

## A THEORY OF THE EVENT

*Marshall Sahlins's "Possible Theory of History"*

In the ordinary language of the human sciences, the expression “theory of the event” is an oxymoron. Events, by definition, are unique and contingent happenings and are subject to the vagaries of human will. They therefore hardly seem a proper subject for a social science that sees its task as the discovery of general social laws. In the traditional division of labor in the human sciences, events were relegated to history, which specialized precisely in recounting the unique and contingent. Even the rise of social history—which by the end of the 1970s had become the dominant form of historical scholarship nearly everywhere—did not lead to the development of a systematic theoretical approach to events. Social historians defined themselves above all in opposition to the previously dominant narrative political history, and they consequently disdained the study of events. The structure-event contrast, which had traditionally distinguished the social sciences from history, was thus replicated within the discipline of history, where it distinguished social history from narrative history. For Fernand Braudel, the leader of the enormously influential French Annales school of social historians, the history of events (*l’histoire événementielle*) was mere froth on the waves of history. The history that really mattered was *l’histoire structurelle*, which studied geographical, ecological, and mental “structures of long duration” (*structures de longue durée*)

This chapter was originally published in German as “Eine Theorie des Ereignisses. Überlegungen sur ‘Möglichen Theorie der Geschichte’ von Marshall Sahlins,” in *Struktur und Ereignis*, ed. Andreas Suter and Manfred Hettling, Sonderheft 19 of *Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Zeitschrift für Historische Sozialwissenschaft*. Copyright © 2000 by Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Göttingen; reprinted with the permission of Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.

and *l'histoire conjoncturelle*, which studied the shifting conjunctures of economy and demography (Braudel 1958, 1966).

It is true that few historians still cleave to Braudel's hard anti-eventementalism. The "return of the event" was announced as early as 1974 (Nora 1974) and by the end of the 1970s a number of historians once associated with something like the Braudelian position had either explored particular events in lavish detail or declared their interest in a more narrative and less structural form of historical writing (e.g., Duby 1973; Le Roy Ladurie 1975, 1979; Stone 1979). But this return to writing about events has not, at least until very recently (e.g., Suter 1997), led historians to reflect upon the event as a theoretical category.

By far the most impressive and systematic theoretical discussion of the event has, instead, taken place in a very different and perhaps surprising disciplinary location: in the work of the structuralist anthropologist Marshall Sahlins. That Sahlins's theory has not been more generally recognized by historians reflects one of the history profession's most unfortunate and most ingrained professional traits: great power chauvinism. Sahlins's theory arose out of his work on the ethnographic history of Polynesia, safely out of the view of historians of Europe or America, or, for that matter, of most historians of the great non-Western civilizations in Asia and the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Sahlins's theory is, in my opinion, brilliant, elegant, widely generalizable, and eminently useful for historians. I regard it as the necessary starting point for any theorization of events. In this article I shall begin with an exposition of Sahlins's theory as I understand it, and will then suggest some elaborations, critiques, and modifications.

Structural anthropology is, at first glance, a surprising source for a theory of events. Indeed, the epistemological conventions of structuralism would seem virtually to rule out the study of rapid and turbulent historical change. Structure is, as I have remarked in chapter 4, a powerful, pervasive, and constitutive metaphor in the human sciences; it implies permanence, order, and solidity. In its various uses in the human sciences (and for that matter in the natural sciences) structure signifies the stable principle of order that underlies the surface multiplicity of phenomena. It represents one of the major strivings of the sciences: the attempt to reduce the apparent chaos of the world to relatively simple and comprehensible models or rules. Events, which are turbulent and chaotic, are conventionally

1. Two European historians who have appreciated the significance of Sahlins's work are Peter Burke (1987, 1992) and Andreas Suter (1997).

contrasted to structure, and they tend to be denigrated in the comparison. Sahlins notes:

For a certain anthropology, as for a certain history, it seemed that “event” and “structure” could not occupy the same epistemological space. The event was conceived as antistructural, the structure as nullifying the event. . . . Indeed, the table of oppositions that could be constructed from *Annales* texts would be worthy almost of the cosmological dualisms of certain Amazonian peoples. Structure is to the event as the social to the individual, the essential to the accidental, the recurrent to the idiosyncratic, the visible to the invisible, the lawful to the aleatory, the quotidian to the extraordinary, the silent to the audible, the anonymous to the authored, the normal to the traumatic, the comparable to the unique. (1991, 38–40)

Sahlins, to his credit, does not simply abandon the contrast between structure and event. After all, it is the powerfully recurrent or structured character of social existence, the strong tendency of social relations to be reproduced, that makes the event an interesting and problematic category in the first place. But Sahlins recasts the meaning of the contrast, attempting to transform the unequal and radical *opposition* between structure and event, which makes the two categories hostile and mutually incomprehensible, into a more balanced *relation*, in which each category implies and requires the other. Sahlins might be characterized as a structuralist of the Lévi-Straussian school who is trying to create a theory of cultural change without abandoning his structuralism. He has attempted to revise the structuralist common sense by giving structuralism a kind of American pragmatist inflection, one that focuses on social actors doing things with structural categories. Events, in Sahlins’s reformulation, are transformations of structure, and structure is the cumulative outcome of past events.

Sahlins points out that events are recognizable as such only within the terms provided by a cultural structure. Events can be distinguished from uneventful happenings only to the extent that they violate the expectations generated by cultural structures. The recognition of the event as event, therefore, presupposes structure. Moreover, what consequences events will have depends on how they are interpreted, and that interpretation can only be made within the terms of the cultural structures in place. What an event will be, how it will run its course, depends on how it is implicated in the structure. Sahlins calls this “the constitution of historical events by cultural structures” (1991, 42). But if structures define and shape

events, it is also true that events (re)define and (re)shape structures. A society's cultural structure is a product of the events through which it has passed.

### SAHLINS'S "POSSIBLE THEORY OF HISTORY"

A number of Sahlins's writings from 1980 to the mid-1990s focused on the relationship between structure and event (Sahlins 1981, 1985, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1994, and 1995; Kirch and Sahlins 1992). In his conclusion to *Islands of History*, he sets forth what he terms "a possible theory of history, of the relation between structure and event" (1985, 138). This "possible theory" has two fundamental propositions. The first is that "*the transformation of a culture is a mode of its reproduction*" (1985, 138). By this paradoxical phrase, Sahlins means that unexpected happenings—like expected happenings—are appropriated and can only be appropriated and acted upon by people in terms of their existing cultural categories. Sahlins elaborates this notion by considering a particularly spectacular case: the arrival of Captain Cook in Hawaii. The gist of his argument is that Cook and the English were received in Hawaii in accordance with the categories of Hawaiian mythical history. They were seen as beings from Kahiki, the "invisible lands beyond the horizon," and hence as divine. In Hawaiian culture, the physical arrival of divine beings was extraordinary but not unprecedented: according to myth, both the current Royal line and the kings they deposed were divine beings who had also arrived by sea from distant lands.<sup>2</sup>

The supposition that Cook was a god was enhanced by an additional

2. It should be noted that Sahlins's interpretation of Cook's encounter with the Hawaiians has been sharply challenged by Gananath Obeyesekere (1992). According to Obeyesekere, the notion that Hawaiians regarded Captain Cook as a god was purely a European invention, one based on long-standing myths about the inferiority and gullibility of savages that were shared by European explorers and landlubbers alike. Obeyesekere argues that Hawaiians dealt with Europeans more in a pragmatic than a mythological register, and that the ceremony interpreted by Sahlins as the deification of Cook was in fact a rite intended to install him as a chief within the Hawaiian scheme. This was probably motivated, Obeyesekere hypothesizes, by the desire of the king of Hawaii to create an alliance with Cook in his wars against Maui. Cook was eventually integrated into the Hawaiian system as a god, but only after his death, as was the case for Hawaiian royalty. Sahlins has, to my satisfaction, effectively refuted Obeyesekere's major claims (Sahlins 1995). Although the issues at dispute between the two protagonists are significant, I do not think that the outcome of their scholarly duel matters much for the arguments I am making here. Obeyesekere, no less than Sahlins, sees the Hawaiians as making sense of and interacting with the Europeans in terms of their own cultural categories; the difference is that he thinks they treated Cook as a chief rather than as a god. Moreover, Obeyesekere, unlike Sahlins, has little to say about the longer-term transformative effects of the event, which is my principal interest in Cook and the Hawaiians.

coincidence: his second landing on Hawaiian shores, in January 1779, took place during the four-month Makahiki festival. During the rainy Hawaiian winter, the god-chief Lono arrived by sea to reclaim the land as his own, restoring its fertility and suspending the cult of the rival god Ku, which notably included human sacrifice. Because Ku was the god of warfare and was closely associated with the ruling line of Hawaiian chiefs, the four-month ritual cycle of Makahiki represented the temporary eclipse of the arts of war by those of peace. At the end of this festival period, Lono's warriors and the warriors of the king engaged in a mock battle, after which the Lono image was dismantled, the cult of Ku restored, and the warlike ways of the kings resumed (Sahlins 1981, 17–20; 1985, 116–20).

When Cook arrived at Kealakekua Bay in January 1779, he and his ships were received with great and joyous ceremony and Cook himself was led through elaborate rites that, in Sahlins's interpretation, identified him as the god Lono. Some days later, Cook unwittingly obliged the Hawaiians' expectations by departing, as Lono should, at the end of the Makahiki period—just as the king was recommencing the Ku cult and ritually regaining possession of his kingdom. But a less happy coincidence soon intervened: Cook's ship sprung a mast and he and his men returned a few days later to obtain a replacement. This time his appearance on the shore signified not the expected return of the peaceful Lono but an unwelcome threat—might not Lono-Cook overthrow the king and take power himself, as the king's own mythical ancestors had once done? In an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and hostility, the situation rapidly deteriorated. The Hawaiians committed a series of thefts, and Cook retaliated by going ashore with a body of marines to take the king hostage. This led to a confrontation on the beach in which Cook's outnumbered men were sent scurrying to a waiting boat and the captain was killed by a dagger thrust and then fallen upon by more than a hundred Hawaiians.

But Cook's death did not end the matter. Precisely what happened to his body is uncertain. Two days after Cook's death, two priests of Lono stole out to one of the ships and turned a piece of his body over to the British, asking when Lono "would come again?" (Sahlins 1981, 24). A few days later, what were apparently the rest of Cook's bones were returned, and the British ceremonially consigned them to the waters of the bay. But by the early nineteenth century, the priests of Lono were carrying what they claimed to be Cook's bones around the island in the annual Makahiki festival—in a sennit casket of the sort used to carry the remains of apotheosized chiefs. Once Cook was dead, he was appropriated by Hawaii's

rulers as an ancestral spirit—most notably by Kamehameha, who succeeded to the kingship of the island of Hawaii shortly after Cook's murder. As the inheritor of the sacrifice of Cook, Kamehameha's mana, according to Sahlins, "had become British" (1981, 26). This was true both ritually and practically. Kamehameha venerated Cook's memory and his relics, and he also undertook a policy of friendship with the British and other Europeans, guaranteeing their safety and promoting their commerce with the islands. His promotion of European trade brought him enough guns, ships, and European advisors to conquer the entire Hawaiian archipelago and subject it to his unified rule.

The intrusion of Europeans into the islands was certainly a transformative event in the history of Hawaii. But how the intrusion affected Hawaii, what its specific historical consequences were, resulted not simply from the brute force or technological superiority of the Europeans. Europeans, their actions, and their material goods were appropriated in Hawaiian cultural terms, absorbed into a Hawaiian scheme of myth and practice. This is the sense in which, as Sahlins puts it, "the transformation of a culture is a mode of its reproduction" (1985, 138).

This brings us to the second proposition of Sahlins's "possible theory." This is that "*in action in the world—technically, in acts of reference—the cultural categories acquire new functional values*" (1985, 138). It follows from Sahlins's first proposition ("the transformation of a culture is a mode of its reproduction") that to act in the world is always to perform an act of reference, that "human social experience is the appropriation of specific percepts by general concepts"—in the case at hand, of a British sea captain by Hawaiian notions of divinity (1985, 145). But this necessary practical classification of the objects of perception and action into our existing categories puts the categories at risk. If a deceased British sea captain is adopted as the favored god of a Hawaiian king, this changes the sorts of mana available to kings. Integrating Cook into the Hawaiian pantheon domesticated Cook in important ways. It not only made the potentially threatening appearance of white men with huge ships, metal tools, and firearms thinkable, but made these novel happenings susceptible to manipulation and calculation according to a Hawaiian logic. Having domesticated European mana through the person of Captain Cook, Kamehameha could confidently trust European traders, protect them against theft and fraud, and could also prohibit others from gaining certain fruits of this trade, which included firearms and warships. These crucial European goods resulted in a remarkable ac-

cumulation of mana in the person of Kamehameha, who performed the unprecedented feat of conquering all the Hawaiian islands. To return to the language of Sahlins's second proposition: Kamehameha's "act of reference"—adopting Cook as a personal god—gave the Hawaiian concept of mana novel referents and therefore changed its meaning. "The cultural categories," as he puts it, "acquire new functional values. Burdened with the world, the cultural meanings are thus altered" (1985, 138).

It is, of course, particularly easy to see how transformations in cultural structures result from spectacular events like the first appearance of Europeans in Hawaii. But unexpected actions on the part of beings of any kind—of those categorized as women, or men, or chiefs, or fish, or rain, or plows, or dreams, or democracies, or verbs, or deaths—set in motion the same logic of cultural transformation. After all, it is true in general that, as Sahlins remarks, "the world is under no obligation to conform to the logic by which some people conceive of it" (1985, 138). Meaningful action in the world, which always includes an implicit or explicit act of reference, puts cultural categories at risk because the world is capable of subverting or contradicting the meanings that presume to describe it. This Sahlins calls the objective risk of the categories in action.

The categories also undergo a subjective risk—because they are used "by acting subjects in their personal projects" (1985, 149–50). To explicate this subjective risk, Sahlins develops a semiotic theory of interest. The term "interest," he notes, is derived from the Latin *inter est*, which means "it makes a difference" (1985, 150). If the meaning of a cultural sign, in Saussurian linguistics, is determined by its differential relation to other signs in the collective symbolic scheme, the interest of a sign is determined by the difference it makes in the life schemes of a particular subject—life schemes in the double sense of the person's unique sequence of experiences and of her or his current plans or intentions (1981, 68–69; 1985, 150). Undertaking an action always subjects a sign or cultural category to the plans or intentions of the person who acts. Actions, as we have seen, are acts of reference, but they are also acts of reference *by a person*, which means that the act inflects the meaning of the sign in accord with the interest of the actor. If the inflection succeeds, as when the Hawaiian monarch extended the concept of "tabu" to give himself and his followers a monopoly over European trade goods, the meaning of the category, and the meanings of all categories defined in relation to that category, are altered (1981, 71). Events transform the meanings and relations of cultural cate-

gories not only because the world fails to conform to categorical expectations, but because actors bend categories to their own ends in the course of action.

This is a brief exposition of Sahlins's "possible theory." In my opinion, Sahlins's theory introduces precisely the right objects of theoretical investigation: *structures*, which shape the world in their image; *events*, which, although they are shaped by structures, transform the structures that shaped them; a balky *world*, which is under no obligation to behave as our categories tell us it should, and *subjects*, whose interested and creative actions are the human stuff of events. I believe that Sahlins's theory is extraordinarily fruitful; that it has important implications for thinking about all kinds of events, in all areas of the world, and all historical eras. Such a simple, elegant, and generalizable theory should have long since broken out of the "islands of history" to be widely adopted by scholars working on history's continents, metropolises, and empires—but it has not. This is due in part, as I have remarked above, to the apparent marginality of precolonial Hawaii to a history dominated by great power chauvinism. But I also think there are certain intrinsic features of Sahlins's theory that might reduce its attractiveness to historians. The elaborations and modifications I suggest in this chapter are intended, among other things, to make the theory more attractive to mainline (or mainland) historians. I might point out in passing that an effort at elaboration and modification of the theory seems authorized by Sahlins's own uncharacteristic hesitancy in putting his theory forward, a hesitancy revealed in the phrase "possible theory."

### WHAT ARE STRUCTURES?

I believe that the best place to begin is with the concept of structure. Sahlins's own concept is distinctly structuralist, firmly in the tradition of Saussurian linguistics and Lévi-Straussian anthropology. Two features of his usage make this clear. First, Sahlins employs the term structure in the singular rather than in the plural. This implies that a given society has one overarching system of meanings, a cultural system in the strong sense. According to this conception, all cultural meanings everywhere in a society are bound tightly into a network of mutual definition. Second, structure means cultural or symbolic structure. Although Sahlins is keenly aware of how resources, including material resources, limit or shape social action, he does not designate material circumstances as structure or part of structure, as they would be in normal sociological or Marxian usage of the term.



Sahlins does deviate from a Lévi-Straussian structuralist conception by emphasizing what Anthony Giddens calls the “duality” of structure. Rather than seeing structure as a sort of extra- or superhuman agency that imposes social behavior on hapless actors from the outside, Sahlins, like Giddens, makes it clear that structure is the outcome as well as the source of social conduct, that it enables as well as constrains, and above all that it can be transformed by human social practice (Giddens 1976, 1979, 1984).

I heartily endorse Sahlins’s recognition of the duality of structure, but I dissent from the more conventionally structuralist features of his usage. I shall attempt to demonstrate that his conception of structure as singular and as exclusively symbolic results in theoretical and interpretive conundrums, and that these could be resolved, or at least ameliorated, by adopting the rather different concept of structure I have outlined in chapter 4, which sees structures as plural rather than singular and as being composed not just of cultural schemas but of mutually reinforcing sets of cultural schemas and material resources. I will be arguing, in effect, that accomplishing the sort of pragmatist inflection of structuralism that Sahlins envisages requires a more far-reaching modification of the concept of structure than he has yet undertaken—one that, appropriately enough, places structures more emphatically in the world of material practice.

#### IS STRUCTURE SINGULAR?

I am convinced that a plural rather than a singular conception of structure is absolutely crucial for a plausible theory of events. The notion that structure is singular for a whole society poses a number of problems, not the least of which is how to determine where one society and its cultural structure ends and the next begins. This problem is not so evident when the society in question is small in scale, relatively undifferentiated, and located on an isolated cluster of islands. But in the ethnically diverse, multi-religious, spatially sprawling, mobile, and highly differentiated social formations that make up virtually all of the contemporary world and most of the world available to us in the historical record, boundaries are notoriously difficult to delineate.

Consider an immigrant Bengali chemical engineer who lives and works in Houston—hardly a freak in the contemporary world. Such a person participates simultaneously in an American culture, a Bengali culture, and an international scientific and engineering culture—among others. Each of these cultural structures or systems has its own language, sets of symbolic distinctions, schemes of hierarchical judgment, modes of authority,

and so on, but none of them has clear geographical or sociological boundaries—precisely because some persons inhabit all of them simultaneously and blend or mix them in the course of their daily activities. Attempting to retain a singular concept of structure in such circumstances would require awkward and arbitrary choices. One could posit some vast globe-spanning cultural structure with local cultural differences encoded as hierarchically imbedded substructures, but such a concept of structure would have to be either so vague and distended as to not count as a structure in any meaningful sense or be so minutely complex and full of epicycles as to be unusable in practice. Alternatively, one could maintain that American culture, Bengali culture, and engineering culture are actually separate entities that have only external relations with each other. But this would require carving our Bengali engineer from Houston into three separate noncommunicating consciousness that accidentally meet in his or her body. One could think about cultural structures in this way—indeed, one might read the structuralists and post-structuralists who proclaimed the death of the subject as saying precisely that the person is a humanist illusion and that subjects are nothing more than carriers of or sites for structures that determine their utterances or activities. But this would nullify the American pragmatist (and humanist) thrust of Sahlins's project, which is to modify structuralism by including within its purview intelligent and suffering human persons who transform structures by their effectual actions.

I believe that if Sahlins's theory is to be applicable not only to the "islands of history" but to the continents, metropolises, and empires as well, structure must be conceptualized as plural. Cultural structures, in my opinion, should not be seen as corresponding to distinct "societies"—because it is so often impossible to specify where one society or culture ends and the next begins—but rather as corresponding to spheres or arenas of social practice of varying scope that intertwine, overlap, and interpenetrate in space and time. This would mean that for any given geographical or social unit, the relevant structures would always be plural rather than singular.

A singular conception of structure is awkward not only for societies that are complex, mobile, and geographically contiguous with other societies, but even for relatively well-bounded and isolated societies like the Hawaiian islands before Cook's arrival. This is true in part because a singular conception of structure makes it difficult to explain where events come from. Notice that Sahlins's paradigm case, the coming of Captain Cook to Hawaii, avoids this problem because it involved a collision of two cultures hitherto isolated from one another. When British and Hawaiians

met, the blatant contradictions between their cultural structures set off a stream of remarkable events. But in the absence of what (literally, from the Hawaiian point of view) we may call the *deus ex machina* of inter-societal contact, it is hard to see how a single overarching cultural structure will generate the differences, the shocks, and the novelties of reference that give rise to transformative events.

Sahlins's theory of interest, which asserts that persons occupying different positions in a system will understand and be motivated by the structure differently, moves toward one possible answer to this objection. In his Hawaiian example, Sahlins notes that women played an especially prominent role in the acts of tabu violation that eventually led to the collapse of the tabu system. For example, during Cook's sojourn in Hawaii and during subsequent visits by Europeans, commoner women repeatedly ignored the occasional tabus on the sea by swimming out to the ships at night to engage in sexual commerce with the sailors. While on the ships they also not only ate with their sailor paramours (Hawaiian women were forbidden to eat in the presence of men), but ate such tabued foods as plantains and pork—and with considerable gusto, according to the Europeans' chronicles (Sahlins 1981, 47–49). Indeed, it was a chiefly woman, Kaahumanu, the powerful widow of Kamehameha, who engineered the public and ceremonial tabu violation that, in 1819, put an end to the tabu system for once and for all (63). Hawaiian women's particular willingness to violate tabus, Sahlins remarks, arose from the fact that

the tabu did not sit upon Hawaiian women with the force it had for men. . . . The tabu as it affected women was rather the negative image of the consecrated status of men and gods: functioning to protect the sanctity of divine beings and things rather than a positive condition, state or attribute of women themselves. (46–47)

Women's personal and emotional commitment to the tabu system was far less powerful than men's, and they were therefore more willing than men to engage in acts of violation. This difference in perspective on a feature of the cultural structure endowed women with different interests than men. So, by analogy, any culturally marked difference in social position could give rise to differences in interest, and hence to potentially disruptive inflections of the meanings of cultural categories.

However, one wonders if this perspectival difference in interests is really sufficient to explain the novel actions of the Hawaiian women. If, as Sahlins seems to suggest, the tabu system is the master code in the cultural

structure of Hawaii and that code defines women only negatively, where did women get the sense of self and the plans for social action that allowed them to engage in subversive and potentially dangerous episodes of tabu violation? One plausible response would be to retain Sahlins's singular usage, but to propose a more deconstructionist or post-structuralist image that would insist on the instability, contradictions, gaps, and fissures in structure. Specifically, in the case of Hawaiian women one could argue that while the tabu system defined women negatively, it defined them negatively in relation to the positively marked categories of men, chiefs, and gods. One might argue in the deconstructionist mode that the negative definition of women inevitably contained traces of the excluded positively defined categories, and that the trace identities with men, chiefs, and gods had the potential to endow women with capacities that are explicitly denied to them. Hence, when breaches occurred in the ordinary and expected course of social relations, these trace identities could be activated in powerful and subversive ways.

But however salutary such a post-structuralist inflection may be, I also think that structures need to be seen as multiple in the quite different sense that different institutional realms, operating at varying social and geographical scales, operate according to different symbolic or cultural logics.<sup>3</sup> Although I am ignorant of Hawaiian history and ethnography beyond what I have learned from Sahlins's work, it is surely not plausible that Hawaiian women's only social definition was as a negative category in the system of tabu relations. Surely women were also defined in quite different ways in other institutional realms—for example, in agricultural and craft production, in their families or households, and in their relations with other women. Of course, these institutional realms and the cultural structures that informed them can only have been relatively autonomous. Relations between men and women, both as categories in public ritual situations and as husbands and wives or brothers and sisters in families, were powerfully structured by the tabu definitions, according to which women are to men as commoners are to chiefs and as humans are to gods. But tabu relations surely did not exhaust the cultural categories of Hawaiian families. I assume that there must have been forms of cooperation, play, authority, and division of labor characteristic of Hawaiian families or households in general that were patterned according to rules quite different from those of tabu. Likewise, interactions among Hawaiian commoner women,

3. For a brilliant development of this point, see Swidler (2001).

all of whom were defined as *noa* rather than *tabu*, must have been structured primarily by principles other than those of the *tabu* system.

Societies should be conceptualized as the sites of a multitude of overlapping and interlocking cultural structures. These structures are only relatively autonomous, in that they contain meanings and symbols shared by other structures—as, for example, both the cultural structures pertaining to family relations and those pertaining to public ritual relations included notions of *tabu*. But however relative, the autonomy is also real: the cultural structure of family relations is by no means reducible to that of *tabu* relations. The different structures that shape a society in fact overlap or interlock in more than one way—they contain common symbols, they refer or lay claim to common objects, and they coexist in and hence inform the subjectivities of the same persons. Structures also may exist at quite different levels or scales. The *tabu* system encompasses all Hawaiians, indeed the entire Hawaiian cosmos. After Cook's arrival, Hawaiian social relations were also affected by a quite different world system of capitalist exchange that spanned vast geographical regions of the globe, but that, in much of the world, governed only a narrow band of human relations. Other structures correspond to broad institutional spheres: the family, priestcraft, chiefly lineages, warfare, or production. But structures also exist at much more microscopic levels—particular work gangs, households, or even diadic friendships develop their own specific cultural structures that are not reducible to the cultural structures operating at more inclusive levels of social relations.

Such a multiple concept of structures is important for two reasons. First, if we assume that subjects are formed by structures, a multiple concept of structure is capable of explaining the existence of persons with widely varied interests, capacities, inclinations, and knowledge. Thus Hawaiian women, in addition to being defined negatively by their relation to the *tabu* system, or in *potentia* by traces of the categories from which the *tabu* system excluded them, were also defined more positively and along quite different axes by their participation in other spheres of social and cultural relations—in teasing relations with brothers, in work relations with other women, in mother-daughter relations, and so on. Second, given that structures overlap, cultural meanings and identities derived from one structure or institutional sphere can be transposed to others. To return to Hawaiian women, it is hard to imagine that the violations of *tabu* occasioned by the appearance of Europeans were not informed in part by identities, solidarities, and meanings derived from, say, everyday relations

among women or relations between sisters and brothers in particular households. With respect to the latter possibility, Sahlins remarks that there were many cases of close male relatives who colluded with women in their sexual commerce with the European sailors, a collusion that must arise at least in part from a sphere of social relations fairly autonomous from tabus (1981, 41–42).

Sahlins himself recognizes in a footnote in a paper on Fijian warfare that some sort of pluralizing of structure is necessary in order to explain the play of difference and the work of mutual redefinitions that is characteristic of the event. “The word ‘structure,’” he remarks, “is also an evident oversimplification. We shall see that what is characteristic of the event, or of the incident as event, is the connections it makes between different orders of structure . . . in the culture of a given society” (1991, 86). He goes on to use the locution “orders of structure,” fairly frequently in the remainder of the paper. I think, however, that the conception of multiple, overlapping, relatively autonomous, and transposable structures that I have been advocating is superior to the half-hearted compromise implied by “orders of structure.” I should say that I am encouraged to advocate a more radical repudiation of the singular structuralist conception of structure by the fact that in the passage marked by the ellipses in the above quotation, Sahlins remarks “alternatively, one could follow Sewell in speaking of different structures,” citing a prepublication version of the paper that became chapter 4 of this book. My remarks over the past few pages are an argument as to why one should “follow Sewell” on this issue.

A conception of structures as multiple rather than singular also helps to solve another issue Sahlins raises in a footnote in his paper on Fijian warfare: the difficulty of determining when a happening should be regarded as an event, rather than simply as an incident that reproduces a structure:

I am aware of the looseness of the formulation of events as acts or incidents that change rather than simply implement structures. . . . There are also practical difficulties in distinguishing acts which reproduce an existing cultural order from those which alter it, insofar as every intelligible act is at once novel and continuous with the order. . . . Cultural orders are event-systems. . . . All this raises problems of the kinds and magnitudes of change necessary to qualify as “event.” I deal with certain of these issues concretely only . . . leaving further consideration of the abstract problems to haunt me another time. (1991, 86)

In one respect it is appropriate that this problem should stay around to haunt anyone who embraces the notion of the duality of structure. Structures are made and reproduced by human action, not by God or by Nature. Because a structure is reproduced by enactments, and because the situation in which a structurally shaped enactment occurs is never quite the same as the previous situation, the difference between an act of reproduction and an event is always a difference in degree, not in kind. Distinguishing transformative events from ordinary implementations of structure is necessarily a matter of practical judgment.

However, determining which happenings are to be regarded as events would be a far less haunting affair if structures were conceptualized as multiple rather than singular. If structure is singular, one will constantly be asking whether an incident that has clearly changed the meaning and relations of categories in some particular corner of social relations is important enough to be called an event from the point of view of the cultural structure as a whole. The problem is often intractable, since what unambiguously qualifies as a local structural transformation may actually have the effect of reproducing a structure at a higher level. A divorce or a remarriage that profoundly transforms the culture of a given family will simply reproduce the categories of the American matrimonial system. If structure is regarded as singular, this incident poses an agonizing problem. But if structures are regarded as multiple, the happening is simultaneously an event from the point of view of the local family culture and an implementation of structure from the broader viewpoint.

A conception of structures as multiple, overlapping, and transposable also clarifies the problem of the production of acting subjects, about which Sahlin says relatively little. Sahlin makes certain assumptions about human subjects, all of which I would endorse: that subjects are willful, that they vary, and that they are profoundly shaped by their cultures. But Sahlin spends little time justifying these assumptions or exploring the relations between them. In particular, he has not pondered the possible contradictions between the assumption that people are culturally produced and that they are various. Since the cultural structure of any society is based on distinctions, it follows that different categories of persons identified in the culture will be different from each other — adults from children, men from women, chiefs from commoners, priests from chiefs, and so on. But Sahlin seems also to assume variations within such culturally recognized categories. I would maintain that within-category variation is com-

patible with an assumption of cultural production of subjects only if the cultural structures that inform subjectivities are conceptualized as multiple. Thus, in addition to being shaped by society-wide definitions of the relation of chiefs, or of women, or of priests to other categories, particular chiefs, women, and priests will also have been shaped by their varying participation in other institutions and bundles of social relationships. Under the assumption of multiple structures, the experiences, capacities, and knowledges of different persons will necessarily vary—because their life histories will yield unique mixes of exposure to different cultural structures, and from different angles of vision. Multiple structures imply varying subjectivities, and hence the varying interests that figure so centrally in Sahlins's account of events.

Moreover, whereas Sahlins clearly assumes that actors are willful, various, and profoundly shaped by their cultures, it is not so clear whether he regards actors as capable of acting creatively. True, they are able to make sense of novel phenomena, but they seem to do so essentially by assigning them to existing categories. Sahlins's Hawaiian actors sometimes seem rather unhesitating and automatic about their acts of reference, especially given the unprecedented and presumably unsettling nature of their situation. A European ship appears on the horizon during the appropriate time for Lono's arrival and Cook is immediately classed as Lono; Cook comes ashore, and the priests unhesitatingly lead him through ceremonies designed to identify him with that god. To be sure, our sources are all written by British sailors, so we are not privy to the perplexities, doubts, arguments, projects and counter-projects that may have emerged among the Hawaiians as they attempted to make sense of Cook's arrival on the scene. But in my opinion Sahlins's account makes the Hawaiians' crucial and risky acts of reference seem too easy, too automatically generated by the structures in place, and makes Hawaiian actors seem insufficiently conscious of the risks or reflective about the possibilities of other acts of reference. Indeed, the term reference seems a bit anemic for the kinds of cultural action that goes on in events. It could be read as implying that people have no sense of distance from their cultural structures, that the only issue is the assignment of the novel phenomenon to the appropriate structural category.

Yet it is not hard to imagine that the appearance of an anomalous phenomenon (and Cook in Hawaii would certainly qualify as anomalous) might result in semiotic actions far more complex than the assignment of the phenomenon to a category. People might also reflect upon the existing



categories, suggesting redefinitions of various kinds—for example, the splicing together of previously separate categories, the moving of a category from its place in one structure to a place in another, the collapsing or multiplying of categorical levels, the development of alternative possible schemes of classification, and so on. Moreover, when confronted with the need for action, people might well act ambiguously, trying out more than one form of semantic reference at once, hoping to be guided further by the future behavior of the anomalous phenomenon itself. While one cannot fault Sahlins for not tracing out the semiotic complexities of Hawaiian action—the documents, unfortunately, are silent or virtually silent about these issues—it seems very likely that such complexities in fact lay behind the acts of reference that emerge in the documents.

I would argue that a multiple conception of structures would make subjects' cultural creativity easier to explain. If the cultural structures by which subjectivities are formed are multiple, then so are the subjectivities. Any individual person combines within herself or himself a number of different situational subjectivities, and the motivations, plans for action, and modes of thinking associated with these different subjectivities can never be strictly limited to any particular situation. Because persons, symbols, and objects of cultural reference overlap between structural realms, structurally generated rules, emotions, categories, and senses of self can potentially be transposed from one situation to another. Indeed, if actors commonly have the experience of negotiating and renegotiating the relationships between noncongruent cultural structures, it follows that they should have some intellectual distance on the structural categories themselves, that they should be able to view one set of cultural categories from the point of view of others that are differently organized, to compare and criticize categories and categorical logics, to work out ways of harmonizing or ordering the seemingly contradictory demands of different structural schemes. A multiple conception of structure, consequently, makes human creativity and reflection an integral element in the theory of history, not a philosophically prior metaphysical assumption.

### IS STRUCTURE ONLY CULTURAL?

I argue that structures are multiple in the sense that different clusters or systems of cultural meanings inform different realms of institutional practice. This claim actually breaks with classical structuralism in two ways. First, it challenges structuralism's sense of totality by separating the symbols and meanings that structure human practices into relatively auto-

mous and noncongruent local clusters. But, second, it also implies that the symbols and meanings are defined as much by their local relations to worldly practice as by their global semiotic relations of similarity and difference. This implies a more substantial link between “structures” and “the world” than can be comfortably accommodated by traditional structuralism, one that I believe can be clarified by conceptualizing structures as made up of both cultural schemas and material resources, rather than of schemas alone.

Although Sahlins does not treat resources as a part of structure, they nevertheless play crucial roles in several episodes of his “structural history.” This can be illustrated most clearly by revisiting his account of structural change in Hawaii after the death of Captain Cook. We might begin a discussion of resources with the question of the dead captain’s bones, which were a matter of dispute between the Hawaiians and the English. The English wanted the bones so that Cook’s barbarous death could at least be appeased by giving his worldly remains a Christian funeral, and they did consign someone’s bones—whose we can only guess—to the waters of the bay. The Hawaiians regarded Cook’s bones as divine, but their use of them was rather more worldly. By extending to Cook’s bones the ritual treatment accorded to those of deceased chiefs, Cook’s mana could be captured for the royal house, thereby increasing the king’s worldly powers. Kamehameha, who succeeded to the throne shortly after Cook’s death, devoted himself particularly to the cult of the British god Lono-Cook, who, according to a priest speaking to Lieutenant Peter Puget in 1793, “always accompanied the king” on his voyages (Sahlins 1981, 26). This royal adoption of the Cook cult and the resulting access of British mana had important practical consequences for Kamehameha; indeed, it might be maintained that it was precisely this that enabled him to conquer all the Hawaiian islands and subject them to his unified rule. Kamehameha, as the privileged possessor of European mana, set himself up as the protector of foreign shipping and placed a royal tabu on all trade with Europeans. This assured him access to European advisors and an effective monopoly over the firearms and ships he needed to overpower his enemies. By 1812, Kamehameha had parlayed these advantages into suzerainty of the entire archipelago.

This successful use of tabu to engross trade had an extended but ultimately disastrous history in Hawaii. In the early nineteenth century, when Hawaiian sandalwood suddenly became a major item in European commerce with China, the value of the trade tabu rose precipitately. Not only Kamehameha but many of the chiefs who administered his kingdom

and/or held the land and controlled the labor of commoners could gain enormous wealth by forcing gangs of commoners to troop into the forests and cut sandalwood. The exploitation of commoners by landholding chiefs drove them into poverty and exhaustion, probably contributing to the alarming drops in population attendant on the spread of “civilized” diseases like smallpox. The chiefs, meanwhile, accumulated new forms of mana from the commerce with Europeans. They bought vast quantities of European and Chinese luxury goods. They built European-style houses, which they used only for ceremonial occasions, and filled them with clocks, dishes, plate, and figurines. They piled up the finest quality Chinese silks, and American and English gingham, linens, and woollens in storehouses where they were left to rot. At the same time, Hawaiian chiefs began calling themselves by European names: Billy Pitt, Cox, John Adams, Charley Fox, Thomas Jefferson, and so on. Sahlins sees these seemingly bizarre behaviors as resulting from perfectly logical extensions of existing Hawaiian notions. Traditionally, rulers claimed to rule as the descendants of foreign conquerors and used various means to emphasize symbolically their difference from the common people. To adopt the name Billy Pitt was precisely to assume a foreign, in this case European, identity that marked one off from ordinary Hawaiians. And the advent of massive levels of European trade in the years before the sandalwood forests were exhausted (around 1830) made possible an accumulation of the signs of foreign mana on previously unheard of proportions. The result was a frenzy of conspicuous consumption in a Hawaiian “political economy of grandeur”—one that wound up exhausting and depleting the ranks of commoners and eventually undermining the chiefs, who had accumulated gigantic debts by the time the boom ended. The eventual result was the “land reforms” of the 1850s, which had the effect of dispossessing Hawaiians altogether and turning the land over to American missionaries and traders (Sahlins 1990; Kirch and Sahlins 1992).

Once again, Sahlins uses this story to show how novel happenings are domesticated by the application of existing semiotic schemas. Cook’s bones were given the same ritual treatment as those of dead kings or of chiefs defeated and killed in battle; this captured the mana of the dead great one as one’s own. Trade with Europeans was coded as a royal affair, in part because the king was the privileged possessor of Cook’s European mana, and the royal tabu was therefore extended to cover it. Luxury goods introduced by Europeans were interpreted as signs of chiefly mana and accumulated accordingly. Once again, European novelties were appropriated

and shaped by Hawaiian cultural categories, but at the same time the meaning of the Hawaiian cultural categories were transformed by the new realities to which they refer.

But how did this simultaneous appropriation by and transformation of cultural categories take place? Here I want to point to the crucial but theoretically unmarked role played in Sahlins's story by the dynamic, dialectical relationship between schemas and resources. The dialectic may be schematized in three points or moments.

1. *Resources are produced by cultural schemas.* By this I do not mean that cultural schemas create the substances or the human beings that become resources in a given social situation. Rather, I mean that humans' or substances' specific value arises from their categorization within existing cultural schemas. Cook's bones become a powerful source of mana because they are treated according to schemas governing the bones of great chiefs. European trade is categorized as royal and subjected to tabus both because the king's association with Lono-Cook has made him "European"—that is, endowed him with European mana—and because the trade comes from over the water, like royal power itself. Action in the world marks substances or persons as resources with certain values and potentials for social power. It not only places the substances (or persons) in abstract categories that have specific semiotic relations with other categories, but endows them with the real-world powers that are characteristic of other substances (or persons) that belong to the category. Cook's bones radiate a quality of divinity comparable to those of other divinized chiefs, and mana inheres in European firearms or fancy cloths as it does in certain tabued foods. A successful act of categorization—and categorizations are often disputed—makes things into resources of a specific sort and thereby subjects them to social dynamics characteristic of that category.

2. *Nevertheless, resources are also governed by other dynamics than those they receive from this categorization.* These supplemental dynamics are of two general types: natural and sociocultural. All resources are subject to certain biological or physical limitations and tendencies. Sahlins's story includes two obvious cases of such dynamics. Sandalwood trees are culturally marked as a trade good of particular value and as the property of chiefs or the king. But these markings do not change the fact that the trees reproduce slowly and therefore will eventually be exhausted by unrestrained cutting. Likewise the harvesters—the Hawaiian common people—could be pushed only so hard without suffering rises in mortality and declines in fertility. In addition to these natural dynamics, culturally defined re-

sources were also subject to sociocultural dynamics beyond those arising from their assignment to a particular category. Hawaiians could classify Cook as a god and a source of mana. But the European mana generated by Lono-Cook differed from previous Hawaiian forms of mana because it depended on modes of production and commercial currents—most particularly European and American trade with China—that extended far beyond the Hawaiian archipelago. The European goods that were categorized as indices of mana (for example, warships, guns, plate, crystal, silks, gingham, clocks) not only had particular physical characteristics (guns were weapons of unprecedented power) but were implicated in cultural schemas and the social dynamics of the emerging world capitalist system. As resources implicated in other cultural universes, they could hardly be governed solely by the Hawaiian schemas of mana and tabu.

3. *The transformation of cultural schemas results from unexpected flows of resources.* This point may be explained by means of a commentary on the second proposition of Sahlins's "possible theory of history": that "in action in the world—technically, in acts of reference—the cultural categories acquire new functional values. Burdened with the world, the cultural meanings are thus altered" (Sahlins 1985, 138). The issue is how we should understand the burdening of cultural categories with the world. I would argue for two elaborations of or amendments to Sahlins's formulation. First, while it is important to understand that action in the world is always an act of reference, this is only a one-sided description of the act. To engage in action is to act linguistically, to designate a thing as belonging to a semantic category—as an instance of "tree," or "god," or "tabu." But this same act is also a marking of a thing in the world as a potential resource for action, as being susceptible to the kinds of social uses characteristic of that category of thing. Meaningful action, then, should be understood as at once a reference in language and a marking of things in the world as potential resources for action. Second, Sahlins's formulation is too synchronic. It is true that the very act of making a reference may be seen as inflecting the meaning of the category to which a thing is referred. Any act of reference changes the empirical contents to which the category refers, and therefore affects the range of characteristics which it may include. But the risk of transformation of cultural categories arises above all from the fact that the things marked as resources in an initial action may be subject over time to other determinations, natural and sociocultural, that will cause them to change significantly in content, in quantity, in value, and in relations. If the Hawaiian categories of mana and tabu were transformed

between the 1790s and the 1830s, it was above all because many of the things marked as resources by their relation to these categories—for example, firearms, European commerce, luxury goods, and sandalwood—were subject to rhythms and valuations unforeseen by the Hawaiian chiefs and priests who so marked them in the 1790s. It was not acts of reference per se that caused categories to be so fatefully transformed, but unpredictable flows or fluctuations of the resources marked by the act of reference.

According to my reading of Sahlins, structural change does not operate on a purely cultural level. It is inextricably wrapped up with the marking, use, and dynamics of resources. For this reason we need to take more literally than Sahlins does his own claim that categories are “burdened with the world.” Cultural categories are worldly facts. They burden the world with potentials for human use whenever actors mark things by using them as resources. And they are burdened by the things they mark, dragged into new constellations of meaning when the course of action doesn’t go as expected. This does not mean that cultural categories are not also defined by their place in webs of semiotic relations—webs that often reach far beyond the locality where they are burdened with particular worldly referents. Indeed, it is precisely this simultaneous participation in far-flung networks of semiotic implication and in local relations of worldly practice that makes novel acts of reference so risky. The designation of European trade goods as tabued meant that resentments arising out of trade relations could react back on the food tabus distinguishing men from women or commoners from chiefs, indeed on the entire tabu system. The power of Sahlins’s own account depends, in my opinion, on an implicit conception of structure that encompasses both schemas and resources. Only such a conception can satisfactorily explain the dialectical relationship between cultural categories and human action in the world.

#### STRUCTURE AND EVENT

Although I have spent much time in this chapter criticizing certain aspects of Sahlins’s theorization of structure, it is important to recognize that we share certain fundamental assumptions. I would state them as follows.

First, historical events should be understood as happenings that transform structures. The reason that events constitute what historians call “turning points” is that they somehow change the structures that govern human conduct. To understand and explain an event, therefore, is to specify what structural change it brings about and to determine how the structural change was effectuated.

Second, the key to an adequate theory of the event is a robust theory of structure. This point may seem paradoxical because “structure” has been understood as an essentially synchronic concept whereas “event” has usually been thought of as preeminently diachronic—as something that can be captured only by means of a detailed narration of happenings in time. But Sahlins’s meditation on the coming of Captain Cook to Hawaii shows that to narrate an event meaningfully, the historian not only must recount happenings in time, but must also break from narration—that is, temporarily suspend time in order to analyze, in a synchronic discursive mode, the skein of relationships that define the nature and the potentialities of the objects and persons about which a story may be told. There can be no adequate diachronic narrative of an event without a synchronic understanding of the structures that the event transforms.

Third, I believe that Sahlins has uncovered the fundamental mechanism of structural change: the necessary but risky application of existing cultural categories to novel circumstances, the action of culturally marking things in the world that, at least occasionally, transforms the meanings of the cultural markers and thereby reorients the possibilities of human social action. Clear and simple in the abstract, this mechanism is of course difficult to specify and subject to countless complexities in the actual details of historical change. But Sahlins has provided the crucial service of naming the quarry that we need to capture and of giving us a luminous example—his Hawaiian historical ethnography—of how the hunt can be carried out successfully.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THE CONJUNCTURE AND THE CONJUNCTION OF STRUCTURES

Sahlins’s historical ethnography possesses a virtue that is much valued by historians: an acute appreciation of the significance of historical detail. The entire thrust of his theory impels us to identify the specific situations in which novel acts of reference (and markings of the world) are made. Even if events in some way mediate or instantiate more gradual changes in larger historical forces (and of course they often do), the social transformations that are effectuated in events depend on the details of what happens in specific times, places, and situations. Hence, details matter: contingent, transient, or seemingly trivial particularities of the situation can have major and lasting effects on subsequent history. The expansion of intensive European navigation into the Pacific was bound to bring Europeans into contact with Hawaiians, and this contact was bound to have a

major impact on Hawaiian social relations. But the specific nature and form of the impact depended upon details of the initial encounter. Had Cook's ships sailed into Kealahou Bay in July instead of December, the fateful assimilation of the British sea captain to the god Lono might never have occurred, since it was normal for Lono to come to Hawaii during the time of Makahiki, but it would have been highly irregular for him to arrive in midsummer. And had Cook not been taken into Hawaiian culture as a god, Hawaiian history over the next half-century or so would have been quite different, as the entire corpus of Sahlins's historical ethnography makes plain.

Sahlins sees this tendency for micro conditions to have macro effects as a characteristic mark of the event. In *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981), Sahlins introduces the paradoxical aphorism "structure of the conjuncture" to designate a peculiar quality of events. He uses this term rather casually, defining it only contextually and in passing, as in the following examples:

Nothing guarantees that the situations encountered in practice will stereotypically follow from the cultural categories by which the circumstances are interpreted and acted upon. Practice, rather, has its own dynamics—a "structure of the conjuncture"—which meaningfully defines the persons and the objects that are parties to it. (35)

\* \* \* \*

The pragmatics had its own dynamics: relationships that defeated both intention and convention. The complex of exchanges that developed between Hawaiians and Europeans, the structure of the conjuncture, brought the former into uncharacteristic conditions of internal conflict and contradiction. (50)

\* \* \* \*

The specificity of practical circumstances, people's differential relations to them, and the set of particular arrangements that ensue (structure of the conjuncture) sediment new functional values on old categories. (68)

\* \* \* \*

We must bring into account the relations of practice itself, the "structure of the conjuncture." My argument has been that there is a sui generis development of cultural relationships at this level: a working-out of the categories of being and things as guided by interests and fitted to contexts. We have seen that such "working disagreements" may entail some arrangement of conflicting intentions and interpretations, even as the meaningful relationships so established conflict with established relationships. (72)



Writing a decade later, he defines structure of the conjuncture only a little more formally:

In other studies I have in effect described the evenemential process as a “structure of the conjuncture,” meaning the way the cultural categories are actualized in specific context through the interested action of the historic agents and the pragmatics of their interaction. (1991, 80–81)

The term requires some unpacking. Sahlins invokes the structure of the conjuncture to explain why, in events, the “situations encountered in practice” will fail to “stereotypically follow from the cultural categories by which the circumstances are interpreted and acted upon” (1981, 35). Structure of the conjuncture, hence, does not refer to structure in its most ordinary sense, that is, enduring and routinely reproduced relationships. It is, rather, a “pragmatics” or a “dynamics” that, although driven by the “interests” of actors, “defeated both intention and convention.” Yet, if structure of the conjuncture does not refer to structure in the usual sense, the term has a certain paradoxical appropriateness. Sahlins is arguing that the dynamics of events are not utterly chaotic, that they exhibit significant regularities, albeit not the regularities that the actors would have expected. The term “structure of the conjuncture” is an attempt to signify that the “conjunctures” we call events are characterized by emergent regularities or logics and are in this sense “structured” in spite of their novelty.

But the neologism “structure of the conjuncture” is reversible and, I believe, gains something from the reversal. The “structure of the conjuncture,” as Sahlins conceptualizes it, may be said to arise from a “conjuncture of structures.” What makes possible the peculiar dynamic that characterizes events is the conjoining in a given situation of structures that previously either had been entirely disjoint or had been connected only in substantially different ways. When people act in a situation in which previously existing structures are newly conjoined, the consequences of certain of their actions will be deflected from what the actors intend. The situation therefore will have the effect of suppressing certain actions and suggesting new possibilities for the elaboration of others. Note that this novel combination of frustrations and incitements will influence actions predicated on each of the previously disjoint structures simultaneously. The consequence is that all the parties can be expected to engage in experimental transpositions of structurally shaped schemes of actions in a volatile and interactive dynamic. In this sort of situation, where the level

of uncertainty is bound to be very high, mutual redefinitions of the situation that significantly restructure practice are likely. And, of course, seemingly minor or contingent details of the situation can have major and enduring consequences.

This may be illustrated once again by Sahlins's Hawaiian example. We have remarked that the utterly contingent fact that Cook's ships arrived at Kealakekua Bay at the beginning of the Makahiki festival made his unexpected appearance codeable as the coming of Lono, thereby inciting Hawaiian priests of the Lono cult to treat him as a god and to perform on his person ceremonies usually performed on an idol. The priests, according to Sahlins, were particularly solicitous of Lono-Cook during his entire stay in Hawaii because they could use the extraordinary fact of Lono's flesh and blood visitation to reinforce their own position in ongoing rivalries with the local chiefs. The British, who needed the supplies that flowed to them from the Lono-priests in the form of gifts, were happy to cooperate. The chiefs, by contrast, were rather more ambivalent in their treatment of Cook, alternating "opportunistically" between "noblesse oblige and stealing" (Sahlins 1995, 70). The consequence was a particular "structure of the conjuncture." As Sahlins puts it,

Chiefs, priests, and English were all following their received inclinations and interests. The result was a little social system, complete with alliances, antagonisms—and a certain dynamic. The British had been drawn into the schismogenic relation "between the Laity and the Clergy." In the existing ceremonial cum political circumstances, this was not necessarily to their advantage. For, the more the priests objectified themselves as the party of Lono, the more they intimated for Cook the destiny of the king's victim. (1995, 71)

Why did this structure of the conjuncture mark Cook as a potential victim? The king traditionally ended the Makahiki period by coming ashore in the vicinity of the Lono temple, where he staged a ritual battle with Lono's adherents. Then the image of Lono was disassembled—he was, that is to say, ritually killed—and a canoe filled with offerings for Lono was set adrift to Kahiki. Meanwhile, the king recommenced the cult of the war god Ku. In the context of these ritual oppositions, traditionally acted out at the end of the Makahiki period, the three-way interaction of chiefs, priests, and English had the effect of marking Cook as a god who stood in a potentially hostile relation to the Hawaiian king and chiefs. The potential hostility was held in abeyance when Cook and his men—coinciden-

tally, but, from the Hawaiian point of view, appropriately—set off from Hawaii into the open sea at the end of the Makahiki period. But the potential hostility was powerfully actualized when another of history's little accidents, a storm that broke a mast, induced Cook's untimely return to Hawaiian shores a few days after his ceremonious departure. The upshot, of course, was that the flesh-and-blood Lono-Cook suffered the death and dismemberment normally visited on the idol and that his mana was captured by Hawaiian royalty.

Here the structure of the conjuncture was formed by a three-way conjuncture of structures. The preexisting structural tensions between Lono priests and chiefs were exacerbated and given a particular twist by the unexpected appearance of Cook, whose own interests unwittingly drew him into the ritual drama of the Makahiki on the side of the priests—in a role whose significance he could not know, but for which he was singularly suited as a consequence of his own highly ritualized and absolute power as a captain in the British Navy. In the structured improvisations that arose in this complex conjuncture, Cook gained his divinity and lost his life, and the Hawaiians absorbed the presence of ship-borne Europeans into their social world in a way destined to transform it in a particular fashion.

The specific nature of the structure of the conjuncture will, of course, be different in every event. But if Sahlins's theory of the event is correct, it should always involve a novel conjuncture of structures. Hence, we cannot predict in advance what structure of the conjuncture will shape the novel acts of reference that constitute the core of a given event. But we do know what to look for: a conjunction of structures that sets off a synergetic interaction between actors attempting to make structural sense of a highly volatile situation.

#### A POSSIBLE THEORY OF HISTORY

Sahlins's theory of the event is appropriately open-ended. It is a "possible" theory of history not only in the sense that it might just work, but in the sense that what it specifies is not a collection of iron laws of historical development but a set of possibilities inherent in history generally. It provides a vocabulary and a paradigmatic logic for the historical analysis of events. I have tried to elucidate Sahlins's paradigm, to convey its elegance and power, and also to show how it invites elaboration and modification. Its essential terms are all abstract—structure, event, actor, interest, reference, structure of the conjuncture, and, I would add, schemas, resources, and conjunctions of structures. We might wish for a more elaborated and

richer theory of the event than Sahlins provides. But if so, it is our job as students of history to produce one. By reflecting further, on the basis of events that interest us—events with the widest variety of actors, geographical and historical locations, political and cultural dynamics, and temporalities—we should be able to say more about the different ways that conjunctions of structures may give rise to structures of the conjuncture, the different kinds of semiotic acts of reference that reshape structures, the types and relationships of structures that are effected by events, and so on. But it is my contention that Sahlins has provided us with the essential framework for such further reflections. In short, I regard his theory of history as much more than merely *possible*. It is, as I see it, a powerful, generalizable, fruitful, and open-ended theory of historical change. It should be a theory impossible to do without—not just a *possible* but an *indispensable* theory of history.