

Louise Audino Tilly: an appreciation*

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Abstract

Louise Audino Tilly, who died on March 2, 2018, enjoyed a relatively short twenty-five year career as a historian. But Tilly left an enduring imprint through her example and through her scholarship on the history of women and work, on the social and economic circumstances affecting collective action, and on the connections between demographic changes and family life. In more recent decades, several generations of historians have benefitted from the road maps she left pointing the way for emerging work on the connections between micro-level analysis and national and international histories of social change.

Louise Audino Tilly, who died on March 2, 2018, enjoyed a relatively short twenty-five year career as a historian. Her scholarship, her mentorship, and her activism within the historical profession, however, created a long legacy. She made outstanding, pioneering contributions to the fields of women's, gender, and social history.

Tilly is best known for her work in the history of women and the family. In the early 1970s, women's history, stimulated by the growing feminist movement, was just emerging; Tilly was completing her PhD in European history from the University of Toronto. She had returned to school to earn her degree while raising four children. Like growing numbers of historians at the time, Tilly was interested in studying ordinary people; in her case, how large-scale social processes, such as industrialization, migration, and demographic change, affected their lives. She and historian Joan Scott began sharing ideas on recent scholarship in European social history, pointing to the development of industrial capitalism as a key moment of opportunity for working women; with the growth of wage labor, the analysis went, women could now become individualists. According to historian Edward Shorter, the rising rates of illegitimacy in urban areas reflected working women's ability to embrace freer sexual mores.¹ For Tilly and Scott, that argument not only failed to comprehend the difficulties of pregnancy and childrearing for poor single women but also profoundly misunderstood the role of work for most women. As "labor historians," Scott recently wrote, "we were familiar with the long history of women's employment well before the rise of industrial capitalism and with the kind of exploitation brought by factory work and domestic work." Many feminists at the time emphasized work as a liberating experience for women. But Tilly and Scott understood that "paid labor and emancipation may have been synonymous for some women in the twentieth century, but not for all."²

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To put forth a more complex story about women's work, Tilly and Scott embarked on a massive history of women's employment in England and in France, which culminated in the 1978 publication of the now classic *Women, Work, and Family*. Looking at how economic and demographic variables affected women's work opportunities and women's family roles, they showed that England and France, because they developed into industrial economies differently, provided different work experiences for women. They also showed that while there were regional differences within the countries, similarities between regions cut across national boundaries. In their study, which covered women's experience from the pre to the post-industrial eras, they argued that women's work was not new to the industrial age, and that wage work did not mean liberation from the traditional familial obligations that most women were expected to fulfill. Deeply held norms about women's roles as child bearers responsible for child rearing constrained women's work opportunities and framed attitudes about the meaning of work for women.³ Emphasizing the difficulties that work outside the home posed for most women, even in the twentieth century, Tilly and Scott's scholarship was essential to understanding how class intersected with gender to shape women's lives. Today, thanks to the work of many scholars, we have an even better awareness of how race, class, and gender intersect to condition women's lives. In 1991, one of Tilly's former students, historian Tessie Liu, provided a very important analysis of how race and gender work together to construct women's experiences.⁴

Throughout her career, Tilly focused on how demography framed the lives of ordinary people. In *Women, Work, and Family*, she and Scott showed how varying economic opportunities for women's and men's work affected marriage and fertility patterns in both rural and urban Europe. And because women bore and raised children, demographic patterns in turn determined much about the ways they could spend their time. Demographic patterns had implications for all family members. Tilly's co-edited collection with John Gillis and David Levine, *The European Experience of Declining Fertility* (1992), focused on how new attitudes towards children rearing, based on political, economic, and cultural changes, contributed to the decline in the birthrate.⁵

Tilly often quoted Marx's famous dictum from the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that "men (and women) make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." She believed agency should be understood in that way. As people coped with different social circumstances, strategies shifted over time. No one moment produces great transformations in behavior or mindset, but an accumulation of shifting strategies for handling the daily realities of life can result in important social/historical changes.⁶

Understanding how behavior and attitudes shift as ordinary people handle the daily realities of life not only informed Tilly's historical analysis of women, work, and family but also her work on collective action. *Politics and Class in Milan, 1881–1901* (1992) looked at both large-scale structural processes and

political struggles that shaped working class formation in fin de siècle Italy. To get at the large-scale changes, she again focused on detailed analysis of local areas, as well as national trends. The development of working class politics and its successes or failures could be understood as part of the particular “changes in the form of economic activity, the structure of the labor force, and conditions of life and work that are most often regional... .” While one region cannot explain the entire process of the nation, it can suggest how variations in these processes can affect the possibilities of class mobilization. In the end, she argued, the vast variation in the patterns of class formation in Italy meant that there remained large numbers of peasants and independent producers, outside of the labor movement, and politically powerful economic elites “who were committed to neither liberal economics or democratic politics.” But the pace of economic change did not tell the whole story about why democratic socialism failed. Class formation, she argued, “was a contingent political process in which the actions of worker, intellectuals, industrialists, and politicians are the engine of change, not the unfolding of a logic inherent in economic change.” Thus, an understanding of Italian working-class politics must also pay attention to national political factors, such as laws that enabled mobilization, the expansion of suffrage, or laws that limited collective action, such as state repression of strikes. In Italy in the early twentieth century, the continuation of state structures in which authoritarian rule was embedded, and the potential for repression remained. Therefore, after World War One it was “all too easy for conservative and reactionary governments to repress any opposition.” With fascism arriving in full force in the early 1920s, “a [working] class had been made and unmade.”⁷

In her work on women and collective action in France during the same era, Tilly used a variety of sources, including poems, memoirs, newspapers, and government records, to bring individuals and groups of women front and center as they engaged in political action. Through different forms of political action, whether it be participation in strikes, demonstrations over food prices, or supporting political rights, women tried to influence government officials or economic elites in order to promote their interests. And to understand their interests, one needed to take into account the fact that the French economy was still decentralized and household production was important. Women in peasant households and artisan household women, working members of a household unit, “acted [politically] in the interest of the unit, rather than seeing themselves the way bourgeois feminists did, as individuals with autonomous needs.”⁸

However, understanding the pace of economic change did not explain everything about how French women approached politics. As in her work on Italy, Tilly argued that political context and history mattered in understanding the successes and failures of collective action. In France, understanding the difficulties that French feminists faced in promoting suffrage required an appreciation of the long history of the French Catholic Church, which fostered women’s activism that would preserve traditional families but not suffrage.

Similarly, when Tilly turned to an analysis of women and collective action in twentieth-century America, she emphasized that although women's politics of the late twentieth century are different than the mobilizations at the turn of the twentieth century, the past very much shaped the present. Tilly and Patricia Gurin's co-authored introduction to their collection on women and politics in American history pointed to the enduring legacy of racism as an important factor shaping women's politics. In one of her last articles, published in this journal, Tilly compared the histories of women's civic, political, and social rights in England, France, the United States, and Germany. She again stressed that to understand the emergence of women's rights in each country, one had to account not only for the specific histories of women's work but also long-held views about gender, family life, individualism, or race on the part of elites in each country, who were important to making social and political policies.⁹

In the 1990s, Tilly turned to global history, looking at the effects of early industrialization on spinners and weavers in India, England, and France; she presented her early findings in her 1994 American Historical Association presidential address, entitled "Connections." In this work, Tilly brought to bear her decades-long approaches to doing history. She began by saluting the work of recently deceased historian E.P. Thompson, for his attention to how local level protests were connected to large-scale structural changes and to one another. Tilly discussed three kinds of connections—first, the connections "between structures, processes and human agency," which she believed were "social history's defining connections... ." She also emphasized "the spatial links between groups, regions, political units, connected by trade, production, migration, religion, or political relations." In looking at how industrial capitalism disrupted and deprived workers of earlier forms of textile employment in all three countries, Tilly analyzed the effects of imperialism, the changes in the organization of work, and the "power dynamics within the labor markets of each county."¹⁰ She also brought to global history her abiding interest in how gender—the sex segregation of the labor market, the power dynamics between husbands and wives—and the relations between parents and children affected the lives of textile workers and their families in each country.¹¹ Finally, she focused on temporal connections, the ways in which the past constrained the present. For example, she pointed to India's highly specialized labor system and traditional patriarchal control of children's lives as important to understanding Indian responses to English technological innovations that transformed the textile industry.

Tilly envisioned her analysis of the textile industry to be part of a larger global study of the Industrial Revolution. While her illness prevented her from continuing the project, others went on to pursue global histories that emphasized the social and economic connections between world regions; scholars have also studied how transnational structural changes are connected to the history of women, work, and family.¹²

In a footnote to her AHA presidential address, Tilly provided insight into her motivation for scholarship. "The accumulation of knowledge in local social

histories provides an empirical mapping of causal mechanisms in processes of change, explanations, and interpretations of their meaning for individuals and groups. Therein lies the value of social history for understanding the changing world and finding ways to a more egalitarian and just future.”¹³ Her commitment to a more just future influenced her life choices in many ways. At various times in her life, she worked on behalf of progressive politicians and progressive causes. Those of us in the historical profession who had the privilege of knowing Tilly witnessed how she brought her egalitarian convictions to so many aspects of her professional life.

Tilly believed that scholarship was a collaborative enterprise; a long list of co-authored publications reflects that conviction. In addition to the work I have already discussed, she published works with her then-husband Charles Tilly and brother-in-law Richard Tilly, on the history of collective violence in France, Italy, and Germany. She also co-authored works with former students such as Leslie Moch and myself, on the histories of women, family, and migration.¹⁴ Tilly’s cooperative approach influenced other aspects of her career. She and Chuck Tilly hosted seminars in their Ann Arbor home and later at the Committee on Historical Studies at the New School, where graduate students and, sometimes, distinguished scholars met to discuss work over food and drink. These gatherings were models of scholarly exchange as collegiality, not competitiveness.

Tilly’s personal history informed her egalitarianism. Born in 1930 and raised in New Jersey by immigrant parents from northern Italy, she earned her BA in 1952, at the public New Jersey College for women, now Douglass College of Rutgers University. When she embarked on her own career in academia, earning a PhD in 1974, she was older than most graduate students. She began teaching in her early forties, first at the University of Michigan–Flint, then Michigan State, before securing an appointment at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, earning tenure there in 1977. Not only was she older than most junior or newly tenured faculty, she was female in a very male-dominated world. Feeling somewhat an outsider in the profession made her especially welcoming to new faculty who came behind her, and she was always willing to help new scholars she met at seminars, conferences, or workshops, or in the graduate programs where she taught.

Many people benefited from Tilly’s generosity and her inclusiveness, including myself. She was a constant source of suggestions about historical sources that might aid her students, her former students, and her friends and colleagues. No matter how busy, she always seemed to have time to write another letter of recommendation, or to help someone participate in a conference panel.

From her earliest days as a professional historian, Tilly’s desire to open up the field to those previously kept on the margins centered on efforts to promote women scholars and women’s history. Once she became a prominent historian, the task became easier, but even as a new scholar in the early 1970s, her feminist convictions propelled her to action. In those days, her letters to Scott and her conversations with her friend and former professor Natalie Davis were “full

of plots and plans to get women and women's history onto the program of the meetings of the AHA, the Society for French Historical Studies, and the Masion des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris."¹⁵

Tilly also welcomed many colleagues and students to her home; she was a master at putting together dinners on short notice, and she always had room for one more. So, too, at conferences, when attendants went off to restaurants, Tilly usually had a large group accompanying her because she welcomed into the group anyone who wanted to come along.

Tilly took seriously the bread and butter issues that confronted the subjects of her scholarship, and she took seriously the material realities that confronted graduate students. In the mid-1970s, the Michigan PhD program faced an unexpected opening in the position of faculty director for job placement. With no other faculty member willing to accept the position at the last minute, Tilly took it on, despite her multiple career obligations as a relatively new faculty member, in addition to her ongoing family responsibilities.

Tilly assumed many important executive responsibilities during her career. She served as Director of Women's Studies at Michigan and Chair of the Committee on Historical Studies at the New School for Social Research, where she was the Michael E. Gellert Professor of History and Sociology. She was one of the early organizers of the Social Science History Association and served as a president of that organization, in addition to serving as President of the AHA; she edited *ILWCH* in the 1990s. With seemingly unending energy, she managed all of her responsibilities without ever losing her sense of humor.

Her ironic sense of humor reflected her keen understanding that like the subjects of her scholarship, all of us have to manage in a world that is not necessarily fair or equal. Here's an example. The 1976 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, one of the early ones, took place at Bryn Mawr College. On a very hot June day in this small town on the Philadelphia main line, a group of us, including Tilly, were sitting outside, trying to catch a breeze as we ate a picnic lunch; I expressed surprise that no building on this beautiful campus had air conditioning. Tilly looked at me with that bright smile of hers and said by way of explanation, "rich girls don't sweat," those four words illuminating her vision of how gender and class ideology operated together in post-World War Two America.

Those who knew Tilly as a friend, a mentor, and a colleague miss her sense of humor, her openness, her brilliant engagement with our scholarship, with her own work, indeed, with life itself. She loved to travel, to visit museums, to attend concerts, to walk through cities, and to hike in many places throughout the world. She also loved stylish, good clothes. Through the years, we learned about her family—the comings and goings of her children and their partners and her grandchildren—to whom she was fiercely devoted. And Tilly always wanted to know about our lives and our families as well.

At the turn of this century, illness cut short her very active life and deprived scholars of the opportunity to learn even more from her. But Louise Tilly left an

enduring imprint through her example and her scholarship on the history of women and work, on the social and economic circumstances affecting collective action, as well as on the connections between demographic changes and family life. In more recent decades several generations of historians have benefitted from the road maps she left pointing the way for emerging work on the connections between micro-level analysis and national and international histories of social change.

NOTES

- * Thanks to Patricia Wallace and Elizabeth Pleck, for their help and advice on this essay.
1. Edward Shorter, "Female Emancipation, Birth Control, and Fertility in European History," *The American Historical Review* 78 (1973): 606–640.
 2. Joan W. Scott, "Writing Women, Work and Family," *The Tilly-Scott Collaboration*, *Social Science History* 38 (2014): 114. Louise A. Tilly, Joan W. Scott, and Miriam Cohen fleshed out their critique of Shorter in "Women's Work and European Fertility Patterns," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1976): 447–476. For a recent discussion on the changing historiography regarding the Shorter thesis and the Tilly, Scott, Cohen analysis, see Elizabeth H. Pleck, "Seeking Female Sexual Emancipation and the Writing of Women's History," *Social Science History* 38 (2014): 105–112.
 3. Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family*, 2nd ed. (New York: Methuen, 1987).
 4. Tessie Liu, "Teaching the Differences Among Women from a Historical Perspective: Rethinking Race and Gender as Social Categories," *Women's Studies International Forum* 14 (1991): 265–271. A classic statement on intersectionality is Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241–1299. Two examples of Joan Wallach's Scott's work on race and gender are *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010) and *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).
 5. Carl Strikwerda, "Tilly, Louise A. US Social Historian of European Labor and Women," in *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing* 2 ed. Kelly Boyd (London, Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999), 1197. See also Morton O. Schapiro, "The European Experience of Declining Fertility: A Quiet Revolution, 1850–1970." Edited by John R. Gillis, Louise A. Tilly, and David Levine. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992. *The Journal of Economic History* 53 (1994): 671.
 6. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1935 [1852]), 13. Tilly's use of Marx's dictum is also discussed in Miriam Cohen, "Population, Politics, and Unemployment Policy in the Great Depression," *Social Science History* 38 (2014): 79.
 7. Louise A. Tilly, *Politics and Class in Milan, 1881–1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15, 284, 19, 285.
 8. Louise A. Tilly, "Women's Collective Action in France, 1870–1914," in *Class Conflict and Collective Action*, ed. Louise A. Tilly and Charles Tilly (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981), 227.
 9. Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin, "Women, Politics, and Change," *Women, Politics, and Change*, ed. Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin (New York: Russell Sage Foundation), 3–32; "Women, Work, and Citizenship," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 52 (1997): 1–26.
 10. Louise A. Tilly, "Connections," *American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 2, 3, 20.
 11. On this point, see Michael P. Hanagan and Mary Jo Maynes, "Louise Tilly in Intergenerational Perspective," *Social Science History* 38 (2014): 73.
 12. For a longer discussion of Tilly's influence on subsequent global history, see Michael P. Hanagan and Mary Jo Maynes, "Louise Tilly in Intergenerational Perspective," 73. Tilly's framework for looking at global connections was an important aspect of the global textbook that she helped to develop. See John Coatsworth, Juan Cole, Michael Hanagan, Peter

Perdue, Charles Tilly, and Louise Tilly, *Global Connections, Politics, Exchange, and Social Life in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

13. "Connections," 3, ftn 6.

14. Charles Tilly, Louise A. Tilly, and Richard Tilly, *The Rebellious Century, 1830–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); Louise A. Tilly and Leslie Page Moch, "Joining the Urban World: Occupation, Family and Migration in Three Cities," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27 (1985): 33–56; Tilly, Scott, Cohen, "European Fertility Patterns and Women's Work Patterns," Louise A. Tilly and Miriam Cohen, "Does the Family Have a History?: A Review of Theory and Practice in Family History," *Social Science History* 6 (1982): 131–79.

15. Scott, "Writing Women, Work, and Family," 115.