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HISTORICAL EVENTS AS TRANSFORMATIONS OF STRUCTURES

Inventing Revolution at the Bastille

Ever since Herodotus, historians have written about events. Battles, alliances, scandals, conquests, conspiracies, revolts, royal successions, reforms, elections, religious revivals, assassinations, discoveries: momentous events have always been the bread and butter of narrative history. But despite the prominence of events in historical narratives, the event has rarely been scrutinized as a theoretical category. Traditional narrative historians who reveled in the contingency and particularity of events generally refused on principle to engage in explicit theorizing. Meanwhile, historical sociologists, along with the minority of historians who turned to the social sciences in order to escape the hegemony of political narrative, generally disdained the study of mere events and sought instead to discover general causal patterns underlying historical change. This was true of the Annales school in France from the late 1920s forward and of the "new social history" that blossomed in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s the old antagonisms between narrative history and historical sociology had begun to fade; yet theoretical work on historical events has remained relatively rare.[1] I begin by outlining a theoretical con-

A shorter version of this chapter was published with the same title in *Theory and Society* 25 (1996): 841–81. I have had valuable comments on this chapter from Ronald Aminzade, Laura Downs, Muge Goçek, David Laitin, Colin Lucas, Sherry Ortner, Sharon Reitman, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, and the editors of *Theory and Society*.

1. The rapprochement between social history and narrative may be conveniently marked by the appearance of Stone (1979). Among the scholars who have contributed to a theoretical understanding of events are Abrams (1982, 190–226), Nora (1974), Molino (1986), Abbott (1992), Aminzade (1992), and Griffen (1992, 1993).

ception of the historical event, but then refine the theory by using it to analyze particular historical happenings that took place in France in the summer of 1789. I am convinced that an adequate theorization of events can only be built up through a mutual interrogation of theoretical categories and real historical sequences.

EVENTS AS A THEORETICAL CATEGORY

According to standard dictionary definitions, the term event can refer to a happening or occurrence of any kind, but the word is more commonly used to signify an occurrence that is remarkable in some way—one that is widely noted and commented on by contemporaries. Great public ceremonies (such as royal entrances or military parades) might be designated as events even though they had no discernable effect on historical change. But when historians argue for the importance of events, they have in mind occurrences that have momentous consequences, that in some sense "change the course of history." It is historical events in this sense that I intend to deal with in this article.

Although I agree with traditional narrative historians that events play a crucial role in historical change, my general view of social life is radically at odds with theirs. As should be clear from my arguments in chapter 4 of this book, I insist that social relations are profoundly governed by underlying social and cultural structures and that a proper understanding of the role of events in history must be founded on a concept of structure. A structural view of social action accounts for what I regard as an outstanding general characteristic of social life: that most social practices—whether international diplomacy, petty trade, or popular recreation—tend to be reproduced with considerable consistency over relatively extended periods of time. Of course, all social practices undergo constant revision even in the course of reproduction, and the accumulation of small revisions may eventually result in significant transformations. Yet even when such small and undramatic changes accumulate over time, the overall structural framework of social relations tends to be maintained. When changes do take place, they are rarely smooth and linear in character; instead, changes tend to be clustered into relatively intense bursts. Even the accumulation of incremental changes often results in a buildup of pressures and a dramatic crisis of existing practices rather than a gradual transition from one state of affairs to another. Lumpiness, rather than smoothness, is the normal texture of historical temporality. These moments of accelerated change, I would argue, are initiated and carried forward by historical events. While

the events are sometimes the culmination of processes long underway, I would claim that events typically do more than carry out a rearrangement of practices made necessary by gradual and cumulative social change. Historical events tend to transform social relations in ways that could not be fully predicted from the gradual changes that may have made them possible. As I have pointed out in chapter 1, what makes historical events so important to theorize is that they reshape history, imparting an unforeseen direction to social development and altering the nature of the causal nexus in which social interactions take place. For this reason, a theoretically robust conception of events is a necessary component of any adequate theory of social change.

I argue that events should be conceived of as sequences of occurrences that result in transformations of structures. Such sequences begin with a rupture of some kind—that is, a surprising break with routine practice. Such breaks actually occur every day—as a consequence of exogenous causes, of contradictions between structures, of sheer human inventiveness or perversity, or of simple mistakes in enacting routines. But most ruptures are neutralized and reabsorbed into the preexisting structures in one way or another—they may, for example, be forcefully repressed, pointedly ignored, or explained away as exceptions.[2] But whatever the nature of the initial rupture, an occurrence only becomes a historical event, in the sense in which I use the term, when it touches off a chain of occurrences that durably transforms previous structures and practices.

This happens above all when a rupture in one particular structural and spatial location also produces reinforcing ruptures in other locations. Thus, a fight that breaks out in a neighborhood bar breaks the usual routine of sociability. If it can be resolved by the normal politics of tavern sociability—for example, by having the bouncer eject the aggressor, or by having the combatants duke it out in the back alley—it may have no serious consequences. But if, say, one of the combatants is white and the other black, the initial rupture could be amplified by a rupture in the system of race relations that also structures interactions in the bar, and this could lead to a generalized racial brawl, which could draw in the police, who might commit acts of racial violence, which could touch off a city-wide riot, which in turn could permanently embitter race relations, discredit the mayor and police chief, and scare off private investment—and, of course,

2. For a fascinating account of how potential ruptures are handled in face to face interactions, see Goffman (1967b).

alter the mode of sociability in bars. Because structures are articulated to other structures, initially localized ruptures always have the potential of bringing about a cascading series of further ruptures that will result in structural transformations—that is, changes in cultural schemas, shifts of resources, and the emergence of new modes of power. A single, isolated rupture rarely has the effect of transforming structures because standard procedures and sanctions can usually repair the torn fabric of social practice. Ruptures spiral into transformative historical events when a sequence of interrelated ruptures disarticulates the previous structural network, makes repair difficult, and makes a novel rearticulation possible.

A historical event, then, is (1) a ramified sequence of occurrences that (2) is recognized as notable by contemporaries, and that (3) results in a durable transformation of structures. This conception of historical events retains significant theoretical and methodological ambiguities. But rather than elaborating abstract solutions to such difficulties now, I would prefer to clothe my concept of the event with some empirical detail and then return to theoretical and methodological issues toward the end of this chapter. I shall use as my empirical example a sequence of occurrences that took place in the summer of 1789 in France—what is generally known as the taking of the Bastille. I choose this example not because I regard it as providing an ideal type of historical events in general, but because I believe it raises analytical issues of wide import and because I know enough about the context in which it took place to be confident of my empirical and theoretical judgments about it. It goes without saying that a different example might lead to a significantly different theorization. I intend this study not as a definitive statement of the theory of events, but as an invitation to comparison, elaboration, and critique.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE DISLOCATION OF NORMAL LIFE

The French Revolution began with a local rupture, although in a structural location that was already densely articulated to other structures. In 1786, the comptroller general informed the king that the state was nearly bankrupt. By the early summer of 1789, this crisis of the state's fiscal institutions had become a crisis of the system of social stratification (because fiscal reform would mean stripping the clergy and nobility of one of their major privileges, their immunity from taxation); it had become a crisis of the privileged corporate institutions that were the integument of the social order of old regime France (because their privileges were linked to par-

ticular fiscal arrangements); it had become a deep constitutional crisis (because it was unclear which governmental body had the authority to change the system of taxation); and it had also become a crisis of the very principles of the social and political order (because proponents of natural rights, national sovereignty, and civic equality had managed to dominate political discourse and gain a sizeable foothold among the deputies to the Estates General).

I do not recount here how the initial crisis expanded to such proportions—although thinking analytically about the process by which such expansions occur would surely be theoretically illuminating. I focus on a different aspect of the French Revolution and of historical events in general: how the uncertainty of structural relations that characterizes events can stimulate bursts of collective cultural creativity. Here it is important to recognize the internal *temporality* of events. In spite of the punctualist connotations of the term, historical events are never instantaneous happenings: they always have a duration, a period that elapses between the initial rupture and the subsequent structural transformation. During this period, the usual articulations between different structures become profoundly dislocated. Actors, consequently, are beset with insecurity: they are unsure about how to get on with life. This insecurity may produce varying results, sometimes in the same person: anxiety, fear, or exhilaration; incessant activity, paralysis, extreme caution, or reckless abandon. But it almost certainly raises the emotional intensity of life, at least for those whose existence is closely tied to the dislocated structures. And when, as in France in the summer of 1789, the structural dislocation is pervasive and deep, virtually everyone lives on the edge. I examine the effects of such generalized insecurity by concentrating on a period of twelve days stretching from July 12 to July 23. This was an extraordinary period of fear, rejoicing, violence, and cultural creativity that changed the history of the world.

I already indicated some of the reasons why French men and women were living in a state of profound uncertainty by the summer of 1789. The political situation was particularly dislocated and particularly charged. In 1788, after two long years of unsuccessful stratagems, the king was forced to call a meeting of the Estates General, a body made up of elected representatives of the three estates of the realm. The Estates General had not met for 175 years, but according to traditional constitutional theory it had the exclusive right to consent to new taxes. (The three estates were the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners, who were known as the Third Estate.) Calling the Estates General was effectively an admission by the king

that royal absolutism was at an end and that some form of representative government was inevitable; it was clear to all that the meeting of the Estates General would result in a new constitutional arrangement. During the electoral campaign for the Estates General, royal censorship was lifted and the country was flooded with political pamphlets of all stripes. The political struggle had begun as a contest between the Crown and the political nation as a whole, but disputes soon broke out between the nobles and commoners, and by 1789 there was a three-sided struggle. The king was attempting to salvage as much royal power as possible, the nobles were trying to gain an independent role in the state, more or less on the model of the English House of Lords, and the Third Estate, which made up more than 95 percent of the population, was also attempting to gain a predominant role for itself (Lefebvre [1949] 1971; Egret 1977).

When the Estates General finally met in May, the delegates of the Third Estate refused to organize themselves as the lower body of a three-part legislature, and their intransigence brought the meeting to a standstill. Finally on June 17, the delegates of the Third Estate took the radical step of declaring themselves to be the "National Assembly," a title which clearly implied that they were the sole legitimate representative of the French people. They invited the delegates of the clergy and nobility to join the Assembly and proceed to the task of regenerating the nation. Initially the king and most of the nobles resisted this move, but after a couple of tense confrontations during the following week, the king effectively recognized the National Assembly and ordered the nobles to join it. But the king seems to have been merely biding his time, or perhaps he changed his mind. In any case, on July 11 Louis XVI dismissed his liberal minister, the Swiss banker Necker, who had good relations with the National Assembly, and began to encircle Paris and Versailles with royal troops. It appeared that he was ready to dissolve the National Assembly, repress the Parisian popular movement, and return to rule by decree. This, in a nutshell, was the political situation that led to the taking of the Bastille.

The dislocations that had occurred in the French state by early July 1789 were particularly sharp. What Leon Trotsky (1932) later called "dual power" had developed: two distinct and conflicting political apparatuses, the monarchy and the National Assembly, claimed to hold legitimate power.[3] It was consequently difficult for an ordinarily prudent individual to know which apparatus to obey. Moreover, the two powers based their

3. Charles Tilly (1993) speaks of these as situations of "multiple sovereignty."

claims on sharply contradictory ideologies. The monarch claimed to rule by the grace of God, a grace conferred upon him by inheritance through the male line and sealed by the religious ritual of coronation. The National Assembly claimed its authority by popular sovereignty, the natural right of the nation's people to choose its own constitution. These two ideologies not only envisaged different kinds of states, but were based on divergent cosmologies and implied sharply different forms of social order. The cosmology of the monarchy was profoundly hierarchical, with order originating in God and cascading downward through the various orders of heavenly beings, to kings, priests, and nobles, thence to commoners, and finally to animals, plants, and inanimate matter. In the language of the old regime, order was indistinguishable from hierarchy (Mousnier 1972; Sewell 1974a; Loyseau 1666, 1994). The implicit cosmology of the National Assembly was sharply different: order originated not in the spiritual realm, but in nature, and nature created all humans equal in rights. Political institutions arose from a social contract, from a rational agreement by the people about the appropriate form of government. The people had no obligation to obey any authorities except those they had chosen for themselves, either directly or through their duly constituted representatives.

The fact that the two contesting powers in the French state legitimated themselves in terms of two sharply contrasting ideologies meant that the uncertainty experienced by ordinary people went beyond the unsettling question of which authorities to obey. Accepting the authority of the National Assembly also might entail accepting a new language of social order, one that had implications for virtually all spheres of social relations. Relations between priests and parishioners, seigneurs and peasants, municipal officials and townsmen, masters and journeymen, husbands and wives, fathers and children: all of these were currently encoded in the hierarchical language of the old regime monarchy. Accepting the legitimacy of the National Assembly therefore might imply redefining and renegotiating these relations in an idiom of natural equality and social contract. This might mean unsettling changes in numerous spheres of daily life. But the practical implications and the scope of the National Assembly's ideology were as yet unclear, not only to ordinary people, but to deputies in the National Assembly itself. As long as the standoff between the king and the Assembly remained unsettled, no one could be entirely sure what actions were safe or dangerous, moral or wicked, advantageous or foolish, rational or irrational.

In the peculiar circumstances of the summer of 1789, these insecurities

were joined to a harrowing concern about biological survival. The harvest of 1788 had been disastrously short, and for several months impossibly high bread prices had rendered both poor urban-dwellers and peasants chronically hungry. The coming harvest looked promising, but in mid-July it was still several weeks away, and last year's grain stocks were running dangerously low. Untimely hail or sustained rains could still spoil the crop and plunge the nation into another year of hunger and despair. Thus, in mid-July, at the same time when the political crisis reached its peak, anxiety about subsistence was general. This potent combination of political standoff and economic crisis implied a moral and practical uncertainty that penetrated deeply into daily life.

THE TAKING OF THE BASTILLE

On July 11, when Louis XVI dismissed Necker and began to encircle Paris and Versailles with royal troops, the moment of truth seemed at hand.[4] The National Assembly continued to hold firm, but it was meeting in Versailles, where the king's military might was concentrated, and could easily have been overpowered by royal troops had the king given the order. In Paris, where the population overwhelmingly supported the National Assembly, the level of political mobilization was already unprecedentedly high. Newspapers and pamphlets had flooded the city over the past six months, political clubs had sprung up, and the debates in the National Assembly were discussed in cafés, clubs, public squares, and wineshops all over the city. When the news of Necker's dismissal reached Paris, on the afternoon of the 12th, the population was quickly mobilized. "Patriots" massed in the Palais Royal (not a royal palace, but an enclosed public garden). There they heard Camille Desmoulins declaim, "Citizens, you know that the Nation had asked for Necker to be retained, and he has been driven out! Could you be more insolently flouted? After such an act they will dare anything, and they may perhaps be planning and preparing a Saint-Bartholomew massacre of patriots for this very night!" (Godechot 1970, 187–88). This quotation from Desmoulins demonstrates two things about the agitations in Paris. First, it shows that orators were using a language of popular sovereignty and national will to talk about the crisis (the *Nation* had asked for Necker to be retained and its will had been flouted). Second, the invocation of a Saint-Bartholomew massacre both registers

4. My account of the events surrounding the taking of the Bastille is based primarily on Godechot (1970), which is the best single scholarly account.

and propagates the sense of intense insecurity that is palpable in nearly all accounts of these events.

From the Palais Royal, the crowd surged through the city, closing the Opera and theaters, seizing a bust of Necker from a wax museum, and parading into the Tuileries and the place Louis XV (now the place de la Concorde). There the crowd skirmished with a detachment of German mercenaries but were aided by another army unit known as the French Guards, who had already shown strong sympathies with the Parisians and the National Assembly. That evening, mobs broke into gun-shops to arm themselves and smashed and burned the customs posts where dues were assessed on goods coming into the city. Early in the morning they sacked the Saint-Lazare monastery in a search for stored grain. They also forced open the doors of several prisons where, in the words of the newspaper *Les Révolutions de Paris*, they "liberated the prisoners, except for the criminals"—a gesture that seems to suggest an annulling of the king's law (*Les Révolutions de Paris* 1, July 17, 1789, 8). Largely in response to the widespread disorders of July 12, a group of "electors"—those who had chosen Paris's deputation to the Estates General under the city's relatively restricted franchise—met on the 13th and chose an executive committee, which effectively became the municipality of the city. The new municipality's first act was to set up a militia, intended both as a means of defending Paris from royal troops and of maintaining order. It patrolled the streets effectively on the evening of the 13th, but the municipality was far from having enough guns to arm it properly. It was the quest for more arms that led to the Bastille.

On the morning of the 14th, a delegation from the emergency municipality, followed by a crowd of demonstrators, went to the Hôtel des Invalides, on the southwest edge of the city, to demand the arms that they knew to be kept there. The governor of the Invalides temporized, but the crowd soon broke in, and, meeting no significant resistance from the garrison, seized some thirty to forty thousand muskets. It was by this means that the Parisians managed to arm themselves. But the newly armed popular militia remained desperately short of ammunition, which was not stored at the Invalides, so the crowd trekked across the city to the Bastille, directly east of the city center, where a large quantity of powder was known to be kept.

Taking the Bastille was a much more daunting operation than breaking into the Invalides, since the Bastille was an ancient military fortress with thick walls, deep moats, and drawbridges. The story of the operations by

which the besiegers eventually took the fortress has been told many times and need not be recited here.[5] Suffice it to say that nearly one hundred attackers died in the assault, that the attackers finally succeeded because they were joined by a unit of the French Guards, which supplied artillery pieces, and because in the end the defenders, a group of semi-retired veterans, had no stomach for a determined resistance and let down the drawbridge. Once inside the Bastille, the crowd freed the few prisoners kept there—four forgers and three madmen—and removed the barrels of gunpowder they had initially come for. The soldiers who had defended the fortress were led through the streets to the city hall. On the steps of the city hall, their commandant, the marquis de Launay, was shot, stabbed, and beheaded by members of the crowd, who then paraded around the city with his head on a pike. The crowd also killed Flesselles, an official of the old municipality who had temporized about arming the militia, and was therefore suspected of treason. His head was also severed from his body and paraded about on a pike.

The effect of the occurrences of July 14 was sensational. The king's troops pulled back from Paris, and the king, recognizing that the troops could not be trusted to act against the Parisians, ordered them back to the frontiers, thereby giving up his effort to intimidate the National Assembly. The Assembly, which had seemed utterly at the king's mercy, emerged triumphant, thanks to the actions of the Parisian people. It was on July 16 that the king decided that conquering Paris was impossible and that flight to the provinces was pointless and undignified, especially since many of the cities of the kingdom had already rallied to the Assembly. Instead, he made a humiliating visit to Paris on the 17th, accompanied by a delegation from the National Assembly. There he formally assented to the establishment of the new Parisian municipality and the national guard. This ritual effectively marked the king's capitulation to Paris and the National Assembly. The events of July 14 thus constituted a major turning point in the French Revolution.

THE BASTILLE AND THE CONCEPT OF REVOLUTION

But why was this complex of events that unfolded in Paris and Versailles over the week from July 12 to July 17 known, both by contemporaries and by subsequent historians, by the metonymic title "the taking of the Bastille"? And why has the capture of this fortress become synonymous

5. Again, the best account is Godechot (1970).

with the French Revolution? The capture of the Bastille was not, in itself, a matter of supreme military importance; Jacques Godechot, who has written the best scholarly account of the attack, thinks that the earlier and bloodless capture of the Invalides was actually the decisive military action, because it established that the royal troops could not be counted on to resist assaults from the Parisian people (1970, 217). It is also true that in many respects the taking of the Bastille marked no great rupture with what Charles Tilly calls the "repertoire of contention" of eighteenth-century urban dwellers (Tilly 1986). Crowd violence, even pitched battles with the military, were hardly unheard of in old regime France. Nevertheless, the taking of the Bastille was immediately weighted with such heavy symbolic significance that it soon came to be seen as the founding action of the French Revolution (Lusebrink and Reichard 1983, 1990). How did this seemingly inflated evaluation of the actions at the Bastille come about?

We are by now used to the notion that revolutions are radical transformations in political systems imposed by violent uprisings of the people. We therefore don't see the extraordinary novelty of the claim that the taking of the Bastille was an act of revolution. Prior to the summer of 1789, the word revolution did not carry the implication of a change of political regime achieved by popular violence. What was going on in France in the spring and summer of 1789 was sometimes spoken of as a revolution, but in the parlance of the time this meant only a great change in the affairs of a state; as it was used before the Bastille, the term revolution could as well have been applied to the coup d'état that Louis XVI was attempting in the days following July 11 as to the Parisian uprising that took place on the 14th (Baker 1990).[6] There was also a fairly extensive preexisting vocabulary to describe events like the assault on the Bastille and the associated disorders in Paris. In ordinary parlance they could have been called by any number of terms: uprising, emotion, revolt, riot, mutiny, insurrection, rebellion, or sedition (Tilly 1986; Sewell 1990a). The "uprising" or "mutiny" of July 14 could also be designated by contemporaries as a "revolution," but this was only because of its effects — the defeat of the king and the reinforcement of the National Assembly — not because it was a self-conscious attempt by the people to impose by force its sovereign will.

Yet in the days that followed, the taking of the Bastille was construed as

6. Baker's essay "Inventing the French Revolution" charts a wide range of transformations of the term revolution in the eighteenth century, and even during the weeks following the taking of the Bastille, but he does not specifically consider when revolution became associated with an act of popular violence.

an act of the people's sovereign will, as a legitimate uprising that dictated the country's political fate. This construal required a dramatic and utterly unforeseen articulation between two modes of activity not previously understood as linked: on the one hand, political and philosophical claims about the sovereignty of the people, of the sort that delegates of the Third Estate used when they declared themselves the National Assembly; on the other, acts of crowd violence of the sort that the Parisian populace used to defend themselves and the National Assembly from the king's troops on July 14. In the excitement, terror, and elation that characterized the taking of the Bastille, orators, journalists, and the crowd itself seized on the political theory of popular sovereignty to explain and to justify the popular violence. This act of epoch-making cultural creativity occurred in a moment of ecstatic discovery: the taking of the Bastille, which had begun as an act of defense against the king's aggression, revealed itself in the days that followed as a concrete, unmediated, and sublime instance of the people expressing its sovereign will. What happened at the Bastille became the establishing act of a *revolution* in the modern sense. By their action at the Bastille, the people were understood to have risen up, destroyed tyranny, and established liberty. To make sense of the taking of the Bastille as a historical event, then, we must determine when, how, and why the happenings of July 14, 1789 came to be understood as a revolution in which the people rose up, expressed its sovereign will, and transformed the political system of the nation—or, to put the same thing a different way, when, how, and why these happenings effected a durable articulation of popular violence and popular sovereignty in the new category of revolution.

THE TEMPORALITY OF THE BASTILLE: INVENTING REVOLUTION

I have already remarked that events are never instantaneous happenings, that some period of time elapses between the initial rupture and the subsequent structural transformation. Making sense of the taking of the Bastille requires us to reconstruct the sequence of action and interpretation that led from the rupture (the assault on the Bastille, which disrupted existing modes of power and posed a novel challenge to existing claims of political sovereignty) to the new articulation (the encoding of a new conception of revolution, which durably transformed the effective meaning of the sovereignty of the people). While this process began at the Bastille and in the surrounding streets on July 14, it was not until some days later, in the meeting hall of the National Assembly in Versailles, that it can be said to have been definitively achieved.

The first steps toward articulating popular violence and popular sovereignty were made in Paris, if not during the assault, then in actions and commentary immediately afterwards. Certain ritual actions in the events themselves seem to indicate that the crowds claimed to act on behalf of the nation. Thus the popular newspaper *Les Révolutions de Paris* reported that one of the first acts of the men who had captured the Bastille was to seize and display "the sacred flag of the fatherland, to the applause and the transports of an immense crowd of people"(*Les Révolutions de Paris* 1, July 17, 1789, 17). The fact that they claimed the flag as their own, rather than desecrating it, implies that they regarded themselves, rather than the defeated royal troops, as the legitimate armed force of the nation. The display on pikes of the severed heads of de Launay and Flesselles, which seems to mimic the rituals of state exections (Foucault 1977), could be read as implying an assertion of sovereignty. The language employed in contemporary accounts of the events of July 14 also tended to cast the popular violence as an act of the sovereign people. *Les Révolutions de Paris* used the highly charged term "citizens" to designate the attackers, spoke of the hastily improvised urban militia as "soldiers of the nation," and characterized the events as a rising of liberty against despotism.[7] All this implies that the Parisians drew upon the notion of popular sovereignty to assert the legitimacy of the taking of the Bastille.

But simply identifying the attack on the Bastille as an expression of the will of the people did not amount to inventing the modern concept of revolution. A revolution is not just a forceful act that expresses the will of the people, but such an act that puts into place a new political regime. Only when it became clear that the taking of the Bastille had forced the king to yield effective power to the National Assembly could the acts of the Parisian people be viewed as a revolution in this new sense. The epoch-making cultural change—the invention of a new and enduring political category—could therefore only take place in tandem with practical changes in institutional and military power relations. It was in the National Assembly that the new concept of revolution was definitively and authoritatively articulated. As the members of the National Assembly came to realize that the people of Paris had assured them a great victory, they not only began to echo the Parisians' view that the uprising was a blow for liberty against despotism and that it expressed the legitimate wishes of the people, but began

7. The term "citoyen" is used frequently throughout the account. The line about "the soldiers of the fatherland" occurs on 7. The language of liberty and despotism occurs prominently on 18–19.

to cast it as a decisive act of popular sovereignty that rightfully determined the fate of the nation. It took several days of political maneuvering and parliamentary debates for this to happen.

In pre-Bastille political discourse, even the "patriots" regarded popular violence as irrational, blind, and contagious, as a kind of natural disaster virtually impossible to control except by repression. This made it fundamentally incompatible with the sovereign will of the nation, which was regarded as rational, majestic, and generous. When the National Assembly learned of the taking of the Bastille on the evening of the 14th, the deputies did not rejoice that the people had risen up and struck a great blow against the royal forces. According to the minutes of the Assembly, the taking of the Bastille was initially regarded as "disastrous news" which "produced in the Assembly the most mournful impression. All discussion ceased" (*Réimpression de l'Ancien Moniteur*, 158). On the following morning the Assembly talked about what had happened, but its members remained anxious and pessimistic about the probable effects. The marquis de Sillery introduced a motion containing the conventional wisdom: "The massacres that took place yesterday, the Bastille besieged and taken, the bloody executions which resulted, have carried the people to an excess of fury that is very difficult to stop." He went on to charge that the violence had been purposely provoked by the pernicious ministers now in charge of the government so as to convince the king of the need for further armed repression. He, and the Assembly as a whole, worried that the events of July 14 would strengthen the king's hand and undermine the position of the Assembly (155).

It soon became clear, however, that the taking of the Bastille had precisely the opposite effect. By the 16th, the king had ordered the troops away from the capital, dismissed his ministry, and recalled Necker. This unexpected turn doubtless made the Assembly less inclined to bewail the violence and disorder of the Parisian people. Meanwhile, a delegation from the Assembly went to Paris on the afternoon of the 15th and found that far from seething with violent hatred, the capital was bathed in the glow of a joyous and generous patriotism. Mounier, who reported on this visit on the morning of the 16th, described in rapturous tone the delegation's reception in Paris. The Parisians "attempted, by all the most vivid signs of affection, to express the sentiments weighing upon them. It was a great joy for them to shake hands with a member of the National Assembly. . . . Citizens congratulated and embraced one another. All eyes were wet with tears; intoxicated sentiment was everywhere" (163). In this same speech,

Mounier began to rethink the violence of the 14th. "Regrets are surely due for all the troubles that the capital has suffered. May she never again see those terrible moments when the law has lost its empire; but may she never again feel the yoke of despotism! She is worthy of liberty; she has earned it by her courage and energy" (164). Rather than "massacres," and "bloody executions" which "have carried the people to an excess of fury that is very difficult to stop," Mounier spoke of the violence euphemistically as "the troubles that the capital has suffered" and "those terrible moments when the law has lost its empire." Indeed, he hailed it, again euphemistically, as the "courage and energy" that have made Paris "worthy of liberty."

Nor, in Mounier's rendering, does the just and courageous violence of the Parisians presage continuing disorder. "These troubles shall cease; the Constitution will be established; it will console us, it will console the Parisians for all their previous misfortunes." Indeed, the taking of the Bastille, however tragic, must be a source of pride for true patriots:

> Among the people's acts of despair, even while weeping for the death of several citizens, it will perhaps be difficult to resist a sentiment of satisfaction upon seeing the destruction of the Bastille. There, on the ruins of that horrible prison, there will soon be erected, according to the wishes of the citizens of Paris, the statue of a good king, the restorer of the liberty and the happiness of France. (164)

The taking of the Bastille, Mounier wishfully implies, will establish a new era of liberty and happiness, presided over by a good king and a new constitution. Thus, as early as July 16, the taking of the Bastille was spoken of in the National Assembly not only as a justified response of the people to despotic oppression, but as a crucial step toward a new political order. In Mounier's speech we begin to discern not just a new attitude toward the popular violence of July 14, but a sanctioning of the Parisian uprising as a legitimate revolt of liberty against despotism.

Over the course of July 16 and 17, it became ever clearer that the taking of the Bastille was immensely strengthening the position of the National Assembly. These developments must have persuaded many members of the Assembly to concur in Mounier's somewhat ambivalent approval of the popular violence of the 14th. Later on the 16th, shortly after Mounier finished his speech, a sizeable group of deputies of the nobility who had thus far abstained from debates and votes in the Assembly announced that they would henceforth participate fully (166). The victory of the Parisians

and the king's decision to send away the troops thus had the effect of persuading the last holdouts for deliberation by order to abandon their passive resistance and cast their lot with the Assembly. That afternoon came the clinching news: the king had agreed to dismiss his ministry, recall Necker, and visit Paris on the following day to demonstrate his acceptance of the new municipality and civic militia. The king's trip to Paris on the 17th was generally interpreted as a ritual of capitulation. Bailly, the new mayor chosen by the Paris municipality and accepted by the National Assembly and the king, greeted the monarch at the Versailles gate with words that indicated as much: "Sire, I bring to your majesty the keys of your good city of Paris; these are the same ones that were presented to Henry IV. He had reconquered his people; here it is the people who have reconquered their king" (173). The king was then received in a joyous ceremony, the high point of which came when the monarch appeared on the balcony of the city hall and placed on his hat the blue, white, and red rosette that had been adopted as the special badge of the Parisian patriots.

By the morning of July 18, the astonishing results of the taking of the Bastille were clear. The troops had been sent back to their barracks in the provinces, Necker had been recalled, the king had essentially capitulated to both Paris and the National Assembly, Paris had a redoubtable urban militia and a new vigorously patriot municipality, and the last of the nobles had ended their boycott and joined in the work the Assembly. Meanwhile, addresses supporting the Assembly came pouring in from the provinces, indicating that its new political supremacy was national, not merely Parisian. The barriers that had kept the National Assembly from its self-appointed task of providing France with a new constitution were suddenly swept away. The Parisian uprising had resulted in a triumph of astounding proportions for the National Assembly, which henceforth became the chief arbiter of the nation's fate.

These developments did not lead the Assembly to undertake an immediate revaluation of the violent actions of July 14. It was not until July 20 that the Assembly spelled out further a conception of the taking of the Bastille as a legitimate popular revolution. The Assembly was driven to this elaboration not by sheer gratitude, but by a practical need to distinguish the just violence of the sovereign people from the unacceptable violence of the dangerous mob. On July 17, the mayor of the nearby town of Poissy asked the Assembly to help it put down disorders there and in the neighboring town of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where what he termed "a troop of brigands" had killed a miller accused of hoarding grain. The following day, upon learning that another man had been seized by this mob

and that his life was in danger, the Assembly sent a deputation of twelve members to save him (174). On the 20th, the deputation related the harrowing tale of how they had braved the howling mob and barely managed to rescue the unfortunate man from hanging (175–76).

This incident inspired the conservative deputy Lally-Tolendal to rise later that day and introduce a motion condemning political violence (181). Lally's proposal raised an immediate storm of protest from legislators who saw it as a thinly veiled attack on the actions of the Parisians at the Bastille; their collective outrage succeeded in getting Lally's motion tabled. In their arguments, they spelled out more explicitly than Mounier had done the thesis that taking the Bastille had been a legitimate action. Robespierre complained that Lally's motion "presents a disposition against those who have defended liberty. But is there anything more legitimate than to rise up against a horrible conspiracy formed to destroy the nation?" (181–82). De Blesau, an obscure deputy from Brittany, warned against "confusing popular riots with legitimate and necessary revolutions, by placing . . . side by side seditious men armed for licence and citizens armed for liberty" (182). Buzot joined in next, claiming that Lally's motion

> proposes to declare as bad citizens and rebels all armed men indiscriminately. Must we then forget the generous courage of the Parisians who, by taking arms, have procured our liberty, have expelled the ministers, have quieted intrigue, have directed the steps of the king into the Assembly? . . . But this is not all; who will tell us that despotism could not be reborn among us? And who will be the guarantor of its complete destruction? If one day it draws together its forces to strike us down, what citizens will arm themselves in time to save the fatherland? (183)

Buzot's remarks are particularly significant. It was, Buzot emphasized, the Parisians' violent action that effected all the salutary changes of the past few days: it was the people of Paris who procured the liberty of the Assembly, expelled the perfidious ministers, quieted intrigue, and forced the king to submit to the Assembly. Moreover, Buzot implies that comparable action might be necessary in the future to save the fatherland from its enemies. This suggests that, for Buzot, the popular violence that occurred at the Bastille had become not only a legitimate occurrence but an example of a category of legitimate occurrences—of necessary violent actions undertaken by the people to crush despotism and establish liberty. It was in this debate on July 20, in short, that the members of the Assembly explicitly stated the notion of a revolution as a legitimate rising of the sovereign people that transformed the political system of the nation.

In the debate of July 20, the patriots had to defend the victors of the Bastille against the insinuation that they were no better than food rioters. They did this by defining the taking of the Bastille as a legitimate revolution, arguing that the intervention of the armed people against despotism was justified. Three days later, on July 23, the Assembly reiterated this definition, but now in order to limit more carefully the circumstances in which popular intervention was warranted. This was done in response to a new act of "popular justice" in the capital—one that was disturbingly similar to an action of July 14. On July 23, Bertier, the former intendant of Paris, who was widely blamed for food shortages, and his father-in-law Foullon, who was identified with the minister who had replaced Necker, were arrested in the suburbs of Paris and brought to the city hall. There an enraged crowd seized them and treated them much as they had de Launay and Flesselles on July 14: the crowd killed them and paraded their severed heads and Bertier's heart on pikes. This mimetic act of popular violence alarmed the Assembly. But rather than condemning political violence in general, members of the Assembly attempted to distinguish the justified violence of July 14 from the unjustified violence of July 23.

The speeches justifying the taking of the Bastille on July 16 and 20 were abstract in character, referring only to the energy and courage of the Parisians, who took arms or rose up against despotism. The executions of de Launay and Flesselles—clearly the most troubling of the actions taken by the Parisians on the 14th—were passed over in silence. But now that the events of July 14 had been sanctified as a "necessary and legitimate revolution," deputies who wished to condemn the murders of Bertier and Foullon actually felt constrained to justify the murders of the 14th. Gouy d'Arcy proclaimed:

> The first blows struck by the people are due to the effervescence necessarily inspired by the annihilation of despotism and the birth of liberty. It was scarcely possible that a people which had just broken the yoke under which it had groaned for so long would not immolate to its fury its first victims. . . . The governor of a fort taken by assault, of a fort which was the abyss of liberty, could hardly have any other fate; fallen into the hands of the defenders of liberty, of a numerous people which he had wished to sacrifice to despotism, he got what he deserved. (192)

But at a moment when the Parisian people's own generous actions had brought peace and harmony to the state, "nothing can justify the fury that has just been expressed against two individuals." Such "bloody and revolt-

ing scenes" must cease; otherwise "the people could get accustomed to these bloody spectacles and make a game of spilling blood. Barbarity could become a habit" (192). Thus the denunciation of the murders of July 23 was accomplished by justifying those of July 14. Even the conservative Malouet denounced the current atrocities by praising the violence of July 14:

> Resistance to oppression is legitimate and honors a nation; licence debases it. A national insurrection against despotism has a character superior to the power of the laws, without profaning their dignity. But even when a great interest has effected a great uprising, the slightest pretext suffices to reawaken the anxieties of the people and lead it to excesses. . . . It is such misfortunes that must now be prevented. (197)

By July 23, the Assembly had so thoroughly accepted the notion that the taking of the Bastille had been a legitimate revolution that even a conservative deputy who wished above all to bring an end to popular violence spoke of the actions of July 14 as "a national insurrection against despotism," and asserted that such an insurrection "has a character superior to the power of the laws." It seems fair to say that by July 23, the place of the Bastille had been firmly established in French political culture. From then on the capture of the fortress was enshrined as the defining event of a *revolution* in the modern sense—a rising of the sovereign people whose justified violence imposed a new political system on the nation.

But if the meaning of the taking of the Bastille was thenceforth relatively fixed, the precise boundaries of the new concept of revolution remained very much in dispute—indeed, they have remained so up to the present. The elaboration of the new concept of revolution and its definitive identification with the taking of Bastille occurred when the National Assembly was forced to delimit ever more strictly what forms of political violence might be deemed legitimate. Once an act of popular violence was recognized as the very foundation of political legitimacy, it became imperative to distinguish that one transcendent founding moment from other violent actions that might on the surface seem comparable; otherwise, the state would be forever vulnerable to the whim of any crowd that claimed to act on behalf of the people. But at the same time, as Buzot pointed out in his speech of July 20, future acts of legitimate revolution could not be ruled out altogether. No one could guarantee that despotism might not be reborn, and should it return another revolution might be necessary. The problem of bringing the revolution to a close was thus posed at the very moment of its birth. Within the semantic and political field created by the

concept of revolution, the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate popular violence, between revolution and rebellion, could never be definitively etched.[8]

The event of the taking of the Bastille therefore had powerful lingering effects—indeed, many of its effects linger still. Yet one can say that the duration of the event, defined as the time that lapsed between the rupture and the rearticulation, was some twelve days, from July 12 to July 23. The great rupture occurred in the dramatic action of July 14. Over the next few days, from the 14th to the 17th, the effects on the political conjuncture gradually became clear—the withdrawal of the troops from the Paris area, the recall of Necker, the effective capitulation of the king, the official establishment of the new Parisian municipality and militia, and the rise to supremacy of the National Assembly. The seemingly miraculous victory of the National Assembly caused its orators to reassess their initial opinion that the taking of the Bastille was a lamentable disorder and to accept the Parisians' own characterization of it as an act of legitimate resistance against despotism and a valid expression of the nation's will. They did so somewhat tentatively on July 16, but more firmly on July 20 and 23. By the 20th, the evolution of the balance of political forces had not only made it unthinkable for the Assembly's majority to criticize the violence of July 14, but made it imperative for them to embrace the violence as a foundation of their own authority. It was by this process that the modern concept of revolution definitively entered French political culture, effecting a hitherto undreamed of but henceforth enduring articulation of popular violence to popular sovereignty.

THE BASTILLE AND THE THEORY OF HISTORICAL EVENTS

Over the past several pages, my account of the taking of the Bastille has been primarily narrative in form. Careful reconstruction of narrative is, I submit, an intellectual necessity in any serious analysis of events. But it is also necessary to tack back and forth between narration and theoretical reflection. Let me therefore elaborate some theoretical implications of this account.

HISTORICAL EVENTS REARTICULATE STRUCTURES. In this chapter I am attempting to conceptualize historical events in a particular way: as

8. Colin Lucas (1988, 1991) has written with great penetration about the revolutionary conundrum of distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate violence.

dislocations and transformative rearticulations of structures. As I see it, the taking of the Bastille could only become the founding act of the French Revolution—and of the modern concept of revolution in general—because it took place at a time when political structures were massively dislocated. The National Assembly had declared the people's will to be sovereign, but because it was engaged in an inconclusive struggle with the king, it had not yet definitively established its own claim to represent that will. It was because sovereignty was up for grabs that the taking of the Bastille could be interpreted as a direct and sublime expression of the nation's will—that an act of popular violence could be articulated directly with sovereignty to form the new political category of revolution.

HISTORICAL EVENTS ARE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS. The novel articulation that makes this happening a momentous event in world history is an act of signification. Terms—for example "Bastille" and "revolution," but also "people," "liberty," "despotism," and so on—took on authoritative new meanings that, taken together, reshaped the political world. This implies that events are, literally, significant: they signify something new and surprising. They introduce new conceptions of what really exists (the violent crowd as the people's will in action), of what is good (the people in ecstatic union), and of what is possible (revolution, a new kind of regeneration of the state and the nation). The most profound consequence of the taking of the Bastille was, then, a reconstruction of the very categories of French political culture and political action.

This implies that symbolic interpretation is part and parcel of the historical event. It would be artificial and misleading to conceptualize the assault on the Bastille as a brute physical occurrence that, once complete, was mulled over and interpreted. Those who risked (and in some cases lost) their lives to take the fortress did so because they regarded it as an intolerable barrier to their political hopes; their action was already symbolically motivated. And as soon as the fortress had fallen, its captors began to interpret their victory as a blow struck against despotism by the people. Throughout the extraordinary flow of actions, from the first skirmishes on the evening of the 12th to the slaughter of Bertier and Foullon and its condemnation by the Assembly on the 23rd, interpretation of what was happening was a crucial ingredient of what happened, of the sheer factuality of the event.

However, to say that the event of the taking of the Bastille was a cultural transformation and that it arose from interpretive or symbolic action is not

to deny that what happened on July 14 also had crucial military and political consequences. Indeed, had these actions not led to the withdrawal of troops from the Paris region and a victory of the National Assembly over the king, the collective euphoria experienced at the taking of the Bastille would not have resulted in the birth of the concept of revolution—even had those who assaulted the Bastille self-consciously regarded themselves as embodying the will of the nation. The cultural transformation effected by this event—as is true of cultural transformations in general—was both stimulated and locked into place by simultaneous shifts both in resources (e.g., the transfer of control of all those guns and ammunition from the royal forces to the Paris militia) and in modes of power (e.g., the formation of the new Paris militia, which made for a new means of resisting the king, and of a new Parisian municipality, which stood in a novel relation to the city's population).

HISTORICAL EVENTS ARE SHAPED BY PARTICULAR CONDITIONS. The taking of an urban fortress does not automatically lead to the invention of the new concept of revolution. It had this result in the summer of 1789 only because of conditions peculiar to the circumstance—and not only the large and general conditions I have discussed above under the rubric of structural dislocations. There were also very local or particular conditions that made possible the outcome that occurred. Marshall Sahlins uses the term "structure of the conjuncture" to refer to the particular meanings, accidents, and causal forces that shape events—the small but locally determining conditions whose interaction in a particular time and place may seal the fates of whole societies (Sahlins 1981). Three particular conditions that obtained in Paris in July 1789 did much to make the taking of the Bastille into a world-shaping event.

1. First, we can specify a semantic condition that made the new articulation of popular violence and popular sovereignty possible: the long-standing ambiguity of the term *le peuple*—the people. On the one hand, *le peuple* could mean the entire French population. It was the people in this highly generalized and somewhat mystical sense that was designated as sovereign in the political theory adopted by the National Assembly. On the other hand, *le peuple* could mean the ordinary people, commoners as opposed to nobles and clergy, or the poor and vulgar as opposed to the cultured and wealthy. It was, of course, the people in this latter sense who were thought to be capable of acts of crowd violence. The semantic slippage between the two meanings of "the people" made possible an equation of the

people who rose up and took the Bastille (sense two) and the sovereign people choosing the form of government that suited it best (sense one).

2. A second specific condition for the equation of crowd violence at the Bastille with the exercise of the people's will concerns the preexisting meanings of the fortress, which was already a symbol of political injustice. Since the early eighteenth century, publicists and journalists had cast the Bastille as a sinister prison of despotism, where the regime secretly locked up innocent victims and patriotic martyrs (Lusebrink and Reichardt 1983, 1990). Although the attack of July 14 was in fact launched by militiamen with the eminently practical goal of getting ammunition for their muskets, the Bastille's sinister aura meant that the attack could easily be cast as an assault on despotism itself.

This equation of the Bastille and despotism is clear in the earliest accounts of the occurrences of July 14. Thus, *Les Révolutions de Paris* interrupts its story of the attack to paint a portrait of the Bastille as a prison of despotism. "The cells were opened; innocent men were given their liberty, venerable old men astonished to see the light once again." At this point a footnote adds:

> One respectable old man had been shut up for thirty years. It is useless to relate what an immense quantity of pamphlets, what a quantity of books, of registers of imprisonment, of materials for history were found in the Bastille; in brief, among the multiplicity of arms, of flags, it is said that there were also found machines of death unknown to man.

The main text then sums up: "Liberty, august and sainted, has finally been introduced for the first time into this place of horrors, this fearful abode of despotism, of monsters, of crime" (18). This account draws heavily from the conventional black legend of the Bastille as a place where innocent men were sealed off from light for decades, where pamphlets and books critical of the regime were seized and stored, where horrible cruelties were secretly visited on prisoners by means of "machines of death unknown to man." *Les Révolutions de Paris* again invokes the legend of the Bastille on the following page:

> This astonishing fortress, built under Charles V in 1369, and finished in 1383, which that terrifying colossus Louis XIV and Turenne judged impregnable, has thus been taken by assault in four hours, by an undisciplined and leaderless militia, by inexperienced townsmen, supported, to be sure, by a few soldiers of the nation; finally, by a handful of free men. Oh sainted liberty! What is then thy power? (19–20)

If the people were going to rise up against despotism and establish liberty, it is hard to think of a better place to have done this than the Bastille. The Invalides, which was also invaded earlier that day, and whose capture was probably of greater military significance, lacked the Bastille's bad reputation. As a consequence, its capture was hardly heard of in the myth of July 14. No one said "at the Invalides the people rose up and captured liberty." But a similar phrase became a litany about the Bastille.

3. One local condition is rather more generalizable: the assault on the Bastille, unlike that on the Invalides, was a theater of heroism, treachery, and bloodshed. The object was an impregnable fortress, whose commandant was thought to have lured the attackers into an outer courtyard in order to gun them down more efficiently. The operation lasted several hours, it afforded many opportunities for signal bravery under fire, and it brought death to a nearly one hundred assailants and serious wounds to a few score more. It is absolutely crucial to recognize the emotional significance of the bloodshed if we are to understand the unfolding of the event over the following hours and days. The deaths of the assailants made them understandable as martyrs of liberty; the spilling of their blood became a transformative sacrifice, an act of sacred founding violence of the sort analyzed by René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977). And the deaths of the martyrs was avenged and doubled by the ritual slaughter of de Launay and Flesselles. The people itself, so the symbolism went, convicted these two men of treason to the nation. Here the ghastly detail that their severed heads were displayed on pikes is significant. As readers of Foucault (1977, chap. 2) will recognize, this act mimicked royal rituals of public execution, which often involved the display of body parts; the sovereign people, in a fashion strikingly similar to the king as sovereign, wreaked public and visible vengeance on the body of those who dared to defy its law.

These local conditions, then, constituted the structure of the conjuncture of the taking of the Bastille. The semantic ambiguity of the term "people," the preexisting political meanings of the Bastille, and the dramatic and bloody character of the action itself made it possible for the myth of the Bastille as a revolution of the sovereign people to become the political truth of the incidents of July 14, 1789.

HISTORICAL EVENTS ARE CHARACTERIZED BY HEIGHTENED EMOTION. Most social scientists avoid emotion like the plague. They seem to fear that if they take emotion seriously as an object of study, they will be tainted by the irrationality, volatility, subjectivity, and ineffability

that we associate with the term—that their own lucidity and scientific objectivity will be brought into question. But if, as I would maintain, high-pitched emotional excitement is a constitutive ingredient of many transformative actions, then we cannot afford to maintain this protective scientific distance. The transformations that occurred as a consequence of the taking of the Bastille are certainly impossible to explain without considering the emotional tone of the event.

To begin with, the emotional tone of action can be an important sign of structural dislocation and rearticulation. The more or less extended dislocation of structures that characterizes the temporality of the event is profoundly unsettling. It was in part the unresolved dislocations of the spring and summer of 1789 that rendered the Parisians so wrought up by the middle of July; the emotion was then raised to a fever pitch when the king's attempted coup against the Assembly threatened to dash all hopes of reform. The widespread incidents of violence in Paris on the 12th and 13th bear witness to the tension and fear that motivated people to acts of both heroism and butchery on the 14th. And the resolution of structural dislocation—whether by restoring the ruptured articulation or by forging new ones—results in powerful emotional release that consolidates the rearticulation. We have already noted the rapturous reception of the delegation of the National Assembly in Paris on July 15, with its clamorous cheering and spontaneous weeping. It was the delegates' experience of this rapture that first induced them to revalue the events of the 14th as a legitimate revolution.

Emotion not only is an important sign of dislocations and rearticulations, but also shapes the very course of events. This is especially true in moments like the afternoon of July 14, when a large number of people interacted intensively in a restricted space, experiencing the kind of contagious emotional excitement that Emile Durkheim called "collective effervescence." Collective effervescence lifts people out of their ordinary inhibitions and limitations. As Durkheim puts it, "in the midst of an assembly animated by a common passion, we become susceptible of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces" ([1912] 1965, 240).

The powerful emotions introduced by collective effervescence make events markedly unstable. Joy and rage blend into one another, making possible acts of either generosity or savagery. The descriptions in *Les Révolutions de Paris* of the victorious procession from the Bastille to the city hall capture beautifully this supreme and dangerous exaltation. When the victors came forth from the fortress, escorting their captives,

> they formed a column and exited in the midst of an enormous crowd. Applause, an excess of joy, insults, imprecations hurled at the perfidious prisoners of war, all were mixed together; cries of vengeance and of pleasure leapt forth from every heart. The victors, glorious and covered with honor, carrying the arms and the corpses of the vanquished; the flags of victory; the militia mixed in with the soldiers of the fatherland; the laurels offered to them from all sides; everything offered a terrible and superb spectacle. (19)

This was the prelude to the slaughter of de Launay. When the column arrived at city hall,

> the people, impatient to avenge itself, would permit neither de Launay nor the other officers to mount to the tribunal of the city. They were torn from the hands of their victors, trampled under foot one after the other. De Launay was pierced by a thousand blows, his head was severed, and it was placed on the end of a lance with the blood running down on all sides. (19)

This slaughter did not seem to slake the crowd's thirst; the scene of triumph threatened to degenerate into an orgy of bloodshed. When the rest of the soldiers who had defended the Bastille arrived, "the people called for their execution" as well. But then the mood of the crowd suddenly shifted to generosity. The French Guards, who had been escorting these prisoners, "asked for their grace, and upon this request all voices were united and the pardon was unanimous" (19). The volatility that characterizes events in general can sometimes result, as this example implies, from inherently unpredictable shifts in emotions. And its effects on the future can be extremely important: had the killing of de Launay led to a generalized slaughter of the soldiers who had defended the Bastille, the National Assembly might never have embraced the Parisians' actions as a sublime expression of the people's will and the modern category of revolution might never have come into being. Tracking down the causes and character of structural transformations in political events may require us to be particularly sensitive to the emotional tone of action.

HISTORICAL EVENTS ARE ACTS OF COLLECTIVE CREATIVITY. Dislocation of structures, I have tried to suggest, produces in actors a deep sense of insecurity, a real uncertainty about how to get on with life. I think that this uncertainty is a necessary condition for the kind of collective creativity that characterizes so many great historical events. In times of structural dislocation, ordinary routines of social life are open to doubt, the sanctions of existing power relations are uncertain or suspended, and new

possibilities are thinkable. In ordinary times, cultural schemas, arrays of resources, and modes of power are bound into self-reproducing streams of structured social action. But in times of dislocation, like the spring and summer of 1789, resources are up for grabs, cultural logics are elaborated more freely and applied to new circumstances, and modes of power are extended to unforeseen social fields. In 1789, new arguments were tried out, new forms of organization were invented, and new ideas circulated in both old and new media and institutions—newspapers, pamphlets, political clubs, wine-shops, public meetings, caucuses, National Assembly debates, and street-corner conversations. Even in moments like this, which combined extraordinary freedom with an unusual sense of practical urgency, creativity was still shaped and constrained by the structurally available forms of thought and practice. But within these limits, the clamorous and multi-sited public sphere that emerged in France in 1789 was a site of remarkable collective creativity.

If the extended structural dislocations of 1789 led to widespread experimentation, the rearticulation of structures was accomplished above all at very particular places and times—at the Bastille and the city hall on July 14, in the reception ceremonies for the delegation from the National Assembly and for the king on July 15 and July 17, and in the meeting hall of the National Assembly on July 16, 20, and 23. These were moments when the pressure of rapidly unfolding actions and the massing of bodies in space led to emotionally charged cultural improvisations that determined the shape of future history. These improvisations were genuinely collective. For example, the notion that the people itself rose up and conquered despotism at the Bastille was not the invention of one particular orator or journalist but a revelation arrived at by a collectivity of actors in the heat of the moment. The itinerary and gestures of the reception ceremonies of July 15 and 17 were made up on the spot. And the speeches that authoritatively established the events of July 14 as a legitimate revolution were not written out the night before, but were improvised by a succession of speakers in the heat of debate—on July 20 in a feverish effort to rebut Lally's blanket censure of political violence, and on July 23 in response to the shocking news of the murders of Bertier and Foullon.

HISTORICAL EVENTS ARE PUNCTUATED BY RITUAL. We usually think of rituals as formalized ceremonies whose gestures and procedures are prescribed in advance and repeated formulaically on many occasions. Events, in sharp contrast, are unique and unpredictable sequences of hap-

penings that must, by definition, be improvised on the spot. It follows that rituals and events ought to be antithetical categories. Yet in the cluster of occurrences known by the metonymic title "the taking of the Bastille," some of the most important episodes had distinctly ritual qualities. Four crucial episodes were especially ritualized in form; first, the procession of the victors of the Bastille from the fortress to the city hall; second, the murder of de Launay and Flesselles; third, the visit of the delegation of the National Assembly to Paris on July 15; and fourth, the reception of the king in Paris on July 17. It will be recognized that these four episodes played a crucial role in transforming the assault on the Bastille into a revolution of the sovereign people. What did their ritual character have to do with their significance in the invention of the French Revolution? And, more generally, how do we account for the intrusion of the supposedly static category of ritual into the quintessentially dynamic category of the event?

One might, of course, ask in what sense the episodes I have identified had a ritual character. Students of ritual disagree about precisely how ritual should be defined; among the characteristics that have been proposed to mark off ritual from other types of social action are the formalization and repetition of gesture, the theatrical character of the action, the invocation of supernatural forces, the demarcation through gesture of sacred from profane persons, places, and activities, and the delineation of particular stages in "the ritual process" (see, e.g., Leach 1968; Turner 1969). My own usage follows that of Catherine Bell, who argues that there can be no general list of characteristics that universally distinguish ritual from nonritual action. Ritual, in her usage, is a mode of acting "that sets itself off from other ways of acting" in such a way that it "aligns one . . . to the ultimate sources of power" (Bell 1992, 140–41). What is ritualistic about the episodes I cite above is (1) that the actions constituting them are marked off as ritual by the actors and (2) that they align everyone present with the newly posited ultimate source of power: the people-as-nation. In these episodes, to quote Bell, "the strategic production of expedient schemes . . . structure[s] an environment in such a way that the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values" (140). Let me be more specific.

Once the Bastille had been captured, the elated victors celebrated their feat by spontaneously forming a triumphal procession. They marched through the streets to the city hall displaying trophies of their victory—captured weapons, freed prisoners, flags, and the defeated soldiers—to the assembled public. The triumphal procession was a preexisting military rite

but one that previously had displayed the armed might of the king's army—an army that was celebrating the defeat of foreign enemies but that was always also a means of intimidating the king's subjects. In this case, however, an existing ritual form was adapted to a very different situation: the armed men had *defeated* the king's soldiers and in the procession they displayed themselves as members of the people/nation through whose midst they were marching and whose accolades they accepted. They strategically produced an expedient scheme (the triumphal procession), thereby structuring the environment (the streets mobbed with ordinary citizens) in such a way that it (the assembled people, both marching and looking on) appeared to be the source of the schemes and their values (it was the people whose sovereign power made the triumph and celebration possible). This procession stated in highly dramatic and emotionally powerful terms the identity between the people and the armed force that had taken the Bastille.

In an analogous but more terrifying way, the killing of de Launay and Flesselles was ritualized by parading their severed heads on pikes around the thronged plaza in front of the city hall. By mimicking the old regime magistrates' display of body parts of executed criminals, the slaughter was solemnized and identified as an act of the sovereign—but now of the sovereign people. The cries of approval that arose from the crowd in the plaza dramatically and publicly identified the people with this act of vengeance and justice. The remaining ritualized episodes also used preexisting ritual gestures to establish the sovereignty of the people/nation. The rapturous reception of the National Assembly delegation on the 15th and of the king on the 17th both adapted the form of the royal entry. In royal entries, the king or a prince of the blood would be greeted at the city gate and escorted through a cheering throng by urban officials and dignitaries of the city's various guilds and corporate bodies, who would march in a carefully arrayed hierarchy. But once again the spontaneously invented rituals of July 1789 departed from precedent by symbolically establishing the thronged people as the sovereign from whom power arose. On July 15, the crowds established their ecstatic unity with their representatives—so effectively that Mounier returned to Versailles and praised the Parisian uprising as a legitimate revolt of liberty against despotism. And on the 17th, Bailly engaged in a consummate act of symbolic reversal, greeting the king at the gate of the city according to the traditional protocol, but explicitly reminding him that it was the people who had conquered their king, not vice-versa. The high point of this particular ritual arrived only when, having arrived at the city hall, a site by now indelibly associated with the uprising,

the king stepped onto the balcony and publicly placed the insurrectionaries' tricolor rosette on his hat. All of these ritualized episodes placed the various participants in alignment to the new ultimate source of power—whether as members of the sovereign people, as its soldiers, its representatives, or the objects of its wrath. The rituals, I would argue, made palpable the notion that the people/nation was indeed sovereign, and that its will was the ultimate arbiter of the affairs of the nation. These largely spontaneous ritualized actions had the effect of concretely articulating the previously far more abstract will of the sovereign people to the violent uprising of July 14.

To a significant extent, then, the taking of the Bastille was created as a legitimate revolution through the performance of these spontaneous rituals. Most scholarly study of ritual focuses on religious rites of one kind or another. In most religious rituals, the participants are collected into a place marked off as sacred and then participate in a series of activities that induce a certain emotional state—quiet awe, rapt attention, terror, intense pleasure, or frenzied enthusiasm, as the case may be. In many cases, participants enter into what Victor Turner has called liminality—a state of "betwixt and between" in which social constraints and hierarchies momentarily evaporate and the celebrants experience a profound sense of community with one another and with the deity or deities. It is the creation of this sense of communitas that gives rituals their psychological and social power (Turner 1969). In episodes like those surrounding the taking of the Bastille, the usual process is reversed: rather than the ritual inducing the emotional excitement and the sense of communion, the emotional excitement and sense of communion—what Durkheim would call the collective effervescence—induce those present to express and concretize their feelings in ritual. The Parisians who participated in these events were massed in confined spaces, and their emotions were excited by the crowding and by the memory—very recent in the episodes of the 14th, more distant on the 15th and 17th—of the battle fought and the victory won. They were also aware that they were participating in a momentous event, whose outcome could determine their future as individuals and as a nation. Finally, in the very course of the event, they discovered that they were members of the sovereign people, that their actions constituted a sacred collective will that rightfully determined the fate of the nation. They could manifest this state of liminality and communitas only by spontaneously appropriating known ritual forms to create new and powerful rituals of sovereignty. Through these rituals, the Parisians participated in the invention of the modern revolution.

HISTORICAL EVENTS PRODUCE MORE EVENTS. Events are sequences of ruptures that effect transformations of structure. If structures are multiple and overlapping, it follows that any transformation of structure has the potential of touching off dislocations and rearticulations of overlapping or contiguous structures. This cascading character of events can be seen within the series of episodes that I have designated as the overall event of the taking of the Bastille. What happened on the 14th resulted in the strategic retreat of the king and the ecstatic reception of the delegation of the National Assembly in Paris, the Assembly's initial statement of the legitimacy of the violence of the 14th, and the king's ceremonial reconquest by the Parisians on the 17th. But it also led to intensified uncertainty and anxiety in the provinces, and to disturbances like those of the 17th and 18th at Poissy and Saint-Germain-en-Laye, which in turn led to the further justification of the taking of the Bastille as a legitimate revolution. The success of the Parisian insurrection and its explicit justification in the debates of the Assembly also emboldened the Parisian mob to renew its acts of "popular justice" by murdering Bertier and Foullon on the 23rd, which paradoxically led to a further elaboration of the myth of the Bastille as a legitimate revolution so as to condemn as illegitimate the lynching of the 23rd.

I am conceptualizing the taking of the Bastille from a particular perspective: as the historical event that articulates popular violence with the nation's sovereign will in the new concept of revolution. For this reason it is reasonable for me to declare the event completed on July 23. But the cascade of consequences flowing from the actions of July 14 certainly did not stop then. The profound redefinition of sovereignty, the defeat of the king, the victory of the National Assembly, the establishment of a new form of popular urban militia, and the emergence of revolution as a category of political action both raised hopes and accentuated the practical dislocation of social and political structures all over France. It therefore heightened the already pervasive sense of insecurity. I would like to sketch out two of the most spectacular and momentous historical events that flowed from the taking of the Bastille: the vast agrarian panic that historians have come to call "the Great Fear" and the famous legislative session of the night of August 4, which abolished feudalism and privilege and established a new social order based on equality before the law.

The Great Fear was probably the most astonishing mass panic in recorded history. The news of the Paris uprising reached the provinces during the crucial days when the promising crop of 1789 was beginning to ripen in the fields, but in a countryside that was crushed by poverty and

crowded with beggars and vagabonds produced by the previous year's disastrous harvest. The panic began independently at several different points in France during the week that followed July 20—that is, within a few days after the arrival of the astounding news from Paris. At each of the points of origin, someone reported seeing troops of brigands advancing into the fields and cutting the standing grain before it could ripen. The result was a wave of panics that extended over most of the surface of the country by the early days of August. The bells in the church steeple would be rung, the villagers would assemble, arm themselves, and march out in pursuit of the imaginary brigands, usually sending a messenger to the adjacent villages to announce the dreadful news. These villages would mobilize in turn and send out their own messengers. Thus the panic might spread a hundred miles or more in the course of a few days.

In a few cases, the peasants, once mobilized, attacked the lords' chateaux and burned the rolls on which their dues and charges were written. According to Georges Lefebvre, who wrote the classic history of the Great Fear, this event persuaded the vast mass of the peasantry that they were threatened by a nation-wide aristocratic plot (Lefebvre [1932] 1973). But Lefebvre's own evidence seems more consistent with the findings of Clay Ramsay, who concluded in his recent study of the Great Fear in the Soissonais that by far the most common outcome was a symbolic reaffirmation of the hierarchical social order of the old regime village community. When the villagers took up arms against the "brigands," they usually called on the local lord or magistrates to constitute and lead their militias. Faced with a kind of peasants' vision of the apocalypse—the harvest unaccountably destroyed by mysterious outsiders—country people turned to their traditional superiors to save the day (Ramsay 1992). The Great Fear probably is better understood as the last hurrah of the rural old regime than as the definitive triumph of the peasant revolution.

But most of the villages where the Great Fear occurred were distant from Paris, and communications were uncertain and irregular. From the perspective of Paris or Versailles, the news was indeed alarming: chateaux in flames, crops destroyed by brigands, armed men everywhere. It was the journalists and legislators in Paris and Versailles, not the peasants in the villages, who darkly attributed the disorders to an aristocratic plot. The legislators feared a general peasant rising against the feudal system, a rising that would threaten not only the lords' seigneuries but rural property in general. The famed legislative session of the night of August 4 was actually based on this misapprehension of what was happening in the countryside.

The enactments of August 4 resulted in part from a legislative conspiracy. A sizeable conclave of patriot deputies determined to appease the peasants by abolishing the feudal system in return for an indemnity to be paid by the peasants. To this end they recruited two great nobles, the vicomte de Noailles and the duc d'Aiguillon, to propose the renunciation of feudal rights. Their speeches electrified the Assembly, and before long even nobles and clerics who had hitherto been hostile to such reforms began to vie with one another by renouncing their own privileges at the altar of the nation, bathed in tears of joy amid the clamorous applause of the Assembly. The session, which lasted nearly until dawn, destroyed the entire tissue of privilege that had constituted the social and political order of the old regime and replaced it with a new social order based on the equality of all citizens before the law. If the taking of the Bastille definitively established the sovereignty of the people/nation, it was on the night of August 4 that France's principles of social organization were finally brought into harmony with the new foundational ideology of natural equality, national sovereignty, and social contract. The night of August 4 effected the definitive rearticulation between the new metaphysical principles of the state and the juridical organization of social life. It finally spelled out the consequences for daily life of the ideology the delegates had adopted implicitly when they declared themselves the National Assembly on June 17 (Kessel 1969; Fitzsimmons 2003).

The Great Fear and the night of August 4, no less than the taking of the Bastille, had all the characteristics of historical events listed above. They rearticulated structures, transformed cultures, were crucially shaped by local conditions, were bathed in powerful emotions, were acts of collective creativity, were punctuated by improvised rituals, and produced yet more events. In all these respects, they could be analyzed in no less detail than I have lavished on the taking of the Bastille. They formed part of an extraordinary series of historical events that, over the summer of 1789, transformed the political and social system of the most populous, most powerful, and most prestigious state in the European world, and that changed forever the horizons of world politics.

TO BECOME DEFINITIVE, REARTICULATIONS OF STRUCTURES MUST GAIN AUTHORITATIVE SANCTION. In the case of the Bastille, the ruptural action took place in Paris rather than Versailles and involved a clash between armed citizens under the improvised banner of an emergency municipality and a minor military detachment of elderly veterans

guarding an urban fortress. It was also in Paris that the trope of the sovereign people rising against despotism was first introduced, both in spontaneous rituals and in oral and written discourse. But for this to become the recognized truth of the taking of the Bastille required action by the central governing authorities—the National Assembly and the king, both bystanders on July 14. The taking of the Bastille could only become a legitimate and founding revolution after the ceremonial entries of July 15 and 17, which bound the Parisians to the National Assembly and registered the acquiescence of the king, and the debates in the National Assembly that marked off the violence of July 14 as, in Malouet's words, "a national insurrection against despotism" with "a character superior to the power of the laws." The structural rearticulation could only be definitive when it had been sanctioned at the pinnacle of state authority.

The crucial role of action at the center of the state is even clearer in the case of the Great Fear and the night of August 4. The Great Fear might be characterized as an interrelated series of dispersed and local events. Although these events were of tremendous emotional and political impact in each locality, the structural transformations they effected in the localities—usually the reconstruction of a kind of participatory old regime hierarchy—was ephemeral. The most important long-term effects of the Great Fear in the localities was mediated by action at the center. It was because the Great Fear provoked members of the National Assembly to abolish the feudal system on the night of August 4 that its effects not only on French and world history, but also on local history, were so profound. The night of August 4 resulted in the abolition of serfdom, feudal exactions, provincial and municipal privileges, exclusive hunting rights, venality of office, and tithes, and the confiscation and sale of the vast properties of the church. It was the effects of these reforms that transformed the character of social and political relations in French villages, not the ephemeral resurgence of old regime hierarchical relations that were the immediate result of the Great Fear. Once again, even though the impetus of the events came from a peripheral location, it was their resolution at the center of the state that determined their structural effects.

Because the taking of the Bastille and the Great Fear were above all political ruptures, it should not be surprising that in both cases the authoritative rearticulations were effected at the center of the state. But we should expect the location of rearticulating action to vary with the setting and scope of the event. A religious event might well achieve its authoritative resolution in a religious institutional setting: in, say, a presbytery or a

council of bishops. A rupture in kinship relations might be sanctioned by the elders of the clan or by a tacit agreement on the part of the appropriate kinsmen. Where authoritative rearticulations will be achieved depends on what modes of power are activated or challenged by the event in question and on the particular institutional nodes in which the affected power is concentrated. Authoritative rearticulations, however, are likely to take place at power nodes that command an adequate geographic and institutional scope. Given the institutional and geographic cascades that characterize events, this means that even ruptures located primarily outside the sphere of state activity are often resolved only by state action.

HISTORICAL EVENTS ARE SPATIAL AS WELL AS TEMPORAL PROCESSES. We usually think of the event as a temporal category. But it is impossible to analyze an event without encountering spatial processes.[9] This is certainly true of the taking of the Bastille, and of the Great Fear and the Night of August Fourth as well. Let me specify some key spatial dimensions of the taking of the Bastille that seem characteristic of historical events more generally.

1. The actions that determined how structures were transformed were highly concentrated in space. It was spatial concentration that made possible the episodes of "collective effervescence." The exaltation of imagination, the collective creativity, the superheated emotionality, and the spontaneous ritual that marked the occurrences of July 14, 15, 17, and 23 all depended on the massing of large numbers of people into particular spaces—the environs of the Bastille, the place de l'Hotel de Ville, the parade routes along which the delegation of the National Assembly and the king made their way into Paris. These particular spaces, at particular times, constituted crucial nodes in the transformative event known as the taking of the Bastille—crucial because action taken there and then determined the course of subsequent action over long durations and wide geographic scopes. The action of the National Assembly, debating in its meeting place in Versailles, was also concentrated spatially. The fateful outcome of the debates that sanctioned the taking of the Bastille as a legitimate revolution of the sovereign people depended on particular rivalries, alliances, spontaneous flows of debate—and, indeed, on collective effervescence—that were concentrated at a particular moment in a particular building.

2. The intersection of structures that results in cascades of transforma-

9. For elaborations on this point, see Zhao (2001, esp. chap. 8) and Sewell (2001).

tive actions is spatial as well as institutional. The structures that are unevenly articulated into networks have varying and far from congruent spatial scopes. One important reason that some ruptures result in cascades of further ruptures has to do with spatial scale. A rupture that has consequences outside its initial place of occurrence is far more likely to result in a transformative cascade than one that is spatially contained. Whether spread mimetically like the Great Fear, or by immediate or mediated effects on structures of much wider scope like the assault on the Bastille, or because they occur initially in socio-spatial locations with great spatial scope like the night of August 4th, historical events can be defined at least in part by a prodigious expansion in spatial reach of what are initially local phenomena.

3. All action by definition takes place in a particular spatial location. But action taken in some locations has only a local scope, while the scope of other actions is much wider. In part this is because some locations are central nodes in social practices of wide extent. An act taken in the National Assembly or in the king's chambers may bind people spread over the entire territory of the country. Moreover, because of Paris's position as the quasi-capital of France, its centrality in French cultural and political life, and its proximity to the royal government at Versailles, a disturbance that occurred there had reverberations all over the country. By contrast, an equally violent event in a remote village would have only a local impact, unless it was nationalized by the Parisian press or led the National Assembly or the king to take action. The particular shape and dynamic of events—quite different for the taking of the Bastille, for example, than for the Great Fear—will depend fundamentally on the evolving spatial scope of its constituent actions.

DEFINING THE BOUNDARIES OF A HISTORICAL EVENT REQUIRES AN ACT OF JUDGMENT. Historical events have what might be called a fractal character. An event like the taking of the Bastille might well be said to be composed of a series of events—among others, the assault on the Invalides, the slaughter of de Launay and Flesselles, the king's entry into Paris, or the Assembly debate of July 23. And each of these sub-events is itself composed of a series of smaller but significant ruptures. Moreover, the taking of the Bastille itself is but one episode in the French Revolution, and the French Revolution but one component of the vast transformation of forms of government, national boundaries, and modes of warfare that took place between 1789 and 1815. There is no a priori reason to call the tak-

ing of the Bastille an event and to deny the term to the king's entry into Paris on July 17, or to his actions on the balcony of the city hall that afternoon, or to the French Revolution as a whole. Each of these may be usefully conceptualized as a sequence of ruptures that dislocates and rearticulates structures. Each is a historical event at its own particular scale.

But the complexity of events is not limited to their fractal character. Events are also overlapping and interpenetrating. If it is true that structures form a loosely articulated network, and if we define events as sequences of occurrences that transform structures, then an occurrence like the assault on the Bastille will be implicated in the transformations of a number of different structures, and each of these transformations will have a different spatial and temporal range. Once again, deciding how to bound an event is necessarily a matter of judgement. One may state as a rule of thumb that how an analyst should delimit an event will depend on the structural transformation to be explained. For example, I define the event of the taking of the Bastille as beginning with popular resistance to the dismissal of Necker on July 12 and as ending with the Assembly debates of July 23 that authoritatively interpret the assault on the fortress as a legitimate revolution. I do so because I am focusing on a particular structural transformation: the articulation of popular sovereignty with crowd violence to form the category of revolution. But because this was by no means the only significant transformation to come out of the taking of the Bastille, these are not the only appropriate boundaries of the event. A study focusing on the emergence of the urban militia as a new mode of power—another crucial consequence of the taking of the Bastille—might well fix different beginning and ending dates. Such decisions must be made post hoc: with some confidence when dealing with an event that occurred two hundred years ago and whose consequences have generally been fixed for some time, more tentatively when the consequences of a rupture have only recently begun to appear and when additional, perhaps surprising, consequences may yet emerge.

* * *

Just as the taking of the Bastille led to a cascade of further events, so the theoretical reflections touched off by my analysis of that event has led to a cascade of further reflections. And as the analyst must draw an arbitrary boundary to establish analytical closure to an event, so must I bring to a close an essay that still seems to me radically open and unfinished. I believe I have written enough to establish that thinking about historical events as I have done here—that is, treating them as sequences of occurrences that

result in durable transformations of structures—is potentially fruitful. Precisely how fruitful can only be determined by future work on other historical events.

POSTSCRIPT

Calculation, Semiosis, and Charisma

I remarked at the conclusion of my essay that it still seemed to me open and unfinished. This postscript is a practical testimony to that observation. At about the time the essay was initially published, I took part in a several-day conference on revolutions that included practitioners of what is called rational choice theory.[10] This encounter provoked me to articulate more clearly the strategic dimensions of my argument—a task that I undertook initially in a memo drafted shortly after the conference. This postscript is a revised version of that memo. It attempts to specify both the value and the limitations of explaining "the invention of revolution at the Bastille" as a consequence of self-interested strategic action.

The "rational choice" perspective in the social sciences is based upon "methodological individualism." It assumes that no social action has been properly explained until it has been reduced to the aggregate effects of individual actions. It further assumes that individuals are "rational maximizers"—that is, that they act strategically so as to maximize their individual interests. It attempts to develop formal mathematical models, generally derived from game theory, to explain why people act as they do. This perspective, which was explicitly borrowed from economics, has become quite common in contemporary sociology and is currently making a robust but increasingly contested bid for methodological dominance in contemporary political science. Given the growing institutional power of rational choice theory, especially in the discipline of political science, it seems worthwhile to assess a strategic approach to what surely must count as a highly significant happening—the emergence of the modern concept of revolution in July 1789.

Rational choice theory has been applied effectively to certain problems in the study of revolutions. For example, Michael Taylor (1988) has shown that an explicit modeling of the individual choice to join or abstain from revolutionary protests can significantly clarify the process by which small

10. This was a conference on Social Theory and Revolution, organized by Shmuel Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock and held in Uppsala in 1995.

and local actions snowball into revolutionary uprisings; and Jack Goldstone (1990, 1994) has shown that rational choice analysis can provide a plausible micro-translation of his macro-historical explanations of revolutionary dynamics. Yet I suspect that many specialists on revolutions would agree with me that even such cogent analyses as these fail to grasp something essential to the revolutionary phenomenon. Taylor and Goldstone focus on the problem of how people choose which side to take when an explicitly revolutionary movement has been launched. They have to assume a high degree of stability in the goals of the contesting forces; otherwise actors would not know what benefits or costs to expect from a victory by the revolutionaries and could not make rational calculations. The problem is that in most revolutions worthy of the name, the goals of the revolution, and for that matter the identities of the actors as well, are significantly transformed in the course of the revolutionary process. What makes the political struggles we call revolutions *revolutionary* is that they fundamentally change the nature of the ideological and institutional alternatives available to members of the polity, and that they do so by elaborating new and surprising political and moral options. To my knowledge, rational choice approaches have not succeeded in formulating, let alone resolving, this crucial problem of revolutionary changes in cultural meanings. One of the merits of my essay on the Bastille is precisely that it attempts to explain one such transformation: the emergence of the modern concept of "revolution." Although my essay uses none of the rhetorical tropes associated with rational choice, it nevertheless does, like most cultural or historical analyses, contain arguments about interest-based calculations—arguments that could, in principle, be cast in rational-choice terms. In this postscript, I pursue such arguments more systematically—in part to clarify my own explanation, in part as a means of assessing the potential contribution of rational choice arguments to the explanation of revolutionary cultural transformations.

Woven into my account of the taking of the Bastille is a story of strategic action on the part of the National Assembly.[11] It goes as follows. The National Assembly was engaged in a high-stakes political game with the

11. In this argument, I am constrained to consider the National Assembly as, in effect, a single actor, even though it was of course made up of a large number of individual actors who, as my account has made clear, often disagreed. But because there are no roll-call data on votes in the Assembly, I cannot disaggregate their actions to work out a more fine-grained interpretation of the genuinely individual political calculations that were undoubtedly going on between July 12 and July 23, 1789. For an example of a more individual-level analysis of what was at least a quasi-revolutionary process, see Ivan Ermakoff's (2000) study of the legislature's decision to accede to regime change in France in 1940, after the defeat by the Germans.

king. At stake was effective sovereignty. The taking of the Bastille introduced a new element into the game—the rebellious Parisian people. Initially the National Assembly was hesitant to embrace the Parisians. This hesitancy was based on several calculations: (1) that the violence that had taken place was likely to prove contagious, (2) that a contagious expansion of popular violence was likely to have the effect of strengthening the hand of the king, who alone had the armed force necessary to put it down, (3) that a strengthened king would be in a position to dominate or dissolve the Assembly, and (4) that the king would be more likely to use force against the Assembly if it embraced the rebellious Parisians than if it did not. (5) Against these considerations must be weighed whatever strength in either military forces or popular support might have been gained by embracing the Parisians. I am sure that a competent formal modeler could render the strategic situation facing the National Assembly as a utility function or functions.

The mournful silence that greeted the initial news of the taking of the Bastille in the Assembly indicates that it found itself in an irresolvable dilemma. It believed that embracing the Parisians by approving of the taking of the Bastille would have negative utility, but also knew that embracing the king against the Parisians would have negative utility. So rather than choosing sides immediately, the Assembly did what any rational actor would do in a situation where neither choice looks promising: it temporized and gathered more information. It did this by sending a delegation to Paris and by sending a series of delegations to the king. This resulted in new information that shifted the "expected utilities" in two ways. First, the delegation to Paris found that the city, rather than being violent and chaotic, was peaceful and orderly. This decreased the perceived likelihood that the violence would be contagious, therefore increasing the perceived likelihood that supporting the Parisians against the king would actually strengthen the Assembly. Second, the delegations to the king found that he did not seem to regard his own position as more powerful. He first removed his troops from Paris, and then effectively renounced the use of force against the Parisians. The information from the delegation to Paris changed the Assembly's calculations because it indicated that contagious violence was not occurring. And the delegations to the royal palace indicated that the king regarded himself as weakened, rather than strengthened, by the Parisian violence. All of this sharply decreased the perceived costs of forming an alliance with the Parisians. Consequently, the Assembly opted to support the Parisians, cementing the alliance by giving the

uprising retroactive authoritative legitimation—by recognizing it as an act of the sovereign people.

This argument about strategic calculation certainly packs an explanatory punch. But it does not really get us to our goal, which is to explain the invention and locking into place of the modern concept of revolution. The argument explains why the National Assembly, if it behaves as a rational actor, would initially keep its distance from the Parisians and subsequently form a coalition with Paris against the king. But it surely does not tell us why the Assembly would form the coalition in the way it did—by legitimating an act of popular violence as "a national insurrection against despotism" with "a character superior to the power of the laws." By enunciating this doctrine, the National Assembly did more than cement an alliance with the Parisians: it established a new principle of legitimacy that could, in principle, be used against its own power as much as against the king's. If we take the Assembly's goal as the maximizing of its own power and security, it went irrationally far when it defined the Parisian crowd's action in a way that compromised its own claims to a monopoly on the legitimate representation of sovereignty. In short, an argument based on rational calculation cannot explain why crowd violence and popular sovereignty were articulated in this particular and historically fateful way. In order to explain this articulation, we need to move beyond a purely rational choice framework of explanation. We need to explain why the taking of the Bastille, which was initially understood by the Assembly as an act of potentially contagious license and disorder, could be reinterpreted as a rising of the people against despotism and an exercise of popular sovereignty. Here the initial rational choice explanation needs to be joined to a semiotic explanation, one that proceeds on different premises and by different methods.

A semiotic approach would explain what happened in the Assembly between July 14 and July 23 as a novel code switch followed by a further elaboration of the newly adopted code. The initial response of the Assembly was consistent with a well-established code for interpreting popular violence. This code depended on a generalized elite conception of the people *(le peuple)* as irrational, unruly, and naturally violent. Thus, when the Parisian populace attacked the Bastille and gruesomely slaughtered its commander, the automatic response of any educated person would have been to condemn the violence and fear its contagious spread. But over the last few decades of the eighteenth century, and at an accelerated rate since the calling of the Estates General, another entirely different discourse de-

veloped that also used the term *le peuple:* the discourse of national or popular sovereignty, which, in June and July 1789, became the chief legitimating discourse of the self-proclaimed National Assembly. In this discourse the people and the people's will figured in an entirely positive but purely abstract way, as the principle of sovereignty that underlay a legitimate state and as the entity that was represented in the National Assembly or any legitimate government. Far from being a threat to order and morality, "the people" in this somewhat mystical sense was the very source of order and morality.

When, as early as July 15, orators in the National Assembly began to characterize the people who attacked the Bastille as courageous and energetic, and to speak of their action as a blow struck for liberty against despotism, they were seizing on a pregnant ambiguity of the term people. They were shifting the people's action at the Bastille out of the context of a discourse on the people's inherent violence and irrationality and into the context of a discourse on popular sovereignty. Once the shift had been made, the valence of the people's action was systematically reversed from negative to positive. And over the course of the next several days, the logical entailments of inserting the taking of the Bastille into the discourse of popular sovereignty were elaborated, leading to the definition of the violence of July 14 not only as a heroic attack on despotism but as a necessary national insurrection with an authority superior to the laws. The argument about rational calculation can perhaps explain why the National Assembly chose the second discourse over the first. But it cannot explain why these two discourses were the available alternatives nor why the choice of the popular sovereignty discourse led to the elaboration of a concept of popular revolution that actually diminished the Assembly's claim to be the sole legitimate interpreter of the national will. Unless the rational choice argument is joined to a semiotic analysis, this outcome will remain utterly inexplicable.

But even a combined rational choice and semiotic analysis leaves an explanatory puzzle. Rational choice can explain why the National Assembly decided to form a coalition with the Parisians against the king. Semiotic analysis can establish the alternative discursive universes in terms of which the taking of the Bastille could be evaluated and can explicate the logic of semiotic elaboration followed once a given discursive universe had been entered. But neither of these explanatory strategies makes it clear why it suddenly seemed to the Assembly possible, indeed natural, to speak of an act of crowd violence in the discursive categories of popular sovereignty.

Here it is important to recognize the novelty of the interpretation elaborated by the Assembly. The idea of revolution as a radical change of political regime was certainly available to political actors in 1789—chiefly from the English "Glorious" Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution of 1776–83. So was the notion that the regime established by a revolution was to be based on the sovereignty of the nation or the people. But before the taking of the Bastille, the idea that an act of popular violence could be an authoritative expression of the people's will had not been imagined.

To understand why the National Assembly could see this as self-evident in the days after July 14, we need to turn to a third framework of explanation, this one based on Max Weber's (1978, 1:241–25) concept of charisma and Emile Durkheim's ([1912] 1965) concept of collective effervescence. Neither the rational choice nor the semiotic explanatory framework has any way of accounting for the high-pitched emotional excitement that characterized the Bastille episode and many other key revolutionary events. Both frameworks are essentially formal and rationalist, although they posit different notions of rationality and employ different formal methods. Weber and Durkheim, by contrast, both find a place for the power of emotions near the center of their theoretical schemes.

The experience that initially influenced members of the Assembly to rethink the meaning of the Bastille was the visit of a delegation to Paris on July 15. Mounier's account of the visit actually dwelt less on the Paris municipality's new arrangements for assuring law and order or the militia's exemplary discipline than on the emotional tone of the episode. The Parisians, he noted, "attempted, by all the most vivid signs of affection, to express the sentiments weighing upon them. It was a great joy for them to shake hands with a member of the National Assembly. . . . Citizens congratulated and embraced one another. All eyes were wet with tears; intoxicated sentiment was everywhere" (*Réimpression de l'ancien Moniteur*, 163). What Mounier is signaling here is the establishment of an emotional bond between the delegates of the Assembly and the throngs of Parisians who lined their route into the city. As Durkheim would point out, the emotional excitement experienced by both the delegates and the Parisians was in part the consequence of "collective effervescence," the remarkable enhancement of emotion that occurs when a large number of people are crowded into a confined space, especially one that, like the parade route followed by the delegation, was ritually marked off as extraordinary or sacred. The excitement was not merely the mechanical effect of crowding—it is rare for the crowd at Grand Central station during rush hour to erupt

in tears of joy. The emotional power of these crowd scenes derived from what Weber would call their charismatic quality—the sense that what was happening somehow touched ultimate sources of order. The joyous mingling of the National Assembly's delegation with the populace of Paris was experienced by both parties as an incarnation of the unity of the sovereign people and its representatives, as a concrete enactment of the mystery that lay at the center of the theory of popular sovereignty. The sense of ecstatic union, which contrasted sharply with the pervasive conflict and tension of the past several months, was obviously a consequence of the taking of the Bastille. It was, I am convinced, this profound emotional experience on the 15th of July—an experience repeated during the king's visit to Paris on the 17th—that made it thinkable for the Assembly to take the novel step of coding a bloody assault on a fortress as a sublime action of the sovereign people, and thereby to introduce into the world a concept of popular revolution that had the potential of undermining its own authority.

Methodological Lessons

It is my experience that practitioners of rational choice theory have only a minor interest in issues of cultural transformation. The problem is not that they ignore culture altogether, but that culture figures in their accounts in a highly limited fashion: usually either as a residual that is invoked when rational choice accounts have been pushed to the limit and still leave something unexplained, or as a framework within which calculations take place, but that is taken as given for the explanatory purpose at hand. At the outside, rational choice arguments may be used to explain the choice between alternative existing frameworks of meaning or to explain the emergence of certain norms that make rational calculation possible. But on what I regard as the crucial question of the emergence of new and structurally crucial cultural frameworks in transformative events, rational choice theory has, as far as I know, remained silent.

The intent of this postscript is to argue both that rational choice analysis—or at least a serious interrogation of the strategic options faced by actors—has something useful to offer in the study of this question and that it is incapable of providing a sufficient answer on its own. In the case of the taking of the Bastille, and I suspect more generally, arguments about rational calculation of advantage need to be joined to arguments about semiotic structures and their transformations and arguments about the socially generated emotional experiences that inspire the invention and

elaboration of new cultural meanings. Without taking semiotic structures and socio-emotional dynamics into account, and without recognizing the synergistic interaction between calculation, semiotic structure, and socio-emotional dynamics, it is impossible to explain the emergence of the modern concept of revolution—or, I would maintain, the radical transformation of cultural meanings more generally. In some ways this conclusion is one that practitioners of rational choice have heard many times before and are no doubt tired of hearing: that the fundamental failing of the rational choice perspective is its one-dimensional model of the human actor. I am claiming that because human action during the Bastille episode had crucial semiotic and emotional dimensions, an account based solely on the rational calculation of interests cannot generate an adequate explanation. The major difference between my objection to a purely rational choice account and that usually offered is that mine is posed in empirical rather than merely a priori theoretical terms; it offers a concrete explanatory challenge, not just a philosophical objection.

But if previous experience is any guide, practitioners of rational choice may chose to ignore the challenge on another ground. The response I normally get when I object that rational choice falls grievously short in its attempt to explain some important social transformation is a retreat to a certain abstract model of science. Our goal, the answer usually goes, is not to explain every historical case in its fullness. There are always factors at work in any given case that require explanation by other theories than ours. Indeed, a rational choice explanation will never be able to predict the outcomes of a particular case in all its detail; that is a job for (mere) historians or ethnographers. Science is advanced by not by such ideographic detail work but by building a general body of theory that allows us to make predictions across a wide variety of cases. To do so in a fruitful way we need to restrict our focus to a single set of factors that will be present in the widest range of social settings and that can be compared rigorously across the entire range of possible cases. Our inability to explain fully the National Assembly's response to the taking of the Bastille (or any other particular case) is consequently irrelevant to the forward march of our general science.

But the claim I am making is in fact a general one. I am using the case of the taking of the Bastille to argue that rational choice theory, as currently practiced, lacks the conceptual and methodological tools necessary to explain the emergence and transformation of the cultural frameworks within which calculation takes place. I further suggest that it is not likely

to develop such tools from within its own intellectual armory, but can do so only by pursuing a much deeper engagement than it has so far undertaken with existing traditions of cultural analysis. For an approach that regards itself as providing general "Foundations of Sociological Theory" (Coleman 1990), this should be a troubling and challenging diagnosis.

9

HISTORICAL DURATION AND TEMPORAL COMPLEXITY

The Strange Career of Marseille's Dockworkers, 1814–70

The last two chapters have been concerned with events—brief and intense sequences of social interaction that have long-lasting effects on the subsequent history of social relations. This chapter continues to explore the textures of what I have called eventful temporality, but it looks at what might be regarded as the opposite problem: how structured patterns of social relations, once established, can sometimes be reproduced with very little change over long periods of time, even in eras of considerable historical transformation. The case I have chosen to look at is particularly interesting because the continuities in question—the economic privileges of Marseille's nineteenth-century dockworkers—were a stunning exception to the general pattern of French labor relations in this era and were maintained at the core of the city's most dynamic industry during a period of exceptionally rapid economic growth. Making sense of this case requires us to sort out the relations among several nonsynchronous but overlapping and mutually implicated temporal processes—from the rhythms of daily life on the waterfront, to the complex and contradictory dynamics of nineteenth-century capitalism, to the institutional history of the dockworkers' trade organization, to the discontinuous sequence of French national regime changes.

The dockworkers *(portefaix)* of Marseille certainly constitute an exceptional case in the history of the nineteenth-century French working class.

A version of this chapter was published as "Uneven Development, the Autonomy of Politics, and the Dockworkers of Nineteenth-Century Marseille," in *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 604–37. Versions of the chapter have been read and critiqued by Geoff Eley, Jan Goldstein, Howard Kimmeldorf, Bill Reddy, and Joan Scott.