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Reconceptualizing memory as event

From “difficult pasts” to “restless events”

Robin Wagner-Pacifici

This essay is keyed as an appreciative but critical provocation of the entire memory studies project. It begins with the premise that memory studies or studies of collective memory involves a fundamental misrecognition. The argument, in a nutshell, is that scholars of memory should re-identify as scholars of events, and that in order to do so, events themselves (their formations and shapes, their mobility and desuetude, and their longevity) must be reconceptualized.

Over the past several decades, humanist and social scientific studies of memory have identified many themes and frameworks, among them: the differentiation of memory and history; the distinguishing between collective and collected memory/ies; the dialectic of memory and forgetting; and the distinction between the way memory renders the past from the way it serves present purposes. These approaches, while extremely productive and illuminating, have nevertheless made a series of assumptions about the shapes and life spans of historical events themselves. Perhaps the most pervasive assumption is that memory concerns itself with the aftermath, after-effects, or afterlife of precipitating and causative events (even as the ontological status of the events themselves may be questioned). Memories are understood to occupy a meaningful distance (although spatial and temporal distances vary materially and symbolically) from actual events that have, essentially, ended. This distance can come in several forms: temporal, spatial, cognitive, emotional, and experiential. But while memory studies often articulates the ways that, for example, event-precipitated trauma can continue, the event itself is over.

My critique of memory studies follows then from my attempt to elaborate a sociology of events. Traditionally, the division of academic labor has determined that the discipline of history is responsible for events and sociology is responsible for long-term conditions, processes, structures, and practices (the general, the chronic, the repetitive, the habitual). While sociologists have analyzed events, they have tended to favor comparative approaches. Diffidence about claiming events as legitimate objects of analysis has sometimes led sociologists to find more subversive ways to approach events. I would argue that memory studies in sociology has been one mechanism for smuggling events into the discipline. Memory studies or collective memory studies, especially those concentrating on museums, monuments, memorials, and political speeches, have managed to incorporate the so-called original precipitating events.
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into their agendas through the aegis of analyzing spatially and temporally anchoring stones, cenotaphs, and words. I take issue here with this project (one in which I have myself participated) as I think it misrecognizes and misconstrues the event as memory. In other words, it mistakes the event for a memory. In my alternative approach, the memorial, the speech, and the museum are only provisionally congealed moments of the events themselves. While events do have both inchoative and terminative aspects, I would argue that they can never be determined to have ended once and for all. So, for example, I would argue that the 9/11 Memorial and Museum are part of the event of 9/11, one of its myriad shapes or forms, incorporating the massive police presence protecting the fountains, security apparatus, and arduous forms of ingress for the public. Saying this does not deny therupturing reality and shock of planes flying into a building on September 11th. But the event “9/11” only takes shape, becomes coherent, insofar as it moves beyond the initial stage of incoherence, rupture, and surprise. And it does take shape—as laws, wars, policies, police presence, and museums and memorials. Thus memory, whatever else it is, is part of the event itself as it lives on in intermittently tamped down and restless modes. Movement and form are both dynamic elements in the existence of the event, as events are both structured and fluid. To grasp them analytically, we must grasp their mobility, their provisional form taking, and their restlessness. Assessing the nature and capacities of the forms in which events live and through which they move is an alternative and, I would argue, more fruitful way of understanding the relationships between memory and social and cultural mediations.

First, though, with some inevitable dispatch, I need to indicate what I mean by an event. Here I follow other sociologists. For Andy Abbott events are sites of causation for occurrences with consequences (2001: 273). Similarly William Sewell defines events “as that relatively rare subclass of happenings that significantly transforms structure.” Sewell’s approach brings him to focus on semiotic disarticulations in structures in the wake of events. Sewell writes: “Historical events are never instantaneous happenings: they always have a duration, a period that elapses between the initial rupture and the subsequent structural transformation. During this period, the usual articulations between different structures become profoundly dislocated” (1996: 845). But even Sewell does not go much beyond the idea of identifying semiotic disarticulations as he analyzes historic events like the French Revolution. As well, he sustains the epistemological distinction between events and their effects—that period inaugurated by structural transformation.

So what do I have to offer as an alternative? I’m calling for a quantum sociology of events, analogous to quantum mechanics in physics. Quantum mechanics is a branch of physics providing a mathematical description of the dual particle-like and wave-like behavior and interactions of energy and matter. Within this branch of physics, everything—including light and matter—is made up of small, indivisible chunks called quanta. In some conditions, these chunks behave like particles, and in other conditions they behave like waves, without really being either. For analytical purposes, such an analogous approach to events would allow us to grasp events in their movements and trajectories and in their stabilizations in forms and objects: movement and stability; particle and wave; continuities and discontinuities; form and flow. This approach shares something with sociologist Jeffrey Olick’s goal of conceiving memory as dynamic rather than static, seeing it as a “medium of our existence in time” (2014: 28).3

Certainly I’m not the first to argue for this type of re-envisioning of events or social life generally. In a related initiative, Abbott describes the concept of the “turning point,” and the diverse ways we can imagine reality as either “discrete and categorical” or “continuous and numerical.” He goes on to say: “The social world is constantly changing and reforming itself. To be sure, large parts of the world reproduce themselves continually; much of it looks stable.
But this is mere appearance” (247). Agreed. As well, Karin Cetina (2007: 132) identifies the difference between networked and scoping systems of financial markets by highlighting the way, in scopic systems, “trading tends to be a form of informed tracing [of nearly simultaneous inputs and outputs] a form of following and anticipating the flow, grounded more in a structure of feeling than in modes of calculation [calculation previously based on coordinated networked relations of trust and time lags].” But neither Abbott nor Cetina provides a mechanism for tracking the turning points, the turns, and the resultant trajectories. Nor do they provide an analytical language capable of grasping and illuminating the forms and the flows.

No one would argue against the idea that events are mobile. In fact we talk about being swept up in events. Nevertheless, we have a hard time precisely focusing our vision on that mobility, knowing where and how to look as events pull and change our world from under our feet. I propose that events can be examined under the overarching frame of a quantum sociology that tracks the particle and wave dialectic of their movements and their forms.

How? Events take shape(s), are given names and codified in doctrines, manifestos, declarations, constitutions, bank closures, foreclosures and so forth. But events are also on the move, changing hands, washing over and reconfiguring diverse spaces, times, and populations. They are sometimes violent, sometimes quiescent, sometimes, apparently, in the doldrums—as when news reporters covering war zones and standoffs often paradoxically intone, “nothing is happening here today.” I’ve argued that previous analysis has been hampered by an inability to capture and account for both the shape-taking qualities of events and the mobility and developmental quality of events as they spread, grow, morph, or get bogged down.

In my recent writing, I’ve suggested that three distinct features are at work in the process of the emergence, movement, and shape-taking of events: a performative feature, a demonstrative feature, and a representational feature (Wagner-Pacifici 2010). Events are mobilized by and constituted of speech acts or their performative equivalents that materially change the social and/or political world, including the identities of the actors and relationships within it. I refer, of course, to the theory of performative speech acts—acts that change the social world in and through their utterance—associated with J. L. Austin (1975). (For instance: “We find the defendant not guilty,” spoken by a jury foreman to a judge at the end of a trial.) All sorts of what Austin calls “felicity conditions” have to be met for performative acts to be successful, but they are understood to be uniquely consequential kinds of speech. The effectiveness of performative speech acts depends on their uptake by social agents (both individual and collective) in structured but essentially open social and political worlds. Performatives always pivot around the forces of convention and the contingent actualities of uptake. Great things are at stake in performative uptake, including the identity and fate of individuals and collectives—citizenship, nationality, rights, and obligations all hinge on orders, vows and oaths, surrenders, and decrees.

Demonstrative terms are indexical. They distinguish proximal and distal entities and relations (for example, the pronouns this, that, these, and those are demonstratives). Demonstratives also include deictic functions of speech—pronouns (I and you) and adverbs of time and place (such as here, there, now, and then). These are elements of language that shift in their referent according to who is uttering them in any given moment of a communicative interaction. The demonstrative feature calls attention to the situated nature of all events. No event can occur outside of context, even as the context itself expands and contracts and is constantly shifting. Demonstratives actively reconfigure contexts through their reorientations and activated vectors. Demonstratives highlight orientations within and toward situations. Event actors and spectators, individuals and collectivities alike, must get their bearings in ongoing situations as relations and identities are in the process of
transformation; they must determine what is ahead and what is behind (or finished), what is close up and what is far away, what is now and what was then, what is central and what is marginal. We should not underestimate the power of such features of orientation and attention.

Finally, every event involves representational features (perhaps the feature most mobilized in memory studies): copies of the event, or aspects of the event, are generated and sent outward into the wider world of audiences and witnesses at a distance. The representations recruited for the enactment of the world-changing performatives and the reorienting demonstratives participate in the dialectic, which characterizes events, of convention and contingency. Representational copies attempt to stabilize and sediment the historical transition in the face of uncertainty, incoherence, distance, and resistance.

Representations have multiple forms and mimetic capacities. The work of genre is critical. Genres such as narrative, drama, poetry, and pictorial images differentially contain and construe time, space, and causality. Sociologists, perhaps in the aim to find general laws and conditions, tend to under-specify forms, although recent interest in what is sometimes called materiality and iconicity studies identifies and specifies the social and cultural work that different forms do. There’s an interesting convergence here with actor-network theorists as they track the relays (or what some call translations) from one form to another in settings as diverse as laboratories and fishing villages. In my own terminology I want to track the handings-off of representations as they, in tandem with performatives and demonstratives, move the event along. No event lives for more than an instant without copies, and no event escapes representational transformation. Any ideas about permanent form-taking are futile, and there is an inevitable dialectic between the sedimentation and redirection of forms and meanings, even as social, political, and economic consequences occur in their wake.

But a cognate question is necessarily raised here: how specific does the analyst need to get in detailing the variable capacities of forms to signify, to carry meaning, to shape events? Probably this is an empirical question that varies from case to case. I have found specific differences to be meaningful in certain examinations—for example, the essential diachrony of narrative precluding expressions of simultaneity. Of course, when the political stakes in expressing simultaneity are high (as when four airplanes are hijacked more-or-less simultaneously), these generic differences are obviously important. In a similar vein, the great art critic and essayist John Berger notes that medieval paintings of the Garden of Eden scene were painted via cartoon-like narrative sequences. First Eve picks the apple and eats it, then she gives it to Adam, then they discover their nakedness, then the covering, and then the expulsion. Then, he writes: “During the Renaissance the narrative sequence disappeared and the single moment depicted became the moment of shame. The couple wear fig leaves or make a modest gesture with their hands. But now their shame is not so much in relation to one another as to the spectator” (Berger 1972: 49). The event of the eating of the apple, the shameful recognition of nakedness, and the alternating sense of exposure to each other and to a judging spectator is constituted differently: the narrative program is metonymically condensed in a moment that is pictorially unrelieved by any suggested subsequent turning point.

These kinds of genre specifics are important. Arguably as important, though, is how the tripartite machinery I’ve offered leverages our ability to track how events are both particle-like and wave-like. A provisional answer is that the demonstratives and performatives assist the representations in the dance of particle and wave. Here’s a snapshot: planes fly into buildings and crash in a field in Pennsylvania. The President in a statement of ostensible solidarity with Arab Americans two days after the attacks of September 11 refers to winning “the war.” War metaphors are frequently deployed in social and political crises—so its appearance here
might not immediately draw attention. Or it may have served as a (pre-emptive) representation of a state of affairs that had not yet been declared. Or, the phrase might also stake a performative claim if it had force as an authorized declaration of war, in itself containing a representation of the attacks of September 11 as an act of war, rather than a heinous crime. What’s interesting is that its status as a speech act is undecidable and is contingent on its uptake—or not—by a population in a state of shock, by other branches of government, and by allies newly aligned or aligning into a coalition. And here the dance of the performatives, the demonstratives, and the representations is at its most elemental and consequential. A populace reorients its vision, its concerns, its sense of time and history and space and boundaries. It also reanimates and reconfigures its collective identity. It looks skyward and outward in fear as a threat is identified as coming from without rather than within. Space expands and contracts, epochs are cauterized or transposed (an anachronistic cold-war instinct leads military personnel to think that soviet missiles are coming from the sea). War is declared, named (the “war on terror”), alliances are formed (the “coalition of the willing”). In each of these cases, we can look at the emergent forms as particle-like or as wave-like, as bound and binding or as available for mobilization.

Finally, it is important to appreciate that events are not always on the move. Events can get stalled and turn in on themselves through neglect, abandonment, or indeterminate oscillations between opposing forms and forces. Thus eddy—meaning the circular movement of a liquid, counter to a main current and causing a small whirlpool—is a useful term for the analysis of events experiencing such indeterminacies. By definition, event eddies turn in on themselves and are thus without direction and mobility. They may be, nevertheless, filled with intense gyrations and collective emotions. These emotions often take the forms of lamentation—neither inarticulate nor fully civic, the sociologically anticipated pathway from individual trauma, to familial mourning, to collective sentiments, to political program gets diverted into a vortex. Event eddies are just one conceptual approach to the shapes, forms, flows, and trajectories of events. An event in the doldrums, dragged under by political controversies, paradoxically, might take the form of multiple memorial projects. Here we find contested representations, unclear demonstrative orientations, and performative speech acts without uptake. Reconceiving these projects and moments of memory as part and parcel of an event itself leverages and extends our understanding of meaning moving through or getting stuck in culture and history.

Notes


2 According to one physicist: “Their behavior depends on how much ‘stuff’ (other chunks) is nearby. If a chunk is very isolated from everything else (e.g., a lone electron in a cold, dark vacuum), then it behaves like a wave. If there’s a lot of stuff nearby (e.g., an electron in a metal), then the chunk’s position gets ‘localized’; you basically know where it is. That means the chunk behaves like a particle.” Personal communication, Leon Maurer.

3 “We commonly speak of a or the memory rather than of remembering; we judge memory as an accurate or inaccurate representation of the past rather than seeing it as a medium of our existence in time....” (Olick 2014: 28).

Bibliography


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