

Jan Kubik, UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies

Review of Sidney Tarrow's *The Language of Contention. Revolutions in Words, 1699-2012*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

When Sidney Tarrow published "Confessions of the Recovering Structuralist" in 2003 (revised, shorter version 2006), he signaled that the conceptual and theoretical revolution within an approach he helped to establish, *the political process research program*, entered its mature phase. The essence of this revolution, initiated by earlier *Dynamic of Contention* (co-written with Charles Tilly and Doug McAdam), was the move away from static, structuralist explanations of contentious politics toward an approach emphasizing the processual and interactive nature of the studied phenomena.

*Dynamic of Contention* was signaling yet another departure from the predominantly structuralist tenor of the earlier version of the theory – towards culture. For example, Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam talked now about the perception of opportunity, not just "objective" opportunity enshrined in the main concept of the theory – political opportunity structure (POS).

In *The Language of Contention. Revolution in Words, 1688-2012* Tarrow presents a program of studying arguably the most important layer of the cultural dimension of contentious politics: the words and phrases protesting people use to describe the manner of confrontation with their adversaries, often the governments and powerful elites. The book is about several major words (terms) that have been invented or adopted by protestors to label their actions.

But the book, full of characteristic Tarrowian vignettes from all periods and places, offers more. A theory, or at least a full-blown conceptual model, designed to show the significance of the linguistic dimension of contention, is presented in Chapter One. The basic idea is simple yet analytically powerful. A cultural frame of linguistic phrase (often just a term) becomes a potent symbolic weapon of protest when two conditions are met: (1) it is multivocal enough to “resonate” with the culture of as many groups as possible and (2) it is flexible enough to actually become a part of a culture other than the culture of origin. Terms or phrases that “travel” and become effective weapons of contention (for example by facilitating organizing) are called “modular.” To analyze how these two processes work Tarrow relies on his and his colleagues’ earlier work on brokerage and the mechanisms of diffusion. He also assumes that there are two logics behind people’s application of new terms: the logic of strategizing (how can I employ a given term to achieve advantage over my adversary?) and the logic of culture (to what degree am I constrained by the term’s cultural moorings?). None of these logics is prior or dominant; they rather work in a complex dialectical fashion influencing each other – an assumption (or conclusion) that I fully share. The chapter offers also a very useful review of several approaches to the study of the relationship between culture and politics.

In Chapter Two Tarrow offers a succinct history of several key revolutionary terms, such as: “revolution,” “convention,” “patriots,” and “terror/terrorism.” Chapter Three is about “words at work,” that is the words that refer to various forms of protest employed by workers. The word “boycott,” for example, comes from the name of certain Colonel Boycott who protected the interests of a landlord and as a result was subjected to ostracism. Most people around him refused to deal with him, they “boycotted him,” in a phrase that was

coined soon afterwards. Or take the word “sabotage.” It comes, as Tarrow tells the story, from an act of protest involving throwing a wooden shoe, “sabot,” at a machine using jacquard loom and thus perceived as “stealing” workers’ place of employment. The chapter provides also the story of such key terms as “strike,” “class,” and “working class,” relying partially on E.P. Thompson trail-blazing work on the role of culture in the formation of classes.

“Race and rights” are the topics of Chapter Four. Here Tarrow focuses mainly on the history of terms employed to refer to the descendants of African slaves in the US. It is a well-known, politically highly charged story, but Tarrow tells it well, providing a highly useful systematization and several gripping vignettes, including a broadly publicized incident involving famous black Harvard professor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. We get a quick overview of the changes in the terminology that are tightly intertwined with the politics of race in the United States, including a discussion of such prominent personalities as Martin Luther King Jr. and President Obama.

Chapter Five is about the language of gender. The concept of “birth control” and its political relevance are discussed first. “Male chauvinisms” and “sexual harassment” are scrutinized next and the chapter concludes with an excellent comparative analysis of differences in gender-related terminology and the way it plays in politics of the United States and Europe. In Chapter Six Tarrow delves into the conceptual minefield surrounding the issues of nationhood and citizenship. After a brief discussion of controversies over post-Yugoslav Macedonia, the bulk of analysis is focused on Israel. We get a quick reminder of major theorists, from Benedict Anderson to Tilly. The chapter’s main theme is the evolving meaning of citizenship across several contexts.

Love and hatred are the final two topics discussed in Chapter Seven. The relatively recent revival of thinking about these emotions in the literature on protest politics and social movements is briefly reviewed. Hate speech is illustrated with examples drawn from the rhetoric of the Hungarian right wing movement, Jobbik. The dominant theme is, however, marriage and emotions related to the extension of this institution to same sex unions. A very useful analysis of the complex relationship between love and hate follows.

This is an immensely rewarding book. It tackles the issues that are at the center of “cultural turn” in the study of contentious politics, as it provides a systematic overview of words people employ to explain to themselves and to others what it is they are doing when they are challenging power holders. Many of the linguistic discoveries will be truly eye-opening to many readers, as they were to this one. Who knows the story of Colonel Boycott? “Resonance” and “strategic modularity” are the key analytical terms that allow Tarrow distinguish between successful and unsuccessful cases of diffusion. His careful theorizing, centered on the analysis of a complex interplay of strategic and cultural logics, is right on target and will help both undergraduates and advanced researchers to sharpen their analyses of contention.