

Temporality and Contention:

Challenging Action and the Logics of History

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1 Introduction

This essay aspires to provide a theoretical blueprint for integrating the social scientific analysis of contentious action - such as protests, collective violence, social movements, and revolution - with a historicist sensitivity for temporality. What is distinct about a historical approach to the study of contention? What ontological and epistemological commitments does this approach entail? To what extent does contention *interact* with time, as opposed to simply *unfolding* over time? And are transformative contentious events subject to a single, homogenous temporal logic or a complex, heterogenous alternative? These are the fascinating, yet elusive, questions I aim to constructively address.

The complexity of this theoretical agenda necessitates standing on the shoulders of giants, as it were. And so this essay begins in Section II with a critical overview of the pathbreaking contribution of William Sewell - part social historian, part historical sociologist - in his magisterial *Logics of History*. With Sewell's aid we shall explore how the historical imagination conceives of causality and temporality, and how this nuanced treatment exposes fundamental flaws in the arguments forwarded by mainstream scholars of contentious politics. We then consider, and critically assess, Sewell's favored conception of an "eventful" temporality, which underscores how resilient social structures can be transformed by contingent occurrences and powerful exercises of individual agency. While laudably ambitious and generally compelling, in Section III I argue that the residual flaws of Sewell's intervention necessitate scouting the scholarly landscape for ways to bolster his "eventful" theory of history. First, I claim that Sewell undertheorizes the causal significance of event *duration* and its interaction with specifically *contentious* acts of individual agency. I thus turn to Mark Beissinger's fertile theory of "thickened" history in *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* to underscore how temporally compressed contentious events are both unique in their underlying dynamics and their transformative potential. Secondly, I posit that Sewell's rejection of the comparative method impedes social scientists' ability to probe how the *same historical event* can produce remarkably *heterogenous structural legacies* when it interacts with variant social context. To sharpen this critique and defend the utility of the comparative method, I turn to Ruth and David Collier's *Shaping the Political Arena*,

which traces how the the institutionalization of organized labor across eight Latin American states in the early 20th century produced divergent trajectories of political development due to the unique political contexts within which this historical event unfolded. Finally, I conclude in Section IV by providing a restatement of Sewell’s prescriptive intervention that incorporates the lessons learned via a critical review of Beissinger and Collier and Collier’s work.

2 “Eventful Temporality:” Contention and the Transformation of Structures

Trained as a social historian, close friend of cultural anthropologists, and member of both the sociology and political science departments at the University of Chicago at various points during his professional career, William Sewell is uniquely positioned to integrate the historical imagination with social scientific theory. Furthermore, Sewell’s lifelong research interest in revolution and social change in France renders his magnum opus - *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* - an essential point of departure for any theorization of contention and temporality. In this light, it is helpful to compartmentalize and sequentially discuss Sewell’s principal contributions, namely: (i) His exposition of the assumptions necessary for historical explanation, (ii) his critique of the prevailing models of temporality in the contentious politics literature, and (iii) his argument in favor of an “eventful” conception of temporality.

2.1 Building Blocks: The Ontology and Epistemology of Historical Explanation

While historians privilege narrative over explicit theorization, Sewell argues that their nuanced treatment of temporality is derived from a set of assumptions that all historically-engaged social scientists would benefit from adopting. We can usefully treat these assumptions as the latent ontology of social historians - as the ways the social world is assumed to work by Sewell and his colleagues. This ontology is captured in the conviction that time is (i) *fateful*, (2) *complex*, and (3) *heterogeneous*. Time is fateful because it is “irreversible, in the sense that an action, once taken, or an event, once experienced, cannot be obliterated” (Sewell 2005: 6). It is complex in the sense that “historical events...always combine social processes with very different temporalities - relatively gradual or long-run social trends, more volatile swings of public opinion, punctual accidental happenings...oscillating economic or climatic rhythms - which are brought together in specific ways, at specific places and times, in a particular sequence” (Ibid: 9). Finally, time is heterogeneous given that “what entities exist in the social world, how they operate, and what they mean changes fundamentally over time” (Ibid).

Ontology begets epistemology, in the sense that the assumptions we make about the state of the social world influence the means appropriate for its study. The fact that time is fateful compels historically-minded social scientists to “insist on the importance of *chronology*...we cannot know why something happens or what its significance might be without knowing where it fits in a sequence of happenings” (Ibid: 10-11). Further, temporal complexity and heterogeneity necessitate replacing a search for generalizable causal laws akin

to those in the physical sciences with a sensitivity for causal heterogeneity via historical contextualization. After all, “the consequences of a given act,” Sewell posits, “are not intrinsic in the act but rather will depend on the nature of the social world within which it takes place” (Ibid: 9-10).

2.2 Teleological and Experimental Temporality - Or the Shortcomings of Tilly and Skocpol

The purpose of outlining historians’ ontological and epistemological commitments lies in Sewell’s conviction that most political sociologists studying contentious collective action deploy flawed conceptions of temporality. This argument is compellingly delivered via a critique of Charles Tilly’s “teleological” and Theda Skocpol’s “experimental” conceptions of temporality, to which we now turn.

Sewell defines teleological temporality as “the attribution of the cause of a historical happening... to abstract transhistorical processes leading to some future historical state. Events in some historical present, in other words, are actually explained by events in the future” (Ibid: 84). This perspective not only violates assumptions of temporal complexity and heterogeneity, but it converts chronology from a process of historical contextualization into a process whereby historical events are squeezed into a theoretical straight-jacket positing universal and unidirectional causal forces. A prominent and somewhat unlikely perpetrator of this flawed logic is Charles Tilly. First, in *The Vendee*¹ Tilly argues that the history of pre-industrial collective violence in the Val-Saumurois could be traced to its more advanced stage of urbanization compared to the relatively more traditional and complacent region of the Mauges. In Tilly’s own words, this approach “[compares] communities at roughly the same point in time as if they were at different stages of progression from a common origin” (Ibid: 88). Yet Sewell argues that “[t]he contrasting forms of social organization that Tilly attributes to differences in a progressive development... were actually constant and virtually unchanging features of the rural environment... Tilly, in short, committed the fallacy of transmuting a fixed social-geographical difference in social organization into putative stages in the linear development of the abstract master process of urbanization” (Ibid: 89-90). Such teleological predilections remained inculcated in Tilly’s later scholarship. For example, Tilly’s analyses of the changing repertoire of contentious collective action in 19th century France and Britain² “frequently takes on a teleological quality, largely because the asserted causes - capitalist development and state centralization - occur offstage, outside of Tilly’s texts, where they are essentially assumed as ever-present and ever-rising forces, a kind of eternal yeast” (Ibid: 90-91). Ultimately, this conception masks the contingency, complexity, heterogeneity, and agency underlying all processes of contentious social change.

Theda Skocpol’s sin is not an embrace of teleological temporality but her analysis of history using quasi-

¹Tilly, Charles. 1964. *The Vendee*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

²Tilly, Charles. 1989. *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press; Tilly, Charles. 1998. *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

experimental methods. Specifically, in *States and Social Revolutions*³ Skocpol deploys Millian methods of comparison to theorize that the great social revolutions - the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions - were caused by a conjunction of three necessary conditions: “(1) military backwardness, (2) politically powerful landlord classes, and (3) autonomous peasant communities” (Ibid: 93). Yet Skocpol’s comparative historical analyses are embarrassingly antihistorical. To permit comparison, Skocpol’s experimental temporality assumes (i) case equivalence - that is, “that her three great social revolutions are in fact a uniform class of objects governed by identical causal laws,” as well as (ii) case independence, or that the outcomes of one revolution have no effect on a subsequent revolution (Ibid: 94-95). This approach amounts to “cutting up the congealed block of historical time into artificially interchangeable units,” ignoring the fatefulness of historical sequences and the heterogeneity of causal processes across time. For example, the Industrial Revolution “intervened” between the French and Russian Revolutions, and consequently one could plausibly argue that “the revolt of the Petersburg and Moscow proletariat was a necessary condition for social revolution in Russia in 1917, even if it was not a condition for the French Revolution in 1789” (Ibid: 94-95). Ultimately, Skocpol’s experimental temporality blinds her to this possibility. More broadly, case equivalence and independence can rarely be mutually satisfied, as “[t]he obvious way to assure independence is to compare phenomena that are widely separated in space and time... But the very remoteness that assures independence makes the assumption of equivalence impossible to sustain” (Ibid: 96). As a consequence, the historical study of contention is irreconcilable with an experimental treatment of time.

2.3 The Promise of “Eventful” History - Or the Consequential Death of Captain Cook

Turning from critique to constructive intervention, Sewell proposes substituting teleological or experimental understandings of time with an “eventful” conception of temporality. His point of departure is the assumption that the world is governed by social structures - defined as “mutually sustaining cultural schemas [like language] and sets of resources [like the means of production] that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action” (Ibid: 151). Thus while structures are enduring, and most quotidian interactions serve only to reproduce extant structures, this definition highlights how structures also contain the seeds of change and consequential human agency. Individuals can redeploy inherited cultural schemas towards new ends, since culture is “transposable” and the ever-present “multiplicity of structures” creates spaces of ambiguity and tension that can be creatively manipulated (Ibid: 140). A similar logic applies to the distribution of material resources, insofar as “agents are empowered by structures, both by the knowledge of cultural schemas that enables them to mobilize resources and by the access to resources that enables them to enact schemas” (Ibid: 151). It is in this light that an “eventful temporality” can emerge: “Events

³Skocpol, Theda. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

may be defined as that relatively rare subclass of happenings that significantly transform structures. An eventful conception of temporality, therefore, is one that takes into account the transformation of structures by events” (Ibid: 100).

Sewell’s exemplar for this conception of “eventful” temporality is the work of Marshall Sahlins, a structural anthropologist who studied social change following the 1779 landing of the British in Hawaii.⁴ Sewell underscores how the interactions - and the violence - that ensued from this historical event spurred a fundamental structural transformation. When Captain Cook landed in Kelakekua Bay, the local population made sense of this unprecedented occurrence by integrating Cook and his crew within Hawaiian mythology. The British “were seen as being from Kahiki, the “invisible lands beyond the horizon,” and hence as divine. In Hawaiian culture, the physical arrival of divine beings was extraordinary but not unprecedented: according to myth, both the current royal line and the kings they deposed were divine beings who had also arrived by sea from distant lands” (Ibid: 201). Hence even unprecedented happenings “can only be appropriated and acted by people in terms of their existing cultural categories,” implying that the integration of an exogenous occurrence within “a culture is [also] a mode of its reproduction” (Ibid: 200). Yet if this were the end of the story Cook’s landing would fail to constitute an event, for it would reinforce rather than transform Hawaiian social structures. In this light, it was a contingent occurrence that made all the difference. While at sea, Cook’s ship “sprung a mast,” and his crew was forced to return to Hawaii to construct a replacement (Ibid: 201). This second landing did not align with extant mythology, resulting in an “atmosphere of mutual suspicion and hostility:” Might not the divine Cook attempt “to overthrow the king and take power himself?” (Ibid). As tensions mounted, the locals raided Cook’s ship. Cook retaliated by seeking to take the king hostage, but he was quickly outnumbered: Cook was “killed by a dagger thrust and then fallen upon by more than a hundred Hawaiians” (Ibid). It was this contentious interaction that initiated a profound structural transformation. Once dead, Cook was reappropriated as a celestial spirit by Hawaii’s rulers - particularly by King Kamehameha who ascended to the throne shortly after Cook’s death. Kamehameha venerated Cook, his clothes, and his relics, and this “domesticated Cook in important ways. It not only made the potentially threatening appearance of white men with huge ships, metal tools, an firearms thinkable, but made these novel happenings susceptible to manipulation and calculation according to a Hawaiian logic. Having domesticated [Europeanness] through the person of Captain Cook, Kamehameha could confidently trust European traders . . . his promotion of European trade brought him enough guns, ships, and European advisors to conquer the entire Hawaiian archipelago and subject it to his unified rule” (Ibid: 201-202).

In short, the landing of the British in Hawaii and the ensuing contention contain all the elements of “eventful” temporality. A conjuncture of structures - the cultural schemas and resources of the Hawaiians

⁴Sahlins, Marshall. 1981. *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

and the British - provoked a “highly volatile situation,” along with a series of contingent interactions and exercises of agency that engendered an enduring transformation of Hawaiian society (Ibid: 223).

3 Duration, Contention, and Comparison: Elaborating “Eventful” History

Sewell’s eventful temporality is theoretically ambitious and constructive, delivering on its promise to demonstrate how social scientists have much to learn from historians’ treatment of time. Yet there remain at least three crucial areas for further development of Sewell’s framework, as captured by (1) its lack of attention to the consequences of event duration, (2) its implicit and underdeveloped linking of contentious collective action with eventful temporality, and (3) its premature dismissal of the comparative method.

First, the temporal duration of the conceptual category of “event” remains undertheorized in Sewell’s work. Indeed, Sewell suggests that the duration of an event is a byproduct of the temporal scope of a given research agenda: “When one is dealing with millennial time-scales, some of what historians or sociologists might think of as gradual processes or trends begin to look like events. . . This implies that the temporality of the theoretical category “event” is not self-evident but rather must be constructed theoretically in relation to the time-scale of the processes being studied” (Ibid: 121-122). Pragmatically, this conclusion is reasonable enough. Yet by emphasizing the deductive, “constructed” quality of event duration, Sewell’s framework ignores the empirical distinctiveness of the social processes underlying temporally brief events, such as revolutions, when compared to temporally prolonged events, such as industrialization. That is, insofar as temporally prolonged event E_p and temporally concentrated event E_c both have a similarly transformative structural outcome O , Sewell’s framework treats E_p and E_c as functionally equivalent. Yet we might be interested in how the differences in the duration between E_p and E_c alter the dynamics of their underlying causal processes, independently of the resulting structural effects.

Secondly, although Sewell’s empirical examples are all related to various acts of contention, he does not theorize how events engendered via contentious collective action may be qualitatively different from, or empirically more likely than, events lacking contentious dynamics. How does protest, collective violence, or revolutionary action shape the form and transformative potential of social agency? On this intriguing question, Sewell falls silent, even though his selection of illustrative cases implies that there may be an important association between contention and eventful temporality.

Finally, despite Sewell’s conviction that temporality is heterogeneous, his dismissal of “experimental” temporality limits social scientists’ ability to leverage the comparative method to explore how similar events may engender diverse legacies. Indeed, most of Sewell’s empirical illustrations - from the landing of Captain Cook in Hawaii to the French Revolution - consist of single case studies lacking in empirical counterfactuals. Yet a historically transformative “event” that commonly affects multiple cases may nonetheless produce diverse structural transformations due to the diversity of social context within which it unfolds. Hence by dismissing the comparative method, Sewell precludes an assessment of how contextual heterogeneity may

combine with a single, trans-contextual event to produce distinct structural transformations.

How can we address the foregoing shortcomings in Sewell's approach? Thankfully, the extant scholarship on social movements and revolution offers plenty of suggestions for how to proceed. In particular, I argue that we can leverage the contributions of Mark Beissinger and David and Ruth Collier to forge a constructive way forward. First, Beissinger's *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* introduces the concept of "thickened history" that treats seriously how temporal compression and contentious collective action combine to produce a distinct type of event. In so doing, Beissinger helps us remedy Sewell's under-theorization of event duration and the relationship between contention and transformative events. Second, Collier and Collier's *Shaping the Political Arena* combines Sewell's emphasis on temporal sequencing with the comparative method to explore how a common historical event - the early 20th century incorporation of the labor movement across eight Latin American countries - interacted with a diversity of political contexts to produce distinct legacies, thereby showcasing how comparative analysis facilitates the study of temporal heterogeneity. To this end, let us consider Beissinger and the Colliers' contributions in turn.

3.1 "Thickened" History

Beissinger's *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* explores how over a temporally compressed period of time - from 1987 through 1990 - "the seemingly impossible" - the collapse of the Soviet Union - "came to be widely viewed as the seemingly inevitable" (Beissinger 2002: 3). Descriptively, the sequence of events has its origins in the increasing transparency of Soviet institutions and freedom of expression accompanying Mikhail Gorbachev's *Glasnost* (Ibid: 47). As internal fissures within the Politburo began to emerge in September 1987, *Glasnost* facilitated media coverage of the split within the Soviet leadership (Ibid: 64). In response, "interactive attempts to contest the state grew regularized and began to influence one another" for the first time (Ibid: 74). These challenging acts mobilized around previously dormant national identities: The Soviet State had always been an overextended ethnofederal policy comprised of "several distinct, compactly settled, cultural entities," a fact that had hitherto been masked by Soviet propaganda and the threat of state repression (Ibid: 48; 79). Yet for the first time - often out of state incompetence rather than strategic planning - these early protests were not "shut down," contributing to a growing perception that state contestation was becoming possible (Ibid: 67). Within a few months the challenging groups were sharing "pamphlets, expertise, modes of challenge, and mobilizational frames" (Ibid: 83). Contentious collective action reached a boiling point in early 1989 as the first semi-competitive electoral campaign spurred challengers to develop an organizational infrastructure to mobilize the electorate and cultivate shared grievances in response to the regime's efforts to "control nominations and electoral outcomes" (Ibid: 86). By 1990 the Soviet State was crumbling, and "in many parts of the USSR demonstration activity... had become a normal means for dealing with political conflict" (Ibid: 90).

Two elements stand out in Beissinger's account of this remarkable historical moment: (i) Temporal compres-

sion and (ii) the transformative power of contention. Beginning with the first element, Beissinger highlights that “[n]ot all historical eras are alike,” for while “there are times when change occurs so slowly that time seems almost frozen. . . there are other times when change is so compressed, blaring, and fundamental that it is almost impossible to take its measure” (Ibid: 47). The 1987-1990 period comprised the latter category - a moment of “thickened history” where “what takes place. . . has the potential to move history onto tracks otherwise unimaginable, affecting the prisms through which individuals relate to authority, consolidating conviction around new norms, and forcing individuals to make choices among competing categories of identity about which they may previously have given little thought - all within an extremely compressed period of time” (Ibid: 27). Russians themselves recognized the simultaneity and rapid sequencing of events: One Soviet journalist remarked in 1989 that “[we] are living in an extremely condensed historical period. Social processes which earlier required decades now develop in a matter of months” (Ibid). In the same year, Gorbachev admitted at a special Communist Party conference that “restructuring the party is lagging substantially behind the processes taking place in society” (Ibid: 92). This, indeed, is one of the distinct features of “thickened” history: “the pace of events tends to outstrip the movement of institutions and the understanding of leaders” (Ibid). Information overload, the density of interaction between diverse social actors, and the diffusion of contention engendered “enormous confusion and division within Soviet institutions,” allowing the hypertrophy of challenging acts to play “an increasingly significant role in their own causal structure” (Ibid: 97; 27). In this light, it is precisely the temporal compression of this contentious event that bolsters the causal role of human agency and contingent interactions and erodes the constraints of social structure.

Yet what bolstered the transformative power of this historical event was not solely temporal compression, but its interaction with a tide of identity-driven contentious collective action. Contention played two critical roles. First, it reinforced the “spectaclelike quality” of the collapse of the Soviet state (Ibid: 15). All events are comprised of at least three categories of agents - those who uphold a given order, those who challenge it, and those who observe. Events are at their most transformative when they invite “the “observer” to become agent: to affirm the transcendence of a prior series and the ascendancy of its alternative” (Ibid: 15-16). Confrontations with the police, mass demonstrations, and other forms of protest concentrate the semiotic drama of challenging action and the magnetic draw of participating in making history. The more spectacular the contentious challenge, the more corrupt, demoralized, and confused the Soviet State appeared: “As Albert Hirschman has noted, “People enjoy and feel empowered by the confidence, however vague, that they have history on their side”” (Ibid: 24). Secondly, contentious action sharpened what Sewell termed the “conjuncture of structures” - the competition of divergent cultural schemas, identity-commitments, and resource allotments. As Beissinger emphasizes, “[it] is only in uncommon circumstances - in the context of the heightened challenge represented by the event - that individuals in large numbers are confronted with the necessity of having to choose between competing cultural allegiances” (Ibid: 25). The artificiality of Soviet

identity, no longer resolutely backed by the barrel of a gun, became apparent as a “tide of nationalism” fragmented the Soviet State from below. Yet it was only via semiotically charged interactions, in the context of uncertain, risky, subversive challenging acts, that the unselfconscious acceptance of state-directed identity commitments could be challenged and displaced by a competing cultural fabric that had previously been “effectively marginalized” (Ibid: 47). In short, a conjuncture of structures is insufficient for the emergence of a transformative event: “purposeful forms of action” to sharpen the tension inherent in the conjuncture with the “aim to transform rather than to reproduce” is equally necessary (Ibid: 15). And the most spectacular means of doing so is through contentious collective action.

3.2 Temporal Heterogeneity and the Comparative Method

Whereas Beissinger’s analysis showcases the conjunctural effect of temporal compression and contention, Ruth and David Collier’s *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* demonstrates how a more incremental process of social change can interact with variant political context to produce distinct structural legacies. The antecedent conditions for this transformative period were laid over several decades in the late 19th century. Specifically, broad-based socioeconomic transformations were overspreading much of Latin America: Traditional oligarchic groups’ political dominance was challenged by a new cohort of reformist elites from the emergent middle class; an economic policy of *laissez-faire* was being replaced by growing state intervention in social, welfare, and economic affairs; and industrialization was giving rise to European-inspired unionization efforts amongst urban laborers (Collier and Collier 1991: 6). In the countries with the longest history of urban commercial and industrial development - Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela - the resulting “enclaves” of export production and large-scale urban factories bolstered labor collective action and facilitated unions’ confrontations with the state (Ibid: 41).

By the early 20th century this shifting social landscape had set the stage for a fundamental transformation in state-labor relations: Initial efforts by the state to repress and exclude labor were replaced by the active legitimation and institutionalization of unions (Ibid: 7). This process of “labor incorporation” - which occurred between 1900 and 1950 across the eight cases and lasted approximately a decade within each country - constitutes what Collier and Collier term a “critical juncture,” or “a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies” (Ibid: 162; 29). What is unique about this definition - particularly when compared to the subsequent historical institutionalist scholarship on the subject - is that a critical juncture is conceived not as a historical event within a single context (as, say, in Marshall Sahlins’ account of Captain Cook’s death) but as a cross-contextual and heterogeneously consequential event. Comparative analysis is thus mandated by conceptual construction, precisely because critical junctures transform structures “in distinct ways in different cases” (Ibid: 30). The most fertile consequence of this definitional choice is that it takes

seriously Sewell's argument that temporal heterogeneity implies causal heterogeneity while simultaneously showcasing the enduring analytic purchase of the comparative method, as we now move to discuss.

"Within the framework of [the] historical commonality" of labor incorporation, Collier and Collier emphasize that "there were fundamental political differences in how this process" occurred (Ibid: 7). In Brazil and Chile, labor incorporation was primarily promoted by the state, which attempted "to address the [so-called] social question by repressing the preexisting unions and replacing them with highly constrained, state-penetrated labor organizations" (Ibid: 169). In the other six cases, labor incorporation was instead promoted by political parties seeking not to co-opt unions but to mobilize them to expand their electoral base. Yet partisan incorporation was championed by parties with fundamentally divergent ideological orientations. In Colombia and Uruguay, labor was incorporated by traditional parties - the Liberals and the Colorados, respectively - resulting in the "most limited form of party mobilization, where new groups were added to the old party coalitions" (Ibid: 165). In Peru and Argentina, labor was mobilized by populist parties "that displaced traditional parties and/or the traditional political class. The incorporation period was [thus] strongly antioligarchic, but not to the point of fundamentally altering property relations in the rural sector" (Ibid). Finally, in Mexico and Venezuela labor was incorporated by radical populist parties seeking to mobilize both the urban working class and the rural peasantry, and consequently the incorporation period "represented [the most] comprehensive assault on the oligarchy and on preexisting property relations" (Ibid). Hence while the result of the incorporation period was common to all eight Latin American countries, Collier and Collier's comparative analysis reveals the extent to which homogeneity of outcome can mask heterogeneity of process.

Given the divergent political contexts within which labor incorporation unfolded, it should be unsurprising that this common critical juncture produced divergent political legacies. In Brazil and Chile's statist path towards labor incorporation, the authoritarian state's objective had been "antidemocratic and antimobilizational" (Ibid: 353). The working class thus laid dormant until opposition to authoritarianism achieved the restoration of competitive elections, at which time the "repoliticization of the working class" emerged as a salient political issue (Ibid). Yet with no history of partisan cultivation of labor interests, the "stage was set for increasing polarization" between labor and populist parties (Ibid: 367). While labor incorporation by traditional parties in Colombia and Uruguay was nowhere near as demobilizing as in Brazil and Chile, partisan conservatism cauterized calls for radical reform and sheltered the power of landed elites. Consequently, "policies that went beyond modest rural reform to a more fundamental restructuring of property and political relationships in the countryside were not adopted" (Ibid: 271). Yet limited reform meant that the counterreformist reaction to the incorporation period was "relatively mild," and consequently neither country was beset by a dramatic, right-wing military coup (Ibid: 354). In contrast, electoral incorporation of unions by populist parties in Peru and Argentina produced "intense popular activation in the urban sector" yet little mobilization in the rural sector, with the effect that the "new political forces" within urban centers

faced a “powerful pole of opposition” from the “economic elites of the agrarian sector” (Ibid: 314). The latter’s vigorous reactionary effort culminated in a “military coup that ousted the reformist governments and inaugurated a period of counterreformist military rule” (Ibid: 354). Finally, the mobilization of labor by radical populist parties in Mexico and Venezuela also “alienated important sectors of society” which formed a conservative “counterrevolutionary or counterreform alliance” (Ibid: 196). While the broad-based coalition between peasantry and labor was retained in both countries - particularly within Mexico’s *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) party - the counterraction by the middle and upper classes produced the de-radicalization of party policy in Mexico and a right-wing military coup in Venezuela (Ibid: 405).

In short, while all eight countries analyzed by Collier and Collier’s comparative historical analysis experienced a common critical juncture at roughly the same historical moment, the process of labor incorporation interacted with distinct country-specific political constellations to produce a remarkably divergent set of legacies. Absent the comparative method, single case studies might well have revealed the transformative impact of labor incorporation, yet it would have been impossible for Collier and Collier to demonstrate the temporal and causal heterogeneity of this historical event.

4 Eventful Temporality: A Restatement

To conclude, it is helpful to take stock of the theoretical ground covered in our journey from Sahlins’ Hawaii to Beissinger’s Soviet State to Collier and Collier’s Latin America. How has this critical review opened a space for the further elaboration of Sewell’s theory of eventful temporality? I propose that three modifications of the original version are in order.

First, event duration is not merely a deductive construction, derivative of a scholar’s research agenda; it is a causally consequential empirical variable that is partially independent of research design. While the extended temporal scope of Ruth and David Collier’s *Shaping the Political Arena* allows them to treat a decade-long period of labor incorporation as a “critical juncture” roughly akin to Sewell’s “event,” the underlying dynamics of the incremental process of labor incorporation *cannot* be the same as the constitutive process of what Beissinger terms “thickened” history. Temporally compressed events are unique because the rapidity of social change is precisely what liberates contingent interactions and human agency from structural constraints and enables them to develop their own recursive causal logic.

Second, contention is not merely an accidental or inconsequential element of some historical events - it is a particularly transformative component of a unique subclass of events. If, as Sewell underscores, historical events arise when a conjuncture of social structures results in the transposition of cultural schemas and resource endowments, then contentious collective action is uniquely suited for sharpening the tensions between competing structures and spectacularly manipulating the ambiguities emerging from said tensions. Indeed, Beissinger’s account of the collapse of the Soviet State demonstrates how the transformation of identity and the displacement of previously resilient cultural schemas can only occur in the context of

contentious exercises of defiance, disruption, and challenge.

Finally, temporal heterogeneity can only be analyzed via the intelligent use of the comparative method, and consequently Sewell's chastisement of what he pejoratively terms "experimental temporality" needs to be qualified. It is true that the comparative method cannot be leveraged to compare cases from widely divergent historical periods or by assuming that events that follow one another will somehow be independent. Yet Collier and Collier brilliantly showcase how the comparative method can be deployed nonetheless. By asserting that a critical juncture affects a multitude of spatially and temporally proximate cases, the unreasonable assumption of independence is relaxed and the comparability of cases is ensured. And by asserting that the distinctiveness of each case will nonetheless interact with the critical juncture to produce divergent legacies, the heterogenous causal impact of transformative events can be extensively explored.

In short, a fully developed theory of eventful temporality must treat temporal duration as a critical causal variable, contentious events as possessive of unique transformative potential, and the comparative method as an essential compass for navigating through the fog of temporal complexity.

5 References

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