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Narrative Refiguration of Social Events

Paul Ricœur's Contribution to Rethinking the Social

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Abstract

The analysis of events has been a central issue for social sciences for a long time, and the problem of an event's definition and distinctiveness is still at stake in sociological debates today. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the contribution of Paul Ricœur's narrative theory to social events studies. First, this is done through an explication of the concept of the event in the framework of a narrative approach. Secondly, the paper highlights the narrative's capacity of "refiguring" the social by re-describing social events and their temporality through the logic of story-telling. In addition to its interpretative explanations and illustrations, the paper provides critical arguments concerning the limitations of Paul Ricœur's narrative approach with respect to sociological event-analysis.

Keywords: *Event, Narrative, Causation, Ricœur, Davidson, Configuration, Refiguration*

Résumé

L'analyse des événements a toujours été une question centrale pour l'histoire et les sciences sociales. Le problème de la définition et de la distinction des événements est encore en jeu dans les débats sociologiques contemporains. L'objectif de cet article est de s'attarder sur la contribution de la théorie de Paul Ricœur aux études des événements sociaux. Après avoir montré les limites d'une conception impersonnelle de l'événement, l'auteur se penche sur la solution narrative proposée par Ricœur, à savoir la capacité du récit à "refigurer" du Social par la re-description des événements sociaux. Il s'agit de soumettre la logique de la succession temporelle à la logique de la narration. Tout en rendant justice à la valeur heuristique de telles analyses (à travers une série d'explicitations et d'illustrations), l'article pointe les limites de l'approche narrative de Paul Ricœur au regard des analyses sociologique des événements.

Mots-clés *: Evénément, Narrative, Causalité, Ricœur, Davidson, Configuration, Refiguration*

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Time comes into it.
Say it. Say it.
The universe is made of stories,
Not of atoms.
- *Muriel Rukeyser*

We can tell people abstract rules of thumb which we have derived from prior experiences, but it is very difficult for other people to learn from these. We have difficulty remembering such abstractions, but we can more easily remember a good story. Stories give life to past experience. Stories make the events in memory memorable to others and to ourselves. This is one of the reasons why people like to tell stories.
- Roger C. Shank, from "Tell Me a Story"

Introduction

Event analysis has an extremely broad scope in sociology. There are at least two varieties of event analysis. The first variety allows information on large-scale social processes and changes to be investigated through the study of conflicts such as race riots, strikes, protests, rebellions, revolutionary activity and coups d'état.[1] [2] [3] [4] One of the arguments for its application in sociology is that the study of events provides more information about the dynamics of change in social movements than do strategies that treat movements as unitary phenomena.[5] Event analysis is used to build replicable and generalizable interpretations. The second type of event analysis, on the contrary, focuses on small-scale events, having either ordinary or historical dimension. In this case, a sociologist's task is to explore particular event-event causation by considering the unique temporal and spatial characteristics of events.[6]

It is a difficult task to juxtapose these two different types of events, for example, a national strike and a sudden meeting of two strangers. Due to their differences, it would seem natural to place these events in two quite different conceptual frameworks, implying a separate logic and language of description. However, one parallel between them has to do with the role played by an interpretive process which constitutes them – the attribution of significance to these "happenings" and "occurrences."[7] Although there is no common concept for an event in macro- and micro-sociological studies, investigators of both large-scale and small-scale events point out the necessity of distinguishing social events from a mere succession of occurrences. Both must somehow be able to make a distinction between an event and a non-event. For instance, a strike might be considered an event by a sociologist, whereas the arrival of the police afterwards might not be mentioned by him at all. A sudden meeting of two strangers could gain the status of being an event, whereas a traffic accident which happened at the same time and space would be

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remembered neither by the strangers nor by a distant observer as something significant. This prompts questions of the following kind: How is it possible to distinguish an event from a mere happening or occurrence? What distinguishing criteria define a social event in sociological research? How do we distinguish between different events (in terms of their significance, scale, and order)?

These questions call on us to shed analytical light on the "event-ness" of social events rather than to study the actual interpretation of events in empirical studies. Here I follow Iain MacKenzie's argument which seeks to establish a broader, richer analysis of "political events" by considering their nature from the perspective of the event, that is, by the "evental" traits of political events.[8] This means that in order to understand the specificity of events (social, political or historical), we should first concentrate on the nature of the event itself: its immanent characteristics and the peculiarities of its formation. Given the paucity of resources within sociological research itself (in most empirical studies, the nature of an event is simply taken for granted), we need to turn to philosophical and social theories that have introduced the notion of an "event" as a foundational concept. Specifically, his paper will begin by taking up the philosophy of events provided by Donald Davidson and the social theory of events of Alexander Filippov, partly derived from the theory of social systems of Niklas Luhmann. In dialogue with those two thinkers, I will show that Paul Ricœur's narrative theory provides a better contribution to an account of "event-ness" and the distinction between an event and a non-event, but in spite of its significance, I also want to highlight a few limitations of his approach.

The Embeddedness of Events in Narrative

Before considering Ricœur's distinction between an event and a non-event, I would like to point out a preliminary distinction between an event and a mere happening. In analytic philosophy, the notion of event is conceived as a mediator between two radically opposed terms: a "happening" and an "action." A.I. Melden, for instance, ranks the physiological changes that occur within a person's body as mere "happenings", of which the person is a "helpless victim" (a phrase, which recurs frequently in Melden's contrast between actions and mere "bodily movements.")[9] The description of an action, by contrast, implies that some agent has caused it. But, Richard Taylor warns that "the word cause in such contexts has not the ordinary meaning of a certain relationship between events, but has rather the older meaning of the efficacy or power of an agent to produce certain results."[10] The notion of an event, in turn, is defined as more meaningful in comparison with a happening but as less subjectively determined than an action.

Ricœur clarifies his own theoretical position on the general nature of events by criticizing the event analysis presented by Donald Davidson in his *Essays on Actions and Events*.[11] For Davidson, the philosophical problem of distinguishing between causation and explanation must be considered through the analysis of ordinary language. In the analytical tradition, events are ordinarily considered to be mere changes in the properties of things and therefore it is stated that there is no need for an ontological commitment to events. However, Davidson argues that events can be said to exist, because truth conditional semantics requires that these entities be identified.[12] In other words, action sentences can be true, if and only if events provide empirical evidence of the action truth. Davidson adds that events and things are not reducible to each other, though they have an equal ontological status. This theoretical proposal leaves untouched the question of the definition of events and their distinction from things. Most likely, the

distinction lies in the capacity of events as opposed to things to provide truth to the propositions describing them. Ricœur comments on Davidson's ontology of events as follows: "The bulk of the argument is devoted to justifying the claim according to which events – and among these, actions – are as deserving as substances of being called primitive entities, if we term 'entities' the realities that give a truth value to the propositions referring to them."[13]

A further claim proposed by Davidson (which is important for further consideration of Ricœur's criticism) is a contrast of physical events with a specific type of events, that is, human actions. His major claim is that "rationalization is a species of causal explanation." He notes:

> Whenever someone does something for a reason, therefore, he can be characterized as (a) having sort of pro attitude towards actions of a certain kind, and (b) believing (or knowing, perceiving, noticing, remembering) that his action is of that kind… Given the reason why an agent did something is often a matter of naming the pro attitude (a) or the related belief or both; let me call this pair the primary reason why the agent performed the action.[14]

In other words, Davidson equates the reason for doing something and the intention with which one does something. By equating the processes of rationalization (explanation by reasons) and causal explanation (which we use to apply to the explanation of discrete events), Davidson gives both a reason for action and an action itself the status of events, which is analogous to the relation between natural events.

Ricœur thinks that Davidson's analysis of action events (which are considered by Davidson to be particular events) reveals the weakest point of his general account of events. Davidson's ontology, according to Riceour, provides no clear distinction between an event and a material object. Ricœur notes: "The criteria for deciding identity are the same for events and for objects/substances. Everything contributes to the claim that events are individuated just as are singular substances."[15] The way Davidson accounts for actions permits us to state that "the mental event, considered from the angle of incidence, is entirely parallel to the sudden fissure that transforms the faulty construction of a bridge into an event that causes a catastrophe."[16] In both cases the same processes of rationalization (equated to causal explanation) take place.

Ricœur's critique of Davidson thus targets the impersonal nature of events, leading him to pose the following question: "Is not an ontology of events, founded on the sort of logical analysis of action phrases conducted with the rigor and subtlety of Davidson's analysis, condemned to conceal the problematic of the agent as the *possessor* of his or her action?"[17] Event theory, according to Ricœur's logic, should not exclude the agent from its conceptual framework and instead should take into consideration the "*mineness*" of events, their reference to a person. Otherwise, events are said to be something non-human, deprived of vitality, and indistinguishable from mere happenings. This deficiency leads Ricœur to seek out a different ontology of the event based on the concept of *narrative.*

The basic distinction between an event and a happening can be provided by a narrative. The notion of an event, as a result, is equated with the notion of a narrated event (or an event described in a story). An event *per se* is subordinated to the intelligibility of the narrative intrigue and determined by the concordance of the plot. An unnarrated fragment of human experience remains just a happening.

Human life has narrative traits. Deeds, actions, interactions, emotions, and memories are told and transmitted in stories from one generation to another. Everything we are able to remember about ourselves and our environment can be represented discursively in narratives. Ricœur observes: "by entering into the movement of a narrative which relates a character to a plot, the event loses its impersonal neutrality. By the same token, the narrative status conferred upon the event averts the drift of the notion of event which would make it difficult, if not impossible, to take the agent into account in the description of the action."[18] Through narrativity an event also acquires "mineness", a kind of belonging to a human and social world. The interpretation scheme, proposed by Ricœur, can be easily applied to sociological analysis aimed at the revelation of social events. A narrative act (the action of narration) is always oriented towards another person.[19] Besides, the content of narrative (i.e. events described) is also socially constructed as a narrator and real or potential listeners and readers assign significance to them by considering them worth being told, heard or read.

Thus Ricœur suggests considering the ontology of events through narrativity. It is narrative that provides a clear distinction between events and mere happenings, social events and natural events. We could analyze the specificity of events by studying the peculiarities of discourse. For instance, the distinct operation of different sorts of events (in terms of their significance, scale and order) is based on a specific process of narrative refiguration. However, before clarifying the peculiarities of refiguration I would like to consider what Ricœur's account adds to a sociological scheme of events distinction.

Narration vs. Observation: Towards the Problem of Distinguishing Events

The account of events elaborated by Ricœur allows for a critical reconsideration of current approaches in social theory such as the one provided by Alexander Filippov.[20] For Filippov, a social event is an occurrence of a special kind with a delineated meaning. Social events are constituted by an observation procedure. If an observer pays attention to both the beginning and the end of an occurrence and identifies what happens in the time between the beginning and the end as actually "the same" (or, as having no distinction between beginning and end), then the observer discerns an event. Here Filippov follows Niklas Luhmann's approach towards social systems, which is based on the so-called second-order cybernetics and the philosophy of autopoiesis.

Second-order cybernetics and the philosophy of autopoiesis understand making a distinction ("drawing a line between separate parts") to be a basic cognitive procedure. Humberto Maturano, for instance, states in his philosophy of autopoiesis that:

> The basic cognitive operation that we perform as observers is the operation of distinction. By means of this operation we specify a unity as an entity distinct from a background, characterize both unity and background with the properties with which this operation endows them and specify their separability. A unity thus specified is a simple unity that defines through its properties the space in which it exists and the phenomenal domain which it may generate in its interactions with other unities.[21] [22] [23]

Moreover, observers are also considered to be a source of distinctions, since they distinguish the space they occupy.[24] Therefore, a specific picture of the world is being formed. The Universe is

composed of self-reflexive parts (observers) who are able to "draw a line" (make a distinction) between themselves and their environment, occurrences they are observing and the context.

Filippov applies the above arguments to sociology. He states that a social event is the smallest unit of observable sociality. Moreover, the social is constituted through these small events. Observation is an operation which constitutes an event and distinguishes it from a mere occurrence and from the surrounding environment. Filippov states that sociologists do not invent their distinctions; they deal with distinctions already in use.[25] But how do observers in fact know which distinctions are worth being used? Filippov's answer is that sociologists belong to communities of observers where the word *community* means not a *Gemeinschaft* but a "universality of discourse", as understood in the work of George Herbert Mead.[26] This community is constituted when someone uses the same distinctions as other members of a community do and when these lines are drawn in the same way as others do.[27]

This conceptual framework for the analysis of social events, however, lacks a significant component, i.e. the constitutive power of *narration.* How is it actually possible to know what distinctions are being used by other observers, if we do not communicate with them? Whatever distinctions may be made in the community of observers could be clarified only through the process of communication, that is, in the process of sharing narratives about observed events. These events, which acquire meaning and significance, are transmitted from one observer to another through the process of story-telling. So, could there ever be a distinguishable event that is not at the same time narrated?

Narration is not an alternative procedure to observation; observation requires narration. According to Ricœur, there cannot be an event which has not been narrated yet, or better, which has not yet had the possibility of being narrated. A social event is narrated *a priori*. Support for this argument can be found in Paul Ricœur's consideration of a "virtuous" circle of narration which traverses from *mimesis*^{1} (prefiguration) to *mimesis*^{3} (reconfiguration) across *mimesis*^{2} (configuration). But, this raises a challenging question: Could there ever be a "non-narrated" experience? Is it possible to transfer the logic of narrative description to the sphere of happenings, physical movements, emotions, and feelings? Does narrative experience leave any place for anything which is not discursive?

Ricœur sets the problem in the following way:

> If there is no human experience that is not already mediated by symbolic symbols and, among them, by narratives, it seems vain to say, as I have, that action is in quest of narrative. How, indeed, can we speak of a human life as a story in its nascent state since we do not have access to the temporal dramas of existence outside of stories told about them by others and by ourselves?[28]

Ricœur's answer is that there could be an experience which has not been told yet but still places a genuine demand for narrativity; in other words, all experience at least possesses a pre-narrative quality. According to Ricœur, this pre-narrative quality of human experience is best characterized by the concept of the "untold story." He notes: "Without leaving everyday experience, are we not inclined to see in a given sequence of the episodes of our lives "(as yet) untold stories," stories that demand to be told, stories that offer anchorage points for narrative?"[29]

Ricœur provides two examples of such "untold stories." The first one involves the interaction of a patient and a psychoanalyst. The patient presents bits and pieces of lived stories, dreams, "primitive scenes," or conflictual episodes. The goal of such analytical sessions is to draw a narrative from these bits and pieces that will be both more bearable and more intelligible to the patient. As Ricœur points out, "the narrative interpretation implies that a life story proceeds from untold and repressed stories in the direction of actual stories the subject can take up and hold as constitutive of his personal identity."[30] The second example of an untold story concerns the role of the judge of a court case. A judge seeks to understand a course of actions and characters, by unraveling the tangled plots in which the subject is caught. Here Ricœur draws our attention to the expression "being entangled", used by Wilhelm Schapp:

> The entanglement seems more like the "prehistory" of the told story, whose beginning has to be chosen by the narrator. This "prehistory" of the story is what binds it to a larger whole and gives it a "background." This background is made up of the "living imbrication" of every lived story with every other such story. Told stories have to "emerge" (*auftauchen*) from this background.[31]

What is most important is that Ricœur emphasizes the fact that narrating is a secondary process, that of "the story's becoming known." Storytelling, therefore, is considered to be a continuation of the untold stories which are in search of narration.

Although Ricœur does not reduce all human experience to stories, he clearly suggests that every untold fragment of experience constitutes a demand for narrative. Each experience can be described afterwards in various stories and transmitted from one narrator to another. That is why it is impossible to ignore narration while speaking about the distinction of social events. Observation can not be reduced to the procedure of "drawing a line" between a social event and the context in which it has happened. Observation can be either preceded by narration (as an observer could have taken stories about similar events told by others into consideration, i.e. he has already had an idea what to observe), or followed by it (otherwise nobody would know what has happened). Narration, in either case, turns out to be necessary for the establishment of social events. Events are ultimately distinguished and acquire their significance in narrative.

Narrative Refiguration of Social Events: Transformation of Event-Event Causation

It is important to add that the potential of narrative is not reduced to the operations of constitution and distinction. Narrative also demonstrates a capacity of "refiguring" the social by re-describing social events, subordinating their succession to the logic of story-telling, and transforming their temporal characteristics. According to Ricœur, this capacity lies in the act of emplotment or plot-making (borrowing from the concept of "emplotment" in Aristotle's *Poetics*), performed by a narrative on the stage of *mimesis*^{2}. Ricœur describes emplotment as a balance between a demand for concordance and the admission of discordances. By concordance, he means the principle of order that presides over what Aristotle calls "the arrangement of facts". By discordance, he means the reversal of fortune that transforms the plot from an initial situation to a terminal situation. Ricœur applies the term "configuration" to this art of narrative composition which mediates between concordance and discordance. He characterizes this discordant concordance, by the notion of the synthesis of the heterogeneous.[32]

In order to demonstrate the refigurative and constructive power of narrative, I want to highlight the following characteristics of emplotment.

> 1. Ricœur notes that "a plot is mediation between the individual events or incidents and a story taken as a whole. As a consequence, an event must be more than just a singular occurrence. It gets its definition from its contribution to the development of the plot."[33] An event loses its temporal and spatial uniqueness and is subordinated to the logic of the whole story.
> 2. "Emplotment brings together factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results."[34]
> 3. "Employment combines in two variable proportions two temporal dimensions, one chronological and the other not. The former constitutes the episodic dimension of narrative. It characterizes the story insofar as it is made up of events. The episodic dimension draws narrative time in the direction of the linear representation of time: 'first', 'then', and 'then', by which we answer the question 'and then what?'. The second is the configurational dimension, thanks to which the plot transforms the events into a story. It draws from this manifold of events the unity of one temporal whole."[35] Thanks to this dimension the entire plot could be translated in one "thought."
> 4. The story "constitutes an alternative to the representation of time as flowing from the past toward the future, following the well-known metaphor of the 'arrow of time'. It is as though recollection inverted the so-called 'natural' order of time. In reading the ending in the beginning and the beginning in the ending we also learn to read time itself backwards."[36]
> 5. Finally, the configuration of a plot imposes the "sense of an ending" on the indefinite succession of incidents. As Ricœur notes, "to follow a story is to move forward in the midst of contingencies and peripetia under the guidance of an expectation that finds its fulfillment in the 'conclusion' of the story. It gives the story an 'end point', which, in turn, furnishes the point of view from which the story can be perceived as forming a whole."[37]

To illustrate the work of narrative configuration, I will refer to Walter Benjamin's essay "*Moscow.*"[38] Benjamin published this story after his return from the Soviet Union in 1927. It thus deals with events that first were observed and then later described by him in his diary. In this way, we discern the process of transformation that results from it. Benjamin writes:

> Once I needed to be wakened at seven in the morning: "Please knock tomorrow at seven". This elicited from the hotel porter the following Shakespearean monologue: "If we think of it we shall wake you, but if we do not think of it we shall not wake you. Actually we usually do not think of it, and then we wake people. But to be sure we also forget sometimes when we do not think of it. Then we do not wake people. We are under no obligation, of course but if it crosses our mind, we do it. When do you want to be wakened? At seven? Then we shall write that down. You see, I am putting the message there where he will find it. Of course if he does not find it, then he will not wake you. But usually we do wake people." The real unit of time is the "seychas." That means "at once." You can hear it ten, twenty, thirty times, and wait hours, days, or weeks until the promise is carried out. Just as you seldom hear the answer "no," negative replies are left to time. Time catastrophes, time collisions are therefore as much the order of the day as "the

> remonte." They make each hour superabundant, each day exhausting, and each life a moment.[39]

We can barely get a sense of what this passage is about, until the phrase *"the real unit of time is the seychas."* But it is Benjamin's conclusion which makes the story clear and understandable as a whole. There the narrator emphasizes his thoughts about the specificity of time perception in Russia. This allows readers to read the story backwards, in an inverted order.

This example supports Ricœur's notion that narrative configuration modifies event-event causation. He asserts that "whereas in a causal-type model, event and occurrence are indiscernible, the narrative event is defined by its relation to the very operation of configuration."[40] It is the narrative configuration that determines the distinction between events in compliance with their significance, scale, and order. The events are arranged in the order determined by the intrigue of the story. The significant events are selected and represented by various discursive tools. Thus the refigurative power provides the criteria of social event distinction which could be changed according to the plot controversies. Besides, Ricœur points out that:

> The paradox of emplotment is that it inverts the effect of contingency, in the sense of that which could have happened differently or which might not have happened at all, by incorporating it in some way into the effect of necessity or probability exerted by the configuring act. This necessity is a narrative necessity whose meaning effect comes from the configurating act as such; this narrative necessity transforms physical contingency, the other side of physical necessity, into narrative contingency, implied in narrative necessity.[41]

Narrative offers an alternative event-event causation, which is reduced neither to natural causation, nor to the causation proposed by scientific models. This is an imaginary, plot-governed causation.

From this discussion, we can draw two significant conclusions from Ricœur's unique approach to contemporary discussions of events. The first one is that there cannot be a mere sequence of events, registered by a distant observer. All events are embedded in a process of story-telling. The second conclusion is even more provocative. Ricœur's account of events suggests that, if a social event is the most basic part of the Social and if a social event is constituted by narrative, then narrative should be necessary for any analysis of the Social. But, in response to this conclusion, we could pose a critical question about the narration of social events: "Is it somehow possible to think the Social and its constitutive elements without taking narrativity into consideration?"

Limitations of Ricœur's Narrative Theory

In addition to the fruitful ideas concerning "refiguration" of the Social that we have examined, I also want to indicate the limitations of narrative as it is understood by Ricœur. The main point, earlier proposed by Johann Michel, is that the Aristotelian model of *muthos* does not cover all of the possible types of narratives.[42] As Michel notes, Ricœur's narrative model is supposed to be more prescriptive than descriptive. It is a kind of a "narrative ethics" or a "narrative normativity", which aims to preserve our living together, threatened by "dissolution", narrative defiguration or "the end of the art of story-telling."[43] Although the Aristotelian model

of *muthos* could be an ideal tool for the analysis of a Greek tragedy or a passage of the Bible ("the Model of all the narrative models"), it does not adequately account for many modern narrative forms.

First, it is not applicable to the analysis of a modern novel (such as the "Nouveau roman") that follows a "stream of consciousness" and which could be characterized by multiple levels of consciousness and incompleteness of the personality. Social events described in fragmented stories cannot be investigated under the Aristotelian classic model. Second, the Aristotelian-Ricœurian *muthos* cannot be used to analyze social events imprinted on photos. According to Michel, photography does indeed have narrative traits. Despite the fact that a photo image may imply certain clichés of "legends", its narrativity hardly resembles a classic plot or *muthos* in any sense. Third, the Ricœurian approach is unable to provide an understanding of new narrative media which Jean-Marc Ferry calls "a new social semiosis (une nouvelle *sémiosis sociale*)."[44] This social semiosis includes such examples as running commentaries, cinema fiction, telephone calls, parliamentary debates, private telecommunications, romantic stories, news, and journalistic commentaries. These media forms are not reducible to a threefold *mimesis* scheme. Finally, there are many other fragments of human experience that cannot be embedded easily into a narrative plot. Short monologues or exchanges may have narrative traits, but they do not necessarily imply emplotment.

Another important limitation in Ricœur's account of narrative is connected to the idea of "narrative necessity." According to Ricœur, the meaning of an event is dependent on a plot. It acquires "mineness," a kind of belongingness to the person who has described it, through the plot. But at the same time the event loses its independence. Ricœur's approach can be very fruitful in the investigation of a chain of events and event-event causation, but it does not provide a focus on the uniqueness of a social event. The only aspect that matters is the place where each event is located in a plot, and as a result of its emplotment, its own temporal and spatial dimension loses its importance.

Due to these limitations, Ricœur's theory of narrativity should have only limited use for the social sciences. Ricœur rightly identifies the importance of narrative for a theory of social events. Narrative as a linguistic and social phenomenon does not only identify events and constitute their meaning; it also displays an ability to refigure the natural order of events and to reconfigure their meaning. Ricœur's thought should be valued by social researchers for reminding us of the great refigurative power of narrative, but the major limitation of Ricœur's theory for the social sciences concerns his adoption of an Aristotelian model of narrative. This model does not provide adequate tools to study social practices of story-telling and the narrative traits of new and ever-changing modes of communication in society. In order to develop a better methodology for the study of the narrativity of these types of social events, Ricœur's theory should be supplemented by a more flexible model (like the one developed by David Carr), which can adapt to multiple narrative forms.

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