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Historical Event as a Structural Factor. South America Conquest by the Spanish in Nathan Wachtel Perspective¹

The actual state of our knowledge in the subject of a given phenomenon, process or more generally this or other piece of reality, often defined is by few general ideas, which—created and publicized in a somehow different ways and thanks to various mechanisms—constitute individual emblematic structure correlated with its subject. If in relation to western historiography of 1950-1970 (especially French) one can talk today about existence and functioning of this kind cognitive emblem, then it appears, that one of its components sets an opposition between the event and a structure. Presenting the matter a bit differently, every attempt of conveying in possibly conceited form of the essence of the “new history” in the mentioned period almost automatically evokes as one the first a thought, that it concentrated on searching and recreating of the historical structures (and circumstances), turning away at the same time from the analysis of events.

The theory presented above could be supported with many examples of characteristics of the discussed historiography, in which opposition event—structure plays fundamental role. Lets mention here, choosing completely accidentally, only about three. And so Jacques Revel, noticing, that next to the political events exist also social event dimensions, economical and cultural (un evenementiel social, un evenementiel economique, un evenementiel culturel), he stated:

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New history presented them the interest of various registers of cycle fluctuations (circumstances) and—in a much stronger way—interest in structures of long lasting.²

On the other hand Marschall Sahlins, comparing in the beginning of the 80 of the XX century anthropology and history situation of that time, notes:

Anthropologists start from the abstract structures, to get closer to concrete events. Contemporary historians depreciating singular events in favor of reconstructing the deep structures.³

At last the third example, taken from issued in 1973 a collection of the articles by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie:

Modern historiography, which wants to be quantitative, structural, was from the beginning forced to kill in order to live: tens of the years ago sentenced to quasi—death the events history Totalizing history—quantitative and structural as much as it is possible—tries therefore come out beyond the event, or it would digest or absorb it.⁴

And really, even if to look into a masterpiece of the most influential historian of that time—the work of Fernand Braudel—quoted judgments and opinions find the confirmation within it. Unnecessary seems here reminding Braudel reflections and historiographical conclusion, within which the opposition event—structure embodies. Lets just say, that it is based in Braudels on whole row of pole distinctions: unconscious v. conscious, deep v. superficial, permanent v. ephemeral, secretive v. apparent, reconstructed v. given. First elements of those oppositions characterize structural reality, second ones refer to event level.⁵

Though already in the beginning of the 70s of the XX century discussed opposition came into the precinct of a complex process of problematization. For its beginning, at least on French ground, may be acknowledged publicized in 1972 a special issue of *Communications* titled “L’évenement,” where Edgar Morin, pronouncing “the return of an event” to social sciences, turned towards biology and genetics to indicate possible frame of the reorganizing function

² *La Nouvelle histoire*, sous la dir. de J. Le Goff, R. Chartier et J. Revel, Paris 1978, p. 167 (entry: *Evenement*).

³ M. Sahlins, *Other Times, Other Customs: the Anthropology of History*, “American Anthropologist,” Vol. 85, 1983, p. 534. Cyt. za: H. Medick, „Missionnaires en canot.” *Les modes de connaissance ethnologiques, un défi à l’histoire sociale?*, „Geneses,” 1, sept. 1990, p. 28.

⁴ E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Le territoire de l’historien*, Paris 1973, p. 171.

⁵ The existence of the opposition event—structure is of course recognized in the works of other contemporary historians: P. Goubetrta, F.Furet, and D.Richert, American cliometricians etc.

of events with the relation to the structural entity.⁶ What is important, their contribution to that issue also had historians: Pierre Nora and most of all Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, who has reviewed the book of Paul Boris *Peasants of the West*,⁷ in which he noticed—as he himself defined—“structural—event—structural reasoning.”⁸ Next years have brought more trials, demands and concrete projects aimed at constituting relations between an event and a structure beyond opposition ratio. For example in one of his essays J. Le Goff stated, that history oriented ethnologically, keeping elaborated distance towards the traditional “event history,” at the same time “proposes history built out of events repeated and expected—religious celebrations, event and ceremonies related to the biological and family history: births, marriage, death.”⁹ And the French historian asked:

Whether after excessive interest with, what is variable, what goes on at a high pace, historian—ethnologist doesn’t privilege too hastily this, what reveals too slowly, what does not change at all or in a small degree? Whether in purpose of getting closer to the ethnologist did not get too attached to the opposition structure—economic situation, structure—event, to stand on the side of structure, when in the meantime present needs within the frames of historical issues demanding overstepping the fake dilemma structure—economical situation, and especially: structure—event?¹⁰

In a different way this opposition tried to reconsider a year later Michael Vovelle. Stating, that works concentrating on revealing of structural level of reality in its extreme form led to impugning such events as “black death,” this historian accepted the necessity of defining new dialectics of “short time” and “long time.” Basing on his own and a few other historians studies, Vovelle distinguished two way of dialectical connection between the structure and the event: in the first one analytical way leads from the explicit structure to the hidden event, in the second—the opposite—from the explicit event to the hidden structure.¹¹

⁶ Comp. E. Morin, *L'événement*, “Communications,” no. 18, 1972, on p. 4 writes: „Systems are aspiring to consolidate in their own being and repeating without any modification (homeostasis, reproduction). Yet they change, they evolve! Meanwhile the accidental, perturbative, destructive and disorganizing events have in some cases, in certain conditions and on some thresholds an opposite effect that is: reorganizing—morfogenic.”

⁷ P. Bois, *Paysans de l'Ouest*, Paris 1971.

⁸ E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Evenement et longue duree dans l'histoire sociale: l'exemple chouan*, „Communications,” no. 18, 1972; reprinted in: id., *Le territoire de l'historien*, Paris 1973, p. 173.

⁹ J. Le Goff, *Pour un autre Moyen Age. Temps, travail, et culture en Occident: 18 essais*, Paris 1977, p. 338.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 346-347.

¹¹ M. Vovelle, *L'histoire et la longue duree*, in: *La Nouvelle Histoire*, especially p. 336 i n.

This list of trials to work through relation on the line structure—event could be expanded further. Mentioned here should be a reflection of Paul Ricoeura, connecting both figures on the grounds of narration; about the considerations of Krzysztof Pomian in the subject of the theory of Rene Thom and structural revolutions;¹² about remarks of Marshall Sahlins included in his *Islands of History*,¹³ and so on. Surely various are those approaches, situated on different levels and solving a given problem in their own way.

In the further part of the text we would like to widely show yet another, less known, but at the same time *stricte* historiographical enterprise, which—in our opinion—links, on the occasion of the analysis of the concrete occurrences, historical event with the structural order, making out of it the first factor responsible for the inter-structural transformation. It is about historical works of Nathan Wachtel from the turn of 60 and 70-ties of the previous century in the subject of native people of South America in the time of Spanish colonization. As far as we know, nobody until now has taken a closer look at an interesting for us angle of relation between an event and a structure.

Discovery and conquest of South America by the Spanish colonizers at the threshold of the new era—hardly any event in the history has become a subject of so many historical elaborations, frames and analysis. However most of them, at least those created in the western culture—writes Wachtel in 1967—has one primary limit: accepts only the Europeans point of view, describing—in example—their stupefaction of the sight of an unknown to them, up till then, world.

There exists though a different side of events . . . In what way the Indians survived the Spanish conquest? What were their feelings, their reactions, when the white people came? How did they interpret those events? How do they present them today?¹⁴

¹²Comp. K. Pomian, *L'ordre du temps*, Paris 1984, pp. 34-35.

¹³M. Sahlins, *Wyspy historii*, transl. I. Kołbon, Kraków 2006, ie. p. 13: „An event is a relation between an action and a structure (or structures): perceiving the phenomenon itself as a significant value, from which its defined historical effectiveness comes out.”

¹⁴N. Wachtel, *La vision des vaincus: la conquete espagnole dans le folklore indigene*, „Annales. E.S.C.,” no. 3, 1967, p. 554.

This attempt to look at the conquest “from the other side” Wachtel fully elaborates in published four years later work¹⁵, which in the context of a link of an ethnological perspective with the historical one Le Goff acknowledged as pioneer.¹⁶ In the introduction we read:

We are envisaging a phenomenon, possibly a unique one, which constitutes a true experiment situation within the field of humanistic sciences: closed societies, with the white people invasion, get a shock because of the event originating *stricto* from outside. How do they react? What is their further evolution?¹⁷

This, what in quoted fragment is defined as “shock” caused by exogenous event, Wachtel further recognizes as a rapid process of destruction of “destruction” of the mental universe of Indians, on the other hand their reactions to this process is identified with the effort of notional “restructure” of this broken “deconstructed” world.¹⁸

Let us begin with direct and negative consequences of the event—conquer. In the first step Wachtel assumes quite traditionally, that:

Every society has a certain vision of the world, mental structure ruled by specific logic. Both historical events as well as natural events find their place within the order of explanation built out of myths and cosmogonist characteristic for each culture. Everything that constitutes an exception within this rational order (animal, whose behavior seems strange, unusual event and so on) means an invasion into the everyday world of supernatural or divine forces.¹⁹

Arrival of the Europeans to America, fact of encountering (and the whole of their dissimilarity) of an Indian culture with them, constituted for the last one the kind of exception, that is an event, which interrupts the natural cause of events. No wonder that, for example Monezuma saw in the Cortezs’

¹⁵ N. Wachtel, *La vision des vaincus. Les Indiens du Perou devant la Conquete espagnole 1530–1570*, Paris 1971.

¹⁶ Por. J. Le Goff, *Historia i pamięć*, przeł. A. Gronowska i J. Stryjczyk, Warszawa 2007, p. 215.

¹⁷ N. Wachtel, *La vision des vaincus. Les Indiens*, p. 22.

¹⁸ In his book Wachtel does not limit himself to the level of mental structures—the significant part of it is dedicated amongst others to the analysis of structural social-economical conversions of the Incas country in the effect of Spanish conquest and Spanish colonization (wherein we should add conversions “from the perspective” of the Indians societies, which means i.e. that change of a traditional order into the colonial order does not mean, according to Wechtel, restructurisation, which would mean a global point of view, but destruction). Our reconstruction out of necessity follows in this text only one axis of this work.

¹⁹ N. Wachtel, *La vision des vaincus. Les Indiens*, p. 51.

appearance the return of Quetialcoatla, the Aztec god. And although not all the Indian societies deified Europeans, seeing in them human beings or sons of “demon,” however—according to Wechtel—each of them originally asked a question about divinity of the new comers. That would be synonymous with the effort of rationalization, attempts of understanding—through the reference to traditional myths and using the only possible “mind accessories”—an event of an extraordinary character, to integrate them into the order in force.

All this trouble comes however to nothing because actually in an instant an intercultural contact turns into a short conflict, defeat of Indians and the beginning of a colonization process. And so for defeated this event—conquer by the white people—means, using the Wachtel words, “mental disinheritance.”²⁰ In the light of preserved sources it seems that Indians “were touched a kind of numbness, as if they were unable to understand this occurrence anymore, as if it blew their mental universe up.”²¹ It is easy to explain: loss in the battle with the conquerors is at the same time a fall of the old customs, rituals and traditions, it is the loss by the Gods of their innate supernatural power and their death. The event has at the same the religious and cosmic range. Lets take the Aztecs, who believed themselves a chosen people by Huitzilopochtli, solar god of war. Their mission was aspiring to subordinate all of the people, who from the fourth sides surrounded the Mexico. Therefore the fall of the city was more then just a military failure. “Together with it the Suns ruling ended. Earth life lost its sense since then Whole Aztecs culture suddenly was stripped of all meaning.”²²

A similar picture emerges from the Mayans sources:

Mayans experience the same fall of a traditional world. Chilam Balam [sacred Mayans books from the XVII c.], although they are strongly marked with the Christian influences, they confirm, that the old gods really existed. They add however, that those gods have died. The old ancestors worshiped them, but the revelation of the true faith has put an end to their ruling.²³

One could ask in a fact, with the relation to this penetration of the christian faith have we not to deal with the slow process of restructuring Indian mentality (and—in consequence—with the lack of destruction, breakage of events)? From objective point of view and the perspective of the winners—that is how it could have looked like. But from the perspective of the defeated the loss and implicated by it “death of gods” constitutes a

²⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

²¹ Ibid., p. 37.

²² Ibid., pp. 56-57.

²³ Ibid., p. 57.

traumatic situation, disintegration of their old universe, a kind, as Wachtel writes “expropriation;” it is about a sudden destruction of their mental structure.²⁴ In this sense there cannot be any discussion about a gradual and stretched in time transfer from traditional way of seeing the world into a kind of a mixed form, eclectic connection of old beliefs and superstitions with the foreign elements, what could be an outcome of a mistaken interpretation of the preserved sources; on the opposite, the rupture—as a result of an event of conquest—is total.

After this re-interpretation of Indians failure in the categories of traumatic experience and mental destruction Wachtel moves to the present times, where the subject of his interest become folk recreations of this collective catastrophe. During annual traditional celebrations Indians in Peru, Bolivia, Guatemala or Mexico organize independently from each other and, so to speak, for their own use theatrical performances—“Tragedy of the death of Atahualpa,” “Dance of Conquest,” “Dance of a Great Conquest,” “Dance of Feathers”—during which they impersonate the old characters and play the events from four centuries ago. Important here are two things: first, on the basis of the source data it can be presumed, that this type of folk manifestation are rooted in XVI century. Secondly, they were written down only in XIX century, that would mean a tradition passed on mainly orally, therefore rooted directly in the collective memory.²⁵

Therefore there is nothing surprising in the differences between, what—according to the chronicles—had happened during the conquest and the contents of particular performances. If to compare a historical truth with the “Dance of Conquest” or “Tragedy of Atahualpa,” the differences turn to be significant. Would they though—asks Wachtel—be taken out of the random and accumulated aberrations from the original and closest version of events? Would there be no ruling logic to those performance re-interpretations?

So looking at all four of those “Dances” from different parts of America, Wachtel in the first step attempts to set their structural level (according to the structuralism method). Similarly as Levi-Strauss did within example myths,²⁶ French historian decomposes the contents of each folk performance into

²⁴ Analogically in the case of social-economical structures of Incas country after the Spanish conquer: “it is true, that the colonial structure is included in a wider system, balanced in a different way, because they are defined by relations connecting Peru with Spain: this is however seen from the perspective of the winners. For the conquered only remains are left separated from the old context. This exact decomposition of the global system inca we defined as destruction.” (Ibid., p. 250.)

²⁵ Comp. N. Wachtel, *La vision des vaincus: la conquete*, p. 555.

²⁶ Comp. Recently issued in Poland first volume of *Mythologiques*: C. Lévi-Strauss, *Surowe i gotowane*, transl. M. Falski, Warszawa 2010, ie. table on p. 213, where basing on the five

basic elements. Comparing then obtained this way four analytical partitions, he notices, that each of the stories constitutes one of the permutations of the same structure, which is built out of following opposite pairs: resistance/fear (Indians of the conquerors), dialog/misunderstanding, conversion of a chief/sticking to old beliefs, agreement/disagreement between Indians and Spanish, death/survival of the chief, death/survival of the Spanish leader, Indian domination/Spanish domination and so on. In other words, although clear differences between individual performances, at the deeper level there would exist a common and ruling structural logic for them. Uncovering (construction) of this fundamental and unifying structure allows, on the other hand, Wachtel to arrange its four variants along a kind of continuum, leading from “Atahuallpas Tragedy” through “Dance of Conquest” and “Dance of Great Conquest” up to “Dance of Feathers,” where two outermost forms are structurally most distant from each other, that is they are symmetrically opposite.²⁷ It is shown, for example, in degree of the historical closeness of the performances: Peruvian folklore is the closest to the real events, Mexican folklore is most distant. But—and that constitutes a question most important for us—it is most of all about the reverse of the message. For, according to Wachtel, structural variant “Atahuallpas Tragedy”—the one, in which single parts of the opposition mostly agree with the facts of conquer—includes a messianic thread within it: “the return of Inka is really awaited, Indians victory is projected onto the future as a real possibility.” On the other hand “Dance of Feathers,” though does not consist of this subject, still—through the specific permutation of the structure, playing the arrangement consisting of the elements such as Montezumas survival, Indians victory or Cortezs’ death—“also reflects a dream of the revenge, but it only remains within the precinct of the theatrical stage, pushed into the imagined past. Messianic hope [I] turned into phantasmatic compensation [IV].”²⁸

All this leads to the following conclusion: under the different contents of theatrical performances about the conquest one logic should be noticed, one structure, which different variants hide the same reality—traumatic character of the event and reaction to it in a form of an attempt of the mental universe restructure, broken in a result of a lost battle with the conquerors. In other words, structural analysis would reveal the process of restructuring

myths distinguished are eight basic characteristics making up the “skeleton”(p. 201): raising, withdrawal, fire, water etc.

²⁷ Comp. N. Wachtel, *La vision des vaincus: la conquete*, p. 583.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 582. Roman numbers distinguish the position of each of the „Dances” within the structural *continuum*.

(itself) of the mental structure, where the factor deciding of its form would be, using the psychoanalysis terminology, a done over event.

Trauma of the conquest spreads its effects as far as the XX century Indians, being deeply written into their mental structures—a true mark of the past imprinting the present.²⁹

Connecting both threads—reinterpretation of the direct effect of the event and structural analysis of the long term event—Wachtel can therefore say:

Local sources show a double phenomenon: breakage at the same time (caused by exogenous event, arrival of white people), with the continuity (permanence of the conquer trauma) ... Collective memory of Indians, keeping the memory of the past, at the same time it transforms it. This transformation and interpretation of historical facts (however they differ in modalities of those processes) is ruled nevertheless by a structural logic. There is no need to relate to the details of the psychoanalysis explanations to say, that this work of reconstructing the past appears as a compensation or a reaction for the trauma of a conquer. Work, and also restructuring activity on the level of mentality as an answer for a survived situation and survived again and again as a catastrophe of the collective . . . Trauma of a conquer reflects in the end a game of structures and praxis, though only on the grounds of imagination (and in the effect of an event).³⁰

Lets sum up. Before the Spanish arrival, overview and experience of the world by a given Indian society would define a kind of native shaped general and frame system consisting of mythical, cosmogonist and other categories, which—as can be assumed—would distinguish itself with a high stability factor and reach out from its beginning far into the past. Wachtel may speak here about the existence of a historical mental structure. The moment Europeans appeared and in the result of their victory in a short fight this system undergoes a complete decomposition—gods die, earth existence looses the whole previous sense for Indians. Quasi-point event performs therefore a most basic destruction, because of sense creating and reordering outside structural phenomenons. This is the moment of radical breakage, but also the birth of a collective trauma. In reaction to the last one it comes to an attempt—moment of praxis—restructuring of a broken system, but—as Wachtel writes—it is about “a theatrical restructure (*restructuration dansee*), in a notional way, because other forms of practice fail.”³¹ In other words, there is no way to talk here about the recreation of the same mental structure.

²⁹ N. Wachtel, *La vision des vaincus. Les Indiens*, p. 65.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97-98.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

After the event of conquest there is no going back to the old world. What is more, that exact event, though—as to say—remaining in this traumatic dimension (“mark of the past”), crystallizes this new structure. The event trauma creates something in a shape of an axis, around which the particular effects of restructuring praxis focus. And because in this case we have to deal with one, extending to a few centuries historical structure—although subsequent changes and regional differences of Indian folklore—confirms, at least it is its role, structural analysis.

Let move now onto a more general level and try to define the mutual game between the event and a structural order, which emerges out of the reconstruction of Wachtels view of Spanish conquest of South America.

First we have to deal here with the movement, which Le Roy Ladurie in relation to Paul Boris analysis called, lets remind, structural—event—structural. From one “long lasting” (traditional mental universe of Indians) through “short time” (event of conquer) we go to a second “long lasting” (imaginative mental structure expressed in four Dances). Chronologically *speaking*, between the two realities in the time dimension measured in a hundred year scale we find the phenomenon occurring within a few, locally within over a dozen years.

This placement of an “event” between two “structures” is justified, above all, functionally, because it plays, regarding them, two basic roles: breakage and genesis. On one hand, the event of a conquer performs the destruction or de - construction of Indians traditional “mental equipment” - therefore a breakage of the contemporary structure occurs. On the other hand, this short term phenomenon, more precisely—its traumatic character—lays at the source of a beginning of the new structural layout (“theatrical restructure”) and what is more important, prejudices of historical continuance. In other words, the vitality of this new structure results exactly in what happened in the field of “short time.” The proof of that is a fact, that created by the event mental structure of the Indian societies lasts and reproduces even though there are different acculturation processes, which—as it may seem—should influence it significantly.

On a structural level, between two successively occurring historical structures, there would be therefore in the described case a place for a kind of positive element of an event - nature, for an exogenous (that is besides—structural source) short term phenomenon, historical event. First structure does not die autonomously, the second one autonomously does not come

to life—for both acts responsible is originating from outside an event phenomenon. In the classification sketched by E. Morin—who distinguished three basic modals of mutual relations between “system” and “event:”

- 1 embryo—genetic relation (catastrophes result in a program and system control),
- 2 revolutions (catastrophes generated by the system, more or less submitting to the control—Marks’ thinking) and
- 3 casual relationship, mutations (aleatoric encounter of systems and events)³²—analyzed by us structure—event arrangement would be a subject of the last category.

Next conclusion: this transfer from one structure to the another through the moment of the event, which fulfills defined functions for them, is in a basic measure a historiographical construction and does not belong to the order of what is instantly available, read straight from the sources. To say more specifically, if to keep to the information emerging directly from the documents referring to the Spanish conquest, it would never be possible to show its structural meaning in the sphere of Indian people mentality; as Wachtel shows, a change of perspective (“vision of defeated”) and a structural method is needed. In consequence this functional connection of an event with two structures would be a kind of model of a historical change, which would realize a following Michel Foucault postulate:

To substitute the abstract, general and monotone form of “change,” into which so eagerly the movement of succession is fitted, with the analysis of various types of transformations. This implies two things: putting in the brackets all of the old forms of misty continuance figure, throughout which a brutal fact of change is blurred ... , and—on the opposite—persistent bringing into the light of liveliness of a difference, scrupulous measuring of the distance In all it is about giving up the motive of becoming (general form, abstract element, first cause and universal effect, complicated relationship of identity and novelty) to the account of analysis of transformation in their specifics.³³

And finally the last thing: historical structures, which come here to an interaction with the event, characterized not only by the time parameter, therefore the sustainability, but also its general morphology. For this, what in the effect of conquer is deconstructed and generated, are some internally complex arrangements—mental systems built out of traditional beliefs, customs, superstitions and intellectual habits and deep and multiple structure expressing itself in different variants during annual Indian performances.

³² E. Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

³³ M. Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, no. 58 (text from 1968), t. I, p. 705.

Is the way of connecting, this what is an event, with this what is structural, which we tried to reconstruct and systematize basing on the Wachtel historiographical analysis, would be in contemporary historiography something exceptional? Or—on the opposite—would it be possible to find formally analogical connections of both orders? It seems therefore, that the second question should be answered affirmatively: next to the mentioned work of Bois in the subject of les chouans (peasants war of 1793-1799 carried in the western regions of France) and its destructive—genetic role in relation to the structures characteristic for French peasantry, as an example of a similar integration of an event and a structure one could point out for instance “Copernican revolution,” which—in an opinion of a science historian George Canguilhem—performed Claude Bernard in the medicine thanks to the discovery of a glycogen function of a liver.³⁴ In the consequence of the presented Wachtels analysis would be under the discussed view a sign of a kind of a broader historiographical phenomenon of the turn of the 60 s and 70 s of the previous century.

³⁴ See: G. Canguilhem, *L'idée de médecine expérimentale selon Cl. Bernard*, [w:] id., *Études d'histoire et de philosophie des sciences concernant les vivants et la vie*, ed. VII (extended), Paris 2002, pp. 127-143 (1st ed. from 1968).