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Event Catalogs as Theories

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All empirical social research rests, at least implicitly, on not one but two theories: a theory explaining the phenomenon under study, another theory explaining the generation of evidence concerning the phenomenon. The two theories necessarily interact, setting important constraints on each other. The second theory answers questions about how the phenomenon leaves traces, how analysts can observe those traces, and how analysts can reconstruct attributes, elements, causes, and effects of the phenomenon from those traces. As employed in studies of contentious politics, event catalogs raise all these questions. Competing conceptions of the phenomenon under study as protest, as collective violence, as collective action, as conflict, and as contentious claim-making imply different measurement strategies. The strategy of aggregation follows plausibly from identification of the phenomenon as protest or violence, the strategy of incidence from most of the competing conceptions, the strategy of internal regularities only from treatments of the crucial phenomenon as collective action, conflict, or contentious claim-making.

A vivid memory returns from the Parisian Left Bank almost 40 years later. I write in my tiny, dim garret at the Centre Universitaire International, near the rue des Saints-Pères on the boulevard Saint-Germain. Squinting out of my small window into an interior courtyard, I see a spacious, brightly lighted office, where secretaries, research assistants, and famous scholars scurry in and out. Behind a big desk sits Paul F. Lazarsfeld. Do I feel awe? No, I feel envy.

Although I still live without secretaries, research assistants, and streams of important visitors, these days I work in a big, brightly lit office. Do I notice envy surrounding me? No; of course I assume that I have earned my comfort, and that other people recognize my just desserts. So, no doubt, did Lazarsfeld in those distant days. He had already, after all, exercised a large, salutary influence on how all of us understood, and sometimes even practiced, social research.

With characteristic economy, Lazarsfeld once laid out his approach to proceeding from observation to explanation through measurement in four steps:

1. The original imagery, the intended classification, is put into words and communicated by examples; efforts at definition are made.
2. In the course of this verbalization, often called conceptual analysis, several indicators are mentioned, and these help to decide where a given concrete object (person or group or organization) belongs in regard to the new classificatory concept. As the discussion of the concept expands, the number of eligible indicators increases; the array of these I shall call the *universe of indicators*.
3. Usually this universe is very large, and for practical purposes we have to select a *subset* of indicators which is then made the basis for empirical work.
4. Finally, we have to combine the indicators into some kind of index (Lazarsfeld 1959:48).

Lazarsfeld's instructions convey a more eclectic view of explanation, a less demanding set of requirements for theoretically grounded priors, and a greater readiness to think of variance exhaustion as intellectual success than I would now like my students to take away from their educations. But as a declaration of how much creative theorizing actually goes into what people loosely call measurement, the text serves splendidly.

In fact, no one—not even a Lazarsfeld—can pursue empirical social research effectively without deploying and testing two interdependent bodies of theory simultaneously: a theory embodying explanations of the phenomenon under investigation, and another theory embodying explanations of the *evidence* concerning that phenomenon. The two theories necessarily interact, but they stem from different “originating questions,” as Robert Merton (1959) calls them: questions about certain phenomena, questions about the generation of knowledge concerning the same phenomena.

The two theories inevitably have implications for each other; a theory concerning effects of associational participation on democracy necessarily interacts with a theory concerning how evidence of associational participation, democracy, and their connections comes into being. Each assertion about the effects of associational participation has implications for how and where we could detect those effects, but each assertion about how we might recognize such effects also has implications for the nature of the effects. Since social scientists have the habit of treating the first issue, but not the second, as Theory, let me concentrate on theories that embody explanation of the evidence concerning the phenomenon under investigation. I will illustrate my point from the creation of event catalogs as a means of social research, an activity in which I was already engaged when I looked down enviously at Paul Lazarsfeld's little domain.

Three questions clamor for attention: *First*, how does the phenomenon under investigation leave traces? *Second*, how can analysts elicit or observe those traces? *Third*, using those traces, how can analysts reconstruct specified attributes, elements, causes, or effects of the phenomenon? Event catalogs raise these questions emphatically because anyone who builds them worries unavoidably about problems of selectivity, reliability, verifiability, comparability, bounding, and inclusiveness. If compilers of event catalogs do not worry about these problems, their critics surely will.

An *event catalog* is a set of descriptions of multiple social interactions collected from a delimited set of sources according to relatively uniform procedures. Historical demographers produce catalogs of events from religious or civil registration, thus typically taking baptisms, burials, and weddings to represent the births, deaths, and onsets of cohabitation about which their discipline actually reasons. They have no choice but to elaborate additional theories concerning unregistered births, deaths, and cohabitation; indeed, the powerful event-based historical procedure of family reconstitution concentrates on people who live in households and maintain fairly stable residences precisely to reduce the uncertainties surrounding registration of vital events involving mobile individuals (Willigan and Lynch 1982).

Similarly, criminologists take recorded complaints, arrests, convictions, and incarcerations as evidence concerning crimes, with due warning about selectivity in all these regards and about the “dark figure” of crime (Hagan, Gillis, and Brownfield 1996). Their self-conscious theorizing focuses on the generation of crime, but they cannot escape extensive theorizing about the processes by which crime leaves traces. Event catalogs also figure widely in life course reconstructions, international relations studies, treatments of industrial conflict, social mobility analyses, epidemiology, and a variety of other fields. In all those fields, interdependent theorizing about phenomena and evidence necessarily occurs. Here, however, I concentrate on a field in which event catalogs have become standard tools, and where an abundant literature comparing and

criticizing alternative approaches to their construction has welled up: the study of contentious episodes.

The very definition of contentious episodes raises precisely the sorts of conceptual and theoretical issues this article seeks to clarify. For the moment, nevertheless, it will do to identify a contentious episode as an interaction between at least two parties in the course of which at least one party makes claims that, if realized, would affect another party's welfare. Demands, attacks, petitions, professions of support, and pleas for help all qualify. Following standard practice in the study of contentious episodes, let us narrow the focus to public, discontinuous, collective claim-making where at least one government official figures as a participant or a third party—for example, as an absent object of claims. The narrowing spotlights politically relevant contentious episodes.

Catalogs of politically relevant contentious episodes have sometimes singled out strikes, assassinations, terrorist attacks, riots, lynchings, petitions, meetings, or some broader category of events (see Bohstedt 1983; Diani and Eyerman 1992; Franzosi 1995, 1998; Gerner et al. 1994; Hug and Wisler 1998; Mueller 1997; Oliver and Maney 2000; Oliver and Myers 1999; Rucht and Koopmans 1999; Rucht, Koopmans, and Neidhardt 1998). A minor industry has also grown up around the cataloging and analysis of political demonstrations (see, e.g., Favre, Fillieule, and Mayer 1997; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Tartakowsky 1997). Demonstrations lend themselves to uniform cataloging because within democratic polities they have acquired strikingly standard forms. Political activists in polities exiting from socialism, furthermore, have regularly adopted demonstrations as a means of pressing and publicizing their claims (see, e.g., Beissinger 2001; Mueller 1997; Oberschall 1994; Titarenko, McCarthy, McPhail, and Augustyn 2001). Students of democratic polities and of transitions from socialism have therefore used catalogs of demonstrations as evidence for change and variation in the actors and issues of popular politics.

How did contentious event catalogs come into such widespread use? Neglecting an ample prehistory, let me tell a story of contentious episodes as an object of systematic research from George Rudé to Clark McPhail. In 1959, Rudé's *Crowd in the French Revolution* blazed a trail through political struggle for populist scholars in the overlapping areas of social science and history; they saw the possibility of organizing reports of popular struggles into systematic accounts of change and variation. They would amplify the voices of inarticulate masses. Over the intervening years, they learned how much uncertainty, selectivity, creativity, and interpretation entered into the recording of those voices. As a consequence, the usual procedures for collecting accounts, converting them into comparable records, analyzing their variation, and performing the four steps of Lazarsfeld's methodological pavane all changed enormously (Olzak 1989). Practitioners of the art have, I think, improved on Rudé.

The expansion and acceleration of computers made a huge difference. But at the same time collaboration and criticism among people who were drawing their information chiefly from archival material, chiefly from periodicals, and chiefly from interviews or observations raised the standards of detail and precision prevailing in the study of contentious episodes. When the second volume of Clark McPhail's meticulous work on the subject appears, we will have not only a painstaking history of all those changes but also an exquisitely precise decomposition of contentious episodes into single, observable actions and interactions. No one imagined such systematic procedures at the start.

Even McPhail's summaries do not quite address, much less resolve, a muffled theoretical debate that persisted throughout the invention and adaptation of contentious event catalogs: Just what were investigators measuring? Some scholars (e.g., Wells 1990) thought they were examining *protest*, frequently conceived of as an expression of popular consciousness. Event catalogs became a means of gathering evidence concerning the ideas

and feelings of people who left few written records and fewer public declarations of their shared understandings. In this line of thought, disputes among scholars centered on the meanings of such interactions as seizures of grain, shaming ceremonies, and building occupations, not to mention relations between the orientations of people who actually participated in such interactions and those of the majority who stayed away.

Another definition of the problem became more prominent with the American ghetto rebellions and student revolts of the 1960s. Specialists in event catalogs were all measuring *collective violence* (see, e.g., Button 1978; Conant and Levin 1969; Feagin and Hahn 1975; Fine 1989; Fogelson 1971; Graham and Gurr 1969; National Commission 1969; Thompson 2000). Such a definition brought its own perplexities: since in the events at hand police and other specialists in armed force did so much of the wounding and killing, while other participants concentrated on attacking or seizing property, in what sense could anyone treat total damage as an expression of discontent, disorder, or any other general condition of the relevant social settings? Did it make any sense to equate different sorts of violence, then to sum them up into general indices? What about so-called "structural" violence, in which the damage done occurred indirectly, psychologically, morally, or over the long run rather than in the heat of conflict? We can imagine Paul Lazarsfeld impatiently throwing up his hands, or lighting up another cigar.

Despite some fluctuation and overlap, advocates of event catalogs as measurements of protest and of violence both differed from a third theoretical cluster, students of *collective action* or *conflict* as a general phenomenon. In individualistic formulations, the fundamental phenomenon becomes collective action rather than conflict, while group-centered formulations typically shift to conflict as their object of explanation (see, e.g., Boulding 1962; Burton 1997; Hardin 1995; Oberschall 1973; Olzak 1992; Schellenberg 1982; Schelling 1960).

Once again theoretically grounded divisions arose. To what extent does conflict ultimately reduce to motivated individual action, strategic interaction, or some other social process not explained by the rational calculations of individuals? Does neoclassical economics, properly specified or adapted, provide an adequate guide to the general explanation of conflict? Given the paucity and unreliability of evidence concerning mental processes in the course of conflict, what would constitute persuasive grounds for preferring one model of collective action or conflict over another? Again, theories of measurement interact with theories of the phenomenon under study.

A smaller fourth cluster of scholars eventually defected from the first three clusters, arguing that the general phenomenon registered by event catalogs was not protest, violence, collective action, or conflict, but the contentious making of claims (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Imig and Tarrow 2001; Tarrow 1998). They came to see the elementary particle of that phenomenon as the interpersonal transaction, with transactions compounding into social relations in one direction, into interactive episodes, in another direction. Members of this cluster have been backing away from definitions of their subject as protest or violence as they move into uneasy but fruitful alliances with self-styled analysts of collective action and conflict, who in recent times have themselves devoted increasing energy to the study of social settings, institutional changes, and interactive processes (see, e.g., Bates et al. 1998; Levi 1997; Levi and Stoker 2000; Lichbach 1996; Ostrom 1998).

Still, members of the four clusters characteristically differ not only in their definitions of what event catalogs are measuring and what sorts of explanations make sense, but also in their practical employment of catalogs. Let us make rough distinctions among three ways of employing catalogs of events: aggregation, incidence, and internal regularity. As specialists often do for vital events, crimes, or strikes, analysts can *aggregate* counts

or selected aspects of events—for example, fatalities—into overall measures for times, places, or social categories, then attempt to explain variation over time, place, or social category. Such a procedure makes some sense for definitions of the basic phenomenon as protest or violence, but rather less sense for ideas of collective action, conflict, or contention.

Analysts can also study *incidence*; they can examine whether distinguishable features of the phenomenon measured by event catalogs co-vary with characteristics of settings, participants, or associated events. Incidence studies remain compatible with understandings of the basic phenomenon as protest, violence, collective action, conflict, or contentious claim-making. But to the (large) extent that they lead to further understandings of the phenomena as multifarious rather than monolithic, they sit awkwardly with most attempts to gauge underlying levels of protest or to homogenize violence into a single entity.

The search for internal regularities such as recurrent sequences or causal links among apparently separate events requires more sophisticated event catalogs than the simple counts that have often characterized political event analyses. For this purpose, it does not suffice to determine that more rebellions, sit-ins, strikes, assaults, assassinations, marches, petitions, or looting occurred in one time, place, or setting than another. Analysts have no choice but to break down and recombine narratives of episodes and descriptions of their settings into elements that analysts can then reassemble into representations of the associations or causal connections they have theorized.

We reach an interesting moment in the history of catalogs prepared for contentious episodes. As analysts of various theoretical persuasions turn away from studies of aggregation and incidence toward treatment of internal regularities, they arrive at an ontological divide: choices among alternative units of observation become assertions about what exists. Some event catalogers assume, however implicitly, that they are cataloging individual decisions and their consequences in individual behavior. Others remain agnostic about cognitive and emotional processes, insisting on close recording of individual behavior. Some insist that the elementary units consist of interpersonal transactions. A declining number, finally, assume that events as such follow coherent logics: strikes, demonstrations, revolutions, rebellions, riots, and other kinds of contentious episodes each have distinctive recurrent properties.

Because construction of event catalogs in any of these forms commonly requires extensive, technically demanding work, of course, many analysts of different theoretical persuasions will continue to borrow whatever data come to hand, bridging the gap between ontology and evidence with well-crafted stories and interpretations. Little by little, nevertheless, the increasing availability of event catalogs that follow connection and variation within events (however conceived by their originators) will almost certainly reduce the popularity of “protest” and “violence” as answers to the question “Exactly what are you studying?” Thus theories of the phenomenon at hand and theories of measurement continue to influence each other.

Need I belabor the point? Throughout the history this brief report has traced, assemblers and users of event catalogs have inevitably been supplying answers, however implicit, to the three questions with which we began: How does the phenomenon under investigation leave traces? How can analysts elicit or observe those traces? Using those traces, how can analysts reconstruct specified elements, causes, or effects of the phenomenon? Interweaving with deep theoretical disputes over the character, causes, and effects of protest, violence, conflict, and contentious claim-making we have witnessed partly independent but equally theoretical disputes concerning the measurement process itself. In this field, at least, measurement embodies theory, and poses a distinctive set of theoretical challenges.

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