CONTINGENCY, MEANING AND HISTORY

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Introduction

What is historical explanation? Grossly simplifying, we can distinguish two types of answers to this question. One is associated with the analytical tradition, rooted in the Anglo–Saxon world. The other is related to the 'historicist' or 'narrativist' tradition, stemming mainly from the Continent.

Post–war, analytical philosophy of history has been under the spell – for better or worse – of Hempel's deductive–nomological model of explanation. According to Hempel, an ideal explanation consists in the correct deduction of the explanandum from one or more general empirical laws and certain antecedent conditions. From the outset, historians were agreed that this model, relabeled the 'Covering Law Model' (CLM) by Dray, was inaccurate for historiography. Time and again they objected that CLM's requirements for scientific explanation were too strict for the science of history. The alternative models of explanation advocated by Mackie, Dray, Von Wright, Danto, and others, can be considered as so many attempts to loosen the requirements of Hempel's criteria for scientific explanation. By formulating an 'inductive–statistical' model of explanation, Hempel himself had already given an idea of what a less strict explanation scheme could look like.[1] Mackie's INUS model took some additional steps to meet historiographical practice by abandoning the requirement that an explanation must be 'sufficient': for an historical explanation, indicating the necessary conditions of the explanandum event will do. In Dray's 'rational explanation', the required empirical law was replaced by a normative principle of action. Finally, Von Wright's 'teleological' model of explanation focused on the actor's motives, which return in his 'practical syllogism' as premises of an explanatory argument.

Whatever the differences between these models, they are all alike in at least one essential aspect: They view explanations as

deductive schemes of argumentation, although in some cases, deduction occurs on the basis of a deontic logic. Like Hempel, the analytical philosophers of history focus on the problem of the *validity* of an explanation. In line with traditional, internalist philosophy of science, the question 'What is a historical explanation ?' is interpreted in a normative way: What are the requirements a historical argument must meet so that we are warranted to call it an 'explanation' proper?

In contrast with this emphasis on the formal structure of a valid argument, the narrativist tradition has emphasized the *evocative* function of the narrative. The explanatory character of a historical work is now associated with its expressive and interpretative power rather than with the argumentative compulsion which emanates from a valid conjunction of separate syllogisms. Answers to the question: 'What gives the narrative its evocative power ?' usually refer to the encompassing network of meaningful relations created by the historical work as a rhetoric whole. As Huizinga wrote: "Every work of history construes relations, designs forms which render the past truly intelligible. History creates a sense of understanding mainly by arranging facts in a meaningful order and to a far lesser extent by representing strict causalities" (Huizinga, 1929, p.55, translation TB/TN).[2] Meaning (*Sinn*) is here brought to the fore as the main source of the cognitive surplus which a historical work brings about in addition to our knowledge of the singular, documented facts. Not causality, but meaning appears to be the prime category of explanation.

In view of this emphasis on the evocative and meaning-creating functions of the narrative, it is only natural that the literary and rhetorical qualities of historical writings have enjoyed a great deal of attention.[3] This has also served as a point of departure for a pragmatically oriented approach to the problem of explanation, interested in issues such as: What is the historian 'doing' when narrating the past? What is it that makes a historical reconstruction plausible? How is the public convinced? etc. In modern narrativism as championed by, e.g., Gallie and Louch, this pragmatic point of view figures prominently. The advocates of this approach were not very successful, however, in formulating feasible criteria for a critical evaluation of the scientific quality of a historical work. They have not offered anything more substantial than Perelman's principle according to which historians must adapt to the criteria of intelligibility which the audience practices itself. That narration is preferable, then, which anticipates a maximally demanding readership (Perelman, 1970).

To sum up, the narrativist tradition moves ahead on a double track. On the one hand, meaning is viewed as a mode of ordering past events. Meaningfully relating the scattered historical material, it is claimed, *is to explain* the past. Historical insight – which differs from knowledge of the bare facts – is rendered possible by the mediation of meaning. On the other hand, meaning appears as the lever of the interaction between the historian and his public. The encompassing network of meaningful relations is taken to provide the narration with its persuasive power.

In view of these two functions, it would be expected that through the concept of meaning a pragmatical perspective could be profitably united with a more formal theory of explanation that emphasises the internal structure of historical reasoning. Unfortunately, this promise has not been redeemed so far. What is missing is a satisfactory theory of meaning that could function as an overarching frame. A torturing question, incessantly posed by philosophers of science as well as by sociological or economical oriented historians is, in what sense exactly *does* 'meaning' explain? How are we supposed to understand 'meaning' as an explanatory category? Talk about 'networks of meaning', conceptions of 'meaning providing context', etc., has remained notoriously vague. All the more so, since the historicists concept of meaning is not the concept philosophers of language have in mind; it is not 'meaning' in the sense in which semantics deals with the meaning of linguistic expressions.

In this paper we approach the question of meaning from a different angle. Our lead will be the notion that *contingency* is a fundamental feature of historical reality. An adequate theory of meaning should take into account the observation, constitutive of the historical universe, that *no historical event was either necessary or impossible*. Meaning, we will argue, is the mode of ordering *par excellence* contingent events. Meaning, if correctly understood, is a mode of *selecting* which marks off relationships without destroying the contingent character of the relata. The theory of meaning we will outline depicts historical explanation as the operation – or, if you like, manipulation – of a complex 'selecting device' which exploits the selectivity inherent in 'meaning' in order to render plausible the train of historical events. The historian, however, can set this machinery into motion only by courtesy of his audience.

In addition, this connection between meaning, contingency, and selectivity will allow us to tackle normative problems: Which explanations are we to prefer? On what grounds can one narration be said to have more explanatory power than the other? etc.

Such questions, we think, can not be fruitfully discussed, as long as one endorses the idea that causality, or causal determination, must be represented in the formal structure of an argument. When causality is replaced by meaning as the prime category of explanation, our problem shifts to the issue of how a historical narration can successfully exploit and reinforce the selectivity which meaning provides. Such a selectivity does not demonstrate the necessity of the historical process, but its plausibility.[4]

2. *Meaning as a mode of ordering the contingent*

> "Die Geschichte ist das Feld der Möglichkeiten. Für den Historiker der sie nacherlebend noch einmal vollzieht, ist sie in der Fülle der Möglichkeiten der Deutung noch einmal das Feld der Möglichkeiten" (Von Weizsäcker, 1983,p.221).

Von Weizsäcker here compactly formulates the historian's profound instinct that at any given moment in time, history is 'open'. The events that link up to constitute the historical process are *contingent*: other events than those which actually occurred could have happened. Although in this view history is perceived as a sequence of contingent events, it does not keep the historian from searching for an order of some kind. History is not the St. Vitus's dance of sheer accidents; it is a past handed over to us by historians as a succession of events, related according to their meaning. Mommsen thus describes the relation between the contingency of historical events and meaning as a mode of ordering which renders the past intelligible:

> "Herauslösung des Gegenstandes aus dem Bereich des bloss kausalen und determinierten hebt [die Geschichte] auf die Stube einer übergeordneten, nicht mehr zwingend beweisbaren Sinneinheit... [Der Historiker] modelt erst die ordnende, wertende und Zusammenhänge aufweisende geistige Bemühung der Menschen das chaotische Vielerlei der Ueberlieferung um in eine mehr oder minder sinnvolle Geschehensabfolge, die er als Geschichte begreift" (Mommsen, 1961, p. 81 and 83).

We think that an adequate theory of meaning should elaborate the (usually intuitive) understanding of the connection between meaning and contingency which traditionally underlies the role the concept of meaning plays in history. In this section our

analysis of this connection will center on a specific type of events: *actions,* and in particular on *social actions.* This allows us to exploit a common intuition concerning some essential assumptions of our everyday experience of social reality. We do not normally regard a person as *acting*, or view our relation to him as a *social* one, when we intimate that our actions *determine* his reactions. Whatever his repertoire of reactions, interacting with him would not differ much from interacting with a programmed machine. This intuition, which is the theme of many science fiction novels, is embedded in the conceptual apparatus of modern sociology by means of a distinction between 'action' and 'behavior'. By definition, action is *meaningful behavior*. Conceived as meaningful behavior, action expresses the contingency of human doings. The behaviorist category of 'behavior' is linked in turn to conceptions of genetic, neurophysiological, ethological, etc. determination. This relation between the meaning and contingency of an action is often explicated by equating the first with the subjective intention(s) of the actor, i.e. the motives and goals 'behind' the action. In this way, the meaning of an action is directly related to the individual's psychological make up, to his drives, needs and wants, which, while remaining largely accidental from the sociological point of view, form the stronghold of free will.

We consent with the sociological tradition that actions are to be identified by their meaning, but we reject the identification of meaning with subjective intention.[5] Contrary to this subjectivist program, we assume that the meaning of an action is constituted by the entire range of *possible* actions that are compatible with the actually performed action. This notion of 'compatibility' needs further clarification. In a first approximation one can say that the meaning of an action concerns the fact that every actual action refers to a field of possible actions. This field of possibilities is delimited in a way aptly characterised by Husserl's metaphor of the *horizon* of meaning. Beyond the horizon of what is given – and therefore observable – here and now, other possibilities remain, perhaps to be brought within the area of special attention, at other moments and other places. The horizon of possibilities which is given with the meaning of an act displays, so to speak, an 'inside' and an 'outside'. It forms a boundary between what occupies the scope of action at that moment and what lingers in the periphery. A particular feature of this boundary is its capacity to select a domain of possibilities without destroying the non–selected.[6]

The set of possibilities which constitute the meaning of a current action is then a selection from the universe of all

possible actions. We associate the meaning of an action, for
example a 'declaration of war', with activities such as mobiliza-
tion, propaganda, generals studying maps, etc., but usually not
with marriages, harvesthomes, or health legislation. This does
not mean that there can be no relation whatsoever between, e.g.,
declarations of war and marriages. The meaning of a declaration
of war, however, singles out a relatively restricted range of
possibilities, which are put in the forefront as 'probable',
whereas other possibilities dwindle into the background as 'not
having any bearing on a declaration of war'. This selectivity,
inherent in the meaning of actions as such, is exactly what
constitutes the *content* of concrete meaning. Labeling an action
as 'economical', 'political', or 'religious' amounts to viewing a
certain action in terms of a *constraint set* of possible actions
from which other actions are excluded as 'not relevant for the
time being' In Luhmann's words:

> "...jeder bestimmte Sinn qualifiziert sich dadurch, dass er
> bestimmte Anschlussmöglichkeiten nahelegt, und andere
> unwahrscheinlich oder schwierig oder weitläufig macht oder
> (vorläufig) ausschliesst" (Luhmann, 1985, p.94).

Until now the picture we have offered was rather static, pre-
senting actions as non-temporal entities. This is deceiving, for
talking about the meaning of isolated actions doesn't really make
sense. Actions are always the momentary components of a tempo-
ral sequence of successive actions. This temporality is reflected
in the multi-dimensional character of meaning. Within the field of
the possible, meaning not only differentiates between what is
here and now relevant versus what is not (synchronic dimen-
sion); meaning also differentiates diachronically between *two
temporal horizons*: the horizon of what is possible in the *future*,
and the horizon of *past* possibilities. Meaning locates an action at
the intersection of possible future actions and past possible
actions.

   The future-horizon can be specified as the whole of those
possible actions which link up with the current action. Seen in
this perspective, the meaning of a current action demarcates a
domain of possible continuations of the action process. As Jürgen
Frese puts it,

> "Der Sinn eines Aktes ist das als eine bestimmte Situation
> gegebene Ensemble der Möglichkeiten, an diesen Akt wei-
> tere Akte anzuschliessen; d.h. der Sinn eines Aktes ist die

Mannigfaltigkeit der Anschliessbarkeiten, die er eröffnet."
(Frese, 1967, p.51).

Bearing in mind the problem of reciprocal adjustment between interacting persons, we may be inclined to talk about a 'sign-post-function' of meaning: The meaning of a social action points to a typical pattern of interactions.

At the same time, the meaning of an action also demarcates a domain of foregoing possible actions, of which the current action might be a follow-up. Note that this 'past-horizon' encompasses not only the actions which actually occurred but also those which could have been – but were not – predecessors of the current action. This expresses the fact that within a sequence of actions the meaning content of the separate actions cannot be reduced to 'mere consequence' or 'inevitable effect' of the actually foregoing action(s). The 'past-horizon' thus guarantees, in retrospect, the contingency of an action.

In the light of this analysis, an ongoing process of action takes the form of a succession of more specific selections within the (already limited) horizon of possibilities created by each actual action. The longer this process continues, the more the realized selectivity of the past sequence may function as a directive for future selections.[7] In other words, a continuous process of action shows a tendency to reinforce its own selec-tivity. This is sustained by the fact that the meaning of an action not only points into the future, but also 'backwards' into the past: The (positive or negative) 'connecting-value' of an action is always given with its past-horizon. By this entangle-ment of future- and past-horizons, action processes keep themselves on the track which they set out themselves. However, the contingency of the separate actions remains intact. At any moment the action process may change its direction or break down.

The minimal selectivity an action process displays – it was *this* sequence, not another – can be reinforced by repetition as well as by duration. Since in processes of interaction, the selectivity of the sequence is an effect of the actions of more than one actor, this selectivity takes an objective shape vis- à-vis the participants. None of the singular actors is able to intend the selectivity of the action process as a whole. In such a situation, the expectations which the actors develop with respect to the continuation of interaction process, no longer have to be experienced as a purely subjective design of what is probable and what is not. *What* is expected may well be regarded then, as a trait of 'objective'reality. Consequently, frustrated expecta-

tions do not immediately refer back to the actor himself as the one who was apparently mistaken. In good trust, these disappointments may be raised within the interaction process: Alter's nonconformity is no nonconformity with Ego's subjective assessment of the situation, but a deviation from an order which presents itself as an intersubjectively valid reality. This *reentry* of the past interaction process in the current interaction process may then be the catalyst of an intersubjective effort to interpret and explicate the meaning of actions or patterns of actions (Spencer-Brown,1972). To the extent that, along this route, structures of expectations are made intersubjectively available, this explication of meaning and meaning relations in turn results in a reinforcement of the selective order of interaction processes. Though always partial, these articulations of meaning will possibly serve as junctures for sanction mechanisms.[8]

Not every sequence of interactions is heading for consolidation or institutionalisation. Given the preservation and reproduction of contingency in meaningfully ordered processes of interaction, the whole of society's interactions functions as the field of social experiments. Only a few of the spontaneously developing interaction sequences prove themselves to be durable and repeatable. If so, they will contribute to the differention of the societal organisation of interaction. This societal differentiation, expressed in common sense distinctions between economic, political, juridical, scientific, etc. patterns of action, is the non-intended result of long-standing social processes of meaning creation crystallizing in traditions, roles, and institutions on one hand, and in culture as the stock of meaning explications and interpretations on the other.

In everyday social life, actors use habitually interaction patterns suggested by meaning without being conscious of the full meaning content of their actions – let alone intending it. By education and training, the socialized actors dispose of an 'implicit knowledge' as to which actions relate to which others and not: What typically belongs to family life? What is to be expected in the market? What is at stake when a cabinet crisis occurs? etc. Socialized individuals act against a background of beliefs and expectations, usually, however, without seeing their actions as role performances or as being prescribed by mores and institutions. Members of a family, for instance, do not – normally – perceive each other's behaviour as 'family-action', but rather as the expression of affections, passions, or private goals. Whenever we speak of 'intentionality' we refer to the subjective experience of acting on a pre-reflective level. Here the actors

understand each other's actions as attempts to reach certain ends, to get things done, as expressions of inner feelings, etc. However, what links an action to past and future actions, viz. the meaning of an action, is something quite different from its motive or intention. This explains why interaction processes are not in constant danger of breaking down, given the practical impossibility of being constantly aware of Alter's real intentions. The participants may fake motives, delude goals, simulate in short, they may harbour intentions different from the ones they mutually assume. Nonetheless in spite of what philosophers of 'the dialogue' want us to believe, the interaction may proceed smoothly. Action is not *social* action because of its intentional character, but because it meaningfully relates to the actions of other persons.

In this section we have presented 'meaning' as a mode of ordering contingent events. Note, though, that 'meaning' is by no means to be seen as a sort of paperclip that keeps the actual and the possible together. Meaning must not be perceived as an abstract substance or external power which forces the chaos of contingency into beaten tracks. Disregarding the fact that historically given meaning is, with respect to its content, itself variable – cooking might have been a fine art and maybe it will be one day –, such a 'paperclip view' tends to a one–sided conception of the relation between meaning and contingency. The problem of contingency of human action did not come first, to be followed, then, by meaning as its solution – as the Word that created order in the chaos of Genesis. To be sure, meaning is a mode of ordering the contingent. But at the same time, the meaningful handling of actions or events presupposes their contingency. Meaning and contingency imply one another, in both the domains we call the social and the historical: Bygone times become a meaningfully explainable 'past', only to the extent that we are willing to accept the contingency of the historical process, or, as Demandt puts it:

"Wenn wir ungeschehene Möglichkeiten nicht konstruieren dürfen, können wir geschichtliche Wirklichkeit nicht konstruieren. (...) Die Beschränkung auf eine positivistische Faktensuche ist eine respektable Haltung, doch sollte sie andere nicht daran hindern wollen, die bereitgestellten Materialien zu Sinngebäuden zu verarbeiten." (Demandt, 1984, p.33-4)

3 *The structure of historical explanations*

The permanent anticipation of things to come is a typical feature
of current interactions. Historical processes, to the contrary,
consist of factual events which occurred in the past. At first
glance, history seems to be dealing only with the given, i.e. with
the inevitability of the factual. Whereas we explore the future in
terms of the 'possible'/'impossible' distinction, we seem forced to
represent bygone times in terms of the distinction between 'has
occurred' and 'has not-occurred'. Yet this is a distortion. His-
toriography is not merely the summation of facts in chronological
order. "History", as Trevor-Roper correctly remarks, "is not
merely what happened, it is what happened in the context of
what might have happened" (Trevor-Roper, 1981, p. 364). The
historian is not to be compared to the train traveller who, from
his destination, looks back at the route he has covered, seeing it
as one continuous, unilinear section. The historian wants to
repeat the journey, pass switches and branches once more.

The very maxim that history is always 'open' assigns to
meaning its crucial function for the science of history. As
already indicated, meaning allows events to be selectively re-
lated, to experience sequences of events as an interrelated
process, while preserving the contingency of singular events.
The historian exploits this function of meaning in his recon-
struction of the past as a non-random sequence of events that
could have followed an alternative course. The meaning we
assign to an event by interpreting it as an economic crisis, a
revolution, or an ecclesiastical schism, links this event to a
previous history and additionally presents it as directing the
further course of history.

For the meaning of a historical event, both temporal horizons
are constitutive. Without a future-horizon which has 'proved
itself' in an 'after-history', i.e. without a "Vergangene Zukunft"
in Koselleck's phrase the past can have no *historical* signifi-
cance. That is why Kossmann could not finish his *The Low
Countries 1780-1980* – not as a historian. In the early eighties,
the period between 1973 and 1980 was not 'history' yet, writes
Kossmann:

> "What, then, is it? We do not know. It has not yet found an
> end point from which it can be surveyed and judged and
> therefore it can only be described in the (...) form of a
> chronicle: A story of succeeding events leading to a con-
> clusion which we do not know nor overlook, a summation of
> matters of facts, unassesable with respect to its signifi-

cance, in short, the registration of what can only be stud-
ied as incidents." (Kossmann, 1987, p.368, translation
TB/TN)

The meaning of a historical event not only anticipates its after-
history, it also ranges over the past. In other words, the
meaning of an event places this event at the apex of a 'pre-
history', selected from the preceding facts by that particular
meaning. Nipperdey formulates this characteristic feature of the
historical reconstruction thus:

> "Die Struktur einer Geschichte, die handelnden Personen,
> das Wichtige und das Unwichtige, die Art der Aufeinan-
> derfolge, die Interdependenz und die kausale Verkettung,
> das hängt alles vom Ende der Geschichte ab. Der Geschicht-
> enerzähler wählt all das aus, was für das Ende relevant ist;
> er weiss immer schon, wie das Ende sein wird, und er
> organisiert das Material unter dieser Perspektive."
> (Nipperdey, 1986, p.221)

At first sight, this interaction between past, historical actuality
and future hides a peculiar paradox. Since the rise of symphonic
music, we can no longer listen without 'prejudice' to medieval
music, which is and remains 'non-symphonic', a quality it did not
have for people in the Middle Ages. When, today, we try to hear
the forebodings of symphonic music in the musical expressions of
the preceding period, we 'listen' to a genesis *selectively created*
by its end result – symphonic music (Oesterberg, 1976, p.69 n.5).
The same applies to our reconstructions of the historical pro-
cesses that climax in the Renaissance; the Enlightenment; the
rise of Capitalism; the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions;
or the Second World War. The reconstruction of the history of
the development of such events shows them as the final point of
a history they create themselves. After the Second World War,
the pursuit of national unity by the German people could no
longer be represented the way Heinrich von Treitschke did.
    The paradox is, obviously, that something which occurs later
in time cannot be the cause or reason of earlier events. The
whole issue disappears when we realize that 'history' is a reality
that, even though we create it from the remnants of the past, is
always created in the present. History is always *our* history, a
connection of events comprehensible in the light of an after-
history received by us. This explains, in part, the societal
importance of historiography, worded as follows by Romein:
"History is the form in which a culture tries to understand its

present by accounting for the accessible past" (Romein, 1937, p.76-7, translation TB/TN). As a consequence of our previous argument, we take it that the societal importance of historiography lies in its contribution to explicating present-day meaning structures. We will see that history achieves this elucidation of current meaning, by using the past as a field of application for the ordering capacity of meaning, thereby demonstrating its content and constraints.

What remains is not a paradox, but a *self-referring loop.* Short-circuited to a bare tautology, this loop is rather unproductive. No new insights are gained when we describe a historical event as a 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution and go on to explain this event by interpretation of its prehistory as a sequence of 'events- leading- to- a- bourgeois- democratic-revolution'. Only by interrupting this self-referential structure, by regularly opening it up for new perspectives – i.e. *new premisses of selection* – can we make it fertile for historical explanation. It is this very compulsion to interrupt step by step the circularity of the historical reconstruction that renders its explanatory structure so complex. Wehler, a social-science oriented, structuralist, historian, who is not at all what you would call a hermeneuticist, when commenting on his own explanation of the German Revolution of 1848/49, underlines the complex interdependence between the overall interpretation and the phased analysis of the historical course as follows:

> "Die Entscheidungen und Abläufe...wirkten zwar in dialektischer Verschränkung nachhaltig aufeinander ein, aber da die 'Totalität' dieser Interdependenzstruktur ohnehin nicht abgebildet werden kann, verspricht die Schritt für Schritt erfolgende Analyse dessen, was die Revolution auf den einzelnen Handlungsebenen jeweils in den Grundzügen bedeutete, am ehesten Einsicht in die komplizierten Zusammenhänge." (Wehler, 1987, p.706).

Without resort to 'dialektische Verschränkung', we will analyze Wehler's step-by-step method as a phased utilization of the selectivity intrinsic in meaning. We might distinguish three explanatory circles or phases which have, among others, the feature that in each phase the historian involves his audience. Step by step, the narrative mobilizes and exploits the everyday expectations and intuitions of the imaginary public with respect to what is and what is not probable.

With regard to the first explanatory circle, the following remarks are in order: A description of an event as 'political',

'economical', 'social' or 'religious' appeals primarily to every-day notions as to which actions, events or processes could possibly have a political, economical, religious, etc. meaning. Such a description provides the event with a tentative horizon of possibilities which comprises certain preceding and posterior events. Conversely, other events, being somehow irrelevant for the phenomenon in question, disappear into the margin. To be sure, the historian is not interested in abstract but in *historical* events: facts located in time, considered and qualified under a certain description. At the focus of interest is, e.g., the *German Revolution of 1848*, which the historian presents as a *bourgeois-democratic* revolution. This shows an important feature of the historical explanation. Every description of an event activates several references, placing the event at the center of varying horizons of possibilities whilst excluding others. It is a revolution, not a *coup d'état*; it takes place in March and not in January 1848 or in 1847, in Germany and not in France; it is a bourgeois-democratic and not a Communist revolution, etc.[9]

These combined qualifications give a more detailed specification of the meaning of a historical event, thereby narrowing down the scope of the probable. (We can conceive the result as the cross-section of several domains of relevant possibilities.) Thus a provisional framework is created in which the historian can locate preceding events and present their complex course as a meaningful whole. Insofar as he manages to render the suggested meaning relations between consecutive events acceptable, this leads to a confirmation and, at the same time, to a further-reaching explication of the initial framework. The overarching frame of interpretation 'proves itself' via the historiographical analysis which it directs. Usually, the original perspective returns at the end of the historical study as the product or the conclusion of the historical analysis – not as the *quod erat demonstrandum*, nor as a mere repetition of the preliminary perspective, but as a well confirmed and explicated perception of what happened.

Within the analysis of the prehistory that is to support the explanation of a historical event, we may further distinguish between (a) the explication of the *process*, and (b) the explication of the *events* that constitute the process. Vis-à-vis the first circle, these two explanatory phases perform a typical function. They serve as entries for new selection premises, thus interrupting the tautology of the encompassing perspective and increasing the cognitive value of the definitive explanation. Although the encompassing perspective functions as a selection premise for these new, more specific selection premises, the

latter cannot be deduced from the former. In a more classical
language, we could say that in each of these phases a synthesis
is accomplished autonomously.

How does the historian bring about this increase in selec-
tivity? To begin with b), the explication of events: how can the
historian successfully specify the diffuse meaning the initial
perspective on the explanandum bestows on the preceding
events? In fact this is brought about by convincing the audience
that, given their acceptance of the qualification of an event as,
say 'political', the 'political' actions which make up this event are
performed under specific historical conditions, which exclude
more than can be justified solely on the basis of the initial
qualification 'political event'. These conditions pertain to physi-
cal, psychological and social circumstances equally. In order to
explain the course of a revolutionary process, the historian can
point out, for instance, the psychological structure of the per-
sons in power. Rejai thus refer to the psychic make-up of
individuals such as Robespierre, Lenin and Mao, to explain
decisive moments of the revolutions in which these men played a
major role (Rejai, 1979). More rationalistically inclined historians
will rather look for idealistic and material interests of the actors
and groups involved and try to reconstruct the latter's percep-
tion of the means which (would) have (best) served their goals.
That the German Revolution of 1848/49 did not bring about a
lasting alliance between liberals and democrats, has been ex-
plained as a result of the profound difference of opinion between
both parties with regard to the character of the desired state
power, the political institutions to be formed, their legitimate
competences, etc. (Nipperdey, 1976, p.259-278 and 1983,p.631-51)
Marxist historians, on the other hand, emphasize the objective
class interests of the liberal middle class: It was the liberals'
fear of the 'red peril' – a social revolution that was to put the
mob in power, and would eventually result in an attack on the
social, political and economic position of the middle class – that
drove them in the direction of a counterrevolution. In turn,
Skocpol's explanation of the minor role farmers played in the
early days of the Chinese revolution is more sociological ori-
ented. Her explanation of this phenomenon centers on the limited
possibilities of the farmers to organize themselves, a result of
the direct control the local landlords exercised on rural areas
(Skocpol, 1979).

All these explanations of concrete courses of action are
attempts to further delimit the range of possibilities triggered
by the historian's preliminary characterization of clusters of
actions as political events, revolutions, etc. By placing 'circum-

stances', 'individual qualities', 'the state of technology', etc., as selection perspectives within the more encompassing perspective, the reader is led gently along the path of probability, only to discover the compulsion of history when looking back at the selectivity of the factual course of action. In this way, the diffuse meaning the event in question originally had for the reader is being defined more precisely. Historical analysis, if successful, tightens the boundaries between what is and what is not plausible, therewith substantiating the meaning of an event.

When linking up events to processes, the historian of course exploits the results of the partial explanations of his total reconstruction. An explication of the meaning of an event at T1 circumscribes the boundaries of the whole of possible 'follow-up' events. In the past-horizon of the meaning of an event T2, the connecting value to event T1 is given retrospectively. The partial explanations of a narrative thus begin to interlock, culminating in the historical work as an organized whole: The partial explanations form each other's setting and confirmation.[10] A historical process then appears as a string of subsequent realisations within the domain of possibilities suggested by every preceding event.

To make a reasonable case for the selectivity inherent in his representation of the order of events – i.e. in order to increase the plausibility of the historical reconstruction – the historian must once more introduce new selection perspectives. However, leaving the level of individual action he runs into the problem of no longer being able to rely on motives and perceptions by the actor as reinforcers of selectivity. In supra-individual processes, the actors are no longer able to elucidate the relations obtaining between the historical events.[11] At this level, general principles and theories may enter the historiographical scene referring to supra-individual, societal dynamics: Elias' theory of civilization, Weber's rationalization thesis, functionalist modernization theories, Marxist laws of societal development, etc. The historian can exploit the logical force of such formalized models, to substantiate the selectivity of his perspective. This still does not imply a causal explanation of history. At best, it concerns strong heuristics with a limited field of application. Van Berkel assesses the value of such theories quite accurately:

> "Well-known theories, like Elias' theory of civilization or Wallerstein's theory of the modern world system, are nothing more but useful narrative schemes, just stories, albeit on a slightly larger scale than usual" (Van Berkel, 1986, p.105-6, translation TB/TN).

In this section we have offered a schematization of the complex and stratified structure of historical reconstruction. We have argued that this complexity inevitable results from the circular character of historical explanation. Explanation of a historical event *is* explication of its meaning. To explicate meaning is to define the boundaries of what can be expected with respect to past and future events, given the actual (explanandum) event as the historical condition. As we noted, here lures a barren tautology: the meaning attributed initially to an event explains the occurrence of that event as the outcome of a prehistory and the condition for a after–history, which this attribution of meaning itself suggests. From a historiographic point of view, this circle is just as unfruitful as a semantical analysis of the *concepts* used to describe the event in question. The historian's enterprise becomes cognitively fruitful only when this direct self-reference is interrupted, when the historian uses the preliminary perspective to select new selection premises that cannot be deduced analytically from the encompassing point of view. A historical explanation thus takes the shape of a step–by–step demonstration of the specific meaning of the explanandum event. The 'proof' is furnished when the encompassing meaning perspective is able to steer an analysis of the historical material which, in turn, makes the occurrence of this event plausible, now showing it in its historical particularity.

4. *Scope, Originality, Plausibility and Conditionality*

Historians advance substantial arguments to support their own perspective or to undermine competing ones. Such arguments include the criticism of sources, or the reproach of interpretational one–sidedness, as well as political or socio–theoretical convictions and alleged insights in 'human nature'. From the point of view of a formal theory of explanation, to this nothing can be added. This goes for the analytical tradition as well as for the narrativistic philosophy of history. First and foremost, a theory of explanation focuses on the relation between the formal structure of the narrative and its explanatory power.

Taking up this last question, we assume on basis of the preceding, that those explanations of events are to be preferred which permits:
a) to order as many preceding events as possible into a prehistory;
b) to suggest more plausible after–histories than competing reconstructions.

This assumption can be elaborated by discussing some well-known topics from the philosophy of history – scope, originality and plausibility – which count as important dimensions in judging the explanatory power of historical works. Notwithstanding their relevance, so far their formulation has been so vague that they have failed as practicable criteria. We think, however, that it is possible to formulate these criteria more accurate, using the relation between *meaning*, *contingency* and *selectivity* as our theoretical basis. In addition, our theoretical assumptions imply a new criterion, which we will call *'conditionality'*.

Scope. The 'scope' of a historical work is usually defined as the *number* of documented events that can be coherently related on the basis of the perspective used. To begin with, it seems wise to distinguish between scope in the sense of 'repeatability' and scope in the sense of 'encompassment'.[12] A perspective or an ordering principle can have a large scope, i.e. link many events, in virtue of its applicability to many different situations, varying in time and/or place. This is what we call scope by repeatability. A well-known example of this is the frustration-aggression thesis which states a relation between relative deprivation and political resistance or rebellion. This thesis pretends to be valid for all civilizations at all times. For each *particular* historical situation, however, the scope of this thesis is very limited. In this last respect it has a small extension, or encompassment. In other words: encompassment refers to the number of facts that can be linked per historical situation or per specific process. In historiographical practice, more value is usually attached to encompassment than to repeatability. The reason is a simple one: the historian's primary objective is a maximal description and explanation of a concrete event. Therefore, we will focus in the following on scope in the sense of encompassment.

Obviously, one is tempted to represent scope after the image of beads threaded on a string. The more beads that can be threaded, i.e. the more data or events the historian can order in time, the wider the scope and therefore the explanatory power of his historical reconstruction. This picture is deceivingly primitive. It suggests that we have a 'ready made' perspective (the thread) by which we pick up the historical data one after another until we firstly reach the explanandum event. The explanandum, however, whether a crucial event or a historical process, is not only the end or the end result, but also the *beginning* of the historical explanation.

It is this very circularity that explains why scope is related

to the explanatory power of a historical narrative. It hides the answer to the question: why is it, that we do value a wide scope? Answering that a narrative with a wider scope arranges more events begs the question. Our theory of meaning allows to provide the relation between scope and explanatory power with a stronger basis, which, in addition, takes into account the pragmatical dimension of historical explanations.

To elucidate the meaning of a historical event the historian anticipates the background beliefs and expectations of his audience, which he triggers to create a preliminary horizon of meaning and therewith outlining a probable interdependence of events. In the narrative, this horizon is made more explicit. The selectivity of the initial content of meaning is strengthened by the presentation of this event as the outcome of preceding events, which are selectively linked by their meaning. The extent to which the meaning of an event is made explicit and thus confirmed by its prehistory determines the narrative's explanatory power. The better the historian locates varying courses of action, or processes, within the past horizon of an explanandum event, the more explanatory his narrative will be. We therefore define the *scope* of a narrative as the totality of meaningfully related processes, which, as prehistories, explicate the meaning of an explanandum event. That narrative is to be preferred, then, which so explains an event or process as to have a wider scope than its competitors.

This definition of scope as a criterion allows to account for the feeling among historians that a narrative which puts the explanandum at the intersection of several processes is to be favoured over one which can cluster less access roads in explaining an event.

Originality. We can view 'originality' as surprise value and thus associate it with informativity. The more surprising (i.e. the less probable) an event is, the higher the 'informativity' of its occurrence. (Repetition does not make assertions less true, but decreases their informativity!) This makes it clear that informativity is a variable whose value depends on the convictions and expectations of the person being informed. For our purposes, the implication is that 'originality', as a concept of the philosophy of history, only has content against the background of a historiographical tradition. Our speaking of a historiographical *tradition* is warranted by the circumstance that in history, a number of standard expectations concerning probable relations between events have emerged. This pragmatical dimension of originality implies that an original contribution to historiography can be

made in several ways: by unearthing new historical facts, by
adjusting existing perspectives, or by suggesting new meaning
relations.

Can we say, now, that the narrative making more improba-
bilities probable, is 'more original'? Not obviously so. Originality
not only entails that more, and other, events have been put into
place than before, but can also refer to the surprise value of the
chosen perspective. Thus considered, originality does not
strengthen the given explanation the way an increase in scope
would. The role of originality lies elsewhere: only where enough
deviating conceptions and perspectives are articulated can his-
toriography renew itself continuously. This alone enables history
to perform its societal function: by experimenting with new
meaning relations, original historiography scans the ordering
capacity of the presently perceived meaning, keeping alive the
awareness of the genesis and continuity of existing meaning
structures.

Plausibility. Our conception of meaning as an explanatory cate-
gory is rooted in the thought that explanations are plausible in
virtue of the probability of the relations between contingent
events, suggested by meaning. 'Plausibility' then, seems opposed
to 'originality'. Although not false, the image delivered by this
conclusion is too flat. It suggests that the historian has to
compromise between the implausible and the platitude.
Ankersmit's emphasis on the 'suggestive power' that emanates
from historiography, however, points in the direction of rhetori-
cal techniques, which the historian can utilize to make this
tension productive. Prototypical is the use of metaphors. By
inviting the reader to consider a historical event, process or
period, analogous to a well-known phenomenon, the historian
seduces him into seeing relations, which are original in the light
of current historiography. The familiarity with the image, evoked
by the metaphor (or the model), gives the new the air of being
natural. The heuristic power of such rhetorical techniques can
be measured by the new perspectives it opens up and the
historical research it generates.

Does 'plausibility', apart from being the counterpoint of
'originality', really have an independent status as criterion of
preference? After all, we do not demand 'expressis verbis' of a
scientific explanation that it should be 'plausible'. Here, the
explanatory argument has to be *correct*, i.e. formally valid. In
fact, the inclination to emphasize the plausibility of an historical
argument tells us something about the historians' deeply rooted
intuitions about historical explanation. Even if, from a formal

point of view, a deductive argument would be totally correct –
e.g. in the case of a neurophysiological deduction of the deci-
sions taken by a politician – a historian still wants to weigh the
plausibility of the argument. Does the explanation elucidate the
actual historical process in such a way that it becomes vivid as
the connecting of contingent events? In other words: is the
encompassing coherence of the history described, presented as a
meaningful coherence? Plausibility is not so much a criterion for
explanatory power as a check on the *nature* of the explanation.

Conditionality. The contingency of history not only entails the
topos – well-loved among historians – that history should not be
reduced finalistically to prehistory. It also implies that the
historical meaning of an event or process should not be reduced
to its actual after-history. This is taken into account by our
conception of meaning as an explanatory category. The meaning
of a historical event not only refers to the past; it also casts its
shadow ahead. The meaningful explanation of an event as a
moment in an historical process presents this event as an
actuality that conditions of possible follow-ups. This relation
between the 'historically actual' and the 'afterwards possible',
intrinsic to every historical explanation, we call *conditionality*.
Interpreted as a criterion of explanatory power: That historical
explanation is to be preferred which succeeds in suggesting
more alternative posterior developments as *plausible* after-histo-
ries.

Again, the question to be faced is: what has conditionality to
do with explanatory power? Why should an explanation which
suggests more after-histories also be the better one? Is not
Wehler quite right, in fulminating against Nipperdey, that we are
not interested in the question what could have happened in 1848
in Germany on the basis of the preceding events, but rather in
the question what actually happened (Wehler, 1987, p.660-1).
Here we have to preclude a possible misunderstanding. The
conditionality of the historical explanation does not concern the
explanation of what happened afterwards, but the explanation of
an event in the light of possible consequences. The factual
events of 1848 are not 'sheer possibilities' with a view to ex-
plaining what happened in 1849, but are suggested as possible
follow-ups when explaining the period 1840-1847. We can illus-
trate the general relation between explanatory power and condi-
tionality with the metaphor of the train journey used before. A
full-blown description of the train entering a station includes
the possible directions the train may take when continuing its
journey. In other words, an adequate interpretation of the here

and now must take into account the possible futures.[13] This becomes salient when, for instance, we recall Kennedy's policy during the Cuba crisis. With hindsight, we know how this crisis ended. In our reconstruction, when determining the meaning of this event, we cannot consider American politics but in the light of the events that *could* have followed Kennedy's ultimatum to Khrushchev. Only this allows for historical actors to enter history as heroes or villains.

From the perspective of our theory of meaning, we can provide these intuitions with a solid basis. Although 'scope' concerns a *factual* past, the same arguments that go for 'scope' as a criterion of explanation, apply, in principle, to the underpinning of conditionality. The power of an explanation, we maintain, depends on the narrative's capacity to substantiate the meaning horizons of the events under study, i.e. on its success in making the parameters of the possible plausible. The after-history of possible developments suggested by the narrative *is* a counterfactual exploration of the future horizon of the event in question. By counterfactually indicating which possibilities are expectable, it thus performs a function in the process of elucidating the content of meaning horizons. Peter Burg, in *Die Funktion kontrafaktischer Urteile am Beispiel der Bauernkriegsforschung*, describes this function of counterfactual analysis in historiography more picturesque:

> "Kontrafaktische Urteile dienen der Ermittung der Folgen einer nicht realisierten Möglichkeit. Sie beschreiben die Modalität der verpassten und vergangenen Gelegenheiten. Die Bedeutung der Folgen einer bestimmten historischen Gegebenheit kann durch 'Ausmahlung' in besonderen Masse verdeutlicht werden" (Burg, 1983, p.777).

In this perspective, the problem of counterfactuals in history – i.e. the problem what can reasonably be permitted as a counterfactual argument – is tackled from a different angle than usual.[14] Meaning, as we perceive it, functions as a filter exploiting the realized selectivity of the preceding as an indication of the boundaries of what is possible in the future. Consequently, a powerful historical explanation allows us to check counterfactual hypotheses concerning future developments.

The analysis of the different criteria of explanation shows that 'originality' and 'plausibility' are, strictly speaking, not criteria which pertain to the explanatory power of a narrative. 'Originality' primarily concerns the function new perspectives may have for the science of history. 'Plausibility' refers to the

nature of historical explanations. Criteria of explanation, properly so called, are 'scope' and 'conditionality'. We consider both as independent standards, the relative weight of which depends on the kind of history practised. Whenever the historian focuses on a specific event, 'scope' tends to be the most important criterion. Whenever the explanation of a separate event functions as a partial explanation within an encompassing interpretation of a longer period, 'conditionality' gains weight.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to answer the question how 'meaning' is to be interpreted as a category of historical explanation. In line with historians' intuitions concerning the nature of historical reality, we have presented meaning as a mode of ordering contingent events. Put differently, meaning enables us to order the historical material without leading to determinism. Meaning achieves this order by viewing what actually happened in the light of a *limited* domain of *possible* past and future events. We have shown how the historian exploits this limitation on the possible – a selectivity intrinsic to meaning – to present successive events as 'probable'. By showing what was to be expected, given the meaning of the events, the historian renders the past intelligible as a probable course of events.

   The relation between meaning, contingency and selectivity which this theory of meaning postulates, offers, in our opinion, fertile points of departure to discuss a wider range of issues in the philosophy of history. Here we scrutinized some criteria for judging historical explanations. In addition, this theory of meaning and the related vision of history as a reality characterized, ontologically, by contingency, gives access to such themes as 'periodization', the problem of continuity/discontinuity, and the discussion of the status of counterfactual argumentation.[15]

   To conclude, we would like to remark that by taking this path we have distanced ourselves both from the analytical tradition and from radical-constructionist tendencies luring in modern narrativism. Vis-à-vis the analytical tradition, we denounce any attempt at presenting explanatory schemes primarily in terms of causal relations, not because it entails too strict requirements, but because we do not share the deterministic vision on historical reality it conceals. Moreover, our approach advocates a shift of attention from a purely formal analysis to an approach taking into account the pragmatic aspect of the relation between the historian and his audience. In contrast with

radical constructivism, which leads to idealistic narrativism, we insist that interactive action is always action within lived frameworks of meaning, and this includes, of course, the actions of historical actors. We have pointed out that the plausibility of historical reconstruction is based in part on the analysis of intentional actions of actors in particular circumstances, in specific contexts which include the historically obtaining structures of meaning. The historiographical discussion itself offers substantial arguments for accepting or rejecting a proposed representation of given structures of meaning.

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NOTES

1. For an overview of the complications this maneuver entails for Hempel's general theory of explanation, see Callebaut (1989).
2. Kossmann repeats Huizinga almost literally: "It is the ambition of the historian to arrange and integrate the factual data he has on the past in such a way as to be able to compose an intelligible and coherent story on the basis of these data." (Kossmann 1986, p. 368, translation TB/TN)
3. Interesting in this respect, is the nowadays influential work of Hayden White on strategies to realise such cognitive fruitful networks or contexts of meaningful relations. Starting from literary theory, White e.g. concludes that the historian has in fact only a limited number of narrative styles or figures of speech at his disposal to arrange his material and present it to his public as a cogent story (e.g. White 1973, 1986).
4. The theory of meaning we present in this paper is by and large the product of philosophical development which got on its way by the turn of the century. In particular we acknowledge an intellectual debt to the phenomenological tradition (Husserl, Schutz) on the one hand, and to system theorists like Ashby and Luhmann on the other hand. Besides, we found Dag Oesterberg's 'Meta-sociological Essay' very stimulating, although its semantics differs from our own. A general survey of the history of the concept of meaning is offered by J. Köhhler (1983).
5. The reasons of this rejection are discussed in Schülein (1982), Köhler (1983, p. 83 ff.), and Luhmann (1975, p. 26–30).
6. Niklas Luhmann states this point of view as follows: "Das

Phänomen Sinn erscheint in der Form eines Ueberschusses von Verweisungen auf weitere Möglichkeiten des Erlebens und Handelns. Etwas steht im Blickpunkt, im Zentrum der Intention, und anderes wird marginal angedeutet als Horizont für ein Und–so–weiter des Erlebens und Handelns." (Luhmann 1984, p.93).

7.   See Oesterberg (1976, p.68 ff.) for a lucid, though very interesting analysis of the relation between time and selectivity.

8.   It is important to note, that sanction mechanisms, based on physical violence, economic pressure, legal–political force, or psychological coercion, cannot direct the process of meaning creation immediately, but only by diminishing the chance at non–conformity with an explicit order of social life. Along this way, the autonomous dynamics of meaning creation can never fully be lamed. This is technocrat's grief. The blueprint of the new social order which forward–looking reformers and revolutionaries want to establish, must tolerate the dynamics of meaning, which the planners can detect only ex post factum, a dynamic which besides has the advantage of the impact of its own history.

9.   This again makes clear that we are not interested in the *semantic* meaning of the expression 'revolution', etc. Of course, the historian depends on language for conveying messages, but it is impossible to deduce the actions, events and processes that we associate with revolutions, from the meaning of the expression 'revolution'. The function of such expressions is to trigger common sense conceptions, linking them to the event in question. This explains why the historian is not very interested in rigid definitions: he rather embarks on descriptive concepts than on analytically purified concepts, tightly fit into a theoretical framework; cf. Hobsbawm (1987, p.9).

10. This gives us access to the problem of periodization, of continuity as well as discontinuity. In principle, every occurence in history embodies continuity as well as discontinuitry. In our explanation of history, we place each event within the horizon of the preceding, while at the same time we realize that each event creates new horizons. Meaning permits this double perspective. It is impossible for the practising historian, however, to render this double perspective explicit in each case. The division of the past into periods and watersheds is a way of handling this problem. Both are historiographical artefacts, constructed by a one-sided generalization of one of the two perspectives. The

'period', the era of continuity, is formed by the meaningful relation shown by the separate explanations of successive events. Generally speaking, a 'period' is characterized then, by higher order (e.g. colligatory) concepts, which denominate this coherence. We create watersheds on the assumption that it is no longer possible to describe the way in which the actual events form the condition of possible follow-up events, in terms which were valid for the preceding period.

11. Normally, it is at this level that historians introduce the concept of structure. Emphasis is then put on what Braudel called 'durée'. Although structures change also, such an alteration escapes the consciousness of the historical actors. In other words: Structures do not fit the 'before/after'-scheme of presentation which serves as the chariot of the narratives spun around the course of life of concrete individuals. Koselleck: "Strukturen (sind) Zusammenhänge...die nicht in der strikten Abfolge von einmal erfahrenen Ereignissen aufgehen.(...) (I)hre zeitlichen Konstanten (weisen) über den chronologisch registrierbaren Erfahrungsraum der an einem Ereignis Beteiligten hinaus. Während Ereignisse von bestimmbaren Subjekten ausgelöst oder erlitten werden, sind Strukturen als solche überindividuell und intersubjektiv." (Koselleck, 1985 p.146/147)

12. Illustrative of the confusion created by neglecting this distinction is Goudsblom's *Sociology in the Balance*: the reader keeps wondering why 'grand theories' like that of Parsons, should have a smaller scope than historically descriptive theories such as the one advocated by Elias (i.e. if the reader does not want to let the scales tip in favour of Elias anyhow).

13. Jon Elster's definition of the 'social situation' expresses this compactly: "The social situation encompasses the given state of affairs plus the possible states of affairs compatible with the current state of affairs". He connects this definition with a number of methodological criteria, including the postulate that a sociological explanation must indicate the parameters of the possible.

14. An alternative, modal theoretical approach is Climo/Howells (1976); this Lewis-oriented approach is criticized by Hurst (1979).

15 See p. 921 and note 10.

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