An aesthetic education of social theory: some comments on Robin Wagner-Pacifici’s *What is an event?*

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Events strike and haunt, from different locations and in multiple ways, and they are always altogether unexpected. As Robin Wagner-Pacifici repeats, ‘events appear to come out of the blue’. That she has pulled off a conceptually consistent and analytically coherent account of a category and phenomenon as elusive as the event is perhaps a bit of an event in itself, albeit of a minor kind if compared to happenings such as the French Revolution, the Paris Commune or the terrorist attacks on New York City in September 2001, these three being main stations of her analysis.

Events that interest Wagner-Pacifici most are shattering, confusing and often destructive. They force open a void. They offer an encounter with chaos. Precisely because of this, they incite interpretation, the construction of new meaning. Wagner-Pacifici’s analytical language gravitates toward this abyss of non-meaning. By bringing rational analysis within nudging distance to its opposite, to social and cultural disorientation caused by fortuitous reversals, outbursts of violence, destruction or death itself, she seeks to remodel the interpretive apparatus of social theory so as to make it able to reabsorb such events into its conceptual universe. In some strange way, this books inhales chaos and exhales order, and it successfully establishes a conceptual platform where social theory intersects with the theory of history.

Such platforms, from which it again becomes possible to rethink the relationship between system and transformation, are precisely what the human and social sciences need if they are to retain their ability to critically interpret the dense fabric of late capitalist society and culture – a society of the spectacle if there ever was one, a world from heel to head made up by events.

It should not be ignored, however, that this book is also a mirror of such a world, in which thinking and scholarship have lost their grip on the meaning of causality and therefore are less interested in terms such as history, movement and transformation than in compiling a theoretical lexicon of ruptures, outbursts and explosions. The cultural and political theory at the turn of the twenty-first century has seen a sharp increase in various theories of the event. This rise can only in part be explained by the massive influence of Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze, later also of Antonio Negri, Alain Badiou or Vladimir Lenin himself. The tendency should also be historicized as reaction to a new political reality characterized by flash news, media spins, virtual crowds, hacking, covert state violence, political protest, drone strikes and terrorism, be it called a society of risk (Beck...
1992), a liquid modernity (Bauman 2006), a geography of anger (Appadurai 2006), or something else. Indeed, Wagner-Pacifici confesses that her undertaking was initially prompted by the shock that was soon classified as 9/11. Her often repeated metaphor to the effect that events come out of the blue appears to be distinctively coloured by the sky of that same September day as it appeared worldwide on screens and front pages – and on that blue sky the black star of the event itself, the instant before its explosion.

The category of the event appears to be cannibalizing the category of history. There are in my view good reasons to resist this tendency as it probably contributes to an ongoing transformation of our understanding of society and our theories of society in ways that end up supporting a social imaginary in which the world is perceived as an inchoate and unstable process that distributes ‘events’, but little else, in all branches and directions of its all-encompassing network. The real challenge, here, would be to rethink temporality not under the sign of the event, but under the sign of history, whatever such a category would mean to us today.

This, precisely, is the challenge and concern addressed by Wagner-Pacifici’s book. What makes it stand out in the rich contemporary corpus of theories of the event is that its interests are primarily analytic; it is a book about the method of social and historical interpretation. As such, it draws on inspiration and support from numerous theorists of society and history. Chicago historian and political scientist William Sewell Jr. (2005) and intellectual historian Hayden White (1982) are some major interlocutors. The book draws less on philosophers who have sought to inscribe the category of the event in ontologies of the temporality of being, such as Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, Benjamin or Ricoeur. True, Ricoeur receives a dutiful mention in the beginning and Benjamin makes an appearance at the end, with, predictably, the overused angel of history as his sidekick. Yet, Wagner-Pacifici’s few sentences on the topic come nowhere near a true discussion of the importance – for the issues raised by her book – of Ricoeur’s (1984–88) theory of the inevitable ‘narrativization’ of events or of Benjamin’s configuration of the Jetztzeit as a potential fusion of agency, action and change.

Dialectical and epistemological theories of history and time seem simply, and peculiarly, to be off limits to this text. Such theories are never really discussed by the author, despite the fact that they are largely accountable for the codification of the epistemological conundrum that is at the heart of her investigation: how to rigorously examine the emergence of ‘newness’ while at the same time avoiding the dual risk either to fold it back into the (by now old) ground from which it emerged or to posit it as singularly exceptional and hence without any real bearing on the status quo. Indeed, this is a classical problem that shows up in most theories of modernity. Perhaps, it is even the problem of any theory modernity.

So, despite the title of the book, Wagner-Pacifici does not pursue an ontology or epistemology of the event; she also does not historicize the event as a category that surfaces, as a social or intellectual problem, in some periods or societies rather than others. Put differently, neither does she answer what an event is, nor how it can be rationally known; rather, she asks how events are constructed. I believe that her scepticism vis-à-vis the ontological and epistemological question is motivated by an intuitive and probably accurate sense that any scrupulous interrogation of ‘the event’ must start by acknowledging that the term refers to phenomena that negate the ground of being just as much as they interrupt knowledge. It is no coincidence that the most insightful accounts of the event that are on record
have been composed by mystics, theologians, poets and political revolutionaries, who have
been transfixed by the messianic power of events. Wagner-Pacifici is part of that company
in spirit, as she acknowledges the mysterious constituent power of the event, but she is
pragmatic and sociological in method, as she carefully details how society and culture con-
tribute to the event’s constitution – and it is precisely this tension that explains the
drawing power of her book. To note, this tension surfaces not least in her claim that aesthet-
cific figuration presents an idea of events that is superior to what sociological models
have on offer. I shall return to this claim below.

Rather than epistemological or ontological, the premise of Wagner-Pacifici’s theory is
empirical: events happen. They ‘appear to come out of the blue, yet they must be made out
to have a history’ (67). The analysis of this problem is one of the great values of this book; it
provides a supple method and vocabulary that enable us to approach and interpret the
crossing of permanence and change, order and transition, structure and agency,
without – as has usually been the case in both sociology and history – allowing the
longue durée of structures (mode of production, geopolitics, sovereignty, symbolic
order, etc.) eclipse the unstable and revolutionary character of human history.

‘Event’, then, is a signifier used by Wagner-Pacifici to hold on to this dual character of
collective human existence. Had she been more guided by Marxist theory, she would have
spoken of the event as a dialectical sign, or she would have called it, after Benjamin, a dia-
lectical image. For, essentially, the method she presents is a dialectical one: the event
divides time, as it holds time together, in one unsayable gesture. Or in Wagner-Pacifici’s
more sequential account: at first a ‘rupture’ that arises from a ‘ground’, or that simply
breaks ‘ground’, the event is a chaotic interruption in the order of things that is con-
structed as such by the countless reactions and sense-making efforts that are drawn to
it as to a magnet.

The central component in this undertaking is the ‘analytical apparatus’ of political
semiosis, which accounts for the ways in which unexpected happenings – what
Wagner-Pacifici generalizes as ruptures – are processed by ‘a cognitive and perceptual
apparatus’ that ‘integrate ruptures into linear time, epochal time, directional time, prefi-
gured time (both sacred and secular) and so forth’ (32). Through such an integration,
an ineffable rupture is transformed into an event that can be reabsorbed by discourse
and realigned with social norms. Political semiosis has three aspects: it establishes a
rupture as a performative event, by ascribing agency to it and showing how it brings
new identities into being; through its demonstrative feature, political semiosis situates rup-
tures in time and space, and often in reference to demonstrative indices such as here and
there, now and then, ours and theirs. Finally, ruptures are identified, categorized, classified
and assessed as events through the representative feature of political semiosis. In these
three ways, upheavals and crises are interpreted, explained and eventually domesticated
into historical events, inscribed into recognizable historical and social forms and flows,
which, however, continue to carry the traces of that which cannot be fully assimilated
to any order.

Is political semiosis an original and useful idea? Does it not just describe a general
notion of ideological symbolization? Is it a new bid on how to conceptualize those ‘strat-
egies of containment’, as Fredric Jameson (1981) once called them, that rein back pro-
duction of meaning and constrain interpretation so as to make all events cohere within
the dominant fictions and master narratives by which any given community protects its
self-identity? Or, again, isn’t political semiosis a new chart of what Lacan termed symbolic order, subsequently developed by Althusser (1971) into a theory of ideological interpellation, the process by which historical events, social phenomena and human subjects themselves are absorbed into a community of interpretation that ensures the system’s reproduction?

Notwithstanding these questions, Wagner-Pacifici’s book is a true advance over social theory that has been dominated by an epistemology of representation. Sociological thinking has had a strong tendency to stamp contingency as such as irrational; events that have not fitted established representations of social forms have been written off as outbursts of erratic social forces. Nowhere has this been more obvious than in explanations of collective social and political phenomena such as uprisings, revolts, revolutions and other crowd actions, which also occupy the greater part of Wagner Pacifici’s storehouse of events.

When observing collective protests, social researchers and journalists have tended to ask one and the same question. In classical sociology, this mode of inquiry was first described by Georg Simmel, as he pondered the peculiar category of ‘the mass’ (1895/1999). How is it, Simmel asked, that a number of diachronically unfolding processes, each of which comprises single persons or smaller groups, are suddenly synchronized into a mass event? People with diverging motivations converge into a single force – crowd sociologists of yesteryear spoke of the ‘activated’ mass – and these people battle against police, upset political institutions and transform relations of power. Historians and journalists own an arsenal of metaphors with which they disguise their inability to understand such events. Sometimes they say that history changes direction (as if it had one) or reaches a turning point (as if it otherwise proceeded linearly). There is also frequent use of ‘explosions’, ‘eruptions’, ‘storms’, ‘waves’, typically prefixed by ‘popular’. Or it is said – in analytical but still meaningless fashion – that quantitative changes turn into a qualitative one. When we encounter such tropes, we can be sure that sociological and historical explanations have run up against their limit. The observer switches key. Language becomes figural. The account is invaded by emotional expressions and frozen metaphors.

The epistemology of representation that informs such mainstream accounts of collective behaviour is simple and self-evident, and it often goes unnoticed. It operates under the assumption that there is a distance between the observing subject and the observed collective event. Due to its remoteness and its power of observation, the subject of observation experiences itself as an individual in relation to the collective event that it observes (and that the subject tacitly also generates and frames). Ideas of collective behaviour that rest on this structure thus move along a perspective line stretching from an individual’s viewing eye to the ‘masses’ filling out the field of vision.

Such, then, is the structure that usually determines how crowd behaviour is treated in history writing and sociology. In order to become the object of analysis, an event or process must first be pre-interpreted as an expression of an underlying agent, force, agency or potentiality. In this way, for instance, the historian or social scientist trims an unbounded and plural crowd so as to make it fit the representation of a collective agent, which is then given a name and identified as the cause of the historical event – be it a mob, a proletariat, a many-headed hydra, a peasant movement, angry urban youth or any other kind of multitude.
Hence the predictability of many a historians’ portraits of lower-class, subaltern or feminist protests, especially of the seemingly spontaneous ones. ‘The masses are always the others’, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1973, 73) once stated as he rebuked this redundant logic of representation.

One important conclusion follows from this. The problem as to the right way of knowing collective events does not consist in finding a correct representation of the event and its presumed agent, but in developing a method of analysis that avoids recoding such events as representations. Wagner-Pacifici offers such a method.

An adequate understanding of events, this book suggests, requires an analysis that attends not just to questions of appropriate theoretical representations, but also to their demonstrative and performative aspects. First, in their demonstrative dimension, events appear differently depending on how they are situated in relation to a social field, and they often simply displace and redraw the boundaries of communities. Second, events performatively shatter old identities – individual and collective – and bring new subjects into being.

It is significant, in this context, to note that Wagner-Pacifici designates her theory as political semiosis (as opposed to cultural, ideological or historical). Apparently, it is the political dimension of events that are of primary importance to her, plausibly because ‘the political’ suggests the presence of an agency – a doer, a mover, a rising collective movement – which, as it were, acts as a transformative force upon the established political order. In speaking about the political semiosis of events Wagner-Pacifici thus forbids us to see the event as some neuter form in the grammar of history. She entreats us to grasp the event as a situation of what I would call political emergence, ie the slow rise of new kinds of social and political agency, which emerges in the breach of an existing order.

But this is also where Wagner-Pacifici’s argument to the effect that events appear against the background of some already existing order or system – or simply from a ‘ground’ – loses some of its credibility. Rather than stating, as she does, that events are being produced by ‘grounds’, or that the event is a figuration of a rupture that inexplicably appears against a background of habit, order and routine, why not try a framework that acknowledges that the ground is always already shattered by antagonisms and contradictions that generate those crises and upsets, or those moments of political emergence, which are then domesticated through political semiosis and reabsorbed by historical time?

It is hard to understand why a thinker of such quality overlooks or ignores that her theory of the event tends to ground itself in that which is the event’s supplement or opposite, in some kind of fictitious state of nature: the ‘ground’. Do events really emerge from grounds? Isn’t the ground of events rather the lack of a ground, or the desire to recapture lost grounds, or to find new grounds in situations of conflict or under circumstances of scarcity, need and oppression?

Wagner-Pacifici’s reading of Jacques-Louis David’s 1799 painting The Intervention of the Sabine Women points in this direction. She has dealt with this painting before, in her remarkable work (2000) on the standoff as a situation that brings power, violence and politics into perspective. In David’s painting, the rupture is here constituted by a pause, a standoff, which inserts itself as a moment of stillness in the midst of a battle between the Sabines and the Romans: ‘Amid the chaos of soldiers, swords, lances, horses, women, and babies Hersilia stops the violent encounter’ (100).
This is how the revolutionary French artist commanded history with his brush. He always captured rapid historical transformation by entering into, and painting, the still eye of the event where contradictory forces are hung in the perfect balance. In *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* Hersilia stands, cross-like, between two groups of warring soldiers, her two arms raised left and right in a gesture that halts and separates the antagonists. She, a Sabine woman who in a previous war between the same parties was abducted, raped and had to bear a child to her enemy and conqueror, Romulus, the founder of Rome, is here footed in the no man’s land between the charging groups that embody the dual lineage of her child. It would be incorrect to state that Hersilia reconciles the antagonists. Rather, she unmakes the contradiction between them by negating the soldierly ethnos of both camps, built on violence and conflict. She does this through an ethics of femininity that has no place for either patriarchy or patriotism.

Many readers will appreciate Wagner-Pacifici’s extensive and innovative use of paintings (Nicolas Poussin, Jacques-Louis David, Gustave Courbet and Giuseppe Pelizza da Volpedo) and prose fiction (a superb analysis of Kamel Daoud’s reversal, in his novel *Meursault, contre-enquête*, of the colonial violence in Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*) to illustrate the process by which a ground is posited and then ruptured, the rupture being subsequently domesticated by mechanisms of political semiosis.

It would be a mistake, however, to see the use of aesthetic works as illustrations of theoretical arguments. It is rather the other way around. In visual and literary interpretations, Wagner-Pacifici subjects the sociological imagination to an aesthetic education and uncovers nuances of social reality and historical complexity that historiography and sociological discourse typically transmit in black and white. To take this intervention seriously would amount to acknowledging that the arts may teach historians and social scientists a new language, in which their mutual conversation would start to resonate with a deeper sense. It would amount to the recognition that the platform where social theory intersects with the theory of history is constituted by a theory of the aesthetic. Works of art own an apparatus of perception that can register thresholds of being, knowing and acting – they embody a method and practice that can demonstrate political emergence.

How does this practice work? As I mentioned, political emergence applies to movements that appear outside established political formations or are generated by contradictions and conflicts within these formations. Because they own weak political representation, such movements are at first not recognizable as political entities. For the same reasons, they go unrecognized by the social sciences, which are often constrained by an epistemology of representation. By contrast, aesthetic presentations and performances (fiction, poetry, visual arts, film and theatre), as distilled expressions of ‘voice’, seem to offer unique ways of understanding cases of political emergence.

I have written elsewhere that aesthetic works embody this potentiality because they are able to register the experience of sociopolitical events in ways comparable to the testimonial mode of the participant and the witness, in situations of social stress, mass struggle, antagonism and political violence (Jonsson 2008, forthcoming). Using Wagner-Pacifici’s terms, we could say that aesthetic works are able to render and explain precisely those moments of crisis when existing modes of representation (political or cultural) collapse, and when political life becomes entirely performative and demonstrative.

Because of its ability to capture such moments of political emergence, aesthetic mediations may also be said to provide access to knowledge about democratic experience.
and participation in a deep sense. This knowledge does not operate in the mode of representation. It stresses those performative and demonstrative aspects of events which Wagner-Pacifici circumscribes in her analyses of political semiosis. As for the performative dimension: in moments of political emergence, collective actors will always, before they emerge as subjects and objects of political representation, appear as subjects of aesthetic self-presentation through the simple fact of claiming voice and presence, by being seen and heard in the polity, or by challenging, as Hersilia does, what Jacques Rancière (2004) calls the ‘distribution of the sensible’, i.e., the mechanisms of exclusion that determine who can speak and who must remain silent in the polis. As for the demonstrative dimension: such movements emerge from particular sites and localities in the socio-economic landscape, and they often entail a process in which one collective sets itself up as against another one and claims a new vantage point from which to perceive society, act upon it and eventually rebuild it. Aesthetic works are able to account for this complex process. Not only do they disclose the contingent boundaries of political order. They also project visions in which those boundaries are broken, ruptured and redrawn, thus making the system of representation more inclusive.

When in *The human condition* (1958) Hannah Arendt once sought to theorize political events, she invented the notion of ‘space of appearance’. A repurposed Heideggerian term, the space of appearance designates those ineffable constituent moments of public life that precede the representational forms of politics that we normally take for granted. Spaces of appearance are spaces of public participation and performance. Social theory and political science have been poor guides as regards the transactions going on in such spaces, where politics confronts its ontological origins in human action. It is at this point, precisely, that Wagner-Pacifici calls on aesthetics to resolve the riddle of political emergence. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) once demonstrated in his literary aesthetics, the search for an authentic idea of political dialogue and political action cannot be limited to political science and sociology, but it must look toward aesthetic figurations, the modern novel being his privileged example. According to Bakhtin, this was because the novel is inherently dialogical and multivocal, as moments of emergence and historical events also are. In art and literature, we simultaneously perceive both the voice or image of the rupture at its very moment of emergence, and the impression of that rupture on the onlooker or the witness, who declares it to be an event.

In one of his books about the political history of France’s democracy, Pierre Rosanvallon (1998, 35–55) talked about ‘the people as event’ (*peuple-événement*): the transient – perhaps non-existent – historical moment when the people as a plural empirical reality (*peuple-société*) becomes one with the people as a singular principle of sovereignty (*peuple-souverain*). In Rosanvallon’s book, this is a brilliant phrase, a metaphor for the revolution. In Robin Wagner-Pacifici’s new book we watch the dramatic unfolding of that very revolutionary trope, in crafted analyses where social theory, history, politics and aesthetics come together in a rare moment of intellectual emergence.

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