

Process, Structure, Intervention: Notes on Eventful Environmental Memory
(Working Paper 1, WG5 “Transformation of the Environment”)

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In a first conceptual outline on Slow Memory, Jenny Wüstenberg suggests that the field’s “conventional focus on discrete events and sites of memory – even when these have transnational reverberations as the third wave of scholarship shows [...] – has made the field less concerned with the ‘slow moving’, dispersed and event-less developments such as climate change, deindustrialization, the hollowing out of welfare states, gentrification, shifts in gender relations, or the creeping rise in disinformation”. (Wüstenberg, “Toward Slow Memory Studies.”)

The idea of environmental memory, with or without the qualifier ‘slow’, suggests that there is both a qualitative and a temporal dimension to these mnemonic practices. The Slow Memory framework invites us to think about “which ‘pasts’ have a meaningful impact on our present(s).” (Wüstenberg.) Whilst one might argue that this is the central premise of the field of memory studies itself, the Slow Memory framework draws specific attention to the presence (no pun intended) of several temporalities in a wide range of contemporary mnemonic practices. (Wüstenberg.)

At first glimpse, Wüstenberg’s statement quoted above seems to build on a binary structure of eventfulness and more “dispersed, slow-moving” processes that largely remain ‘out of sight’ of public attention. I do not think that such a binary setting is what Wüstenberg aims at setting up, or proposes as a conceptual framework. My reading is that the issue lies with memory studies’ prevalent notion of event, as it seems to have become a blanket denominator for what are actually competing and intersecting temporalities.

Ever since I immersed myself in the study of memory, I have found myself struggling with the use and role of the ‘event’, yet was constantly under the impression that a certain consensus on what eventfulness refers to had been reached within the field. The Holocaust, for example, is as much defined as an event as, say, settler colonialism is. The storming of the Bastille is, apparently, as much an event as is the Bhopal catastrophe in India. And I wondered: How can these vastly different temporalities be subsumed under one category, namely event?

In order to tackle my unease, I went back to what I identified as foundational texts (Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*; Sewell, “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures”; Sewell, “Three Temporalities. Toward an Eventful Sociology”; Wagner-Pacifici, *What Is an Event?*) -- I am aware that I give these texts short shrift and pluck them out of their respective critical environments. This argument will be turned into a longer essay in which I will work with them more thoroughly.-- in the study of eventfulness, and found myself to be not much the wiser. William Sewell argues that “[e]ver

since Herodotus, historians have written about events”, which eventually became the “bread and butter of narrative history”. (Sewell, “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures.”) Historical events, in Sewell’s terms, are instances that are deemed “remarkable” by “contemporaries”, worthy of being “widely noted and commented on”. (Sewell, 842.) As events of seismic proportions, they have “momentous consequences” and hold the potential to “change the course of history”. (Sewell, 842.) The historical narrative thus “transforms actions into histories” through the act of emplotment, not by means of mere reconstruction but by virtue of rendering it tellable. (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1–3:229–30.)

There are thus two modes of engaging with eventfulness at work here: There is the disruptive power of the event that is felt in the moment, and the mytho-poetic potential that is activated retrospectively, and by narrative action. (Assmann, *Impact and Resonance*.) Sewell pays tribute to this double-bind when he reminds the reader that the impact of an event can only be judged against the very structures it is situated in, which it challenges or seeks to challenge, and which it engages with in various ways. A historical event disrupts these entangled modes of social action, as it effectively rearranges “the causal nexus in which social interactions take place”. (Sewell, “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures,” 843.) Events, thus conceived, change history, because they – in the words of Sewell – transform the governing structures. Cause cannot be separated from effect.

Robin Wagner-Pacifici – as one of the most visible theorists of eventfulness – particularly focuses on the disruptive potential of a historical event. For Wagner-Pacifici, “[t]heories of events inevitably begin with rupture. An event depends on the experience whether in the moment, or constructed in retrospect – that the ground has dramatically shifted.” (Tavory and Wagner-Pacifici, “Climate Change as an Event.”) Here, it is about the *break* with the status quo ante that the event brings about, as an act of severance between temporal as well as epistemological frames. Accordingly, the observer can retrospectively distinguish between ‘before’ and ‘after’ the event, and thus draw an outline around the contours of the event. Contrary to a narratological perspective (Hühn, “Event and Eventfulness”; Hühn, “Functions and Forms of Eventfulness in Narrative Fiction.”) on textual events, which builds on a rather neutral ‘change of events’, historical events break with the broader structures at play, as well as potentially discontinuing the narratives in which history is manifested. Cause cannot be separated from effect, and the effect is rupture.

The further we move into contemporary takes on the theory of events, the more normative they become, and the less they are actually concerned with the “discordant rhythms of multiple temporalities” that profoundly characterize the tenuous relationship between the *longue-durée* and the event. (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1–3:227.) Add the *longue-durée* of climate change to the mix and event definitions become particularly murky. Consider, for example, Iddo Tavory’s and Robin Wagner-Pacifici’s take on climate change and eventfulness:

What kind of an event is climate change? Theories of events inevitably begin with rupture. [...] Climate change, in that sense, is an ambiguous event, perhaps uniquely

so. Its effects are experienced as an extension or exacerbation of normal weather patterns: an unseasonably warm day, larger-than-usual fires in a fire prone area; a stronger-than-usual storm. Its unfolding is depicted via oscillating temporalities, sometimes in terms of years, sometimes decades, sometimes centuries: the rhythm of the dripping of melting glaciers. The agency of those causing it is similarly distributed across multiple human and non-human actors, among states and global corporations. (Tavory and Wagner-Pacifici, “Climate Change as an Event.”)

The authors subsequently propose a “theory of events” that distinguishes between “scientific modes of eventfulness”, “radical eventfulness” as represented by climate change activism, and the “sensible eventfulness” displayed by “the European Union and United Nations functionaries, as it is gleaned from climate change documents such as the European Green Deal.” (Tavory and Wagner-Pacifici.) My point here is not to engage critically with the aforementioned distinctions – which strongly remind me of the three temporalities offered by Sewell in another essay (Sewell, “Three Temporalities. Toward an Eventful Sociology.”) – this could actually be a topic for a reading group session of Working Group 5. I want to draw the attention to the fact that this theory of environmental eventfulness focuses on the actors and agents, even on the institutions, but not on temporalities and *how* and *why* they come to intersect. Tavory and Wagner-Pacific argue: “Actors are located not only in place, but also in time. Defining the moment of the event contributes to the effect of defining what the event is”, rendering the event a momentous action that circulates around the notion of rupture: a break with time and a break with causality. (Tavory and Wagner-Pacifici, “Climate Change as an Event.”) Yet how that actually unfolds, how different time regimes, culturally conditioned notions of time as well as different temporal epistemologies, are brought to bear on the discourse of climate change, remains unaddressed. In order to maintain the notion of events rupturing existent structures and narratives, the authors resort to settling for environmental eventfulness as “ambiguous”, with fuzzy edges. We are back to a structure-and-agency debate, whilst the notion of temporality is sidelined to the point of becoming a “demonstrative aspect”. (Tavory and Wagner-Pacifici.) As I suggested earlier, I think the issue here comes from potentially undertheorized notions of temporalities and their effects in relation to eventfulness, which render the notion of event rather a fuzzy category, especially in light of geological timeframes that increasingly come into view through the environmental turn.

I am thus prompted to ask: How useful is a theory of events if it focuses on actors and performances, and not also on the experience and representation of time and temporality, especially if these notions are challenged by the encounter of geological and human time?

We need a typology of eventfulness. In this Working Paper I propose the following framework as a tentative first step towards such a typology, and I am looking forward to discussing my suggestions further. I distinguish between three different types of events, each steeped in and at the same time producing different temporalities: intervention, structure and process.

It might be a good idea to start with the most straightforward of these event types, the ephemeral *event-as-intervention*. I am thinking here for example about the funeral that was organized in 2019 to mourn the ‘death’ of glacier Okjökull in Iceland: Around 100 people attended a ceremony that entailed “readings, speeches, a moment of silence and the placing of a memorial plaque”. (Quaglia, “Glacier Grief: How Funerals and Rituals Can Help Us Mourn the Loss of Nature.”) Stef Craps, who introduced this highly intriguing case to us on occasion of the Portland meeting, remarks that “we are somewhat at a loss as to how to adequately navigate the affective terrain of environmental breakdown. Lacking standard protocols and procedures, we do not quite know how to make sense of, channel, or cope with its psychological impact.” (Craps, “Ecological Mourning: Living with Loss in the Anthropocene.”) This vigil is an example of how this sense-making unfolds, how short-term collective action draws from the repertoire of recognizable social practices (funerals) and transposes these rituals into a different context. These interventions are highly symbolic and are designed to achieve certain goals: to connect certain unfathomable transformations (environmental breakdown) to established cultural practices, to render them conceivable in the process. Lastly, this is what renders them tellable and digestible for news cycles. These interventions have a beginning and an end, yet they tie in with temporalities that oftentimes remain outside the purview of the cultural or the social.

These performances lay bare the deeper temporal and narrative *structures* that operate in the background, and gain visibility when connected with these relatively ephemeral interventions. Important to consider here is that these interventions may or simply *may not* cause ruptures or signal breaks with dominant frameworks; rupture is not a condition sine qua non. Longer-durée-structures are oftentimes referred to as “hegemonic narratives” or perceived as structures that continue to influence social hierarchies, (identity) politics and notions of national time. (Rigney, “Decommissioning Monuments, Mobilizing Materialities.”) These structures reach across generations and epochs and have gained entry in multiple forms to cultural memory, but are constructed in retrospect. In this sense, these *events-as-structure* are invoked by observers and participants, and take on the function of frameworks to remember with, to remember through. Put differently: Remembering is made possible through the construction of these events-as-structures. I think that the Slow Memory framework is particularly conducive to exploring different epistemological underpinnings of what these structures are, especially when considering alternative frameworks to the national container – oceanic temporalities spring to mind. (Bentley, Bridenthal, and Wigen, *Seascapes*; Kabir, “Elmina as Postcolonial Space”; Hofmeyr, “The Complicating Sea: The Indian Ocean as Method.”)

Or consider the Bhopal disaster, as it has come to be known. (Broughton, “The Bhopal Disaster and Its Aftermath.”) During the night of December 2-3, 1984, more than 40 tons of poisonous gas leaked from the Union Carbide India Limited pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, into the environment. The number of deaths directly related to the leak ranges between 4,000 and 8,000; the estimated number of longer-term victims may be as high as 550,000. In the decades after the accident, litigation resulted in the payment of some compensation; the most notable one was issued by the American parent company, Union Carbide Company (UCC).

Although it quickly sought to distance itself from the events of December 3, UCC was pressured into accepting “moral responsibility” and agreed to pay \$470 million to the Indian government. (Broughton) Today, almost 40 years after the disastrous event, most of the land surrounding the former plant still remains uninhabitable due to the strong presence of chemical agents in soil, water and air.

There is also a different aspect to the story: Bhopal and its factory were at some point considered success stories of Indian post-independence industrialization. In the 1970s, the Indian government sought to attract foreign investment in its burgeoning industries, and as soon as the Bhopal factory was erected, the government held 22% in stocks. (Broughton) Global capitalist expansion tragically came to meet local demands and desires. ‘Bhopal’ as a historical and mnemonic referent can be considered an example of Rob Nixon’s “environmentalism of the poor” (Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*), as this catastrophe exposes how larger political, historical and temporal structures intersect: colonialism and imperial rule-by-proxy set the conditions for this disaster to unfold, yet local post-independence politics allowed for negligence and failures (especially in terms of labour standards) to occur. It is thanks to the work of memory that these larger structures and their entanglements come into view, as it brings about a shift in perception on the intrinsic connection of environment and colonialism.

It is thanks to the environmental turn in many of our academic contexts, as well as the significant rise in environmental activism (Gutman et al., *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*) around the world, that a third temporal frame claims the stage: the *longue-durée* that I tentatively frame as *event-as-process*. I am thinking here about the processes of transformation that operate outside the grasp of the timeframes we draw upon to organize our social and cultural worlds (generation, epoch, era etc.), and thus of human temporal agency as a tool to locate oneself in the *Zeitläufe* beyond the grand flux of messianic time. These events-as-process, in a similar manner to event-as-structure, become relevant to memory as retrospective constructions that ontologically underpin the epistemological structures of memory, of event-as-intervention. The most prominent example that comes to mind is Anthropocene Time, as an attempt to frame not human time, but a time that humans condition. (Chakrabarty, “Anthropocene Time.”)

The three types of events enable the emergence of mnemonic complexes -- I owe the term ‘mnemonic complex’ to Jeffrey K. Olick --, which are points in time where different temporal regimes and narratives coagulate, and thus become visible, rememberable, performable. Mnemonic complexes are – to borrow a term from Braudel – “conjunctures” through which we can see how remembering (as situating oneself in time) compresses, condenses and anchors more complex and ambiguous temporal structures operating within and beyond the sphere of human perception. (Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*.) Memory is process, mechanism and outcome.

Whilst my proposed triad may not be entirely satisfactory, and I may not have fully delivered on the promise of moving away from actor-participant-focused notions of environmental

eventfulness, it may point towards a more nuanced understanding of eventfulness and events, and this understanding – at least in the context of environmental memory studies – decidedly turns towards non-human agency activated by very human agency, by way of linking eventfulness to materiality, for example. The interesting question, at least for me, then is how these temporalities are intertwined, and how these entanglements unfold across different cultures, media, minds and environments. Which experiences, imaginaries and explorations of experiences in and of time are activated, mobilized, drawn upon in the moment, and how do they affect broader structures in place and in play?

There is an argument to be made that the question of how to grasp and theorize different temporalities concerns all our thematic Working Groups, and I am looking forward to engaging in cross-Working Group discussions on how we can productively theorize event and eventfulness in memory studies. The Slow Memory COST Action will provide the framework to do so.

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