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Theorizing contingency

> In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers . . . After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story.
>
> (Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*, p. 86)

> God Himself probably preferred to speak of His world in the subjunctive of possibility . . . for God creates the world and thinks while He is at it that it could just as well be done differently.
>
> (Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, p. 14)

> The grammarian's activity could not in itself be considered autonomous but must be seen as an aspect of an investigation conducted on two fronts, one of enunciation and one of observation. Grammar then presents itself as a theory of the event in its evolution.
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> (Ferdinand Gonseth, *Time and Method*, p. 106)

Imagine that your life is like being on a train and looking out the window. Things fly past – houses, back yards, factories, forests, train stations, people on platforms, people in cars on the highway. Sometimes, though rarely, you catch the eye of a child playing in a yard or a motorist in a car. And then you are gone. What can you say about all of this stuff which is, for you, doubly in movement? Everything moves in its own right (motility, gesture, bodily functions, growth, reproduction, death), and everything moves before your eyes as the train of your life, flinging up one snapshot of reality after another, hurtles on to its destination. Might not one say that the whole project of sociology is to account theoretically for the contingent patterns and shapes of this mutable and mutating social stuff of life – life as a speeding train with windows, Leibniz's monads on parallel tracks? Certainly the

sociological preoccupation with cause and effect, where sequenced and predictable effects are tracked from their causes, seems to point in that direction. And yet, causality seems to imply a process that moves toward a stationary end point, that which is, or will be, given. Further, much of sociology, at least, has set a goal of identifying more overarching general patterns and hypothesizing laws – at both the macro and the micro levels.

So what does it mean to genuinely theorize contingency, to even want to theorize about what happens when things could literally go one way or another, when the station platform moves away as you approach it? In some sense, this is the opposite of what both the comparative-historical sociologists and the ethnomethodologists have, at their chosen levels of analysis, set out to do, that being to theorize the emergence of order, or regularity, and shared meaning. It also differs from these other approaches in aiming its illuminating light at what I call the "midro" life of the analytic object, that level where macro structure and micro interaction are *both* "in the picture." One might think here about a multiconstituency "event" as the characteristic object of analysis.[1] As well, such a project differs from the current preoccupations with trying to decipher patterns in apparent chaos, as theorists of chaos in physics, biology, and psychology, among other disciplines, are doing, though it shares with them the desire to keep up with that which is emerging out of the past into the present. Finally, and perhaps unusually, the emphasis is *not* on predicting the outcomes of contingent action (though outcomes are not irrelevant). The *focus* is rather on charting or describing the coming together of diverse elements, individuals, institutions, and languages, in a moment of action and interaction. It is the charting of a process in the present.

My goal is to theorize these moments – the moments just before and as a social interaction takes its definitive form. This is very difficult. How do you look head-on at something that is process, movement, fluid provisionality? To theorize contingency means to highlight rather than bracket the insight that reality is a moving target and that theory has to keep moving to try and keep up with it.

Probability theory may hold a clue here, but not in the way that it is normally invoked. Charles Sanders Peirce's insight that probability really applies to series of events, rather than to individual events provides an image of probability calculus chasing after a phantom, for example, chasing that which "could" but never actually does happen. For once happening, an event is no longer probable or, in the term significant here, contingent. It is momentarily in the shining light of the seemingly inevitable present tense, before slipping away into the past. So in a way, probability statements are masquerading as statements in and for the (near) future

tense but are really assertions of a subjunctive or conditional mood. Probability statements in themselves refer to that which could happen (thus the conditional). If one adds a notion of contingent causality to such statements, the grammatical frame is the subjunctive (if x were to occur, then y would happen). Probability statements thus hover above reality, creating their own reality which is simultaneously both correct and in error. Probability statements never make contact with reality or – what may be the same thing – only in the long run, when, applied as it is to a series, the discrete event has long since come and gone. Contingency then, understood in this subjunctive, probabilistic way, traffics in hypothetical, merely imaginary worlds. That is its beauty and what makes it so elusive.

Indeed, perhaps there is a clue to be found in these heuristic characterizations of the grammatical tense or mood of the event. There may simply be no point to thinking about the contingent present – better to think about these moments as operating in and with the subjunctive mood. In this way, uncertainty, provisionality, a tentative quality is smuggled into our understanding of social interaction. Some languages, Italian is one, have baroquely well-developed subjunctive tenses, some, such as English, merely have a subjunctive mood – so maybe that is what I am aiming for – a theory of contingency as *action in the subjunctive mood*.

How is *action in the subjunctive mood* to be approached? The subjunctive is a subjective world in which strong emotions (statements of superlatives), uncertainty, and ambiguity are foregrounded. In his book, *Shakespearean Pragmatism*, Lars Engle writes that "*plays and poems* may be more suitable in some ways for the central pragmatic and economic enterprise of delivering finely tuned pictures of social operation and social change than is theoretical debate . . . in which there are always winners and losers."[2] As well, Michael André Bernstein's book, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, elaborates its theory of sideshadowing techniques in fictional works such as novels, where the reader is moved to contemplate hypothetical, if generally unrealized, counterlives for the resident characters. Thus, we can profitably turn to the general frame of narrative in our project to understand social contingency, where the theorists of narrativity, authors of fiction, and directors of film have variably circled around this contingency problematic. The manners in which film directors, for example, have grounded the contingency issue in the plots of their films have inspired me to situate my own preoccupation more precisely. Thus, it is important to show how alternative dramaturgic approaches to contingency focus on diverse aspects of actors, events, and their causal ramifications.

One approach is best exemplified by the famous Kurosawa film *Rashomon*. This is the *retrospective interpretation* approach, looking at

what Umberto Eco would call the diagnostic signs (signs moving from effects to causes). A violent event has occurred at a previous point in time. A man, his wife, a bandit, a murder. Various narrators, dead and alive, all invested in the event, present variable interpretations that reveal different realities, different stories of the *same* event. Characters and actions are moved about, positioned, and repositioned to highlight blame and guilt. While it's not true to say that in these retrospective theoretical dilemmas there is nothing at stake (certainly different interpretations will lead to different individual fates), it is also true that there is a finished quality to the event itself. It remains in the past and the focus has shifted to how it will reverberate into the future.

Alternatively, Krzysztof Kieslowski (the Polish film director famous for his *Red*, *White*, and *Blue* trilogy), has taken a *prospective*, or prognostic approach (moving with the cause to the possible effects) to what I'm calling the subjunctive problematic in his 1982 film, *Blind Chance*. Here, a young man is revealed to have three different alternate fates depending on whether or not he happens to catch a specific train. Will he become a Polish Communist Party hack, an activist in the underground Flying University publishing industry, or a play-it-safe doctor at a respectable medical academy? His various stories are like alternative narrative threads that are drawn out and examined. Time is an important dimension here, the protagonist catching or not catching the train with its inexorable schedule, the resultant narrative threads unwinding over a period of years. But I don't think time is the central philosophical preoccupation. Action is rather the hinge, the point at which past, present, and future align and realign in a variety of ways. Yet while Kieslowski's film gets us closer to that moment of contingency, with the pressure that it puts on the act of catching the train, it doesn't linger there. The man either catches the train or he doesn't. In one of the three possible lives, the hero responds to another character's assertion that life "isn't wholly a matter of chance," with the statement, "Sometimes I think it is."[3]

Sociologists haven't wanted to deal with chance or luck, according to Marc Granovetter, in his book *Getting a Job*. And indeed, it is hard to know what to do with chance theoretically other than to relegate it to some statistical purgatory. But contingency seems to me to be fairly close to chance, and a bit more amenable to theoretical analysis. So the question becomes, how is it possible to linger on the contingent quality of moments of action? Kurosawa and Kieslowski delicately examine the hinge quality of contingency by drawing out its repercussions. But I would like to approach contingency without either placing that moment (somewhat) safely in the past or barreling through that moment as you speed into the future to see how it

plays out. The question becomes: is it possible to theorize what exactly happens during those moments when "fate hangs in the balance?" People move and gesture, and words are said so quickly. And there we are already in the future as the present falls over itself to get there over and over again. We simply do not usually have the liberty of slowing things down or freezing the frame to examine each transient moment and to link these moments theoretically to those that have come before or those that will come after. And besides, we never have the liberty, or luxury, of reliving a conversation or interaction, of seeing how it might have turned out differently . . . if only . . .

Reality, unlike films and novels, only provides us with gross approximations of those idealized visions of Kurosawa and Kieslowski, where alternative trajectories can be either retrospectively or prospectively lingered over. Bernstein's "sideshadowing" approach, specifically as he develops it within the context of literature about the Holocaust, aims to stick it out in the ongoingness of events. It's a bold and difficult task: simultaneously to acknowledge a (tragic) reality and to imagine its alternative. As he writes: "Rather than casting doubt on the event-ness of history, sideshadowing helps us to reckon the human cost of an occurrence by reminding us of all that its coming-into-existence made impossible. The nonlives of the sideshadowed events that never happened are a part of the emotional/intellectual legacy and aura of each actually occurring event . . ."[4]

Yet still, the events configured by the novelists analyzed reside resolutely in the past. The question is whether there is both an event that is self-conscious enough about its own contingent quality (leaning, as it were, on its contingency) and an analytical strategy for gainsaying such an event whereby the area illumined is precisely that space between the probability and the reality? In the aim of meeting this challenge, my approach to theorizing contingency has led me to focus on a very particular and decidedly contingent event, the standoff.

The standoff as an exemplar of contingency

At some level, it is ironic to indicate the standoff as the situation best suited to analyzing contingency. The standoff may be viewed as a frozen moment, where the mechanisms and processes of social interaction have ceased to function in their usual predictable and elastic way. They are neither the normal "structure" nor the periodic, but necessary "antistructure" in Victor Turner's terms. They are a heightened form of structure, frozen in the way that histological sections placed on a slide are, and, simultaneously, in the manner of live cell samples, engaging in their own forms of movement, threatening to slide off the social microscope. Participants in standoffs

usually spend a good deal of time just waiting, waiting to see what the "enemy" will do. The basic social parameters of time, day and night, weekday and weekend (systematically analyzed by Eviatar Zerubavel in his works on the social construction of temporal boundaries), diminish their hold on the situation. Thus while we normally associate contingency with fluidity, I need to conjure up a different image of it, an image more bumpy and prone to stops and starts, both frozen and leaking at the same time.

But is a standoff – cops behind the rock , robbers in the hideout is a stereotypical image – just too eccentric a social situation to focus on for studying social processes that are relentlessly and continuously at work in all interactions? Standoffs, with their attendant expectations and dramatic denouements are interesting enough in their own right. But I would submit a larger claim – one that draws standoffs squarely into the ambit of social life more generally. In other words, I'd like to make that claim that most of social life can be understood as avoidance of standoffs and that there's something of the standoff lurking, contingently, behind every social situation. I'm trying to capture those things that contingently turn exchanges into standoffs.

Surely, we all have an image of what a standoff is, who the characters are, and even what is supposed to happen (someone is supposed to win and someone lose). Of course, history is replete with standoffs, the legendary case of Masada is a well-known example and in more recent historical time, that between US Federal Troops and John Brown and his fellows at the Harpers Ferry Federal Arsenal, is similarly famous. Certainly, we, in the United States, have been beset by such standoffs in the recent past. The following have figured prominently and will form the empirical basis for the analysis of this book. They are: Wounded Knee in 1973, MOVE in Philadelphia in 1985, the Randall Weaver family in Ruby Ridge, Idaho in 1992, the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas in 1993, the Freemen of Montana in 1996, and the Republic of Texas in 1997. The details of these cases will be presented at the end of this chapter.

Other countries also experience their own standoffs: the recent occupation of the Japanese Ambassador's house in Lima, Peru by the indigenous group Tupac Amaru is a case in point. This standoff will also be examined in detail as it provides an interesting exogenous case with some similarities and some differences from those occurring in the United States. Despite their cultural and political differences, for all of these it is clear that the image of antagonists frozen in their opposition to each other is a first approximation of an adequate description of the situation. But can we conjure a different understanding of standoffs,[5] one that may provide the analytical leverage to concentrate on the contingent and provisional

interactions that take place during its occurrence rather than on who wins and who loses? Can we assay a standoff in terms of its own subjunctivity?

The standoff as a conflict of meaning

> Senator Kohl: And [Randall Weaver] is right in terms of fact. He is not a major firearms dealer. You are suggesting that he could have become but he was not. And you were in control of that whole operation to have made it, in fact, the case . . .
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> Mr. Byerly: There were only two firearms which were received by ATF, that is correct.
>
> Sen. Kohl: I mean the rest is possibility, maybe, could have, did not happen, dispute over the price, but it did not happen. (The Federal Raid on Ruby Ridge, Hearings – Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, questioning by Senator Kohl of ATF Special Agent Herb Byerly regarding whether Randy Weaver was a big-time gun dealer, p. 110.)

> Our sense of the completeness of a form, in other words, often depends upon a class of forms with which we identify it. We will know that a sonnet is complete as such only if we know what sonnets are. (Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Poetic Closure*, pp. 26–27.)

Let me begin by provisionally defining what I mean by a standoff. Stand-offs are situations of mutual and symmetrical threat, wherein the central parties face each other, literally and figuratively, across some key divide. Stand-offs engage committed adversaries in a frozen and exposed moment of interaction. Everything is placed in high relief – actions and reactions, language, gestures, behaviors. The moment is framed, often literally, in that a space of the standoff is, if possible, located and cordoned off. As well, temporal parameters are anticipated, cordoning off the period of the standoff in time, as X number of days are designated for waiting or negotiating or whatever.

A standoff may be viewed as the "eye of the storm" of a conflict in two ways. First, this image suggests the idea of calm before, during, or after a storm. This calm exists as a stalled moment of violence – a waiting, a holding until something happens. Alternatively it can come after an initial act of violence and places the reaction to that act in abeyance – it holds off the reaction. The second way in which the standoff is the "*eye* of the storm" is in the sense of vision, of revelation, of shedding some light on a situation that has temporarily been frozen fast.

A paradox of the standoff is that while all participants have committed themselves to the situation (with highly variable degrees of freedom), they have, in a profound sense, committed themselves to *different* situations. They

have taken their "stands," that is positioned themselves around some set of issues. And their definitions of the situation are usually diametrically opposed. Institutions of law and politics and organizations of law enforcement attempt to appropriate the standoff with preferred categories of assessment and control. The antagonist is alternately terrorist, cultist, fanatic, fundamentalist, or (as in the case of the long-running metaphorical standoff with the Unabomber) just plain old serial killer. Antistate groups, as well, have their own rigid and reified categories of identity and reality with which they operate. Thus the standoff is often as much about clashes of categorical imperatives as they are clashes of individuals and groups.

This conflict of meanings, at the levels of both cognition and experience of the participants, is what freezes the action. What needs to happen, at its most basic, is a restructuring of the situation so that there is some, however small, place of overlap between the definitions of the situation on the parts of the adversaries – to get a wedge into the frozen moment. (This is my own strong sense of what needs to happen; obviously others will define their goals differently – for example, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms might say, at least before the Congressional hearings on the Waco disaster, that their goal was to arrest David Koresh.) I believe that my articulation of a goal is in accord with George Herbert Mead's notion of the relation of truth and the world: "Truth emerges in the process of experimental activity within a common world when problematic situations are resolved by *restructuring* a part of the world that is there in ways that work, which allow ongoing conduct that had been stopped by a conflict of meanings, to continue." [6]

Narrative as a bridge of meaning

What is the best way of analytically approaching this conflict of meaning and the contingent search for resolution in paralyzed situations? I believe that one needs two distinct, but contingently connected, analytical tools; a *theory* of situations (viz Pragmatism) and a *typology* of situations (viz Structuralism). And narrative is the connecting bridge between the two. Narratives tell stories about unique situations in ways that appeal both to recognizable archetypes and to contingent relations among the designated characters, events, and locales. All narratives are about the relationship between certainty and uncertainty. Past actions and past generic conventions of narrative forms provide a sense of predictability from beginning, through middles, to the end. And yet each narrative must inexorably ply its way through sequential time and social space (locales) – with characters, scenes, and plots acting and interacting and where, really, anything might

happen.[7] Narratives thus provide both movement through time and space (sequence and action) and stopping points where socially meaningful transformative events (marriages, births, deaths, ruptures) are foregrounded and their consequences revealed. If the stopping-point of a standoff seems, at one level, literally to stop the action of ongoing narratives (or "conduct" in Mead's terms) in ways that typically emphasize binary opposition (us against them), an analysis that can handle this binarism is required. If, on another level, the standoff is viewed as having its own narrative life history of sequenced interaction, an analysis that can handle the processual syntax of the standoff is necessary.

As suggested above, I believe that such a combined project requires both the insights and tools of a general Structuralist approach and the insights and tools of Pragmatism. Such a combining is similar, in intent and theoretical patronage, to that described by anthropologist William Hanks in his analysis of discourse genres. For such analysis, he turns to the work of literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. Hanks writes that:

> . . . for the analysis of discourse, both "sociological poetics" [Bakhtin] and "practice" [Bourdieu] theory are insufficient when taken individually, but make up a coherent and revealing approach when combined. The former gives an inadequate account of the diachronic processes of discourse production, of the action-centric perspective of language users, and of the partial, open-ended realization of discourse forms in communicative practice. Bourdieu has written insightfully on each of these issues. On the other hand, Bakhtin's careful studies of formalist poetics, linguistics, and literary genres provide a nonreductive approach to verbal form, which will be necessary if practice theory is to come to terms with the linguistic processes embodied in action.[8]

Poetics and practice reflect, respectively, the Structuralist and Pragmatist approaches to social life. My own previous work has relied upon a methodological preference for a form of discourse analysis based primarily upon a Structuralist reading of discursive frameworks. At its most basic level, this Structuralist-oriented discourse analysis assumes an important relationship between systems of symbolic representation (most notably speech) and the organizations and institutions of the social world through which such symbol systems flow. It assumes, as Barry Schwartz and I have written elsewhere, that:

> specific world views inhere in the specialized discourses of social organizations . . . These world views involve ideas of what it is to be a human being in society and how human beings ought to be represented. Discourse analysis moves back and forth between organizations and the contours of their world views by attending to the specific words and acts of organizational incumbents.[9]

Thus context is not sacrificed for formal assessment of the internal features of discursive formations, and internal features are not sacrificed for a context-derived covering explanation.

The substance of discourse analysis has been variously configured by different scholars and pitched at many different levels of social life. Michel Foucault identifies discourses with the "disciplines" of modern life, including such professions and attendant worldviews as medicine, psychiatry, and criminology. The notion of the human agent varies across these disciplines according to their paradigmatic worldviews. In the discipline of psychiatry, for example, the central norm is that of sanity, from which flows specific modes of assessing, naming, and treating human beings as either sane or sick. All discourses thus entail vocabularies of motives – the most essential engaging the question of what it means to be a human being. Working out of his own dramaturgical system, Kenneth Burke calls such centering and motivating images "God-terms" – the terms that literally stand in for God (or the first mover, or the final arbiter) in all human-made systems of knowledge, action, and truth. However, it has also been generally recognized, at least since the onset of modernity, that all discourses are partial – they can articulate some areas of human experience and literally *have no words* for others. These other areas of human experience then become unsayable.

But of course discourse, broadly interpreted, must include symbolic systems and acts beyond that of language *per se*. Analyses of three-dimensional social situations thus require a systematic assessment of more than just the linguistic features of the interactions. Algirdas Greimas, in his program to develop a semiotics of the natural world, speaks of the need to "consider the extralinguistic world as no longer being the absolute referent, but as the place where what is manifested through the senses can become the manifestation of human meaning, that is to say, of signification."[10] Put succinctly, bodies in time and in space move and gesture, build and demolish, come forward and go back in ways that are systematically signifying of the situation's narrative-in-the-making. As such, the features of this "extralinguistic" world need to be drawn into the analysis as well.

The orientation of Structuralism and the introduction of Pragmatism

As I noted above, my own engagement with discourse analysis has been heavily inflected with such Structuralist imperatives as seeking out oppositional pairs (of social genres or discursive formations), looking for formal patterns of organization, and charting their structured transformation.