On the social constitution of structures, actions and events

Ramy Youssef

Introduction

It seems difficult to imagine how empirical research in history and sociology could be properly conducted without any reference to events. As Paul Ricoeur (2012) has demonstrated, even the most radical attempts at writing »structural history« need to construct some kind of turning point or *quasi-event* for the sake of a plausible narrative. The same could be said of empirical sociological research, e.g. in the field of life course research (Abbott 2010, Chapter 8). However, theorizing events is somewhat difficult: »With events […] there is the genuine epistemological problem of generalizing the singular« (Wagner-Pacifici 2017, 21).

Particularly theoretical approaches focusing on the relationship between social structures and agency tend to put events in second place. This article therefore aims to address some obstacles to understanding events that are inherent in these approaches. Its critique is twofold: First, the relationship between structures and events is not to be understood as one of mutual causal conditioning and constraining, as it is usually the case with the relation between structure and agency. Instead, it has to be considered as one of meaningful reproduction and mutual constitution. Second, social actions cannot be properly understood in causal terms but rather, in Andrew Abbott's terms, as conceptual events summarizing several occurrences in a causal narrative. Therefore, this paper suggests shifting the focus from explaining causalities of action to the analysis of the communicative constitution of action as a socially meaningful event. It begins by identifying some basic notions of structures and events and suggests defining structures as expectations and events as novelties in the broadest sense.

Subsequently, the relation between structures and events will be described as eventful reproduction of social structures. After elaborating on the relation between actions and events, the conclusion will be drawn that actions have to be considered semantic events rather than being described in causal terms.

Coming to terms with structures and events

The distinction between structure and agency lies at the heart of many sociological theories, although not all of them might describe themselves in this way. However, the point here is not to make the case for either side of this distinction, nor to suggest another way of mediating between structures and agency. Instead, a closer look at the distinction structure /agency itself will be offered to highlight some of the blind spots in it which will become apparent when events are taken into consideration. Of course, there are many sociological theories on the market, each of which has its own particular understanding of structure, agency and events. To remain compatible with as many approaches as possible, the following considerations and notions will thus have to be rather rough and abstract. They seek to highlight some generalizable problems of a common distinction and try to suggest a solution for them. For this purpose, common traits in defining structures, actions and events will be identified and synthesized.

It would go beyond the scope of this article to show how particular theories define social structures. But, following an overview offered by Douglas V. Porpora (1989, 195), at least four typical ways of understanding social structures can be distinguished:

>   1. Patterns of aggregate behavior that are stable over time
>   2. Lawlike regularities that govern the behavior of social facts
>   3. Systems of human relationships among social positions
>   4. Collective rules and resources that structure behavior«

Since all these possible ways to think of structures aim at specific problems in sociological research, it does not seem very promising to be able to find an inclusive notion of structure. Thus, rather than looking for an

encompassing concept, finding a lowest common denominator could be a practicable way to relate and compare various approaches. In this sense, the following considerations start from the premise that structures can be understood as social expectations. This understanding of structures is deeply rooted in classical sociological and anthropological functionalism (Martin 2009, 5–7). However, there is some evidence that it can serve as the lowest common denominator in the aforementioned sense: Expectations may become manifest as behavioral patterns or lawlike regularities, respectively, which become observable when actions and communications are repeatedly oriented toward unchanged expectations. They may be features of relationships, particularly when they are based on trust (Nickel 2009), reciprocity (Gouldner 1960) or expected social rewards (Blau 1964, 143–45). Collective rules may as well be considered a very specific form of normative expectation. In any case, so long as social life is considered meaningfully constituted, theorizing about structures will seem difficult without considering the role of expectations.

It was Max Weber who pointed out that actions do not become socially meaningful unless they are oriented toward the expected behavior of others (Weber 1979, 22). Without expectations it would be difficult to recognize a particular behavior as social action. Therefore, expectations are constitutive for social events like actions and communication, whereas social situations tend to become anomic without institutionalized expectations. Harold Garfinkel (1967) elaborated on what he called *background expectancies* and demonstrated impressively with breaching experiments how interactions plunge into crisis when certain expectations of social conduct are disappointed by unforeseen events. But the theoretical significance of expectations is not limited to the works of Weber and Garfinkel. On the contrary, attempts at developing a relational theory of agency also highlight the importance of expectations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 980–81), and its bridging capacity also becomes particularly noticeable in the field of science and technology studies (Borup et al. 2006; Brown and Michael 2003). Apart from that, it invites a dialogue among various approaches usually deemed incompatible such as

microsociology à la Garfinkel and game theory (Vollmer 2013b), making expectations, all in all, a valuable concept for further theorizing.

Broadly speaking, actions are usually defined as attempts at causing social effects attributable to individual or collective actors, whereas the notion of agency refers to the capacity to shape social structures by means of actions. Consequently, actions may have social effects but not all actions may have *structural* effects, that is, the capacity to change social expectations. Therefore, theories dealing with the relation between structure and action /agency show clear differences in assessing the probability of structural change caused by individual and collective actions. But it is not the aim of this article to take sides in this controversy. Instead, it tries to show that the whole idea of actions as *causes* of *any kind of social effect* is in general problematic. What is at stake here is not whether actors may cause structural change by means of action, but the assumption that action can be discussed in causal terms in the first place. The problems of this assumption will become apparent when events are taken into consideration.

The lowest common denominator for sociological and historical notions of events can be found with comparative ease. Events are usually defined by their »news value,« meaning that events represent novelty and variation against a background of redundant, ordinary routines that is taken for granted. However, opinions differ on the question of what degree of novelty is required in order to speak of events. At one end of the spectrum, events are defined as ruptures and significant transformations of social structures (Badiou 2003; Sahlins 1987; Sewell 1996; Wagner-Pacifici 2017). At the other, the threshold for events is quite low for authors like Michel Foucault (2013, 137) who considers mere communications and utterances events—although he occasionally referred to revolutions and uprisings as a particular kind of event.

While the notions of structures, actions and events were presented here as common denominators, at least two problems reside in the details and are solved in different ways by diverse approaches. One problem lies in the relationship between structures and events, the other concerns the

relation between actions and events. Both issues will be discussed in the following sections.

Structures and events: Transformation and/or reproduction?

A common way of pinning down the relationship between structures and events is, as previously mentioned, by defining events as moments of structural transformation. According to this approach, events would occur as revolutions, crises or innovations. From a research-pragmatic point of view, one need not search long for this solution. Structural differences can be found by comparing measurement results from two close points in time, and the critical event of interest can be assumed in the timespan between. Or the event is considered so dramatic (in terms of Turner 2006, 33–35) that it can serve as a starting point for identifying structural changes. In this sense, by means of »simple counterfactualism« (Martin 2011, 37–39) one could say that Europe would have developed entirely differently without the French Revolution or the invention of moveable-type printing.

On the other hand, not all salient and remarkable events of crisis or deviation necessarily have transformational effects on structures; some offer opportunities to make them visible in the first place (Durkheim 2013, 63). If nothing else, this is what Harold Garfinkel's breaching experiments have shown. Critical events of this sort do not represent the aforementioned understanding of transformative events in structure/agency approaches, although they contribute to the persistence of structures. Presumably, this is because the explanation of structural transformation is a constitutive problem for structure/agency theories (New 1994; Sewell 1992). In their framework, events stand for a short-term accumulation of actions causing structural change. Actions are then of particular explana-tory value for structural change when they can be allocated as elements of disruptive, transformative events. In contrast, »ordinary« actions are considered mere elements of an eventless and inconspicuous social background noise. They may also have the potential to induce structural transformations, but of course less disruptively and more in processes of long-term change. Events thereby add some spice and variety to the

otherwise boring relationship between structure and agency. The problems of relating actions and events this way will be discussed later in detail. The question here is whether it is necessary to keep events so rare and define them quite so narrowly. Will this approach pave the way for an *eventful* history and sociology or could it be worthwhile considering alternatives at hand?

After a critical reading of contributions from William Sewell and Marshall D. Sahlins, Adam Moore (2011) suggested conceiving of events as elements of structural *reproduction* (see also Gilmore and O'Donoughue 2015; Ohnuki-Tierney 1995). This proposal enables us to continue the research program suggested by Sewell and Sahlins, but goes a step further and allows the inclusion of »uncritical« events as well. Apart from this, »making change our constant« (Abbott 2010, 255) by understanding events as reproductive elements is highly compatible with process-oriented approaches (Bennett and Checkel 2015; Onaka 2013). However, Moore leaves open the question of which events reproduce which structures.

In contrast to traditional structuralist positions, William Sewell has convincingly argued for assuming a plurality of structures rather than one singular social structure (Sewell 1996, 205–7). After all, not all events may transform a singular social structure of a given society. Instead, it should be assumed that particular events are relevant only for particular differentiated social structures according to their own selection criteria (see for example Galtung and Ruge 1965). This insight is of course a key assumption of theories of social differentiation. But starting from this premise, the question of to what extent which events are significant for the reproduction of which structures is left unanswered. If it is true that events reproduce structures, the latter have to replace past events continuously with new, subsequent events. This applies to conversations which desire new events, no matter how serious or trivial these events may seem. »So conversation can burn everything«, as Erving Goffman (1981, 38) would say. The same applies to protest movements mobilizing their adherents by organizing new events (Della Porta 2008) or to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), for which the end of the

Olympic summer games usually means the beginning of the preparation for the next summer games (Theodoraki 2007).

Two implications arise from these considerations. First, subsequent events do not vary arbitrarily but are connected by expectations. Depending on the social context, there are more or less clear expectations about what may be counted as an appropriate topic for conversation (Schank 1977). Analogously, the IOC does not usually spontaneously organize protests, nor are protest movements known for organizing Olympic summer games. Of course, structures do change: activist cells of a protest movement can, for example, transform into terrorist organizations (Youssef 2016). But whether particular events can be made analytically accountable for structural transformations is a different question.

A second implication of the considerations above is that if events reproduce structures, they can hardly be as rare as typically »big« singular events like summer games and protests. Furthermore, whenever Olympic summer games or revolutions are referred to as »events,« it is obvious that things are being estimated and generalized rather than analyzed. Andrew Abbott (1984) coined the term »colligation« for this phenomenon: events are conceptual abstractions of colligated occurrences and can be decomposed into measurable sequences of »smaller« such occurrences. The French Revolution, for example, consists of events like the storming of the Bastille or the decapitation of Louis XVI. Each of these events can again be decomposed into smaller units of analysis. Therefore, »the ›event‹ is defined in terms of the analyst's interest« (Martin 2011, 42). This already raises some doubts concerning the explanatory value of using common notions of events (and actions) as analytical units—more about this in a bit. But the point here is that if we think the dissolvability of events through to the end, events appear to be extremely volatile. Consequently, Alain Badiou suggested that »the being of an event is to disappear; the being of an event is disappearing. The event is nothing— just a sort of illumination« (Badiou 2003, 140). If Badiou is taken literally here, events have no temporal expansion, no permanence, and no duration. Instead, they can be characterized by their simultaneous appearance and disappearance. Any other notion would raise the question how an event

11

should be defined in terms of its beginning and its end, although beginning and end can also be considered particular events.

Events in the phenomenological sense proposed here are not substances or movable things, as Robin Wagner-Pacifici (Wagner-Pacifici 2017, 10–12) seems to suggest. They also do not carry any information in themselves but rather acquire their meaning by their relation to previous and subsequent events (Simmel 1916, 19). In other terms, the way events get their meaning is by being structurally related to other past or expected events. Socially meaningful events, thus, are not »existing« substances put together but emerge in a network of structurally related events, whereas conversely structures or expectations, as it were, are in turn being reproduced (or else transformed) by these events.

Not all occurrences out there are relevant for all structures. A particular occurrence, let's take an apple falling from a tree, may have no social significance at all. But this occurrence may be a topic of conversation conducted by bystanders or it may be observed as an inspiration for a scientific revolution. We thus have to deal with either structures of face-to-face interaction, which exploit a particular event for their reproduction, or with structures of science, for which this event becomes part of a narrative of a scientific paradigm shift. »[E]very event lies in many narratives at once. Every event has multiple narrative antecedents as well as multiple narrative consequences« (Abbott 2010, 192). Narratives, in this respect, are self-descriptions of structured processes referring to the same event but locating it in different chains of events.

Another point here is that the same event represents a difference, a novelty, however futile it may be, for distinct structures with their own distinct relevance criteria. From the point of view of these structures the event is therefore, according to Gregory Bateson (1972, 315), a difference that makes a difference. This may be the most general notion of an event one can possibly conceive of. But it is compatible with the notion of extremely volatile events as proposed here and it is especially suitable for quite heterogeneous research programs. For example, Bruno Latour describes actants as events in this particular sense, namely differences

that make a difference for other entities: »an actor that makes no difference is not an actor at all. An actor, if words have any meaning, is exactly what is not substitutable. It's a unique event, totally irreducible to any other« (Latour 2005, 153). Bateson's definition can be found in Luhmann's systems theory, in Anthony Gidden's theory of structuration (Giddens 1985, 14) and it is without more ado compatible with, for example, Foucault's notion of events (Flynn 2004, 214).

By broadening the concept of event and focusing on problems of structural reproduction, as proposed here, we get a higher density of observation and may provide answers to the overall question of the social constitution of structures and events. In temporal terms nothing can undercut the event, as it is defined by the simultaneity of its appearance and disappearance. The concept of event presented here now serves as the smallest possible unit of analysis and therefore replaces actions as analytical units. Instead, actions themselves have to be understood as eventfully constituted, as the following section argues.

Events as actions or eventful actions?

Given that the distinction structure/agency is a key element of many sociological theories, it aims to produce generalizable explanations by referring to relations of one-sided or mutual conditioning and reproduction between actions and structures (Hays 1994). But how do events fit in this framework? Structure/agency approaches consider events either singular actions or sequences of actions (Butts 2008; Griffin 1992; Sewell 1996). Often, events are also described instead as objects, as it were, to be controlled, created or influenced by agency (Coleman 1990, 133; Giddens 1985, 14; Goffman 1974, 22–23; Weick 1979, 148).

Understanding events as actions or sequences of actions raises the question of how, for example, natural disasters can be taken into account in sociological and historical research. The 1755 Lisbon earthquake would then not be an event because it does not represent an action in the common sense of the word (putting actor-network theory aside for a moment). This example also shows the conceptual shortcomings of considering

events as targets of interfering actions. The social relevance of this occurrence does not originate from the actions of the rather helpless Lisboans. One may ask, of course, how cooperation becomes possible under the conditions of such disasters (Vollmer 2013a). But this is a sociological issue which was not at stake for contemporaries like Voltaire, who was much more concerned with the intellectual consequences of the earthquake (Braun and Radner 2005). The social consequences of the Lisbon earthquake are usually being ascribed to an event which changed the experience of the world and contributed to the reframing of a particular world view.[1] Of course, this is only one particular instance of what Erving Goffman probably had in mind when he referred to processes of reframing (Goffman 1974).[2] Summing up, by referring to expectations, this framework enables us not only to discuss normative expectations but also to highlight the relevance of cognitive orders for social reproduction (Galtung 1959; Knorr Cetina and Cicourel 2014, 2–4).

Consequently, starting from the duality of structures and agency, the theoretical status of events becomes rather unclear. That is to say, structurally relevant events entail not only actions but experiences as

---

1   For Max Weber, world views (*Weltbilder*) can set actions on diverse ideational tracks and function as a switchman (*Weichensteller*) for social actions (for the nexus between revolutions and »cosmological visions« see also Eisenstadt 2006, 103–5; Weber 1989, 101). Within this framework, however, world views have an explanatory function as motivational factors for action. The framework thus conflates *categories of practice* with *categories of analysis* (Strand and Lizardo 2015). Considering world views as a kind of semantics seems more plausible in the framework presented here.

2   Goffman (1974, 13) explicitly denied that his work on frame analysis deals with social structures. According to him, it deals with matters that are secondary to them, namely individual experiences. Thinking of structures as expectations, however, makes Goffman's work invaluable for a deeper empirical understanding of how experiences reproduce and transform social structures.

well.[3] Thinking of natural disasters one might ask to what extent they are caused by human agency in the »Anthropocene« age and whether this kind of agency is available to our experience, or whether we can only deduce some kind of human agency by experiencing merely its effects (Chakrabarty 2012). Apart from that, it is crucial in many social contexts whether a particular event is being experienced or »enacted.« The semantics of responsibility, for example, »describes the addressability of a specific normative expectation to basic communicative entities« (Bora 2015, 458). It ascribes events causally to persons or organizations and it usually matches their actions, or else their omissions, with normative expectations. But in general, noone can be held responsible in legal terms for merely experiencing events without causing them by action or omission. A sociologist may then come to different conclusions by attributing agency by different criteria. However, these sociological criteria are usually not taken into account in practical definitions of social situations and do not serve as a basis for allocating agency, omission or responsibility in social practices.

At any rate, with events as starting points, agency and experience can both be considered ways of framing social behavior that are inevitably eventfully constituted.[4] But speaking of agency in causal terms leads to

---

3　　It is of course one of Pierre Bourdieu's most noteworthy achievements to have taken the constitution of experience into consideration. Nevertheless, a theory of the event within this framework is just beginning to take shape (see Aisenberg 2008).

4　　For Karl Weick (1979, 147–49), experience is a matter of action or *enactment*, respectively. »Experience is the consequence of activity. The manager literally wades into the swarm of ›events‹ that surround him and actively tries to unrandomize them and impose some order. The manager acts physically in the environment, attends to some of it, ignores most of it, talks to other people about what they see and are doing« (Weick 1979, 148). Contrary to that, one may say that »we no more *perform* our experience of acting than we *see* our visual experiences« (Searle 1994, 89). From another point of view one may ask as well whether a manager does not have to listen to the people he talks to. For the organization of social life and of conversation in particular, acting and experience are rather

aporia in the evenemental framework presented here. Agency is itself eventfully constituted, making it necessary to take a closer look at the relationship between events and actions.

I have previously mentioned that actions and events cannot be fully substituted for each other as units of analysis. But it is striking that events and actions are often described in analogous ways insofar as both can be considered products of colligations. Actions as well as events can be decomposed into particular »phases« or »stages« (Norman 2013, 40–42; Schutz 1989, 49–51). However, whereas events appear and disappear simultaneously, the same cannot be said about actions so long as they are being described in causal terms. In temporal terms, consequently, an action has to entail at least two distinguishable events, namely a particular act and its effect (Elster 2015, 3–5). This applies regardless of whether the starting point for action theories is the causal explanation of particular actions or whether they aim at reconstructing purposes, intentions, types or (inter-)subjective meanings of actions. The argument also does not depend on the order in which acts and effects occur, nor on the way causal links between these two events are established—be it through mechanisms, conditions, probabilities or other instances or metaphors of causation commonly referred to in contemporary sociology (Vaidyanathan et al. 2016).[5] But the mere distinction between causes and effects of actions raises the problem of temporal delimitation insofar as actions can hardly be separated from their causes and effects. In the growth medium of causality, the duration of action expands into a potentially endless temporal horizon. »The causes that have determined any individual event

---

sequenced and divided between participants (Goffman 1976; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974).

5   Of course, not all causal explanations link events with each other but instead some assume a figure-ground relationship (Vaidyanathan et al. 2016, 11) in the sense that, for example, structure X is the context or condition under which event Y is caused. However, explanations of this kind share the implicit ontological assumption that entities, structures or other kinds of causal backgrounds are not themselves eventfully constituted but constants.

are always *infinite* in number and *infinitely* varied in character; and the things in themselves possess no inherent criterion according to which some of them can be selected as the only part to be taken into account« (Weber 2012, 117; emphasis in original). The consequences of actions can as well be endlessly pursued, not only in causal series but in cascades if unintended side effects are taken into consideration (Merton 1936, 897). Actions are therefore neither singular events nor delimitable series of events, making their temporal status as units of analysis rather questionable.[6]

Until now, common theories of agency could not provide convincing answers for the question of the temporal constitution of actions. Instead, they have treated actions as final units of analysis although these are undoubtedly temporally dissolvable units.[7] Addressing this temporal problem is declared ex cathedra to be »simply an absurdity« (Weber 2012, 118). Instead, efforts in sociological research may focus on contexts, orientations, purposes, meanings, types and situational conditions of actions just as if actions unfold without consuming time themselves (see for

---

6   Emirbayer and Mische (1998) contributed some interesting considerations on time as context of agency as well as on temporal orientations of actors. However, they conceive of the relation between actors and structures in terms of *mediation* thus raising the question how the relation between actors and mediating instances is mediated in return.

7   Causality can also be conceptualized as a relation between causal qualities of objects (Chakravartty 2005). This notion of causality finds its clearest sociological expression in the situational logic of practice theories (cf. Pouliot 2014, 252–54). Social practices, accordingly, unfold in situations which are characterized by the simultaneous co-presence of diverse processors of social action like bodies and artifacts. In this framework, a problematic temporal horizon just gets substituted by a potentially endless material horizon, making it necessary to »break from narration—that is, temporarily suspend time in order to analyze, in a synchronic discursive mode, the skein of relationships that define the nature and the potentialities of the objects and persons about which a story may be told« (Sewell 2005, 219). Actor-network theory, however, *equates* time with materiality on a metaphorical level since mediators are considered equivalents to events in this framework (Latour 2005, 216).

example Parsons 1937, 482–83).[8] That's not surprising, since the problem cannot be solved by referring to action as a unit of analysis again without risking an infinite regress. Instead, it is circumvented by focusing on the matters of agency, rather than on its eventful temporal constitution. Thus, sociological theories of action can cut their units of analysis to size. The delimitation of actions, that is the scope of their »eventness,« does not vary with the social meaning attached to them but rather with the research question posed by the historian or sociologist.

Having said that, do we, as recipients of this kind of research, want to learn something about the way the analyst tailors his objects and gets surprised by his own analytical constructions? Or do we want to learn more about the objects of interest themselves by observing empirically how self-descriptions emerge out of eventful social practices and become socially meaningful? After all, not only sociological and historical research constructs actions and events. Social practices in everyday life also do not bother themselves with tracing back causes in endless temporal horizons. Instead, they take shortcuts and have their own ways of identifying events and of attributing causes and consequences to actions, as evidence from social psychology clearly shows (Crittenden 1983; Heider 1958, 246–48; Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson 1967, 54–56).

Actions and events are therefore, in the sense of Giddens's *double hermeneutics* (Giddens 1997, 9–11), already meaningfully constituted and interpreted before they become objects of sociological and historical research. Taking the same line, Thomas Luckmann (1980, 50–51) pointed out that the interpretation of experiences and actions is a constitutive element of sociological data *and* part of historical life-worlds expressed and typified in respective contemporary everyday language. According to Luckmann, the task of sociology should therefore be to develop a formalized meta-language to describe how a particular historical life-world

---

8   Parsons notoriously did consider instrumental and consummatory dimensions in his AGIL paradigm. However, it is not quite clear how the unit act extends temporally, given that it has to sustain and balance all AGIL functions at once.

is being constituted by invariant structures bringing about historically varying typifications of actions and experiences. Invariant structures could be, for example, non-negotiable embodied and perceptual bases of conceptualization (Johnson 1987; Lakoff and Johnson 2010). Taking up the challenge, Omar Lizardo (2013) suggested an intriguing way of utilizing research on these bases from cognitive sciences for an analysis of abstract sociological concepts. The same could of course be applied to notions of »action« and »event« in everyday language as well as in sociological theories. However, I have to admit that I am not very familiar with the relevant debates in cognitive sciences. Instead, I will refer to invariant bases of communication to suggest a heuristic for comparing historically varying evenemental concepts.

Therefore, in the following section the argument will be presented that action is a reified social interpretation of communicative occurrences being colligated as events. By using actions as analytical units, consequently, most of sociological and historical research falls into the same trap of reification.

The communicative construction of events (and actions)

By characterizing events as simultaneously appearing and disappearing, sociological and historical research is released from the fruitless task of more or less arbitrary temporal delimitation. Particular events appear and disappear, making it difficult to say anything else about them. As soon as they have appeared and disappeared, they are intangible, inaccessible and unreproducible. This understanding of events is owed to a phenomeno-logical perspective trying to figure out how the social realm is constituted temporally, and therefore brackets some assumptions that are taken for granted. Actors, matters or relations cannot be considered constitutive elements in this respect since they all are not particular events but *entities* with a »property of repetition, of being events that keep happening in the same way« (Abbott 2010, 273). But sociological as well as historical research cannot be satisfied with postulating the unrepeatability of particular events. Instead, such research can point out that the impermanence and uniqueness of events is not only a theoretical problem but a practical

one. In so doing, research has to make a virtue out of necessity by observing empirically how this problem is being solved in the social realm. Therefore, the *social, that is to say the communicative, construction of events* will be the main subject matter in this section.

The communicative construction of events has been discussed by various authors within different frameworks. Certain attempts at developing a narrative theory of history assume that events get their historical significance when plots integrate events into narratives (Ricoeur 2012; White 1980, 2008). Alain Badiou (2007, 201–3) coined the term *intervention* for the act of naming and interpretation, which makes an event part of the definition of a situation. Drawing on Austin's theory of performative speech acts, Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2017, 20–22) developed a framework focusing on the performative aspects of how events are being produced and made effective. All these approaches share the assumption that the social meaning of events is being produced retrospectively after a particular happening has occurred. They also seem to agree on the constitutive role of communication in making events socially meaningful. However, they also have a certain »agent bias« in common, meaning that they focus on problems of sending or actively »producing« communication rather than on problems of understanding. For theorists of historiography like Hayden White (1973), it is the historian who is considered the producer of a historical event. Badiou and Wagner-Pacifici also focus on the intervening subject (or the performing actor, respectively) as producers of events, although both consider the possibility of misunderstandings and resistance in the social production of events (Badiou 2007, 398). In any case, we are thrown back to the problems of agency and causality discussed earlier in this paper. Is the historical event being produced during research processes of a particular historian, or does it come into being by reading a particular book on history? When, in Wagner-Pacifici's framework, does an event-producing speech act end and when does its consequence begin? Is it not eventfully constituted itself? To avoid problems of this kind, it may be worthwhile to take Niklas Luhmann's theory of communication into consideration.

Socially meaningful events cannot be produced by one actor alone since it is essential that these events are understood by others as meaningful for them to become socially relevant. In an elevator, a short-term contact with sensitive body parts of a stranger may pass unnoticed by one of the affected individuals. It might well be noticed but be interpreted as an accident rather than as meaningful in any social sense. But it is only by means of institutionalized structures, in this case the social expectations in a public place (Goffman 1963, 139; Hirschauer 2005), that a particular kind of behavior may be identified as a noticeable social expression. It may thus be understood, for example, as a blatantly obvious advance. Thereby, however futile it may be, this event contributes to the reproduction of communicative structures. It appears and disappears, but it may serve as a reference point or as a construed beginning of a narrative ending with a marriage or a criminal charge. In both cases it may be important for the narrative to attribute not only intentions to actors in a particular situation but also to distribute roles, actions, reactions and experiences in retrospect. As mentioned before, not only action may be attributed in such narratives but also experience: Who can be held responsible for a bodily contact? Who was actively engaged in this event and who was just experiencing (or suffering from) an action? This is basically the stuff narratives are made of, including all kinds of conflicts, competitions, contingencies, ambiguities and intricacies involved in the interpretation of events, as Wagner-Pacifici (2010) shows with stunning sociological intuition using the empirical example of 9/11.

At any rate, no matter whether a communicative event is a terrorist attack or whether it merely refers to an attack (or an earthquake) and »copies« it (Wagner-Pacifici 2010, 1362–64): only if an event is understood as meaningful information and attributed to a communicative intention, that is a (non-)verbal message, does it become a communicative event and contribute to the reproduction of social structures. Therefore, Niklas Luhmann suggested defining a communicative event as a synthesis of three selections: information, message and understanding (Luhmann 1995, 137–39). These three selections cannot be determined by individual actors since they do not have the receiver's perception and attention at

their free disposal. Instead, events are synthesized by an emergent order with its own structures of selectivity. Therefore, the only way to find out whether a message is being understood is by means of a subsequent communicative event. In our fictional »crowded elevator« scenario, this may be, for example, a slap in the face or a »confirming allusion« (Schegloff 1996).

Another implication is that the merging of these three selections to a communicative event cannot be observed directly but only assumed hypothetically and in retrospect in practice as well as in research. These selections occur in a complex stream of social behavior which gets punctuated and interpreted retrospectively in the form of socially constructed events—a subject of intensive research in social psychology but still relatively unnoticed in history and sociology (Barker 1963; Bateson 1972, 170–72; Leeds-Hurwitz 1990, 97–98; Smith and Williamson 1977, 104–6; Watzlawick et al. 1967, 54–56; Weick 1979, 194–96). In this sense, and following Andrew Abbott (1984, 192–94), events can be described as conceptual and hypothetical assumptions about a particular sequence of occurrences. Communication constructs an event as an abstract hypothesis by colligating occurrences of messaging and understanding information. In contemporary society, these communicative events are usually semantically flagged as »actions.« A communicative event marked as action thus appears and disappears simultaneously. However, it should be made clear that the simultaneity of appearance and disappearance does not refer to any kind of objective time measure, but rather to the way events are handled in social practice. Each event signified as action can still be decomposed into various occurrences. These occurrences are then again transformed into colligated events which can be processed as simultaneously appearing and disappearing. But the temporal limitation of action or, as the case may be, its »atomization« does not vary with the analyst's interest but with the problem communicatively referred to in social practice. Again, the framework presented here re-describes analytical problems as practical problems. This, however, presupposes the development of a semantics of theory (communicative events) that is clearly distinguishable from a semantics of practice (actions).

The practical semantic of action not only constitutes the communicative event by »naming« it. Actions are also attributed to »actors« who endure the event and act as temporally stable carriers: »[S]ome materials are more *durable* than others and so maintain their relational patterns for longer. Imagine a continuum. Thoughts are cheap but they do not last long, and speech lasts very little longer. But when we start to *perform* relations—and in particular when we *embody* them […]—they may last longer« (Law 1992, 387). Apart from that, as mentioned before, the modern understanding of action as causation implies an endless temporal horizon, making it possible to relate an event with many other past and anticipated events. What is highly problematic for sociological explanations is functional for communication, which has much more leeway in integrating diverse temporal perspectives in a given present. This is particularly important in modern society where social spheres like religion, science, politics, the economy, etc. develop their own temporalities which may to some extent drift apart, making simultaneous temporal integration by one single act difficult to achieve. But the semantic of action makes it possible to focus on one problem by postponing others. It also allows long-term historical reflection, foresight, planning and the »lengthening of chains of actions«, as Norbert Elias (2010, 370) pointed out—with the important difference that this concept is not applied as an analytical category but analyzed as a semantic artifact of communicative self-description.

Conclusion

Considering the explanatory value of events has created new momentum in debates on the relation between structure and agency. However, the growing interest in events has also highlighted the necessity to reconsider the temporality of structures and actions. At least two obstacles arise when events become an element of theorizing on structures and agency. The first rather epistemological obstacle is a terminological conflation between categories of theory and categories of practice. This conflation leads on the one hand to theoretical inconsistencies, particularly when action is being described in causal terms and events are being considered as temporal accumulation of actions. On the other, it points at the

problem-solving capacity of a particular understanding of agency within social practices. In this sense, events and actions may be considered simplifying reifications with a social function rather than analytically promising terms. With the communicative framework introduced here, »agency« can be discussed as a contingent and historically variable category of social practice.[9]

The second obstacle is rather »ontological« and concerns the density of time. From the analyst's point of view, it seems rather unproblematic to call the French Revolution an event, although it may easily be decomposed into myriads of particular events. But with the same argument, the history of mankind may also be called an event. An approach focusing on the communicative construction of events and actions as an emergent process would avoid analytical problems arising from the density of time. Considering this approach makes an eventful analysis of social practices appear a worthwhile interdisciplinary undertaking in history as well as in sociology. Its application and further methodological refinement, however, will depend on both structures and events.

---

9   Starting from rather different assumptions, actor-network theory seems to agree on this point by coining the term *punctualization* for social practices of *translating* complex relational network-effects into individual agency (Law 1992).

References

Abbott, Andrew. 1984. »Event Sequence and Event Duration: Colligation and Measurement.« *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History* 17 (4): 192–204.

—— 2010. *Time Matters: On Theory and Method.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Aisenberg, A. 2008. »Bourdieu, Ambiguity, and the Significance of Events.« *differences* 19 (2): 82–98.

Badiou, Alain. 2003. *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy.* London: Continuum.

—— 2007. *Being and Event.* London: Continuum International Publishing.

Barker, Roger G. 1963. *The Stream of Behavior: Explorations of Its Structure and Content.* East Norwalk: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Bateson, Gregory. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: A Revolutionary Approach to Man's Understanding of Himself.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Bennett, Andrew, and Jeffrey T. Checkel, eds. 2015. *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool.* Strategies for Social Inquiry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Blau, Peter M. 1964. *Exchange and Power in Social Life.* New York: Wiley.

Bora, Alfons. 2015. »Vanishing Points. Responsibility as a Normative Shifting Symbol and the Search for Social Addressability.« *Soziale Systeme* 19 (2): 456–69.

Borup, Mads, Nik Brown, Kornelia Konrad, and Harro van Lente. 2006. »The Sociology of Expectations in Science and Technology.« *Technology Analysis and Strategic Management* 18 (3/4): 285–98.

Braun, Theodore E. D., and John B. Radner, eds. 2005. *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755: Representations and Reactions.* SVEC 2005:02. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation.

Brown, Nik, and Mike Michael. 2003. »A Sociology of Expectations: Retrospecting Prospects and Prospecting Retrospects.« *Technology Analysis and Strategic Management* 15 (1): 3–18.

Butts, Carter T. 2008. »A Relational Event Framework for Social Action.« *Sociological Methodology* 38 (1): 155–200.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2012. »Human Agency in the Anthropocene.« *Perspectives on History* 50 (9): 35–36.

Chakravartty, Anjan. 2005. »Causal Realism: Events and Processes.« *Erkenntnis* 63 (1): 7–31.

Coleman, James S. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Crittenden, Kathleen S. 1983. »Sociological Aspects of Attribution.« *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1): 425–46.

Della Porta, Donatella. 2008. »Eventful Protest, Global Conflicts.« *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 9 (2): 27–56.

Durkheim, Émile. 2013. *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and Its Method.* Edited by Steven Lukes. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Eisenstadt, Shmuel N. 2006. *The Great Revolutions and the Civilizations of Modernity.* Leiden: Brill.

Elias, Norbert. 2010. *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations.* Malden: Blackwell.

Elster, Jon. 2015. *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Emirbayer, Mustafa, and Ann Mische. 1998. »What Is Agency?« *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (4): 962–1023.

Flynn, Thomas R. 2004. »Foucault as Philosopher of the Historical Event.« In *Ereignis auf Französisch: Von Bergson bis Deleuze*, edited by Marc Rölli, 209–34. München: Fink.

Foucault, Michel. 2013. *Archaeology of Knowledge.* Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Galtung, Johan. 1959. »Expectations and Interaction Processes.« *Inquiry* 2 (1–4): 213–34.

Galtung, Johan, and Mari H. Ruge. 1965. »The Structure of Foreign News.« *Journal of Peace Research* 2 (1): 64–90.

Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. *Studies in Ethnomethodology.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Giddens, Anthony. 1985. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

—— 1997. *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gilmore, Zackary I., and Jason M. O'Donoughue. 2015. *The Archaeology of Events: Cultural Change and Continuity in the Pre-Columbian Southeast.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings.* New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

—— 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

—— 1976. »Replies and Responses.« *Language in Society* 5 (3): 257–313.

—— 1981. *Forms of Talk.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gouldner, Alvin W. 1960. »The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement.« *American Sociological Review* 25 (2): 161–78.

Griffin, Larry J. 1992. »Temporality, Events, and Explanation in Historical Sociology.« *Sociological Methods and Research* 20 (4): 403–27.

Hays, Sharon. 1994. »Structure and Agency and the Sticky Problem of Culture.« *Sociological Theory* 12 (1): 57–72.

Heider, Fritz. 1958. *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations.* New York: Wiley.

Hirschauer, Stefan. 2005. »On Doing Being a Stranger: The Practical Constitution of Civil Inattention.« *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 35 (1): 41–67.

Johnson, Mark. 1987. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Knorr Cetina, Karin, and A. V. Cicourel. 2014. *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro- and Macro-sociologies.* Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 2010. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought.* New York: Basic Books.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Law, John. 1992. »Notes on the Theory of the Actor-Network: Ordering, Strategy, and Heterogeneity.« *Systems Practice* 5 (4): 379–93.

Leeds-Hurwitz, Wendy. 1990. *Communication in Everyday Life: A Social Interpretation.* Norwood: Ablex Publ.

Lizardo, Omar. 2013. »Re-conceptualizing Abstract Conceptualization in Social Theory: The Case of the ›Structure‹ Concept.« *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 43 (2): 155–80.

Luckmann, Thomas. 1980. *Lebenswelt und Gesellschaft: Grundstrukturen und geschichtliche Wandlungen*. Paderborn: Schöningh.

Luhmann, Niklas. 1995. *Social Systems*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Martin, John L. 2009. *Social Structures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—— 2011. *The Explanation of Social Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Merton, Robert K. 1936. »The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action.« *American Sociological Review* 1 (6): 894–904.

Moore, Adam. 2011. »The Eventfulness of Social Reproduction.« *Sociological Theory* 29 (4): 294–314.

New, Caroline. 1994. »Structure, Agency and Social Transformation.« *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 24 (3): 187–205.

Nickel, Philip J. 2009. »Trust, Staking, and Expectations.« *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 39 (3): 345–62.

Norman, Donald A. 2013. *The Design of Everyday Things*. New York: Basic Books.

Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. 1995. »Structure, Event and Historical Metaphor: Rice and Identities in Japanese History.« *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1 (2): 227–53.

Onaka, Fumiya. 2013. »Aspects of Process Theories and Process-Oriented Methodologies in Historical and Comparative Sociology: An Introduction.« *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 38 (2): 161–71.

Parsons, Talcott. 1937. *The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Porpora, Douglas V. 1989. »Four Concepts of Social Structure.« *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 19 (2): 195–211.

Pouliot, Vincent. 2014. »Practice Tracing.« In *Process Tracing*, edited by Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, 237–59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 2012. *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sacks, Harvey, Emanuel A. Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson. 1974. »A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation.« *Language* 50 (4): 696–735.

Sahlins, Marshall. 1987. *Islands of History*. London: Tavistock.

Schank, Roger C. 1977. »Rules and Topics in Conversation.« *Cognitive Science* 1 (4): 421–41.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. 1996. »Confirming Allusions: Toward an Empirical Account of Action.« *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (1): 161–216.

Schutz, Alfred. 1989. *The Structures of the Life-World*. Vol. 2. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Searle, John R. 1994. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Reprint. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sewell, W. H. 1992. »A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation.« *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1): 1–29.

Sewell, William H., Jr. 1996. »Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille.« *Theory and Society* 25 (6): 841–81.

—— 2005. *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Simmel, Georg. 1916. *Das Problem der historischen Zeit*. Berlin: Reuther and Reichard.

Smith, Dennis R., and L. K. Williamson. 1977. *Interpersonal Communication: Roles, Rules, Strategies, and Games*. Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown.

Strand, Michael, and Omar Lizardo. 2015. »Beyond World Images: Belief as Embodied Action in the World.« *Sociological Theory* 33 (1): 44–70.

Theodoraki, Eleni. 2007. *Olympic Event Organization.* Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Turner, Victor. 2006. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Vaidyanathan, Brandon, Michael Strand, Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick, Thomas Buschman, Meghan Davis, and Amanda Varela. 2016. »Causality in Contemporary American Sociology: An Empirical Assessment and Critique.« *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 46 (1): 3–26.

Vollmer, Hendrik. 2013a. *The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change: Punctuated Cooperation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—— 2013b. »What Kind of Game is Everyday Interaction?« *Rationality and Society* 25 (3): 370–404.

Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. 2010. »Theorizing the Restlessness of Events.« *American Journal of Sociology* 115 (5): 1351–86.

—— 2017. *What Is an Event?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Watzlawick, Paul, Janet B. Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson. 1967. *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes.* New York: Norton.

Weber, Max. 1979. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

—— 1989. *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen Konfuzianismus und Taoismus: Schriften 1915–1920.* Edited by Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer. Tübingen: Mohr.

—— 2012. »The Objectivity of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy.« In *Collected Methodological Writings*, edited by Hans H. Bruun and Sam Whimster, 100–138. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Weick, Karl E. 1979. *The Social Psychology of Organizing.* Reading: Addison-Wesley.

White, Hayden. 1973. »Interpretation in History.« *New Literary History* 4 (2): 281–314.

—— 1980. »The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality.« *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1): 5–27.

—— 2008. »The Historical Event.« *differences* 19 (2): 9–34.

Youssef, Ramy. 2016. »State Support of Terrorist Organisations as a Potential Means of Hybrid Threat Projection.« In *Networked Insecurity—Hybrid Threats in the 21st Century*, edited by Anton Dengg and Michael Schurian, 175–92. Schriftenreihe der Landesverteidigungsakademie. Vienna: Federal Ministry of Defence and Sports.

<center>***</center>

Ramy Youssef, Department of History and Sociology, University of Konstanz: ramy.youssef@uni-konstanz.de.