Theories and Methods for a Social History of Historical Events — A Reply to Hermann Rebel

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> Une large partie de ce qui s'est passé avant et après
> 1989 était effectivement imprévisible et surprenant,
> nouveau et en rupture — nous rappelant que l'his-
> toire est aussi faite de surgissements et d'innovations,
> de hasards et de contingence, de liberté et de spo-
> nanéité. La véritable question qui se pose dès lors est
> celle de savoir comment prendre en compte à sa juste
> mesure la dimension d'imprévu, de surprise et de
> hasard dans l'histoire, comment repenser cette
> dernière dans ses dimensions d'ouverture et de con-
> tingence, comment modifier en conséquence nos
> modes de présentation et d'écriture du passé.
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> — Étienne François[1] —

I

MY study of the Swiss Peasants' War of 1653 has received four reviews in the United States.[2] I am grateful to Hermann Rebel for supplying another, most unusual review to *Central European History*.[3] It is unusual not only in length but also in judgment. Where the other reviews wrote positively about the book, Rebel rejects it completely.

If I read Rebel correctly, his criticism covers four main points. First, he criticizes the book's theoretical point of view, alleging that the call for a "return to historical events in social history" means a return to "*histoire événemen-tielle*" and would lead to "high antiquarianism."[4] Second, Rebel criticizes my

1. Étienne François, Les "trésors" de la Stasi ou le mirage des archives, in *Passés recomposés, Champs et chantiers de l'Histoire*, ed. Jean Boutier, et al. (Paris, 1995), 145–51, here at 151.
2. Edmund M. Kern, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24 (1998); Mark R. Forster, *American Journal of Sociology* 104 (1998); Randolph C. Head, *Journal of Modern History* 71 (1999); Thomas A. Brady, Jr., *The American Historical Review* 104 (1999).
3. Rebel, "What Do the Peasants Want Now?"
4. Ibid., 355, 315 n. 8.

methodological inferences from this theoretical point:[5] systematic attention to the cultural dimension of human action; the expansion of social history's traditional methods of analysis and perspectives on time (*longue durée, temps sociale*) to include cultural and anthropological insights (from, i.e., Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Clifford Geertz); and the introduction of a "slow-motion" perspective. Third, Rebel thinks he has discovered empirical faults and errors in my portrayal of the course of events, which he believes derive from my one-sided partisanship for the urban patricians, whose actions I wish to justify. He attributes this partisanship to the author's questionable political convictions, namely, his reactionary views.[6] Fourth, Rebel accuses the book of falsely estimating the conflict's consequences. According to him, the rebels of 1653 did not achieve a partial success, despite their military defeat, and did not thereby halt the political development of Switzerland toward absolutism. His view is that the Peasants' War ended in a complete defeat for the rebels.[7]

This long list of objections represents itself as a fundamental attack on my book. Yet even longer is the list of errors of scholarship committed by Rebel in his reading of my book and his formulation of the critique. I can demonstrate this criticism by examining his third point and subjecting the arguments and proofs he adduces to a critical examination.

The charge of one-sided, reactionary partisanship for the rulers is stated in general at several places but is never documented. On page 347, notes 85 and 86, Rebel at last produces the following evidence: "[Suter, Bauernkrieg,] 598. Ibid., 399. There is no doubt where Suter's allegiance lies; he even apologizes for his usage of 'peasant war' and assures us that he does not wish to endorse the peasants' use of them, 253. Elsewhere he takes the very dubious position that the peasants were threatening the "existence" of the patricians and that the latter were therefore fully justified in their actions, 216. 87. See n. 34."

The truth is that neither on the page cited (253) nor at any other place do I apologize for using the concept of "Peasants' War." On the contrary, I deliberately employ the term in the book's title. What stands on p. 253 comes from the sources: a systematic survey of the sources reveals that the concepts employed in sociopolitical language were not neutral but tied to the speaker's position. The term "Peasants' War," for example, was never employed by the ruling patricians and was even rejected by them, while it was in normal usage in the rural population's discourse. The urban ruling authorities' rejection of this concept, I try to show, reflects their view of politics based on a society of orders or estates, that is to say, on the idea of a divinely established hierarchy of patrician superiority and peasant inferiority. They therefore rejected out of hand not only the legitimacy but also the capability of a war by peasants against the authorities.

5. Ibid., 8.
6. Ibid., 347 n. 86.
7. Ibid., 314.

At this place, too, I distinguish my own use of the concept from the language of the sources — a venerable and important distinction in historical scholarship, which Rebel apparently either does not know or regards as unimportant.[8] I emphasize that in adopting the language of the sources I do not intend "to privilege the peasants' terminology in principle."[9] Rather, my analytical employment of the concept intends primarily to express the degree of violence, which justifies characterizing this conflict as a war.

On pp. 498–520, where the discussion of this problem is resumed, I show that while the sources' concept of a "peasants' war" correctly conveys the conflict's military quality, it was at the same time a fighting concept of the rebels. As such, it emphasizes too much the unity of the rebel movement and rural population, while it underplays their social differences based on the socioeconomic position, the sociopolitical situation, sex, and age. To employ this concept without proper nuance obscures the existence within rural society and within the rebel movement of quite different interests and possibilities for serving those interests through action.

This all had the effect, as I explain on the pages cited, of working to the advantage of the well-placed, established stratum of peasants. Although from a sociological point of view they already by the seventeenth century formed a clear minority of the rural population, it is quite clear that the insurrection of 1653 primarily served their interests. This happened at the expense not only of the poorer and younger parts of the rural population but also of the women, whose roles and interests are portrayed (pp. 514ff.) in as great a detail as the sources permit. Rebel's allegation that women made only "extremely rare appearances in this study," simply dismisses this important section and so misses the mark.[10] The section in question also examines the position of authority and power on which this relatively small stratum of well-off peasants could draw both in everyday life and in the conflict of 1653. If the latter may be designated a "peasants' war" according to my analytical point of view and manner of applying the term, this is not because I conceive a homogeneous rural society or a unified insurrectionary movement, but because the conflict's military character was in fact strongly shaped by the authority and power of the established peasants.

It is also true that neither on p. 598 and p. 399 nor on p. 216 can one read, as Rebel alleges, that the rulers acted "rightfully" against the subjects. The concept of "rightfully," which Rebel places in quotation marks to indicate a

8. See the study by Max Weber, "Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis," in Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 7th ed. (Tübingen, 1988), 146–214.

9. Andreas Suter, *Der schweizerische Bauernkrieg von 1653: Politische Sozialgeschichte — Sozialgeschichte eines politischen Ereignisses* (Tübingen, 1997), 253.

10. Rebel, "What Do the Peasants Want Now?," 316 n. 10.

citation from my study, is nowhere to be found on these pages. And nowhere in my study will one read — as Rebel alleges — that the patricians were "fully justified" in their actions against the subjects. On the contrary, I characterize the rebels, especially the subjects in the Entlebuch, as the "tragic heroes" of this conflict.[11]

This evaluation rests on various considerations, among them the point that an analysis of the course of events leaves no room for doubt as to who was chiefly to blame for this hopeless situation that led to open conflict. On p. 64, I assert "that the rulers' coinage policy was of decisive importance for the outbreak of the peasants' war." On p. 89 I judge the coinage policy and the ruling patricians' refusal to relieve by means of emergency measures the liquidity crisis that deflation had produced among their subjects as follows: "The subjects," I write there, "could with good reason interpret the rulers' refusal as a rejection of their own legitimate demands. With their refusal to accept the subjects' monetary and economic demands as a solution to the liquidity crisis, the rulers had defaulted on their fundamental obligations to their subjects. Instead of offering their cooperation to help solve the crisis, they worsened the subjects' situation that was aggravated by blatant insider deals on the part of the councilors and the treasury."

In the book's second part, which examines the economic, political, and cultural structures and processes that underlie the conflict, the coinage policy is examined once more (pp. 363–404). There I show that "the debasement was nothing less than a delayed consequence of the inflationary sins committed during the 1620s by these three regimes, mainly to benefit their treasuries."[12] I also show that these inflationary "sins" must be seen in the context of a budgetary crisis that had several different causes. Once again, I show conclusively that the rulers' solution to the crisis — the debasement of coinage and the state's entire fiscal policy — posed a striking analogy to their debasement of coinage in 1653. These earlier measures, too, had been regarded as violating the norm of shared sacrifices and, therefore, as unjust. "Because the ruler's fiscal policy in many respects served urban interests at the cost of the rural subjects, the redistribution of resources at the subjects' cost and the civic budgets' advantage could hardly be justified."[13]

My review of the evidence and arguments concerning Rebel's third point of criticism, which could easily be extended, with similar results, to all of his other points, shows in detail the practical faults in Rebel's reading and in his critique. He often criticizes in general terms that are not based on evidence or argument. Furthermore, he pays no attention to passages and even entire chapters that

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11. Suter, *Bauernkrieg*, 49.
12. Ibid., 375.
13. Ibid., 400.

attempt to produce precisely what he claims is missing. In many places his alleged evidence rests on questionable interpretations of what the text states or on questionable readings of the sources presented. Worse, in many places he simply cites the text incorrectly.

These faults give the reader no chance to form even a roughly accurate idea of the book. For this reason, Rebel's critique offers nothing more than a welcome opportunity for me to present my own views to the reader. This I do in the second part of my reply. In it I concentrate my comments on the first two points of Rebel's critique, which concern the study's theoretical and methodological principles. I will explain in greater detail a topic, which Rebel dismisses as "some awkward shadow-boxing with Ladurie and Braudel" and rejects as a regression to *histoire événementielle* leading to "high antiquarianism."[14] What does it mean to call for a social history of events? Why do I, along with other European and American social historians, increasingly consider this an important desideratum? What does it mean to employ a "slow-motion perspective," with the aid of which theoretical considerations about the relationship between structure and event can be translated into practical method? What kind of important results can a study that employs this method hope to yield?

These questions can be answered by means of a slightly revised version of an article that presents the theoretical-methodological introduction and a few of the conclusions of my book on the Swiss Peasants' War.[15] Based on these points, in the third and last part of my reply to Rebel I will define the most fundamental difference between my theoretical-methodological standpoint and his. Concerning Rebel's fourth point of criticism — my allegedly false evaluation of the conflict's short- and long-term consequences — considerations of space oblige me to refer the reader to the second part of my book, chap. 5 (pp. 525–87). Here I can merely state the most important conclusion: by means of strong resistance in the Peasants' War, the rural subjects of Switzerland did halt the development toward absolutism and defended, at least at the level of the local communes, their political and economic realm of action. Thereby they defended their access to the world market, as is shown by the flourishing protocapitalist rural economy (export of cheese and livestock) and rural protoindustry (cotton cloth, clocks) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These findings refute Rebel's theory of a "world system" and his estimate of the consequences for Central European rural populations.[16]

14. Rebel, "What Do the Peasants Want Now?," 315, 355, 315 n. 8.

15. The study first appeared in French: Andreas Suter, "Histoire sociale et événements historique: Pour une nouvelle appproche," *Annales HSS* 52 (1997): 543–67. The German version bears the title, "Theorien und Methoden für eine Sozialgeschichte historischer Ereignisse," *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 25 (1998): 209–43.

16. Rebel, "What Do the Peasants Want Now?," 549ff.

II

This study presents theoretical and methodological reflections about a social history of historical events. It supplies the conceptual basis for an investigation of the Swiss Peasants' War of 1653, the greatest social conflict in early modern Switzerland.[17] There are two reasons why reflections on the social history of historical events seem especially appropriate at this time.

The first reason is the point of the quotation that stands at the head of and states the leitmotiv of this reply to Rebel. The toppling of regimes in 1989 in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Germany, which unleashed irreversible structural transformations of the greatest possible scope and reminded us emphatically of the great transformative power of events on the shaping of long-term historical change, poses difficult problems for social history and questions some of its central theoretical and methodological assumptions. Then, too, there is a fundamental parallel between the events of 1989 and the Swiss Peasants' War, as different as these two events may have been as a whole and in their details. For this reason the Peasants' War offers a fascinating possibility for approaching much more closely the historical events and attendant theoretical and method-ological questions that have not yet been posed about 1989. Since historical events can never repeat themselves, we cannot simply transfer reflections, pro-cedures, and solutions from the Peasants' War to the events of 1989 or to other historical events. But a study of the earlier events can sharpen our awareness of theoretical and methodological issues and may supply analytical tools to make easier the investigation of later ones.

How is it possible to write the social history of historical events? My answer to this question can be formulated in a single point, for which is needed a new temporal perspective, that of slow motion. This perspective differs fundamen-tally from the classical temporality of *histoire événementielle*, which is the natural chronology of minutes, hours, days, weeks, and years, along which the medieval chroniclers and many nineteenth and twentieth-century historians structured their narratives of historical events. At the same time, slow motion is a supple-ment to the temporalities of social history conceived by Fernand Braudel as distinct from natural chronology, for only in the perspective of slow motion can we gaze upon historical events and explain their most important characteristic: the cultural creativity of collective actors, on whom are grounded the individ-uality and capacity for change that differentiate events from structures.

The following pages present in four sections this proposed theoretical-methodological basis of a social history of historical events. Section 1 clarifies important concepts of a social history of historical events. What is an event, and how does it differ from a simply everyday occurrence? How do we distinguish

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17. Instead of referring to contemporary sources I will cite Suter, *Bauernkrieg*.

between events and historical events? Section 2 explains why the social history of historical events misses its goal, if it employs the traditional theoretical and methodological approaches and temporalities of *histoire événementielle* and social history. Section 3 presents the theoretical and methodological alternatives for a social history of the historical event that lead to the temporal perspective of slow motion. Finally, Section 4 offers some results of my investigation of the Peasants' War, which are designed to show, based on the sources, why historical events can be understood as collective cultural creations of the participants.

(1) Happening, Event, Historical Event

For the sake of conceptual clarity it is important to keep three things distinct. First, the simple occurrence or everyday action; second, the event; and third, the historical event.[18] If we begin with a determination of what an event is, it is helpful to start from the original meaning of the word, which was dominant until the eighteenth century and is still current. The noun "*Ereignis*" and the verb "*sich ereignen*" contain the verb "*eräugen*," that is, "to appear before the eyes."[19] An event is therefore a happening that moves into the field of vision of an observer and happens before his eyes. The word designates a subjective connection between the happening and the observer.

Yet not everything an observer "*eräugt*" becomes an event for him. The countless multiplicity of recorded occurrences — births, marriages, death, the acts of purchase and sale, election, etc. — also happens. They, too, move into the observer's field of vision, but for him they are not events. What makes a happening an event for him requires something more. It is the fact that the observed happening appears against the background of his everyday horizon of experience and expectation as something unusual and unexpected to the observer.

Events surprise. No one, not the ablest politician and social scientist, diplomat or historian, nor the very much better endowed information bureaus of the global banking houses, could imagine before the fact the rapid collapse of the Soviet Union, the German reunification, or the political changes in Poland and other states of the former Communist bloc. The same thing happened in 1653 in Switzerland with the Peasants' War. As the conflict went on, for example, the magistrates of Lucerne exhibited pure astonishment over the special quality of

18. I take definitions of happening, event, and historical event from Reinhart Koselleck, "Ereignis und Struktur," in Geschichte — Ereignis und Erzählung (Munich, 1973), 560–71, here 560f. Hans Robert Jauss, "Versuch einer Ehrenrettung des Ereignisbegriffs," in ibid., 554–60; Marshal Sahling, "Die erneute Wiederkehr des Ereignisses: Zu den Anfängen des grossen Fidschikrieges zwischen den Königreichen Bau und Rewa (1843–1855)," in *Das Schwein des Häuptlings: Beiträge zur historischen Anthropologie*, ed. Rebekka Habermas, et al. (Berlin, 1992), 83–128, here 83ff.

19. See Jauss, "Versuch," 554.

their subjects' resistance. The subjects, as the magistrates expressed in April, three months after the revolt began, "resort to procedures and extreme actions, which we could not have imagined." The field of discourse, in which contemporaries formulated the complex occurrences and sequences of actions in categories of sociopolitical language, so as to conceive them as a coherent event with a precise meaning, exhibits the same characteristics.

The concepts, it turns out, change with the viewpoint of the observer and the phase of the conflict.[20] At the same time the process of conceptualization becomes increasingly more original. The meaning and importance of the event for contemporaries, therefore, were not fixed once and for all but were altered by them in the course of events and ever reinterpreted. A systematic chronological study of the acts of the revolt reveals that for the rulers involved and also for their subjects, the widely known concepts used for open resistance of rural subjects in the entire German-speaking world no longer sufficed to express in words the event's altered reality.

At first the rulers branded the peasants' acts of resistance with the very common concept of a "disturbance" (*Unruhe*), somewhat later as a "revolt" (*Revolte*) or "rebellion" (*Rebellion*). The latter two concepts meant a public, criminal violation of the divine natural order, which the rulers claimed to represent. [21] Conversely, the subjects spoke at this time of a "quarrel" (*Span*) and meant simply that they were engaged in a public dispute with the rulers.

Since the last third of April 1653 and just at the moment when Lucerne and other Swiss magistrates began to be astonished by their subjects' actions, various new, supplementary concepts came into use. In contrast to the normal terms mentioned, these concepts were rarely used in the late medieval and early modern sociopolitical vocabulary to designate social conflict.[22] At this stage the council of Schwyz wrote of a "general conspiracy" (*General-machination*); that of Solothurn spoke of a "general rebellion" (*Generalaufstand*).

The mayor and council of Zurich went a step further. In a letter to the magistrates of Lucerne on 19 April 1653 they called the conflict a "revolution" and wrote in this sense about a "thoroughgoing revolution of many Swiss subjects." Here the council and mayor employed a thoroughly original language, for, based on the current status of research, this is the earliest source

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20. This is generally so, and it can be observed with respect to other conflicts and events. See Arlette, Farge and Jacques Revel, *Logiques de la foule: L'affaire des enlèvements d'enfants Paris 1750*, (Paris, 1988).

21. On these common expressions in political and social language, see Reinhart Koselleck, "Revolution, Rebellion, Aufruhr, Bürgerkrieg," *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 5 (Stuttgart, 1984), 653–788.

22. For the use of such common expressions as "*Revolution*," "*Generalverschwörung*," and "*Generalaufstand*" in the Swiss Peasants' War, see Suter, *Bauernkrieg*, Introduction and Part I, chap. 3.1.

in the German-speaking area that employs the concept of "revolution" to characterize more precisely a social conflict.[23]

At an even more advanced stage, after an open military confrontation between peasant troops and those of the Swiss Assembly (*Tagsatzung*), another term came into use. Given the extent of the engagements and the partly military expression of them, at least the rebels spoke of a "peasants' war" (*Purenkrieg*). Here, only at the very end of the strife, the concept was formulated that names this conflict in modern Swiss historiography.

The fact that the Peasants' War evoked such astonishment and surprise from contemporaries and forced them over the course of events to fashion again and again a new and more original language shows that the contemporaries did experience this conflict as an occurrence quite distinct from everyday life and a special unit of time — in a word, as an event. But can the Peasants' War also be called a "historical event"? The decisive criterion that qualifies events as historical events is not solely the contemporaries' collective horizon of experience and expectation. The decisive thing is rather the horizon of experience and expectation of the historian, which forms out of the results of scholarly research.

That this perspective, thanks both to the greater chronological distance and to the possibility for synchronic and diachronic comparison with a variety of other social conflicts, is also in some ways superior to the contemporaries' view, confirms the contemporary sense of a surprising and unusual occurrence. In the narrower perspective of Swiss historiography the Peasants' War, together with the Reformation, poses the deepest and most radical challenge to political, social, and economic relations that the lands of the early modern Confederation ever experienced.

In the broader European perspective of historical research on conflicts, the in many respects unusual characteristics of these struggles also become apparent.[24] The most important differences from the widespread form of public resistance — for which historical study of conflict employs the contemporary term of "revolt" — were three in number.[25] First, the Peasants' War, like other

23. In German dictionaries and lexica on the early modern era, the concept of revolution is simply not used to characterize social conflicts before 1789. In colloquial German speech the concept of revolution has been documented, to my knowledge, only for the Bavarian peasants' war of 1705–1706. Cf. Koselleck, "Revolution, Rebellion, Aufruhr, Bürgerkrieg," 715ff. and 723.

24. On the study of conflicts in early modern Europe, see Yves-Marie Bercé, *Révoltes et révolutions dans l'Europe moderne (XVIᵉ–XVIIIᵉ siècles)* (Paris, 1980); Peter Bierbrauer, "Bäuerliche Revolten im Alten Reich: Ein Forschungsbericht," in *Aufruhr und Empörung? Studien zum bäuerlichen Widerstand im Alten Reich*, ed. Peter Blickle, et al. (Munich, 1980), 1–62; Winfried Schulze, *Bäuerlicher Widerstand und feudale Herrschaft in der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart, 1980); Jean Nicolas, ed., *Mouvements populaires et conscience sociale XIIIᵉ–XIXᵉ siècles: Actes du Colloque de Paris 24–26 mai 1984* (Paris, 1985); Peter Blickle, *Unruhen in der ständischen Gesellschaft 1300–1800* (Munich, 1988).

25. For typical characterizations used to describe revolts, see Andreas Suter, "Der schweizerische

peasants' wars but in contrast to the revolts, overflowed the boundaries of an individual territorial lordship to involve much larger regions. Second, unlike the modest goals of a revolt, the rebels pursued revolutionary goals, aiming to change whole systems. Third, the conflict escalated into a military confrontation between numerically significant forces of the rebels and of the established rulers, a rare occurrence during the early modern era.

Historical events, finally, qualify themselves as such through the structural changes they effect, something the Peasants' War truly did. The effects were confined, unlike those of the 1989 event, to Switzerland, and they turned out to be relatively more modest in character, because in the end the revolution of the rural subjects failed. Yet, because of the powerful characteristics exhibited by the rural subjects' resistance in this case, the Peasants' War nevertheless possessed for the Confederacy as a whole important systemic effects, and it added new historical dimensions to this historical and geographic space. Especially noteworthy was the experience of the unusual power of resistance, exceeding all known limits, which the rural subjects developed in 1653 and which forced the rulers of the city-states to the brink of collapse. It formed a clear warning sign for the Swiss authorities, who took it to heart.[26]

Since the alliance system of the premodern Swiss Confederacy could be reformed by neither diplomatic nor military means, only a fundamental change of course could increase the rulers' repressive capabilities. For this reason the strengthening and centralizing of state power in the absolutist sense, such as had been attempted before the Peasants' War and had formed an important spur to the conflict, were blocked until the end of the Old Regime. This meant a failure to establish the absolutist state in terms of taxation, administration, and military power, which had succeeded in other European states of this era. Instead, another form of government appeared, the "paternalistic" regime, which was distinguished by its lack of the basic foundations of absolutist state power — a developed system of taxation, a central administration, and a standing army. Accordingly, the Swiss rulers were forced until the end of the Old Regime to concede to their subjects a relatively great level of autonomy and broad powers to shape their own living conditions.[27]

Bauernkrieg 1653. Ein Forschungsbericht," in *Die Bauern in der Geschichte der Schweiz*, ed. Albert Tanner et al., Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte, vol. 10 (Zurich, 1992), 69–104, here at 69ff., where the results of recent research on rural revolts are summarized.

26. On the structural consequences, see Suter, *Bauernkrieg*, Part II, chap. 5.

27. The concept of paternalism comes not from the sources but from its theoretical use by E. P. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History* 7 (1974): 382–405; idem, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?" *Social History* 3 (1978): 133–68. Thompson framed this concept to characterize the political relations between the English governing groups and the lower classes as they developed after the Civil War. In England, as in Switzerland, these relations allowed the common people a relatively broad autonomy and freedom of action.

This mid-seventeenth century shift of course also became important for the development of state institutions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The "paternalistic" regime created favorable preconditions for the success of the nineteenth-century liberal revolutions, which by European standards appeared relatively early and strongly, and which created the liberal-democratic Swiss national state. The Peasants' War in fact both breached and built structures of general social significance. How was this historical event possible? Whence came the creative and innovative dynamic and individuality that enabled it to transcend the existing structures? What theoretical and methodological tools enable us to investigate and recreate this dynamic and this individuality? How does one write in a concrete manner the social history of an historical event?

(2) The Conundrums of Natural Chronology, Social Time, and the *longue durée*

The answer seems to be quite simple, and since today it is once again frequently accepted, it is important that it be debated.[28] Does it not suffice for an understanding and for an explanation of historical events, as seems apparent from intuition about our own experience of life, to reconstruct as precisely as the existing sources allow the occurrences, actions, and sequences of action between the beginning and the end of the specified time period, and then to reproduce them as a narrative for the reader in the order prescribed by the natural chronology of physical time?[29]

This classic procedure of narrative history has in fact been employed by all previous historians of the Peasants' War. The yield has been a number of narratives of this conflict, some of them quite detailed, which report from day-to-day, week-to-week, and month-to-month what happened in the various theaters of conflict. These accounts find it difficult, however, to answer the questions they themselves ask. Urs Hostettler, for example, who makes the reasons for the revolution's failure the central issue of his study, has to end several hundred pages of day-by-day reporting by passing the question back to the reader.[30]

We can explain the apparently paradoxical outcome: the most precise and fullest narratives of events not only leave historical questions unanswered but,

28. Various recent, "revisionist" studies of the English Revolution have turned from social-historical methods to deal with events in a narrative way. See Kaspar von Greyerz, *England im Jahrhundert der Revolutionen 1603–1714* (Stuttgart, 1994), 14ff.

29. I depend here on Paul Ricoeur, who speaks in this connection of a "structure prénarrative de l'expérience," by which he means that the how we normally tell history is shaped by our experience before we ever begin to reflect upon it. See Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, 3 vol. (Paris, 1983–1995), here at 1:141.

30. Thus Urs Hostettler *Der Rebell von Eggiwil: Aufstand der Emmentaler 1653* (Bern, 1991), 752.

on closer examination, make it impossible to answer them. The reason for this is that while the chronologically correct ordering of all of the occurrences, actions, and sequences of actions that make up an event is an indispensable prerequisite to its narration, it is also true that "natural chronology as such is blind to historical meaning."[31] With this "blindness to the meaning of natural chronology" we come to the following point. The narration of an event that restricts itself to a chronicle or, to give it its modern name, a reportage of observed occurrences and handlings in temporal sequence, can merely say when, where, and what has occurred, and in what sequence. But the reporter of facts of "the chronicler can never tell a genuine history."[32] He can, in the end, never answer all those decisive questions of the inner logical connections, the meanings and the structural preconditions of what has happened before his very eyes.

The inherently dynamic logic of the occurrences and actions, not to mention their significance or structural preconditions can by no means be identified with what can, strictly speaking, be recorded. Nor can the chronicler or reporter make them transparent, because the significance, structural preconditions, and dynamic logic of events are "invisible."[33] They become visible only when the historians apply comprehending and explanatory interpretations to the meanings intended by the historical actors. In this way the actions and their motivations can be reconstructed.

A comprehending and explanatory interpretation can, in turn, rest only on a basis of chosen theories and deliberately framed questions and problems, which alone can meaningfully structure a narrative. They alone can do what natural chronology, taken as a structuring principle, fails to do: they make it possible to tell a history and therefore to put the individual parts and historical information that give access to an event in a new order governed by an analytical purpose; they can then be portrayed as parts of an insightful complete complex that yields answers to specific historical questions.[34]

Even when pure narratives of events do give the impression of having overcome natural chronology's blindness to meaning, they are able to do this because they work from theoretical premises, rarely transparent and often

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31. Koselleck, ed., *Geschichte — Ereignis und Erzählung*, 561.

32. Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), 268.

33. See Krzysztof Pomian, *L'ordre du temps* (Paris, 1984), 16ff.

34. This concept of narrative depends on Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, 1:127: "Une histoire, d'autre part, doit être plus qu'une énumération d'événements dans un ordre sériel, elle doit les organiser dans une totalité intelligible." He emphasizes that the social historian, too, tells stories and has, therefore, nothing in common with the traditional narrative in the sense of presenting events in chronological order. Fearing misunderstanding, some social historians have rejected this position. See, for examples, Jürgen Kocka, "Zurück zur Erzählung?" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 10 (1984): 395–408; Peter Burke, *Offene Geschichte: Die Schule der "Annales"* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991 [Cambridge, 1990]), 93.

questionable, to pseudo-explanations and interpretations of events. The rule of post hoc ergo propter hoc comes first to mind. It always and everywhere attributes a causally effective but never demonstrable coherence to an event's happenings and actions. The reader receives the deceptive impression that everything that happens in the temporal framework of the events related belongs in an essential way to this event.

A second aspect of this deficit is that purely chronological narratives profit from an illusion that events possess absolute beginnings and definite ends. According to this postulate, each historical event possesses a single, unambiguous beginning, which becomes absolute by making it the sufficient condition of all following occurrences and actions. This means that we may ignore the effects of relationships, conditions, and structures, which "anticipate [the event] in some way other than by preceding them chronologically."[35] Conversely, the assumption of a definitive end of events disregards the possibility that events can be "elements of a new disturbance," that is, they can have effects at longer term and distance, so that they never really come to an end.[36]

Social history, which established itself since the 1950s as an alternative to *histoire événementielle* by distinguishing itself from the methodological and theoretical norms of chronologically structured narrative history, gave the historical event a different — though not greatly improved — treatment. In contrast to narrative history, for social history historical events were not the most important and decisive medium of historical change, nor were their actors the influential bearers of such change. On the contrary, events were demoted to purely "superficial," "ephemeral," "fleeting," "deceptive," and "meaningless" phenomena.[37] The historian's attention should properly be turned not to these ephemeral superficialities but to the very much more powerful, more deeply situated processes and conjunctures of "social time" and the even more slowly changing structures of "the very *longue durée*."[38]

In this connection it is important to see that historical events still have their place in this perspective. Fernand Braudel himself differentiates quite carefully between a narrative history captive to natural chronology, which he called "*histoire événementielle*" and which he vigorously attacked, and a "*histoire politique*," which he approved by writing it himself.[39] This *histoire politique* was

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35. Koselleck, ed., *Geschichte — Ereignis und Erzählung*, 562.

36. Thus Johann Gustav Droysen in his critique of Leopold von Ranke. See Droysen's *Historik: Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte*, ed. Rudolf Hübner, (5th ed. Munich, 1967), 298.

37. These adjectives are used by Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949), here at xiii; idem, "Historie et sciences sociale: La longue durée," in *Annales E.S.C.* 13 (1958): 725–53, here 728.

38. Braudel, *La Méditerranée*, ix–xv; idem, "Histoire et sciences sociales."

39. On this difference, see ibid., 728f. The entire third part of Braudel's work is devoted to "*histoire politique*."

distinguished by the fact that it placed the events and actions captive to natural chronology in contact with the other temporal levels. This also distinguished his *histoire politique* from the *histoire événementielle*.

While events and their contexts remain isolated and unconnected within the framework of *histoire événementielle*, social history examines them from the long-term perspective of structural connections and developments. In social history an event may be explained as the result of deeper economic, hegemonic, or cultural constellations, developments and latent contrasts, whose relationships, both in their origins and their impact, may be sought in more extended histor-ical time frames. Contrary to the natural chronology used in *histoire événemen-tielle*, this method offers without doubt considerably enhanced explanatory possibilities. Most important, the question concerning the causes of events becomes the center of attention and may be brought closer to a solution.

The solution of the problem of causation, however, comes at a high price. To the degree that the method of social history attempts mainly to ground histor-ical events in and explain them within social-structural contexts, the events are necessarily stripped of any autonomy and individuality, characteristics that, in contrast to the long-term processes and structural constellations, they certainly do possess. Consequently, events become mere appendages, "manifestations," or are reduced to elements of deeper, fateful, and in a sense determining structures.[40] As a result, social historians were strongly inclined to exclude the problematic of possible structural consequences from the circle of possible questions, and, even more so, that of the autonomous logical progression and individuality as opposed to the structural context.

To a considerable extent, the social-historical treatment of historical events thus shared the deficits of the methods of *histoire événementielle*. While the latter incorrectly explain the question of logical progression and individuality of historical events, for the former this question does not even arise. Moreover, both neglect, albeit for different reasons, the question of possible consequences. The social-historical method possesses definite advantages only when events are to be explained on the basis of long-term structures and processes. But this is done in such a broad fashion that the event is reduced to a mere element of a structure and finally totally disappears in a societal-structural context. This reduction is that much more serious as it obstructs the empirical insight into the possibilities available to the actors, whose collective actions underlie the slower structural processes of change as well as their faster spurts that may help change social conditions.[41]

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40. Braudel, *La Méditerranée*, xiv: "Les événements ne sont que des instants, que des manifesta-tions de ces larges destines et ne s'expliquent que par eux."

41. This is the core of Thompson's critique of structure. See his *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978).

With the above in mind, as early as the beginning of the 1970s at two conferences, sociologists presented arguments to the theme of structures and events that aimed at overcoming the reductionist treatment of historical events.[42] This provided the impetus to "return the event" to social history.[43] Guiding this change was a fresh assessment of the impact of events that owed much to the 1968 disturbances in France, an approach that may be described as a double-distancing from Braudel's position.

On the one hand, it recalled the fact, neglected meanwhile by many social historians, that events have a retroactive impact on their structure's context and therefore may change it to a lesser or greater degree. They anticipated here the actual experience of the revolutionary change in 1989. On the other hand, they stressed that, although events are influenced by structural contexts, the latter nevertheless cannot unequivocally and totally explain them. "Every event," in the words of Reinhart Koselleck, "shows more and at the same time less than is contained in its preconditions: thus, its always surprising novelty."[44] In other words, the event possesses a quality all its own that can neither be foretold nor satisfactorily explained in retrospect as arising out of structures. In view of existing structures, one may see this quality as a novel occurrence (*Neuheit*) that at once establishes a difference, even a break between the level of experience, of actions, and the events as more complex chains of action on the one hand and those of structures and structural processes on the other. Both never totally mesh (kommen nie vollkommen zur Deckung).

This double distancing leads to the conclusion, today shared by ever more social historians, that the earlier sharp differentiation between event and social history represents an obstructing contrast that should be removed through the social history of historical events.[45] Under the impression of the far-reaching and sudden changes (*Veränderungsschubs*) of the past years, this insight has once again gained attention. Especially among historians living in Germany it provided, among other things, the impulse to promote a revived "political science history" of which social history of historical events considers itself a part.[46] For, while it would be wrong to attempt to explain the course of history without taking into account the potential of slowly changing structures and processes, it would be equally wrong to neglect the potential and the power of events to affect change.

42. See the conference papers edited by Edgar Morin, "L'événement" in *Communications* 18 (Paris, 1972) and Kosseleck, *Geschichte — Ereignis.*

43. Thus the title of the programmatical essay of Morin, "Le return de l'événement" in *Communications* 18 (1972): 6–20.

44. Koselleck, *Geschichte — Ereignis*, 566.

45. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Satz und Gegensatz: Über die Verantwortung der Intellektuellen* (Berlin, 1989 [Paris, 1984]), 56.

46. See Jürgen Kocka's position at the German Historikertag of 1992, "Perspektiven für die Sozialgeschichte der neunziger Jahre," in *Sozialgeschichte, Alltagsgeschichte, Mikro-Historie*, ed.

Considerable difficulties arise, however, in empirically establishing the social history of historical events. This becomes evident when considering the fact that meanwhile the old demand of the early 1970s for a return of the event to social history has not exerted any discernable impact on scholarly research. As Peter Burke pointed out in a recent presentation on the Annals School, particular events have seldom been used as the subject for social-historical research.[47] And when they were used — examples are Georges Duby's *Le dimanche de Bouvines* (1973) or Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie's *Le carnaval de Romans* (1979) — the interest focused on what for Braudel manifested itself in economic, social, and cultural structures.[48] Thus, the question of the individuality and novelty of events and the complex relationship of structures and processes on the one hand and experience and action that is realized therein on the other remained unanswered.

Microhistory and *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life) again, both of which in the 1980s emphatically sought and indeed looked into a differentiated examination of the collaboration between these two levels, are also not interested in the historical event.[49] For certain methodological reasons, their interest covered small-scale units of research, such as a person and his or her biography, a family, or a social group and its networks, a village, or a town.[50] At best, microhistory and *Alltagsgeschichte* concerned themselves with certain aspects of historical events, for instance their symbolism.[51] So far, they have not attempted to examine and analyze, in their totality, historical events that often involved thousands of people of the most diverse social groups, that spread over large areas, had widespread impact, and without exception occurred in a macrohistorical context.

Winfried Schulze (Göttingen, 1994), 33–39, which, along with the question of Étienne François cited above, was most deeply influenced by the experience of the revolution of 1989.

47. See Burke, *Offene Geschichte*, 92ff. Jürgen Kocka, in his *Sozialgeschichte: Begriff-Entwicklung-Probleme*, rev. ed. (Göttingen, 1986), 164, arrived from the viewpoint of German social history already earlier at a similar conclusion: "To be sure, from the viewpoint of German social history, one will not deny that experiences and actions, events and persons (to be hermeneutically decoded) also belong within the research field of social history. But one must admit that the question of how to reconcile structures and processes that are central to historical research with equally important experiences and action is neither theoretically nor practically solved."

48. The return to social history of a second classical theme, that of biography, is by contrast further advanced. See Hedwig Röckelein, ed., *Biographie als Geschichte*, Forum Psychohistorie, vol. 1 (Munich, 1993).

49. See for microhistory the introductory article by Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge, 1991), 93–113. To *Alltagsgeschichte*, see the introductory volume by Alf Lüdtke, ed. *Alltagsgeschichte: Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989).

50. See below regarding the research subjects preferred by microhistory and *Alltagsgeschichte* and the methodological reason for this preference, Winfried Schulze, "Mikrohistorie versus Makrohistorie? Anmerkungen zu einem aktuellen Thema," in *Theorie der Geschichte: Historische Methode*, ed. Christian Meier et al. (Nördlingen, 1988), 319–41.

51. See also Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis zum Faschismus* (Hamburg, 1993).

In practice, as a result of the above, the establishment of the project of a social history of historical events hardly faces a more comfortable research atmosphere than it did in the 1970s. Not enough studies are so far available to show how one would concretely proceed.[52] It has since become clear, however, what demands a social history must satisfy. Similar to the traditional social-historical interpretation of events, it must show which longer-term processes of change led to a constellation of conditions that made the event under consideration possible. Furthermore, it must do justice to the dual character of historical events. It must show, first of all, how the actions of those participating in historical events were informed by these processes of change and the cultural conditions in place, and second, how these actions, within certain limits, were able to develop their own logic and autonomous dynamic. Third, it will have to examine how these actions, by their own dynamic, brought forth results and effects that in turn changed conditions that enabled, and at the same time put their stamp on, but did not determine, these actions.

(3) The Historical Event in Slow-Motion Perspective

Of these three demands facing a social history of historical events, the second is the most difficult to meet. What is the reason, and how can it be shown, that a historical event such as a social conflict "produces at all times more or less than is contained in its preconditions"? How can one examine and explain the dual character of historical events? According to the research project developed for the examination of the Swiss Peasants' War, its dual character can be explained only by understanding as a genuine cultural phenomenon the collective actions of the rebels that produced this event. In order to be able to examine the collective actions of the rebels as a cultural phenomenon, however, there is no other way than to surrender the perspective of a natural chronology and the traditional social-historical temporalities of "social time" and the "*longue durée*" in favor of the slow-motion perspective.

The conceptualization of events as cultural phenomena rests on a series of theoretical considerations concerning the nature of collective handling of conflict that emerged in the Peasants' War as well as in other conflicts. Here, the starting point may be an understanding formulated not by the historical profession but by the actors involved in that social conflict: that ironic and fanciful slogan launched by students of the Sorbonne during the May upheavals in 1968 that spread from there quickly throughout Europe: "Il est evident que les structures ne descendent jamais dans la rue."[53]

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52. Notable exceptions are Marshal Sahlins, *Der Tod des Kapitän Cook: Geschichte als Metapher und Mythos als Wirklichkeit in der Frühgeschichte des Königreiches Hawaii* (Berlin, 1981); Farge and Revel, *Logiques de la foule.*

53. The man who vouched for the origin of this slogan, the linguist and Paris professor Algirdas

Indeed, structures do not venture, protesting, into the streets. Structures are not historical subjects and do not exist in and of themselves. Nevertheless, the question does arise: are the people one meets, protesting in the streets, really people and totally free individuals, as this slogan in its reverse application suggests and hopefully proclaims? The answer is again negative. If we take the results of historical research of conflict seriously, we must suppose that structures after all, in one form or another, are found in the streets. This applies even to those exciting spring days of May in Paris when everything seemed possible.

As a matter of fact, acts of resistance always obey time-specific models, in spite of the participants' in principle unlimited possibilities for action. The astonishing similarities between the collective acts of resistance in May of 1968 and those of the latest events of 1995 in France that in journalistic jargon were immediately dubbed "French conditions," for example, prove the above finding.[54] The existence of time-specific models of "repertoires" for protest and resistance also validates the results of the historical research of protest.[55]

How can this contradiction be resolved that, on the one hand, structures are not historical subjects and do not exist in and of themselves, while on the other, in this world and the actions of people they nevertheless have effect? It can be resolved if one allows that social action and social practice of the participants themselves make it possible for structures to become social reality.[56] The actors appropriate the structure through their social action or in their acts of resistance, and they act accordingly. And as they act in one certain way rather than another, what can be described as political, economic, social, or cultural structure becomes reality and is, as such, maintained. Structures exist only as long as social actions perpetuate them.[57]

Julien Greimas, did not merely follow its origins in the circle of rebelling students of the Sorbonne. While on a subsequent extended speaking tour in the U.S., he was surprised to find that this slogan had spread throughout the universities of America. See Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Sur l'histoire événementielle et histoire fondamentale," in Kosseleck et al., *Geschichte — Ereignis*, 139–53, here 140f.

54. See the commentary of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 30/31 December 1995, p. 21: "In France the attempt of the Juppé regime seriously to take up the long overdue reform of the welfare system, leads to upheavals not seen on their scale to 'French conditions,' as the rapidly coined slogan called it."

55. The term and concept of repertoires of action or conflict were theoretically developed by Charles Tilly in his *From Mobilization to Revolution: Reading Massachusetts* (Reading, Mass. 1978). The repertoire of rural subjects and peasants in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, for example, included at one end the means of supplication by subjects, accepted at least within limits. It led through the so-called soft and notably often female forms of protest and resistance, i.e., the *Schadenzauber* and the spreading of rumors inimical toward the rulers, and finally the various forms of covert resistance, i.e., smuggling, tax avoidance, poaching and stealing wood, and, at the other end of the spectrum either to suits and litigation in the courts or the open forms of resistance, as hunger strikes and revolts.

56. This refers to the theory of action by collective actors outlined by Antony Giddens, *Die Konstitution der Gesellschaft: Grundzüge einer Theorie der Strukturierung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988 [Cambridge, 1984]), 67ff. Thompson, The Poverty of Theory, here at 219ff.

57. The reproduction of structures, of course, never occurs wholly through social action. Rather,

A second result of conflict research is important in order to understand events as cultural phenomena: conflict repertoires do not change over long-term historical time. As the Peasants' War and other cases involving social conflict that may be characterized as historical events show, repertories of acts of resistance are capable of further generating totally new forms within the course of one and the same conflict.

What made the Peasants' War for contemporaries as well as historians stand out as a conflict was exactly the fact that the participants, during its course, varied the concept of "revolt" that denoted the structuring of resistance as it was understood at the time, more, that they eventually were able to go beyond (*sprengen*) it. They developed forms of resistance such as "revolution," "peasants' war," and conspiratorial assassination, all of which were extremely rare occurrences for rural subjects during the early modern period.[58]

The process of adopting structures in social discourse, as one may generalize these observations, may not be conceptualized as determining action. In order to recapitulate how the smaller or larger variations of protest and resistance are able to develop, the process that can be described as the adoption of structures or, according to Antony Giddens, the structuring of action, must be more precisely described.[59] What does it mean to adopt structures? How and where does it happen? How, where, and why is action structured?

Structures are adopted through the collective and rational decision-making process of the actors. The results of various recent, well-documented case studies of revolts and conflicts during the early modern period show that the behavior of peasants and rural subjects, in their political actions, was anything but "traditional" as Max Weber would have it, but in general exactly the same as that of present-day actors.[60] Similar to their economic behavior, in their

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it begins with small variations and adaptations, which in the sense of unintended results of actions bring about process-like changes.

58. See regarding the rare occurrence of conspiracies within rural resistance Andreas Suter, "Verschwörungen in der schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft der Frühen Neuzeit," *Schweizer Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 45 (1995): 330–70.

59. Pierre Bourdieu also uses the concept of structuring action, but understands it to mean something else. He holds that the structuring of action does not happen within the framework of collective action and "limited rational" decision-making processes, but within the framework of habitus acquired through socialization. In contrast to Giddens's conceptualization, that of Bourdieu does not take into account the possibility of learning processes that break open the existing structure of action and may lead to new structure.

60. See Rod Aya, *Rethinking Revolution and Collective Violence: Studies on Concept, Theory and Method* (Amsterdam, 1990), 99f., who uses the discussion of economics of the "bounded rationality" of economic subjects (inspired by Simon) for the analysis of social conflict. Independently, and methodologically even less reflective of the above, various case studies characterized peasants' and rural subjects' action in conflicts as "rational." See Andreas Suter, *"Troublen" im Fürstbistum Basel: Eine Fallstudie zum bäuerlichen Widerstand im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1985), 398f.; Werner Trossbach, *Bauernbewegungen im Wetterau-Vogelsberg-Gebiet, 1648–1806: Fallstudien zum bäuerlichen Widerstand im Alten Reich* (Darmstadt, 1985), 449f. Similar as to the subject but totally different in

political actions they followed a specific logic according to the rules of "limited rationality."[61] In other words, they knew very well that political resistance would come at great costs to them, and they decided on this step only when they could expect, with some assurance, that success would be theirs and the gain expected from their resistance would make up the cost.[62] To adopt structures therefore means that the actors translate structures into a cost/benefit calculation, where structures appear as assessments of one's own and one's foe's chances of actions and their limits. They suggested a certain course of action, or, to put it differently, they structured the actors' resistance.

The participants take very seriously the translation and assessment of structures in light of their social-cultural knowledge gained through their lives and in light of their actual experiences acquired during the progression of events over time: namely within the horizon of historical experiences that is at least partially available to them in the form of handed-down cultural lore.[63] Another

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its historical context, to wit the political actions of slaves and plantation workers, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990).

61. Giovanni Levi's basic assumption in his examination of the market pricing of rural acreage in the village of Santena holds that behind the alleged "traditional" economic outlook and economic action of peasants during the early modern period also hides a "limited rationality." See his *Le pouvoir au village* (Paris, 1989). Similar assumptions are in Ulrich Pfister, *Die Züricher Fabriques: Protoindustrielles Wachstum vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Zurich, 1992). To the fundamental ideas and new perspectives for research into rural society arising out of the above, see Andreas Suter, "Neue Forschungen und Perspektiven zur Geschichte der ländlichen Gesellschaft in der Schweiz," in *Positionen und Perspektiven zur Agrargeschichte*, ed. Werner Trossbach and Clemens Zimmermann (Stuttgart, 1998), 73–98.

62. In order to avoid misunderstandings, it should be stressed that such categories as expectations of cost, utility, and success are used in a strictly formal sense. "Limited rationality" in human action is an anthropological constant and not a phenomenon limited to the modern. Moreover, rationality, or the horizon of criteria, value, and experience, as well as the reserves of knowledge used by actors to assess cost/benefit as well as expectations regarding the success of their actions are to be seen as sociocultural constructions or translations of reality through the participants and must be empirically determined according to the context of time and action. See Rod Aya, "Making Sense of Revolutions and Collective Violence ever since Thucydides," in *Essays in Honor of J. F. Boissevain*, ed. Jojada Verrips (Amsterdam, 1994), 251–65.

63. The concepts of actual experience and sociocultural knowledge are used according to Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 356. "What we have found (in my view) lies within a missing term: 'human experience.' Men and women also return as subjects, within this term — not as autonomous subjects, 'free individuals' but as persons experiencing their determinate productive situations and relationships, as needs and interests and as antagonisms, and then 'handling' this experience within their '*consciousness*' and their '*culture*' (emphasis Thompsons', AS) in the most complex ways, and then acting upon their determinate situation in their turn." Consciousness, therefore, is understood as lived experience of a situative or biographical nature. Culture, by contrast, is understood as stable and generalized forms of lived experience. It includes an ensemble of internalized forms, attitudes, knowledge, basic understanding of right and wrong, rules of perception and thinking, which makes it possible for all of us to function as social beings, and to make ourselves understood to others as well as to understand others, and finally to be able to act within our own social setting. Historical experiences, by contrast to lived experience of the actors refers to past times and situations and are based on special means of handing down traditions that form these experiences in a particular way.

decisive factor should be mentioned: the actors are able to take part in collective learning processes through the cost/benefit calculation, and they may reach a creative understanding that they have to build new organizational and action structures to improve their chances or to remove obvious barriers that hinder their actions.[64]

The fact that, firstly, objectively describable structures in social action are present as social reality, not directly but in the form of an act of collective cultural translation and construction by the actors, and secondly, that at all times one may count on the possibility of creative learning processes, is the reason why structures really do not determine action. Rather, there always remains room for variations of the social construction of reality and therefore for variation of social action. Moreover, there remains room for innovative social action.

This is true particularly for events that go beyond the horizon of experience and expectation of both contemporaries and historians. Especially such events are accompanied to a high degree by innovative cultural learning processes. Hans Robert Jauss, therefore, rightly compares historical events to unique works of art.[65] While people in the everyday world or in most social conflicts behave like jazz musicians or actors in the tradition of "commedia dell arte," improvising on a familiar theme, in conflict situations that may be defined as historical events they create totally new roles for themselves.[66] Exactly therein lies the autonomy and individuality of events as opposed to the structural context or the limited freedom of people.

Consequently, the cardinal point of a social history of events is to describe and analyze decision-making processes and their "limited rationality" as exactly as possible. By this I mean the calculation of costs and benefits on the part of actors who participate in them, taking into account the processes of learning and deliberation, cultural translation and construction that such calculations entail. Taken together, these processes mediate between collective action on the one hand, and the objectively describable structures of economy, power and domination (*Herrschaft*), culture, and of social stratification. In this way it becomes possible to examine in a variety of conflict situations the objective structures that at once present opportunities for action and impose constraints on it, together with the many factors that influence and disrupt the construction of these objective structures as social reality — common experiences of life and history, the daily flow of events, as well as the lessons of collective learning processes.

64. See the concept and meaning of collective learning in crisis- and conflict situations in H. Siegenthaler, *Regelvertrauen, Prosperität and Krisen: Die Ungleichmässigkeit wirtschaftlicher Entwicklung als Ergebnis individuellen Handelns und sozialen Lernens* (Tübingen, 1993).
65. See Hans Robert Jauss, "Zur Analogie von historischem Werk and historischem Ereignis," in Koselleck et al., *Geschichte — Ereignis*, 535.
66. The comparison of collective actors to jazz musicians and stage actors comes from Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 390.

Admittedly, the task of converting such analytical intentions into empirical practice immediately presents the problem that not all such decision-making processes are legible in the sources, and of course we are no longer in a position to ask the participants about them after the fact. For this reason, as an alternative to the personal interview there is ultimately no other way than a labor intensive process of historical reconstruction that involves assembling, describing, and analyzing the totality of available source information — quite often consisting of only the tiniest, hidden clues — in order to piece together as exact a mosaic as one can make of decision-making processes and immediate circumstances in which they took place.

Examples of such source information include the rumors and collective anxieties that proliferated at moments of open decision-making; the rare snippets of conversations carried on in taverns, while going to church, at work, or on market-day, which reached the ears of informers and survive in their reports; verbal confrontations with the officials who recorded them; certain actions taken by the people themselves that permit us to make certain inferences about hidden motivations; statements preserved in the protocols of interrogations conducted after the fact; the contemporaneous assessments of outsiders; and, to the extent that these survive, writings produced by those involved in particular processes of learning and decision-making.

This project of historical reconstruction is made all the more difficult by the fact that the rebellious actors themselves were cognizant of the hazards their own actions involved. In the interest of self-preservation, they strove to keep themselves and their actions opaque to eyes of strangers. Their meetings, for example, were held only under conditions of strict secrecy and confidence, particularly during the early phases of a conflict. Or they consciously dispensed with all written communication — material that otherwise would have provided valuable evidence for historical analysis. As one rebellious subject described this cunning game of hide-and-seek, "the letter endures and can . . . fall into official hands. You should write down nothing." Fortunately for us, all these processes of learning and decision-making, though they originated within small and secretive circles, would eventually come into the open. The reason is simply that actors who wish to engage in a conflict collectively must, within certain limits, generate a collective assessment of the possibilities and constraints that a given situation presents and then execute any common decision to pursue a particular course of action.

This necessity also requires actors to deliberate with one another intensively during periods of decision-making. In the vast majority of cases, such interaction took the forms of verbal communication I have already mentioned, which unfortunately were recorded only in the rarest instances. Quite often, however, communication within the group and with the authorities was achieved in the

form of highly visible, symbolic, and ritual performances.[67] In sharp contrast to verbal forms of communication, the sources often describe these ritual performances very exactly. Admittedly, the task of decoding symbols and rituals that are quite foreign to us demands a large measure of contextualizing interpretation. Here too, it is necessary to analyze signs and the situations in which they emerged in all their variety, so that we may discover their full range of meanings — it is necessary, in other words, to describe them "thickly."[68]

Without the concept and methods of "thick description" it is simply impossible to recover the calculations of cost and benefit that guided action. Invoking this important catchword returns us to the perspective of the slow-motion camera, an analogy to cinematographic techniques that is based on the observations of Jacques Revel, who compared the method of "thick description" to working with a magnifying glass.[69] Methodologically, it describes a double maneuver in relation to the decisions and actions of historical actors in time and space. First, the slow-motion perspective decelerates the natural progression of time in which all events are imprisoned, so that the action unfolds more slowly before our eyes. Second, the slow-motion perspective also shortens the distance between the observer and the actions that come into his field of vision. Examined under greater magnification, the events and processes unfolding within this close-up frame appear much larger. Together, the effects of deceleration and magnification make it possible to scrutinize events more intensely, to describe them "thickly," and to explain them more precisely.

Thick description requires an investment of empirical energies so great and a weight of descriptive detail so dense that it is normally applied only to the smallest units of analysis. The special advantage of the slow-motion perspective is that it permits the application of this empirically and descriptively exhaustive procedure to large-scale units of historical analysis, even historical events as monumental as the Swiss Peasants' War. In short, it allows the application of microstructural analytic methods in macrostructural contexts. This capability derives from the fact that the slow-motion camera is always deployed in conjunction with another familiar cinematographic effect, the accelerated time that

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67. The central role of symbolic and ritual communication in political contexts generally and specifically in connection with social conflict lies in the fact that they represent an "ideal vehicle for a compelling and convincing representation of messages," as Sally F. Moore and Barbara Myerhoff emphasize; see their introduction to *Secular Ritual* (Assen, 1977), 8. Indeed, the impact and to some extent also the broadcast breadth of symbolic and ritual communication is superior to that of merely verbal or written communication; see David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, 1988).

68. On thick description see Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in his *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 3–30.

69. Jacques Revel, "L'Histoire au ras du sol," *Levi* (1989): i–xxxiii.

film–editing can produce. Because the microscopic work of thick descriptions takes up so much time and space, this method can only be applied sparingly, to carefully chosen places and moments in the broad sweep of events that made up the Swiss Peasants' War. Episodes that occurred during the periods between each local close-up, as well as concurrent events unfolding in other places, must either remain on the cutting-room floor or receive at best a very compressed treatment.

The slow-motion perspective not only solves important problems in the social history of historical events, it also raises difficult questions that every investigation of complex historical events must answer. When and where can the slow-motion camera be employed to the greatest hermeneutic effect? At one level, the answer is clear: the slow-motion camera must of course be used to examine the most important instances of collective decision-making. In view of the complexity with which events unfolded, however, it is often quite difficult to establish empirically the exact location in time of even the most important decision-making processes. In the case of the Swiss Peasants' War, two empirical observations made it easier to escape this conundrum, and these I think could also be applied in similar fashion to the analysis of other historical events.

As I have already noted, the participants in this event and the contemporaries who observed them used a wide variety of terms to describe the complex relationship between peasant action and its multiple contexts. Initially, everyone spoke of "unrest," then of a "revolt" or a "contestation" (*Span*), still later of a "revolution," and finally of a "Peasants' War" (*Purenkrieg*). In the course of my investigations, it was possible to establish empirically that these developments in terminology were not merely the reflection of some lofty, abstract discourse, removed from practical realities. Rather, each of these conceptual shifts corresponded precisely to the specific qualities of particular resistance practices. Each new term came into use soon after a new pattern of resistance emerged; moreover, the rebels inaugurated each qualitative transformation of collective action with a marked increase in the intensity of ritual and symbolic performances. In what follows I refer to these transformations as "border crossings."[70]

With the aid of these observations it becomes possible to fix the chronology of collective decision-making processes and to identify precisely the moments during the Peasants' War that must be decelerated, investigated in depth, and given a "thick description." During the high times of conflict no less than in everyday life, symbolic and ritual performances served to augment decision-

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70. The idea of "border crossing" derives from Turner's concept of liminal periods that subdivide social dramas into individual act. See Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (Manchester, 1957); and his "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," in his *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, 1967), 93–111.

making processes in promoting the formation of collective understandings.[71] This in turn means that crucial decision-making processes must have occurred in tandem with an intensification of ritual and symbolic performances shortly before new concepts entered the sociopolitical vocabulary. Having determined the timing of these transformations, it is also possible to divide the natural chronology of the Peasants' War into "Acts" of a "social drama." The substance of each act is a tragic narrative in which the rebels, as heroes of the piece, gradually remove all existing behavioral constraints on their resistance activity, only to reimpose them under harsh repression in the final act. In this way, each act can also be understood as a decision-making process, in which historical actors enabled themselves to traverse the accustomed "borders" that defined and limited resistance in order to create new and different forms of collective action.

The task of selecting geographical localities for study under a slow-motion lens presents a further difficulty, for it is impossible to analyze in such depth all the sites where important border crossings took place. It is well known that the Swiss Peasants' War affected a very large territory and involved a host of collective actors. On the rebels' side, the most important of these collectivities were subject populations of Lucerne, Berne, Basel, and Solothurn, each of which confronted a primary opponent in the civic authorities that ruled from the administrative seat of each canton. As the conflict developed, each of these collective actors accomplished decisive and fundamentally similar "border crossings," from the everyday politics all the way to revolution. In a few cases, peasants achieved a border crossing without guidance, although in the majority of cases, the crucial influences came from regions that had already rebelled.

The logical solution, then, was to select those localities and collective actors that took the lead in the collective decision-making processes specific to each successive act in the social drama. In each of its phases, the first decisive escalation created important new conditions for rebels in other cantons; one can demonstrate empirically that the latter would have acted differently without these outside influences. It makes sense, therefore, to aim the slow-motion camera at the collective actor whose influence on decision-making was strongest. Throughout the Swiss Peasants' War, the most influential collective actor was the population resident in the incorporated valley of Entlebuch, located within the territory subject to the city of Lucerne. They were the leading dramatis personae of the Swiss Peasants' War, whom Ludwig Hartmann, the civic scribe of Lucerne, described with some justice as "the root of all evil." The

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71. The concept of "rites de passage" developed by Arnold van Gennep shows that border crossings were occasions of intensified ritual and symbolic communication not only during periods of social conflict but in daily life as well. See his *Manuel de folklore français contemporain* (Paris, 1943). That said, border crossings in situations of social conflict always demand the creative appropriation of existing symbols and rituals that are often enmeshed with the exercise of power and domination; see Suter, *Bauernkrieg*, Part I, chap. 2.1 and Part II, chap. 3.1.

fretful scribe added that they all possessed "equally an inherited rebellious temperament" (*ihnen gleichsam angeborenes rebellisches Gemüet*).

Theoretical and methodological considerations find their echo in the tone and structure of representation; they can be heard in the particular manner in which one tells a story. The same holds for my social history of the Swiss Peasants' War. It consists of two parts, each of equal weight, each with a fundamentally distinct approach to the passage of time. In the first part, the Peasants' War is examined from the perspective of the slow-motion camera. The collective decision-making processes that accompanied and facilitated each crucial border crossing are described in a sequence of five in-depth analyses. These correspond to five individual acts of a "social drama," each characterized by a qualitatively distinct form of resistance activity. The first act portrays the border crossing from everyday life to a state of "unrest"; the second act describes the passage from unrest to revolt; the third from revolt to revolution; the fourth from the revolutionary situation to peasant war (*Bauernkrieg*); and the fifth, finally, the passage from peasant war to assassination. Building on the findings contained in part one, a second segment examines the Swiss Peasants' War from the vantage of "social time" and the *longue durée*. Through their calculation of costs and benefits, historical actors conveyed their awareness of structures as notions of opportunity and constraint. In so doing, the actors themselves identified the structures and processes that in fact motivated collective action most powerfully. Here, then, the objects of analysis are social, political, and cultural structures and processes, as the historical actors conceived of them, as well as the structural consequences of the Peasants' War itself.

(4) Empirical Results: The Peasants' War as a Cultural Phenomenon

Social history has found it difficult to produce explanations for the surprising quality of some events and for the power of historical events to change structures. Should we therefore return to the familiar explanations of *histoire événementielle* or look for explanations in the genius and the forcefulness of outstanding "great men" or revolutionary avant-gardes, able to preserve their freedom and their influence as heroic active agents vis-à-vis the overwhelming force of structures and structural processes? Or (as has often been maintained in the practice of *histoire événementielle*) does the actual occurrence of historical events rest in the end on mere coincidence, which eludes further explanation? Put another way: is our experience of the surprising and unpredictable quality of the historical event of 1989 no more than an illusion resulting from our lack of historical distance from what happened, an illusion that will dissolve with the passage of time? Will we succeed eventually in connecting the great event of 1989 with its structural context through the help of accepted social historical

modes of explanation, and comprehending it as a train of events determined by structures and structural processes?

Since an investigation of the Swiss Peasants' War need not cope with the difficulty of absent temporal distance, it offers better opportunities for answering such questions. If one believes the accounts of contemporary chroniclers and some later historians, outstanding individuals or revolutionary avant-gardes were indeed responsible for causing this historical event to take place. Because of their decisiveness and forcefulness they exercised a shaping influence on the course of the conflict and brought about the Peasants' War in its surprising uniqueness. A powerful example for this view appears in a contemporary illustration of the military encounter at Mellingen. The image shows General Werdmüller from Zurich in the lordly pose of a victor, suggesting to the viewer through a variety of visual elements that he had single-handedly won the decisive battle with his supposedly brave and boldly guided campaign, in the process deciding the entire conflict for the benefit of the authorities. Close examination of the collective process of decision-making by means of the extremely detailed "slow-motion perspective," however, was unable to document this or many other stories. In every case the evidence consisted entirely of mere anecdotes, either invented for the later glory of those they dignified, or resulting from a mode of thought which — in order to confirm the analyst's own future-oriented socialistic hopes — assessed the participants' freedom of action to be much greater than a close investigation of the specific moments of decision or action actually reveals.

Was the Peasants' War as a historical event accordingly the result of historical coincidence, in the face of which the accepted methods of the social historian must surrender? The answer is negative. An investigation of the processes of collective decision-making that allowed the boundaries of political routine to be broken, leading to a surprising revolutionary situation and an equally surprising war and tyrannicide, brings to light a whole series of important factors; these were in fact determined to a large extent by structural givens and processes, which can be recognized through the perspectives of social time and the *longue durée* in the spheres of economics, dominion, and culture. In the course of the early seventeenth century these factors led to worsening circumstances in various spheres of society, notably in how the population, agricultural resources, state finances and tax collection mechanisms, and legal and political institutions developed. In the wake of the extremely serious agrarian depression of the 1640s that followed the boom of the Thirty Years' War, these burdens intensified into an economic, social, and political crisis that formed the social opening and frame for the Peasants' War.

Does this mean that the Peasants' War as event was determined by structural givens and processes after all? Not in the slightest. A mode of thought operating by means of structural connections and processes comes up short if one's

goal is to understand the original tactical modes of operation and the revolutionary programmatic goals of the Peasants' War movement, which were of dominating importance for the actual concrete course of events, as collective cultural achievements of the participants. As such they were not at all contained within the structural preconditions, and it was these achievements that in the end resulted in the decisive difference between 1653 and earlier revolts.

As the "slow-motion perspective" reveals, the actors in the foreground of the conflict were not in fact confronted with an unlimited number of interpretations of the crisis, which we could describe exactly with the objectifying methods of social history. Equally, there was also not only one possible interpretation; above all, the collective experience of crisis possessed by the participants did not prescribe a necessary tactical and programmatic pathway that could have led them out of a situation that they perceived as hopeless. Rather, both the political tactics and the program of the Peasants' War movement are better seen as a cultural product of the actors engaged in the conflict, which one might characterize as a process of collective learning. The fact that the Peasants' War was not an isolated conflict, but rather the high point of an actual wave of conflicts, was decisive in bringing about such a learning process. Already in 1629–1636, 1640 and 1645 there had been smaller revolts in the areas that would become the centers of the Peasants' War.

When conflict broke out again in 1653, therefore, various leaders as well as many ordinary rebels already had at their disposal a broad and demonstrable body of experience about open political resistance, anchored in their own biographies. No fewer than ten persons are known to have taken a leading role both in the earlier revolts mentioned above and in the Peasants' War.[72] One of them had even been condemned to death in his youth, and owed his survival exclusively to an act of mercy on the part of the authorities. In 1653 he identified this treatment by the official justice of his lords, which he perceived as unjust, as his most important motive for taking part in the Peasants' War. Playing on his dishonoring condemnation twenty-eight years earlier, he emphasized that he did not want to be "a bought man" (*ein geschenkter man*).

Another factor was just as important as the experience of oppression, something referred to by the expression "heads hewn off" in the following passage. I mean the important experience of political helplessness and the lack of success through earlier revolts. As one of the most important documents about the entire Peasants' War movement describes it, the subjects had

> often and repeatedly complained to our gracious lords of the City of Lucerne [about the] new impositions, burdens and unfitting punishments. Not only did we not achieve assistance in helping us to obtain our rights, but just as soon one came and complained, one was brushed off with sharp words and

72. Ibid., Part 2, chap. 3.1.

coercion (mit scharfen Worten und Zwingen), and often with prideful speeches and disrespectful words. If one let oneself be sent away in this fashion, it all came to nothing; if not, and if one persisted in one's demands, they threatened to have our heads hewn off (*Kopfabhauen*) or with other punishments, so that no one was able to protest or speak his mind.

It was from this experience of political powerlessness and defeat in earlier revolts that the rebels of 1653 drew fundamental conclusions when they once again found themselves confronted with a deep crisis that could not be solved with the received political methods. The most important thing they had learned was that success in this new conflict was possible only under one condition. The rebels needed to reach for more effective means than the supplications and requests, than the passive resistance that had been employed in earlier unrest and rebellions. In the words of the Lucerne articles of alliance, they finally needed to "resist with appropriate means and act seriously."

The expression "appropriate means" meant nothing other than the organized consolidation of the rebellious subjects, who had up to that point risen up against the authorities individually and in isolation, as is clear from the subsequent passage in the Lucerne articles of alliance:

> And since we are well aware that they will never lightly permit and allow this, therefore the . . . districts have concluded that it is useful and just that they should ally themselves with one another on account of this cause, and swear an oath together, since whenever a single district has previously asked and demanded from our magistrates, that their new burdens should be graciously removed, this request (as noted above) was often and regularly denied and rejected. Since now all ten districts will be able to appear more easily and more energetically before the magistrates, . . . we therefore wish to hold together from now for eternity with our bodies and honor, with our goods and our blood . . .

In addition to the social knowledge acquired in connection with earlier revolts, the experiences born out of the temporal process of the conflict itself were also significant. This was particularly true for the Peasants' War because these differed in significant qualitative ways from earlier experiences of conflict, largely because the tactical innovation of a broadly drawn confederative organization was actually carried out. The initially isolated and individually rebelling subjects of the Swiss city-cantons Lucerne, Berne, Basel, and Solothurn succeeded in organizing themselves into a common Swiss league. According to the stated intention of its founders, this league was intended to include *all* Swiss subjects in the near future.

Even in its incomplete form, however, this league of subjects was a thoroughly effective instrument that expanded the political negotiating power and the military enforcing power of the Peasants' War movement to a degree not otherwise observed in the entire history of Swiss rebellions and conflicts. The

extremely strong counter-power that the rebels were able to organize also had fundamental consequences for the subsequent course of the conflict. In the beginning, it made a simple resolution of the conflict through the granting of a few small concessions impossible, while later on it also brought about the failure of a large-scale military effort on the part of the Swiss authorities. In the end, it caused the hidden loci of conflict and tension within the political system of the old Confederation to be revealed.

Under the enormous burdens of this conflict, which harshly tested existing loyalties between social groups and individual cantons, latent conflicts between the citizens and the ruling patricians in the cities, born out of their opposed social, political, and economic interests, were also transformed into open social conflicts. The underprivileged citizens saw in the Peasants' War a promising opportunity for them to act against the weakened patrician councils, even as it became evident that long-standing constitutional tensions between the rural and urban cantons, and between those of Catholic and Reformed religious adherence, had severely limited the capacity of the Diet — the only common political institution of the thirteen Swiss cantons — to act.[73]

These various observations can be generalized by stating that as a consequence of the new tactical procedures and the heightened oppositional pressure caused by the Peasants' War movement, different structural characteristics of the political system became recognizable than had been visible in everyday life or during earlier conflicts. This recognition in turn enabled the rural subject population to experience successes that shaped their understanding, and encouraged in them a previously unknown conviction of their own strength. As one contemporary observer put it, the failed military efforts of the Swiss authorities "heartened" (ein Herz gemacht) the subjects and strengthened their confidence in their own abilities in a lasting way. Together, their new way of seeing things and their new confidence led to a fundamentally novel estimation of the entire field of conflict and of the existing limits on and opportunities for action.

This change is revealed with particular clarity by the fact that as the conflict went on, the rebels dropped their initially very limited economic demands. Aware of their own successes and strengths, they began to issue ever more expansive, indeed genuinely system-challenging or revolutionary political demands. One of the Lucerne rebels swept their original and very modest list of demands from the table with the comment, this first formulation "meant nothing, they probably wanted to make other demands." He justified his comment by arguing that they could safely speak up much more energetically and

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73. This was most evident in the first poorly coordinated joint military action that the authorities of the thirteen cantons undertook, which failed utterly and thus inordinately strengthened the self-consciousness of the rebels. See the citation below.

pose more serious requests now that they had successfully established their league. "When they [the peasants] put their heads together," the authorities "no longer [could] deny them anything." Another peasant chimed in immediately with the argument that the cause of the peasants was largely won with the establishment of their league, so that they now "had the cat pretty much in the bag" (allbereit die Khatz im Sack haben).

Along with the social knowledge acquired in the course of their own lives and the specific new experiences accumulated during the conflict, a third form of experience played a further central role in causing the Peasants' War to take place as a historical event. Here I am referring to the remembered experience that the rebels had about earlier historical conflicts. These traditional bodies of experience became particularly important when, as a result of the revolutionary nature of its demands, the conflict moved in the direction of a military confrontation. An analysis of this decisive phase raises an explanatory problem: why were rebels still willing to risk crossing the boundary to open warfare at this point? The balance of power had by this point shifted once again to their disadvantage, and two preconditions that the rebels had previously viewed as important for a military success against the city-cantons had not, against all hope, come about. First of all, the extension of the league organization to the entire Swiss Confederation had failed; secondly, urban internal conflicts had remained limited to Lucerne, against the expectations of the rebels, and even there they had been resolved shortly before the outbreak of hostilities by major concessions to the citizen opposition.

Why then did the rebels nevertheless risk a military confrontation, and for what reasons were these new, disappointing experiences of conflict not taken seriously and integrated into their calculations, in contrast to their experiences of success earlier on? Where did the specific logic and rationality lie at the moment of the decision to go to war? The answer lies in the fact that the rebels had begun to interpret their actual situation and their experience of it in terms of a horizon formed by the story of the founding and liberation of the Swiss Confederation, that is in light of the tale — popular in most of the rebellious areas — of the supposed victory of the "Old Confederates" and William Tell against the tyrannical Habsburgs.

Numerous passages in the sources document that the peasants increasingly connected their actual conflict with their own ruling authorities with the historical conflict that had taken place between the Swiss confederates and the Habsburgs during the fifteenth century. Things now were just as bad, or even worse, as back then: the subjects now had to endure the arbitrary domination of the towns, which "did not happen in William Tell's times." In keeping with this historical equation, the rebels constructed an understanding of the present and of the ruling authorities that replicated descriptions of the tyrannical dominion of the Habsburg bailiffs in great detail. Anecdotes about the bailiffs

that included well-known motifs such as the theft of cattle, arbitrary dispensation of justice, and the rape of women became the subjects of a new "Song of Tell" and of oral narratives. "If a bailiff or noble sleeps with the wife of a peasant man," one Lucerne subject told his audience, no court and no law in these days could protect the subjects from such abuse.

This unification of past and present had further consequences because it became an important source of the movement's revolutionary confidence in its own victory. According to an abundantly documented view, earlier revolts had failed only because the peasants then had "surely lacked a William Tell" or had not followed his example.[74] Such an explanation of earlier defeats naturally led to the opposite conclusion as well, provided only that one followed the historical example of William Tell and the early confederates with sufficient accuracy.

It was just this prerequisite that the Peasants' War movement fulfilled with great precision according to the way the participants understood themselves, as they made clear in various ways. Frequently they emphasized that the peasant leagues of 1653 were modeled on the example of the "ancient confederates" (uralte Eydtgnossen), and had been sworn in the same "upright, patriotic and old Confederal trust" (eydtgnössischen glaubens) as their ancestors had done. Even the military regulations that the Peasants' War movement drafted for itself were understood as replicating medieval military regulations as they had been laid out in the *Sempacherbrief* of 1393. Finally, the attack by three Lucerne subjects dressed as "Tells" against a high-ranking delegation from the city's council imitated to the last detail William Tell's assassination of the Habsburg bailiff Gessler, as it was described in the history of the founding and liberation of the Swiss Confederation. When one of the assassins saw that he had hit his target, the protocol of the investigation reports that he had loudly "boasted that he had carried out Tell's shot."

Through such perspectival expansion of their range of experience the actors relativized the actual experiences that they had acquired during the course of the uprising, and thus took the deterioration of the balance of power that had intervened less seriously than they should have. Within this mental range of vision, moreover, the movement came to expect that they could still win the war against the cities.[75] Military defeat, however, brutally destroyed this certainty of victory, nor could the defeat be overcome, as the history of Swiss liberation suggested, through a successful assassination. The tyrannicides' historically

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74. This evidence comes from a revolt in 1570. Similar, in fact practically identical statements may be found in several conflicts before the Peasants' War of 1653 as well as in the Peasants' War itself. See Suter, *Bauernkrieg*, Part II, chap. 3.3.

75. On the concepts "range of experience" (*Erfahrungsraum*) and "horizon of expectations" (*Erwartungshorizont*) see Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunf: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), 349–74.

founded expectation that their successful attack would "bring about great changes" was not fulfilled.

What the rebels of 1653 did not and could not know before their military defeat and before the unavailing assassinations was the fact that the supposedly true historical experiences conveyed by the history of Swiss liberation were actually highly fictional in character, and indeed had to be fictional because of the conditions attending their long oral transmission. They had relied on an artfully dramatized history, which provided them with entirely imprecise historical experiences and incomplete information about the historical events and conflicts between the Swiss and the empire in the late Middle Ages.

Since 1653, historical research has systematically deconstructed the narrative of Switzerland's foundation. We now know that William Tell never existed, and that the separation of the Swiss Confederation from the empire in no way resulted from his bold tyrannicide, as the tradition had maintained. Such a story was therefore a truly inappropriate informational foundation for making decisions suited to the rebels' actual situation. As a result, the peasants' expansion of their horizon of experience through Swiss history led to a tragic error that no small number of rebels paid for with their lives.

Beyond such results for those directly involved, this error once again makes clearly visible the extent to which the Peasants' War represented a cultural phenomenon. Together with the experiences of earlier uprisings and with processes of learning that developed during the course of the conflict, the peasants' confidence in victory and their assessment of the consequences of tyrannicide, based on a horizon formed by the history of Swiss liberation, decisively contributed to collective decisions and collective action that transcended structural preconditions. They were after a fashion cultural building blocks that the actors in this conflict used to construct their cultural reality. Such intellectual "bricolage" on the part of the actors engaged in this conflict made opaque the difference between objective structures, structural processes, and the contents of collective experience contained in them, the momentary experiences of the conflict, processes of learning, and remembered experiences of conflict, all in favor of a fundamentally unpredictable and nondeterminate construction of their own world and the opportunities for and constraints on action it contained.[76]

For this reason, the actors in the Peasants' War did not simply reproduce actions from the well-known repertoire of peasant resistance, but rather created themselves in the literal sense in their roles as revolutionaries. If a French historian once claimed that the peasants and rural subjects in France had never

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76. On the concept of "intellectual bricolage" see Claude Levi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris, 1962), 26–33; and Guy Marchal, "Das 'Schweizeralpenland': Eine imagologische Bastelei," in *Erfundene Schweiz, Konstruktionen nationaler Identität*, ed. idem (Zurich, 1992), 37–49.

behaved in a revolutionary fashion because they continued to believe without interruption in the holiness and inviolability of their kings, then we can argue for the Peasants' War that these peasants actually did dare a revolution because they believed in the history of their ancestors' successful struggle against tyranny.[77] And because they dared to carry out a revolution, and because they resisted with notable intensity, their actions possessed long-lasting consequences despite their defeat. The powerful resistance of the rural subjects in the Peasants' War was an important reason for the failure of absolutism to establish itself in Switzerland from the second half of the seventeenth century until the end of the Ancien Régime.

III

How should the important differences between Rebel's theoretical and methodological approach and my study of the Peasants' War be characterized? In my judgment the difference lies in the way that we conceptualize the relationship between structure and event or structure and action by individual actors, and how much attention we correspondingly attribute to the role of culture in the context of human behavior.

Rebel conceptualizes this relationship in reliance on Louis Althusser, who developed an extremely structural and determinist version of Marxism in France in the 1960s, together with Étienne Balibar, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and others.[78] In Althusser's essay cited by Rebel (note 8) we find the following train of argument. Althusser begins by establishing that the "'problem'of the 'role of the individual in history'" rests on a fallacy, to which historians are unfortunately all too vulnerable.[79] The fallacy rests in the false assumption that structure and action, structure and individual need to be distinguished from each other at all. Such deceptive distinctions nevertheless point to a genuine problem, namely to "the problem of the concept of *the historical forms of existence of individuality* [Althusser's emphasis]."[80] Once the issue had been redefined in this way, it can be answered in the following fashion: "*Capital* [Althusser's emphasis] gives us the principles necessary for the posing of this problem. It defines for the capitalist mode of production the different forms of individuality required and produced by that mode according to

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77. Hugues Neveux, "Die ideologische Dimension der französischen Bauernaufstände im 17. Jahrhundert," *Historische Zeitschrift* 238 (1984): 265–85, esp. 265ff.

78. Cf. François Dosse, *Geschichte des Strukturalismus*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1996, originally Paris, 1991), esp. 425ff. For a critique of Althusser, see e.g., Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory, 193ff.*

79. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London, 1970 [Paris, 1968]), 111.

80. Ibid.

functions, of which the individuals are 'supports,' in the division of labour, in the different 'levels' of the structure."[81]

Althusser and Rebel thus define individuals and actors as though they were wholly determined through economic structures, or as though they acted exclusively as a function of such structures. Strictly speaking, individuals and individual action do not even exist; both exist only in the sense of carriers of functions and interests, which are themselves predetermined through capitalist or other modes of production. What is true for everyday life, moreover, should also be valid for conflicts and for the actors involved in social movements. This is exactly the position that Jacques Lacan maintained in a noteworthy presentation he made on 22 February 1969 to the "Société française de philosophie." There he responded to the creative and utopian slogan of the 1968 movement, that it was indeed humans and not structures that could be seen out on the streets, with the following sentence: "If the events of May 1968 prove anything," so Lacan, "then it is exactly the going-onto-the-streets of structures!"[82]

My investigation of the Peasants' War, on the contrary, grows precisely out of the assumption that the relationship between structure and action or between structure and event can *not* be conceptualized as an unambiguously determined relationship, such as Althusser and Rebel postulate, as do also some non-Marxist sociologies such as the structural-functional approaches in the tradition of Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons or the structuralist approach in the most recent version of Pierre Bourdieu's work. If nothing more is at stake than describing and explaining the repertoires of action in everyday life or in conflict, all of these conceptual models may represent a heuristically useful simplification, but the assumption of any deterministic relationship between action and structure fails as soon as one's goal is to investigate historical events. The possibility that actors in events are capable of breaking through patterns of behavior points exactly toward the conclusion that in their actions, they do *not* always and routinely carry out the preexisting "interests" and "functions" that are determined through their class situation and through the relations of production, nor do they actualize the "norms of the social system" that are determined through cultural values and internalized through the personality system. Nor do they merely follow the rules of a deeper "cultural grammar" or of a "code," nor do they merely pursue goals for their action that are preselected by their "Habitus."

Rather, the results and sources presented in the second part of my answer to Rebel speak strongly for the conclusion that the process by which structures are appropriated and translated into calculations of action and decision about the opportunities for and constraints on action can be a highly creative and

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81. Ibid., 112.
82. Cited from Dosse, *Geschichte des Strukturalismus*, 1:152.

innovative one, under the right circumstances. This conclusion applies with particular force to historical events, which one could thus also describe as cultural creations of the participating actors. Historical events are creative and innovative in the sense, first of all, that the participants can fundamentally change how the translation of structures into opportunities for and constraints on action takes place, through the reflexive analysis of their situational, biographical, or historical experiences. Secondly, they are creative and innovative in that the participating actors are also able to construct new, initially labile structures of action as the result of reflexive processes of learning; these fundamentally change the opportunities for and constraints on action that are recognizable at the beginning of a historical event. As a result forms of action become possible that genuinely transcend existing repertoires, so that in the Peasants' War, "transgressions and extremities become possible, that we could not have imagined," to express the same idea in the startled words of the Lucerne magistrates.

Social historians can regain an understanding of the openness of historical processes only if they investigate such achievements of cultural creativity. This does not require that they relinquish the attempt to explain what happened historically, but rather makes possible a much higher degree of complexity. It is essential for this purpose that received procedures for the analysis of structural processes be broadened. Only through the application of culturalist and anthropological approaches will it be possible to reconstruct the meaning and interpretation that historical actors themselves attributed to their world and the possibilities for action embedded in it, thus adding perspective to and simultaneously critiquing the world that structuralists understand as a system of structures. Anyone who investigates human action by trusting exclusively in the received methods of social history neglects the subjective mode of perception of the actors themselves. But equally, anyone who investigates human action by trusting exclusively in cultural approaches will blindly believe everything that "native" actors tell him. Today we can no longer debate about privileging one of these two paths as sovereign, but must rather attempt to follow both of them in the sense of a "double hermeneutic" (Antony Giddens). Despite all the controversy, this is the consensus reached by the theoretical discussions of the last ten or fifteen years, which simultaneously represents a rediscovery of the older achievements of the cultural sciences.[83] He who will not recognize it is digging himself deeper into the positions of the past.

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83. For a full discussion of this theoretical debate, see Andreas Suter and Manfred Hettling, eds., *Struktur und Ereignis*, Special Issue of *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (Göttingen, 2001).