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CHAPTER 26

THE PRESENT AS HISTORY

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THE Iowa Caucuses, the first electoral test for the eight people then campaigning to be the Democratic Party's nominee for President of the United States, took place on 19 January 2004.¹ After months of speeches, debates, television advertising, and public appearances, Iowa voters were finally able to declare a preference for the candidate of their choice. Around 8:30 p.m., it became apparent from exit polls and preliminary vote returns, that Senator John Kerry would be the victor, followed by Senator John Edwards and then by Howard Dean, the former Governor of Vermont. Shortly after the television news networks "called" the election based on their projections of the final numbers, Dean—as is traditional for an American presidential candidate—appeared before a crowd of his supporters and campaign workers to deliver some brief remarks. "I'm sure there are some disappointed people here," Dean began. "You know something? If you had told us one year ago that we were going to come in third in Iowa, we would have given anything for that." According to the text printed in the next day's *New York Times*, Dean continued:

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¹ Only six of those people were actually on the ballot in Iowa, however, as Joe Lieberman and Al Sharpton had skipped the contest altogether.

Not only are we going to New Hampshire . . . we're going to South Carolina and Oklahoma and Arizona and North Dakota and New Mexico, and we're going to California and Texas and New York. And we're going to South Dakota and Oregon and Washington and Michigan. And then we're going to Washington, D.C. To take back the White House. Yeah.

At the point where the transcript reads merely "yeah," Dean gave a yell, or a call, or a cry. The answer depended on whom you asked. The next day's *Washington Post* described the speech as "an arm-waving, voice-booming appearance that seemed like a victory address" (Harris 2004: 7) while the *New York Times* noted that Dean was "shouting himself hoarse" and displaying "a fierce grin and a red face" (Wilgoren 2004b). By the following day, the *Times* was referring to Dean's "guttural concession-speech battle cry" (Rutenberg 2004) while the *Post* reported that Dean had "shocked many Democrats by storming onto the stage in Iowa with arms flailing and face reddening to fire up a huge crowd of younger supporters" (VandeHei 2004a: 6), and that Dean had appeared "almost frenzied" and "shrieked his determination to win coming contests" (Broder 2004: 6).

The campaign quickly tried to control the situation. At a press conference the day after the Iowa Caucuses, Dean explained that he had been focused on the campaign volunteers in attendance and not on how his remarks and actions might play on television: "Last night there were 3,500 people there who had worked for weeks in Iowa . . . and I thought I owed them the reason they came to the campaign, which was passion" (Wilgoren 2004a). The following day he pointed out in speeches that he was "not a perfect person" and sometimes engaged in ill-advised public performances, but that his candidacy was driven by "passion" and that his post-Caucus speech should be understood in that light. Dean even poked fun at himself: "I still have not recovered my voice from my screeching in Iowa" (Nagourney and Wilgoren 2004).

But the speech had already become a media staple, with television stations "replaying it constantly" and late-night talk shows building gags around clips from it (VandeHei 2004b: 11). Numerous commentators declared the Dean candidacy to be at an end, as the speech had shown Dean unfit to be president (Kurtz 2004a). The *Times* quoted unnamed "advisers" as saying that "they had concluded that the portrayal of Dr. Dean as a candidate unhinged would make it impossible, at least for now, to run advertisements attacking their opponents" (Nagourney and Wilgoren 2004). By the end of the week, the reporters covering Dean had changed their tone dramatically, shifting from a celebration of an unorthodox campaign characterized by its innovative use of the Internet for fundraising to "exploring the psychodrama of Dean vs. Dean . . . reasonable moderate or reckless hothead?" (Kurtz 2004b: 7).

In the space of a week, Howard Dean had gone from being the presumptive winner of the Democratic primary election to a candidate fighting to stay alive in the polls. Dean had been the clear winner of the "invisible primary"—the

campaigning prior to actual elections, in which success is measured through fundraising and public opinion polls—and had received disproportionate media coverage throughout the months before the Iowa Caucuses. He had also collected the most commitments from “superdelegates”—party dignitaries who are appointed by various constituencies rather than being elected at large—and the most prominent endorsements, including the endorsement of former Vice President and 2000 presidential candidate Al Gore (Bernstein 2004: 2–3). But all of that quickly evaporated. Dean failed to win any of the successive electoral contests and withdrew from the race a little over a month later. Dean’s post-Caucus speech—dubbed the “I have a scream” speech by many, including by Dean’s own pollster (Maslin 2004)—was often cited in the press as a significant moment contributing to his campaign’s demise (e.g. Garfield 2004; Stolberg 2004).

Dean’s post-Caucus speech, and the rapid production of its meaning, illustrates that the issues of historical interpretation well-known to historians are by no means unique to occurrences taking place in the distant past. The proximity of an occurrence is no guarantee of access to a “true” and unequivocal stream of data that will only subsequently be subject to interpretative controversies. The initial occurrence itself is always mediated by the various combinations of cultural resources that are brought to bear almost at once, as people struggle to make sense of what they have just seen and experienced. This irreducibly historical character of the present extends not merely to the “significance” of some occurrence, but even to the very definition of the occurrence as an “event.” What *are* the proper boundaries of Dean’s post-Caucus speech? How should it be characterized: red-faced rant, attempt to blow off steam and fire up the troops, public relations gaffe by an inexperienced staff of handlers, or something else? What *did* happen that evening?

Considerations like this direct our analytical attention away from conventional neopositivist causal accounts that seek to disclose cross-case correlations between presumptively stable and unambiguous events (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). Instead, we should focus on the *cultural politics of “eventing”*: the ways in which occurrences, even present-day or just-recently-past occurrences, come to take on the shape that they have for us at a particular historical juncture. Eventing is logically prior to the study of connections between events, since it is impossible to conduct a study on (for example) the effects of “emotional outbursts” on a candidate’s electoral success unless we have first established that Dean’s post-Caucus speech was, in fact, an “emotional outburst.”

But a focus on eventing also calls into question the whole explanatory strategy of trying systematically to connect events and outcomes so as to generate law-like generalizations, since the contours of an event are never definitively fixed and remain subject to renegotiation. Precisely because the initial experience of an occurrence does not provide anything like a solid core of incontrovertible data that could ground subsequent interpretations, we should be surprised when an

occurrence takes on a relatively stable meaning as an “event”—and should seek to explain this outcome instead of simply taking it for granted.

1 PRESUPPOSITIONS

Robert Jervis (1976: 5) suggests that when analyzing how actors perceive situations we should not assume that those actors are any less capable and competent than the social scientists studying them, and notes that both utilize similar methods in order to deal with “uncertain knowledge and ambiguous information.” Similarly, Roy Bhaskar (1998: 14) argues that the practices characterizing scientists as they pursue knowledge are similar, at least in form, to the practices characteristic of actors struggling to make sense of their situations: “the properties that scientific activity depends upon . . . turn on features that are a necessary condition for any social life at all.” This position seems plausible, given that social scientists remain “internal” to their objects of study in a distinctive way: social scientists are always studying situations and objects that are fundamentally like themselves, and are simultaneously observing and engaging in social action.² Thus it stands to reason that the ways that social scientists go about making sense of situations might provide some helpful clues as to how sense-making occurs in the course of daily life.

Since the collapse of logical positivism in the mid-twentieth century, philosophers of science have generally agreed with the position that “there is no natural . . . demarcation between observational and theoretical propositions,” and that observation is therefore in important ways theory-dependent (Lakatos 1978: 99). The sources of evidence that we use to support our arguments are never the unambiguous sources for those arguments. “A source can never tell us what we ought to say . . . a theory of possible history is required so that the sources might be brought to speak at all” (Koselleck 1985: 156). This observation applies equally to textual sources, which have their own embedded theoretical presuppositions, and to non-textual sources such as direct personal experience, which are hermeneutically “pre-structured” by the expectations and categories that we bring into those experiences. Apprehending the world is never a matter of allowing raw data to impress itself onto a *tabula rasa* observer, but is always theoretically mediated (Elias 1992, 61–4).

Events and their meanings can therefore never be reduced to some kind of innate dispositional property of the world. Rather, it is the interaction *between* our way of

² The question of whether this is a strong ontological claim about the distinctiveness of “social” objects, or merely a methodological point about the definition of “the social” with which we ordinarily work, can be safely set aside for the time being. In either case, social scientists always remain, inescapably, social beings—like their objects of study.

interrogating potential sources of evidence and the contents of those sources themselves that leads to conclusions about the character of events. Max Weber forcefully argued that there could be no scientific analysis of social phenomena “independent of specialized and ‘one-sided’ points of view according to which—expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously—they are selected, analyzed, and structured for representational purposes as objects of research” (Weber 1999: 170). Indeed, it is the value-orientation of the researcher (and of her or his research community) that enables scientific analysis in the first place, by delimiting the empirical field and permitting a focus on particular aspects of the world. Weber further suggested that social scientists always apprehend the world through “ideal-types,” which are

formed through a one-sided *accentuation* of *one* or *more* points of view and through bringing together a great many diffuse and discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* events, which are arranged according to these emphatically one-sided points of view in order to construct a unified *analytical construct* [*Gedanken*]. In its conceptual purity, this analytical construct [*Gedankenbild*] is found nowhere in empirical reality; it is a utopia. (Weber 1999: 191)

In other words, “a fact is a particular ordering of reality in terms of a theoretical interest” (Easton 1971 [1953]: 53). It is important to keep in mind that both the description of a phenomenon *and* the subsequent analysis or interpretation of that phenomenon are ideal-typical in character, as both derive from the interaction between a conceptual apparatus and the world. This is especially true of “events,” which result from processes of “demarcation undertaken for the purpose of uttering particular sentences.” Events are plucked out of “dynamic reality” through the insertion of “static boundaries” into the characterization, and have an analytical or theoretical character (Riker 1990: 168–9). Events, and sequences of events are thus generated by a set of theoretical commitments, rather than by the putatively innate character of reality itself.

The analyst’s temporal proximity to the phenomenon being analyzed does not mitigate this theoretical character, as scholarly apprehensions of the recent past involve much the same conceptual issues as those presented by the analysis of phenomena at a greater temporal remove. Indeed, there is little compelling reason to suspect that directly experiencing something will provide privileged access to the real character or significance of the thing experienced.³ While eyewitnesses can

³ I set aside here “spiritual” and other mystical experiences, the distinguishing character of which is that they purport to provide privileged access to the truest nature of things. The problem with such experiences is not that they are necessarily unable to provide what they promise, but that there is no non-tautological way to *evaluate* whether or not they have done so—which is related to the fact that such experiences are, by definition, subjective and thus not capable of being spoken about in an intelligible manner. “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein 1974: §7).

provide information that might not be otherwise obtainable, this consideration of *method* (how to gain access to the relevant data) should not be inflated to a *methodological* claim about what kind of data is preferable and what the status of that data is. Eyewitness accounts, especially accounts of contentious events, rarely settle the issue under discussion in a definitive way. Also, memoirs and other first-hand accounts have to be handled with extreme care given the possibility that the writer of the memoir is still fighting old political battles in giving her or his account.

2 HISTORICITY

Matters become even more complicated when we turn from scholarly analysts to ordinary participants. "In fulfilling our responsibilities as competent and professional academics, we must write *systematic texts*; we run the risk of being accounted incompetent if we do not" (Shotter 1993a: 25). Such a mode of presentation, whatever its drawbacks,⁴ has at least the virtue of spelling out its theoretical presumptions more or less explicitly; much scholarly writing operates with models that provide "an explicit, deductively sound statement of the theoretical argument, separate from a particular empirical context," and that which does not can often be formalized so as to provide such a model (Büthe 2002: 482).

But everyday life is considerably less orderly. People do not tend to operate with the highly abstract conceptual equipment that appears in scholarly accounts (Shotter 1993b: 164). Rather, everyday sense-making operates with far more ambiguous schemas, which cannot be exhaustively delineated in advance of their deployment in concrete circumstances (Sewell 1992: 18–19). These schemas are "cultural," in that they consist of "socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people do such things as signal conspiracies and join them or perceive insults and answer them" (Geertz 1973: 12–13)—or observe Howard Dean's post-Caucus speech and understand it as an emotional outburst. As an analytical concept,⁵ "culture" directs our attention to those resources of meaning on which

⁴ In the case of everyday sense-making, the typical scholarly way of writing presents immense problems, inasmuch as it can lead to the mistaken impression that scholarly ideal-typical oversimplifications of public conceptual resources are in fact the same as the resources in question—as though people in their everyday lives actually operated with rigorously demarcated scholarly categories. Scholars of public attitudes, particularly those operating in the Weberian tradition (e.g. Mannheim 1936: 58–9), are very cognizant of the difference.

⁵ Designating processes as cultural offers "a view of political phenomena by focusing attention on how and why actors invest them with meaning," and should not be taken as a claim that this is the only way to analyze such processes (Wedeen 2002: 714).

