What is interpretive explanation in Sociohistorical Analysis?

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The distinction between understanding and explanation, frequently used to make sense of the human sciences and their relationship to the natural or physical sciences, reliably destabilizes philosophical categorizations, because it is ontological, epistemological, and pragmatic all at once. “Understanding” can describe what historians and sociologists study, that is to say, a “sociology of understandings”¹ (ontology: people, with their understandings of the world and their wild and wonderfully weird subjectivities), how they study them (epistemology: methods of interpretation leading to understanding, routes to secure the validity of interpretation), and the inherently communicative nature of scholarly investigation and publishing as an accomplishable task (pragmatics: science is similar in some ways to all communicative action—for example, it has both a constative and performative dimension). It is tempting, then, to deconstruct the distinction between explanation and understanding itself. But this would be a mistake; instead an ill-fated but nonetheless useful attempt at sublation should be attempted. In what follows, I do so from a point of view defined by the line between sociology and history, a zone full of hermeneutic problems but surprisingly under-influenced by hermeneutic philosophy. I will refer to the research that occurs at this line as “sociohistorical analysis,” and be concerned to show, in a concrete register defined by an arena of empirical study, how “interpretive explanation” works.²

For sociohistorical analysis, the debate about explanation and understanding matters because what it means to successfully explain (account for? retrodict? predict?) why people do what they do (or why they did, what they did) is both in dispute, and massively consequential for—to give just a few examples—policy proposals, the collective self-understanding of groups of people confronting their own violent histories, and the constitution of social movements as organizations both identity-bound and strategic. And, since the birth of the modern historical profession, the question of explanation and understanding as been part of thinking about the very possibility of doing history itself. What is an explanation? How does it work? When is it causal? And how do you make causal statements about particular historical transformations, full of willful agents engaged in contingent contests for power?³

Hermeneutics suggests, rather obviously, that explanation is subsumed under a broader category of human understanding, which can take many forms. Less obviously, hermeneutics suggests that causal explanation itself can be usefully reformed via a reconceptualization driven by hermeneutic approaches to meaning. In other words, not only is explanation a subcategory of understanding, but also explanation itself is simultaneously causal and interpretive in an interesting and underexplored way.

This idea of interpretive explanation—captured famously in Max Weber’s definition of sociology in the opening pages of Economy and Society—can be better comprehended by expanding our purview on causality beyond the intent imitation of

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efficient causality in social theory. This devotion to efficient causality is based usually upon one or another idealization of the causal theories of the natural sciences, but it lives in many forms, and is perhaps the ultimate sense in which Thomas Hobbes can be interpreted as the founder of modern social thought.

To move outside of thinking efficient causality, I present a necessarily degraded reading of Aristotle’s four causes—degraded in the sense that is bent towards the problems of 20th-century and 21st-century social theory, and thus glides and glosses over major problems in the philosophical interpretation of Aristotle. With regrets, then, I propose a reformulation of Aristotle’s schema of four causes so as to draw distinction between forming and forcing causality which, in my view, would greatly enhance our comprehension of what is at stake in debates about causality in sociohistorical analysis. I show how this is the case by examining debates about the origins of the French Revolution.

I. Aristotle’s Four Causes in Sociological Theory: A hermeneutic possibility?

As is well known, in the Metaphysics, Aristotle gives the example of the casting of a bronze statue, and divides the causal aspects of this situation into four. The material cause is the bronze (e.g. the temperature at which it melts, its properties as a liquid and as a solid). The final cause is the endpoint of the process, “that for the sake of which other things are”—in this case, the finished statue. The efficient cause is that from which change comes, that is to say, the actual pouring of the bronze into the caste. And finally, the formal cause is, somewhat elusively “the whole, the synthesis, the form,” the

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reference for which is the way in which a designed plaster caste gives shape to the bronze poured into it. I propose that by interpreting this schema with the problems of contemporary sociohistorical analysis in mind, this enigmatically given example can be useful for sorting through the causal confusion of social theory, and rendering somehow comprehensible the idea of interpretive explanation.

Though there are accounts in social theory of the relationship between Marx’s concept of labor and Aristotle’s metaphysics, of the importance of the distinction between *zoe* and *bios* for understanding politics and state-society relations, and even an attempt to base sociological research itself on the specifically Aristotelean concept of *phronesis,* I here depart from the overwhelming emphasis in Aristotelean social theory on the constitution of human beings as practical reasoners in pursuit of good action or as political actors engaged in collective decision-making. This is because, in my view, for the problem of understanding/explanation in contemporary sociohistorical analysis, the dominant account of Aristotle’s metaphysics and epistemology comes from Donald Levine, who developed an understanding of Aristotle’s four causes as a means to comprehend a vast array of arguments in the history of modern social theory, and to argue against the reductionism inherent in many different approaches to explaining human life. Levine’s basic reading is as follows.

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Levine begins by noting Aristotle’s differentiation of the universal “theoretical” sciences from the “practical sciences,” thus lining Aristotle up with Max Weber, Wilhelm Dilthey, and the elements of Karl Marx’s work that emphasize historical conjunctures and specificities.10 This is because, unlike the “internal” dynamic of natural substances, human actions are subject to will, opinion, and how people construe the good. Thus the human sciences must strive for knowledge of “particulars”.11 Then, Levine argues that Aristotle distinguishes between that which is still “natural” about human action, and that which is “artificial.” The passions (motivating emotions like grief, hate, desire, etc.) are “organismically grounded” (Levine’s term).12 “These provide the motivational energies for action.”13 Also, the faculties are also organismically grounded—sense perception, calculation, ability for thought, etc. All of this, then, is grounded in the “material cause” (or, we could say, the biophysical substrate of being human).

There are some social elements to the “material cause” of human nature in Levine’s interpretation—humans naturally form associations, and the polis, in particular “exists by nature.” This is because “(1) human beings by nature are endowed with the faculty of speech, by which they are disposed to discourse about good and bad, a disposition they can express only in the political community; (2) the component units of the polis, households and village, exist by nature; (3) the polis is the form of association towards which these unites aspire, the culmination of their existence—and that makes it their end.”14

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10 Levine writes that, “methods geared to the demonstration of universal propositions are therefore out of place in the practical sciences, Visions, 109.
11 Levine, Visions, 108.
12 Levine, Visions, 112.
13 Levine, Visions, 112.
14 Levine, Visions, 113.
Thus, in Levine’s reading, the human sciences are constituted or founded on an Aristotelean distinction between nature and artifice, with an understanding of *material* and *final* causes as “natural,” and of *efficient* and *formal* causes as “artificial.” Of these artificial causes, Levine suggests that we think of a political *regime* (e.g. as defined by Charles Tilly as “repeated, strong interactions among major political actors including a government”\(^\text{15}\))—as a formal cause, and the socialization and education that reinforces a regime as an efficient cause. In other words, formal causes refer to large social and state structures, whereas efficient causes are what we see “at work” in reproducing them, when we turn on the sociological microscope.

Levine uses all of this as a way to develop an anti-Hobbesian agenda for social and political theory. The idea here is that for Thomas Hobbes, the human world is constituted as a great field of interacting impulses, just as the mechanical world is constituted as a great field of interacting atoms, and their force is so strong that they perturb the workings of the only other natural phenomenon humans evince, reason. Analysis of these intertacting motions, based on the natural propensities of atomic individualism, constitutes the alpha and omega of Hobbesian social science.

Hobbes thus “eliminates two other phenomena that Aristotle also assumed to be natural: the propensity of substances to actualize their potential in a certain direction, and the tendency of humans to organize themselves in enduring associations.”\(^\text{16}\)

Hobbes is, for Levine, the origins of the ‘modern’ reductionism that he wants to avoid, and he does so by resisting both Hobbes’ tendency to make causes in human life

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\(^{16}\) Levine, *Visions*, 124.
“natural,” and his rather exclusive interest in “material and efficient causes.” It is not hard to see that Levine’s reading here is in fact part of the argument, in sociology, against rational choice theory, methodological individualism, etc. However, beyond this particular set of arguments, Levine’s reading of Aristotle is useful because it locates quite clearly the links between Aristotle and the hermeneutic understanding of the human sciences in Dilthey, and because it shows how pre-modern schemas can be used to unsettle thinking about social causality in the contemporary philosophy of social science, and in sociological research itself.

I view Levine’s argument is correct in so far as it finds and criticizes in contemporary social science a tendency to read material interests, on the one hand, and efficient social mechanisms, on the other, onto every social situation that is being analyzed, in a way that creates parsimony at the cost of external validity. (cite Cartwright). If this is what we mean by reduction, then clearly Aristotle, and the hermeneutic tradition more generally, is its antidote. But to affirm and advance this antidote, I want to propose a different reading of the classic Aristotelean schema.

II. Rereading Aristotle: Forcing and Forming Causes

My reading is less informed by the debates about classical and modern social theory which occupied Levine, and more informed by cultural sociology and, to some degree, science and technology studies. It also draws on Alastair MacIntyre for its reconceptualization of formal causes. It is as follows.

Consider again the casting of the bronze statue as Aristotle’s point of theorization for causality. The material cause, the properties of bronze, should be reconceptualized as the materiality of social life that participates in an assemblage. That is to say, there are
material objects and technologies that are implicated in the heterogeneous networks and alliances that make up social life. Frequent examples of material causes in sociohistorical analysis include the built environment (including, famously for Bruno Latour, mechanical door closers), the “natural” environment, human bodies, and transportation, communication, and production technologies.\textsuperscript{17}

The final cause is conceptualized elsewhere by Aristotle as telos or purpose, but here in terms of the image of final statue in the artist’s mind, which is very close to saying the artist’s intention. Final causes, then, should be read as referring to that set of causes we could call the motivation of human actors. Within the space of these sorts of causes, we find a set of debates about reasons, intentions, unconscious motives, and habituation, as well as the ubiquitous question of “interest” in social science explanations.\textsuperscript{18}

Efficient causes are of course the most trouble, for a reason that is four hundred years old. Since the attack on the scholastics in the scientific revolution, the pull to have one’s own causal rendering of the world understood by the scientific community as an efficient cause is like intellectual gravity—you can fight it and build buildings that help you avoid crashing to the earth, but it does not go away. In social theory, this is central to the appeal of rational action theory and analytical sociology. But, from a hermeneutic perspective, we can see efficient causes as social mechanisms that are one part of the larger causal imagination. This, in particular, aids historical sociology, which has always


been centered around questions about the conditions for, and pathways whereby, social life comes to be more “efficient” or “mechanistic.” In other words, in historical sociology, we are in the business not only of identifying social mechanisms, but in trying to figure out the answers to questions such as When and how did state power become more \textit{mechanistic} and \textit{efficient} in its application? and How did the \textit{rationalization} of scholarship occur in relationship to the advent of bureaucracy and the market society? Thus, Aristotle’s efficient causes should be reconceptualized as the repeatable, reliable, codified social mechanisms that can be triggered. These can be examined via “process tracing.” Further examples are the triggering of the legal process by the filing of charges, self-fulfilling prophesies such as bank runs, and a variety of cause-effect mechanisms that we associate with market competition.

Finally, formal causes should be thought of indicating the dependence of human action on meaning, with an understanding that meaning includes referential, moral, and aesthetic elements. In other words, the references for actions, when they emanate from motives and participate in social actions, also include previous actions, not in themselves, but \textit{as those previous actions are understood}. Those previous actions that are in the network of reference for an action thus make up its \textit{meaningful context}. In his classic essay on the intelligibility of action Alastair MacIntyre explains that if you consider different sequences of actions, of differing temporal expanse, one quickly finds that such sequences are also “of different types: conversations, feuds, enquiries such as those of the sciences, projects in the arts or politics, playing through a particular game and indefinitely many more long- or short-term individual or joint types of project and
transaction.” What MacIntyre calls intelligibility, we might identify as the formal cause in action-reaction sequences, whose shaping of motive and mechanism makes both more concrete, and more comprehensible as motives and mechanisms with force in the world. Thus, for MacIntyre, “intelligibility is an objective property of actions or of sets of actions; it is not in the eye of the beholder” and thus includes in its purview both “the private world of the mental as well as the public world of the social.”

MacIntryre then renders intelligibility as a property of everyday routines and of more consciously cultivated and rationally criticized practices (under which we can include sculpture).

The colligation of different actions sequences into types may vary significantly in the degree of generality that is possible while keeping a grip on the meanings that inflect action. So, if we take the intelligibility of action seriously, we will have to let the generality of an appropriate explanation vary by the research question as a well-defined why question about certain specific actions. For some research questions, the practice of sculpture in the classical tradition may be enough of a reference point to get at the formal cause; for other questions, important distinctions between different artistic schools will be significant. What all such explanations share, however, is this embedding of the push and pull of the world into a meaningful context.

At this point we have, then, a recharacterization of Aristotle’s four causes that can be tracked in the following way:

---material: built environment, technology, materiality

---final: motives, interests, and intentions as the springs of action


--efficient: social processes that achieve regularity

--formal: the meaningful or intelligible background or context for action

One of the clear indications of several decades worth of work in science and technology studies is that the material causes are complexly intertwined with the formal in “giving form to” or “shaping meaningfully” how humans are motivated and navigate the social world. In other words, the way in which the world grants agencement to certain actions and not others, requires a comprehension of meaningful context, understood in a hermeneutic way, but also material semiotics. I would, indeed, suggest that in a hermeneutic social science, the role of the material is paired well with formal causes in so far as both together constitute the historically variable context for action. The question then becomes how, if we understand these as types of causes, our understanding of and conduct of sociohistorical inquiry will change.

To begin with, a significantly different reading of the human sciences’ relationship to the natural sciences than that proposed by Levine emerges. It now appears that, in so far as accounting for human action in its full efflorescence remains the goal of the human sciences in general and sociohistorical inquiry in particular, it is the material and formal causes that make up a complex of historical difficulties for the investigator that are relatively alienated from the image of natural science in Western modernity. Both the meaningful context for action and the uptake of the material into social life are the location of extensive work on the radical variation in the history of human social groupings, and, as I will shortly press on further, extensive work on the formation of

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social kinds. That is to say, it is with material and formal causes that we find the core insights of hermeneutic philosophy to be directly at work in sociohistorical analysis: the relationship of part to whole as essential to understanding the environment for action, the emergence of new kinds, forms, and entities in the social world, including identities, systems of categorization, and sociotechnical objects such as options in options markets and derivatives.

It is still the case that motives and mechanisms, as those things to which the investigator is sometimes prone to attribute certain actions and outcomes, require interpretation—what is more interpretive than the problem of other minds? However, it would appear that final and efficient causes, understood in this way, are the sorts of things that investigators are prone to put into context. They are analogized, more frequently and more often with Humean bias, to causal forces. They are also, in well-known ways, the most frequent reference points for “reductionist” explanations, whether those reductions are done in terms of “interest,” “status attainment,” or some other moniker that, while of course being a useful part of the theoretical lexicon in the human sciences, is far too often leaned upon in the social sciences as the foundation of every explanation (“parsimony”).

For this reason, I want to make distinction between forcing causes (final cause/motives, efficient cause/mechanisms), and forming causes (material cause/technological, formal cause/meaning) in sociohistorical analysis. It is, of course, an excessively crude distinction. But it is useful precisely because it captures and criticizes the central tendency of social science to focus on forcing causality, and, by implication, not to see forming causes as causes at all. Indeed, the overwhelming tendency in modern
social science has been to see that which cannot be wedged into the efficient processes of mechanisms or the revealed or unrevealed preferences of interest to be outside the very possibility of explanation. This is a tendency shared, unfortunately, by some of the central thinkers in the hermeneutic tradition, who depart from the very possibility of explanation, and recede instead into the language of recontextualization and the addition of further accounts to the ones we already have.²³

What differentiates forcing and forming causes from each other, as causes? If it is anything, it is that forcing causes take place as a kind of analogue of motion, where something, metaphorically speaking, “pushes” or “pulls” on something else. In contrast, forming causes work via a kind of arrangement—of signs, borders, boundaries, and other aspects of the “ground” for action. As such, these arrangements constitute a hermeneutic causality. The basic insights of the hermeneutic tradition apply to the grounds for action, the intelligibility of action, the “moral background” of action, and so on: these causes are collectively emergent, arbitrary, conventional, and historically variable; no actor can do without them; that to exert some control over these arrangements is, in part, to grasp at power. However, it should be noted that, precisely because of emergent, social, and interpretation-dependent nature of these forming causes, attempts to influence them by this or that actor seeking an adjustment in power are subject to significant uncertainty and thus both unanticipated and unintended consequences. Action molded by the arrangements that are forming causes is inevitable qua action; changing this or that arrangement intentionally is quite difficult indeed. Finally, in the hermeneutic view,

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explanation rarely emerges at a high level of abstraction. For that reason, I now try to show what I mean by forming causes with reference to a specific problem in sociohistorical analysis.

II. Public Opinion, Books, and the Causes of the French Revolution

Explaining the French Revolution is a central occupation of Western historiography and of comparative-historical sociology; it looms in the background of classical social theory itself; Krause and Guggenheim even claim that the French Revolution is the “model system” for historical sociologists studying social change. Here I examine work from history and sociology on the lead up to revolution in the second half of the 18th century and on the very early stages of the “revolutionary situation,” namely 1787-1789. I do not claim to offer an exhaustive review of the literature, or definitive evidence in favor of any particular interpretation of the French Revolution. Rather, I wish to use this extremely well researched topic as a testing ground for the distinction between forming and forcing causes. In particular, I will use the forming-forcing distinction to understand the relationship between the cultural historiography of the revolution and the widespread consensus, in comparative-historical sociology, that the fiscal crisis of the French state helped precipitate the revolution.

The very first thing to note is that the shift towards a cultural interpretation of the revolution’s origins in the histories written in the 1980s and 1990s involved a tremendous amount of causal talk. Exemplary in this regard is the way in which two of the most important books in the cultural historiography of the Revolution contain sections titled

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“Do Books Make Revolutions?” and “Do Books Cause Revolutions?” (These authors were surely, also, two of the most self-aware concerning the conceptual problems they were opening up for social theory, hence the bluntness of the titles, which have a certain measure of irony to them).25

This causal talk in Revolutionary historiography focused on changes in French (and especially Parisian) social life, and in particular the communicative aspects of that life, in the century before the revolution began in 1789, and especially after 1750. The messiness and difficulty of claiming causality here is intensely felt by historians—on the one hand, it feels absurd to say the revolution was Rousseau’s fault; on the other, it is equally clear that in the years leading up to the revolution, something shifted in the meanings that somehow informed revolutionary action, and these meanings appear to bear some interesting resemblances to the core philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment. In sociology, the difficulty of making these sorts of causal claims is well known via the debate between Theda Skocpol and William Sewell, Jr. in the Journal of Modern History about the role of “ideology” in revolutions, and, in the French case, the role of Enlightenment ideologies in particular.26 In what follows, I first elucidate how the explanation of the French Revolution via “culture” refers to forming causes. I then recapitulate the forcing cause explanation, well known in comparative-historical sociology, which traces the precipitation of revolution to the fiscal crisis of the French state. Finally, I discuss the potentially productive relationship between these two different


causal analyses, and discuss a third option, a cultural forcing cause argument, which has been superseded in the literature.

**a. Forming causes in the lead up to the French Revolution**

The forming cause story for the French Revolution has (as I will present it here) two parts: the formation of a new social kind, “opinion publique”, and a shift in the arrangement of emotions, meanings, and status-ascriptions to royal authority. By describing these, together, we can describe the cultural atmosphere for action in the 1780s. And it was this atmosphere or context that gave shape and meaning to the fiscal crisis of the late 1780s.

*Public opinion* In “Public Opinion as Political Invention,” Keith Baker traces the invention of public opinion as a politically relevant object in pre-revolutionary France. He begins with a simple indicator of a change in meaning. In the *Encyclopédie* (1765), “opinion” is derided as the uncertain, subjective opposite of rational knowledge. And earlier in the century, beliefs about fluctuations in uncertain opinion were mobilized as part of arguments for absolutist monarchy. However, in the parts of the *Encyclopédie methodique* that concerned finances and the police (published in subscription format in the 1780s), “opinion” is no longer defined, and instead there is an entry for “opinion publique.” Strangely, this “public opinion” possesses the precise qualities that “opinion” lacked. Public opinion is, in this definition, universal, rational and objective, and it is a kind of court that judges people and governments. What happened?

In the ideologies of absolutism, the King was the only public person, and thus communication of advice to him could and should be secret, precisely to protect the King
as the protector of the “public” or general good. But over the second half of the 18th century, public opinion crept into politics and became a source of authority. First, French “notables” had to acknowledge developments in English politics, but in so doing they had to distance themselves from them, while also desiring reform of French government. Across the political spectrum, the French elite hated what was perceived as the chaotic, fear based, irrational party politics of England after 1688. And yet, they articulated a desire for “liberty” of some sort, in opposition to the perceived despotism of the King’s ministers, who spent the second half of the 18th century attempting to beat the regional parlements into submission. Simultaneously, another transfer occurred: from the early 18th century discourse concerning how an international “public” of Europe would judge the maneuvers of various absolutist regimes, to the possibility that a domestic “public” could discuss, and perhaps even judge, its own monarch—and especially the actions of his ministers. The result of this interwoven process was a thorough transformation of “public opinion.” In 1750, Rousseau had used it to refer to collective values and customs and the source of the social standing of individuals. In contrast, “From 1770,” explains Baker, “the term begins also to take on connotations of the Enlightenment and to acquire a more explicitly political resonance.”

What is particularly interesting for our purposes is that this new meaning of “public opinion” was a category of speech, and a frequently invoked justification for decisions, before any consensus was obtained on what it really referred to or on how to mention it. Hence, as Baker explains, “public opinion” emerged as an “abstract category” that

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political actors used to make their claims legitimate. Furthermore, because of the desire to avoid English party politics, this category, though lacking a clear referent, acquired an association not only with “rationality,” “enlightenment” and “the people,” but also with stability. “Public opinion” became both “the enlightened expression of active and open discussion of all political matters,” and “incompatible with divisions and factions” (Baker 1990: 188,194). And so, this complex set of associations and criss-crossing meanings were embedded in a category that was used in everyday political discourse and disputation, and, eventually, used by the King’s ministers to legitimize state actions. For, the advocates and representatives of Versailles also began referencing public opinion in their attacks on the parlements. Jacob-Nicolas Moreau, defending monarchy, argued that the pamphlets decrying despotism and corruption in government failed because, when it comes to the pamphleteers, “neither their opinions nor mine will ever form what one means by ‘public opinion’—unless one agrees that there can be an immense difference, in every sense, between public opinion and the unanimous wish of the nation” (in Baker 1990: 190; we will have reason to return to these pamphlets in a moment). Public opinion, though controversial and non-referential, is nonetheless real as a category at the middle of a constellation of meanings essential to the legitimation of domination. A new social kind has appeared on the political scene. It can be struggled over, reinterpreted, and even despised, but it cannot be erased. It is, as sociologists are fond of saying “real in its consequences.”

At this point, a few comments are in order. First, note that the meaning of “opinion publique” emerges in the French/Parisian context in relation to other meanings

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29 Baker, Inventing the French Revolution, 172.
that work in and around “public” and “opinion” and “politics,” and especially in relation to those ascribed, by the French elite, to English politics. Second, the reality of the term precedes its reification. Indeed, the calling of the Estates General led, in Baker’s view, to a set of actions which served to specify the referent for the term: “clarification was forced by the political process set in train by the calling of the Estates General.”31 Finally, third, this tracing of the formation of a social kind has an important material and technological shift as part of its arrangement: printing. Indeed, the lack of a clear “sociological referent” for the measurement of public opinion does not mean that the social kind “public opinion” was stranded—a category without support. Rather, public opinion came into being via an assemblage of different sorts of “stuff.” Printing, as material aspect of forming cause, was also essential to another shift the “cultural atmosphere” in France.

Reading and delegitimation What printed materials were people reading in 18th century Paris? And did what they read “make” or “cause” the revolution in some sense of the term?32 We can begin with a set of basic empirical theses, about the spread of print and reading in the second half of the 18th century.33 Readership increased massively, and the

32 The initial model of “intellectual origins” of the revolution was, as both Chartier and Darnton agree, “diffusionist” and top down. In his classic The Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution, Daniel Mornet traced the spread of philosophical ideas, and ultimately what he liked to call “intelligence,” through various institutions, examining, for example, what was taught in schools, increases in readership, and the growth of the Freemasons. Lacking a concept of “field” or “discourse,” however, Mornet dichotomized ‘ideas and principles’ and ‘pragmatic action’ in an unfortunate way; the inheritors of his project in the 1990s set themselves the task of reconsidering these “origins” from an updated theoretical perspective.
33 For printing and the theory of ideological infrastructures and its applicability in pre-revolutionary France, see Michael Mann, Sources of Social Power, volume 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 175-176 and 36-37; For printing and distribution structures in the provinces for “under the cloak” literature, see Darnton, Forbidden Bestsellers, 22-82; For the growing importance of a literary market and its consequences, see Geoffrey Turnovsky, The Literary Market: Authorship and Modernity in the Old Regime (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); For quantitative figures on the orders of clandestine literature in the
product people were reading in Paris was qualitatively transformed. This applied to both the Affiches traced by Jones, and to the prohibited works that were not given the King’s seal. The latter, the so-called “livres philosophiques” sold “under the cloak,” exploded in popularity in the second half of the 18th century, and they included an overlapping typology of books: libelles attacking the depravity, lack of morality, and general self-indulgence of the King and those close to him (these could be of a scandal-mongering pamphlet variety, or of a longer, biographical nature); sheer pornography; works of political philosophy (e.g. treatises from Voltaire and Rousseau); and “utopian fantasy.” These genres bled into each other in complex ways. Furthermore, how people read changed, as well. A “new relationship between reader and text was forged; it was disrespectful of authorities, in turn seduced and disillusioned by novelty, and, above all, little inclined to belief and adherence.”

Subtle shifts of meaning occurred in these illegal texts. For example, later 18th century libels paint very different pictures of the King and his mistresses than did those that were popular during the reign of Louis XIV. One classic of the earlier era, La France galante, though scandalous, painted a picture of a powerful Louis XIV, “cutting a wide swath through the ladies of his court…he is an imposing figure, the virile master of a powerful kingdom, usually referred to as ‘le Grand Alcandre.” In contrast, the libelles of Louis XV, especially those published after 1770, are quite different: the King is presented as having screwed up two foreign wars, perhaps because he “cares only for women,”

35 Darnton, Forbidden Bestsellers, 115-136.
36 Chartier, Cultural Origins, 91.
though he “is barely capable of an erection, so he falls under the spell of a common whore.” Simultaneously, Darnton points to an important philosophical difference between the earlier texts and the later ones:

the early *libelles* often protested against tyranny, a notion that goes back to antiquity and that underwent a revival during the Renaissance. But the late *libelles* accused the monarchy of degenerating into despotism, a concept that began to acquire a powerful new range of meaning at the end of the seventeenth century. Both terms conveyed the idea of the abuse of power, but tyranny connected it with the arbitrary rule of an individual, someone whose removal would eliminate the problem, whereas despotism indicated that it pervaded an entire system of government.

Though this view of despotism began at the end of the reign of Louis XIV, by the end of the 18th century, despotism was central to the whole enterprise of libel: “From 1771 to 1789, despotism would be the main theme of *libelle* literature, one perfectly suited to the standard, scabrous details about royal orgies and *lettres de cachet*.”

*Initial causal interpretations* The authors who reconstructed the meanings that made up cultural atmosphere of Paris were clear in their conclusions that these meanings shaped the early moments of the revolution. Darnton explains that what the Marxist historians called the “aristocratic revolt” of 1787-88 was not, in fact, perceived as such in Paris. Rather, “contemporary Frenchmen...did not perceive the ‘aristocratic revolt’… Most of

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37 Darnton, *Forbidden Bestsellers*, 213.
38 Darnton, *Forbidden Bestsellers*, 213.
them despised Calonne and applauded the Notables’ resistance to him…the public took the parlements’ side. And when [Brienne] tried to destroy the parlements, it took to the streets. These events, in other words, fell into interpretive framework developed by readers of the forbidden bestsellers of the 18th century. That framework centered on ministerial despotism, the incompetence of the King, and the overarching corruption of the system. It thus “helped contemporaries make sense of things” when the conflict with the parlements came to a head. And so, the final flourish: “That the Bastille was nearly empty and that Louis XVI desired nothing more than the welfare of his subjects did not matter in 1787 and 1788. The regime stood condemned. It has lost the final round in the long struggle to control public opinion. It had lost its legitimacy.”

Thus what happened in France in 1787-1789 is, according to the cultural historiography of the revolution, in part due to the invention of public opinion, and the reshaping and redefinition of the meaning and scope of royal authority. The question, however, is how to relate this kind of causal talk with the kind that prefers the more Humean, billiard-ball locutions of “triggers” and “forces.”

b. The force given form: the financial crisis of the state reconsidered

Though debates over “culture” and the French Revolution continue, sociologists and historians are in fact relatively clear about one aspect of the causal explanation of the early moments of the revolutionary situation (1787-1789). That is the causal link between war, state debt, and the conflicts that ensued from the attempt by the King and his ministers to raise money to meet said debt. Here we find a chorus of voices:

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40 Darnton, Forbidden Bestsellers, 243.
41 Darnton, Forbidden Bestsellers, 246.
The debt accumulated by the French monarchy during the Seven Years’ War and the War of American Independence precipitated the struggles of the French Revolution.42

[R]oyal treasurers finally exhausted their capacity to raise loans from financiers, and were forced (again) to propose reforms of the tax system. The usual resistance from the parlements ensued, and an expedient adopted in an attempt to circumvent it—the summoning of an Assembly of Notables in 1787—only provided privileged interests yet another platform for voicing resistance. A last ditch effort to override the parlements (by Brienne in 1787-88) crumbled in the face of concerted upper-class defiance, popular demonstrations, and the unwillingness of army officers to direct forcible suppression of the popular resistance. 43

Army and church did not cause the struggles of 1788 and 1789. All they did was contribute to the regime’s feeble response. The cause lay squarely in the crown’s inability to solve its fiscal problems.44 (Mann 1993: 179).

The Old Regime state was thrown into crisis by impending bankruptcy, not by its split ideology.45

44 Michael Mann, Sources of Social Power, Volume 2, 179.
This is a clear example of a forcing cause, one that takes certain fixed entities to be real within the scope of the given analysis, and then watches as these entities push and pull on each other. As Tilly himself writes about his own work, “the arguments proceed as if each category were real, unitary, and unproblematic.” French society in 1787 has “particular structural characteristics” (Skocpol 1976: 182), and these characteristics help explain what happens when tremendous “foreign pressures” brought to bear. The King can no longer borrow, so he and his ministers are “forced” to raise money by modernizing the finance system, and in particular by raiding areas of privilege that had been exempt. This leads to resistance (“push back”) by the nobles.

The consensus on this forcing cause is clear, but it is also incomplete. The obvious question is: what differentiates earlier financial crises from the one that precipitated the French Revolution? Tilly admits that the alliance that formed in reaction to the financial crisis was “odd”: why, this time, did the opposition to the King take such a broad-based, popular form, knitting together “sinkholes of aristocratic privilege and

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45 Sewell, “Ideologies”, 66-67. Anticipating the kinds of arguments we make here based on the cultural historiography of the revolution, Sewell continues on to write that “once the crisis had begun, ideological contradictions contributed mightily to the deepening of the crisis into revolution.” Forming causes are a useful category, in part, because they help specify how something could “contribute mightily” to a revolution without forcing it to happen.

46 Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, 35.

47 Skocpol, “France, Russia, China” 182.

48 This forcing cause is itself the product, in these accounts, of the *conjunction* of two earlier forcing causes (and thus the utility of conjunctural causality to historical sociology becomes quite concrete): (1) the imperial war-making of the French state in competition with other European states (a cause which became more powerful as England developed economically (see Skocpol “France, Russia, China,” 179-180)), and (2) a series of money-raising procedures, such as venality, that worked in the short term but which, over the longer term, were disastrous: “each time the state raised money in one of these ways, furthermore, it created another walled-off pool of privilege that would be harder to drain for new money in the future” (Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions: 1492-1992* [Wiley-Blackwell, 1996], 162).
purchased royal office…with peasants and bourgeois who railed against the expense, arbitrariness and corruption of government.”\textsuperscript{49}

The counterfactual that would be predicted by a strictly forcing cause account of French state finances and war-making, is nicely implied by the historiographical expert on 18\textsuperscript{th} century French finance:

The financial problems of the French monarchy on the eve of the Revolution might be seen, therefore, as a predictable consequence of long-standing institutional difficulties. What was not predictable was the path that the monarchy took. In 1788, instead of defaulting on part of its obligations, the monarchy convoked the Estates-General, the kingdom’s representative body, which had not met for 175 years. It was this act, the calling of the Estates-General to solve a financial crisis, and not impending bankruptcy per se, that was novel in French history. This fateful decision opened the way to a whole new era of politics, in fact, to revolution.\textsuperscript{50}

I submit that this eventful pathway occurred because of the way the events of 1787-1789 were \textit{shaped and formed} by the existence of “public opinion” as a politically relevant object—which had \textit{not} been part of the landscape in 1750 or 1770—and the atmosphere into which this latest attempt by the King’s ministers to shore up the state’s finances was thrust—an atmosphere of delegitimized and pornographically ridiculed

\textsuperscript{49} Tilly, \textit{European Revolutions}, 163.
royal authority. This “made the difference” between, for example, the outcome of the financial crisis of 1770 and that of 1787. More generally, it provided the arranged and significant background for action as the events of the revolution began to be strung together as a series of cause-and-effect, pushes-and-pulls.

The importance of the background for action is causal in the sense that it refers to a difference that made a difference, to a shift or change in meaning consequential for an outcome as we have identified it. Indeed, the essence of the cultural historiography of the revolution is that several shifts in the meaning of French politics had emerged, along with a rapid change in the network of pamphlets and books, and that the books themselves contained a shift in meanings and attitudes towards the monarchy. The pamphlets and books were, moreover, read with an increasing intensity as they were produced at great rates in the later 18th century. This intense reading shifted the cognitive and emotional relationship of many of the people in Paris towards the King; simultaneously, “public opinion” became a potential source of political legitimacy for French notables, even if no one yet knew how to measure it.

But as I describe the shift, note that none of these make sense without the whole, and they certainly could not have forced anything to happen inside the state by themselves. Rather, they are parts of the whole atmosphere of meaning that could give shape to “social forces”: first during the resistance of Nobles to the King and his ministers that was supported by the lower parts of the social hierarchy in Paris, and again
when the Bastille was stormed, thus “inventing” revolution by combining popular violence with reasoned legitimacy in the name of “the people.”\textsuperscript{51}

Note, finally, how this cause that “gave form to” the events of the French Revolution came to be: through an assemblage of heterogeneous things, not a regularized process or even a conjunction of regularized processes. Rather, some mechanistic things happened, some manifestly singular things happened, some “material” things happened, some “ideal” things happened, and it was all networked together via a series of “alliances”—between printing, pornography, and philosophy, for example. Out of the whole mess came an assemblage, an arrangement of meaning and material, that guided the actions that became the French Revolution.

\textit{Culture as a Forcing Cause?} At this point, it should be relatively clear that under the rubric of “culture,” many historians of the French revolution arrived at a conclusion concerning what I am here calling “forming causes.” And an unsympathetic reader might be inclined to read this entire debate/debacle as really one between economics and culture, or perhaps between Marx and Durkheim. But in fact, there is one final note to make about the cultural turn in the historiography of the French revolution, and it is one that speaks directly to the distinction between forcing and forming causes, and the possibility of a hermeneutic approach to sociohistorical analysis.

The authors of the cultural turn in the French Revolution (Baker, Darnton, Chartier, Sewell, Hunt) have many theoretical differences between them.\textsuperscript{52} What they

share, however, is an overwhelming tendency to reach for a form of causal talk that is explicitly non-mechanistic. Chartier, for example, attacks any notion of a “direct” causal connection between the content of the works of forbidden literature and a shift in beliefs that undermined the legitimacy of the ancien régime. He writes: “the images in the libels and in the topical pamphlets were not graven into the soft wax of their readers’ minds, and reading did not necessarily lead to belief. If a connection existed between the massive distribution of an aggressively disrespectful pamphlet literature and the destruction of the image of the monarchy, it was doubtless neither direct nor ineluctable.”

Darnton, for his part, claims that Baker is insufficiently subtle because he imposes a model of discourse that is overly determinate and perhaps anti-humanistic.

To what is all this critique directed? It is relatively clear, in fact, that it is directed at an earlier cultural historiography that posited culture as a forcing rather than forming cause. For this earlier work, the causal importance of culture was to be identified by the push-and-pull of “values” on “action.” And in this particular understanding, the cultural hypothesis failed. For, while intellectual historians have long been fond of noting certain “writer-philosophes” or men of letters who also participated in the Constituent Assembly, a by careful analysis of the writings of the members of the Assembly led to the conclusion that “in the end, the Constituents who had participated in the ‘Republic of Letters’ prior to 1789 represented only a small minority, about one-twelfth of the Assembly’s membership.” Timothy Tackett thus casts significant doubt upon the degree

52 Specifically, Darnton takes a more Geertzian position vis-à-vis “culture,” Baker prefers arguing for the the autonomy of “discourse” (thus implicitly engaging Althusser and Marxism), Chartier uses a theory of “representation” and is influenced by Habermas‘ theory of the public sphere, Sewell identifies a dialectic between action and structure taken from the social theory of Anthony Giddens, and Hunt focuses on the Durkheimian notion of “collective representations.”

53 Chartier, Cultural Origins, 83.
54 Darnton, Forbidden Bestsellers, 176.
to which, say, the “values” of the Enlightenment were direct, forcing motivators of what assemblymen did, or, say, whether “reading Rousseau” could force someone to “become revolutionary.” Note, however, that even Tackett admits that references to “reason” and “natural rights” began to appear later on in 1789 in certain member’s writings, and thus concludes that there may have been some influence on the Assembly by “their more intellectual colleagues.” This indicates a movement away from attempts to render meaning a forcing cause, and an embrace of an understanding of its work as inhering in forming causality.

III. Discussion: How to think about forming causes

In pointing to these arrangements of materiality and meaning the analysts of the French Revolution articulated precisely that which, in one way or another, has been the occupation of both hermeneutic philosophy, interpretive sociology, and symbolic anthropology for many academic generations. The invention of public opinion is the “condition of intelligibility” for calling the Estates General; the delegitimation of the King via printed pornography provides part of the moral and aesthetic background against which the storming of the Bastille can occur and be lauded as an expression of popular sovereignty. In this sense, these historians operate in the universe of Clifford Geertz and Susan Bordo, examining the public documents of discourse to infer the anatomy of a shifting worldview. However, they do so in a way that engages the enduring

56 The following fourfold distinction was developed by myself and Daniel Hirschman, and thus this section is in dialogue with Daniel Hirschman and Isaac Ariail Reed, “Formation Stories and Causality in Sociology,” Sociological Theory, 32 (4): 259-282 (2014). The discussion here emphasizes the hermeneutic dimensions of the concept and their relationship to cultural history, whereas Reed and Hirschman is are more concerned with the formation of objects and kinds, engaging field theory and Actor Network Theory directly.
questions of causality and plausible worlds of sociohistorical analysis. As such, their work is particularly useful for understanding the possibility of interpretive explanation.

What do their analysis reveal about the difference between forming and forcing causes, as I have termed them here? I see four essential ways in which these causes depart from the standard understanding of cause in social science.

*Lack of fixed entities.* Forming causes address not how kinds, objects, and forces push and pull on each other, but rather how kinds objects and forces came to be in the first place, or have their meaning and significance fundamentally changed. Public opinion becomes a social kind—first as a category of politically inflected language, and then as the disputed reference for that category. Meanwhile, what it means to *have a fiscal crisis in the state* is fundamentally different in 1789 than it was in 1750, because the “atmosphere” created by the pamphlets and forbidden bestsellers inflects crisis with a new set of meanings, including the system-wide corruption and despotism of the King’s men.

*An eventful approach to history.* In examining the formation and modulation of kinds, one is presented with a world subject to an “eventful” revision of its causal laws, precisely because the entities and the atmospheres in which they act are fundamentally variable. Thus the calling of the Estates-General to solve the fiscal crisis, and the “invention” of revolution at the Bastille opens up a new political ontology, with very different meanings, definitions, and possibilities.\(^{57}\)

*Assemblage* The forming cause piece of the causal story of the French Revolution is not reliably tractable as “micro” or “macro,” or as following rules of aggregation and

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emergence familiar from social theories that take the individual as the fundamental unit of analysis. Rather, the atmosphere of the revolution was created by a network of objects (printing presses, pamphlets in circulation), meanings (the content of such pamphlets, the emergent legitimacy of “public opinion”) political devices and tools available within the current system (the calling of the estates general), and beliefs in certain sectors of the French nobility (the entitlement to “liberty” felt deeply by “notables”). In forming causes, in other words, the emergence of new kinds is not something that happens from a lower level to a higher level so much as it occurs across “levels,” it is, when it comes to levels and entities, ontologically promiscuous.

Dynamic nominalism. Ian Hacking refers to his species of investigation as one in which he traces the interaction between the name and the named, and public opinion certain fits with this. This interaction is evident at key moments in the revolution: calling of the estates general was interpretable in terms of, but also gives new meaning to, “public opinion;” while Jones argues about the Affiches that the papers could “could claim to embody as well as represent that ‘public opinion’ whose importance recent historians have not been slow to emphasize.” That “public opinion” could be so contested in its referents and meanings is precisely the point of Hacking’s dynamic nominalism.

IV. Breaking the Break: Hermeneutics and Sociohistorical Analysis

In the Anglophone tradition of thinking about the history, causality, and society, the legacy of J.S. Mill dominated that of William Whewell in the 20th century. The mirror

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image of this is the break Hans George-Gadamer made with the project of Wilhelm Dilthey in *Truth and Method*, thereby eschewing the project of explanation, and with it, most of social science. This reading was reinforced because it was shared, in its broad outlines, by Gadamer’s debating opponent Jürgen Habermas. The essence of this reading of Dilthey was that, first, Dilthey’s hermeneutics was a psychologism that rested on an unsustainable concept of empathetic feeling; Second, Dilthey’s hermeneutics alternated wildly between an implausible capturing of the subjective soul or intention of the author and an “objectivist” or even “Cartesian” attempt to develop a sovereign perspective on all of history; Thirdly, that, trapped inside these 19th century prisms, Dilthey expressed a devotion to “method” that was scientism by another name.60

Through the work of Austin Harrington, this understanding of Dilthey has been revealed as flawed the sense that it grasps neither the relational meaning of Dilthey’s work vis-à-vis his contemporaries nor the core ideas of his vision for the human sciences. In particular, Dilthey, first, countered psychologism with an understand of *Geist* which was a prologue to the 20th century view of cultural or discursive formations as text-analogues; second, did engage in the idea of using general theory, but did so to articulate an project of historical explanation that we would recognize now as concrete and historically bounded—connected to questions such as ‘what were the origins of the

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This suggests an opening in hermeneutics to ask questions about meaning, cause and effect. Interestingly, a parallel opening may be emerging in sociology. Certainly, the field of comparative-historical sociology has expressed deep discontent with Millsian conceptualizations of social science. In sociology more broadly, there has been a partial unsettlement of the notion of causality. In a variety of recent texts, sociology is understood to have reconsidered its overwhelming dependence on specific statistical techniques, and in particular, logistic regression, to make causal or quasi-causal claims. Thus, in the field today, there is a reconsideration of a wide variety of philosophical issues concerning how to think about explanation, including events and eventfulness, the meaning and utility of counterfactuals, necessity and sufficiency in causal analysis, and different understandings of what constitutes explanation.\footnote{Andrew Abbott, \textit{Time Matters: On Theory and Method} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Richard Biernacki, \textit{Reinventing Evidence in Social Inquiry: Decoding Facts and Variables} (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012). Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, \textit{A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Qualitative and Quantitative Paradigms} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Kristin Luker, \textit{Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-glut} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); George Steinmetz, editor, \textit{The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2005).}

This unsettlement means that the line between history and sociology can no longer be easily assimilated into a simple version of the ideographic/nomothetic
distinction. And it is precisely in such a moment that the core ideas of hermeneutics can be helpful. For example, hermeneutics provides a language with which to think about how in human science the goal is often to “illustrate the general significance that resides within each chosen case.” Furthermore, the concept of a virtuous hermeneutic circle offers an alternative to hypothesis testing in social science that does not dispense with responsibility to evidence or the idea that one interpretation can be judged to be superior to another.

Given these shifts in intellectual context, the issue of explanation and understanding looks different. Since Max Weber, much of the debate about interpretation and explanation in the human sciences has focused on the action inside the actor’s head; on what I have here termed final causes as motives. A vast literature exists here, which concerns the possibility of interpreting individuals in a way that gets at the core of their subjectivity. Hence the essential questions: Are reasons causes? Should we start with the presumption of rationality, and infer the degree to which actors’ understandings depart from it? If we say that someone is driven by an unconscious motive, are we in effect telling them they have false consciousness? In contrast to this, the questions I have asked here are: how can we characterize discursive formations as causal? What sort of power do we want to ascribe to them? And how does materiality play a role? In my view, this is part of the way forward for hermeneutics in the 21st century.

It is towards this end that I have drawn a single, and crude, distinction between forcing and forming causality in this chapter. In doing so, I hope to have rendered explicit something that implicit in the best sociohistorical practice. To grasp the vagaries of causality in human life, we need an understanding causality far more expansive than has

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63 Harrington, “In Defence of Verstehen and Erklären,” 446.
heretofore been dominant. For human action is too weighted with significance to be understood only as subject to efficient causes. To put the matter paradoxically, for hermeneutics, arrangements of meaning may be efficacious without being efficient.