Book Reviews/Comptes rendu

Charles Tilly. *Credit and Blame*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 196 pp. $US 24.95 hardcover (978-0-691-13578-6)

Credit and Blame, the last of Tilly's books to appear in print before his death, could be read in relation to his *Why?* (2006), as it often discusses the same cases, or takes up problems left unresolved in the former book. Like *Why?, Credit and Blame* is not a "pure" social science book. Unlike the well known *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978) or *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (1995), it is more of a trade book hybrid allowing for many autobiographical elements. It is thus that one learns a great deal about the author's youth in Illinois, about his time spent in the military, or about his long-lasting passion for Francophone culture; all of it fascinating without being unproblematic, as we shall see.

Credit and Blame's main thesis starts from the question of "how people assign credit and blame for things that go right or wrong" (p. 3), and proposes that these assignations closely depend on the social context as much as they create such contexts. Credits and blames, rewards and punishments are not embedded in objective truths, but they are nonetheless permanent features of social life. They touch upon profound and sensitive realities since they always a) revolve around questions of justice; b) carry huge emotional loads; and c) encourage the formation of us/them boundaries. As Tilly puts it: "none of us escapes the urge to assign value — positive or negative — to other people's actions, as well as our own" (p. vii). How, then, are people able to translate this urge, this fervour into comprehensible words? The answer to this question has to do with the production of stories. Story telling is just as old as mankind; it simplifies complex knots of actions while allowing for partial judgments. On this, Tilly is close to authors like Abbott, Ricoeur, or White, for whom narratives are persistently moral while also often being political. Take the different accounts of what happened on September 11th 2001, for instance. From personal stories to official reports, all attempts to make sense of these events bundle together agency, responsibility, competence, and outcome: these people were negligent, those people were evildoers, etc. Conflicting interpretations share the need to activate what Tilly calls "justice detectors" (p. 36), meaning that if total or pure

justice is, in the end, out of reach, it is nevertheless possible for individuals to feel outraged about this factual impossibility.

Of course, not all moral evaluations are as dramatic as those related to 9/11, and this is why it is essential to analyze more positive situations involving crediting — Tilly's book is precisely designed to exhibit this back-and-forth movement between recognition and reprimand. In this business of crediting, nothing comes even close to the cultural magnitude of the Oscars. That big a prize seduces and forces people into one of these hostile tournaments that "offer spectacular rewards to a few highly visible winners, and stimulate excessive hopes among likely losers" (p. 69). The case of honours and promotions presents slightly different situations. It is now about "self-selected elites," being rewarded for having stayed out of trouble and, more often than anything, about reproducing the institution by reinforcing its us/them boundary. Credit thus structures social life even when we move closer to everyday life, in our relationships with friends, family, etc. One has to appreciate this sort of insight by Tilly, as it offers kind ways to bind the reader and the author in earnestness: "most of the time, most of us get our credit in … small ways" (p. 87).

Among the most remarkable findings of the book is the idea that blame is not credit turned upside down. In fact, Tilly would say that "blame resembles credit as an image in a funhouse mirror resembles the person standing before it" (p. 104). Blame games are more passionate, more clean-cut and salient in the way they try, among other things, to make the punishment fit the crime. The question then is not only about how people blame, but also about how they seek adequate compensation. Take the case of the value of dead children as analyzed by Viviana Zelizer and reassessed by Tilly. In today's America, children have become "priceless," hence explaining why courts usually fall short of finding their "true" monetary worth. What is five million dollars in such situation? No one can really tell and no one, for sure, wants to be put in the situation of having to take it. What is clear, however, is that in the case of dead children — as in other similar cases — people try to reinforce the us/them boundary with a good versus evil, sacred versus polluted moral one: we are the good victim, you are the bad assailant. Indeed, all of this has no real chance of arriving at a peaceful, once-and-for-all resolution, but it is the ongoing process that counts. According to Tilly, there is no reason for blaming blame itself; if it is sometimes purely destructive, it would also be important, in some other cases, to "salute just blame's creative destruction" (p. 119).

Towards the end, the book incorporates more discussions on politics and collective memory. Credit and blame are the means by which most

actors interpret the past, in general, and the nation's past, in particular. The value and meaning of history is the object of a constant conflict of interpretations among monument builders or advocates of competing accounts, politicians, military personnel, etc. In a move that resembles Carl Schmitt's friends/enemies distinction — Tilly would probably dispute this association — the book goes on to say that "war stimulates collective attributions of credit and blame more often than any other human activity" (p. 127). Again, it is all about us/them boundaries and the assignation of every moral value for one camp, and none for the other. Is this compatible with democracy? Tilly's conclusion should be read as an invitation to be "very careful when you call for the authorities to back up your assignments of credit and blame" (p. 151). Fundamentally, he calls for a defence of liberalism, which is a legitimate argument without being a full argument. By presenting so many small stories, the book is highly suggestive, but it does not provide a complete explanation of the politics of credit and blame. In the end, this is the critical limit of the book: it is impossible not to feel left with a hunger for more.

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