Barricades as Repertoire:
Continuities and Discontinuities
in the History of French Contention

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CHARLES TILLY has introduced to historical and sociological discourse the concept of the repertoire of collective action. The concept is rooted in the observation that "any given population tends to have a fairly limited and well-established set of means for action on shared interests..." (Tilly 1977: 39) The repertoire of collective action, like its theatrical counterpart, implies a group of actors who choose among a restricted number of performances with which they are familiar. Their options are circumscribed both by prior experience and by the material, organizational, and conceptual resources they find readily at hand (Tilly and Tilly 1981: 19). Tilly also likens the repertoire of collective action to a
game that involves a set of basic rules around which a considerable degree of extemporization is not only permitted but required. The result is a "paradoxical combination of ritual and flexibility" (Tilly 1977: 22; Tilly 1986b: 33, 37) in which neither element must be allowed to displace the other, lest the performance lose either its creative edge or its ready communicability.

In more formal terms a repertoire of collective action consists of the "whole set of means" that a group has available for use in making claims and to which its members turn consistently, "even when in principle some unfamiliar form of action would serve their interests much better." (Tilly, 1986b: 4)² Although Tilly emphasizes that such behaviors are learned, the mechanisms by which such knowledge is transmitted to new initiates, other than by direct experience, are not specified. He downplays the strong version of the concept that would see the repertoire as the result of deliberate choices on the part of collective actors, appearing to favor a weaker version in which the loosely structured interaction between contenders and authorities makes certain forms of protest "more feasible, attractive, and frequent" than the alternatives.³

The distinctive features that set the repertoire apart are the considerable stability it exhibits over long swaths of time and the constraining influence it exercises over participants in collective action, as it shapes their activities in patterns that are sometimes wondrously, sometimes infuriatingly, self-consistent. Tilly's original model attributes this patterning to the rootedness of all collective action in the organization of everyday life and to the usefulness of repertoires for the purposes of "signaling, negotiation, and struggle" with other parties (Tilly 1986b: 4).

But the continuity exhibited by repertoires over time is just one aspect of their nature. Tilly also is concerned with the changes they undergo. These include the small, incremental modifications that occur continuously across generations of use as actors adapt to the changing political, economic, and social context in which they operate, and as new interests and opportunities emerge (Tilly 1977: 22). They also embrace the even more fascinating, epochal transformations in an entire people’s repertoire of contention that occur at long intervals.

In the French context, Tilly identifies one eighteenth-century repertoire, which actually survives well into the 1800s, and another nineteenth-century repertoire, which sets the stage for and persists into the twentieth. The former includes food riots and grain seizures but also embraces the charivari, the draft riot, the intervillage brawl, invasions of fields and forests, armed rebellions against tax collectors, and a wide variety of public rituals, often involving the use of costumes, disguises, and effigies, including mock trials and executions. Among the distinctive features of this earlier style of protest are the reliance on tactics normally reserved for use by the authorities, often subjected to some symbolic or parodic reversal, and the tendency to direct such actions to third parties who are invited to intervene on behalf of participants.⁴

More typical of the nineteenth-century pattern are strikes, demonstrations, electoral rallies, petition marches, public assemblies of all kinds, especially those organized around programmatic objectives and involving visible public actions, including the use of signs, banners, and pamphlets. Tilly explicitly states that the "planned insurrection" is specific to this repertoire, a point to which we shall return. The thread which binds these disparate activities together is that, in relation to the forms of protest that preceded them, they are less likely to be communal and more likely to be national in scope; they rely more heavily on formal organization (in the sense of associations, clubs, societies, etc.); and they are more autonomous (in the sense of using tactics that are distinct from those employed by the constituted authorities).⁵ Such activities, which carry over into the twentieth century, are more likely to present direct challenges to their targets (especially those who hold power), to operate on a larger scale, and to make more effective use of explicit and well-elaborated programs of action.⁶

Although the transition from an old to a new repertoire usually takes place over a span measured in decades or generations, Tilly believes it possible to isolate what he terms the "hinge": the moment, typically associated with a landmark set of events, when the predominance of an earlier style of protest is irreversibly supplanted by that of its successor. At such pivotal junctures in history those sociological forces that normally channel collective action into previously established patterns are temporarily suspended. In the heat of some great cataclysmic confrontation the attention of contending parties becomes fixated on new alternatives that hold promise for change. Suddenly, forces are realigned in support of the emergent repertoire, which now rapidly displaces the older
style of protest with which it had coexisted for some time. Tilly
suggests that one such moment of transformation occurred at the
time of the Fronde (i.e., the mid-seventeenth century), and he
specifically places the crucial watershed between the eighteenth-
and nineteenth-century repertoires in 1848.

WHEN DID STYLES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION
CHANGE IN FRANCE?

In a 1990 article William Sewell, Jr., both praises Tilly’s con-
tributions, empirical and theoretical, to our understanding of
the history of contention in France. He also raises questions about
Tilly’s “novel periodization.” Sewell’s exposition of Tilly’s fram-
work avoids explicit reference to the concept of repertoire but
does rely on the contrast between communal and associative styles
of protest, thus echoing Tilly’s distinction between eighteenth-
and nineteenth-century repertoires and usefully tying the shift to
changing forms of social organization. However, in contrast to
Tilly’s “hinge” of 1848, Sewell locates what might be termed a
“wedge,” driven between the two divergent styles of collective
action, in the radical phase of the great French Revolution, 1789–
95. In his view, it was the attempt to destroy the corporation—
the institutional form around which Old Regime society had been
structured—that defined the revolutionary period and launched
the century-long struggle by French citizens to regain the right
of association that the attack on privilege had severely restricted.
Thus, for Sewell, the French Revolution mattered more than 1848.

In part, we see revealed in this debate the difference between
those (like Sewell) for whom the moment of origin carries within it
the as-yet-unrealized germ of later transformations, and those (like
Tilly) for whom the shift in the preponderant style of collective
action is what is significant because it encapsulates the trend of
larger historical forces. Tilly’s interpretive style emphasizes more
structural and encompassing (but also more diffuse) factors like
the growth of state power and the degree of urbanization, whose
impact on events becomes apparent only across long stretches
of time. Sewell’s style, in contrast, stresses the cultural and lin-
guistic dimensions of collective violence and the way in which
short-term and situationally specific factors account for the form
in which change becomes manifest. Sweeping historical conse-
quencces are seen as unfolding in a gradual and contingent manner
from ostensibly modest beginnings.

There is one point on which Sewell (1990: 540) agrees with
Tilly and that I mention because I wish to take issue with them
both: that the insurrection represents a new category of collective
violence specific to the late-modern period. It is true that each
qualifies his assertion in such a way as to allow for the occurrence
of at least superficially similar events before the end of the eight-
teenth century. Tilly specifies that it is their planned character that
sets the insurrections of the second half of the nineteenth century
apart. Sewell situates the novelty chiefly in the newly positive
connotations associated with the term insurrection (as opposed to
revolt, mutiny, rebellion, sedition, etc.), the increased frequency
of such events, and their enlarged role in legitimating new forms
of the state. Despite these stipulations, I have found it impossible
to distinguish in unambiguous terms the insurrections of the nine-
teenth century from others that long predated them. A review of
the history of barricade use in France will make the nature of the
problem clearer.

A VIEW FROM THE BARRICADES

From their beginnings, barricades have been associated with urban
insurrection. Yet until the mid-nineteenth century, urban insur-
rection was associated with barricades only in France. The origin
of the modern tradition of barricade construction can, in fact, be
retraced to Paris in 1588. It is even possible to specify the indi-
vidual—a count of Cossé de Brissac—who is said to have invented
the tactic. Yet the building of barricades, like most elements of
popular repertoires irrespective of period or setting, originated as
a by-product of everyday experiences, just as Tilly has suggested.
Sixteenth-century Parisians had long since devised a means of
protecting their neighborhoods by embedding one end of a heavy
iron chain in the foundation of a corner building. It was the custom
each evening to stretch such chains across the mouths of adjoining
streets as a way of blocking access and preventing outsiders
from disturbing the sleep of residents. However, chains also were
used in daylight hours to secure the Parisian quartier whenever
unrest in the city threatened disruption. The great innovation of
12 May 1588 was to fortify the line of demarcation represented
by the chains and to use the barriers thus created to impede the movements of King Henri III’s Royal Guards.

Henri had ordered his troops to enter Paris against the chance that the arrival of the enormously popular and ultra-Catholic Duke of Guise would incite unrest. Their deployment prompted precisely the result it was intended to forestall. Parisians, enraged at this armed intrusion, followed the instructions of Cossé de Brissac and reinforced the chain barriers by heaping earth and paving stones into wooden barrels (or barricues, in the French of that day, whence the term barricades). The Royal Guards suddenly found themselves isolated in small units. With their lines of communication broken, they became highly vulnerable to the barricade-builders who had so quickly asserted control over the capital. After initial collisions in which a few guardsmen were killed and many others disarmed, the troops—and eventually the king himself—were forced to withdraw from the city.

The important role played by the Seize (delegates of the 16 quarters of Paris) and by the Duke of Guise’s aristocratic lieutenants, who coordinated popular resistance, gave to this Day of the Barricades a planned character that is difficult to differentiate sharply from such events as the February and June Days of 1848. As with virtually all events of this type, the 1588 rising of the Parisian population combined elements of organization and spontaneity.

The lessons of that victory were not lost on subsequent generations of Parisians. In 1648 a second major event took place (also referred to, somewhat confusingly, as the Day of the Barricades). During Louis XIV’s minority, France was effectively ruled by Anne of Austria, acting as regent, and Cardinal Mazarin, as head of the king’s council. By the late 1640s, the cardinal’s foreign adventures had seriously depleted the royal treasury. Mazarin’s plans to levy new taxes met resistance in the capital. A crisis ensued in August 1648, culminating in an order for the arrest of the widely respected and beloved councilor of the Paris parliament, Pierre Broussel, among others. All Paris rose to his defense. The idea of erecting barricades is said to have been planted by agents of Cardinal de Retz, ringleader of the opposition forces, although the concept appears to have been generally familiar to the residents of Paris, even if few veterans of the 1588 rebellion could still have been alive (Anquetil 1851: 517; DeRetz 1872). Contemporary sources claimed that no fewer than 1,260 barricades were erected.

Only after the queen grudgingly granted concessions, including the release of Broussel, was calm restored to the city. The truce was only temporary, however, for these events marked the onset of the period of civil war known as the Fronde, which lasted through 1653.

With the death of Mazarin in 1661, Louis XIV began the 54-year personal rule that succeeded in consolidating the authority of the Bourbon monarchy over France. With this strengthening of the state, the phenomenon of barricade construction went into eclipse. I have been unable to identify a single, further instance of their use until the period of the French Revolution. Thus, barricades, and the urban insurrections from which they were inseparable, flourished for a time in the late 1500s and mid-1600s, before disappearing for nearly 150 years. Their earlier occurrence needs to be reconciled with the notion of a distinctive and period-specific nineteenth-century repertoire of urban insurrection.

BARRICADES IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION

Between the end of the Old Regime and the fall of the Paris Commune, at least 21 independent occurrences of barricade construction took place in France. These events can be roughly grouped into three subperiods corresponding to stages in the further elaboration of a repertoire of barricade construction.

The initial stage extended from 1795 to 1827. In the first of those years the French capital witnessed the only instance of barricade construction to occur during the great Revolution. A generation later, the period closed with the abortive coup attempt in which Auguste Blanqui and a cohort of young radicals served their apprenticeship in insurrection. But this resurgence of the use of barricades occurred within a changed context. Whereas insurrections in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries might paralyze the monarchy, by the nineteenth century they at times achieved the outright overthrow and reconstitution of the state. In the earlier period, because the nation was less well-integrated and administrative control less complete, it was harder for a popular rebellion to conceive, much less carry out, an actual takeover of the governmental apparatus and the conscious redirection of social policy. By the nineteenth century a shift in the calculus of power had taken place, and capital cities, where the intellectual and political as
well as material resources of the nation were concentrated, could impose their will over the more numerous but more dispersed population of the provinces.

A second phase, which ran roughly from 1830 to 1848, witnessed the diffusion of the barricade as a technique of insurrection. It began with the July Days that toppled the last of the Bourbon kings and within a month had spawned barricades in Belgium, the first such use I have been able to document outside their country of origin. It concluded with the great conflagration of 1848, when barricades spread across the Continent and achieved a genuinely international status as a tactic of revolt. They appeared for the first time in Vienna, Berlin, Munich, Milan, Naples, Budapest, Frankfurt, Prague, and Dresden. In barely more than six months, these and other cities were rocked by rebellion, arguably the most temporally concentrated and spatially diffused outburst of insurrectionary activity that had ever been observed. It is reasonable to conjecture (although I have found it impossible to establish systematically) that the carriers of this epidemic of barricade construction included emigrant workers and intellectuals, whether because they were forced to leave France behind by the economic crisis of 1846–47 or were simply inspired by the February Revolution to bear the torch of democratic reform back to their homelands. But it also is clear that the outbreak of insurrection might be prompted by nothing more than the arrival of scattered news dispatches concerning events that had taken place in Paris or elsewhere. Barricades, which became a widespread and increasingly ritualized element in this wave of unrest, served as both an instrument and an index of the pan-European sense of solidarity that developed among proponents of democratic change.

By the start of the third stage, barricades were rapidly losing much of their purely military efficacy. Despite the victories of popular forces in the July Days and February Days, the 1830 introduction of cannons, and especially their unrestricted use against the domestic population during the June Days, marked the beginning of the end for the barricade as a strictly pragmatic tactic of insurrection. Where the government and its forces of social control were determined to resist insurrectionary challenges by such means, the result was inevitably the defeat of the insurgents. Moreover, army and militia commanders had learned the lessons of previous revolutions in which troops had immediately been dispersed to prevent the construction of barricades spread across the capital. This approach exposed the rank and file to appeals by insurgents and to the risk of being disarmed. Based on this experience, the June insurrection was allowed to develop more completely before troops were dispatched in massed units with orders to attack.

Yet the barricade did not disappear. Instead, its symbolic and sociological functions, which had always played a real if less visible role, came increasingly to the fore. The great barricades of the Commune were for the most part elaborate showpieces that did little to inhibit the invasion of the capital. Their primary contribution was to mobilize prospective combatants and reinforce the bonds of solidarity among them by expressing the participants’ sense of identification with the actions and values of generations of insurgents who had come before. In this way the barricade became as much a representation of the revolutionary tradition as an instrument of combat pure and simple.

CONCLUSION

While the construction and defense of barricades may lack the comprehensive character that would qualify it as a repertoire unto itself, it exhibits many of the attributes described by Tilly. Originating in France as an outgrowth of customary practices, barricades became a standard tactic to which participants in collective action had consistent recourse. From 1588 to 1968 the French have built barricades in each of the last five centuries. Yet during that time the technique of barricade construction not only has crossed national borders, but has violated the chronological boundaries that are supposed to separate the discrete repertoires that Tilly assigns to the period. Indeed, barricades are so broadly distributed that one is forced to conclude that they (like the insurrections with which they are so closely associated and unlike other forms of repertorial action) are non-period-specific.

On closer examination, the remarkable longevity of the barricade seems due in part to its ability to adapt in form and function as a response to a changing social context. The barricades of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were relatively modest, essentially defensive structures thrown up by small groups of neighbors drawn from a highly restricted local area. During the long nine-
state in France. When barricades returned in 1795, it was again at a moment when fiscal crisis and administrative disarray had opened the legitimacy and efficacy of the state to renewed question. The French Revolution ushered in a century so rich in political contention and attempted insurrections that the practice of barricade construction was nearly continuous in the experience of four successive generations. No fewer than eight different forms of government ruled France during this period. These changes produced an unprecedented level of violent social conflict right up until the 1870s, when the founding of the Third Republic brought a measure of political calm.

If one considers the history of collective action in France solely from the perspective of when barricades have been erected, then the periodizations of both Sewell and Tilly are wrong. Neither 1789 nor 1848 seems to mark a radical break in a pattern of barricade construction that stretches from 1588 to 1968. This apparent continuity makes it difficult to distinguish a clear watershed between sharply divergent styles of protest on the grounds of barricade use alone. Furthermore, the contention, advanced by Sewell and Tilly alike, that the insurrection is a strictly modern occurrence is even more difficult to sustain. In its nineteenth-century manifestation, it may well have possessed a distinctive potential for effecting social and political change, but this was mainly because such events were by then embedded within revolutionary movements (or benefited from structural conditions that were specific, in the European context, to the nineteenth century) rather than because of characteristics inherent to the urban insurrection.

But if we also consider qualitative changes in barricade use, then both Sewell and Tilly may claim some vindication. Consistent with Sewell’s dating, the revival of barricades during the French Revolution, after a 150-year absence, coincided with the new and enlarged role of the common people in the political and social affairs of the nation. This was indeed the moment when the attack on the corporate basis of Old Regime society, the rise of novel forms of organization, and the shift to a larger scale of collective action all began.

It also is true that 1848 was the year that most clearly confirmed the trends to which the French Revolution had pointed. In 1789 old and new styles were juxtaposed—the food riot alongside the public rally, attacks on the homes of factory owners alongside the birth of the modern political movement. By mid-century the newly dominant forms of collective action had largely displaced the old. Both the program and the activities of the republican and democratic-socialist movements of 1848 aimed at being, in Tilly’s terms, national and autonomous. From this point of view there is no necessary contradiction in Sewell seeing the French Revolution as the modern repertoire’s moment of origination and Tilly specifying 1848 as the point at which the transformation irreversibly took hold.

Perhaps more satisfying, however, is the alternative conceptualization offered in Goldstone’s examination of Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World. For him, the linearity of the dominant models of social change—from the classic formulations of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber to the more focused efforts of contemporary theorists such as Tilly and Sewell—is at odds with the empirical record. Goldstone (1991: 38–44) is struck by a remarkable global synchronicity in the great waves of social change that occurred during the seventeenth century and during the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. The first included not just the English Revolution but crises in Ottoman Turkey and Ming China. The second encompassed not just the French Revolution but further paroxysms in China, the Ottoman Empire, and Tokugawa Japan. From this perspective, patterns of large-scale social upheaval must be seen as worldwide in scope and cyclical in character. Their rhythms are tied to secular processes such as state-making, the expansion of the market economy, and demographic fluctuation. Only when a conjuncture among such forces takes place are its consequences felt on a global scale, but when such rare events occur, they need to be recognized and explained in their own terms rather than as part of a preordained, linear progression.

A thorough assessment of so ambitious and broad-ranging a thesis lies beyond the scope of this essay. Still, a remarkable convergence exists between the observed peaks of barricade use in France and the great waves of revolution and rebellion, in France and elsewhere, between 1500 and 1900. Moreover, the incidence of barricade construction suggests that rather than fitting a pattern of successive, discrete repertoires, barricades respond to long cycles of conjunctural social change.

The cycles in question do not, of course, produce simple repeti-
tions of what has gone before. The form and function of barricades are powerfully inflected by the social and historical context in which they arise. We have seen how their initially tactical, military utility receded in importance, and how an alternative set of organizational and mobilizational advantages increased in importance until, by the second half of the nineteenth century, the symbolic significance of barricades became the predominant reason for their continued use.

This dynamism explains why the barricade, which originated as a weapon in early-modern struggles against the centralizing state, could prove just as useful in waves of revolutionism two centuries later, and even in countercultural social movements like that of May 1968. In the process, what began as a uniquely Parisian tactic of resistance became first a French, then a European, and ultimately a global symbol of revolt. It is this facility for adaptation and assimilation across both temporal and cultural boundaries that explains how the barricade has succeeded in overcoming the period-specificity exhibited by many other forms of collective action and acquired its central place in a popular culture of insurgation that now spans the contemporary world.

NOTES

1 References to repertoires of collective action, explicit or otherwise, are scattered throughout Tilly’s writings. In assembling this overview, I have relied primarily on the following four sources, where the concept is discussed at length: Tilly (1977); Tilly and Tilly (1981: 13–25); Tilly (1986a); Tilly (1986b).

2 Under this definition, it is not clear that barricade-building properly qualifies as a repertoire unto itself. It would be logical to apply the term only to the complete array of alternative courses of action among which participants in collective action make knowing choices. In its practical application the concept has been used to designate activities, like the construction of barricades, to which rebels predictably resort, even when the behavior is actually part of a larger pattern like the urban insurrection.

3 See Tilly (1986a: 17).


5 In the earliest formulations, participants in the kinds of events that constitute the nineteenth-century repertoire were seen as adopting a more “pro-active” orientation, versus the essentially reactive stance that typified collective action in the eighteenth-century repertoire. Note, however, that the pro-active/reactive distinction used in Tilly’s original conceptualization of the repertoire disappeared by the late 1970s, although it persists in others’ appropriations of Tilly’s ideas.

6 On the nineteenth-century repertoire in France, see Tilly (1977: 25, 29); Tilly and Tilly (1981: 19); Tilly (1986a: 14, 36); and Tilly (1986b: 391).

7 To be more precise, barricades are said to have been used in Paris during the skirmishes that followed the pitched battle between the opposing armies of Condé and Turenne in July 1652, and again in 1657. For a variety of reasons— principally because they were used in conflicts between opposing armies rather than by irregular formations of civilian insurgents— these structures would not properly qualify as barricades in the sense employed here.

8 Independence is difficult to establish, and such independence would be relative at best, as the concept of repertoire implies. In the present context I have counted as a single occurrence all those incidents of barricade-building that may have taken place in scattered locales within a few days or weeks. Thus, the barricades of the July Days of 1830 or those erected under the Paris Commune have been treated as discrete and unitary events. It is, however, often impossible to demonstrate that such incidents were interconnected by mechanisms more concrete than imitation or the inspiration of example.

9 The 1827 rising is incorrectly treated as the first modern use of barricades by Duveau (1967), who also states categorically and erroneously that barricades were not used during the French Revolution. I sympathize wholeheartedly with Duveau for these lapses, since anyone reporting on what are intrinsically rare events taking place over long blocks of time in far-flung locations is unlikely to unearth them all. Invariably, it seems, when missing cases are finally uncovered, they contradict conclusions based on an incomplete subsample. In my attempts to make sense of patterns of barricade use, I have been forced to proceed as if I possessed complete information, relying on others to fill in the gaps in my knowledge. For the record, I am reasonably confident that my enumeration of events in Paris is comprehensive for the modern period, whereas my coverage of events in the rest of France remains spotty and my knowledge of events in other European countries is rudimentary.

10 Although there is little evidence that they actually exerted the intended influence, Blanqui’s treatises on the art of insurrection and explicit instructions on how to construct a barricade give evidence of this change in orientation.

11 While I have not made the barricades of nineteenth-century France a focus of my research, the details of May 1968 (another peak of collective action, and on a global scale) illustrate the extent to which the symbolic or representational aspects of barricade use had come to predominate by that time.

12 These governments were the Old Regime, the First Republic, the First Empire, the Restoration, the July Monarchy, the Second Republic, the Second Empire, and the Third Republic.

13 Although the Third Republic was relatively long-lived, the disappearance of barricades for the remainder of the century was likely due less to the new government’s inherent strength than to the opportunities that this more liberal regime created for pursuing alternative paths to political and social change.
I attempt to discuss some of the factors that created a period-specific potential for urban insurrections to capture national states in a forthcoming manuscript, “Capital Cities and Revolution.”

REFERENCES


The Roar of the Crowd:

MARC W. STEINBERG

ON FRIDAY, 9 MAY 1823, Thomas Wilson, M.P. for London, rose from the bench to present a petition to the Commons from the silk manufacturers of London and Westminster. The petitioners, among them the largest and most prosperous in the trade, requested the repeal of the Spitalfields Acts, laws passed in the late eighteenth century to placate rioting weavers. Among their clauses, the Acts prohibited the importation of foreign wrought silks, provided for minimum piece rates among the silk weavers in the London area, and authorized magisterial intervention in determining these rates (Bland et al. 1919: 547–51; Clapham 1916; Plummer 1972). To free traders these protective laws were the sorry relics of a previous era; to the manufacturers they were vexatious regulations that fettered their business. They objected to the Acts not only on economic grounds, but on political principles as well. The law, they argued, should not infringe on but protect their rights as English citizens to freely use their property, capital. As they stated, they wished to be exempted from the arbitrary, injurious, and impolitic enactment which prevents them, while they continue to reside in certain districts, from employing any portion of their

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