

Review:

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**Charles Tilly (2006). Why? What Happens When People Give Reasons ... And Why.** Princeton: Princeton UP, 202 pages, ISBN 0-691-12521-X, \$24.95 (Hardcover)

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**Abstract:** While it is clear that we are constantly giving as well as receiving justifications, it is less clear how justification works. New York sociologist Charles TILLY (1929-2008) claims that both social scientists and historians have failed to properly address this question and to develop on its methodological implications. Therefore, he has written a book on "why?". Is there an imperative to justify? If there is, how is it activated? How do justifications emerge? How do situations which have justification come to an end? TILLY argues that operations of justification take a variety of forms and he distinguishes four different formats justification can take: Justifications are given in terms of conventions (pp.32-60), stories (pp.61-95), codes (pp.96-125), and technical accounts (pp.126-156). While TILLY has chosen to highlight these different forms throughout the main chapters of his book, he maintains that all types of justifications have something in common. Whatever form justifications may take, they always relate to "practices" and "social relations." This implies that neither practices nor relations determine justifications (and vice versa).

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## 1. The Omnipresence of Justification

Justifications matter and they do so as practices and relations matter. This sounds a bit vague and confusing. In order to grasp TILLY's argument it is helpful to slightly overstate the book's conclusion: it aims to establish a method prepared for "reconciling reasons" (pp.157-180). In other words, it seeks to better understand and respect the plurality of different forms of reason-giving. This is an ambitious project for at least the following reasons: Just as justifications are to be found everywhere, so is the object of analysis. There is no way to build the study of justifications on the claim of a confined area of research. How to deal with the question of who is right and whose justification is well founded? How not to duplicate justifications pronounced by courts or tested by laboratories? [1]

One might expect these questions to be treated with many references to analytical philosophy. Interestingly, though, TILLY refrains from quoting even the most usual suspects (RAWLS, 1971; WALZER, 1983). The bulk of references go to sociological case studies on ordinary encounters with justification and to historical sources illustrating situations of justification. How does a woman justify a second abortion within six months to her doctor (p.55)? How does a Protestant preacher justify accepting blacks to participate in religious ceremonies (pp.63ff.)? How does a marine accountant (actually TILLY himself) justify refusing to give small favors to his friends (p.52)? Why is it that sometimes no justification is provided, for instance to a patient waiting hours and hours for treatment in the emergency room (p.48)? Why has the U.S. government never justified not including the devastating fire effects of atomic bombs in the nuclear-damage calculation (p.58)? [2]

## **2. Justification by Convention**

These examples are used to introduce how different forms of justification work. Justification by convention may be illustrated by the first example quoted: Having been instructed to use contraceptive devices after the first abortion, a couple's failure of contraception is explained by convention, namely a Puritan principle which says that "artificial things" have to be excluded from sexual intercourse. It is the striking simplicity and the availability of stylized formula which characterize justification by convention. "The acceptability of such reasons does not depend on their truth, much less on their explanatory value, but on their appropriateness to the social situation" (p.40). [3]

## **3. Justification by Stories**

In the second case, the Protestant preacher's justification of having changed his idea on racial segregation is an example which illustrates justification by storytelling. The reason is provided in the form of an autobiographic account which leaves out the whole process of contemporary political mobilization. Yet TILLY argues that what might be regarded as a deficiency is also a powerful source of reason-giving: Stories provide reasons by deliberately keeping the numbers of actors involved to a minimum. The preacher found out that he had no reason to further exclude African Americans from religious service when an old Afro-American shoe-shiner he used to frequent had once dared to ask humbly and softly why he was not admitted. [4]

TILLY provides elaborate distinctions on the different formats of justification, and he sticks to his ambition to conceive of justifications as part of social processes. As the lack of philosophical references suggests, his aim is not to isolate what might be a justificatory proposition or to define a system of justifications. Consequently, TILLY is not clear on why there are precisely four repertoires of justification. He is much more concerned with clarifying how justifications relate to social order. As demonstrated throughout the book, this question falls into the domain of sociologists and social historians. Justifications are delivered to maintain, to change, or to repair social relations, including asymmetrical relations.

To understand TILLY's interest in (a) asymmetries of power in justification and (b) the interference of different types of justifications, one should briefly return to the exposition of the third and fourth type of justification, namely codes and technical accounts. [5]

#### **4. Justification by Codes**

Codes or codified systems of rules and procedures

"emerge from the incremental efforts of organizations to impose their order on the ideas, resources, activities, and people that fall under their control ... Once in place, they strongly affect the lives of people who work for these organizations, or who cannot escape their jurisdiction. In those arenas, they shape the reasons people give for their actions as well as for their failures to act" (TILLY, p.125). [6]

On the other hand, research on organizations clearly shows how organizational practice may switch between what is justified by codes and what is to be accounted for by stories. TILLY provides many examples drawn from this corpus of research suggesting that justifications matter although organizations may put them to instrumental uses. This is where an interesting tension arises: how does the study of justifications relate to organizations—given that organizations partly derive their power from setting standards of justification? [7]

Following TILLY's argument, organizations are by no means to be excluded from the study of justifications. On the contrary, his choice of examples shows a predilection for organizational settings, and he is fairly interested in how justification occurs in relations of asymmetry within organizations. This path of inquiry is promising when it points at the interferences between the different types of justification. However, TILLY is more than reluctant to directly address this question and to elaborate on it in terms of a more theoretical discussion. A more thorough review of his examples would probably show that he sticks to explanations in terms of asymmetry, abandoning his ambition to do justice to all types of justifications and how they interfere. [8]

#### **5. Justification by Technical Accounts**

But why would he not acknowledge and sustain the view that organizations systemically fail to purify justifications? This is somewhat puzzling as his book has examples which would confirm just that. These examples include a fourth type of justification by accounts established by technical experts. None of these ways of giving reasons is said to enjoy superiority. All of them are shown to intermingle. For instance, it is demonstrated that some professional experts facing laypersons are highly experienced in bridging technical accounts and stories (physicians, lawyers, and theologians). Even if he is not ready to radicalize the point of interference, TILLY's broad interest in how justifications work may be said to focus on that point. He is most intrigued by cases which simultaneously display the whole range of justifications he has suggested to divide up into the four categories of convention, stories, code, and technical accounts. [9]

## 6. Reconciling Reasons?

TILLY's book is also about 9/11; an event which was troubling for both the abundance and the absence of justifications. Distinguishing between different formats of justification, TILLY comments on the cacophony of justifications produced in the aftermath of the terrorist attack. Stories came along with conventions and codes.

"STORY: Terrorists did it, but lax officials let them do it.

CONVENTION: Modern life is dangerous.

CODE: Because we have freedom to defend, we must combat terror" (p.160). [10]

TILLY's book sharpens our sensitivity for conflicts of interpretation which typically arise after catastrophic events but his instrument is not limited to these extraordinary situations. As is shown by his analysis, conflicts of interpretation do not limit themselves to the question of whether a story is unlikely to happen, whether a convention is outdated, or whether a code is seen as inappropriate. To capture their uncertainty, one has to focus on switches and compromises between different types of justifications. Obviously, the way stories simplify is not compatible with the exigencies of technical accounts, codes clash with conventions, and so on. [11]

TILLY concludes that the historian's or sociologist's role might be to observe switches and cacophonies of justification. He shows how different forms of justification are embedded in relations and practices. In the case of 9/11, this allows for a close analysis of how political spaces are shaped and reshaped. As mentioned above, TILLY is intrigued by the question of how asymmetry relates to interference but he fails to theorize it. If he has a preference for asymmetry (and this appears to be the case), there is another issue waiting to be dealt with. TILLY ignores the question how justifications come to an end. If providing a justification always failed to close a critical situation, the world would be uninhabitable (cf. BOLTANSKI & THÉVENOT, 2006). TILLY does not state explicitly that it is only asymmetries (of power) which bring disputes to an end. But he does not rule it out, either. TILLY's analysis is powerful when it concentrates on how justifications get started. It is yet another dimension of social order waiting to be explored to study how and why justifications bring disputes to an end. [12]

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