

orders and people's sense of justice. Developments in this perspective show how people seek grounds for certainty by socio-material practices (a notion drawn from actor-network theory) that turn features of situations into tests of reality, how people mobilize second-order justifications about what will count as a test, and how repertoires of justification and orders of worth emerge across multiple temporalities.

Virtually all previous approaches to norms, according to Neil Gross and Zachary Hyde, boil down to something like rule-following behavior, leading to accounts that feature "cultural dopes" or avoid the concept. Instead, drawing on pragmatists

George Mead and John Dewey, they formulate an approach that focuses on how people build up stocks of "mental imagery" that allow them to compare prospective lines of conduct and anticipate reactions and sanctions of others through "dramatic rehearsal" in imagination. This embodied, affective, aesthetic, and reflective process is constitutive of selfhood. Norms are, these authors suggest, the behavioral regularities that emerge as people mutually adjust their behavior in line with these collective representations of proper conduct, a formulation, Gross and Hyde propose, that opens up new lines of inquiry and fits well with recent empirical findings.

Elusive Events

IVAN ERMAKOFF

University of Wisconsin-Madison
ermakoff@ssc.wisc.edu

The purpose of *What Is an Event?* by Robin Wagner-Pacifi is to "build a model for the analysis of events in general" (p. 3). To this end, it develops an "analytical apparatus, termed political semiosis," the "basic features" of which are "performatives, demonstratives, and representations" (Chapter 1). At the forefront of this endeavor is the attempt to understand how "events take shape" (pp. 10, 83, 91, 109, 140) given the "grounds from which they erupt" (p. 48) and the "ruptures" that set them off (p. 105). "To model the emergence of event forms and track their flows," the book "works through exemplary cases" (p. 3): "9/11" and its aftermaths (Chapters 1 and 6), six paintings, one sculpture, three personal accounts, the killing narrated in Albert Camus's novel, *The Stranger* (pp. 78, 81), the killing in Kamel Daoud's novel, *Meursault, contre-enquête* (pp. 81–82), the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman and the trial that followed (pp. 78, 80), the "French Revolution" (pp. 88–89), the "Paris Commune" (pp. 100–115), and posters displayed during the May 1981 referenda in Italy (pp. 118–20). The following remarks probe the book's general claims about event properties and along

What Is an Event? by **Robin Wagner-Pacifi**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 225 pp. \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9780226439785.

the way discuss several interpretative claims about "exemplary cases."

1. "Events must be understood as composed of both form and flow" (p. 75). Ultimately, the meaning of this claim rests on the notions of "form" and "flow." The "flow" of events denotes their "movement" (p. 10), their "trajectory" (p. 109), what they become over time ("the flow of 9/11 into the war on terror," p. 140). Beyond these notations, the book provides no definitional statement. The meaning of the term remains metaphorical throughout.

What about "form"? "Form is a capacious concept. It includes temporal, spatial, institutional, discursive, and pictorial forms, *among others*" (p. 85, my emphasis). In the absence of a definition, we could expect instances here and there to provide some clue to this "capacious concept": the gamut runs from "executive orders, letters, trials, handshakes,

newspaper articles, photographs, and paintings" (p. 10) and "linguistic modalities . . . images, bodily gestures, institutional forms, and social identities" (p. 14) to "an oath, a declaration, . . . a constitution" (p. 86) and "revolutions" (p. 87). The "forms" of the "Paris Commune" include "prominently" "city neighborhoods as organizing forces," "the absence of a leader," political events and decisions, such as the toppling of the Napoleonic Vendôme column and the ban on collecting rents, women's participation, biographies, photographs, and Gustave Courbet's painting, *The Origin of the World* (p. 113).

These enumerations are instructive in two respects. First, they underscore the fact that in this framework anything can be labeled a "form" from the moment *someone* (an analyst, a witness, a participant, an artist, a critic) draws a connection with the event *irrespective of the type of connection*. It is for instance enough to note that Courbet had been a participant in the Paris Commune, or that, several years later, "loyalist critics" (what does "loyalist" mean in this instance?) disparaged Courbet's painting, *The Origin of the World*, to make this painting a "form" of the Paris Commune, notwithstanding the fact that Courbet completed this painting in 1866, five years before the event called the "Paris Commune" (March to May 1871) (p. 36).

Second, these enumerations indicate that there is no point in trying to clearly delineate "event," "form," and "flow." "Events," such as "revolutions" or the "toppling of the Vendôme Column," are also "event forms" (p. 87). A "form" can be "flow" or "event." For instance, Chapter Four ("Resonating Forms") depicts the "pause" in Jacques-Louis David's painting *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* as "the event" (p. 100). Stated in general terms: "Pauses stop events, pauses reroute events, *pauses are events*" (p. 103). The same chapter alludes to the "pause" as a "form" or a "flow": "what kind of a form, or what kind of a flow, is a pause?" (p. 102).

Underlying this circulation of meanings is an analogy with quantum physics. "[The] vocabulary of form and flow . . . borrows from quantum physics the idea of changing angles of vision onto the same universe"

(p. 10). This is an argument about ontology: "In spirit, as noted above, this angle onto forms and flows of events is similar to the ontological underpinnings of the quantum mechanics branch of physics, wherein the dual particle-like and wavelike behavior of energy and matter is recognized" (pp. 11–12). Hence, alternating perspectives makes it possible to ask: "Pursuing the analytical vocabulary of form and flow (or particle and wave) for alternating visions of events proposed by this study leads to a question: is a pause more particle, or more wave?" (p. 102).

2. Events have "grounds" (p. 35). Chapter Two is devoted to the "relationship of an event to its ground" (p. 37). The first distinctive feature of the notion of "ground" is its haziness. Witness these statements: "depending on the nature of the event, and the analytical language employed to grasp it, [the] ground [of events] can be conceptualized as the everyday, the unremarkable, the habitual, the unreportable, the virtual, the undifferentiated, the inchoative, the prefigured, the *langue* (as opposed to *parole*), or the origin" (p. 42). "We might understand ground as the middle form between the active and the passive, or between structure and event" (p. 50). Chapter One evokes the "ground of being, from which all events spring" (p. 32).

Second, statements intended to explicate the "ground" of events intertwine metaphorical formulations with literal references: "it is analytically crucial to hold together the sense of a ground as both a space (literal and metaphorical) of incipient eruptions, births, and innovations and a space of return, death, and desuetude" (p. 46). Why this consideration is "analytically crucial" remains a mystery. Third, grounds have agentic qualities of some sort, left at the discretion of the metaphor at play. A ground can "vibrate." When it "begins" to do so or when it "presents its own demands, events may be in the offing" (p. 48). Grounds furthermore "can be understood to have moods" (pp. 42, 50). Their "moods" can be "peaceful, tense, disgruntled, distracted" (p. 47). In any case, these "moods" "influence perceptions of events" (p. 50). Chapter Three evokes "unsuspecting (though not always unsuspecting) grounds" (p. 78).

Fourth, "ground" and "event" blend together. In Courbet's *The Origin of the World*, the "central image" of which, "a vagina, suggests an endogenous origin for the world," "the figure of the woman . . . doubles as the very ground of being—it is the site of the origin of the world and is very much its own world, *its own event*" (p. 35, my emphasis). In the case of Adenauer's "stepping directly onto the carpet" on which the Allied high commissioners stood during the ceremony at which the latter were to hand over the Occupation Statute on September 21, 1949, "once again, we see the ground becoming the figure, and thus *entering the scene as an event in its own right*" (p. 49, my emphasis).

3. "Only when the representations, demonstrations, and performatives buttress and reflect one another, will an event and an event concept take definite shape" (p. 91). This claim calls for two points of clarification. How shall we interpret "buttressing and reflecting one another"? What does "taking shape" or "definite shape" mean? In the present context, "buttressing and reflecting one another" can be interpreted as: "having congruent or consistent effects." As for "taking shape," it most likely means "having meaning," "definite shape" conveying the idea of "definite meaning."

If so, three points come to the fore. First, the predicate "taking shape" (i.e., "having meaning") can only be understood by reference to actors who endorse a particular interpretation of a happening, and to the moment in time when they make this interpretation theirs. Individuals constantly seek to make sense of what they experience. An experience has collective significance for a set of actors insofar as these lend credence to a way of interpreting it. This idea is a truism.

However, and this is the second point, the book relies on formulations that deliberately shun the specification of temporal or group coordinates. "In fact, an analytical vocabulary of forms and their flows purposely puts into abeyance the epistemological distinctions of before, during, and after to which the search for cause and consequence, origin and outcome, adheres" (p. 88). As a result, claims about events get abstracted from the temporality of what the book terms "events."

Similarly, statements about "grounds, ruptures, and events" do not specify group and actor parameters (positions, resources, constraints, and opportunities in an interactional setting). In discursive terms, the elusion of references to temporal or group coordinates takes the form of a recurrent use of the passive voice and impersonal expressions ("there is").

Third, what grounds the assertion that *only* when "representations, demonstrations and performatives" are at play and have congruent effects will an event have a definite meaning for a specific category of actors? The mention of "representations" and "demonstrations" is also a truism. Actors cannot interpret without representing. Nor can they impute meaning to a happening without situating it, which is the function proper of "demonstratives" (e.g., demonstrative pronouns and deictics such as personal pronouns) (p. 23). But why would actors or commentators need "performatives" as Austin (1962:5) defined the term (i.e., speech acts such that "the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action") to make sense of a happening? The book fails to provide the rationale for this claim.

Equally troublesome, the book disconnects "performative, illocutionary, and demonstrative" from the reference to speech acts. In Austin's (1962:99) terminology, "illocutionary" refers to the "performance of an act in saying something." In this book, the term is affixed to "the force" of Courbet's painting *The Origin of the World* (p. 38). "Perceptions, imaginative or pictorial representations, acts of conceptual thought, and conjectures" constitutive of "experiences" as Husserl elaborates the term (*Erlebnisse*) get depicted as "illocutionary acts and representations" (p. 65). Chapter Six evokes the "performative uptake of identities" without further qualification (p. 145).

The "demonstrative element" of Courbet's *The Origin of the World* is "the event of the painting (the act of creating the painting itself as it emerges from its contexts)" (p. 38). "Demonstrative" also characterizes "disorientation" (p. 65), "violence" (p. 86), and the "reorientations of legal procedures" (p. 139), as well as "orientations" (p. 144) *tout court*. Chapter Five states that "the

word demonstrative has an interesting double meaning—it can mean either ‘indicative’ (the connection with semiotic indexicality) or ‘expressive’ (the connection with emotions)” (p. 96).¹ The term therefore can be used with regard to anything that “indicates” or “expresses.” Redesigned along these lines, it would be difficult to find a category more expandable.

4. “Uptake is critical” (pp. 21, 26), “required” (p. 32), “essential” (p. 96), “always key” (p. 103), “crucial” (p. 108). The book reminds us that performatives can fail (p. 93). They work when “those involved in them” “take them up” (p. 94). To say that a performative “works,” or that there is “uptake,” is to say that those at whom it is directed heed it and view it as valid: they “believe and follow” (p. 26). “Uptake” is simply a shorthand designating this act of validation.

If we want to understand the production of meaning through performatives and its behavioral outcomes, the crux of the matter lies in explaining these acts of validation. This requires a theory of impact. On this front, the book is silent. The claim that “uptake can be denied or deferred as a function of skepticism, ingrained habits, or resistance” (pp. 21–22) does not amount to a specification of mechanisms. Nor does the claim that uptake “often involves emotional resonance along with normative convictions and political calculations” (p. 96).

5. “Events are restless” (p. 5). They are “mobile—relentlessly so” (p. 11). “Restlessness is the sine qua non for the existence of events” (p. 88). “Restless” means “unsettled,” that is, subjected to “continuous revisitings and refigurings” such as “scholarly articles and books, annual holidays, rhetorical appeals, and commemorative ceremonies” in the case of the “French Revolution” (p. 88). “According to the approach of this book,” “all events” are “unsettled” (p. 88). They “move” (p. 94).

The claim about “restlessness” is another leitmotif in the book and is emblematic of its style: it asserts and hypostasizes a general

predicate (“all events . . .”) without concern for what it means in terms of actors’ subjective experience. By the same token it reifies the notion of “event.” “Events” get transmuted into entities that “do” things.

Metaphorical flourishes yield inconsistencies. First, images do not fit. The image of event “sedimentation” (pp. 122, 124) hardly goes along with the image of “restlessness.” Second, these claims contradict each other. Against the assertion quoted above (“all events . . .”), it turns out that not *all* events are “unsettled” (or “restless” or “on the move”): some are “without direction and mobility” because of “event-eddies” (p. 123). In the same vein, we learn on page 123 that “events are *not always* on the move,” contrary to what we had been told and contrary to the assertion reiterated in the last chapter: “events are *continuously* on the move” (p. 154)

6. “True events cohere, consolidate, expand, and mobilize in ways that come to seem inexorable (even with uncertainties and contestations along the way). Others, we might call them ‘near events,’ have more diffuse and ambiguous physiognomies preempting consensus on what, exactly, they are” (p. 105). Chapter Five illustrates this claim with the contrast between the “French Revolution” and the “Paris Commune.”

This claim does not stand critical examination. There is no ground for suggesting that, in contrast to the Paris Commune, the “French Revolution”—assuming that we agree on what this nominal construct means in phenomenal terms—elicits interpretive consensus. Conversely, what justifies the suggestion that for historians and sociologists engaged in primary empirical research the “Paris Commune” has “a diffuse and ambiguous physiognomy”?

Carried away by their looseness and by rhetorical drifts, statements supposed to back up the distinction between “true” and “near events” (or “near misses”) disclose it as an artifact. “The Paris Commune . . . provides an empirical case of heightened awareness of misrepresentations (of political agents), of misdirections (of social geographic spaces), and of illocutionary misfires” (Who “misrepresents, misdirects, and misfires”?). Next sentence: “*such*

¹ “It is useful to connect these emotional upsurges of events to the indexical work of demonstratives” (p. 97).

displacements and misalignments may be bad for events developing qua events, but may nonetheless be productive and life-enhancing (as long as they last) for those involved" (p. 109, my emphasis). The term "displacements," which sounds awkward given the previous sentence, turns out to be a paraphrase by anticipation of Kristin Ross's notion of "displacement of the political," quoted on the same page. With this notion, Ross points to the insurgents' appropriation of their daily lives and to their political autonomy. Here, the claim is that for the insurgents the experience of the Commune was fully meaningful. It was a "true event." These few statements confuse different standpoints and make the overall argument incoherent.

Such inconsistencies are not occasional lapses. They reflect the book's mode of argumentation and composition. Indebted to evocative images and preconceptions, and devoid of empirical moorings, assertoric claims about event properties blur and invalidate one another. Events have "ground" but they "must be" "groundless, unexpected" (p. 68). Ruptures precede events (p. 55), but they can be "experienced as incipient events" (p. 64). Events are "contingent" (pp. 8, 71, 112), but some outcomes are "inevitable" (e.g., "violence" [p. 95], and the fluctuation of "event forms and identities" [p. 113]).

As for interpretive claims about specific cases, the striking fact is how approximate and casual these are. For instance, Chapter Three ("Rupture") cites William James's account of his experience of the 1906 earthquake. In this account, James describes himself *naming* the phenomenon as it took place: his emotion was one of "glee" at the "vividness" with which he was experiencing the "abstract idea" "earthquake" (p. 64). The book then provides the following interpretation: "At this stage of experiencing the rupture, actions and entities that later become events go *unnamed* (though James plays with the very concept of earthquake in his experiential recounting)" (p. 64, my emphasis). In other words, the case is discrepant with the claim. Yet this discrepancy is of no consequence for the argument. The

presumption that actors cannot categorize "ruptures" as they experience them prevails over empirical observations that indicate the contrary.

These few remarks bring into relief several characteristic features of the book's argumentative setup. Metaphorical thinking and metaphors—nominally converted into "concepts" without further ado—hold center stage. Correlatively, categories and notions—chief among them the category of "event"—lack clear-cut empirical boundaries and content. They morph into one another. Malleability hollows them out. Coupled with free-floating and indistinct categories is a mode of composition drifting across broad and hazy "themes" (e.g., "bodies," genealogies, "pauses," "identities"), extrapolating preconceptions, and relying on analogies, "parallels," "echoes," and "resonances."

While the book repeatedly resorts to arguments by assertion and statements of "importance" (as well as "illumination"), it cultivates its own analytical indeterminacy and looseness. One frequent trope consists in making an assertoric statement coexist with the possibility of its negation (usually indicated between parentheses). For instance: "Equally important in this insight into the inscrutability of the posture of Christ is the way it *manages* (or *doesn't*) the relationship between ground and movement" (p. 57, my emphasis). Claim A (e.g., "it manages . . .") goes along with claim *nonA* ("it does not manage"). A second, equally frequent, trope consists in stating a claim by reference to a multiplicity of dimensions that saturate the field of what is conceivable. For instance: "Significantly, the question of the relationship (*epistemological, grammatical, conceptual, existential*) between the extent context or ground and the erupting event-in-the-making is fundamental" (p. 53, my emphasis). Here claim A should be understood by reference to dimensions B and C and D and E, at times expanded by the clauses "among others" or "and so forth."

I could have started this review by considering the book's reliance on metaphors, themes, and analogies, the deliberate

shunning of temporal and social specifications, the blurring of categories, and the frequency of statements that simultaneously assert a claim and its opposite. The conclusion would have been the same: *What Is an Event?* is a very problematic book because of its loose language and muddled claims.

Reference

Austin, J. L. [1962] 1975. *How to Do Things with Words*. Second edition. Edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.