endnotes

1. Tilly also argues that in an even more stripped down sense, there are only three elementary forms since hierarchy is really a special kind of chain and an organization is what he calls “an overgrown categorical pair”. All social structures, then, can be viewed as complex forms of combination and development of three elementary forms: chain, triad and categorical pair.

2. For an extended discussion of the relationship between Marx’s and Weber’s general approach to class which emphasizes the centrality of the problem of exploitation to Marxist class analysis, see Wright (1997: 29-37).

3. The interpretation of the relationship between the economic base and ideological superstructure in Marx as a form of functional explanation is most rigorously developed by G.A. Cohen (1978).

4. Although different terms are used, the distinction between opportunity hoarding and exploitation is almost identical to the distinction between “nonexploitative economic oppression” and “exploitation” in my elaboration of the conceptual foundations of class analysis.. See especially Wright (1994: 39-46; 1997: chapter 1).

5. For an extended discussion of this distinction between methodological individualism and methodological atomism, see Wright, Levine and Sober (1992).