Theorizing the Standoff

Contingency in Action

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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.

(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 . . .

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.

While the social crises I have studied (the kidnapping of Italian political leader Aldo Moro in 1978 by the Italian terrorist group, the Red Brigades, and the confrontation between Philadelphia city police and the antisystem group MOVE[11] in 1985) have certainly called forth a sensitivity to the ongoingness of process, my chosen analytical strategies focused more on combinations and recombinations of the discrete symbolic items of these events viewed as systems. As T.S. Eliot wrote in "East Coker":

> For the pattern is new in every moment
> And every moment is a new and shocking
> Valuation of all we have been.

Eliot, in poetic shorthand, draws structure, pattern, and transformation together in precisely the way I understand Structuralism to do. Structuralism, founded as it is on the premise that the individual items of symbolic systems (from language, to totems, to kinship, to food) derive their meaning from their contrastive and correlative relations to other items in the system, rests on the claim that the items have no intrinsic meaning and must be assessed in terms of their systemic lives. So meaning is found in the mediating and enabling spaces between the items, in their relationships to each other. And, at the existential level, all such symbolic systems refer, according to such Structuralists as Claude Lévi-Strauss, to a defining general problematic; "how to make opposition, instead of being an obstacle to integration, serve rather to produce it."[12]

In terms of my own approach, I have tended, until quite recently, to resonate fairly exclusively with this Structuralist, neo-Kantian, Durkheimian, Lévi-Straussian vision of society as being comprised of categorical, collective representations – whether one assumes their source is in the mind, with Kant, or in society itself, with Durkheim. A more recent engagement with the process-oriented analytical framework of Pragmatism has pushed me to think beyond the Structuralist paradigm.

It was the work on the MOVE confrontation that ultimately drew my attention to Pragmatist models of interpretation. A series of overarching questions has motivated almost all of my research and was particularly true for that on MOVE. These questions include: How might we understand the actual trajectory taken in such cases, cases where a broad array of institutions and individuals confront each other in high stakes situations, where institutions (sometimes the very state itself) and organizations are either salvaged or broken, where lives are saved or lost, where power is ratified, accrued, or sacrificed? What are the roles of language in these cases (language here understood to be both cognitive and conceptual *and* normative and political)? Is language use and deployment during such emergencies

different than it is during "normal time?" Should it be? How do we know when we are in an emergency? And finally, how might these crises have been resolved differently?

I concluded the book I wrote about MOVE (*Discourse and Destruction: The City of Philadelphia vs MOVE*) by theorizing a difference in the modes of discursive interaction I found operating in the case, that is, in the ways that the different discourses of action made contact with each other (or didn't).[13] The basic discovery was that there were two modes of interdiscursive interaction, *contamination* and *hybridization*. Both modes, despite their critical differences, provided the Burkean friction among the terms of order and motivation to move the narrative action of stories forward.

Narrative friction

Contamination refers to the process by which apparently insular, self-sufficient discourses experience discursive eruptions that reveal their dependency on other discursive formations. For example, the rules-bound, hierarchical, universalistic, disinterested discourse of Bureaucracy proved to be dependent upon the private and interested discourse of Sentimentality when bureaucracy had to articulate (justify) its actions to the outside world. Asked about his general expectations for MOVE members' actions at a moment of great tension during the day of confrontation, the singularly bureaucratic-minded managing director responded that: "Then I probably – I had an emotion that [the members of MOVE] might come out or that those who wanted to come out might come out." What was emotion doing in this sentence? What was it doing in Managing Director Brooks as he calculated the odds of a particular event? Certainly it appeared as a foreign body in both the discourse and the persona of Brooks as city bureaucrat. But its appearance was meaningful.

Similarly, the discourse of War demonstrated its dependence on images from a domestic discursive economy – literally from the kitchen. Tear gas was described as "like" powdered milk or talcum powder, shaped explosive charges were likened to different sizes of sausages. For all its striking strangeness, such dependency was revealed only in so-called marginal moments, in socially unconscious leaks in texts and speeches, and was thus unacknowledged as critical, essential. It happened, as it were, behind the backs of the very speakers.

Hybridization, on the other hand, means a *practical* acknowledgment of the incompleteness, the partiality of a given discursive formation. This involves discursive self-critique and an openness to other discourses. The constant aim of hybridization is the deinstitutionalization of discourse.

Those speakers engaged in discursive hybridization are structurally similar to those social agents about whom Foucault wrote, such as the professional, yet subordinate, caregiver nurse, who are in contradictory locations in disciplinary power formations. These agents have the metaphorical taste of two discursive worlds in their mouths, and their knowledge is "local," not completely caught up in the institutional relations of power, not completely constructed either as "in charge" or as "incarcerated." In this light it is interesting to note the voiced frustrations of the former hostages in the recent Tupac Amaru standoff in Lima, Peru who, rather than being actively solicited for help and advice as the standoff continued, were alternately ignored and placed under surveillance themselves by the Peruvian authorities. While former hostages are often given a kind of muted authority (the most positive role suggested by the government in the Peruvian case, for a former hostage, Canadian Ambassador Anthony Vincent, was that of "observer"), it is their discursive silencing that is striking.

An alternative conceptualization of the transdiscursive speakers I analytically identify as "organic mediators" might be Georg Simmel's idea of individuals located at the intersection of multiple "social circles," enacting, in the demanding and contradictory ways of modernity, multiple social roles and plural value systems. Sometimes, times such as those I am analyzing, such locations can be used to the advantage of the situation. In the MOVE conflict, there were such individuals. Shifting back and forth across discursive domains: doing elaborate forms of deference, invoking religious precepts, asserting their form of authority based on their civil rights activism (listing places and times where they had demonstrated against racism, poverty, disenfranchisement, etc.), these individuals cobbled speech acts together on the day of the confrontation through borrowings and reframings. Simply, they gave themselves the license to be creative and to act in the situation. That they were unsuccessful in catching and holding the attention of the authorities and in gaining an authoritative portfolio for action during the standoff, indicates, as we shall see in Chapter 4, the zealous reliance on legitimate experts in such cases.

Analytically, it is important to stress the relentlessly deinstitutionalized discourse (both during the crisis and in later testimony at the Hearings) of the "organic mediators" who were trying anything to preempt tragedy. By contrast, those participants bound up in institutional discourses were continually preoccupied with categories: who is in charge, who is a criminal, what kind of criminal, what category of crime, and – the biggest question of all – what is MOVE? Thus the irony – even those most attuned to strategy and tactics (the police, in an essential state of war) were *categorically* unable to focus on the situation. Thus I ended the MOVE book with the clear sense

and suggestion that there was something important about the fluidity and flexibility of extrainstitutional discourses in social and political crises.

After finishing the book, and reading other case studies, it occurred to me that what I might be talking about when I was talking about hybridized discourses was perhaps akin to Pragmatism. Most importantly, the cases I was studying and reading about were inspiring me to think about the relationship between categories and institutions (law enforcement, medicine, bureacracy, etc.) and the social consequences of alternately clinging to or disengaging such worldviews and the categories they generate in moments of conflict and crisis. Perhaps the key lies in what kinds of questions are asked in such moments. If the question is, "how do we all get out of this intact?" rather than, for example, "what does the license and inspection code say about boarded-up houses?" then the repertoire of possible responses might be reconfigured. This is not a simplistic maxim to abandon the experts. Rather, in this formulation, the analytical issue becomes less that of "uncovering" a false distinction between experts and lay participants (i.e. problematizing expertise itself), than of problematizing what it is that the "experts" ought to be expert in. For example, as will be shown, academic and FBI (Behavioral Science Division) scholars of religion were not systematically consulted during the standoff between the Branch Davidians at Waco and the FBI. They were, in fact, ignored because the Branch Davidians had been labelled a "cult." As two such experts write, "This suggests that 'cult' stories are not perceived to be 'religion' stories."[14] Thus cult and religion, the illegitimate and legitimate categories of faith, have split themselves in two in the institutional mind, and reified in this way, become unavailable to each other.

Beyond such discursive splitting and segregation, I would like to consider what it would mean to invoke an apparently irrelevant type of expert in a standoff, experts in improvisation? But I'm getting ahead of myself. For now, what is key is that the qualitative difference between these kinds of questions (institutional versus situational questions), matters *analytically*, because the question about getting through a situation intact anticipates a theory of Pragmatism more than a theory of Structuralism. As Eugene Rochberg-Halton has written, in an article titled, "Situation, Structure, and the Context of Meaning," "[Charles] Peirce argued that a sign only has meaning in the context of a continuing process of interpretation. Because each sign is part of a continuous temporal process of interpretation, his theory is intrinsically processual and thus incompatible with Saussure's dyadic and intrinsically static theory . . . The continuity of the temporal interpretive process assures freedom in the pragmatic tradition. . ."[15] This is the key, the continuing process of interpretation in ongoing situations.

But, given my abiding interest in Structuralism, the route I have taken from Structuralism to Pragmatism has incorporated and sustained my preoccupation with form, and thus with the *specific forms of language* in crisis situations. The goal, then, is a large one – to be able to make theoretical sense of the formal discursive elements of the processual interaction. In order to do this an appropriate analytical language must be developed that can account for such a combination of the formally structured and the interactively procedural. In other words, as David Harvey poses Alfred North Whitehead's own project: "how to devise an adequate language with which to capture process, motion, flux and flow without abandoning the obvious commonsense idea that we are surrounded with things possessing relative stability and definable properties."[16] Or, to put this in symmetrical reverse, the aim is to develop a formalist analysis of language and the narratives of action from within the stance of Pragmatism.[17]

The Pragmatic stance

What then does "within the stance of Pragmatism" mean? Let me begin to explore this by way of a discussion of Jeffrey Alexander's essay, "Action and its Environments." In the context of his broader discussion of the relations of the macro to the micro, Alexander focuses on the crucial concept of effort. He writes: "Effort is the contingent element of action . . . the motor, the microprocess, that drives the combination of the other elements."[18] Ever since the days of the debate between Lévi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp about the respective analytical priority of the synchronic (axis of simultaneity where oppositional pairs are located) and the diachronic (axis of history where linear sequence is highlighted) in Structuralist analysis, precisely this contingent element of effort has been insufficiently addressed in discussions of the ongoing narrative composings of society. It is, I believe the crucial relationship between this contingent effort and the emergent symbolic combinings, viewed from both the synchronic and the diachronic perspective, that deserves our analytical attention. Alexander's essay points out some of the terms by which this relationship may be deciphered.

At the outset of the essay, Alexander asserts that the *macro* parameters of action have a determining role in interaction. Such a claim makes theoretical contact with my analysis of the institutional prerogatives of "official" participants and discourses in social conflicts. The impulse to locate the macro in the micro, through the crucial auspices of effort, leads, in an analysis of standoffs, to an articulation of the processes of interaction from several points of view; the various institutional representatives'

points of view, the anti-institutional institutions' (MOVE, Branch Davidian, etc.) point of view, and the extrainstitutional individual's point of view. Given the inevitable presence of authoritative institutions and discourses in such situations, rather than ask the question – should we or should we not depend upon the presence of institutionalized authorities or experts in crises – we might more fruitfully look at the self-understandings of these institutions and the public's relation to them. How do we use institutions, or (with Foucault) how do they use us?

In his book, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cornelius Castoriadis dwells on the nature of the relationship of society to its institutions: "Alienation occurs when the imaginary moment in the institution becomes autonomous and predominates, which leads to the institution's becoming autonomous and predominating with respect to society . . . in other words [society] does not recognize in the imaginary of institutions something that is its own product."[19] What is this "imaginary moment?" And, perhaps *counter* to the relentless disciplinizing process Foucault sees, how might we resurrect this imaginary moment, a moment of pure effort to intervene into the status quo, when we most need it?

To get at this, let me return to the central concept of action. "Every action," writes Alexander, "is both interpretation and strategization; each process ensues at every moment in time. Interpretation itself consists of two different processes: typification and invention."[20] One thing we know for sure about institutions is that they are fundamentally in the business of typification or, to put it another way, categorization. So the interpretive strategy of institutions when confronted with a new situation is inevitably to categorize or typify the situation with the particular classificatory schema at its disposal. On the face of it, such a process appears to be essentially simplifying – the institution takes a real-life, complex situation and calls it an X (religious cult, serial killer, terrorist, etc.). And then, once having made such a classificatory determination, the institution is clear on how to act with *that* kind of antagonist.

However, such a reading doesn't do full justice to the discovery of the "inventive moments of typification" as Alexander puts it. Even the process of typification requires the effort of making a connection, a connection between that which is known and that which is unknown. And any such effort must engage the processes of interpretation and fitting, both of which rely on the language of metaphor, which, as Eco reminds us, simultaneously illuminates the similarities and the differences between the two terms. Thus, a space opens up where the public, if able to recall the "imaginary moment" in institutions, can glimpse the process by which the institution makes the claim that X is a Y. I don't want to downplay the importance of this art of

categorizing (even as I critique it for its inability to persevere with contingency over the long run). Categorizing does have going for it the benefit of recognition, knowing when you are encountering a species of experience you have encountered before. And even though institutional categories seem to catch people in their figurative net of definitions, to varying degrees, the categories must fit themselves to the specific individuals encountered. That process of fitting announces an existential contingency, or provisionality, at the core of the act of classification. In another context, that of employers seeking the right job candidate for the right job, Mark Granovetter has written, "The abstract categories of social theory discourage us from noticing that in many important situations, one has to obtain information about rather unstandardized alternatives."[21]

The notion of unstandardized alternatives appearing in a world that seems interested only in standards is especially important to the project of theorizing contingency because it invokes the issue of incommensurability. And here, where incommensurability announces its importance in a system of symbolic exchange, is where, I think, Pragmatism and Structuralism must work together.

I'd like to return to Durkheim and his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, by way of Lévi-Strauss in his *Totemism*, to capture something of the feeling I'm trying to conjure in this rapprochement of Pragmatism and Structuralism. Lévi-Strauss quotes Durkheim, who is himself quoting from a Native American Dakota wise man:

Everything as it moves, now and then, here and there, makes stops. The bird as it flies stops in one place to make its nest, and in another to rest in its flight. A man when he goes forth stops when he wills. So the god has stopped. The sun, which is so bright and beautiful, is one place where he has stopped. The moon, the stars, the winds, he has been with. The trees, the animals, are all where he has stopped, and the Indian thinks of these places and sends his prayers there to reach the place where the god has stopped and win help and a blessing.[22]

Lévi-Strauss goes on to write that there is a relationship here between this Native-American passage in Durkheim and Henri Bergson's philosophical metaphysics: "It seems that the relationship results from one and the same desire to apprehend in a total fashion the two aspects of reality which the philosopher terms continuous and discontinuous; from the same refusal to choose between the two; and from the same effort to see them as complementary perspectives giving on the same truth."[23]

Pragmatism would have us focus on the ongoing situation, on the changing meaning of the sign over the course of the continual process of interpretation. Structuralism would have us focus on the meaning-bearing

relations of symbolic opposition and correlation within and between symbolic systems. There is both movement through time and stopping points, where meaning temporarily congeals as the result of recombinations of the symbolic items of the set.[24] Pragmatism's claim on temporality, or historicity and Structuralism's claim on social systems has led anthropologist Marshall Sahlins to invoke them both in his idea of the "structure of the conjuncture." Specifically, in his analysis of Captain Cook's visit to the Hawaiian Sandwich Islands, he reveals the way that Cook's reading of the Hawaiian categories of ritual and social status and the Hawaiian attempts to incorporate the European relations of trade into their ritual universe together work to demonstrate how the reproduction of structure becomes its transformation, for all parties involved, I might add. Thus, here is a case where classification reveals its existential contingency. As Sahlins writes: "Signs thus take on functional and implicational values in a *project of action, not merely the mutual determinations of a synchronic state*. They are subjected to analysis and recombination, from which arise unprecedented forms and meanings (metaphors for example)."[25]

Standoffs as interpretive moments

Senator Craig: My question – there was an official declaration of emergency by the Governor of Idaho?

Mr. Johnson (Former US Marshall, District of Idaho): Yes there was.

Sen. Craig: Did that allow the deployment of the National Guard?

Mr. Johnson: Yes it did Senator.

(The Federal Raid on Ruby Ridge, Hearings Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, p. 311.)

Let me now try and draw all of this together to talk about the ongoing process of institutional and extrainstitutional interpretation that occurs during standoffs. At this point, having made the point, convincingly I hope, that there is invention even in the archetypically conventional act of institutional classification, I'd like to refocus on those moments in standoffs when *predictable* classification makes restructuring less probable and where continuing paralysis is usually only broken by the emergence of violence.

One alternative to this standard operating procedure might be called a pragmatic stance: that is an approach that insists on directing the attention of consciousness to the continuous interpretive work in such situations. Interpretation as an ongoing process is the willed action of Alexander's schema as I understand it. Truth is discovered through this interpretive action in situ. This fits nicely with *The Oxford English Dictionary of Philosophy*'s statement that: "The driving motivation of Pragmatism is the

idea that belief in the truth on the one hand must have a close connection with success in action on the other."[26]

The action driving the parties of a standoff to the standoff state and out through the other side of it is primarily a project of interpretation. Standoffs must be set off categorically from other situations. Participants must find themselves or declare themselves to be in an emergency. Such an existentially diacritical moment foregrounds the difference between *normal* time and space and *emergency* time and space.

There are several ways of understanding this difference between situations that are identified as normal and those that are identified as emergencies. Part of the larger task of this book is to try and elaborate a model of just such a difference by way of working through several empirical cases in which normal social life and emergencies are played off against each other. Here, at the outset, it might be useful simply to speculate on the analytical differences. For example, might one say that the normal is that which is structured in known and predictable ways and that emergencies are declared when such structure is either altogether absent or is dramatically increased, decreased, or distorted? Alternatively, one might claim that normal time is that time during which structure is merely implicit or latent (unmarked) and that emergencies are those situations in which structure becomes explicit (exposed). Thus, as a subset of emergencies, the standoff can be viewed as situations of either distorted, absent, predominant, or explicit social structure. Here, paralysis is a form of structural distortion.

Emergencies put stress on whatever organizations must deal with them, even those organizations like law enforcement, firefighters, the military, and hospital emergency rooms that are established precisely in order to meet emergency situations. Certainly, such organizations must prepare themselves for the emergencies within their purview – medical instruments, bandages, fire-fighting equipment, weapons, and so forth, must be stocked and ready to be used. But the exact nature, extent, time and shape of the contingent emergencies that do occur cannot be fully anticipated. "Normal accidents,"[27] a phrase that neatly captures the ironic acknowledgement of the cohabitation of the normal and the emergency, result from cascade effects of interdependent events. In his striking analysis of the famous Mann Gulch fire, in which many of the firefighters died trying to flee an unexpectedly escalating forest fire, Karl Weick charts what we might call an epistemological chronology of the fire and the interpretive paradoxes it throws up in the path of the fire-fighting team:

1. The crew expects a 10:00 fire [a fire that can be surrounded and isolated by 10:00 the next morning] but grows uneasy when **this fire does not act like one**. 2. Crewmembers wonder how this fire can be all that serious if Dodge and Harrison

eat supper while they hike toward the river. 3. People are often unclear who is in charge of the crew. 4. The flames on the south side of the gulch look intense, yet one of the smokejumpers, David Navon is **taking pictures,** so people conclude the fire can't be that serious, even though **their senses tell them otherwise** . . . 6. As the fire gains on them, Dodge says, "**Drop your tools,**" but if the people in the crew do that, then who are they? Firefighters? With no tools?[28]

The "who are we?" question is a key one for understanding the behavior of participants in a standoff, and will be dealt with at length in Chapter 4. In the case of standoffs between social groups, organizational self-under-standing and situational sensitivity clearly hold the key. But for immediate purposes, it is useful to look more closely at Weick's chronology of the fire and the firefighters' reactions to it to try and identify the key parameters of the ongoing interpretations. Identity is clearly one of of them, but it is the variable relations of time, space, and action that most adamantly move the story forward towards its disjointed and tragic finale. Some things are going too slowly; others too quickly. Eating supper and taking pictures are activities that inhabit a leisurely world in which time exerts a minimal pressure. Such a temporal reading contradicts other sensory experiences that emphasize speed. The mixed-up times seem to cancel each other out. Such temporal and spatial dislocations create strange environments for situational action. Time and space coordinates normally provide anchors for individuals moving through social life. All presuppositions about what is appropriate (from eating breakfast, to sleeping, to stopping and going at a traffic light) rely on naturalized cues about where and when such things can and should occur. Not only is this so, but temporal and spatial ordering systems are *interdependent* in establishing such coordinates. As Carol Greenhouse writes: "Official time systems originating in the West, for example, claim to separate time and space as different dimensions of reality; however, their underlying unity can be recovered in the notion of 'events,' which situate temporal moments in social space, or [in the notion of] 'regime,' which does the inverse . . ."[29]

Contexts: time and space

Space and time are thus obviously key to the project of theorizing contingency in social crises, when these normally taken-for-granted coordinates go radically off course. Rhetoricians divide the world of rhetorical modes into the spatial (descriptive and classificatory) and the temporal (narrative and processual). But perhaps a better way to think about this is that in all social narratives, time and space coordinates are variably stressed. Recall