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# Theorizing the Restlessness of Events<sup>1</sup>

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This article offers a theoretical and methodological system for a sociological analysis of the restless nature of historical events. This system, political semiosis, is able to identify and assess the performative speech acts, the demonstrative orientational specifications, and the mimetic representations required to advance historical transformations. The features of political semiosis structure the flow of historical events by managing the specific media and generic forms that are the vehicles through which events take shape. Political semiosis provides a method for analyzing both the circulation and the materialization of events. The exemplary case of September 11 illuminates this approach's capabilities.

Everything as it moves, now and then, here and there, makes stops. The bird as it flies stops in one place to make its nest, and in another to rest in its flight. A man when he goes forth stops when he wills. So the god has stopped. The sun, which is so bright and beautiful, is one place where he has stopped. The moon, the stars, the winds, he has been with. The trees, the animals, are all where he has stopped, and the Indian thinks of these places and sends his prayers there to reach the place where the god has stopped and win help and a blessing. (Quoted in Lévi-Strauss 1963, p. 98)

## PROLOGUE

The 21st century has had a turbulent beginning. For the United States, the inaugural decade of this century has brought crises of national security,

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war, civil liberties, the rule of law, and the economy. Attempts to take a sociological sounding of this eventful period are first obliged to locate and analyze the events generating and carrying these crises forward. And this, in turn, requires theoretical and methodological choices about how to look at events.

For example, where and how do we look at the numerous actions we call “September 11”? Even as we face the task of determining whether and how these actions colligate into a historic event, as social scientists understand events, we also face the task of actually demarcating them. Do we bind the event by limiting it to acts perpetrated on that one day in 2001, a day in which startled news commentators progressed unevenly from describing airplanes flying into buildings as “accidents” to describing them as “incidents” and then as “terrorist attacks”? Do we bind the event by limiting it to acts taking place in the air on that day, or do we include acts taking place in buildings in two major U.S. cities and on the ground in one rural field in Pennsylvania? Do we include speech communications occurring in these spaces or those transmitted (as images and discourse) across electronic media? The sociological tracking of this event involves following its contours across time and space as, with great difficulty, September 11 came to take intelligible shape.<sup>2</sup>

As an event, even as an event understood conventionally as a distinctly unique historical break, September 11 pressed at the limits of recognition by constantly shifting its grounds, both literally and metaphorically. Its multiple actions confounded many categories, including those of foreign and domestic threat, hijacking and suicide bombing, crime and war. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* reflects on these confounding

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<sup>2</sup> Lévi-Strauss claims that the multiply embedded quotation that appears at the opening of this article articulates a Native American cosmology “according to which things and beings are nothing but materialized forms of creative continuity” (p. 98). It seems appropriate here to point out that the quote was originally drawn from an oral transcription of a Dakotan chief by a Miss Fletcher of the Peabody Museum, which was in turn reproduced in an article by James Owen Dorsey in the Smithsonian Institution’s *Eleventh Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, then reproduced in Émile Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, and reproduced in Lévi-Strauss (1963, p. 98). While the origins and transmissions of the quotation itself may be said to mirror the restless movement that it describes, it also inspires a sociological analysis of the restless movement of historical events through time, space, and cultural informing—an analysis this article aims to develop.

categories, noting, for example, that “the September 11 attacks fell into the void between the foreign and domestic threats. . . . No one was looking for a foreign threat to domestic targets. The threat that was coming was not from sleeper cells. It was foreign—but from foreigners who had infiltrated into the United States” (9/11 Commission 2004, p. 263). Thrusting these difficulties of recognition and categorization into high relief, September 11 presses on the more general need to revisit our sociological phenomenology of events, to theorize events on the move.

Political efforts to bind September 11 as an event consist of, among other things, official state documents. Such documents as *The 9/11 Commission Report* have attempted to assay and direct the course of this event in its descriptions, explanations, and prescriptions.<sup>3</sup> I read such documents of statecraft and political policy as both evidence and incarnations of historical events. *The 9/11 Commission Report* itself conjures up a world of misrecognized and undermined political and territorial boundaries in which the disorientation of a vulnerable superpower is manifest in the report’s multiple runs at explaining how the actions of September 11, 2001, were able to occur. Understanding the mechanisms by which the unfolding acts of signification in and of such official reports operate is critical to fully understanding events as complex, mobile social processes.

The case of what has become known as September 11 is introduced here as an exemplar of such social processes becoming historical events. As such, while this article does not pretend to develop a full-scale analysis of September 11, its eventful trajectory will be highlighted as exemplary. Social and political agents across a range of domains (political, judicial, mass media, military, and aesthetic) have asserted diverse characterizations and interpretations of September 11. Official reports represent only one stream in a river of documents, speeches, and images. These characterizations have rhetorical and material consequences in that they variably constitute the event for the relevant publics and pave the way for specific actions and institutionalizations. Thus, social and political agents

<sup>3</sup> After significant pressure was put on President George W. Bush by the families of the victims of the attacks on September 11, he agreed to establish the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States in 2002. After almost two years of investigations, interviews, and hearings, the commission published its findings, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, in 2004. Released both on the Internet for free and as a bound paperback book by W. W. Norton for \$10 in bookstores, it quickly became a best seller. The 567-page report details the events of September 11, incorporating analyses of the Federal Aviation Association, the New York Police and Fire Departments, and the North American Aerospace Defense Command, among others. It also details the histories of al Qaeda, the phenomenon it terms “New Terrorism,” counterterrorism, American intelligence agencies, the Clinton administration’s actions (and inactions) on terrorism, and the Bush administration’s actions (and inactions) on the same, and it finally ends with a series of proposals.

have alternately incorporated within September 11 the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the legitimization of the torture of “enemy combatants,” and the militarization of public health structures and activities.<sup>4</sup>

Where September 11 begins and ends is no small question. It is not sociologically sufficient to see this question as one of divergent framings or interpretations. The more radical claim here is that the business of event framing is part and parcel of the continuing effect flow of events.<sup>5</sup> Here a suggestive and kindred concept of “scene” derives from the dramatic framework of the great social theorist Kenneth Burke (1945). Identifying the relevant rhetorical “scene” for particular events or social movements is, according to Burke’s famous pentad heuristic, tantamount to establishing the relevant political context and the legitimate domain of cognition and action (1945, p. 3). As social and political actors struggle over the right interpretations of events (and thus simultaneously struggle over the event trajectories), they assert diverse relevant scenes. If, for example, the scene of September 11 is the “war on terror,” (rather than that of international crime) the purview of those charged with responding to September 11 extends to wherever and however the war on terror is fought. Burke’s framework provides a powerful way to understand the worldviews within which eventful acts take place and take meaning. But it is not capable of tracking events in the making. For this, sociological analysis of effect flows must identify specific semiotic mechanisms by and through which events are so constituted. This article offers a framework for identifying these mechanisms.

#### EVENT BOUNDING AND UNBOUNDING

Social and political actors seek to identify discrete political and historical events and entities. They also seek to distinguish between events and entities (sometimes referred to as “structures” in social scientific analyses).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Rosner and Markowitz (2006, pp. 58–59) analyze the United States’ public health response to September 11 and its absorption into a military frame: “September 11 helped galvanize the nation against terrorism, and the anthrax outbreaks in October 2001 . . . thrust public health and public health agencies into the national spotlight. But these episodes also stimulated influential people inside and outside government to see prevention, surveillance, and disease reporting . . . as integral to the country’s national defense system.”

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to an *AJS* reviewer for this concise phrase.

<sup>6</sup> Sewell, in his appreciative engagement with the work of Marshall Sahlins, notes that Sahlins took issue with the way in which, “for a certain anthropology, as for a certain history, it seemed that ‘event’ and ‘structure’ could not occupy the same epistemological space. The event was conceived as anti-structural, the structure as nullifying the event” (Sewell 2005, p. 199).

In and with their documents, speeches, gestures, and images, actors want to be able to bind and map these phenomena, to determine their beginnings and endings. Recent sociological studies of boundaries, surveyed to great effect by Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont (2007), have productively analyzed “multidimensionality in collective identity formation; conceptualizing multiple, interacting boundaries; how the diversity and topology of social networks reciprocally influence boundary processes; how different types of cultural capital contribute to the production of ethno-racial boundaries; how organizational and institutional structures influence boundary processes” (p. 344). Boundaries are thus being investigated as multidimensional and dynamic, but few scholars concerned with boundaries have investigated the dynamic mechanisms of event bounding and unbounding.

Typically, scholarly studies of events and theorizing about events have come from the field of history, not sociology.<sup>7</sup> As Sewell (2005, p. 197) writes, “In the traditional division of labor in the human sciences, events were relegated to history, which specialized precisely in recounting the unique and contingent.”<sup>8</sup> Exceptions to this disciplinary division of labor include, importantly, Abrams (1982), Griffin (1993), Brubaker (1994, 2004), Sewell (1996, 2005), and Abbott (2001). Abrams was among the first to claim the legitimacy of the sociological purchase on events by highlighting their constructed nature, characterizing the event as “a primary construct, relatively full of empirical content, mediating action and structure” (1982, p. 193). Brubaker goes even further, claiming that structures are themselves eventlike: “Contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame[s] of vision and basis for individual and collective action” (1994,

<sup>7</sup> Such sociological studies concerned with historical events have rarely focused on questions regarding the category or concept of event itself, even as they have engaged specific methodological choices regarding event analysis. Significant studies of particular events and comparisons of events include Erikson (1976), Skocpol (1979), Wagner-Pacifi (1986), Vaughan (1997), and Klinenberg (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Anthropologists also have not generally focused on events in their analyses, or they have done so in a way that actually downplayed the socially rerouting consequences of events. Exceptions have included Sahlins, of course, but even his work is assessed as fundamentally about structure rather than about, as anthropologists Daniel Hoffman and Stephen Lubkemann write, “causal markers of shift in social course” (2005, p. 317). In their introduction to a special issue of *Anthropological Quarterly*, “West African Warscapes,” they seek a new anthropology of events, not surprisingly of violent events in particular. They contrast this project with anthropology’s alternative tendency: “If history as a discipline has primarily focused on rupture as the marker of its ‘events,’ anthropology’s paradigmatic ‘events’ were ‘rituals’ (Van Gennep 1909)—where even rebellion (Gluckman 1963) could be examined for its contribution to social and cultural continuity” (Hoffman and Lubkemann 2005, p. 317).

p. 9).<sup>9</sup> In this article, I want to move with and beyond these insights to closely examine the mechanisms by which events form, reform, and deform. Further, the article will shed light on a paradox of events understood sociologically—you cannot have an event without boundaries, and you cannot definitively bind an event.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of the specifiable event itself reflects an important aspect of sociological interest in them—that is, that events have significant and durable transformational effects.<sup>11</sup> The key question is this: how is it possible to hold together an open, fluid sense of events (with its recognition that events do not settle into one interpretive frame) and a conviction that events do durably transform structures and relations? In order to approach this question, I want first to purposely explode the concept of the bounded event, remove events from their disciplinarily narrow historical frame, and develop the concept of the restlessness of events. By doing so, I also aim to reconceptualize (without entirely rejecting) the very idea of “uniqueness” that clings to the scholarly assessment of events. I will argue that events exist only by virtue of specific inhabitations or informings and that their existence is intrinsically restless.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately,

<sup>9</sup> In the context of a discussion of cognitive practices regarding ethnicity, Brubaker writes, “Rather than take ‘groups’ as basic units of analysis, cognitive perspectives shift analytical attention to ‘group-making’ and ‘grouping’ activities such as classification, categorization, and identification, public and private, through which they are sustained from day to day” (2004, p. 45). These activities can be productively viewed from the perspective being developed here as those involved in demonstratives, performatives, and representations. Abbott’s (2001) conceptualization of event is developed in his book, *Time Matters*. Griffin (1993) interrogates the causal explanations in historical narratives by employing the formal method of event-structure analysis in his article, “Narrative, Event-Structure Analysis, and Causal Interpretation in Historical Sociology.”

<sup>10</sup> Of course, historical subjects and analysts alike “bind” events all the time, as we put ruptures and transformations “in the past.” The motivations for such binding are multiple, with various degrees of self-consciousness. For example, Sewell binds the event of the taking of the Bastille as “beginning with popular resistance to the dismissal of Necker on July 12 and as ending with the Assembly debates of July 23 that authoritatively interpreted the assault on the fortress as a legitimate revolution” (1996, p. 878). He goes on to state that this temporalization of the event of the Bastille is motivated by his focus on a particular structural transformation: “The articulation of popular sovereignty with crowd violence to form the category of revolution” (p. 878). Thus, this is claimed as a bound event for, and only for, this conceptual exegesis concerned with the historical category of revolution.

<sup>11</sup> Many thanks to William Sewell, Jr., for insisting on this important characteristic of events understood sociologically.

<sup>12</sup> While the focus here is on the dynamic relationship between the continuous and discontinuous aspects of historic events, the recognition of the need to assess the deep structures of cultural informings of events takes seriously Griswold’s (1987, p. 3) definition of cultural objects as “shared significance embodied in form.”

the subject of this article is the relationship between the intelligible forms taken by events and their fundamentally restless existence.

Events take shapes. Gestures, declarations, maps, documents, exchanges, images, and symbols are simultaneously the concrete material and the formal hosts for the relay of actions that get identified as events. It is the very mobility of events, the handings-off from one inhabitation to the next, that brings them to life and keeps them alive. When philosopher Arthur Danto probes the issue of what constitutes a “full description” of events in historical writing, he approaches a consideration of event mobility, only to turn the discussion into a historicist preoccupation with emerging criteria of relevancy for inclusion in such descriptions. Danto writes that, with new criteria of relevancy, a “description of E[vent] at  $t - 1$  may become richer over time without the event itself exhibiting any sort of instability” (1985, p. 155). Alternatively, I argue that events are, in their essence, essentially unstable and that only a theory of event restlessness and a methodology that can adequately capture and analyze the handing-off process can hope to analytically track events and account for their meaning and persisting consequentiality.

#### ACCOUNTING FOR EVENTS

Historical transitions are composed of eventful transactions that have consequences for individual and group identities and life chances. The question of what makes an event historic has been answered sociologically by Sewell, who has argued that only events that “change the course of history,” giving birth to “multiple, overlapping, and relatively autonomous” structures, should count as historic (1996, p. 842). In Sewell’s famous study of the invention of revolution at the Bastille, he draws directly from Giddens’s concept of the dualism of social structures: “Structures . . . shape practices, but it is also people’s practices that constitute and reproduce structures” (1996, p. 842). Thus, structural persistences, as well as structural transformations, are constituted of practices. But the practices that make events are themselves only inductively drawn into Sewell’s analysis—in the case of the French Revolution, this includes mobs searching for grain and guns, the king’s reluctant recognition of and capitulation to the National Assembly, the abolition of feudal privileges, and the slaughter of the officials de Launay and Flesselles. These are actions that proceed in diverse modalities across diverse domains. And a theory of events must be able to account for both the conjunctural contingency of such practices and their elemental conditions of operation. This requires an apparatus that considers the specificities of the modalities, the diverse



domains, and their interrelations. It is just such an apparatus that this article attempts to construct.

The question of what makes an event historic has been answered philosophically by Hegel (1827–31), in his contention that historical breaks are generally affiliated with violent eruptions of social and political contestation (Hegel 1999). I would argue that violence indeed inheres in history, not just in the Hegelian sense in which there is no history without struggle or difference, and in which that struggle is interpreted as a succession of wars and victors. It inheres as well in the naming, appropriating, and displacing of this violence as cultural artifacts do the work of constituting history. This work of constituting history takes enormous effort. Events must force their way into historical subjects' fields of attention and action, and while violence is not an essential ingredient of all historic transformations, it is a condition of many of them. Great things are at stake, including the remaking of social and political identities and the redistribution of power and resources. Sociological analysis of events compels an understanding of them from, as it were, the inside. Thus, answering the question "What makes an event historic?" needs to be supplemented by the question "What makes an event an 'event'?"

It was while studying the conventions, ceremonies, and exchanges of military surrenders that I made the theoretical discovery that the transactional events ending war consisted of several essential structural features (Wagner-Pacifici 2005). Of course, there are infinite variations in the deployment of those features, and the variations in the case of military surrenders specifically had significant historical consequences: more or less humiliation for the vanquished, more or less magnanimity from the victor, more or less definitive change of identities and fealties, more or less freedom for those defeated. Nevertheless, these structural features are all necessary and distinct in the ways they intervene in and remake the world in such historically transformational moments. And each feature has its own distinct logic of practice. The framework I am developing to characterize these features, or mechanisms, is one I call political semiosis. Political semiosis offers a method for capturing the restless conveyance of power and meaning in the eventful constitution of history.

#### WHAT IS POLITICAL SEMIOSIS?

All historic transitions must include three features: a performative feature, a demonstrative feature, and a representational feature. In other words, every transition requires, first, a speech act or its performative equivalent that materially changes the social and/or political world. For example, pronouncing the statement "I surrender" and appending a signature to

an official surrender document are performative speech acts that constitute termination actions ending war. This feature of successful surrenders and other historical transitions is termed performative, after Austin's speech act theory. Austin (1975) identified a particular species of speech acts that literally change the social world in and through their utterance. Some common examples include the utterances "I now pronounce you husband and wife" and "I find the defendant guilty." Austin originally contrasted performative speech acts with what he termed constative speech acts, those acts seeking to represent the world outside of language itself ("The sky is blue" and "I went to the store") but not directly intervening in and remaking that world.

All sorts of what Austin called "felicity conditions" have to be met for performative acts to be successful (sincerity, the proper authorities articulating them in the proper times and places), 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 worlds. Thus, in describing the operations of performatives, Austin (1975) differentiated between their illocutionary force ("the performance of an act *in* saying something" [p. 99]; "acts [such as ordering or warning that] invite by convention a response or sequel" [p. 117]) and their perlocutionary force ("what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring" [p. 109]). Thus, performatives always pivot around the forces of convention and the actualities of uptake. Austin writes that "illocutionary acts are conventional: perlocutionary acts are not conventional" (p. 121). For example, orders and verdicts must draw from conventional templates and formulas, but deterrence or persuasion of social agents in real-life situations cannot be accomplished simply by appeal to convention. Thus, interactional uptake is critical for bridging the existential and empirical gap between, for example, a warning and successful deterrence. Constant possibilities for mismatches or disjunctures between illocutions and perlocutions provide spaces for change or redirection. Historic events take shape in just such spaces, junctures of stability and instability.

Thus, the specific content of a performative speech act is only as significant as its context-dependent specific force. Social agents performing performatives depend on other agents acknowledging and heeding these speech acts. There is an essential real-time dynamic here between interpretation and action that opens up a space of contingency and change. And this dynamic relies for its production on the other two features of political semiosis.

The second feature of political semiosis is the demonstrative feature. Less familiar as a linguistic and semiotic function than the performative

or representational features, demonstrative terms typically index and distinguish proximal and distal entities and relations (in English, for example, “this,” “that,” “these,” and “those” are demonstratives). Demonstratives also include the deictical features of speech—pronouns and adverbs of time and place like “here,” “there,” “now,” and “then”—drawn from the linguistic theory of deictics (shifters or floaters). These are elements of language that shift in their referent according to who is uttering them in any given moment of a communicative interaction. I write “I,” for example, right now, but you say “I” when you are making a comment on this article in a few moments. “I” is thus a shifter, utterly reliant on context for its meaning.

The demonstrative feature in political semiosis builds from this original linguistic function to call attention to the situated nature of all events. No event can occur outside of context, even as the context itself is constantly shifting. Demonstrative features operate to highlight possible and necessary orientations within and toward situations. This feature is fundamental for multiple types of orientation, including political orientation and reorientation. 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, what is close up and what is far away, what is central and what is marginal. In other words, every transition requires that the parties to it are oriented in time and space and oriented to each other. They need indexing and directions.<sup>13</sup>

Collective shifters like “we” and “they” become particularly charged in historical transitions in which identities change or in which the identity differences are being highlighted or elided. Drawing on an example from President George W. Bush’s televised conference call with New York Mayor Rudolf Giuliani and New York Governor George Pataki on September 13, 2001, immediately after the attacks of September 11, we find several confounding deictical shifts in Bush’s use of pronouns: “*Our* nation must be mindful that there are thousands of Arab-Americans who live in New York City, who love *their* flag just as much as the three of us do, and we must be mindful that as *we* seek to win the war that *we* treat Arab-Americans and Muslims with the respect *they* deserve” (emphasis added).<sup>14</sup> The “we” appears to be ultimately inclusive of all Americans,

<sup>13</sup> Deictical misrecognitions come back to haunt actors experiencing historic events. For example, *The 9/11 Commission Report* notes, “To us, Afghanistan seemed very far away. To members of al Qaeda, America seemed very close. In a sense, they were more globalized than we were” (9/11 Commission 2004, p. 340).

<sup>14</sup> For the full transcript of this televised phone call, see “We Will Rebuild,” American Rhetoric Web site, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911calltonewyork.htm>.

as the nation's perspective is that initially invoked. Yet Arab Americans and Muslims (assumedly also U.S. citizens who are Muslims) become unaccountably "they" and thus are outside the boundary of this collective "we" even as "they" are shown respect.

Note also here how the word "war" slips into President Bush's statement of solidarity with Arab Americans. Two days after the airplane attacks, as the individual hijackers' identities were just emerging, President Bush was already referring to winning "the war."<sup>15</sup> How is this term to be interpreted? How does its assertion participate in the constitution of the event *September 11*? War metaphors are frequently deployed in social and political crises—so its appearance here does not immediately draw attention to itself. It might operate as a (metaphorical) representation of the emerging state of affairs. Yet it might also stake a performative claim if it has effects as an authorized assertion that the attacks of September 11 are being absorbed into a war frame rather than a crime frame. Attention to the dynamic between illocutionary and perlocutionary force allows us to raise these questions, questions that touch on recognitions (or misrecognitions) of conventional declarations of war and their displacements. The statement "This is war" should succeed as a performative only when it is uttered by a legitimate political authority in a serious way and when it is recognized as such by the relevant publics of political and military authorities. Only then does such a statement actually declare war rather than simply represent a situation as warlike.<sup>16</sup>

Other demonstrative features, such as adverbs of space ("here," "there"), can also be used to locate and demarcate a "homeland" and thus a proper space of war. Indeed, such features appear at critical moments in the official *9/11 Commission Report*. The report approaches its conclusion by inverting the disturbingly misrecognized voids between foreign and domestic threat announced in its initial chapters. It flips these voids inside

<sup>15</sup> See Chang and Mehan (2008) for a sophisticated analysis of the discourse by way of which the nature and scope of that war crystallized in the two years following the September 11 attacks, eventuating in the invasion of Iraq by the United States–led coalition.

<sup>16</sup> Hallett (1998) provides a detailed and thoughtful analysis of the way in which formal declarations of war have generally fallen into desuetude. Among other important features of his analysis is his specification that "the power to declare war is emphatically not the power to initiate or start a war. . . . It is the power to compose a text, to draft a document, to write a denunciation" (p. xi). This specification points precisely to the way in which speech acts have unique logics that can have specific consequences. These consequences have been recognized by such authoritative bodies as the U.S. State Department, one 1971 document of which notes that "formal declarations of war are often deliberately avoided because they tend to indicate both at home and abroad a commitment to total victory and may impede settlement possibilities" (quoted in Hallett 1998, p. 37).

out by declaring that America is actually everywhere: “9/11 has taught us that terrorism against American interests ‘over there’ should be regarded just as we regard terrorism against Americans ‘over here.’ In this same sense the American homeland is the planet” (9/11 Commission 2004, p. 362). The planet thus becomes the “here” of America, theoretically extending the space of a *defensive* war to encompass the globe.

Finally, demonstrative elements of eventful transactions also guide actors and witnesses to direct their attention inward toward central exchanges and interactions, as well as outward toward the relay of generated forms. In this aspect, they resemble what Latour (2002) calls “sets of instructions.” For example, he writes that “an isolated scientific image is meaningless. . . . It is a set of instructions to reach another one down the line. A table of figures will lead to a grid that will lead to a photograph that will lead to a diagram that will lead to a paragraph that will lead to a statement. The whole series has meaning but none of its elements has any sense” (p. 14). Interested agents are directed to follow the series in order to take and make meaning. Additionally, the transformational mimeses embedded in these series of images, graphs, and discourses introduce the third feature of political semiosis, that of the representational.

Every eventful transformation involves representational features—copies of the event, or aspects of the event, need to be generated and sent outward into the wider world of audiences and witnesses at a distance. Even the “original” documents signed and stamped and the “original” handshakes beginning or ending such things as battles are, in this sense, copies, as they take their forms from templates developed in the past and brought to bear on this emergent event. The representations thus recruited *in* the enactment of the world-changing performatives participate in the event dialectic of convention and change. But representations *of* the performatively produced transformations are generated as well. Thus we find copies of “original” exchanges, attacks, signings, and handshakes in the form of paintings, plays, poems, journalistic renderings, photographs, films, monuments, and novels. These copies attempt to stabilize and sediment the historical transition in the face of uncertainty, distance, and resistance.

Representational copies are no less critical elements of eventful transactions than are performatives and demonstratives. For no event can live for more than an instant without copies, and no event escapes representational transformation. Representations invariably participate in the production and redirection of the event’s meaning. In a profoundly social sense, all ideas about permanent form taking are futile, and there is an inevitable dialectic between sedimentation and redirection of forms and meanings. The representational feature draws on theories of mimesis—pictures and other symbolic renderings aiming to represent the world as

it is (or was, or will be). It also draws on the circulatory power of the copy, reiterating an event or identity across time and space. Indeed, power itself is associated with such ubiquity (more about this below).

The features of political semiosis thus possess different ontological and epistemological logics (logics involving reliance on conventions and templates, the relationship of speech to the world outside speech, repetition, uptake, mimesis, and so forth). But they operate conjointly to produce the event. Performatives transform the world but are only effective through the operations of representations and demonstratives. Effectiveness via uptake is key here and can never be assumed in advance, even on the basis of all Austinian felicity conditions being met (sincerity, authority, conventionality, and contextual appropriateness). As the empirical examples presented here begin to show, events always involve complex and contingent interactions of social agents engaging and deploying performatives, demonstratives, and representations.

In spite of their different logics, all three features are fundamentally relational—that is, they work through relations. One way of assessing these relations is to characterize the features of political semiosis in terms of their differential stances on the stability of the world and their relation to it.

Thus, when appraised from the actors' points of view (actors comprising both central participants and spectators), representations assume a world that has, at least provisionally, stabilized (even if it is a defunct or anticipated stabilization), thus making it available to representational, mimetic forms. Actors in this world are idealized as having fixed points of view, temporarily immobilized by a world similarly fixed in its representation. Social and political agents in historical transactions continuously generate copies or repetitions, even as these reproducing copies are paradoxically implicated in projects of event binding. In an analysis with affinities to the one being developed here, Abbott (2001) plays the concepts of entity and event off each other by highlighting the role of repetition. He writes, "If 'the world is a world of events,' in Mead's ringing phrase, then what distinguishes entities is their property of repetition, of being events that keep happening in the same way" (p. 273). Of course, the point here, and one with which Abbott would agree, is that no event ever keeps happening in the same way, as all "entities," or event repetitions, incur displacements of time, space, social context, and medium. As well, it is important to underline the fact that repetition is critical to all three features of political semiosis, not just the representational.

Demonstratives assume a world stabilized in time and space or about to be stabilized, a world in which orientation is possible (this includes reorientation). Actors in this world can move, can change their direction, their angles of vision and attention, to attend to or turn away from sites

of action as well as points of stability. The demonstrative feature likewise often engages repetition. For example, Derrida draws attention to the way that the events of September 11, 2001, had quickly become known by the repeated invocation of the date on which they occurred (“September 11th”) and how this temporal indexing highlighted the work of deictics. Derrida noted that “for the index pointing toward this date, the bare act, the minimal deictic, the minimalist aim of this dating, also marks something else. Namely, the fact that we perhaps have no concept and no meaning available to us to name in any other way *this ‘thing’ that has just happened, this supposed ‘event’*” (quoted in Borradori 2003, p. 86; emphasis added). The public is deictically directed, over and over again, to that calendar date, a characterization that appears resistant to inscription in any larger political epoch.

Finally, the illocutions and perlocutions composing performative speech acts moderate a dialectic of stability and instability, repetition and change. When actors utter or inscribe orders, declarations, warnings, or verdicts, they repeat phrases that have conventional meanings, but they do so in order to reconfigure their worlds, changing identities (constituting enemies from friends, the guilty from the innocent) and relations. Performatives assume a world in the process of destabilization and restabilization. Actors in this world intervene in the world to alter it and/or undergo these transformations through their orders, declarations, vows, signatures, and so forth.

By highlighting and intervening in the relative stability or instability of the world, the features of political semiosis also highlight and manage the complex of temporalities at work in events.<sup>17</sup> As Abrams (1982) asserted, events themselves highlight time. This is captured in his somewhat oxymoronic phrase defining an event as “a portentous outcome.” Abrams goes on to write that an event “is a transformation device between past and future; it has eventuated from the past and it signifies for the future. . . . And its identity and significance are established primarily in terms of its location in time, in relation to a course or chain of other happenings” (p. 191). The analysis being developed here provides a way to track the temporal fluctuations of events without reifying these temporalities in

<sup>17</sup> Ermakoff’s recent study of political capitulation by legitimate legislatures under stress acknowledges and addresses the complex of temporalities at work in events with great effect, though they are put to somewhat different purposes than those being developed here. His study foregrounds the motivational factors at play in collective decisions, and he thus has “shifted back and forth between different temporal frames to capture the different types of motivations at play” (2008, p. 324).

projects of periodization (even as the event protagonists aim precisely to draft such periodizations for their own purposes).<sup>18</sup>

Performatives, demonstratives, and representations engage multiple temporal orders and orientations. They highlight Koselleck's claim that "in actu, all temporal dimensions are always intertwined, and it would contradict experience to define the 'present' as for instance, one of those moments that accumulate from the past into the future—or, conversely that slip as intangible points of transition from the future into the past" (2002, p. 30). Actors constituting and caught up in events aim to cut the past off from the future through their deployments of performatives. In turn, performatives rely on representations of the remembered past or the imagined future to achieve uptake. And the demonstratives highlight the relative distance from or proximity to the past ("then") and the differentiating present ("now").

To summarize thus far, participants in historic transactions must be brought to attend to or orient toward situated times and spaces of transition, must heed the illocutionary acts (e.g., warnings, exhortations, declarations, and promises) and absorb the perlocutionary force (e.g., persuasion, mobilization, and deferral) of the emergent performatives, and must be able to refer to and remember these acts via a (re)reading of its subsequent representations.

#### POINTS OF REST

However provisional and contingent the contours of historic events may be, their points of "rest" are hard won. It is the cultural work of the performatives, demonstratives, and representations to exile the mutability and dynamism of events as events appear to take the form of hard facts. The cultural informings that occur via the mechanisms of performatives, demonstratives, and representations work to solidify and sustain the event's boundaries, the desired trajectory being from the mutable to the provisional to the stabilized. Institutions themselves, particularly those with a strong charge of charisma, can be understood as attempts to "fix" the dynamism of events. Viewed from this perspective, institutions can be alternatively understood as being elements of events, as constituting

<sup>18</sup> For a brilliant cognitive sociological critique of the historical project of periodization, see Zerubavel (2003). Zerubavel identifies many consequences of periodization for historical consciousness, including "distort[ing] actual historical distances by essentially compressing those within any given 'period' while inflating those across the mental divides separating such conventional segments from one another" (p. 8).



the pathway of events, or as being the residue of events—or, returning to the crucial role of ongoing repetition, all three at once.<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of such aims and pretensions toward stabilization, historic events are rampant and generative. In fact, they are veritably protean in form, appearance, and consequence. Historic events are bodied forth through and in a variety of media and genres. They can be termed restless, insofar as they must take perceptible form, and insofar as these forms are necessarily multiple, reiterated, and situated. Events are shape-shifters, now appearing as letters and treaties, now paintings and maps, now political constitutions, now dramas, now physical gestures like handshakes or laying down of arms, now dream narratives, now signatures, now institutions. Once set in motion (and motion is a key term here), historic events are essentially a relay of signs and symbols, gestures and exchanges, images and texts. How, exactly, do events live in and through such a variety of cultural forms—reiterative and reconfiguring at the same time? Theorizing this emergent constellation is difficult on several levels. A theory must be able to track events through their various forms.<sup>20</sup> It must be sensitive to the variable significations of those forms and their combinations, and it must take account of the pathways of flows of power and meaning as multiple constituencies contend for control. The restlessness, or instability, of the flows of power through historic events is intermingled with their mutability of meanings, and they are so in ways that must always be empirically discovered.

Power plays an important role here, and political semiosis must account for flows of power in its elaboration of the restlessness of events. The provisional shapes and trajectories taken by events are motivated—social and political actors draw from available templates, media, and genres to perform, demonstrate, and represent the condition of the world they hold to be true (a truth that may be desired or abhorred). Struggles over the

<sup>19</sup> Analyzing Weber's exegeses of the relations between charisma and institution building, Eisenstadt (1968, p. xxi) claimed that "the test of any great charismatic leader lies not only in his ability to create a single event or great movement, but also in his ability to leave a continuous impact on an institutional structure—to transform any given institutional setting by infusing into it some of his charismatic vision, by investing the regular, orderly offices, or aspects of social organization with some of his charismatic qualities and aura."

<sup>20</sup> This focus on the varieties and specificities of the modalities by which events are constituted recalls Koselleck's analysis of events in the practice of conceptual history, particularly his idea of "advance work": "A history does not happen without speaking, but it is never identical with it, it cannot be reduced to it. For that reason, there must be further advance work and performative modes beyond spoken language in order for events to be possible" (2002, p. 25).

accumulation of power take the form of struggles over the event significations that emerge and circulate.<sup>21</sup>

#### POWER

Two quite disparate social theorists, Parsons (1969) and Foucault (1980), theorized power itself as, primarily, a circulating medium. For them, power was not and could not be a static, hypostasized entity. Rather, it realized itself only in and through action. But the recognition of power's circulation reads differently in the work of the two theorists: it is generally benign and collectively effective for Parsons, and it is generally colonizing and controlling (though not without crucial elements of desire) for Foucault. The focus on circulation is a theoretical breakthrough in both renderings. But the circulatory nature of power is emphasized over any thorough examination of power's stopping points. This is a more general problem with the processual vision of power. The necessary moments of crystallization of power (wherein new relationships and structures take a recognizable and durable shape) are analytically dismissed as either mere precipitates or as generically "symbolic." So the question is how can a theory of power hold on to the processual insight that power is not an inert entity that gets transferred and also claim an analytical purchase on the congealings of power, the artifactual points of rest of the forms it takes?

With his specific focus on transformations in and of violence in the process of civilization, Elias claimed that it was the work of culture to inscribe and displace violence. Political semiosis provides access to the important subcategory of historic events that have violence as an essential element. It is able to track projects of displacing violence through such things as reorientations (demonstratives), declarations (performatives), and memorializations (representations). The palpable sense of precipitant and incipient violence suffuses a great many historic events. The performatives, demonstratives, and representations that constitute these events engage with that violence even as they attempt to end it, stave it off, excoriate it, or justify it.

This ontological divide between violence and its cultural apprehension (apprehension understood complexly as anxiety, understanding, and seizing) relies on several orders of contingency. One type of contingency involves that discussed earlier between the illocutionary acts (e.g., com-

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the approach to power here is decidedly cultural, sharing deep affinities with Elias's (1978) analyses of the interplay between violence and figurations of civilization. Many thanks to Michèle Lamont for pointing out the homology between political semiosis and the figurational sociology of Elias.

mands to surrender) and their (contingent) perlocutionary effects (e.g., persuasion to lay down arms). Another is the related dynamic between conventions and the unconventional. Performatives may be viewed in this light, as conventions activated and deployed in the service of the unconventional. The event itself may be viewed as a rupture built from a complex mix of convention and un-convention, with public comprehension often lagging behind.<sup>22</sup>

This project of making violent ruptures comprehensible, the project of making them “events,” can only occur, then, through the aegis of meaningful acts of signification. And here is one paradox of such informing. Cultural objects cannot really “contain” trauma and violence, as violence, in its shocking physicality, is paradoxically a disembodying experience. Sociologist Harvie Ferguson presses on this point when he writes, “Warfare is a real presence, not a system of signs. It is not something to be understood, but imposing itself as an absolutely objective reality, constitutes an inescapable event. . . . The incommensurability of combat with ‘normal’ experiences renders the whole process of collective memorializing an invention; it is war re-invented, not remembered” (2004, pp. 14, 21). Warfare and other struggles over power and resources that involve violence and force actually highlight the fundamental and essential work of political semiosis. The move from the shock of violence to its cultural and social inscriptions requires adoptions of and adaptations to available, comprehensible cultural genres and media. While force may be a pre-condition of the ability to direct the traffic of demonstratives, performatives, and representations, even actors and institutions that claim monopolies over violence must *claim* monopolies over violence.<sup>23</sup> And they inevitably do so in the context of available media and forms of claims making, of competing claims, and of resistance.

#### GENERIC BUILDING BLOCKS OF POLITICAL SEMIOSIS

In spite of the proliferation of and contestation among the forms carrying events forward, historical subjects manage to track events, even as they

<sup>22</sup> Writing again of September 11, Derrida states, “The event is first of all *that which* I do not first of all comprehend . . . the fact that I do not comprehend: my incomprehension” (quoted in Borradori 2003, p. 90).

<sup>23</sup> Weber’s famous sociological definition of the state renders this difficult and essential dynamic as that between force and legitimation. He writes that the state is “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (1958, p. 78).

are themselves constituted and reconfigured by them.<sup>24</sup> Historical subjects are directed toward spaces and times of transaction and transformation and are encouraged and/or forced to reflect on them as they appear in their variety of forms. Sociologists perform a different sort of tracking, one that accounts for the specific meanings that inhere in the very forms events take. The tripartite process of political semiosis can itself be activated only through the aegis of the specific generic forms in which performatives, demonstratives, and representations are enacted. Key here is the insight that performatives, demonstratives, and representations are built out of generic forms. These generic forms, in turn, are variably capable of conjuring (or performing) the historical world. And assessing these capabilities is a crucial step toward addressing what Sewell terms “the problem of articulations between diverse semiotic modalities” (2005, p. 340).<sup>25</sup>

For all of the centrality of the concept of genre in both the humanities and the humanistically inflected social sciences, it is difficult to pin down the meaning of the term itself. There are, of course, genres of art (e.g., painting, sculpture, photography), of literature (e.g., novel, poem, epic), of modes of communication (e.g., conversation, lecture, debate), and of human transaction (e.g., gift, contract, sacrifice), and there are subgenres within each of these. Genre has proven to be a useful but admittedly labile term, expanding and contracting as befits the contexts of its invocation. Literary theorist Franco Moretti understands literary genre as intersections of structure and flow, history, and form: “Janus-like creatures, with one face turned to history and the other to form, genres are . . . where flow and form meet” (2003, p. 76). Here, the term will signify shared, recognizable form (in much the same manner that Griswold [1987] understands cultural objects generally), unless it is otherwise specified.

A first step, then, is to identify these different genres and analyze their capabilities—in other words, analyze how they differentially operate as vehicles for the demonstratives, performatives, and representations. These capabilities generally concern the ways these genres intervene in and

<sup>24</sup> This particular duality of actor participation in events is precisely captured in the following statement from Armstrong and Cragge’s study of the making of the myth of the Stonewall riots: “Our research also illustrates that meaning-making is constitutive of events—people simultaneously participate in and interpret events” (2006, p. 745).

<sup>25</sup> Sewell provides an interesting example from his own work on the French Revolution, which involves the very concept of revolution: “The articulation between the semiotics of urban crowd behavior and the semiotics of the theory of popular sovereignty changed the meanings and potentialities of both, reinforcing at once the power of the crowd and the ideology of popular sovereignty. This articulation, which created the new political category ‘revolution,’ turned out to be irreversible” (2005, p. 342).

construe temporalities, spatialities, and relations, among other existential conditions.

Narratives, pictures, and maps, for example, are three prevalent genres in event formation. Discursive narratives are built on and sustain diachrony. They recount stories of individual or collective transformation that navigate a diachronic path between certainty and uncertainty, conflict and resolution. Within the narrative genre, there are many variations on this theme of transformation over time. For example, Zerubavel identifies archetypal historical narratives that variably frame the course and meaning of these transformations: “Both rise-and-fall and fall-and-rise narratives . . . always involve some dramatic *change of course*. . . . It essentially entails a major redirection of a historical trajectory, sometimes even a complete reversal. *Turning points* are the mental road signs marking such perceived transitions” (2003, p. 19). Event narratives manage these variations as they emerge and are either taken up, retooled, or rejected by their recipients.

Alternatively, paintings deriving from a Renaissance tradition of figurative perspectivalism are based on synchronic vision, as parts and whole relate in a single presented moment. One traditional informing of historical events is the history painting, an example of which is the famous *Surrender of Breda*, painted in 1635 by Diego Velazquez (Wagner-Pacifici 2005; fig. 1). History paintings like this one are representational “portraits” of an event, usually commissioned a few years after the fact. And the “facts” of the event are, literally, on view. The victor and the vanquished are identifiable. If the theme is military, and it often is, someone is positioned higher; someone lower. Victors are triumphant, and the vanquished are despondent and disoriented. Someone offers a sword or a key; someone receives it. Nevertheless, variation is the norm here as well—in *The Surrender of Breda*, the differences and distances between victor and vanquished are muted, the key remains suspended in midair, and the distracted soldiers’ indexical focus is confounded in spite of the centrality of the key exchange.

Maps are particularly complex genres. They highlight the copresence of representational, demonstrative, and performative features. Maps claim to mimetically copy the world “out there,” reproducing it in cartographic form; they direct the attention of the viewer to prominent and shifting dimensions of up and down, here and there, close and far away, center and periphery (orienting viewing subjects in terms of political centers, routes of exchange and military maneuvers, and boundaries); and they alter the world by (re)naming the cities, rivers, and territories of that world and inscribing their political boundaries.

The crystallized “facts” offered up by narratives, paintings, and maps (among other genres), these formal points of rest for the restlessly evolving



FIG. 1.—*The Surrender of Breda* by Diego Velazquez

event, are unsettled by their own internal complexities and by the inevitable handings-off from one informing to another. Narratives of rise and fall, history paintings of surrenders, and maps with royal seals or governmental imprimaturs alike harbor their own ambiguities and participate in complex networks of promises, oaths, agreements, signatures, treaties, prayers, and diaries. Even as these genres provide the material for the representations, demonstratives, and performatives that direct the traffic of events, their shape takings should not be reified. A general theory of the restlessness of events must account for the continuous transformations of events, as actions and interpretations unfold across time, space, diverse media, and variably receptive publics. It must, as well, be able to account for the discontinuous stopping points as events take recognizable shape as “entities.”

It is useful to compare the approach being developed here to other recent work tracing the boundaries of events. Such comparisons can highlight the distinctly different ways of assessing the specific forms events take. Sociological work in network analysis, for example, has very occasionally been concerned with events. A study by Bearman, Faris, and

Moody (1999) of what is termed “casing” reveals a similar preoccupation with the meaning of events in the making. The authors write, “The meaning of an event is conditional on its position in a sequence of interrelated events, which we conventionally call a case” (p. 502). Further, in order to identify the implications of redundancy in what they term “event structures,” they locate a ready-made data set of life stories of Chinese villagers that originally appeared in a 1965 book by Jan Myrdal and set about to locate redundancies in the narratives. The methodological claim is to thus be able to discern a “case” out of a set of redundancies in the narratives, overlaps sufficient to limn the boundaries of historical events. This approach is sophisticated and provocative in its pursuit of a probabilistic method for predicting (“casing”) the past. But several critical things are elided in the naive approach to narratives in the article. The assumption of the article is that sociologists know what we mean when we deploy the term “narrative” and when we assess found narratives. It also assumes that we understand the generic capabilities of narratives to configure historical events. Beyond noting that life stories have “weak theoretical structures” as opposed to formal histories, the authors do not give attention to genre conventions of storytelling or chronicling generally or to local conditions of the narrative formation and solicitation.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, in his discussion and deployment of the analytical technique event-structure analysis, Griffin usefully highlights and works with the epistemologies of historical narratives. He writes that narratives “are analytical constructs (or ‘colligations’) that unify a number of past or contemporaneous actions and happenings . . . into a coherent relational whole” and “are made up of the raw materials of sequences of social action . . . in a particular temporal order for a particular purpose” (1993, p. 1097). Nevertheless, Griffin’s preoccupation with causality leads him to focus on the issue of the accuracy of specific historical narratives, as opposed to the issue of the generic opportunities and constraints of narrative (a genre existentially bound to the diachrony of language). A deeper specification of the particular capabilities of genres such as narratives, specifications developed by scholars in the humanities, is necessary to track event mobility, mobilization, and colligation.

On this point, disciplinary boundaries have prevented social scientists

<sup>26</sup> For recent sociological work on the role of narrative in the fields of social movements and law and society that does take the generic conditions of narrative seriously, see Ewick and Silbey (1998) and Polletta (2006).

and humanists from benefiting from each other's studies.<sup>27</sup> Sensitivity to generic capabilities in sociology has been most keen in studies of collective memory and commemoration, in which the variable and consequential commemorations of events are the primary objects of analysis (Olick 1999; Polletta 2003).<sup>28</sup> But even memory studies, with their sensitivities to the power of interpretation and the interplays of past and present concerns and blind spots, cast events as essentially finished.

Finally, part of the problem of the underspecification of the cultural genres comprising events can be tied to the preoccupation with causality. The claim here is not that all questions about causality in eventful transformations of social and political processes and institutions are irrelevant; it is rather that they may be premature. In other words, even the most sophisticated comparative historical analyses of the path-dependent processes involved in social and political transformations, even those with a sensitivity to the diverse temporal structures involved in these processes, do not have a sufficient understanding of the ways in which the paths themselves function to constitute these transformations. If the pathways can be understood to consist of performatives, demonstratives, and representations that themselves are constituted of variable genres (speeches, sworn statements, handshakes, legal opinions, paintings, maps, and parades), the meaning-making and world-altering capabilities of these genres of action and the multiple ways they interact must be delineated before their consequential participation in path-dependent sequencing arguments can be assessed.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> A fruitful line of inquiry that addresses this oversight is that of Breiger's analysis of homologous quantitative methodologies used by practice theory. Breiger recognizes the ways that specific quantitative methods have their own capabilities, as well as the ways they involve structures and events. He writes, "When it comes to quantitative methods . . . we often assume . . . that styles of quantification are entirely irrelevant to the theoretical and ideological struggles. . . . [Jonathan] Culler identifies as a major problem for the theory of poetry the relation between the poem as a structure made of words (a text) and the poem as an event (an act of the poet, an experience of the reader, an event in literary history). Likewise, it is important to recognize that quantitative methods consist of a formal structure (a mathematics) and an event (an application to a dataset, a linkage to another mathematical structure, an incorporation within a social or cultural story)" (2000, pp. 109–110).

<sup>28</sup> Olick, in particular, has developed a sophisticated understanding of the contingent work of genre in official commemorative discourse in the Federal Republic of Germany. He extends literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's approach "with its axiomatic emphasis on dialogue and on genre as its central mechanism . . . that simultaneously takes into account its conjunctural (politics of commemoration), developmental (history of commemoration), and dialogic (memory of commemoration) dimensions" (Olick 1999, p. 384).

<sup>29</sup> Pierson has written on the question of divergent temporalities at work in macrosocial processes and has developed a compelling argument about the importance of path dependency in historical and political transformations. In this, he exhibits a sensitivity



Of course, the pathway of an event is never one-dimensional and linear—even as social and political actors consider the respective demonstratives, performatives, and representations, there is also the significant problem of identifying the accumulated effect of multiple modalities at work at the same time. The question of colligation here suggests a need for specification of historical technologies of communication and circulation.<sup>30</sup> Modern mass-mediated communication travels in an instant, makes representations ubiquitous, and inserts the public into private, intimate domains of offices and homes. Organizational forms (bureaucracy, democracy, hierarchy) are also key in these mediation processes. A necessary preliminary step toward analytically grasping such colligation effects is to identify the internal logics, the generic capabilities of the individual media. While recognizing the reality of events moving simultaneously through multiple modalities, the event analyst is nevertheless compelled to break into this dynamic network at a specific point, regardless of its complexity. And perhaps the most productive place in which to enter the system in action is at a very point of a handing-off, a point at which the restlessness of events and the circulations of power and meaning are most visible.

#### SEMIOTIC ARTICULATIONS AND DISARTICULATIONS

Given that different genres enable performatives, demonstratives, and representations differently, they may be more or less effective and more or less coherent at different circulatory event junctures. The restlessness of events is a function of the ongoing interpretive and interactional competitions and contestations among principal actors and witnesses. Such a characterization of events reflects the apprehension that on top of their existential inadequacy in permanently shutting down the motor of the social and cultural production of events, specific emergent significations may not quite work or may work only with particular participants or in particular contexts. Thus we look not only for articulations between diverse semiotic modalities to make sense of the shapes being taken by

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to the importance of extant social capacities for understanding the trajectory of these processes, without, however, fully exploring the distinct ontologies of those capacities. He writes, “The stock of available resources in social life—material, technological, organizational, and ideational—changes dramatically over time” (2000, p. 82). The features of the political semiotic work with these resources to advance historical events.

<sup>30</sup> The work of art theorist Jonathan Crary, specifically his books, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1992) and *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (2001), is valuable here. In these works, he has explored the technologies constituting modern visual culture, with their attendant transformations of perception.

events but also, and especially, for disarticulations to locate event fault lines. In fact, the transformational potential of events is best seen in these disarticulations.<sup>31</sup> Thus, when Latour speaks of “sets of instructions” that move down the line from a table to a figure to a grid to a photograph, and so forth, he grasps but does not highlight the ways that these constant handoffs are managing the unsettled shock wave of an event (in his example, a scientific event).

Sociological tracking of the dislocations and disarticulations of recent transformational events is both easier and harder than tracking those emerging in the distant past. It is easier because of real-time access to multiple modalities of signification. We have the powerful experience as citizens, social actors, and political subjects of living through the event (and of being reconstituted by it). Tracking is harder in that, as sociologists, we are attempting, in medias res, to gauge the likelihood that it will, in fact, turn out to be a transformative historic event as Sewell has defined it.

In this regard, some analysts might say that it is too early to claim that September 11 has changed the course of history by transforming structures. Nevertheless, as this article has begun to reveal, the political semiosis framework provides a mechanism for tracking the flow of this event in the making as performatives (declarations of a war on terror, legislation enhancing surveillance of national and international communication, pronouncements of a new preemptive war policy and a new governmental security agency—i.e., the Department of Homeland Security), demonstratives (identifications of “us” and “them” in the war on terror, the American homeland indexed as coterminous with the planet), and representations (ubiquitous renderings of the World Trade Center towers, narrative accounts of the attacks that place blame on particular parties, circulations of videos and photographs of terrorist hostages and American prisoners) have transformed social and political structures. Close attention to semiotic disarticulations in this process can provide access to the uneven and contingent nature of the structural transformations wrought by September 11. A close reading of the first chapter of *The 9/11 Commission Report* reveals a point of politically consequential semiotic disarticulation.

<sup>31</sup> Such an approach to disarticulations among the specific significations that manage the essential performatives, demonstratives, and representations of events aligns with Sewell’s claim about the consequences of the durative quality of historical events but engages it at the level of semiosis. Sewell writes, “In spite of the punctualist connotations of the term, 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, p. 845; emphasis added).

The 9/11 Commission was administered by an executive director, Philip Zelikow, a lawyer and professor of law and diplomacy at the University of Virginia, who was a former colleague of Condoleezza Rice and had actually served in both Bush (George H. W. and George W.) administrations. Zelikow immediately asked his friend and sometime coauthor, the historian Ernest May, to be the commission staff's senior advisor. May was the Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard and a consultant to the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Council.

Zelikow and May decided, in consultation with the actual commissioners, that their report should be written in the form of a historical narrative. In his memoir of his experience with the commission, May wrote, "Typically, government reports focus on 'findings' and array the evidence accordingly. None, to our knowledge, had ever attempted simply to produce professional-quality narrative history. None, certainly, had been conceived as international history, not just American history. None had aspired to deal not only with the immediate past but also with the long background that would be needed if, as we said to each other, the report was to remain the reference volume on September 11 sitting on the shelves of high school and college teachers a generation hence" (2005, p. 3).

This initial decision about how to construct the report points to a crucial and illuminating semiotic dilemma. That is, there is a semiotic undecidability in the report's implicit statement, "This is history" (similar in nature to the undecidability in the statement "This is war"). How should this statement, one that subtends, motivates, and shapes *The 9/11 Commission Report*, be interpreted? Should it be interpreted as a performative speech act, a demonstrative indexical device, or a representation of an external state of the world? Can this statement be all three at once? Can it oscillate back and forth among them? Answering this question has significant implications for the political consequentiality of such a statement, of the report itself, and for the evolution of September 11 as an event.

To argue that in making the statement "This is history" the report is making a performative speech act means that the statement has the illocutionary intent and perlocutionary effect of declaring the event (in this case, that of September 11) to be history. In other words, if successful as a performative, the event is finished, and September 11 is in the past. Alternatively, the claim that "This is history" is a demonstrative act highlights the report's involvement in efforts of periodization—that was *then*, this is *now*. September 11 belongs to history. And, in a further deictical gesture, the report's future position on a high school teacher's shelf identifies a collectivity's *later*. Finally, the claim that "This is history" is a representational act highlights the way the report is (simply) representing

how the post-9/11 world came to be, charting a chronology via the representational conventions of the discipline of history.

What is the significance of these alternative interpretations and this semiotic undecidability? Part of the significance lies in the relation between these uncertainties and the commission's actual political power. What kinds of power are required to make any or all kinds of political semiotic intervention? Does and can the commission and its report reflect the world, direct the world's attention, and/or change the world? Can "history" be declared, narrated, and located? While the theory of restless events being developed here cannot answer these questions—only the eventual empirical social and political forces mobilizing, directing, and absorbing the events can do so—it can certainly illuminate the stakes in such claims.

*The 9/11 Commission Report* promises to be one place of rest for the event that is (or was, or will be) September 11. But it is typical in being a rather restless place of rest, with all of its representations, demonstratives, and performatives vibrating with uncertainty about how to self-institutionalize. On the one hand, the report seeks to neutralize the event that is proposed as historical. On the other hand, the report seeks to manage and shape the event that is, reluctantly, recognized as ongoing.

#### GENRE DILEMMAS AND SEMIOTIC DISARTICULATIONS

*The 9/11 Commission Report* is composed of narratives, photographs, and diagrams. The photos are of Osama bin Laden; Khalid Sheikh Mohammed; the 9/11 hijackers; the World Trade Center towers, with smoke billowing out after the crashes of the airplanes; the Pentagon after the attack; and the Shanksville, Pennsylvania, field crash site. The diagrams are of the flight paths of the four airplanes, the internal stairwells, the radio repeater network, the external footprint of the World Trade Center towers, and, in the final section of the report that presents recommendations, a proposed organizational chart of a reorganized U.S. intelligence community. The narratives recount the details of the loadings, takeoffs, and hijackings of the four planes, along with life histories of the hijackers and the story of conflicts in the development of U.S. national policy toward terrorism in both the Clinton and the Bush administrations. Of course, in accordance with May and Zelikow's plan, the overarching frame of the report is one of a rather conventional historical narrative, in spite of the copresence of other semiotic forms.

In a multilayered consideration of temporality in social processes, Abbott (2001, p. 227) recalls that for George Herbert Mead, "It is by the happening of events that we know time." The obverse is also true—it is

by the accomplishing of time that we know events. Official reports framed as narrative would appear to be committed to temporal sequentiality through their reliance on language—one event follows another sequentially, if not causally (though we tend to read narrative sequence as causality).<sup>32</sup> But causal reasoning and reckoning are not always desirable. Causality runs counter to alternative mandates (both cognitive and political) to construe other temporalities—for example, that of simultaneity. Given its existential investment in linguistic diachrony, narrative has great difficulties when attempting to represent simultaneity. All discursive organizations of events are implicated in sequentiality; some are more explicit and self-conscious of their own constitutive strategies and limitations. These genre dilemmas have not yet been adequately theorized.<sup>33</sup> Sewell anticipates such a theory in his own appreciative assessment of the work of anthropologist Marshall Sahlins: “Sahlins’s meditation on the coming of Captain Cook to Hawaii shows that to narrate an event meaningfully, the historian not only must recount happenings in time, but must also break from narration—that is, temporarily suspend time in order to analyze, in a synchronic discursive mode, the skein of relationships that define the nature and the potentialities of the objects and persons about which a story may be told” (2005, p. 219). But given that no discourse can fully escape diachrony, what actually happens when the representational, demonstrative, and performative limitations of narration to constitute alternative temporalities and relationships are reached? Such limits, and the experience of them, identify the points of disarticulation in the restless transmission of an event. These are the points where one genre hands off to another, one perhaps better equipped to accomplish alternative logics of time, space, or relationships.

Take, for example, the first, riveting chapter of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, “We Have Some Planes.” This initial chapter struggles to narrate the four nearly simultaneous (occurring between 7:59 a.m. and 8:42 a.m.) aircraft hijackings on the morning of September 11, but it can only do so by way of the critical, if unsatisfying, literary device of “meanwhile.”<sup>34</sup> In seriatim, the chapter painstakingly chronicles each plane’s loading of passengers, loading of baggage, takeoff, cockpit communication, and so forth. The four sequential narratives of the four airplanes force readers to endure the metaphorical use of “meanwhile,” a device that keeps re-

<sup>32</sup> For a definitive philosophical interrogation of the relationship between narrative and temporality, see Ricoeur’s three-volume work, *Time and Narrative* (1984–88).

<sup>33</sup> A recent article by Abbott (2007) begins to examine the details and consequences of specific generic framing structures for the sociological imagination.

<sup>34</sup> For an important historical analysis of the development of the modern concept “meanwhile,” see Anderson (1991).

turning them to (essentially) the beginning of the tale and the beginning of that fateful day and forces them to relive it through the changes of venues described—now Boston, now Washington, D.C., now Newark. In the report's narrative, each flight begins on a clear September morning, and each goes through the process of screening and boarding passengers. Each plane's detailed fate is presented as an integral and separated whole, each equally deserving of its own narrative rendering (as is, the reader may intuit, each respective set of victims). No one sequence of events is privileged over another, as each plane gets its due.<sup>35</sup>

But the effects of these equal and autonomous descriptions are paradoxically troubling for the reader. This is so because, with each description, the resetting of the narrative clock induces a futile and irrational hope that "this time" at "this airport," the terrorists will finally be prevented from boarding. And yet they are not. The separate stories of flight boardings and takeoffs signal multiple missed opportunities for government intervention and preemption (at the moment of check-in, the moment of security control, the moment of boarding, the moment of the invasion of the cockpit). In fact, the serially presented separate narratives give the illusion of the kind of narrative sequence in which early events play an obvious role in those events coming later (here, the possibility of learning from earlier oversights in boarding procedures, for example). Of course, given the compressed time frame, the near simultaneity of these four flights, there was no learning, no possibility of using acquired knowledge. Here is where the copresence in the report of genres operating on the basis of synchrony is important. When the mini-narratives of the first chapter are complete, the text is interrupted by a graph. It is actually a bare-bones series of maps/graphs with flight paths and time lines of the four planes in four contiguous boxes on two contiguous pages (fig. 2). For a reader of the report, there is a strange feeling of relief upon seeing these diagrams, a feeling of a tragic event occurring "all at once" that settles and subdues the question of hope once and for all. The graph operates as an oddly restful moment in the chapter. The multisited event can be absorbed at a glance, as it has now obviously become one consolidated event rather than a congeries of events, each with its own logic and (potentially different) trajectory. The configuration of the (nearly) simultaneous takeoffs is better managed by a synchronic genre of a pictorial graph than by a narrative.

<sup>35</sup> Northwestern University student Juliet Litman (2007) claims that *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, a graphic novel by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, did engage a ranking scheme that put Flight 11 literally above the others in the pictorial space of its pages, largely because it was the first plane to take off and the first to hit the World Trade Center.

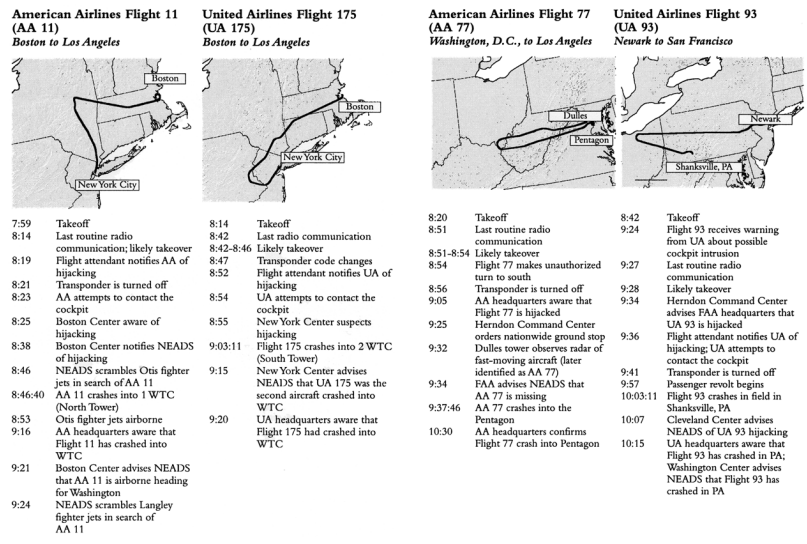


FIG. 2.—Flight-path diagrams and time lines (9/11 Commission 2004, pp. 32–33)

Style is substance here. A key principle of the drafters of the report was to establish balance and blamelessness—neither the Bush nor the Clinton administration was to be identified as more responsible for the security lapses that thwarted any preemption of the attacks. And neither administration (nor, for the most part, any of the major intelligence or relevant federal agencies) was to be singled out for blame.<sup>36</sup> The generic inability of the dramatic and nerve-racking narrative of the first chapter to be convincing in its depiction of the simultaneity of the four attacks might have opened up a space for blame—even if a largely irrational space. The supplement of the graph is much more successful at its representational task because of its generic capabilities and thus is arguably more successful in deterring blame.

EVENT RESTLESSNESS DEFINED

The examples offered in this article begin to illuminate the differential capabilities (and limitations) of different genres by way of which the features of political semiosis mobilize events. The theoretical program here is to map the work of performatives, demonstratives, and represen-

<sup>36</sup> Vaughan writes that “the report gave an even-handed treatment to the lack of pre-9/11 preparedness of relevant agencies. None were prepared, none were blamed. Their goals and resources had gone in other directions” (2006, p. 301).

tations, pursuant to the recognition of both the facticity and the restlessness of the circulations of power and meaning in the performance of history. It seeks to trace the shapes of events as they evolve through these various informings and handings-off, with greater or lesser uptake, greater or lesser resonance, greater or lesser staying power.

Continuity and discontinuity play off each other dynamically, necessarily summoning into action a variety of media and genres. As events migrate and congeal, participants, witnesses, and spectators perceive and participate in the trajectories of power. But, as I have already argued, power's nature is to circulate and to reiterate in the face of inevitable interpretations and challenges by social and political actors. So the forms of power and meaning constituting events are restless in several ways. First, there is the restlessness of movement itself, as the event inhabits many genres in its expansive and multifaceted trajectories. Further, genres are restless because they can get stressed, inappropriately used, or over-used.

Literary critic Susan Stewart (1991) writes about "distressed" literary genres, ones that refract particular surpassed epistemologies of authority and temporality. Among the distressed genres that she examines are the epic, the proverb, the fable, the fairy tale, and the ballad. She writes that they "all mime the oral mode of production and project the authority of the oral world. But these imitations just as surely suffer from an inauthenticity of presentation, a loss ensuing from the very periodization that is the foundation of their aesthetic" (p. 7). Importantly, these distressed genres are deployed in moments that, according to Stewart, are in need of political closure and defined meaning. Of course, they are not always deployed successfully. And, being distressed, their artifice is often self-consciously on display.

Scholars like Taylor (2007) and Scheppele (2005) have, from the diverse disciplines of performance studies and legal studies, made a similar claim about the generic format of the "hypothetical scenario" as it has played out recently in debates over torture (debates that are themselves part of the event flow of September 11). In this case, the artifice on display in the "ticking-bomb scenario," in which torture is justified as a means of preventing disaster, consists in imagining a scene suffused with representational certainty (the captured suspect has complete knowledge; torture successfully elicits truthful information), demonstrative immediacy (the bomb is imminent), and performative legal opinions and commands authorizing torture. Such a decontextualized formula is easily reproduced and is transportable from context to context; in fact, it demands constant reiteration to fuel its imagined preemptive intervention into the persistently dangerous world of the war on terror. But it wears its artifice too obviously, as its immediate referents conjure cinematic action heroes



rather than authorized agents of the state. As well, ironically, the unstable world it conjures up is strangely fixed in its unrelenting alternation between dystopian visions of constant menace and utopian visions of absolute deliverance.

On the other hand, obsolete and transposed forms and genres can sometimes give depth to newer ones. For example, newer genres can productively evoke older ones, thereby creating hybrid or evocatively resonant images or ideas. Belting (2005), in his program for a new iconology, notes that “the framed easel picture, when it came into use, still contained the memory of the icon whose basic shape, a framed and a movable panel, it continued to employ while it changed in meaning and visible structure altogether” (p. 10). Older genres can themselves morph into something new by extending their formal reach. Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (1991) have argued that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial did just that in proposing itself as a war memorial at the same time that it broke with all previous design guidelines for such objects.

So, to briefly reprise: events are restless because the media and genres constituting the essential representations, demonstratives, and performatives inevitably proliferate. Second, they are restless because the recruited forms get misused, stressed, overused, or recycled. Genres are existentially implicated in the circulatory work of displacement (of violence and coercion first and foremost) and announce the unlocalizability of power even as they seek to demonstrate, perform, or represent it. Meanwhile, with all these circulations and handing-offs from documents and treaties to handshakes and paintings, meaning accrues. But the meaning is always provisional, open to reinterpretation as successive and coterminous iterations carry the event differently and as audiences regard, contemplate, and are transformed by their varied manifestations. The same “event” captured in different media, even the same “moment” of the same event captured in different media can suggest diverse meanings and consequences, as already seen in the case of the narrative and graphic moments of *The 9/11 Commission Report*.

#### CONCLUSION

It is the claim of this article that the framework of political semiosis offers an analytical apprehension of precisely such colligations and disarticulations, along with the diverse meanings and trajectories of events in which they play a role. I want to argue further that the performance of historic events relies on this very restlessness of events, is established, routinized by its nomadism. The lives and trajectories of transformational historic events, of politics, war, diplomacy, and statecraft, are captivating

and confusing precisely because they are both in motion and, often appearing unmovable, also at rest. Social and political actors struggle to make sense of the very events that constitute and reconstitute their own and others' social and political identities. They participate in the complex dialectic of rupture and form—heeding, warding off, countering, or absorbing the river of performatives, demonstratives, and representations carrying events forward.

As sociologists, our interest in events regards the ways they resonate socially and politically and the ways they relate to other events and other moments. As such, we must pay attention to their formal habitations, their paths of transmission, and their provisional boundaries. The restless “handoffs” from one genre to another, the constant action of the representations, demonstratives, and performatives do several things: (1) they keep events alive (as opposed to their sinking into incoherence and/or oblivion); (2) they highlight the inability of any one genre to contain or fix events, highlighting the limits of their generic-specific capabilities; (3) they highlight the competitive work of social and political actors deploying diverse political semiotic features; (4) they are a mechanism for the necessary reiterations that allow events to be recognized as entities; (5) they manage a paradox of events—the paradox that it is not the crystallization of forms that accomplishes stability but rather their circulation; and (6) they prevent us from ever permanently getting our bearings in the social and political world, keeping us and that world open to reorientation and reinterpretation.

There are inevitable moments of reckoning for subjects of historic events, moments of realization that the very contours of the social and political world have been transformed. These moments constitute pauses, pauses of greater or lesser duration and greater or lesser consequence. The pauses are stops along the pathways of restless events, the forms that the performative, demonstrative, and representational acts have shaped and enacted. Analyzing historic events requires that we both bore deeply into these forms and that we follow their paths as they reconfigure the world.

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