

## **Between structural breakdown and crisis action: Interpretation in the Whiskey Rebellion and the Salem Witch Trials<sup>1</sup>**

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When the governing structures of society break down for a certain number of its participants, the institutional guides for action that have existed become degraded or contradictory to the point that even everyday behavior becomes uncertain. Whatever the social situation that precedes such a breakdown—a highly differentiated institutional arrangement that sorts the life of millions into different zones of activity, or a smaller, more cohesive and undifferentiated collective unit—when degradation proceeds far enough, or enough external shocks disrupt habit, or both, a space of possibility emerges. There begins to exist an inchoate feeling, even among well-situated elites, that something akin to a crisis has arrived. But this feeling has to be given focus and meaning. The purpose of this paper is to explore the process whereby that focus and meaning is

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developed; and thereby to theorize how the meaningful grounds for action under conditions of uncertainty come into being.

However, my subject is not crisis in general, though I hope that the following text can be useful to the social theory of crisis. Rather, I note that some crises are “political.” What counts as a political crisis would serve well as the subject for a paper in its own right, but herein I take political crises to be a subset of social crises, in the sense that those crises in which institutional degradation includes open challenges to sovereignty and the monopoly over the legitimate use of violence can be classified as political. In a political crisis, the essential capacity of states and state-like organizations to enforce the law is rendered doubtful in the breakdown.<sup>2</sup> However, what happens to and with the breakdown of political order is precisely what I propose to examine: some of the variation in how political crises develop, I will argue, concerns how they are interpreted by the actors involved in them. Stated baldly, this is perhaps somewhat obvious. But how this is the case, and the specific intellectual leverage that knowledge of such interpretations provides us as investigators, is less clear in current scholarship. In what follows, then, I propose that a theoretical account of the interpretation of political crisis can serve as a “missing link” in the field of comparative-historical sociology, which tends to counterpose structural breakdown and crisis action, with insufficient attention to the bridge between them.

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<sup>2</sup> This is close to what Charles Tilly designates “revolutionary situations,” in which contenders and citizens committed to them are insufficiently suppressed by rulers, for a time. Tilly notes that “larger revolutions contain not one but a succession of revolutionary situations.” Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1492-1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 10-11. See also Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

## Structure and Crisis: Mirrors in Social Theory

It is an old conceit to understand social theory as a dialogue between opposing sides, but it is perhaps not unreasonable to characterize the theoretical development of comparative-historical sociology in this manner, at least when it comes to thinking about political crisis. The foundational texts for the subdiscipline—written by Immanuel Wallerstein, Theda Skocpol, and Charles Tilly, among others, and drawing inspiration from the analysis of dictatorship and democracy written by Barrington Moore—were deeply structural in their orientation towards revolutions, crises, and, more generally, social change.<sup>3</sup> They tended to disavow an interest in how revolutionary actors themselves imagined revolution, and system-level causes were central to analysis. Demographic trends, class structures and international competition between states were movers and shakers whose dynamics were found well beyond the purview of revolutionaries' own plans and imaginaries. Thus, at least at the level of stated method, if not in the actual narratives that supported explanations, structural sociology countered the tradition of investigating revolutionaries' understanding of their own revolutions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States: AD 990-1992* (Wiley-Blackwell, Revised Edition, 1992); Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). For a discussion of the structuralism of the “second wave” of comparative-historical sociology, see Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff, “Social Theory, Modernity, and the Three Waves of Historical Sociology,” in Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens and Ann Shola Orloff, eds. *Remaking Modernity: Politics and Processes in Historical Sociology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> For an example of disavowing revolutionary consciousness or “psychology,” see Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, 14-18. For a discussion of how Skocpol's explanation actually worked in the middle chapters of her book, see Philip Gorski, “The

This structuralist provocation induced two responses. First, an emphasis on interpretation by cultural theorists, and second, an emphasis on confusion, uncertainty, and interactional procedure, promoted by theorists I term “anti-structuralist.”

*Culture* In 1996, as part of the cultural turn in studies of the French Revolution, William Sewell Jr. argued that the French Revolution as violent democratic movement was, in part, invented when the storming of the Bastille was interpreted in the National Assembly as a revolutionary expression of popular sovereignty: “in the days that followed, the taking of the Bastille was construed as an act of the people’s sovereign will, as a legitimate uprising that dictated the people’s fate.”<sup>5</sup> For Sewell, understanding the dialectic of action and interpretation whereby the storming of this militarily unimportant fortress became the founding moment of the French Revolution is essential to understanding the flow and process of the revolution itself, as an “eventful” transformation of structures.

Sewell’s paper has been followed by a significant engagement with the “event” in sociology (of course, historians did not need to be convinced to analyze the category of

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Poverty of Deductivism: A constructive realist model of social explanation.” *Sociological Methodology*. 34(1): 1-33. 2004. The intellectual move to distance one’s account of revolution from revolutionaries’ own understandings, it should be noted, has many different sources and meanings beyond the subfield of comparative-historical sociology. For example, Francois Furet attacked the complicity of Marxist historians with the French revolutionaries’ own understandings of themselves, arguing that this hermeneutic link skewed analysis and overpoliticized interpretations of the revolution. Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Thus in an odd way, Skocpol and Furet are similar in their arguments that, when it comes to *analyzing* revolution, the understanding of crisis possessed by political actors should be approached with tremendous caution and skepticism.

<sup>5</sup> William Sewell, Jr. “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” pp. 225-270 in *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 235-236. See also, William Sewell, Jr. “A Theory of the Event: Marshall Sahlins’s ‘Possible Theory of History’,” pp. 197-224 in *Logics of History*.

“event”). For interpretivists, a focus on what Robin Wagner-Pacifici called “political semiosis” emerged, and the way in which events are always being reinterpreted after the fact, has become part of the theoretical repertoire of historical sociology.<sup>6</sup> However, the engagement with the event was also an important part of the second response to structural historical sociology.

*Anti-structuralism* If, for Sewell, “eventness” was a conceptual approach to the recurrent problem of temporality in sociological analysis, then, for a new wave of comparative-historical scholars, it has become more of a metaphysics—a clearer example of a reaction-formation to structuralism, one might say. And, when it comes to analyzing events, the analysis of political crisis has been central to this movement of thought. For, while the term event can apply to the particular ‘happenings’ that make up a larger story or case,<sup>7</sup> subjective individual experiences,<sup>8</sup> biographical turning points,<sup>9</sup> the core ontology for all social science,<sup>10</sup> and much more besides, it is clear from the literature that a central way to think about “eventness” is to examine how, in *political crisis*, the minutiae of actions and interactions of people under conditions of radical uncertainty can have momentous consequences for the structure of societies post-crisis. This is the anti-structural movement in comparative-historical sociology.

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<sup>6</sup> Robin Wagner-Pacifici, *Theorizing the Standoff: Contingency in Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Robin Wagner-Pacifici, “Theorizing the Restlessness of Events,” *American Journal of Sociology*. 115(5): 1351-86, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Bearman, Robert Faris, and James Moody, “Blocking the Future: New Solutions for Old Problems in Historical Social Science,” *Social Science History* 23(4): 501-533, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Meyer and Howard Kimeldorf, “Eventful Subjectivity: Collective Action and Subjective Transformation,” *Journal of Historical Sociology*. 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Abbott, “On the concept of turning point,” pp. 240-260 in *Time Matters: On theory and method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Abbott, “Temporality and Process in Social Life,” pp. 209-239 in *Time Matters*.

Anti-structuralism in the study of political crisis emphasizes the importance of uncertainty, confusion, and ultimately, interactional coordination and viability for understanding how crises work. For example, in recent writings analyzing very different empirical cases, Charles Kurzman, Ivan Ermakoff, and Elizabeth Armstrong have argued for that the conditions of radical uncertainty, brought on by the breakdown of longstanding institutional guides for action, create a situation for which the analysis of social action has to be fundamentally different. During revolutions, Kurzman argues, people do not know what is going on. When usual dispositions are disrupted, Ermakoff argues, before anyone can begin to make rational decisions, the intersubjective coordination of action must take place, often via seemingly minute interactional or epistolary signs. Finally, Armstrong argues that in social movements, the interaction of political opportunity, resource mobilization, and framing occurs in a radically different way when the environment is viewed as highly uncertain and potentially revolutionary.<sup>11</sup>

To see the important issues raised by this intellectual maneuver, consider Kurzman's work on the Iranian revolution. In a book length reconstruction of 1978-1979 in Iran, Kurzman argues that most of the "structural" causes of the Iranian revolution posited by sociologists were in fact produced *in the course of the revolution*. For example, through a complicated set of interactions and shifts in subjective preferences

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Kurzman, "Can understanding undermine explanation? The confused experience of revolution" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 2004; Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*. Harvard University Press. 2004; Ivan Ermakoff, "Theory of practice, rational choice, and historical change." *Theory and Society*, 2010; Ivan Ermakoff, *Ruling Oneself Out*. Duke University Press. 2008; Elizabeth Armstrong, "From Struggle to Settlement: The Crystallization of a Field of Lesbian/Gay Organizations in San Francisco, 1969-1973." In *Social Movements and Organization Theory*, edited by Gerald Davis, Doug McAdam, W. Richard Scott, and Mayer N. Zald. Cambridge University Press. 2005.

and beliefs, the mosques became the center of radical anti-state activity. Ever since, sociologists have been anxious to explain the revolution via the organizational form of the mosque network. But this, argues Kurzman, is sociological artifice, for the mosque network was an *effect* of the flow of revolution, not its cause. Kurzman makes the same kind of skeptical argument about the “cultural structures” that supposedly influenced the revolution: In ’78-’79, the forty-day mourning cycle in Islam became an important basis for organizing revolutionary protests, but it was not, before its use as such, “inherently political” or somehow always already “radical.” Rather, the forty-day morning cycle was used and radically reinterpreted during the revolution. From all of this, Kurzman arrives at the following statement, which I take to be the core idea of anti-structuralism:

The greater the break from routine, the greater the degree of de-institutionalization, the harder it is to argue that people are falling back on an established pattern of behavior without being aware of doing so. Breaches and the resulting confusion draw conscious attention to motivations. To the extent that non-routine episodes are characterized by confusion, and by increased reflexiveness and intentionality, understanding such moments may undermine explanation.<sup>12</sup>

Kurzman then argues that, with “structural explanation” disabled by disruption, the study of such crises should proceed by looking at how people deal with uncertainty, via the concept of “viability.” In other words, given the disruption of structure, habit, institutional constraint and routine, and so on, the focus for the analysis must be on the interactional coordination of action. This is also the conclusion arrived at by Ivan

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<sup>12</sup> Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, 169.

Ermakoff, who makes an interactional argument about perception, co-presence, and collective action. The core idea, then, is that as institutions recede, *interactional coordination and beliefs about viability become central*. To understand a crisis, one must understand the process whereby someone tries to figure out if his or her neighbors will be in the street tomorrow.

There is no doubt that this emphasis on confusion and uncertainty, and the interactional techniques that actors use to get out of it, has enabled a great deal of important research to emerge, especially when it comes to political crises. However, the risk is the creation of a mirror-image in social theory, where the structural accounts of revolutionary politics are replaced by interactional accounts of crisis negotiation. It is difficult to avoid the feeling that, in the arguments of the anti-structuralists, a crisis is a kind of vacuum into which actors step, proceeding then to influence each other via interactional skill.

This image of crisis as a vacuum is, however, belied by the empirics of the anti-structuralists' own accounts. In Kurzman's work, for example, there is clear awareness that the pre-crisis relational and cultural position of Khomeini as prophet-in-exile mattered very much for how the Iranian Revolution went.<sup>13</sup> And, in his most recent argument about contingency and uncertainty, Ermakoff points to a key speech by the well-regarded, powerful, and conservative Duke of Chatelet as essential for explaining the course of events in the National Assembly on the night of August 4, 1789 in Paris.<sup>14</sup> The importance attributed, in these accounts, to figures whose public personae and ability

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<sup>13</sup> Kurzman, *Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, 67-68, 155.

<sup>14</sup> Ivan Ermakoff, "The Structure of Contingency," *American Journal of Sociology*, 121(1): 64-125, 2015, 93.

to direct others' actions derived from their *pre-crisis* positions in the field of power suggests that there is a "missing link" here that needs to be further investigated.

### **Between structural breakdown and crisis action: the missing link**

Imagine a crisis as consisting, not of the two elements of structural breakdown and action-in-a-vacuum, but of three elements: breakdown, buildup, and action. A crisis, to be sure, arrives in part because of a lessening of the institutional sources of ordered action, and in a political crisis, this lessening includes those institutions that support the enforcement of law and sovereign claims by a central political authority. But action during a crisis is not determined solely by this lack of institutional guidance. It is also, in part, grounded in the *built up meaning of the crisis*.

In the cultural theories of revolutions and events, there are hints at this missing link. For example, in particular, in his theoretical work on "structure" and "event," anthropologist Marshall Sahlins characterized the relationship between the two terms as one of *translation*, and discussed the devolution of one into the other in the case of a relation between Kingdoms that was affected by how specific Chiefs navigated a crisis:

A higher order of structure—the relations between kingdoms—momentarily devolves upon certain circumstantial relations between particular chiefs, to be reconfigured in the terms and dynamics of this lower level, where it is besides subject to various accidents including those of personality, to emerge finally from the 'structure of the conjuncture' in the changed state of an all-out war. The event

develops as a reciprocal movement between higher and lower orders, a *translation* of each into the register of the other.<sup>15</sup>

Sahlins' concept of translation is intriguing. It suggests that, in thinking about the relationship between a generalized structural breakdown that brings about a crisis, and the action that makes up a crisis itself, we might focus on *interpretation* as the bridge from the former to the latter. This is what I will do in this paper.

### **A case to think with: The Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 in the Early American Republic**

To think about this extremely abstract issue in social theory, it will be useful to examine an actual instance of political crisis. Particularly because of its importance to early American state formation, the Whiskey Rebellion—a case in which the sovereign order broke down in the four westernmost counties of Pennsylvania in 1794—provides an excellent instance of political crisis with which to think.

Western Pennsylvania in the early 1790s was, in many ways, a chaotic mess. Settler-Indian violence was high, and terrifying, and the Ohio Indians were militarily ascendant in the Northwest Territory, having routed the US army in 1790 and 1791.<sup>16</sup> Access to the Mississippi had not been secured by the new American government from the Spanish Empire, while land grabs by wealthy easterners—including George Washington—contrasted sharply with the daily difficulties of small farmers. Farmers

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<sup>15</sup> Marshall Sahlins, "The Return of the Event, Again: With Reflections on the Beginnings of the Great Fijian War of 1843–1855 Between the Kingdoms of Bau and Rewa," Pp. 293-352 in *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 303-304, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Hinteraker, *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 226-267.

without waterways as transport faced the impossibility of hauling a season's grain to market in the east over the Allegheny Mountains.<sup>17</sup> One solution was to distill grain into whiskey, and then attach it to a single horse or donkey which could be taken east. Thus, the desire of Alexander Hamilton to tax the farmers' whiskey so as to pay off the war bonds they had sold to speculators was at best an affront, at worst a new manifestation of tyranny, the British form of which had been ousted from Western Pennsylvania at the cost of much blood.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, elites both west and east discussed the politics of the violent French Revolution and its potential influence on Americans' understandings of democracy and sovereignty. Committed Federalists, in particular, worried about the advent of democratic-republican debating societies, which they likened to Jacobin clubs. Beyond Federalist and anti-Federalist politics, elites wrote even more fearfully about the revolution in Saint Domingue, for obvious reasons.<sup>19</sup> However, while there may have been much turmoil, fear, and argument throughout the USA in 1794, in most areas on the east coast, the sovereign claim to power of the US government was secure. This was not the case on the western frontier. In Western Pennsylvania in particular, a challenge to law and order came from the resistance to the tax on distilled spirits. Hamilton's tax plan had been opposed in congress by local elites like William Findley, and was roundly

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 229-239; Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 84-85.

<sup>18</sup> William Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Frontier Rebels Who Challenged America's Newfound Sovereignty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 51-70.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2014), 42.

denounced in the west as a Federalist grab for power that favored eastern merchants. And, starting in 1792, appointed excise inspectors in the four counties around Pittsburgh were tarred and feathered when they tried to register stills, or even just open up a place for volunteers to come to register their stills.

A previous whiskey excise act enacted at the state level in Pennsylvania had simply never been enforced west of the mountains. But Hamilton pressed the issue with the federal excise, and in particular arranged for the execution of warrants for arrest that indicated those responsible for obstructing the tax inspectors would be tried *in Federal Court in Philadelphia*. Hamilton knew this would inflame the local populace, and it did. The violence that had involved extensive and repeated tarring and feathering and barn burning escalated to something more in the summer of 1794. Simultaneously, a new political entity emerged: the Mingo Creek Society, founded on February 28, 1794, and made up primarily of the militia of Washington County, declared that *all legal complaints* normally taken to court in Washington County had to first be sent to the Society; its members would judge whether the complaint would go forward. This implicit threat of militia justice found its counterpart in the chain of events that followed upon the attempt to deliver a series of federal arrest warrants to those wanted in relationship to violence against tax inspectors.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 163 and footnote 12 on pages 263-264. The evidence suggests very strongly that, despite Hamilton's attempts to convince Washington that this society and the "Republican-Democratic" debating societies were cut from the same cloth, that this was simply not the case. Findley's take is instructive: the Mingo Creek society did not announce itself in the newspapers, was formed around the "Mingo Creek regiment of militia," and "the rules of this institution, and various powers which it is reported to have exercised, imitated the language, and assumed the forms of regularly constituted authority." William Findley, *History of the Insurrection, in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania: In the year M.D.CC.XCIV, with a recital of*

U.S. Marshall David Lenox delegated the task of delivering arrest warrants to a poor goat farmer, known and disrespected in the area as stupid and ineffectual. When this man attempted to deliver the warrants, he was tarred, feathered, and left tied up in the woods, while a crowd of farmers and militiamen confronted Lenox himself at William Miller's house on July 15, 1794. Unsatisfied with the exchange, they decided to reengage Lenox, who they mistakenly believed to be staying at the mansion of excise inspector General John Neville. The group surrounded Neville's house, and Neville and his slaves opened fire, killing one and injuring others. The next day, 500 to 600 men surrounded Neville's mansion, where a major and 10 soldiers from Fort Fayette had arrived as reinforcements to defend the house (Neville himself had fled). After an offer to parlay, local Revolutionary War hero James McFarlane stepped out from cover and advanced towards the house. He was shot and killed. In response, those who had been under MacFarlane's command burned Neville's home and farm buildings to the ground.

In response to these events, on July 18, the deputy excise inspector resigned via a note in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*. The Mingo Creek Society met on July 23, 1794, and a short while later the mail to Pittsburgh was robbed, revealing several missives sent to Philadelphia incriminating locals. In reaction, on July 28<sup>th</sup>, several local leaders circulated a letter calling for a gathering of all local militias at Braddock's field on August 1, asking men to bring all their weapons and four days of supplies. On July 29<sup>th</sup> a contentious meeting at the Washington courthouse ended with an affirmation of the letter. And thus, on August 1, as ordered, 7,000 men gathered outside of Pittsburgh in a show of

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*the circumstances specially connected therewith: and an historical review of the previous situation of the country* (Philadelphia: Samuel Harrison Smith, 1796), 56. Hereafter cited as Findley, *History of the Insurrection*.

force. They marched through Pittsburgh the next day.

On August 7, 1794, George Washington denounced western elites for fomenting unrest, and sent a peace commission to negotiate with the rebels. Meanwhile, on Washington's orders, General Henry Lee mustered 12,950 men in Jersey and began the march for Pittsburgh. On August 14, 250 delegates from the four western counties met at Parkinson's Ferry; they knew, at this point, that George Washington had offered amnesty to all who would forgo rebellion and cooperate with the excise law from this point forward, but they did not reach a conclusion about what to do next. A flurry of letters were sent between the representatives of the rebellion, and the agents for Pennsylvania, and the agents of the Federal government. On August 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, another meeting occurred, this time with 60 delegates representing the four counties. At the end of this tense meeting, the group voted 34-26 to submit to Federal authority.

However, Lee, again on Washington's orders, marched the troops over the mountains anyway, and arrived in late October. Lee was forced to quartermaster his troops, tensions ran high, and certain rebel suspects were tortured while Hamilton interrogated various elites. However, in possession of loyalty oaths signed by the great majority of the white male population of all four counties, most of the army left before the worst of winter set in, leaving 1,500 troops behind. The exiting army took with them a small number of prisoners, set to go trial in Philadelphia in November. Most of these rebel leaders were eventually pardoned, and the Jefferson administration repealed the tax in 1802.

As I will discuss in a later section of this paper, the Whiskey Rebellion thematized several issues essential to early American state formation, including the role

of finance and banking in state-society relations, the importance of conscription in the forging of the relationship between state and citizen, and the role of the emergency powers in republican governments.<sup>21</sup> In the sociological study of social movements, the way the rebellion featured both tarring and feathering and an orderly march through Pittsburgh by 7,000 men has led Sydney Tarrow to cite it as an inflection point between 18<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century repertoires of contention.<sup>22</sup>

### **The missing link: Symbolic boundaries, selections, and speech genres**

My argument here will be that the Whiskey Rebellion can show us that, to understand crisis, we need expand our theoretical repertoires slightly. While we should not give up on those abstract terms we associate with theories of structural breakdown, and while we should continue to investigate how people interact under conditions of radical uncertainty, we should *also* carefully examine the *struggle over interpretation* that makes “the crisis” something that can be acted upon and within. For action does not really happen in a vacuum—it must have a reference point or ground, no matter how fantastical or misconstrued, if it is going to be meaningful, intentional action.

To see the need for this intervening theoretical language, note how the above narrative is beset by the usual distinction between “structure” and “event” in the sense that it is primarily a summary of a series of actions and reactions set against a larger background of imperial conflict, state sovereignty, and economic policy. In a similar way,

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<sup>21</sup> In particular, the Whiskey Rebellion tested the ability of the executive to use the Militia Clause in the Constitution (Article 1, Section 8, Clause 15), which had been delegated by Congress to the President in the “Calling Forth” act of 1792.

<sup>22</sup> Sydney Tarrow, *Powers in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, Revised 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2011), 37-56.

the (much richer and more detailed) histories of the Whiskey Rebellion written by Thomas Slaughter, William Hogeland, and Terry Bouton, which I draw upon below,<sup>23</sup> also interpret the significance of the event by placing it in varied “structural” contexts: the role of land ownership in early American capitalism and elite statecraft, the importance of finance and debt to the American project, and the Federalist “taming” of democratic impulses in the early republic in the name of law and order, and to the tremendous advantage of economic elites. All of this constitutes useful debate. My hope, however, is that the change in language suggested here can help with the ongoing task of connecting structural background and action-filled foreground in such narratives.

In the case of the Whiskey Rebellion, amongst many grievances held by the white men on the Western edge of the American republic, anti-state violence emerged in relationship to one of them in particular—the whiskey excise. They ultimately confronted members of the US Army from Fort Fayette, and burned down the mansion of the excise inspector himself and one of the most powerful men in the area—General John Neville. This violence then demanded interpretation and further action. What did it signify? What was the next set of actions that should “naturally” follow it? What was this whole crisis about? In so far as actors could discern answers to these questions and convince others of their own answers’ correctness, they could exercise a kind of hermeneutic power, crystallizing their interpretation of the crisis as calling forth further action. If we can

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<sup>23</sup> Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*; Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion*; Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: “The People,” the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); see also Terry Bouton, “Tying Up the Revolution: Money, Power, and the Regulation in Pennsylvania.” Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1996.

understand how a crisis was construed in this way, we can, I hope, understand a little bit better the landscapes of meaning and power upon which actors make history.

In the evidence left behind by the rebellion, we can in fact see the construal of the crisis as a *struggle for interpretation*, in two senses of the term “struggle.” First, actors struggle to make sense of that which is occurring. And second, actors struggle to have their interpretations provide the ground for other actors’ actions, which is to say, they struggle to interpret the crisis as a pathway to legitimate domination. To interpret these materials, I will use three well-known sensitizing concepts to aid my interpretation: (symbolic) boundaries, selection, and speech genres. I introduce them briefly here.

First, as a crisis is built up about something in particular, actors struggle to draw boundaries and thus symbolize the crisis, and to link those boundaries together so that inside the boundaries lies “the crisis.” By defining boundaries and locations, the general uncertainty, trouble, and lack of structure that characterizes an institutional breakdown is given a source and a location in the world.<sup>24</sup> Second, when actors talk about, participate in, and interpret the crisis, they *select* from a wide variety of meaningful social relationships, and make a few of them central to “the crisis.” These relationships then take on outsized importance. Via selection a crisis comes not only to have definition in terms of its boundaries and location, but comes to be focused on certain aspects or elements of social struggle, and these struggles come to represent or stand in for many different struggles.<sup>25</sup> And finally, third, as a crisis forms, actors begin to talk about it in a

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Abbott, “Things of Boundaries,” pp. 261-279 in *Time Matters*; Michel Lamont and Virag Molnar, “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29: 167-95, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Work on contemporary processes of “media framing” often emphasizes this kind of selection, or, as Todd Gitlin famously put it, “selection, emphasis, and exclusion.” Here I

particular way, or, sometimes, ways. This means that as a crisis comes into being, it also comes to have many of the qualities that we routinely attribute to stories—genre, tone, and so on. And so, just as literature can be subject to contestation in reading and interpretation, so too can the stories told about crisis. Thus, to examine how a crisis is built, I propose to trace the emergence of a *speech genre* or *genres* in the talk that appears in and through the crisis.<sup>26</sup>

The boundaries, selections, and speech genres that interpret a crisis mutually influence each other as they develop. In doing so, they help produce the meaningful content of the crisis, and it is in relationship to this content that actors operate. This building up is, in the conceptual model presented here, a matter of elite interpretation. I use the term “elite” loosely, as a historically variable reference to those members of the pre-crisis society with access to rhetorical power. In the early modern USA this meant white men of some property and education. The *means for* elite interpretation are, however, varied, and so are the power configurations *achieved by* elite interpretation. Not only is there, in any society, a vast and varied repertoire of tropes by which to interpret a crisis, there are also myriad social cleavages, material obstacles, technological

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view this process as endemic to interpretation itself. See Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 7, and Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., and August E. Grant, *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin explains that, “the speaker’s speech...is manifested primarily in the *choice of a particular speech genre*. This choice is determined by the specific nature of the given sphere of speech communication, semantic (thematic) considerations, the concrete situation of the speech communication, the personal composition of its participants... And when the speaker’s speech plan with all of its individuality and subjectivity is applied and adapted to a chosen genre, it is shaped and developed within a certain generic form.” Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres” pp. 60-102 in *Speech Genres, and Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee, Edited by Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. 1986), 78.

possibilities, and bodily requirements that can become part of a project of interpretation. Indeed, as we will see below, in the struggle to interpret the Whiskey Rebellion, geography—the material landscape itself—became a large part of the symbolic landscape of the crisis in one interpretation, but not in another.

### **The struggle to interpret in the whiskey rebellion of 1794**

In the case of the whiskey tax and the new American state, three different construals of the crisis emerged—two major ones, and one minor one.

#### *1. Rebel interpretation: incoherence, humor, conflicted boundaries*

The elite men who spoke publically at the meetings that became the Whiskey Rebellion had highly compelling religious doctrine and ideologically coherent language at their disposal. Indeed, one of them was a preacher who had not only been involved in a similar “regulation” in North Carolina under the British Empire, but also authored millenarian tracts that connected a populist interpretation of the Constitution with the idea of a New Jerusalem, and also evidenced a deep and consistent animosity to the “eastern Snake” of wealthy financiers.<sup>27</sup> But they did not use this repertoire—neither religion nor coherent ideology emerged in public talk. Rather, no coherent program emerged, boundaries remained fuzzy or in contradiction, and the generalized sense of crisis did not crystallize into a clear interpretation of its meaning and purpose. Those who would not pay their whiskey taxes never quite managed to make this particular grievance into a sign of the times.

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<sup>27</sup> Mark Haddon Jones, “Herman Husband: millenarian, Carolina regulator, and whiskey rebel.” Ph.D. Dissertation, Northern Illinois University. 1983.

Let us begin with the conflicting boundaries. In the four western counties of Pennsylvania, when the arrest warrants were served, geography came to the fore, and the most important boundary in this regard was the Allegheny mountain range. The range divided “The East” from “The Western Frontier” in the state of Pennsylvania, and could be traversed only by a narrow, muddy road littered with trees and roots. This geographically based distinction between East and West had economic significance specific to the use of whiskey, discussed above. This economic importance contributed to the energy and vitality with which the Western identity was felt (something violent conflict with Native Americans also did, as eastern land speculators were immune to the specific dangers associated with actually working the land). Thus the East-West boundary was simultaneously geographic, military, pecuniary, and symbolic.

However, this East-West boundary coexisted uneasily with the social boundary between elite and populace. It is hard to overestimate how much this problem attended the meetings, military gatherings, and circular letters whereby the crisis came into being for the rebels. These letters and meetings involved “esteemed” white men, often lawyers educated in the eastern U.S.A., speaking or writing to their social inferiors: white male farmers, possessed of small amounts of property, the vote, and power over women and blacks, but without access to elite discourse and alienated from the game of high politics.<sup>28</sup> Vulnerable to foreclosure and Indian attack, these men felt deep distance, in

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<sup>28</sup> This tension frames Hogeland’s entire narrative of the rebellion, beginning with his discussion of Brackenridge’s biography, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 11-20. Bouton emphasizes the degree to which the farmer-rebels were regular folk, with experiences broadly consonant with the (white) American populace, as traced for example in Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (Hill and Wang, 2008). However, Bouton also notes—citing a visitor to Pittsburgh on the day of the march—the mixed class composition of the rebellion. See Bouton, *Taming Democracy*, 217.

both social location and political opinion, from the advancing Federalist state-building project.<sup>29</sup> Thus as the crisis became about the whiskey tax, a triangle emerged: (1) white male farmers of variable wealth, (2) western elites, and (3) Federalist elites and some western elites that had been drafted into the federalist patronage system. The specifics of these network structures are shown in detail by Roger Gould in his two papers on the Whiskey Rebellion: the elites who joined the rebellion were much less likely to be connected to the new federalist patronage network.<sup>30</sup> But the consequences of this difficulty were much more extensive than Gould realized, because they also made *interpretation* difficult. It was always unclear which western elites were “really” on the side of the farmers, and furthermore whether western elites and farmers really wanted the same thing. Had the crisis come together about something else (e.g. war with Native Americans or relations with the Spanish empire) it is very likely that the elites identified by Gould would not have been put in the possibly advantageous, yet also risky and confusing, position of brokerage.<sup>31</sup> The patronage network that became so combustible in the Whiskey Rebellion was one specific to the whiskey tax, which was thrust to the forefront of the public eye by the process that began in earnest with the delivery of the warrants in 1794.

These difficulties of interpretation are clear in the historical record. Out west, the rebellion involved a very ambiguous place for George Washington. Jokes were made

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<sup>29</sup> Terry Bouton, “A Road Closed: Rural Insurgency in Post-Independence Pennsylvania,” *Journal of American History*, 87: 3, 2000, 855-887.

<sup>30</sup> Roger Gould, “Patron-Client Ties, State Centralization, and the Whiskey Rebellion,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 1996; Roger Gould, “Political Networks and the Local/National Boundary in the Whiskey Rebellion,” in Hanagan et. al., *Challenging Authority*, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> For the desire of Westerners for federal military support vis-à-vis Indian wars, see Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan*.

about the President's bad decisions in his old age, but he was not profaned as fundamentally evil (many of the rebels had, of course, fought for him in the revolutionary war).<sup>32</sup> Although some saber-rattling language about the replacement of British tyranny by a homegrown version in Philadelphia occasionally emerged, these voices were quickly drowned out. Instead, in the Western meetings during the crisis, speech was full of nervous energy, confusion, misdirection, "temporizing," and even, on occasion, humor. Arguments did not hew together in some sort of singular worldview or ideology. Speakers went on and on, without saying much.<sup>33</sup>

Those speaking during the whiskey rebellion did, of course, make it entirely clear that they were deeply opposed to the whiskey tax. But besides that, it can be hard to tell what is going on. They argued that Pennsylvanians should swear to uphold all the laws of the United States *except* for the whiskey tax. They argued about whether one could be part of a society and also against it, and they kept changing their minds about what, exactly, the resistance meant. In resigning his commission as excise inspector, Robert Johnson argued in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* that he had found out that things were not as they seemed: "Finding the opposition to the revenue law more violent than I expected; regretting the mischief that has been done, and may, from the continuation of measures,-- feeling the opposition changed from disguised rabble to a respectable party, think it my

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<sup>32</sup> H.H. Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection* (New Haven: College & University Press), 87.

<sup>33</sup> "Brackenridge, in a speech of considerable length, drew their attention by amusing them an seeming to countenance their conduct; but before he concluded he ventured to suggest...the propriety of their consulting their fellow citizens in the other parts of the survey..." Findley, *History of the Insurrection*, 92.

duty and do resign my commission.”<sup>34</sup> So, Johnson had changed his mind; he would not occupy his post in the U.S. government. But the reasoning was itself ambiguous, both because it is unclear whether he fears the (physical) violence of the disguised rabble or the moral approbation of the “respectable” in resigning his commission, and because it is of course unclear who the reference is for the term “respectable party.” Indeed, the signifier “more violent,” which modifies “opposition” refers simultaneously to the *feelings* of the populace, and to the physical violence that occurred.

Meanwhile, H.H. Brackenridge gave the following confused and confusing discourse on sovereignty:

It seems to be an idea entertained by the people that we can remain a part of government and yet wage war against it. That is impossible in the nature of the case we are known to the government by representation only and not by force. We must therefore either overthrow it or it must overthrow us. But we have sworn to support it. If we contemplate the overthrowing it, where is our oath of allegiance?

But can we overthrow it?<sup>35</sup>

One posting from the “Liberty Department” had plenty of pragmatic demands (“Blankets, Shroudings, Mockisons, Wampum etc.”) but not much discourse on liberty.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Resignation of Collector Johnson,” July 20, 1794, *Pennsylvania Archives, Second Series, Vol. IV*, Published under direction of Matthew S. Quay, Secretary of the Commonwealth, Edited by John B. Linn and Wm. H. Egle (Harrisburg: B.F. Meyers, State Printer, 1876), p. 71. This collection is hereafter referenced as *Penn. Archives*.

<sup>35</sup> Meeting at Redstone Fort at Brownsville, August 28<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup>, in Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection*, p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> The full note, from the Whiskey Rebellion Collection, Library of Congress, reads:  
Whereas it was & is understood by the people of the Western Country that those Commissioners sent forward by Authority were sent in order to treat wit the Western Inhabitants & it was seriously intended that they would have brought on with them a larger quantity of good, to wit, such as

Local political leader William Findley, in his letter to A.J. Dallas, continued the incoherence. He insisted in the same breath that, “the spirit of outrage has in a great measure subsided, though the aversion to Excises is too deep rooted ever to be eradicated.” The spirit of radicalism had spread with an “infatuation almost incredible” he reported, but also, he proclaimed, he and his moderate friends had been able to influence the meetings. Finally, Findley blamed the whole thing on the proclamation of the president—if only the president had not sent troops, he said, the radicals would not have been “irritated.” The flame of tax resistance, according to Findley’s letter, was eternal and evanescent at the same time.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the investigator seeking ideology, or Jacobin radicalism, or Jeffersonian idealism, in the public interpretation of violence in Western Pennsylvania will be disappointed. He or she will find, instead, an absurdist play. Even extremely tense moments, pregnant with violence, were resolved in odd ways. When a “wealthy miller”

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Blankers, Shroudings, Mockisons, Wampum etc. But since this arrival we have no further talk about this matter—Surely the commissioners cannot possibly think that we will be pacified without them. No. We are happy to be informed that they have fixed on the 20<sup>th</sup>...for this conference at the theater ... But it appears that they have it in Contemplation at this conference to have this door shut, but...They better ought to extend this door wider than usual, because should any obstruction take place on that reason to prevent the free & easy passage of the citizen, it may be attended with bad and dangerous consequences, to prevent which the former is recommended.

From the Liberty Department, August 20, 1794

<sup>37</sup> H.H. Brackenridge does appear to have eventually come around to the eastern/Federalist interpretation of the rebellion (see “The Philadelphia Interpretation,” below) in his letter to Tench Coxe of September 15, 1794, though again in a way that is more pragmatics than ideology: “Were it possible that we could be freed from this system by a revolution without greater mischief, it is possible I might be brought to think of it. But that is impossible. The remedy would be worse than the malady; honest creditors would suffer, and we should lose the advantages of a general union of the States” (*Penn. Archives*, 302).

named Sam Jackson was forcibly brought before an anti-excise meeting for calling the rebels a “scrub congress,” the group could not decide what to do. Should he be violently punished for speaking sedition against the rebels? Twenty militiamen waited for instructions for what to do with him. But Hugh Henry Brackenridge defused the situation by telling an off-color joke about Oliver Cromwell, and then suggesting that this man “be called a scrub himself,” with the result that “the troop that had brought him laughed and took him off to give him the epithet. He got a bucket of whiskey and water to drink with them and we heard no more of it.”<sup>38</sup> So much for ideological purity and the Jacobins of the West.

There was one ideologically coherent voice in the rebellion: David Bradford.<sup>39</sup> He was prone to respond to pragmatic queries with outbursts such as “dastardly to talk of property when liberty is in question.”<sup>40</sup> However, it is interesting that the letter calling for the assembling of the rebel army at Braddock’s field—signed by Bradford along with six others—is itself lacking in ideological justifications. It merely mentions the robbing of the mail, which has revealed that some in Western Pennsylvania are “hostile to our interest.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps sensing how out of place he was, Bradford escaped to the Spanish Empire, rather than waiting around to be captured when Washington’s troops arrived.

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<sup>38</sup> Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection*, 145-146. Findley confirms the story in *History of the Insurrection*, 122.

<sup>39</sup> Findley also notes Bradford as singularly dedicated to justifying the violence committed in July and even at one point compares him to Robespierre. Findley, *History of the Insurrection*, 100.

<sup>40</sup> Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection*, 153.

<sup>41</sup> “Circular of the Western Insurgents to the Militia Officers,” July 28, 1794, *Penn. Archives*, 79. Findley comments on the “ambiguous manner in which the circular orders were written,” which “excited men whose minds were already agitated,” but led some others to “keep them secret,” such that “some clergymen and others in the south of

To summarize, local interpretation of the rebellion displayed conflicting and unsettled boundaries, confusion over the relationship of whiskey tax resistance to sovereignty in a broader sense, and speech genres of nervous humor and “temporizing.” The whiskey excise did come to the fore as a central issue, but it failed to become an unambiguous signifier of the generalized crisis. This was, at least in part, because (1) the boundaries of the crisis were not clear—geography was deeply important, and so were social boundaries, yet they did not “fit” together; (2) the selection of the whiskey tax as the locus of political disputation placed elite Western speakers in a difficult position; and thus (3) talk was confused and confusing.

The wavering, nervous rebels of the whiskey rebellion lacked interpretive discipline, could not find a clear and coherent message, and retained a fundamental inability to overcome the class divisions of the white male population of the American west. They were against the whiskey tax, to the point that they were willing to commit or condone violence to avoid it, but they were simultaneously part of the citizenry of the USA, at least most of the time. They followed the laws in general, but not the laws having to do with internal taxes. They were against the East, but not really against the center of that establishment, for they loved the President, even if he was, they thought, a bit old and stupid. Such was the experience of ambiguity that obtained around Pittsburgh, in the interpretation of “the crisis.” Something very different could be found approximately three hundred miles to the east, however.

## *2. The Philadelphia Interpretation*

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Washington country were active and successful with their neighbors in dissuading them from going.” Findley, *History of the Insurrection*, 97.

In contrast to the rebels out west, the interpretation of the rebellion that emerged at the political center of the country was developed via a dense set of communications between a small number of actors first, and then taken public in August 1794. Beginning with letters between members of President Washington's cabinet in 1792, this interpretation emerged via debate concerning how to think about refusal to pay taxes, and public meetings held to protest the whiskey tax. In the beginning, there were differing positions, but, over time, Alexander Hamilton's interpretation—that the rebels were a threat to the republic and had to be crushed via military force—became more and more dominant. In the wake of the violence of the summer of 1794, any final ambiguities in the interpretation were stripped away, and it went public via Presidential proclamation, speeches to Congress, and speeches by the Governor of Pennsylvania, as well as via directives given to judges and to military officers.

I term this construal of the crisis the “Philadelphia interpretation,” to indicate both the overwhelming frequency with which letters about the rebellion in the upper reaches of the US government originated in and were received in Philadelphia, and to emphasize the way in which this interpretation represented that of the center of power in the early American republic. This was, in effect, the “metropolitan” interpretation, over and against the interpretation that emerged on the “periphery.” This interpretation is guided by a single, abstract political boundary between the friends and the enemies of the young Republic, and was expressed in a speech genre of high constitutional seriousness.

The initial seeds of the Philadelphia interpretation were planted in 1792. As news arrived from Pittsburgh and environs concerning tarring and feathering and barn-burning, Alexander Hamilton wrote to John Jay to explain the grave nature of what was happening

in and around Pittsburgh, which, he explained was “so determined and persevering a spirit of opposition to the laws, as in my opinion to render a vigorous exertion of the powers of government indispensable.”<sup>42</sup> A few days later, in a letter to Hamilton, George Washington expressed his incredulity about the resistance, explaining that this kind of resistance from any citizen was “exceedingly reprehensible,” but that it was “truly unaccountable,” in the case of Western Pennsylvania, since the money garnered from the tax could be used to provide protection of the frontier.<sup>43</sup> Jay urged the government to abstain from any declarations about the tax resistance unless it was ready to “follow them with strong measures.”<sup>44</sup> Chiming in, Edmund Randolph counseled that no prosecution could proceed “*at this moment*, when the malignant spirit has not developed itself in acts so specific, and so manifestly infringing the peace, as obviously to expose the culpable persons to the censures of the Law.”<sup>45</sup> For Randolph, then, there was not enough evidence of insurrection to warrant the use of the military. Firing back, Hamilton insisted to Washington that “there is considerable danger, that before measures can be matured for making a public impression by the prosecution of offenders, the spirit of opposition may extend & break out in other quarters; and by its extension become much more difficult to be overcome.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, Philadelphia, September 3, 1792, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, Volume XII: July 1792-October 1792*, edited by Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 316.

<sup>43</sup> George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, Mount Vernon, September 7, 1792, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, Volume XII*, 332.

<sup>44</sup> John Jay to Alexander Hamilton, New York, September 8, 1792, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton XII*, 334.

<sup>45</sup> Edmund Randolph to Alexander Hamilton, Philadelphia September 8, 1792, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton XII*, 336.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, Philadelphia, September 9, 1792, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton XII*, 345.

This initial argument became a singular interpretation in the summer of 1794, beginning with Alexander Hamilton's long letter to George Washington on August 5, 1794. This text laid out, in clear (if prejudicial) terms a narrative leading to the telos of "the disagreeable crisis."<sup>47</sup> It is primarily a narrative about how "armed banditti" destroyed law and order in Western Pennsylvania. Hamilton ends his narrative with an account of the standoff at Neville's house and the robbing of the mail. He then concludes that the opposition to the whiskey tax *in particular* is "connected with an indisposition, too general in that quarter, to share in the common burdens of the community, and with a wish, among some persons of influence to embarrass the government."<sup>48</sup> Governor of Pennsylvania Thomas Mifflin's letter to Washington arrived the same day; he pleaded restraint so as to give the Judiciary part of Pennsylvania's government time to do its work.<sup>49</sup> But Edmund Randolph replied to Mifflin two days later, laying out the case that the time for judicial solutions to the problem was over. In this text, we can see that Randolph's interpretation now matches Hamilton's.

The "facts which immediately decide the complexion of the existing crisis are these," Randolph explained to Mifflin. Violence had not only repeatedly been committed by an "armed banditti," but *also* the President had been "officially notified" of a the "existence of combinations in two of the counties...too powerful to be suppressed by the Judiciary Authority or by the Powers of the Marshall." Randolph concluded that "it results from these facts, that the case exists when...the military power may, with due

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<sup>47</sup> The Secretary of the Treasury to President Washington, Treasury Department, Philadelphia, August 5, 1794 in *Penn. Archives*, 83.

<sup>48</sup> The Secretary of the Treasury to President Washington, Treasury Department, Philadelphia, August 5, 1794 in *Penn. Archives*, 103.

<sup>49</sup> Governor Mifflin to President Washington, Philadelphia, August 5, in *Penn. Archives*, 105.

regard to all requisite caution, be rightfully interposed.” He then explains that it is Mifflin’s *duty* to affirm this interpretation. Mifflin would, in fact, exceed his duty in this regard.<sup>50</sup>

The Philadelphia interpretation went public in a large way with the President’s proclamation of August 7. In it, Washington mobilizes a single clear boundary: on the one side were “the insurgents,” “criminality” and “tyranny,” on the other side were the majority of citizens of the U.S.A., the members of the Federal and State governments, “just authority,” and “the rights of individuals.” Washington prepared his use of the “Calling Forth” act of 1792, which allowed him to mobilize against U.S. citizens, by repeatedly profaning any and all violence committed in the name of resisting the law. He also linked the violence directed at tax collectors to “certain irregular meetings, whose proceedings have tended to encourage and uphold the spirit of opposition.”<sup>51</sup> By doing so, he referred, ambiguously, to both the meetings in 1791-1794 in Western Pennsylvania, *and* to the more general trend of Democratic-Republican debating societies. On the same day, Mifflin made a public proclamation to support the president, referencing in his first sentence “several lawless bodies of armed men,” who had “committed various cruel and aggravated acts of riot and arson.”<sup>52</sup> On the 8<sup>th</sup> Mifflin wrote to Josiah Harmar and asked him to call into duty the Pennsylvania Militia.<sup>53</sup>

As the crisis stretched into September, the Philadelphia interpretation came into its own as a ground for action. First, it was the basis for action and interpretation by the the negotiators sent west by the President. Second, it was the working justification and

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<sup>50</sup> Secretary of State to Governor Mifflin, Department of State, August 5, 1794, in *Penn. Archives*, 119.

<sup>51</sup> Proclamation of President Washington, August 7, 1794, in *Penn. Archives*, 127

<sup>52</sup> Proclamation of Governor Mifflin, August 7, 1794, in *Penn. Archives*, 127.

<sup>53</sup> Governor Mifflin to Gen. Harmar, Philadelphia, August 8, 1794, in *Penn. Archives*, 129.

motivation for the troops marching west from Jersey. This is evident in Hamilton's letter of September 2 to Washington, which carries the friend/enemy binary into an investigation of the loyalty of certain judges. Hamilton is concerned to show both the incompetence and the duplicity of the Western judiciary; he wants Washington to view the legal situation in the west as a vacuum that can only be filled by the military. So, he attacks Alexander Addison, who had written against the law in a letter to a revenue inspector. "There was," he writes, "a great unfitness in a JUDGE of Pennsylvania indulging himself with gratuitous invectives against the Judiciary System of the Government of the Union, pronouncing it to be impracticable, unfavourable to liberty and to the Just authority of the STATE COURTS." Hamilton then explains, first, that this is not "evidence of a temper cordial to the institutions and arrangements of the United States," and, second, he finds Judge Addison to be duplicitous for advocating "constitutional resistance." This, according to Hamilton, is simply impossible: "The Theory of every constitution pre-supposes as a *first principle* that the *Laws are to be obeyed*. There can therefore be no such thing as 'constitutional resistance.'" Note how, via this clever argument, Hamilton lumped together the tarring and feathering of revenue inspectors with the expression of opinion against the law; both are the opposite of friends of the Union.<sup>54</sup>

Complementing this attack on the judiciary in Western Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Mifflin provided a rousing call to duty directed at those who would be called upon to march, in a speech delivered to the Philadelphia Militia on September 10. Any trace of hesitation about the use of violence has now disappeared and

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<sup>54</sup> Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, to President Washington, Treasury Department, September 2, 1794, in *Penn. Archives*, 291, emphasis in original.

the Philadelphia interpretation is in full force in the Governor's speech: the rebels in the West are clearly identified as an existential threat to the republic. This vituperative rendering of the insurgents only knows the political boundary between friend and enemy. It is worth quoting at length:

Let us not, Gentlemen, be perplexed by prejudices or partial considerations unconnected with the subject. It is no matter of enquiry at this time whether any acts of Congress are politic or not, whether they ought to be repealed or not; the questions are whether our governments are worth preserving, and if so, whether we will tamely and silently see them destroyed, or openly and firmly appear in support of them. Listen to the Languages of the Insurgents and your spirit will rise with indignation,--they not only assert that certain laws shall be repealed, let the sense of the majority be what it may, but they threaten us with the establishment of an Independent Government, or a return to the allegiance of Great Britain. Their cruelty and insolence...and the menace of violence to the family of General Neville... are circumstances so flagrant, so iniquitous, and so dastardly, that for my own part I consider the conduct of the Tories during the war to have been temperate and magnanimous compared with the course of the present opposition.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Address of Gov. Mifflin to the Militia of Philadelphia, September 10, 1794, in *Penn Arch.* p. 275-6.

The comparison to Tories—now applied to a set of white male citizens who had fought on the side of the nascent USA in the Revolutionary War—was a particularly brutal association to make.

To summarize, then, the Philadelphia interpretation had only one boundary that it really cared about—an abstract, political one, between those “for” and those “against” the republic. All mundane politics, disputation, or difference of opinion evaporates in the face of this distinction. The difference between West and East is *not symbolic* for the Philadelphians; it is merely the location of the trouble. The distinction between merchant and farmer is nowhere to be found. Besides the opposition between friend and enemy, the distinction that matters the most to those engaged in the Philadelphia interpretation is *internal* to the Federalist state project—it is a distinction between the judiciary and the military. This divide, a point of contention in 1792, is resolved by 1794—it is, in the view of those in charge of the US government, the military’s turn. Finally, note the significant difference in speech genre: the Philadelphia interpretation is conducted in the tone of constitutional founding and grand political projects. If the rebels were in an absurdist play and an endless meeting, the Federalists in Philadelphia were in a historical drama of the highest order.

### *3. Pennsylvanians in the middle: The rebellion as “an unbridled gust of passion.”*

In a small way, there was a third interpretation of the crisis that differed both from the abundant confusion and strange humor of the rebels, and from the high state seriousness of the U.S. government elite. Officials in the government of the state of Pennsylvania were familiar with their own state’s earlier tax on whiskey that was simply not enforced

in the Western parts of the state. Caught in the middle between the western insurgents and federal government, they would ultimately—like their governor—come to support the view from Philadelphia, and to carry out the orders from Mifflin and Washington. But occasionally in their letters, they developed an argument best summarized by the hackneyed saying, “a few bad apples spoil the bunch.” In this interpretation, the rebellion is really the work of a few scheming, or perhaps hotheaded and drunken, young men; a possible conclusion, gently suggested or only implied, is that sending a large number of troops to lock down the environs around Pittsburgh might be an overreaction.

In a letter to Mifflin, for example, Thomas M’Kean and William Irvine—commissioners appointed to negotiate with the rebels on behalf of the State of Pennsylvania—insist that “the outrages committed at Mr. Nevil’s were not owing to deliberate preconcerted measures, but originated in an unbridled gust of passion artfully raised among young men, who may have been at the time too much heated with strong drink.”<sup>56</sup> In another letter, Irvine admitted that “some officers here have behaved shamefully,” but insisted that “there is nothing in all this justify the measures adopted for redress”—that is, sending 12,500 troops. For, Irvine argued, “the violent measures originated in accident and not in a premeditated plan.” Furthermore, he explained, that before the violence had irrupted, the Marshal “had served several processes in Fayette and Washington counties,” and had done so “without molestation, so far from it that many proposed to enter their stills and even pay the arrearages if he would promise to

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<sup>56</sup> Report of Pennsylvania Commissioners to the Governor, August 22, 1794, *Penn. Archives*, 196

have prosecutions stayed.”<sup>57</sup> Although this interpretation would become popular in the *aftermath* of the rebellion, it did not have much of a life in the midst of the crisis.<sup>58</sup>

### *Historiography*

In a subtle but suggestive manner, the contrast posited above—between the rebel interpretation and the Philadelphia interpretation—reappears in much of the historiographical debate about the Whiskey Rebellion, even if it is not its main focus. Authors who take quite different views on the ultimate significance of the rebellion for understanding the early American republic, and whose narratives have very different points of focus, agree that the talk in the West lacked ideological clarity or adherence to a coherent worldview, while there was something effective about the Philadelphia interpretation. Concerning the former, William Hogeland is fond of pointing out how moderate elites spoke out of both sides of their mouths, and argues that, “fellow moderates” of Hugh Henry Brackenridge “whether they found him brilliant or annoying or both, understood his tactic of feigned support for the rebellion.” Likewise, though his overall interpretation of the rebellion is in contrast to Hogeland’s, Terry Bouton’s neo-progressive account reveals a palpable frustration with the failure of the rebels to fully articulate what was really, in his analysis, at stake—the potential for demos to check

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<sup>57</sup> Gen. William Irvine to Secretary Dallas, Pittsburgh, August 20, 1794, in *Penn. Archives*, 181.

<sup>58</sup> In his retrospective account of the rebellion, William Findley occasionally elaborates on this theme, explaining that “the exertions of those who opposed the law being the result of an infatuated state of mind and a mistaken zeal.” There was, he explained, resentment among “comparatively few,” but that in the summer of 1795, this resentment had “assumed the tone of unreflecting madness, and drew into its vortex many persons of good morals, and who usually discovered a respectable measure of discretion in all their dealing as men and citizens.” Findley, *History of the Insurrection*, p. 65 and p. 85.

financial power. Finally, Patrick Griffin finds so little of ideological interest in how the Whiskey rebels talked that he is led to characterize the tax on whiskey as simply “their excuse” for citizens on the Western frontier to express a deeper, more coherent anger at a state that had failed to protect them against native Americans or strong-arm the Spanish Empire into opening the Mississippi.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to these missives on rebel incoherence, Gordon Wood has recently focused on the meaning of the rebellion for the Federalists, and in doing so he identifies the *coherence* of their interpretation-in-action as essential to the rulers of the early republic, even though the cost of that coherence was the elision of the difference between the Washington Country Militia and the democratic-republican debating societies. For the men in government in 1794, Wood explains, “it was no longer a matter of putting down riots and mobs; eighteenth-century leaders were used to dealing with temporary outbursts of the people and did not usually panic when confronted with them. But the long-standing resistance to the law by the four counties of Western Pennsylvania seemed much more serious.” That is, instead of mob trouble, the rebels thematized, for Federalists intent upon linking them to French Revolution and the advent of debating societies, the core ideological question of whether a republic could survive and what was necessary to ensure this survival. Thus historians who disagree on the significance of the rebellion nonetheless agree that the rebels were “temporizing,” while those in Philadelphia were

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<sup>59</sup> Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, p. 197; Bouton, *Taming Democracy*, p. 259-260; Griffin, *American Leviathan*, p. 224. Bouton writes that “Ordinary Pennsylvanians proved unable to organize at the ballot box to secure the power they need to push through their agenda. Their efforts remained frustrated by the gentry opposition, the difficulties of organizing across county lines, and belief that shared ideals would lead to common action, and a political culture that valorized petitions and crowd protests over electoral politics....it would be an enduring victory for the elite. Although the Federalists fell both politically and personally, the system they created to check democracy has lasted.”

building a coherent rendering of how crushing the rebellion would be an expression of the sovereignty of the people in the new republic, and thus fit precisely with the Federalist project.<sup>60</sup>

### **Interpretation, Power, Action**

The amount of contingency attached to the plan to march men from Jersey to Western Pennsylvania to crush a rebellion of war veterans should not be underestimated. Doubts about the ability of the American state to do this in 1794 were significant, to the point that Brackenridge expressed them during a public meeting. The army encountered resistance and met it with violence in Carlisle, PA, where two protesters were killed.<sup>61</sup>

However, the group centered around Hamilton succeeded, despite many material and financial obstacles, in having their interpretation enacted. The structural breakdown of the Western frontier was, to some degree, sewn up by the massive state response. Perhaps fortuitously for the Philadelphia interpretation, by 1795, the Treaty of Greenville had changed the politics of the Northwest territory, easing tensions in Pittsburgh as a result. It is perhaps an ironic mark of the Federalists' success at state-building that only a few years later, the violent rebels of 1794 would be men of Thomas Jefferson's political party, and their role would be as a potential force to be called upon by Pennsylvania Governor Thomas M'Kean during the election crisis of 1801. In the meantime, however, the crushing of the Whiskey rebellion became significant as a

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<sup>60</sup> Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 137.

<sup>61</sup> Bouton, *Taming Democracy*, 242.

representation of the willingness of the U.S. state to use force to back its economic policies towards its own citizens.

It is of course difficult to parse the myriad causes of the triumph of state power in the Whiskey Rebellion. But, from the available evidence, one is struck by the difference between the Philadelphia interpretation and the Western interpretation of the crisis, and thus inclined to allow some causal power to the sheer clarity and felicity of the Philadelphia interpretation of the crisis, no matter how flawed it was in its understanding of the grievances and motives of the westerners. The Philadelphia interpretation was highly compelling in (1) its rendering of boundaries (abstract, political, patriotic), (2) its rendering of the relationship of judiciary to military in a republic (in the end, a willingness to use the latter to support the former), and (3) in its tone of high seriousness. It construed the crisis as a test of republican political theory, and it prepared the ground perfectly for the President's two-pronged strategy: negotiate with the citizens and former revolutionary soldiers, but with a massive army arriving shortly. For this strategy of action was not merely a strategy. It also perfectly enacted the meaningful and singular question that Philadelphia, via its rhetoric, communicated to Pittsburgh: friend or enemy?

In contrast, in the many public meetings that constituted the primary interpretive space of the Whiskey Rebellion, a *lack* of definitive interpretation obtained. This manifested in the tone and spirit of the meetings, as well as their length. Freedom may indeed be an endless meeting,<sup>62</sup> and it is relatively clear that the Whiskey Rebels were

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<sup>62</sup> Francesca Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

more democratic in their internal procedures than was the state they acted against.<sup>63</sup> But their lack of a definitive interpretation of the crisis not only delayed action, but also set them on unequal footing when it came to engaging the President's negotiators. The representatives of the state apparatus they met and corresponded with had a clear, coherent and compelling position on what had happened in July, and the way forward and out of the crisis: amnesty and the end of resistance to the whiskey excise, and a recognition of the ultimate sovereignty of the U.S. government. Out west, it was not until these negotiations that the representatives of the rebels were forced to definitively interpret the meaning of the crisis that they were themselves part of. In the end, they (narrowly) voted to interpret the resistance as made up of illegal, but forgivable violence, not to be repeated in the coming years of the republic.

It is well known that in popular versions of American history, attention to the founding fathers is notoriously overgrown.<sup>64</sup> But there is one clear sense in which the Whiskey rebellion *is* a story about Alexander Hamilton. It was, in the end, through a complex set of interactions involving many different actors and institutions, the

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<sup>63</sup> Bouton recounts how the farmers at a liberty pole raising in Northumberland County “voted on *everything*: whether to raise a pole, what the flag attached to the pole should say...who should go to the woods to cut down a tree, and who would stay and dig so they could plant the pole. They voted on who would go door to door to get people to sign a petition and on who would ride not neighboring townships...” Bouton, *Taming Democracy*, 238. Johann Neem has argued that argued that the “temporizing” Western elites can be seen as part of a longer arc wherein American elites articulated an understanding of freedom of association in such a way that neither the rebels’ violent resistance to the law, nor the Federalist suppression of the societies, were legitimate. Johann Neem, “Freedom of Association in the Early Republic: The Republican Party, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the Philadelphia and New York Cordwainers’ Cases,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. CXXVII, No. 3, 2003.

<sup>64</sup> William Novak argues that this popular tendency also infects scholarly studies of the American state. William J. Novak, “The Concept of the State in American History,” in James T. Sparrow, William J. Novak, and Stephen W. Sawyer, eds. *Boundaries of the State in US History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Hamiltonian interpretation that emerged as both the ground for effective action and, in many if not all cases, as the interpretation that structured the memory of the event. As Terry Bouton has pointed out, the continuing reference to the episode as the “Whiskey rebellion” or “Whiskey Insurrection” in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography of the event was a Hamiltonian victory, evoking as it does drunken and misguided rebels.<sup>65</sup>

Hamilton’s grasp of hermeneutic power—which he successfully exercised over Washington, Washington’s cabinet, and ultimately over the rebels themselves, was a serious accomplishment indeed, though one which should perhaps give us pause from a normative point of view.

### **Variation in the struggle to interpret crises: The Salem Witch Trials**

Each of the terms proposed here that constitute the building up of a crisis—boundaries, selection, and speech genre—are terms intended to capture how pre-crisis structures are, despite institutional breakdown, mobilized to build up the crisis in a certain way. The boundaries of the crisis are established when certain material geographies and symbolic boundaries are drawn together to locate the crisis; selection puts the focus on certain aspects of the pre-crisis society, leaving others in the shadows; speech genres deploy extant ways of talking as a way to get a grip on a new, and perhaps initially difficult to comprehend, situation. In other words, what is presented here is a theory of how, via various materials, bodies, and speech acts, an institutional breakdown and the pre-crisis structural tensions that generated it are *translated into* the specific meaning and scope of “the crisis.”

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<sup>65</sup> Bouton, *Taming Democracy*, p. 218.

In the Whiskey Rebellion, the struggle over the interpretation of crisis proceeded via the development and co-existence of different interpretations, one of which was more coherent and, in the end, enforced by military power. But other trajectories for the struggle of interpretation are possible. Here I briefly introduce a useful contrasting case, in which a single coherent interpretation of the crisis was imposed by elites, only to be turned on its head.

*Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Salem Witch Trials*

Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1691 was, in many ways, a chaotic mess. The charter had been evacuated by James I in 1684, and the creation of the Dominion of New England create meant that its appointed governor (and Anglican) Edmund Andros could impose the long arm of empire from his seat in Boston. When news of the Glorious Revolution came ashore in 1689, the Puritan leaders initiated a rebellion of their own, jailing Andros. They sent Increase Mather to London negotiate a new charter. The roiling politics of the years without a Charter rendered the legal system uncertain, and it was the legal system that, since midcentury, had replaced religious community as a source of day-to-day social control (much to the chagrin of certain Congregationalist ministers).<sup>66</sup> Thus institutional guides for action were wanting. Andros had challenged decades old land titles, and the question was: would the challenges to his challenges now win out? Also, while the legislature was reconstituted to its pre-1684 form, it was not clear if it could legitimately rule, given that it did not have the stamp of the new King and Queen. Finally, Puritan

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<sup>66</sup> David Konig, *Law and Society in Puritan Massachusetts* (University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

elites worried: would the horrid use of meetinghouses for Anglican prayer—and other telltale signs of religious decline—continue, or would the “popery” be held at bay?

In 1692, through a process that can also be traced via the examination of boundaries, selection, and speech genre, “the crisis” became “the witch crisis” in Massachusetts. This case has been extensively addressed elsewhere; here I briefly examine how this happened.<sup>67</sup> It is a commonplace in the historical literature that the accusations that constituted the Salem Witch Trials came in two waves, with the second wave actions also involving the execution of some of the accused in the first wave.<sup>68</sup> Important in making the first wave possible was the accusation of Rebecca Nurse. This was one of the moments when a “normal” witch trial would have ground to a halt, given Nurse’s high status in the Village. Instead, the accusation of this beloved Puritan matriarch was used to amplify the sense of urgency attached to the witch hunt, as it was offered as evidence of how deep the attack from the Devil ran.

In the public sermons given at the time of Nurse’s accusation, we can trace the ways in which Deodat Lawson and Samuel Parris gave the crisis meaningful content.<sup>69</sup> Both sermons were at pains to locate the crisis within the Congregation, and by extension, within the pious of Massachusetts. Salem Village was the seat of the attack,

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<sup>67</sup> For more extensive treatments of the Salem Witch Trials as a case study, see Isaac Ariail Reed, “Why Salem Made Sense: Culture, Gender, and Puritan Persecution of Witchcraft,” *Cultural Sociology* 1(2): 209-234, 2007, and Isaac Ariail Reed, “Deep Culture in Action: Resignification, synecdoche, and metanarrative in the moral panic of the Salem Witch Trials,” *Theory and Society* 44: 65-94, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Ray, “The Geography of Witchcraft Accusations in 1692 Salem Village,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 65: 449-478, 2008.

<sup>69</sup> Deodat Lawson, “Christ’s Fidelity the Only Shield Against Satan’s Malignity,” pp. 124-128 in Paul Boyer and Seven Nissenbaum, eds., *Salem Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Samuel Parris, “Christ Knows How Many Devils There Are,” pp. 129-131 in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Village Witchcraft*.

but the attack was on the *project* of the Colony as a whole. Thus it was, according to Lawson, *relevant* to all the people of Massachusetts. He gave his warning “to all manner of persons, according to their condition of life, both in civil and sacred order; both high and low, rich and poor, old and young, bond and free.” But though relevant to all, the particular point that both ministers wanted to drive home was that “visible members of the church”<sup>70</sup> had in fact become threats to the community and the colony by having signed the Devil’s book. This idea of witchcraft as having struck the center of the religiously defined community is also why Parris took John 6:70—“Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a Devil” as the reference point for his sermon.

Furthermore, a specific social relation was highlighted. In his sermon, Lawson devoted a long paragraph beseeching the magistrates to pursue the prosecution of the accused with vigor. He asked them to “do all that in you lies to check and rebuke Satan; endeavoring, by all ways and means that are according to the rule of God, to discover his instruments in these horrid operations. You are concerned in the civil government of this people, being invested with power by their Sacred Majesties, under this glorious Jesus (the King and Governor of his church), for the supporting of Christ’s kingdom...we entreat you, bear not the sword in vain...but approve yourselves a terror of and punishment to evil-doers...ever remembering that you judge not for men, but for the Lord.”<sup>71</sup>

Among much else, Lawson here highlights the relationship between the magistrates and the ministers as corporate bodies in Massachusetts. This relationship would be highlighted again when a set of ministers sent their advice to magistrates about

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<sup>70</sup> Lawson, “Christ’s Fidelity,” p. 125.

<sup>71</sup> Lawson, “Christ’s Fidelity,” p. 128.

the use of spectral evidence during the Trials. The elite speakers at Salem were embedded in a variety of power networks, and, the accusers and accused during the witch trials were variously positioned in the larger social and economic landscape of New England. However, as the witch crisis was built up, the relationship between ministers and magistrates became central to the problem of fighting the witches in Essex County.

Finally, it is important to note the tone that the early sermons at Salem carried. In their arguments, they were resolutely apocalyptic, connecting through a vast, elaborate and majestic metonymy the witches, the crisis of the colony, and the war of the Devil and the Savior. Indeed, throughout the Trials, the talk in and around Salem was conducted in a tone of melodramatic, manichean drama—one might say in the language of the heroic epic.

Add to this all of the hard work of trekking between Salem Village and Salem Town, elites coming down from, or writing from, Boston, and the terrifying scenes of afflicted girls in spasms in the sacred space of the meeting house. (It was no small task to put on a witch trial in 1692). The result was a crisis centered in Salem Village, but extended to the whole of the Colony and perhaps to New England at large. It had gone to the heart of the most religious members of the community, which spoke to the special urgency of the crisis. It foregrounded the complex relationship between ministers and magistrates as two groups of leaders of the colony potentially responsible for resolving the crisis. And it narrated the crisis as a moment in apocalyptic time, with all the attendant stories of Satan's amassed armies and the deep, heroic language of the Puritan "errand in the Wilderness." Thus, for a very short while, the problems of Puritan New England became about witches.

This interpretation was, in the summer of 1692, very difficult to dispute. Indeed, the risk associated with proposing a different interpretation of the crisis—that is, the risk of being accused of witchcraft oneself—has become fodder for novels, plays, and television shows ever since. At Salem, then, legal uncertainty, failure in war, and imperial-religious politics were projected through the prism of a scourge of witches. This *briefly* returned the ministry to a position of power that had been lost in the third generation of Puritan elites, and it cost the lives of 19 men and women.

However, if this interpretation exhibited an extreme form of hermeneutic power for a short period of time—enabling, in effect, a small set of ministers and magistrates to seize and apply the violent apparatus of government repression—it also proved to be tremendously fragile. It was quickly smashed in autumn, via a combination of elite interpretation and action. Thomas Brattle’s circulated letter, written well within the confines of the Puritan worldview, expressed extreme skepticism about the trials, and the possibility that members of the *Boston* elite would be accused spurred a counter action, whereby the newly installed governor suspended the court of Oyer and Terminer that had been tasked with trying and convicting witches.<sup>72</sup> When he reinstated it, the tide of interpretation had turned; only a few years later, Samuel Sewall was apologizing to his congregation for his role in the trials, and Cotton Mather’s reputation began its long decline.<sup>73</sup>

This brief introduction of a second case allows comparison, and thus provides an avenue to further theoretical investigation of the “missing link” between structural

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<sup>72</sup> “Letter of Thomas Brattle, F.R.S., 1692,” Pp. 165-190 in *Narratives of the New England Witchcraft Cases*, edited by George Lincoln Burr (New York: Dover Publications, 2002).

<sup>73</sup> Richard Francis, *Judge Sewall’s Apology: The Salem Witch Trials and the Forming of an American Conscience*. (New York: Harper, 2006).

breakdown and crisis action. Initially, the comparison draws our attention to how the struggle over interpretation can vary in space and time in interesting ways. In the Whiskey Rebellion, there was a sharp spatial cleavage in interpretation, between center and periphery. Then, as the crisis progressed, on the basis of the action of those grounded in the center's interpretation, these two interpretations were forced to confront one another. In the case of Salem, some spatial cleavages existed, but in a more private way—certain elites in Boston were surely skeptical about the trials all along, but their voices did not emerge in public until the fall of 1692. So, in the Salem case, there is primarily *temporal* variation in the publically accepted interpretation of the crisis. First, we see an extremely vigorous growth in the public interpretation of the troubles of Massachusetts as bound up with witchcraft, leading to an understanding that held sway long enough to allow for well-regarded neighbors and church members to be accused by the hundreds, and 19 of them to be hanged. During this period, this violence was repeatedly interpreted as necessary for saving the Colony. However, shortly after the hangings of September 11, 1692, a massive public reversal of interpretation took place. This reversal provided the meaningful ground and justification for disbanding the prosecutorial apparatus.

We can generalize from this easily: structural breakdowns can have multiple public interpretations across space and time, as well being subject to variation in their coherence and rhetorical power. Tracing the interpretation of crisis in this way, and thus accessing interesting variations in how crises are construed, is precisely the way to navigate the opposition between “structure” and “action” in analyzing a political crisis.

## Fetish or theme?

This basic idea—that there is spatial and temporal variation in the construal of crisis via a struggle over interpretation raises a natural next question: how do these (variable) interpretations of crisis relate to the structural breakdowns that induce them?

For this question, the comparison of the Salem Witch Trials to the Whiskey Rebellion provides a different kind of insight. It allows us to see that the relationship between the interpretations of a crisis that emerge, and the breakdown that these interpret, can be subjected to critical scrutiny. That is to say, we can examine this relationship and conclude that a given construal of a crisis distorts or misconstrues the sources of breakdown, or we might conclude that it focuses and represents the breakdown. I will call the first possibility, following Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, a *fetishizing* interpretation of crisis,<sup>74</sup> and the second possibility, a *thematizing* interpretation of crisis, and I intend this difference to be conceptualized as a spectrum allowing for differences of degree.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> I call one pole of the spectrum fetishization in reference to Horkheimer's and Adorno's understanding of fetishization of interpretation, and in particular, *one* of their many interpretations of the role of anti-semitism in capitalist societies approaching, or in, crisis. (I make no claim that this is the only vantage point they provide on anti-semitism). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* they write that anti-semitism is a "luxury for the masses" and that it "is an obvious asset to the ruling clique. It is used as a diversion, a cheap means of corruption and an intimidating example. The respectable rackets support it, and the low ones practice it." Later they refer to how the masses "feel mocked" by the rights of man which has not lived up to its promises of happiness, that "they must suppress the very possibility and idea of that happiness." They continue, "And so people shout: Stop Theif!—but point at the Jews." The Freudian language is, of course, not at all accidental. However, as I will try to show below, the specifically *economistic* aspect of this interpretation of fetishism is, while always a possibility in the analysis of crisis, by no means necessary. Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Continuum Publishers, 1972), 170, 172.

<sup>75</sup> I want to express my deepest thanks to Andrew Perrin and Steven Pincus for two, separate, inspiring conversations that led me to make this distinction.

In some arguments about the epistemology of the human sciences, there is an unfortunate tendency to think that an approach that focuses so intently on interpretation cannot make judgments of this kind—e.g. between a fetishized and a thematizing interpretation. Those who take this position hold that, once one embraces “constructivism” such judgments become impossible, because they cannot be grounded “objectively.” But this is not correct, and it is an impoverished reading of the interpretive project. If “culture” refers to the role of meaning in social life, then both structural breakdown and the interpretation of crisis involve “culture”: both the institutions that precede a crisis, and the actions that take place within one, will involve human subjectivity, signification and communication, material semiotics, etc. The important matter to investigate is, rather, whether the content of a crisis refers in a relatively direct way to some of the institutional problems that made an interpretation of crisis necessary in the first place. If so, we say the interpretation of crisis thematizes the breakdown. If not, we say the interpretation fetishizes its meaningful content and displaces the breakdown.<sup>76</sup> For the cases presented here, I interpret the Salem Witch Trials closer to the fetishization pole of the spectrum, and the Whiskey Rebellion as closer to the

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<sup>76</sup> In *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978), Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts articulated, for modern critical theory and cultural studies, the essential problematic for understanding the sociological distinction between the structural roots of crisis, on the one hand, and its construal as meaningful (especially by the modern media), on the other. At the core of their claim was that the “semiotic spiral” around the “mugging problem” aided the interests of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century state in capitalist society both by displacing attention from the various failures by the state vis-a-vis the economic crisis, and by enhancing the legitimacy of violent state responses to protest (e.g., by associating student protest with “hooliganism,” and conflating both of those with a crime wave, thus inducing moral panic). This was, as is well known, the basis of a critical approach to moral panics as ideological distortions of extant social problems and conflicts. However, I see it as describing one end of a spectrum between displacement/fetishization and thematization/focus.

thematization pole. Explaining how and why this is so should enable us to clear up some key issues in the social theory of crisis.

What does it mean to hypothesize, as historians have, that the Salem Witch Trials *displaced* the anxiety of political crisis onto a hunt for witches?<sup>77</sup> To make this argument is, in my view, entirely consistent with an understanding of the crisis in Massachusetts in the 1680s and 1690s as having been, in part, a matter of religion and otherworldliness. To the elite and populace of 17<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts, witches were real, as was the occult more generally, and for this and other reasons, the witch was a very real social role (obviously, it was also real in its consequences for discovered witches). That is to say, witchcraft and magic were part of the institutional structure of society before the breakdown. But even given this, and given the more general way in which Puritan magistrates and ministers conceptualized society (and even economic activity) in religious terms, we can still see the witch trials as a fetishized, distorted misconstrual of the process of institutional breakdown that characterized late 17<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts.

For, that breakdown was simultaneously political, legal, military *and* religious, and as such, it was poorly articulated by the pursuit of witches. Politically, Massachusetts faced the authoritarian transformation of the English (soon to be British) empire that began in the 1670s, took off with the accession of James II, and took an entirely new direction with the glorious revolution. Legally, as Massachusetts society became more diverse along several different dimensions, it also became more litigious, but then, with the revocation of the charter, this new legal organization of society was thrown into

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<sup>77</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Vintage, 2003); Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

radical doubt. Militarily, the war in Maine was a scene of repeated, bloody failure.<sup>78</sup> Finally, and related to this, is the longstanding issue of religious decline, which was certainly a deeply felt reality in the minds of the Massachusetts elite, along with the more existential angst of being a less-than-heroic third generation. All of this together constituted a “breakdown” in the sense that the routine aspects of organizing several different spheres of social life—especially political and legal, but also religious—evaporated.

However, in construing the crisis in 1692, Puritan elites drew on the gendered metaphysics of Puritan culture, and in particular Calvinism’s rendering of gender relations. They thus drew upon well-entrenched cultural schemas,<sup>79</sup> but in doing so they displaced onto these schemas the issues of religious decline, military defeat, and political uncertainty. The specifically gendered and familial fear of witches, who, as misbehaving women, were interpreted as fundamentally disturbing the relationship between the Colony and the cosmos, became a place to direct anxiety and energy. This fetishization was dependent upon and a rendering of the breakdown of legal and political institutions, but it did not articulate them in any clear way. It was a deep expression of important themes in Puritan culture, but it did not connect directly to the institutional breakdown from which it came.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare*.

<sup>79</sup> Isaac Ariail Reed, “Why Salem Made Sense.”

<sup>80</sup> This difficulty of interpretation—wherein the witch trials *were* an expression of Puritan culture, but *were not* a clear articulation of what was really at stake in Massachusetts religiously, politically, and economically between 1684 and 1692, reveals itself in the long historiography of the witch trials and the contentious place they occupy in the historical imagination of the period. On the one hand, the need for new renderings of Salem appears unquenchable. On the other hand, many renderings suggest strongly that

In contrast, while it is easy to show that some specifics of the Federalist interpretation of the Whiskey Rebellion were incorrect, in a broader sense the three interpretations reconstructed above articulated the institutional problems haunting the new Federal state, though they did so in reductive and incomplete, or in muddled, terms. The rebellion revealed the US Government to be both ambitious in reach (actually trying to tax whiskey in Western Pennsylvania), and uncertain in its legitimacy (in 1792, state elites could not agree if military force was necessary; in 1794, westerners could not make up their minds about how to think about Washington's orders and proclamations). It *thematized* in other words, precisely the problem of divided sovereignty that was central to the ratification struggle, and it did so in a way that articulated some of the populist themes that had attended that struggle.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, it articulated in concrete terms an essential constitutional problem to emerge from that struggle, namely how and when the President could call on emergency powers. Finally, in their ambiguous interpretation of their own revolt, the rebels articulated the complex and contradictory relationship to the new Federal state of conscripted revolutionary troops turned enfranchised white male farmers. These men simultaneously wanted the state to protect them from Indian violence, to stay off their land and refrain from foreclosing their farms, and to tax wealthy merchants if the government needed money. Thus in this case, the rebellion *thematized* the breakdown that opened the space for the crisis in 1794.

From this difference between the witchcraft crisis and the crisis of the whiskey tax we can see that the older image from historical sociology of political, economic, and

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the trials were a displacement of energy (most magnificently, Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*. Random House, 2002.)

<sup>81</sup> Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*.

demographic causes (equated with “structure”) bringing about crisis, which then finds its expression via culture during the crisis itself, is insufficient. There is culture and political economy on both sides of the blurry line that divides crisis from pre-crisis, structure from unsettlement. The difference, rather, is one of institutionalized versus non-institutionalized uses of meaning. And that difference is one whose centerpiece is the interpretation of the crisis, which forms the bridge between structural breakdown and crisis action.

## **Conclusion**

In a recent paper, Sidney Tarrow reviewed the historiography of the French Revolution, and argued that a “political process” perspective could shed light on the revolutionary decade 1789-1799. In particular, Tarrow insists that Charles Tilly’s theories of state-building and contentious politics could help to explain the inner life of the Revolution—to address, that is, the space in between its (structural) causes and its outcome.<sup>82</sup> His argument was, in essence, that the classic process-mechanisms of war and provisioning, on the one hand, and political contention, on the other, help explain the trajectory of the unsettled revolutionary years, and, in particular, the origins of the Terror in the pressures of war-making. Thus, even in times of massive upheaval, states make war and war makes states.<sup>83</sup> By articulating the political process perspective vis-a-vis the revolution, Tarrow attempts to avoid being either “structuralist” or “anti-structuralist”.

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<sup>82</sup> Sidney Tarrow, “‘Red of Tooth and Claw’: The French Revolution and the Political Process—Then and Now,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 29(1).

<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, Tarrow’s argument is significantly more process-oriented than Tilly’s original argument in *Capital, Coercion and European States* (Cambridge, MA:

The theoretical language developed herein also tries to navigate between structuralism and anti-structuralism in the analysis of crisis, but with much more attention to the consciousness that crisis actors have of the times they are living through. How do they construe the crisis? To understand this, we have to trace the struggle over interpretation found in the space between pre-crisis and crisis. Then we can see the importance of the politics of interpretation. For the French Revolution, for example, we might investigate how and when the Revolution crystallized as a crisis about “liberty,” “the end of feudalism,” “equality,” or the violent protection of the “virtue” of the people and the republic. To do this tracing, one would need to be sensitized by the concepts of boundary-making, selection, and speech genre.

Such a view has one final aspect to recommend it as an avenue for future research and discussion. It provides an interesting way to think about classic texts on the French Revolution. Hannah Arendt founded her extensive philosophical reflections on revolution on her own account of a shift in the interpretation of content—of what the revolution was primarily about. For Arendt, the moment when the French Revolution became about the “needs” of the people qua hungry, organic bodies, its relationship to political freedom was lost.<sup>84</sup> And Francois Furet analyzed the function of the discursive figure of the

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Blackwell, 1992), wherein his account of the Revolution focused almost entirely on the top down installation of direct rule by a small cadre of unified elites (see pp. 107-114).

<sup>84</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006). She writes, for example, “Robespierre’s glorification of the poor, at any rate, his praise of suffering as the spring of virtue were sentimental in the strict sense of the word, and as such dangerous enough, even if they were not, as we are inclined to suspect, a mere pretext for lust for power” (p. 79). And, earlier, “What counted here, in this great effort of a general human solidarization, was selflessness, the capacity to lose oneself in the sufferings of others, rather than active goodness, and what appeared most odious and even most dangerous was selfishness rather than wickedness” (p. 71). This study of the crystallization of the French Revolution allows her philosophical statements such as:

“aristocratic plot” in the development of the French Revolution (1981: 54-61). The Terror, in his account, is at least in part explainable as the result of what he argues was a fetishized interpretation of the crisis. In that construal, boundaries of the revolution became extraordinarily abstract (“friends” and “enemies” of the revolution having almost no concrete qualities, and thus applicable everywhere), and its accompanying stories became narratives of high morality and asceticism. The speech genre, then, became the melodramatic morality play, centered on a dedication to the virtues of republicanism, and driven by Robespierre’s mastery of this genre of speech. This particular construal of crisis was ended with Robespierre’s downfall. Thus again we see the importance of interpreting the crisis: the revolution became *about* the inner fidelity of its leaders to “the people” as an abstract entity.<sup>85</sup>

All of this is to say that successful, felicitous interpretation is a format of power, and as such, it is a necessary component of politics, revolutionary or otherwise. My argument here has been that to understand how a political breakdown becomes an event wherein specific actions can remake the political game and carve out the future structure of society, we must study the conflicts and struggles to interpret what the breakdown

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“The Revolution, when it turned from the foundation of freedom to the liberation of man from suffering, broke down the barriers of endurance and liberated, as it were, the devastating forces of misfortune and misery instead” (p. 102).

<sup>85</sup> Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, p. 75. He writes: “In fact, the Terror was ‘impossible’ after 9 Thermidor because society had recovered its independence from politics. But that recovery itself had become possible only because revolutionary ideology was no longer co-extensive with power. Henceforth, ideological notions were subordinated to pragmatic action... To defend the Republic against the internal royalist offensive of 1798, the Thermidorians had no need to assert that they were ‘the people.’” Lynn Hunt makes a similar argument in *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 39. For an extensive discussion of this matter, see Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror,” *American Historical Review*, 105(3): 691-713, 2000.

means. The interpretation of crisis is a particularly fraught format of interpretive power, for it is caught between well-established habit and the halls of power, on the one hand, and the opportunity for new action, on the other. In that space, actors may muddle through, unclear about the meaning of their actions; actors may pronounce bold new meanings, which, while empirically unverifiable, are deeply compelling as sources of action; actors may profane others so as to enhance their ability to compel their own audiences; and actors may dress up their own interests as universal ones. But whatever they do, they have to set the stage before they act. That is the process I have tried to elucidate herein.