

The Eventfulness of Social Reproduction*

ADAM MOORE

University of California, Los Angeles

The work of William Sewell and Marshall Sahlins has led to a growing interest in recent years in events as a category of analysis and their role in the transformation of social structures. I argue that tying events solely to instances of significant structural transformation entails problematic theoretical assumptions about stability and change and produces a circumscribed field of events, undercutting the goal of developing an “eventful” account of social life. Social continuity is a state that is achieved just as much as are structural transformations, and events may be constitutive of processes of reproduction as well as change.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2007, I was conducting fieldwork in Mostar when the southern Bosnian city was rocked by two days of violence. It began on a Saturday night when up to 200 Croat and Bosniak youth clashed along the former wartime frontline in the center of the city, the Boulevard of the National Revolution.¹ When a small police patrol responded, several brawlers attacked them with rocks, driving them back and smashing two police vehicles before reinforcements arrived. Three participants were hospitalized—one with a severe knife wound to the neck—and a dozen arrested. The next day was the Derby, the annual football game between Zrinjski and Velež (the Croat- and Bosniak-supported teams in the city, respectively). Because of the threat of further violence, it was decided that Velež supporters were to be bused from *Stari Grad* (Old Town) in East Mostar to Bijeli Brijeg stadium in West Mostar, the Croat-dominated side of the city where the match was being held. Two police vans—one in front and one behind the line of buses—escorted the procession to the stadium a mere kilometer away. Meanwhile, hundreds of police wielding shields and batons lined the route through West Mostar (Figure 1).²

Despite these precautions, another incident erupted as youths emerged from cafés along the procession route and pelted the passing convoy with rocks and bottles while shouting “Zrinjski!” and “This is Croatia!” When riot police intervened with tear gas and armored vehicles to prevent them from physically reaching the buses, the rioters turned their fury toward the authorities, erecting impromptu blockades in the streets and stoning police vehicles and officers from a distance. Scattered confrontations between rioters and police in the streets continued into

*Address correspondence to: Adam Moore, Department of Geography, University of California, Los Angeles, 1255 Bunche Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90095. Tel.: 310-206-5976; E-mail: adam.moore@geog.ucla.edu. This research has been supported by fellowships from the Council for European Studies, International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), and the United States Institute of Peace.

¹Bosniak is the current preferred label of Bosnia’s Muslim population. It is often used to refer to anyone whose family is of Muslim background, though a significant number of Bosniaks are not religiously observant.

²Due to the large contingent of police deemed necessary for the Derby, extra forces were called in from other cantons and cities across the Federation, the mixed Croat-Bosniak entity in Bosnia.

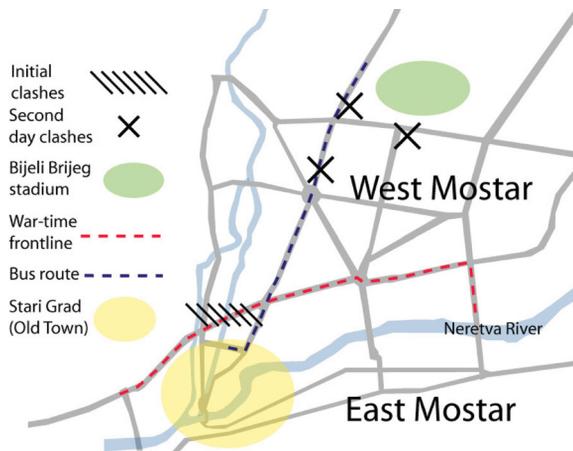


Figure 1. Violence in Mostar, November 2007.

the evening as shops were trashed, several more people hospitalized, and dozens arrested.

Mostar was one of the most diverse cities in Bosnia prior to the war in the 1990s. Despite—or perhaps more accurately because of—this, the city experienced some of the fiercest fighting, physical destruction, and ethnic cleansing in the country. By the end of the war, most ethnic Serbs had been expelled, the city’s famous *Stari Most* (Old Bridge) destroyed, and the town divided into Croat (West Mostar) and Bosniak (East Mostar) halves with a military frontline running through the center of the city.³ Following the war, the city was identified by international and local observers as a “trouble” town with high levels of ethnic tension and potential for renewed conflict. In the postwar period, it was singled out for special international peace-building attention. Despite resistance from local ethnonationalists, halting progress has been made in the past decade and a half: many families have returned to homes from which they were driven during the war, the *Stari Most* has been rebuilt, and the Bosniak and Croat halves of the city are now administratively unified. Nonetheless, ethnic tensions remain high, and the complex consociational political arrangement through which the two communities warily share power in the city is barely functional (International Crisis Group 2009). Mostar, in other words, remains a divided city.

The violence in Mostar was not completely without precedent. The previous summer a large fight broke out along the Boulevard following the Croatia-Brazil World Cup game.⁴ Yet, violent ethnic clashes on the scale of the Mostar incident had been relatively rare in the city in recent years. It is unclear what set off this violence, which is not a surprise: the proximate causes of outbursts of collective violence can be difficult to discern as narratives after such events are often messy and contradictory. For the purposes of this article, though, I am less interested in questions concerning cause—the “who,” “how,” and “why” of the violence—than exploring in more general terms the issue of effect—or the “so what?” question. That is,

³It is a common misconception that the Neretva River is the dividing line between the Bosniak and Croat majority sections of town. While this is true in the northern and southern stretches of Mostar, it is not the case in the city center.

⁴This clash erupted when youth from East Mostar began taunting fans from West Mostar who had supported Croatia, which lost the match.

of what importance were these incidents when viewed in the broader context of social relations in Mostar?

Certainly, riots and brawls are important phenomenon in their own right, not least because they can impact ethnic relations in profound ways (Horowitz 2003; Tilly 2003). But my question is directed at these particular occurrences of violence. Put simply: Were they mere “happenings” or, instead, socially significant “events?” The short answer I give is that they should be viewed as instances of the latter. Supporting this claim requires a broader theoretical examination of events, and conceptualizations of the relationship between events and structure, order and change, especially the accounts developed by William Sewell and Marshall Sahlins.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF EVENTS

Sidney Tarrow has recently observed that there are three broad approaches to utilizing events in sociological research (Tarrow forthcoming). First, events are treated as a unit of analysis in the contentious politics and social movement fields (McAdam and Sewell 2001). Indeed, “protest event analysis” has become a veritable cottage industry within the social movement literature (Koopmans and Rucht 2002). Protest event analysis studies are rarely concerned—theoretically or empirically—with the details of individual events, instead focusing on cycles of protest and mobilization in contentious politics (e.g., Beissinger 2002; Kriesi et al. 1995; McAdam 1999; Olzak 1992; Soule et al. 1999; Tarrow 1989). Such event history or “event counts” studies have typically treated events (and cycles of mobilization) as dependent variables, patterns of which are explainable by other factors such as political opportunity or organizational resources (della Porta 2008). Consequently, while a great deal of attention is given to methodological concerns such as defining, coding, and collecting data on events (e.g., Koopmans and Rucht 2002; Olzak 1989; Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992; Tilly 1978, 2002), comparatively less focus has been directed toward the “contingent features and causal significance of particular contentious events” (McAdam and Sewell 2001:101).⁵

The second approach Tarrow identifies is Charles Tilly’s “events in history” method, which is related to but also distinguishable from the above body of research—especially Tilly’s later work that moves away from an analysis of “thick N, thin data” catalogues of events and toward the exploration of “complex episodes in which these events are embedded” (Tarrow forthcoming:209). This shift from events to episodes of contention as the unit of analysis in turn directs attention toward the task of identifying specific combinations of contentious performances (repertoires) that repeatedly occur during episodes of contention and explaining how “contentious performances change incrementally as a result of accumulating experience and external constraints” (Tilly 2008:5; see also McAdam et al. 2001). For Tilly, then, events—or more precisely, shifting patterns of eventful collective contention over time—are the empirical building blocks of an interactionist research program focused on “examining streams of contention, the inner connections within them, and the responses to them of authorities” (Tarrow 2008:236).

Finally, recent interest in events *qua* events has been generated by the influential efforts of two scholars in particular: Marshall Sahlins and William Sewell. In the

⁵In recent years, social movement scholars (e.g., della Porta 2008; Hess and Martin 2006) have begun to take up McAdam and Sewell’s call for greater attention toward singular transformative events.

rest of this section, I focus on their innovative work, which provides a systematic theoretical grounding of events within the context of social structures and change.

As Sahlins notes, there exists a striking consensus across the social sciences and humanities that events are, and make, a difference. In his words, “what makes an act or incident an event is precisely its contrast to the going order of things, its disruption of that order” (Sahlins 1991:45). As this statement suggests, events are typically contrasted with structure; they are contingent, out of the ordinary happenings that transform social orders. This contrast between event and structure is deeply ingrained in modern academic thought. It provided the traditional basis for the division between history and the social sciences in universities, with the former focusing on narration of political events while the latter investigate underlying social structures (Sewell 2005:197).

This opposition was extended in a fractal manner (Abbott 2001a) within history by the Annales School, which developed an influential theoretical framework that constructed events as the antithesis of structure. Annales scholars strongly rejected the “evenemential history” of military battles, diplomatic negotiations, and political machinations, dismissing such events as “surface disturbances, the crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs” (Braudel 1972:21). In its place, they privileged slow-changing historical, material, and environmental structures as the key causal elements of their analytical narratives. In this way, the opposition between event and structure was constructed in highly unequal terms: events were epiphenomenal and fleeting while structures were the bedrock upon which society is grounded (Sahlins 1991).

Likewise for social scientists in the mid-twentieth century influenced by French structuralism, the mutually exclusive conceptualization of structure and events was also central—even as the relative power of two concepts was reversed as events destroyed long-standing social structures in traditional communities. As Sahlins observes about structural anthropology of the time:

For a certain anthropology, as for a certain history, as it seemed that “event” and “structure” could not occupy the same epistemological space. The event was conceived as antistructural, the structure as nullifying the event. (1991:38–39)

Casting structure and event as irreconcilable opposites entails significant theoretical predicaments, however. Foremost among them, it generates a concomitant chasm between stability and change. If structure and event are antithetical elements of social life, it is nearly impossible to construct plausible accounts that illustrate how events effect change in social structures, and in turn, how the outcomes of events are impacted by the structures they transform.

Sahlins’s solution to these dilemmas is to argue that structure and event are not mutually incompatible, but mutually dependent. Each provides the context through which the other becomes comprehensible. Therefore, an event can only be apprehended in relation to the cultural categories of an existing structure: “an event is not just a happening in the world; it is a *relation* between a certain happening and a given symbolic system” (1985:153, italics in original). Events are possible because the cultural categories that govern a society are continuously put at risk during social action. In most occurrences, the meanings of these cultural categories are not substantially altered, but reflected back into the system, leaving the relationships between them largely undisturbed. In contrast, an event produces breaches in the customs of a social order—in Sahlins’s terminology, “cultural categories acquire new

functional values” (1985:138)—thereby transforming the structure. In this way, events differ from uneventful social happenings that merely reproduce social order.

While an event is an incident that results in the transformation of a cultural system, it is in turn shaped by the terms of the structure it transforms:

An event becomes such as it is interpreted. Only as it is appropriated in and through the cultural scheme does it acquire an historical *significance*. (Sahlins 1985:xiv)

This means that the specific historical effects of an exogenous event—a foreign invasion or a natural disaster such as an earthquake—are determined less by the “objective properties” of the event than by “the way those properties are taken up in the culture in question, a way that is never the only one possible” (Sahlins 1991:43). By the same token, endogenous events of a similar kind—say, student protests or labor strikes—will have different consequences in different societies (1991:45).

William Sewell has taken up and further developed Sahlins’s theorization of the relationship between events and structure in a series of publications, culminating in the book *Logics of History* (2005), which encompasses and extends his thoughts on this subject. Following Sahlins, Sewell distinguishes between the uneventful happenings of ordinary social practices and relatively rare events that constitute structural “turning points”:

A historical event is (1) a ramified sequence of occurrences that (2) is recognized as notable by contemporaries, and that (3) results in a durable transformation of structures. (2005:228)

Sewell also concurs with Sahlins’s observation that structures are always potentially open to reformulation and change by creative and agency-possessing actors during social encounters. Finally, Sewell agrees with Sahlins’s observation that events are not *sui generis* phenomena with their own independent logic, but are fundamentally shaped by the very structures they transform. These foundations of Sahlins’s account he takes as the essential starting points for any theory of event (Sewell 2005:197–204).

Sewell’s extension of Sahlins’s theory of the event consists in the main of a critique and reformulation of the latter’s concept of structure (Sewell 2005:204–18). This may seem a paradoxical choice at first glance. But Sewell argues that Sahlins’s conceptualization of structure as singular and essentially symbolic is too rigid and constraining, thus complicating accounts of agency and change. The result is that it remains difficult to construct explanations of eventful changes that do not rely upon intersections of a specified cultural system with outside forces—as was the case with the momentous encounter of Captain Cook and Hawaiians that Sahlins (1985) principally relies upon to develop his theory of the event. Additionally, while it may be relatively easy to identify the culturally isolated, late-eighteenth-century Hawaiian society as a single, coherent structure, it is much more difficult to discern just where one social structure ends and the other begins in modern, plural societies.

Sewell proposes two modifications to the concept of structure.⁶ First, he argues that they are plural. Properly understood, structures should not be treated as singular attributes of societies, but “corresponding to spheres of social practice of varying

⁶These proposed modifications are derived from an earlier, influential article on the duality of structure Sewell wrote in 1992. This article is reprinted as Ch. 4 (pp. 124–51) in *Logics of History*.

scope that intertwine, overlap, and interpenetrate in space and time” (2005:206). This means that societies are sites of multiple, intersecting social structures that operate at different scales. Sewell identifies two theoretical benefits that flow from a plural view of structures. First, multiple structures “imply varying subjectivities, and hence the varying interests that figure so centrally in Sahlins’ account of events” (2005:212). Second, multiple structures, and the rubbing together and transposition of people and meanings across and among them, makes it easier to explain cultural creativity and the agency of individuals.

The second modification Sewell offers—drawing upon Anthony Giddens’s theory of structuration (1979, 1984)—is that structures should be defined not just as systems of symbolic meaning, but composed of both meaning and resources. That is, they are simultaneously both virtual cultural schemas and actual material resources. The co-constitution of schemas and resources—whereby each is an effect of the other—is what gives structures their dual character: “schemas and resources may properly be said to constitute *structures* only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time” (2005:137). It is also what makes them flexible and open to change by creative social actors who are “capable of applying a wide range of different and even incompatible schemas and have access to heterogeneous arrays of resources” (2005:140).

STRUCTURES AND EVENTS, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

That much of life consists of durable patterns of social practice and relations—structures—is a basic working hypothesis for most scholars in the social sciences. Despite this, the term structure is rarely precisely defined. As Sewell notes, “structure is less a precise concept than a kind of founding epistemic metaphor of social scientific—and scientific—discourse” (2005:125). One consequence of this taken-for-granted quality of the concept is that structures tend to be reified as independent “doing things” that shape social relations of their own accord, existing apart from, and impervious to, the strivings of human actors. The result is a conceptual dichotomy between structures and individual agency, and a tipping of the weight of causal explanation strongly toward the former at the expense of the latter. This in turn generates a second problem: it becomes difficult to explain change, in particular endogenous change, since structure implies continuity.

For both Sahlins and Sewell, articulating the relationship between structure and event represents an attempt to overcome these two dilemmas in social theory. They are successful to a degree, and there is much that is attractive and illuminating in their development of events as a theoretical concept. There are, however, several problematic entailments concerning social continuity and change involved in defining events in relation to structure. First, change is viewed as relatively rare and dramatic, lumpy rather than gradual:

When changes do take place, they are rarely smooth and linear in character; instead, changes tend to be clustered into relatively intense bursts. (Sewell 2005:226)

This is because while structures are in theory always put at risk during social action, the vast majority of deviations from the established order of things are quickly contained and immobilized by the reproductive pressures of structures:

Most ruptures are neutralized and reabsorbed into the preexisting structures in one way or another—they may, for example, be forcefully repressed, pointedly ignored, or explained away as exceptions . . . standard procedures and sanctions can usually repair the torn fabric of social practice. (Sewell 2005:227–28)

Structured social practices and relations, then, tend to remain intact until critical junctures in time, where they are subject to rapid and sharp change by “punctual and discontinuous” events (McAdam and Sewell 2001:102). In essence, this is the biological model of punctuated equilibrium applied to social life, a view that also found adherents in the new institutionalism literature at the end of the last century (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Krasner 1984, 1988). Social equilibrium is maintained by reproductive feedback loops that repair and reabsorb any ruptures to a given structure. This stasis is preserved until dramatic points of social evolution (punctuations/events) bring about a new nexus of social relations and practice, which is then stabilized by the equilibrium-inducing processes inherent in structures. As Charles Tilly has observed, this model can fuel “the temptation to let a few spectacular and well-documented conflicts dominate interpretations of change” (1998:65).

To be certain, change often appears to occur in rapid and intense bursts, a dramatic rupture of existing orders, as in the case of the French Revolution. But not all—or even most, I wager—change is of this kind, though it may seem to be due to the high visibility of historical events such as revolutions, wars, and natural disasters. In addition to punctuated structural transformations, social practices and relations are continually altered in subtle ways, and the incremental accumulation of these adjustments can result in significant social changes over time. Recent work by historical institutionalists provides useful insight into such gradual processes of change. Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen (2005), for example, have identified several types of incremental institutional change, three of which—drift, layering, and conversion—are worth highlighting in brief. Drift occurs when changes transpire in the “operation or effect of policies without significant changes in those policies’ structure.” This is primarily caused by “a shift in the social context of policies . . . with which existing programs are poorly equipped to grapple” (Hacker 2004:246). Layering consists of the addition of “new arrangements on top of preexisting structures” (Schickler 2001:15), which may “alter the overall trajectory of an institution’s development” (Thelen 2004:35). Conversion is a process in which “existing institutions are redirected to new purposes, driving changes in the roles they perform and/or the functions they serve” (Thelen 2003:226). Each of these three gradual processes involve incremental shifts, which nonetheless may produce transformative changes in existing social and political orders over time. As Thelen and Streecker argue, there is a need to account for such evolutionary transformations of social practices and relations in any comprehensive explanation of change—institutional or otherwise. Such an explanation, however, is not to be found in Sahlins and Sewell’s account of events and change.

A second problem with the theory of events developed by Sahlins and Sewell is that it only recognizes transformational social changes. That is, their model posits existing structure(s) of social relations, which are then transformed by an historical event into another distinct set of relations. While the new structure always retains elements of the previous order—as Sahlins reminds us—it is, nonetheless, a wholly different animal. What is missing in this conceptualization of structure and events is recognition of the importance of contextual variability and change that does not rise to the level of dramatic structural transformation. By this I mean the ebbs and flows

in the salience of social categories and practices across spatial and temporal contexts. Sewell's specification of structures as multiple, distinct, and existing at varying levels of society points in this direction as it opens up the possibility that actors will apply a variety of cultural schemas and resources—some operating in harmony and some in conflict—while traversing structural spheres (2005:140). But it does not allow us to account for the variable salience of a specific cultural schema, such as ethnicity, across time absent changes in relevant social structures. However, as Rogers Brubaker and others (Brubaker et al. 2004, 2006) have persuasively argued, the resonance of ethnic ways of seeing and acting is highly variable at the micro scale—shaped more by proximate situational cues than structural influences. Moreover, changes in the salience of specific cultural schemas are important social phenomena in their own right, especially as they often presage broader social change. Again Brubaker's observations about the variable power of ethnicity are useful. The crystallization of ethnic ways of thinking and acting is both the goal of, and a necessary condition for, the successful realization of political nationhood—a contingent event preceded by multiple nationalizing processes (Brubaker 1996).

In addition to these weaknesses in accounting for the dynamics of change, a theoretical framework that defines events in relation to structure also contains some troublesome assumptions about stability. First, it reinforces the view that stability is less something to be explained than assumed. To his credit, Sewell recognizes that stability is often treated as a relatively unproblematic state of affairs. As he remarks:

For most historians and social scientists, reproduction—what historians tend to call “continuity”—hardly requires explanation: we tend to posit a kind of generalized inertia in social life. (2005:272)

This observation about the tendency to take stability for granted in our explanations of social life occurs in a chapter in which he attempts to explain the continued accrual of economic privileges achieved by nineteenth-century dockworkers in Marseille in the face of contradictory changes in labor dynamics throughout France during the same period of time. He declares that one of the goals of the chapter is to “explore the problem of social reproduction in an environment of change” (2005:280). Hence, this example of continuity is seen as worthy of examination because it was an instance of social reproduction in the face of wrenching, countervailing changes in the broader society. The question of social stability *per se* does not seem to be an issue in need of explanation in its own right.

The assumption that much of social life actually does remain the same much of the time is, despite its apparent surface validity, also questionable. To begin, this belief is often based upon a rather foreshortened way of thinking about time and temporal processes (Pierson 2003). Andrew Abbott has observed that our primitive experience of temporality is derived from the “scraping” of social interaction and turn taking. Therefore, what matters when we think about temporality and change is not “how fast social change is occurring,” but “how fast it occurs *relative to* other things like the length of the life course” (2001b:238, italics in original). Indeed, our own life spans are intuitive measuring sticks, or “time horizons,” for evaluating social change and continuity. And to be sure, at this temporal scale much of the world (e.g., social institutions such as marriage and the family, and “entities” such as states and corporations) seems to be relatively stable—though much has also changed with each of these examples in recent decades! But when evaluated in the context of a

longer time horizon spanning generations or centuries the degree to which a variety of social practices and relations have changed is remarkable.

Another problem with the view that continuity is the essential order of things is that the apparent stability of social practices and relations is, in part, an artifact of our stories about the world, which inevitably simplify and flatten the messy complexity and variability of social experiences. As Paul Ricouer has observed, narratives create a “synthesis of the heterogeneous”; they construct “meaningful totalities out of scattered events” (1981:278). This is no less true of the narratives that we as social scientists create and utilize. Indeed, given the emphasis on creating generalizable typologies and explanations of social phenomena, it may be even a more salient concern since, “when a plot is set up as a type and given a name, there is a tendency to forget the definite, to cling to the definition” (Veyne 1984:119). As a result, we tend to paint a picture of the world in which stability and order is more prevalent than actually experienced; a world in which diverse actors and goals, unexpected occurrences and results, and seemingly disparate phenomena are seamlessly tied together and integrated into a coherent narrative.

To provide just one example of this phenomenon, it is useful to consider scholarly accounts of revolutionary events in nineteenth-century France. Sewell (1980), among others, has convincingly argued that the 1848 revolution in Paris was organized around the mobilization of labor identities. In his fascinating examination of the participation identity of insurgents in the 1871 Paris Commune, Robert Gould (1995) notes that analyses of that revolt have generally followed the script from 1848 in also emplotting into their narratives class as the fundamental axis of identity and resistance (cf. Harvey 1985). However, Gould convincingly demonstrates that this is a mistake as collective participation identity in the Commune was centered upon urban communities and neighborhoods rather than labor. It was, he argues, “much more a revolt of city dwellers against the French state than of workers against capitalism” (1995:4). Gould illustrates that this shift was related to profound social and physical changes in the character of Paris in the intervening decades caused by Baron Haussmann’s monumental urban renovation scheme. Consequently, rather than a case of enduring social continuity from 1848 to 1871, there was a great deal of change over the intervening decades that produced a significant difference in organization and motivation between the two events.

WHAT THEN OF EVENTS?

If, as I have argued, defining events in relation to structure entails certain problematic assumptions concerning social continuity and change, what then of the concept of events? One solution is to abandon it in favor of other analytical categories as practitioners of the *Annales* School originally advocated. This would be a mistake. The idea of an event conveys an important truth: that some happenings in the world stand apart from the ordinary flow of life and have greater significance than others. Events do, in this sense, make a difference. What is necessary, though, is to free our conceptualization of events from the erroneous theoretical straightjacket in which significance is defined solely in terms of transformational structural change. As Orlando Patterson has noted, “even those scholars who call for greater attention to events commit the serious error of defining them as sociohistorically important only when they are momentous” (2004:88–89). If stability is something that is effected just as much as is change—and I believe it is—there is no theoretical justification

for limiting events to the latter sphere of analysis because instances of both change and stability are significant. In this, I am in agreement with Sally Falk Moore, who argues that stability and change should be placed on the same empirical and theoretical plane:

A paradigm that postulates an existing symbolic system undervalues the continuous renewal needed by any ongoing system. The process of cultural maintenance and the process of cultural change should have comparable theoretical standing... A process approach does not proceed from the idea of a received order that is then changed. Process is simply a time-oriented perspective on both continuity and change. (1987:729)

There are good reasons for adopting instead such a processual or relational perspective on structure and events, continuity and change.⁷ Empirically, the assumption that social relations and practices are fundamentally stable in the absence of structurally transformative events is, as I have outlined above, flawed. Change is as likely to consist of gradual alterations in social practices and relations—such as the processes of drift, layering, and conversion identified by historical institutionalists—as sharp, punctuated disjunctures. At a theoretical level, a processual approach is capable of surmounting certain analytical dilemmas entailed by the substantialist ontology upon which Sewell and Sahlins's theory of events is grounded.⁸ For example, the difficulty in conceptualizing change outside of the problematic model of punctuated equilibrium dissolves if we assume that social "things" such as individuals, states, or structures are not durable, coherent entities but the outcome of relational processes.

From a processual point of view, all social entities are continually being reproduced, thus their disappearance or transformation is not surprising. This reverses Sewell and Sahlins's assumptions about change and continuity, specifying the former rather than the latter as the normal state of affairs. In Abbott's words:

The social world is constantly changing and reforming itself. To be sure, large parts of the social world reproduce themselves continually; much of it looks stable. But this is mere appearance. What transpires is reproduction, not endurance. (2001b:255)

Abbott goes on to observe that there are solid reasons for adopting this theoretical standpoint—most fundamental is the practical point that it is possible to explain instances of reproduction in the midst of perpetual social change, but quite difficult to explain change emerging from the perpetual stasis of stable social things. Additionally, this perspective entails a useful shift in the focus of research from processes

⁷According to Mustafa Emirbayer (1997), the fundamental theoretical dilemma confronting sociologists today is whether to conceptualize social life as consisting primarily of substances or processes. The first ("substantialist") perspective rests upon the assumption that "it is durable, coherent entities that constitute the legitimate starting points of all sociological inquiry" (1997:285), while the latter begins with dynamic unfolding relations or processes. While my reformulation of Sewell and Sahlins's theory of events proceeds from a processual or relational perspective, the aim here is not to rehearse broader theoretical critiques of substantialism. For that, see Abbott (2001b), Emirbayer (1997), Jackson and Nexon (1999), and Rescher (1996).

⁸Despite Sewell's repeated invocations of process, both he and Sahlins ground their theory of events upon a broadly substantialist ontology, in which stable entities or "things"—the social structures, cultural systems, and purposeful actors of their accounts—are the fundamental units of analysis upon which a theory of order and change is built. This view is reflected in Sewell's assertion that "a proper understanding of the role of events in history must be founded on a concept of structure" (2005:226).

of change toward those of stability and reproduction, which, as noted above, are typically assumed rather than explained. Lest there be any misunderstanding here, this does not mean that social change is something that should be taken for granted analytically. As with Tolstoy's unhappy families, each instance of change is unique in its own way. Therefore, understanding specific patterns and dynamic processes of social change remains an important focus of research.

To briefly sum up: life is far more fluid and heterogeneous than implied by Sahlin and Sewell's conceptualization of structure and events. It is a "continuously changing world that has macroscopic stabilities emerging throughout it" (Abbott 2001b:296). This means that structures—or what Abbott more aptly refers to as "macroscopic stabilities"—are social states that are achieved just as much as are structural transformations. Recognition of this fact places emphasis on the "maintenance work" necessary for the emergence and reproduction of stable social orders. A focus on social reproduction and maintenance work is not, of course, limited to processual theories of continuity and change. It is, for example, in addition to the dynamics of gradual change, a central concern of historical institutionalists of various stripes; and scholars as diverse as Anthony Giddens (1976, 1984) and Erving Goffman (1971) have explored the variety of forms of socially reproductive upkeep that exist.⁹ In advocating a processual approach to continuity and change and highlighting the contingent achievement of social reproduction, then, I am working in well-plowed ground. What *is* unique about the argument being made here is that events are also one such way in which social continuity may be cultivated.

SOCIAL DRAMA AND THE NARRATION OF VIOLENCE IN MOSTAR

At this point in the critique, there are two interrelated questions that flow from the claims I have advanced about events and structures, social change and continuity, which require further explanation: First, how can we distinguish events from ordinary occurrences if the former are no longer exclusively linked to instances of change? I agree with Sewell and Sahlin that it is necessary to be able to clearly distinguish events from everyday happenings if the concept is to have any useful theoretical meaning. But if structural transformation is no longer the primary criterion upon which significance is established, what makes events socially significant? The second question that logically follows is: How may events be constitutive of processes of social reproduction as well as change? In this section, I will attempt to sketch an answer to both questions at a general theoretical level, interspersed with observations from the violent events in Mostar.

In answering the first question, I find Victor Turner's (1974) processual theory of "social dramas" a useful orienting device offering insight into the ways in which events differ from quotidian occurrences. Turner argues that social dramas begin with breaches in everyday social practices and norms. When not quickly repaired or suppressed, these breaches widen and expand into social crises. Social crises, in Turner's account, are liminal junctures in space and time marked by suspense, uncertainty, and potential danger; they are possible turning points that stand apart from more or less routine phases of the social process. Following the emergence of crisis, redressive measures are brought to bear in order to generate a resolution of the conflict. Failure at this stage means regression to an even more polarized period

⁹For insightful reviews of the debates over reproduction and change in historical institutionalism, see Clemens and Cook (1999) and Mahoney and Thelen (2009).

of crisis, which may involve direct violence or endemic, smoldering confrontation. Alternatively, redressive measures may bring about the final phase leading to either social reintegration or recognition and legitimization of an irreparable social schism (1974:38–39).

Thinking about events as social dramas focuses our attention on a crucial aspect of events: their unsettling, liminal ambiguity. Unpredictable, potentially liberating, and threatening, events are affective moments in time, experientially significant in their own right. That this was the case for individuals who took part in the original brawl in Mostar, or those who were caught up in the attack on the bus caravan carrying fans to the soccer game the following day, is not difficult to imagine. But the various emotions generated by events are not limited solely to direct participants. Socially charged emotions spill out beyond the immediate temporal and spatial environs of the event as the affairs are retold, discussed, and interpreted by actors trying to make sense of the developments and gauge how their lives may be affected. Here, then, I am in agreement with Sewell's emphasis on the emotional intensity of events and the sense of danger or suspense that accompanies them (2005:248–50), a point that is echoed elsewhere in recent literature that explores the significance of emotions in relation to social movements and contentious politics (Aminzade and McAdam 2001; Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Flam and King 2005; Goodwin et al. 2001; Jasper 1998; Reed 2004).

On the afternoon of the Derby in Mostar, I was sitting with several acquaintances in a café near the wartime frontline. Everyone in the place was nervously discussing the ongoing events. Two men at my table who rejected ethnic labels—insisting that they were Bosnians or Yugoslavs, not Bosniaks—were waiting for the violence to subside so they could return to their reclaimed apartments in West Mostar. They were fearful of being targeted while walking the streets. Finally, one of them jumped up and exploded at a friend who had recently returned to Mostar from the United States: “See, this is why you never should have come back to this city! If you have anything here sell it—sell everything! And then get the hell out and never come back!” And then he stormed out of the café.

This conversation and outburst, which I witnessed, was not exceptional. In the days and weeks following the violence, tension in Mostar was palpable and the banal experience of ethnicity and difference became highly charged. Conversations with friends and acquaintances about social relations in the city that previously flowed freely in public settings such as restaurants, bars, parks, and streets tacked toward hushed conspiratorial exchanges or were restricted to the privacy of one's home. To be clear, the change was more one of salience—since the end of the war ethnicity has remained the chief framework through which social relations are organized and interpreted. But put in Brubaker's terms, the events precipitated a noticeable recrystallization of ethnic ways of acting and thinking in Mostar.

As the two men's worries in the café illustrate, the sharpening of ethnicity was tied to a “thickening of place” produced by the events, which generated a corresponding hardening of sociospatial relations in Mostar. That is, the violence reinforced not only a categorical, but also a spatial “boundary activation” (Tilly 2003), whereby the wartime frontline (the Boulevard) and respective social spaces (East and West Mostar) underwent a renewed process of ethnic polarization. As a group of students in Mostar explained to me a few weeks after the violence: “The wall is invisible, but yet sensible... We say the ‘other side’. Well what is the other side? If there is another side you have to cross through or over something to get there... The wall is there, I think it will be there forever.”

In the immediate aftermath of the violence, the act of crossing to the “other side” to shop or meet friends, or living on the “wrong” side of town, once again became potentially fraught with dangerous consequences in the forefront of many residents’ minds. Put another way, through the violent events these places attained a renewed semantic density in which ethnicity and geography are intimately fused. (Recall the chants shouted by Croat youth—“This is Croatia!”—while attempting to attack buses carrying Velež fans to the soccer game.)¹⁰

It should be clear from this account of the violence in Mostar that in addition to being liminal, highly emotional occurrences, events also stand apart and gain significance as they are discussed and incorporated in the narratives people construct about themselves and the social relations in which they are enmeshed. This observation fits with research in the past two decades by social scientists and historians who have moved beyond a narrow conceptualization of narratives as mere representational forms and have begun to investigate the ways in which stories constitute social relations and identities.¹¹ As Margaret Somers puts it,

all of us come to *be* who we *are* (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives. (1994:606, italics in original)

It is through the social acts of constructing, sharing, and rearticulating narratives, then, that people “place” themselves in social relationships embedded in space and time.

This is no less true of events as well. In this vein, I find it useful to return to Paul Ricouer, who has written extensively on the relationship between narrative and events. It is not possible to do justice to his vast and erudite writings in this limited space. Instead, I offer here just two brief excerpts that capture the essence of his views on the matter:

events are made *into* a story or—correlatively—a story is made *out* of events. The plot mediates between the event and story.... An event is not only an occurrence, something that happens, but a narrative component. (1991:4, italics in original)

and

The plot of a narrative... “grasps together” and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole. (1990:x)

There are for the purposes of my argument several interrelated points to take from these two quotes. First, it is through narratives that heterogeneous experiences are configured into an intelligible plot. Second, events are made comprehensible through their emplotment in narratives, which brings them together from the manifold of life into an understandable story. Third, events differ from mere occurrences in that they contribute to the progress of a narrative. They become, in effect, points in the

¹⁰For more on the semantic density of places, see Entrikin (1991).

¹¹The literature on narratives, storytelling, and social processes is much too vast to cover here. For sociological reviews, see Ewick and Silbey (1995), Orbuch (1997), Polletta (2006), and Somers (1994).

plot that either carry the story along a preexisting narrative arc or signal a change. In other words, they are not only experientially but also semantically significant happenings. Finally, it is through the social acts of narration and emplotment that this status accrues to experiences and events. In sum, socially narrated events are an integral part of processes of both order and change, actively making and remaking social relations and identities.

Social narratives are also a central concern for those working on collective memory and historical events. In Eviatar Zerubavel's words:

One of the most remarkable features of human memory is our ability to mentally transform essentially unstructured series of events into seemingly coherent historical narratives. (2003:13)¹²

Far from being static, collective narratives of historical events are frequently contested by particular interests and renarrated to serve contemporary purposes. Indeed, "the struggle for possession and interpretation of memory is rooted in the conflict and interplay among social, political and cultural interests and values in the present" (Thelen 1989:1127). Put another way, events are rather malleable and subjective in their significance and meaning due to their inherently narrative basis. As William Cronon notes, "'events' are themselves defined and delimited by the stories with which we configure them" (1992:1351). Likewise, the argument I make here is that the transformative or reproductive effect of specific events is shaped by how their eventfulness and significance comes to be interpreted, a dialectical process that is never predetermined (Ellingson 1995).

Returning then to Mostar, the violent events of November 2007 and how they were narrated served to reinvigorate ethnic tensions. The dominant narrative of the events was that they were emblematic of enduring ethnic division in Mostar. One newspaper's account of the events began: "Old passions, new unrest, injuries, destroyed property, and continued division and mistrust—the epilogue of two days of nationalist acts in Mostar" (Vasilj 2007). This was not the only possible interpretation. In their public responses, police and city officials tended to describe the participants in the violence as soccer hooligans. However, support for the two teams is so closely associated with ethnic identity that few in Mostar narrated the events as an outbreak of hooliganism. Instead, these local acts of violence were mapped onto a broader discourse of ethnic conflict in Bosnia and the city in which it was clear that this clash of rival fans was at root a fight between Croat and Bosniak youth. As an instance of ethnic violence—rather than mere hooliganism—the events served as warning for those who sought to carve out alternative ways of coexisting and identifying themselves. One social activist I interviewed stated that the reoccurrence of violence more than a decade after the end of the war made her despair, that "[s]ometimes I feel like I am the one who is out of place here. I am abnormal, and not this city."

Narrating the violence in Mostar in this way resonated with city residents, in part, due to rising political tensions at that time elsewhere in the city, state, and region. In particular, the imminent independence of Kosovo from Serbia and controversial political reforms imposed by the international High Representative, Miroslav Lajčak, in October had infuriated political elite in the Republika Srpska, the Serb-majority

¹²See also Halbwachs (1992), Olick (1999, 2007), Olick and Robbins (1998), and Zerubavel (1995).

entity in Bosnia.¹³ The entity's Prime Minister, Milorad Dodik, responded by threatening to end participation in the coalition government and withdraw Bosnian Serb officials from state institutions. This was a calculated and destabilizing threat as Bosnians of all backgrounds remembered that ethnic Serbs quit state institutions on the eve of the outbreak of the last war in 1992. At the time, rumors were also circulating that the Republika Srpska was secretly printing ballots for a referendum on secession from Bosnia, an action not permitted by the terms of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which established Bosnia's current political structures. Additionally, only days before the violence in Mostar, the commanding general of the remaining European Union peacekeeping forces (EUFOR) in the country stated in an interview with a local newspaper that the EU would be ready to intervene if another war were to break out in Bosnia (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network 2007). After months of escalating nationalist rhetoric by leading political figures in Bosnia, his comments did little to reassure a jittery public. Combined with the fallout from the interview, the events in Mostar triggered fears of further violence. All of a sudden, what had been largely dismissed or absent from public discussions—the distinct possibility of the return of war in Bosnia—began to be talked about openly in bars, coffee shops, and public gatherings in the city.

These responses to the violent events in Mostar are striking when set in contrast to certain developments in the city over the previous half decade. As noted above, many families have returned to their prewar homes. New shopping centers catering to all residents irrespective of ethnicity have opened across the city. And, public institutions such as the police, high school, and municipal government have been administratively unified (though in practice ethnic parallelism is still widespread). In other words, certain of the institutional and social bases of ethnic division that previously performed the bulk of socially reproductive “maintenance work” have weakened in recent years. To be clear, these developments did not precipitate a fundamental change in social relations, there was no widespread categorical boundary “deactivation.” Since the end of the war, ethnicity has remained the chief framework through which social life is organized and interpreted in the city. But cracks in the façade were beginning to show, opening up space—if only partially—for people to consider the possibility of alternative forms of social identification and association.

Given this it can be argued that the violence had either transformative or reproductive effects. For example, if one takes a more temporally bounded view, the clashes disrupted a slow but perceptible decline in the division of cultural and political life into one of two antagonistic, all-encompassing, social categories—that of Croat or Bosniak identity. On the other hand, within a longer temporal frame, they have been socially reproductive: at a key juncture in time, they reinforced the salience of ethnic division, foreclosing the possibility of a fundamental shift in social relations. Thus, depending on the preferred temporal framework or the pre-existing social patterns one focuses on, there is a certain ambiguity or duality to events.

How, then, should we view the events in Mostar? Consistent with the narratological approach developed here, I believe that the proper starting point is the social narratives constructed by the city's residents in the aftermath of the violence. What is most striking is that the clashes were almost without exception narrated in expansive temporal terms. Thus, the pessimistic interpretation of the violence as ethnic

¹³Mostar is located in Bosnia's other entity, the Croat-Bosniak Federation.

in nature was yoked to preexisting narratives about the inevitable, cyclical nature of nationalist conflict in Bosnia, narratives that are commonly expressed by assertions such as: “there is a war here every 50 years.” Emplotted into this narrative framework, the violent events in Mostar were specters of ethnic conflict past and future, proof that attempts to return to a multiethnic way of living that existed before the war would be futile, or possibly even dangerous. Therefore, it was safer to limit socialization to one’s own ethnic community. In this context, one university student observed: “Sure, we might go over to the side, because the girls are new and interesting. Maybe even have a relationship. But nothing serious, because we all know what happened to mixed marriages in the last war.”

Rather than interpreted as turning points, then, the events were overwhelmingly characterized as reflecting inertial social trajectories (Abbott 1997).¹⁴ Put in the language of the theory of narrative and events developed by Ricoeur, the experience and emplotment of the violence as part of an enduring pattern of ethnic conflict contributed to the continuation of the preexisting story, the arc of which may have been ripe for alteration given a different narration of the events.

As discussed above according to Sewell, localized ruptures in the normal course of social life are fairly common. However, in most cases they are quickly repressed, ignored, or explained away and thus reabsorbed into preexisting structures. When this does not occur, ruptures may spiral into historically transformative events. Yet as this case illustrates, this is a somewhat narrow understanding of the social potential of out of the ordinary happenings. Though the violent clashes recounted here were undoubtedly ruptures according to Sewell’s criteria—“a surprising break with routine practice” (2005:227)—the overwhelming response to them was neither repressive nor dismissive. Rather, the narrative reaction was that they illustrated the pervasive power of ethnic division in Mostar, despite the gradual institutional integration of the city in the previous decade. Narrated in this way, the events served to reinforce rather than threaten an existing social order. One can think of lynching events in the Jim Crow South as serving a similar function in helping to maintain a repressive racial hierarchy that rested upon less comprehensive institutional foundations than the antebellum era (Tolnay and Beck 1992; Griffin 1993). Another example of a socially reproductive rupture, as Patterson (2007:1288) observes, is Nat Turner’s 1831 slave rebellion that ultimately ended up reinforcing an existing social order—Virginia’s slave system—which was in danger of being abolished by the state legislature.

The events’ implication in the reproduction of Mostar’s ethnic order was not a preordained matter. As Sahlins notes, cultural categories are always put at risk in social action. Had residents in Mostar responded to them in other ways—narrating the events as soccer hooliganism rather than examples of enduring ethnic conflict or mobilizing large rallies to protest the reoccurrence of violence in the city, for example—their effects might have differed. Experiential and semantic significance, in other words, are inextricably linked in events. Significance does not adhere to the events alone, but how they are experienced and emplotted into broader social narratives.

¹⁴As Abbott observes, “what make trajectories trajectories is their inertial quality, their quality of enduring large amounts of minor variation without any appreciable change in overall direction or regime” (1997:93).

CONCLUSION

Events, the historian Paul Veyne notes, “have no natural unity; one cannot . . . cut them according to their true joints, because they have none” (1984:37). This observation reminds us that identifying eventful moments in time is no simple task and thus it is wise to be circumspect when conceptualizing events. While mindful of the admonition, I nonetheless believe that the way in which Sahlins and Sewell “cut” events, linking them solely to instances of significant structural transformation, has produced a highly circumscribed field of events, thus undercutting their professed goal of creating an eventful account of social life. The theory of events presented here is more expansive than their theoretical framework in that it does not subscribe to the assumption that eventfulness is restricted to relatively few, structurally transformative Historical Events (written with a capital H and capital E) such as the French Revolution. In contrast, I contend that events are as likely to be constitutive of the reproduction of social relations as their disruption. Additionally, the impact of eventful happenings may be more local in scope, as was the case with the violent clashes in Mostar. A corollary of this last point is that events may have important effects upon a particular community without significantly transforming social relations on a wider scale (e.g., della Porta 2008).

On the other hand, I find it useful to view events in more bounded temporal terms. The structurally transformative events stressed by Sahlins and Sewell are more often than not made up of multiple, “smaller” events that have been yoked together through narrative emplotment in ways that no longer reflect back upon preexisting practices and cultural schemas. Instead, responses to them build upon each other in mutually destabilizing ways, eventually producing a transformation of social relations. Thus, the French Revolution is not, properly speaking, a singular event, but the outcome of a series of narratively enchainned events that unfolded over a relatively extended period of time. In essence, I am advocating an expansion of the spatial terrain of events (insisting that they may be micro and meso as well as macro in extent), while constricting the temporal scale. In both cases, this move expands the potential number of eventful occurrences in the world beyond that recognized by Sewell and Sahlins’s theory of events. This approach toward events may also allow us to better disaggregate and understand the unfolding of gradual macro-social processes such as democratization, nationalization, industrialization, and deindustrialization (Pierson 2003), which are shaped by the accumulation of short-term, more or less locally salient, events.¹⁵

To return to the two questions posed at the beginning of the previous section, I have attempted to demonstrate that affect and narrative provide a solid basis upon which it is possible to distinguish eventful from ordinary happenings. In part, this claim flows from the basic observation that not all experiences are similar in perceived meaning and importance. Much of life is filled with undramatic occurrences that do not trigger emotional responses or provide the material out of which we narrate our social relations. As distinctive social dramas that are emplotted in the stories we tell about ourselves and others, events stand apart from this ordinary background of life. This way of conceptualizing events stands in clear contrast with Sewell and Sahlins, who base their distinction upon analytically defined outcomes—structural transformations—rather than social experience and narration, where I think they can be more properly grounded. It acknowledges the fact that the eventfulness of

¹⁵I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this observation.

an occurrence is, like the experience of ethnicity, variable across space, time, and individual experience. Thus, while the violence in Mostar was, for most living in the town, an eventful happening, it should be no surprise that it did not necessarily register as such in Bosnia's capital, Sarajevo.

As for the second question, the violent clashes in Mostar illustrate that the eventfulness of life can be found in instances of social reproduction as well as change. There is no necessary relationship between events and these two processes. Some may recognize that my analysis of the ethnic identity crystallizing effects of violence in Mostar echoes classic sociological explanations about the role that social conflict plays in the production and maintenance of group cohesion and identity (e.g., Coser 1956; Simmel 1955). Eventful social conflict is without a doubt a key way in which social identities and solidarities may be formed and maintained. But to be clear, this is not necessarily the only manner in which social reproduction can be eventful. As Simmel observed about processes of sociation, "society certainly is not a 'substance,' nothing concrete, but an event" (1950:11).

All theoretical frameworks parse the social world in particular ways. In this article, I have presented a theory of events that rests upon processual assumptions that change rather than stasis is the normal state of affairs. The social world is a world in flux. Therefore, the state of stability—or more accurately, reproduction—is just as much an achievement as are instances of transformation. Social continuity, in other words, requires continuous "maintenance work" and cultivation, and events are one of the many forms of reproductive upkeep that exist. This approach acknowledges that events may be constitutive of both social transformation and reproduction. Events are, of course, only one way in which social relations are maintained. As Abbott has observed, a proper processual theory of social life requires a more fully fleshed out account of reproduction, stability and "entity-ness" (2001b:255). Such a task is beyond the scope of this article. The hope, though, is that this account of events constitutes a useful contribution to some of these theoretical problems.

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