

Leaders Make Events or Events Make Leaders: From Institutionalism, Agentism And Contingencism Analysis

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Abstract

Do leaders make events or do events make leaders? The meaning of the above question depends on a definition of 'events'. On one hand, if viewing historical events as rooted in the existing conditions of sociopolitical institutions, then the above question is one concerning the relationship between individual agency and institutional structure in history. Its underpinning question is: what are the basic dynamics of historical happenings? If one believes that leaders always make events, he/she is placing agency over structure in historical explanations. History for him/her is a history of actions by historical agents. On the contrary, a believer of events over leaders would suggest that structural factors are rather more fundamental. History in this sense is regarded as – borrowing a term from William H. Sewell Jr. – 'eventful'. To draw the distinction clearer, I shall use an analogy to illustrate these two conceptions of history. Consider the cliché of a 'river of history'. The above controversy is about whether the currents – historical agents and the intertwining chains of their actions – shape the landscape of the valley, or the landscape of the valley determine the course of individual currents. On the other hand, if historical events are considered as by nature contingent and emerged – as held by David Hume the historian-philosopher – then the above question is essentially questioning about another relationship: that between the human capacity of shaping history and the inner contingency of historical happenings.

Keywords

Leaders; Event; Institutionalism; Agentism; Contingencism.

1. INTRODUCTION

These two different understandings of the above question are nevertheless not completely indifference to each other. To make it clear, I suggest distinguishing between three conceptions of historical dynamics: (a) institutionalism [8], holding that long established institutions are the overarching driving force in history, (b) agentism, holding that human agency is the overarching driving force in history, and (c) contingencism, holding that the natural contingency of events is the overarching driving force in history. Thus what the first view of the above question shows is controversy between conceptions (a) and (b), whilst the second shows that between conceptions (b) and (c). Institutionalism and agentism argues together – though from radically different understandings of 'events' – for the belief that 'events make leaders', whilst agentism argues for the belief that 'leaders make events'.

A clarification as above has helped us reconstruct the original question into an evaluation of, as well as a comparison between the three conceptions of historical dynamics, which constitute the remaining tasks for me in this essay. My approach to this problem is not empiricist – in other words, I do not intend to apply the 'covering-law' model, arguing that a certain understanding

is better than the others because it can explain the most historical facts – for it is logically insufficient to judge the truth value of either answer to a question as such by listing instances. I therefore treat it rather as a fundamental problem in the philosophy of history and aim to provide my answer via theoretical argumentation.

2. INSTITUTIONALISM ANALYSIS, CONTINGENCISM ANALYSIS AND AGENTISM ANALYSIS

2.1. Institutionalism Analysis

I shall begin with institutionalism. An institutionalist tends to provide sometimes-structuralist analysis of a historical event as shaped within and by its sociopolitical contexts. In its radical sense, it can be formulated as certain versions of determinism, claiming that historical events are not only rooted in, but even determined by and can be reduced to its sociopolitical milieu. The materialist historical explanation of Karl Marx and some of his followers, for instance, claims that the ‘superstructure’ of a society, which includes its sociopolitical institutions, is predominated by its ‘substructure’ or ‘base’, i.e. the forces and relations of production. Marx’s essay, *Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon* (1852), provides a institutionalist case study precisely in this sense, demonstrating ‘how the class struggle in France created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero’s part’ .[5] For Marx, even Napoleon, a political leader with seemingly amongst the strongest individual agency not only in his own day but in the history of modern Europe, is not deciding his assumption of dictatorial powers on his own. The real driving force is rather the invisible but fundamental socioeconomical ‘basis’ underpinning the historical event. One may as well consider the Hegelian philosophy of history and the Whig interpretation of history [1] as other variants of institutionalism. Crucial to all these conceptions of historical dynamics is the idea that events as vehicles of institutional transformation occupies the more central role than individual agents – no matter he/she is a Napoleon or a Menocchio [2]– in historical explanation.

2.2. Contingencism Analysis

As the other conception supporting the ‘eventful’ history, contingencism is based on the premise that events are nothing more than contingent happenings. The origin of this contingency, however, is open to various interpretations. I take Hume as my example here. In his *Treatise*, Hume argues that

[...] the supposition, that the future resembles the past, is not founded on arguments of any kind, but is deriv’d entirely from habit, by which we are determin’d to expect for the future the same train of objects, to which we have been accustom’d. This habit or determination to transfer the past to the future is full and perfect; and consequently the first impulse of the imagination in this species of reasoning is endow’d with the same qualities. [3]

A perceived resemblance between the future and the past is thus the very cornerstone of any empirical knowledge. To Hume, the same is true of historical knowledge. In any attempt of writing histories, the ‘connexion of contiguity in time or space’ functions as the determinative factor for the inclusion or exclusion of elements in the full set of events:

An annalist or historian who should undertake to write the history of Europe during any century, would be influenced by the connexion of contiguity in time and place. All events, which happen in that portion of space, and period of time, are comprehended in his design, tho’ in other respects different and unconnected. They have still a species of unity, amidst all their diversity. [4]

Thanks to the connexion of contiguity, an annalist or historian may get a ‘unity’ of events for certain historical spacetime – but nothing further, for all events are still ‘in other respects

different and unconnected'. The above attribution to habit implies that empirical knowledge, with its laden supposition about resemblance in time, constitutes a typical instance of causal relations which, according to the distinction known as 'Hume's Fork', falls into the category of 'Relation of Ideas' rather than that of 'Matters of Fact'. Thus by no means is historical knowledge any production of reason, but that of habitus a posteriori. A historical event itself is contingent by nature, and any human sensation of causation is essentially nothing more than a psychological phenomenon. History in this sense is a sequence of contingent events, and human actions are reactions to those emerged happenings.

Summarising my analysis so far, conceptions (a) and (c), though arguing from different perspectives, both support the view that 'events make leaders'. But it is worth emphasising once again that the further implications of the two are radically different. Whilst institutionalism embodies a dangerous tendency of falling into determinism or even teleology, contingencism since Hume has always found it difficult to explain the psychological origin of causality. I shall now turn to agentism and try to show that it does better job in solving both problems.

2.3. Agentism Analysis

The first and foremost difference between agentism and the above two conceptions lies in how they theorise human actions in history. Institutionalism and contingencism share the same idea that any single action is essentially a reaction to certain events. Agentism, on the contrary, attributes an action primarily to its subject. Any single action is essentially a subjective activity to fulfill certain motives of an agent. Such an interpretation may therefore well avoid the danger of determinism or teleology. When it comes to causality, agentism also confirms better with our intuition that historical events are immediate effects of individual actions. The problem for an agentism is rather one of degree: to what extent can we / should we say that events are shaped by actions? Are not there grand sociopolitical structures that seem to be unshakable by a single agent? Moreover – though seemingly to be a bit begging the question – what if the 'leader' we are talking about belongs to the 'subaltern', and may never become as influential as a political leader like Napoleon?

3. CONCLUSION

My answer to these challenges is that to believe in agentism does not necessarily means to undermine the power of sociopolitical institutions. It rather urges us to reconsider those institutions in terms of their production (and reproduction). Institutions do not mushroom from nowhere, but are established through processes of historical development and defacto result from past actions. A Marxist 'base' is based on the false ontology that as if the 'forces and relations of production' are real substances independent from individual human agents. It is something derived from the Hegelian myth of 'Geistes'. An event in the Humean sense embodies a similar misunderstanding that human experience is something between the subject-object relation, whilst agentism tends to view it as intersubjective. Once we turn to consider institutional structures as effects of past actions as well, the dichotomy between agency and structure is revealed to be a misleading illusion. And this is precisely where the true meaning of 'leaders make events' lies. It does not imply that every 'leader' in history always has the free power to control his/her fate and to change the course of relevant events. What it suggests is that events are not to be alienised as emerged phenomena that are in tension with individual actions. Our history is a fabric where actions interweave with each other, a network made up of active 'leaders' creating and recreating 'events'.

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- [6] Sewall JR. &William H.: *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (University of Chicago Press, IL 2005)
- [7] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Terry Pinkard (CUP, Cambridge 2017)
- [8] In my usage, the term is intended to have a meaning that is slightly broader than as accepted amongst historical sociologists when they talk about the school of 'historical institutionalism'.