

POLITICS OF THE EVENT

Time, movement, becoming

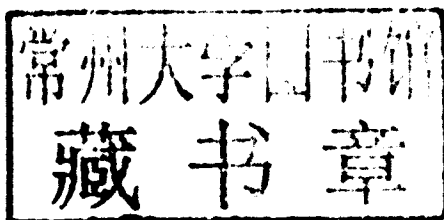
Tom Lundborg

 INTERVENTIONS

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Time, movement, becoming

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Politics of the Event

Despite occupying a central role and frequently being used in the study of international politics, the concept of the “event” remains in many ways unchallenged and unexplored. By combining the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and his concept of the event with the example of 9/11 as an historical event, this book problematizes the role and meaning of “events” in international politics.

Lundborg seeks to demonstrate how the historical event can be analyzed as a practice of inscribing temporal borders and distinctions. Specifically he shows how this practice relies upon an ongoing process of capturing various movements – of thought, sense, experience, and becoming. However, the book also demonstrates how these same movements express a life and reality that elude complete capture, highlighting the potential for alternative encounters with the event, encounters that constantly threaten to undermine the limits and imaginary completeness of the historical event.

This book offers an exciting new way of thinking about the politics of encountering events, arguing that at the heart of such encounters there are always elements of uncertainty and contingency that cannot be fully resolved or fixed. It will be of great interest to students and scholars of international relations, cultural studies, and history.

Tom Lundborg is a research fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Sweden.

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1 Introduction

The historical event and the pure event

This book addresses a simple yet difficult problem: how to think about the relationship between planes crashing into buildings, buildings collapsing, and people falling to the ground on the one hand, and on the other hand 9/11 as a border in time, which has separated before from after, the past from the future, and introduced us to a new beginning. Put differently, the problem that this book seeks to address is how to think about the relationship between two different *concepts of the event*: what philosopher Gilles Deleuze refers to as the *pure event* on the one hand, and on the other hand the *historical event*. Before discussing in more detail what this problem entails and how I intend to address it, it is necessary to say something about each of these two different concepts of the event: the historical event and the pure event.

The borders and limits of the historical event

There are moments that seem more crucial than others – when the event constitutes a border in time, separating a time that was “before” from a time that comes “after,” when the event becomes relevant throughout the social field and even stretches into the realms of foreign affairs and world politics; when the event becomes known as a “historical,” “global,” and “exceptional” event, which penetrates multiple levels of culture, politics, society, and everyday life, having its effects felt almost everywhere.

9/11 can perhaps be seen as an example *par excellence* of this kind of event: a “historical,” “global,” and “exceptional” event that has intervened into and altered the conditions of our social, cultural, and political frameworks. Suddenly, traditional approaches to the order of things do not apply. Different threats are emerging; different fears have to be dealt with; a different kind of war has to be waged; a different form of security must be invented; a different role of the sovereign state is necessary; a different understanding of the “world,” the “west,” and the “United States” has to be thought of. So much has changed and all of it seems to come down to this “event,” the “event” as “9/11,” and “9/11” as a border in time that has separated “before” from “after” and introduced us to a “new beginning.”

At the same time, it is not fully clear exactly what this “event” is supposed to refer to. Is it the idea of having been attacked “at home” that provides the main

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content of this event? Is it an “act of war”? Is it images of people jumping out of the windows of the World Trade Center? Is it the experience of running away from the burning twin towers or the Pentagon building? An endless list of examples could be added to these and the question is how all of them can be translated into one single and coherent “event.”

To speak of events as cutting points or borders in time, which have separated “before” from “after” and produced “new beginnings” and “endings,” seems to rely on the assumption that there are indeed such things as single, coherent, and unitary “events.” It also seems to rely on the assumption that there are such things as “borders in time,” which can cut time into “before” and “after,” and mark the beginning of one era and the ending of another. In this way, the temporal borders of the historical event can also be said to constitute an important ground or foundation for history and historical narrative orders. Without the temporal borders of historical events “history” would not make much sense; “history” would lack its necessary points of reference that make it possible to speak of historical time, historical progress, historical chronology, and so on as natural and indisputable phenomena. History *needs* the historical event in order to make sense. But it also needs someone who can decide what a historical event actually refers to, where its borders are to be located, how these borders can be linked to the borders of other events, and how all of these borders together constitute the basis of a narrative order that can take us from a specific point in the past to the moment that defines our present “being.” Hence, there must also be some kind of *authority* involved in this process – a sovereign voice of historical interpretation that is able to speak the *truth* about history and historical events, connect the dots, and separate the rational and the meaningful from the ambiguous and indeterminate. In this sense, history and historical events can also be linked to a distinctively *modern* political order – an order that is based upon the notion of an indisputable sovereign presence as an originary voice of truth and meaning. Following Richard Ashley,

modern discourses of politics, upon encountering ambiguous and indeterminate circumstances, are disposed to recur to the ideal of a sovereign presence ... They are disposed to invoke one or another sovereign presence as an originary voice, a foundational source of truth and meaning. They are disposed to invoke a sovereign presence as a principle of interpretation that makes it possible to discipline the understanding of ambiguous events and impose a distinction: a distinction between what can be represented as rational and meaningful ... and what must count as external, dangerous, and anarchic ...¹

The “dangerous” might, for example, refer to that which cannot be fully explained; that which does not seem to fit the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the modern subject as a rational “man” – a “man” that is able to connect the dots, tell us how one thing led to another, and inform us about the true origins of our present “being” in the world. In this way, the “dangerous” can also be linked to that which threatens to undermine the notion of a sovereign voice of historical interpretation, challenges the stories of our origins, and introduces us to

something completely different that cannot be subordinated to the narrative orders and linear timelines of history. In the context of this book, the “dangerous” can be linked to what will be referred to as the paradoxes and movements of the pure event.

The paradoxes and movements of the pure event

Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the *pure event* can be read as a problem and a paradox, rather than as an answer or a solution to questions about what has happened in a particular moment in time. Specifically, the pure event can be linked to paradoxes of thought, sense, and experience – as ambiguous events that seem to lack a straightforward connection to a present state of affairs. The pure event highlights something much more paradoxical and indeterminate, eluding the “being” of subjects, objects, and separate moments in time. Rather than a clear and present “being,” the pure event expresses an ambiguous process of *becoming*. It is ambiguous in the sense that it moves in different directions simultaneously, into the past and into the future, displacing and disrupting the full presence of bodies and individual moments in time. As such, the pure event can also be said to elude the systems of representation that order life in accordance with successive moments in time, historical timelines, narrative orders, stable identities, and clear temporal boundaries. In the first paragraph of *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze refers to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* in order to highlight this notion of the pure event:

Alice and *Through the Looking-Glass* involve a category of very special things: events, pure events. When I say “Alice becomes larger,” I mean that she becomes larger than she was. By the same token, however, she becomes smaller than she is now. Certainly, she is not bigger and smaller at the same time. She is larger now, she was smaller before. But it is at the same moment that one becomes larger than one was and smaller than one becomes. This is the simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic is to elude the present. Insofar as it eludes the present, becoming does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to move and to pull in both directions at once: Alice does not grow without shrinking, and vice versa. Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction (*sens*); but paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time.²

In a direct encounter with the pure event there can be no common sense “being” of things, only an ambiguous and paradoxical *becoming*. Thus, instead of emphasizing the full presence of a body, which moves from the past and into the future, the pure event highlights a becoming that advances and retreats – into the past and into the future – *simultaneously*. Bodies keep on moving, but the movements of these bodies cannot be linked to a clear and present “being,” which occupies a well-defined place in a coherent narrative that takes us from the past to

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the present and into the future. The pure event is not a “moment” that belongs to an already established, linear movement. The pure event is *itself* a movement, which pulls the body in different directions at the same time, into the past and into the future, without ever referring to one and the same “thing.” Hence, the pure event does not so much “take place” – in a specific place, in a particular moment in time, or in relation to an already present body. The pure event belongs instead to the paradoxes and movements that surround us in our everyday encounters and everyday experiences, highlighting something ambiguous and indeterminate that cannot be grasped, captured, or represented *as such*.

Examining the production of the historical event

What we have, then, are two different concepts of the event. On the one hand we have the borders and limits of the *historical* event, and on the other hand we have the paradoxes and movements of the *pure* event. In this book I explore the relationship, but also the *lack* of a relationship between these two different concepts of the event. The point of exploring both a relationship and the *lack* of a relationship is to avoid the risk of simply conflating pure events and the historical event. An example of this conflation relates to the popular expression “the events of 9/11.” An undetermined notion of multiple events is linked to a more specific notion of 9/11 as a single, coherent, and unitary whole. We move from the former to the latter, or vice versa, but without being told exactly how they are supposed to relate one to another.

Instead of conflating pure events and the historical event the aim of this book is to explore how they can be analyzed as two separate categories, but also how these two different categories interact with one another and how it is possible to grasp the *political* dimension of their interaction.

The political dimension of the interaction between pure events and the historical event becomes relevant not least when considering how the temporal borders of the latter participate in the construction of historical narratives and linear timelines – narratives and timelines that seek to confirm the present being and continuous becoming of the modern political subject. As noted in Chapter 5, the modern political subject is a subject defined by its aspiration for freedom, liberty, progress, and enlightenment, and whose conditions for realizing those ideals ultimately rely upon the limits of the sovereign territorial *state*, operating in an international *system* of states. The temporal borders of the historical event are crucial in this context because they function as key reference points in *time*, which help to reaffirm the necessity of key reference points in *space*. The temporal borders of the historical event tell us that history is full of important “moments” and that sometimes, when something “big” has happened, it is necessary to go in a different direction than before, take certain measures, and make sure that everything is done in order to guarantee the future existence of the modern political subject and the modern sovereign state. In this way, the temporal borders of the historical event can also be said to provide the necessary backdrop against which the *spatial* borders of states are reinforced and the proper *place* of modern political life is reaffirmed.

It seems that 9/11 can be linked to a specific border in time, which has separated “before” from “after” and introduced us to a “new beginning.” This temporal border confirms that things have indeed changed and that certain measures therefore need to be taken in order to respond to this change – measures that otherwise would probably be considered unacceptable: extreme interrogation techniques and the use of torture, prison flights, warrantless surveillance, and so on. Something has happened that calls for these measures to be taken – something *exceptional* that breaks with the normal order of things and which consequently calls for an *exceptional* response and *exceptional* security measures. In brief, something has happened that calls for the emergence a “new beginning” – the beginning of a new era characterized by a global “war on terror.”

However, rather than starting from the assumption that 9/11 represents an already existing border in time, which has separated “before” from “after” and introduced us to a “new beginning,” this book looks at how 9/11 can be examined as a *political practice*, a practice that seeks to *inscribe* the temporal borders of the historical event and in so doing reproduce the limits of modern political life. Examining 9/11 along these lines implies, then, that even though the exceptional security measures of the “war on terror” can be said to highlight a radical shift and the beginning of something “new,” these measures can also be analyzed as attempts to reaffirm something rather “familiar”: the being and becoming of the modern political subject, defined by its constant desire to keep on moving forward, progress into the future, and become free, equal, and independent – and whose conditions for realizing this desire are based upon the limits of the sovereign territorial state, operating in an international system of states. In this way, the exceptionalism of the “war on terror” can also be seen as intimately linked to ideas about the appropriate limits of modern political life – limits that inform us what kind of change is allowed to take place in the world, what form of life needs to be maintained, and how the future is to be shaped. The temporal borders of the historical event are crucial in this sense because they enable distinctions between “before” and “after,” “beginnings” and “endings” to be made. On the basis of these distinctions it is possible to argue that from “now on,” and from “this particular moment in time” we must act in a certain way in order to guarantee the future existence of the modern political subject and the sovereign territorial state, even if doing so involves making *exceptions* to established rules and norms.

The historical event is, in this sense, *inseparable* from politics. Hence, it also constitutes an interesting object of investigation, which can be used in order to say something important about the reproduction of various limits, not least of time, change, and becoming. For this reason, also, 9/11 can be seen as an interesting object of investigation. If indeed this is the event of all events – the biggest, most spectacular, and perhaps most important in terms of its impact on “history” and the “world” that many of us have experienced in our lifetimes, then the questions of what this “event” actually refers to and how it can be seen as significant in the first place should also be seen as important. And while the potential significance (or indeed insignificance) of 9/11 occupies a central role in discussions about contemporary political practice, questions of what it really means to speak about

9/11 as an event or what constitutes 9/11 as an event tend to be left behind without being critically engaged with.³ In order to engage with such questions this book seeks to problematize the notion of 9/11 by examining the processes that condition its emergence *as* a historical event.

A Deleuzian approach

In order to examine the production of 9/11 this book draws upon Deleuze's philosophy of events. There are two reasons in particular for doing this. The first one has to do with how Deleuze's concept of the *pure event* points to a different conception of life and reality, which does not seem to fit the narrative structures and temporal orders of history. Pure events show that there is another life and another reality outside those structures – a life and reality that cannot be reduced to the presence of subjects, objects, and individual moments in time. Pure events express paradoxical and ambiguous movements of *becoming* that pull the body in different directions, into the past and into the future, without ever referring to one and the same "thing." As such, the pure event can also be seen as an interesting conceptual tool that can be used in order to critically engage with or problematize ideas about individual moments as well as borders in time.

The second reason why Deleuze's philosophy of events is useful for the purposes of this book is that it includes an engagement with various attempts to *capture* the movements of the pure event by *actualizing* and *embodying* the event in different ways. Deleuze refers in this context to a "double structure" of the event:

With every event, there is indeed the present moment of its actualization, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual, or a person, the moment we designate by saying "*here*, the moment has come." The future and the past of the event are evaluated only with respect to this definitive present, and from the point of view of that which embodies it. But on the other hand, there is the future and the past of the event considered in itself, sidestepping each present, being free of the limitations of a state of affairs, impersonal and preindividual, neutral, neither general nor particular. . . .⁴

Thus, Deleuze suggests that the event can be thought of in at least two different ways: first in relation to the *pure event*, and second in relation to the process of *actualization*. In a similar way to this emphasis on two different sides or aspects of the event, many of Deleuze's other favorite concepts are presented as doubles: the virtual and the actual, immanence and transcendence, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, lines of flight and apparatus of capture. This emphasis on doubles highlights the significance of the various tensions that seem to exist between their respective sides. In relation to these tensions, it is not so much the independent existence of the two different sides that is most important. Rather, what is most important is how, despite in some sense being independent of one another, the two sides *interact* with one another. For this reason, it is also important

to explore what happens *between* these sides – *between* the pure event and the process of actualization, and *between* the virtual and the actual, immanence and transcendence, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, lines of flight and apparatus of capture.

In this book, then, I explore how the emphasis on doubles in Deleuze's philosophy can be used to examine the *interaction*, *interplay*, and *tensions* between the pure event and different attempts to actualize the pure event and produce the content and temporal borders of the historical event.⁵ Doing so involves taking into account different attempts to capture and conceal the paradoxes and movements of the pure event, but also how these paradoxes and movements do not fully disappear despite different attempts to capture them. Moreover, it involves taking into account how the paradoxes and movements of the pure event constantly threaten to spring back to life and disrupt what has been actualized or produced. Engaging critically with the historical event along these lines thus implies trying to reveal the inherent *contestability* of the historical event – how the historical event is constantly forced to encounter its own limits and its own incompleteness, never being able to fully capture the paradoxes and movements of the pure event and never being able to draw a clear line that separates “before” from “after” and introduces us to a “new beginning.”

What I refer to as the *politics of the event* relates, in this sense, to the constant interaction and dynamic interplay between the paradoxes and movements of the pure event and the content and temporal borders of the historical event. It relates, moreover, to how the paradoxes and movements, questions and problems of the pure event participate in, yet constantly go missing in the production of the historical event. Finally, it relates to how these *lost* or *missing* events never completely disappear but always remain somewhere in the background, expressing a never-ending potential to spring back to life and disrupt what has been actualized or produced.

Explorative connections

In order to examine the historical event in terms of a production and as a political practice, this book is based on the idea of making a series of explorative connections between on the one hand Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of events and on the other hand the example of 9/11 as a historical event. Thus, it is Deleuze's philosophy of events that provides the main conceptual resource for thinking about the event in this book. The various concepts and ideas that are taken from Deleuze's work will function as conceptual tools for examining the production of the historical event. In this way, I hope to put Deleuze's philosophy to work rather than explaining and analyzing it on its own terms or in relation to other philosophers. There is already a vast literature engaging with Deleuze's philosophy in this latter way, with the purpose of explaining and analyzing various aspects of it.⁶ This literature is very useful for making his work more accessible, and for gaining a deeper understanding of connections to other philosophers. While this book also tries to contribute towards making Deleuze's philosophy more accessible, the way it does so is not

by contextualizing it in relation to other philosophers but rather by showing how some of the concepts that Deleuze develops and works with can be used in order to create a way of thinking about the production of historical events.⁷

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that I am not claiming to speak about the static and independent nature of either Deleuze's philosophy or 9/11. In trying to make explorative connections between the two, the point is precisely to get away from the idea of static reference points and instead adopt the view that everything and anything is the result of making connections, and that these connections themselves emerge from previous connections and not from already existing "things." Therefore, the very purpose of the way I try to engage with both Deleuze's philosophy and 9/11 is to problematize the very notion of reference points and unsettle the static being of things.

Structure of the book

The way this book is structured is based on the idea of moving gradually from the pure event towards the historical event. However, while going "from" the former "towards" the latter, the point is not to examine the production of the historical event as a single-way process. Rather, the point is to examine how this process constantly encounters elements and aspects of the pure event, and how these elements and aspects have the potential to spring back to life and disrupt the limits and imaginary completeness of the historical event. Hence, what we are dealing with is not one, single-way process that goes *from* the pure event *to* the historical event. We are rather dealing with several, co-existing processes that go in different directions at the same time, and which do not add up to one coherent whole.

Chapter 2 explores the movements of the pure event. These movements, it is noted, can be analyzed as both *abstract* and *real*. They are *abstract* in the sense of not being reducible to ontological statements about what *is*, and they are *real* precisely because they have not yet entered the process of being translated into a "state of affairs." Instead of belonging to the latter, the reality of the pure event belongs to movements traveling in different directions simultaneously, into the past and into the future, highlighting an indefinite and ambiguous process of *becoming*. To think of this reality without immediately falling back into the illusions of "being" involves thinking of a body's (human as well as non-human) *relation* to its own becoming – the ways in which the body does not belong to one and the same presence but only ever to the movements that pull the body in different directions, always opening up to something other and different. As Brian Massumi puts it: "This is an abstractness pertaining to the transitional immediacy of a real relation – that of a body to its own *indeterminacy* (its openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now)."⁸ While the abstract refers to the body's relation to its own indeterminacy and its own becoming, this "relation" can also be seen as *real* – it is *real* in the sense that it conditions ongoing processes of becoming without ever bringing these processes to a point of completion. Consequently, the reality of the pure event cannot be grasped or studied by referring to the static being of things. The reality of the pure event can