

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Fruits of the Chase¹

Delving Into Decision Points Inductively

The most important actor during the first years of 9/11's worldwide aftermath was probably President George W. Bush. It was he who announced a few days after the attacks the commencement of a 'war on terror,' and he who gave this statement consequences by introducing the Patriot Act and starting the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. In his memoir – *Decision Points* – Bush pays special attention to his personal experience of the event. He writes:

When I woke up on September 12, America was a different place. Commercial aircraft were grounded. Armed vehicles patrolled the streets of Washington. A wing of the Pentagon had been reduced to rubble. The New York Stock Exchange was closed. New York's Twin Towers were gone. The focus of my presidency, which I had expected to be domestic policy, was now war. The transformation showed how quickly fate can shift, and how sometimes the most demanding tasks a president faces are unexpected (Bush, 2010, p. 139).

This description gives rise to several intriguing event-related questions. How can it be that America had – according to President Bush – turned into a different place over the course of one day? Which processes create the rupture he depicts? And when and why does it end?

In Chapter 2, I outlined two dominant notions sociologists often use as lenses to look at events. The first views them as *self-evident turning points*. This notion assumes that events are watershed moments, which can bring about radical transformations in a very short time period (for instance, over the course of a day). The second is the *corollaries of structures*-notion, which posits that events are actually not that significant to social life, but rather remarkable expressions of

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societal conditions or conduits for long-term developments. My book's starting point was the observation that because sociologists often regard events through those two lenses they frequently remain both theoretically and empirically underexplored. The turning points-notion takes the origins and consequences of events for granted. The corollaries-notion does not seriously engage with the transformative power of ruptures (e.g., the unexpected emergence of demanding tasks, which Bush suddenly had to face).

One of my book's central contributions is introducing a new event research methodology: an *inductive approach for studying events*. This approach is inspired by sociologists who have worked on events (Sewell, 2005; Wagner-Pacifici, 2010, 2017 and also Berezin, 2009; Kingdon, 2011[1984]; Mahoney, 2000; Sahlins, 1985; Swidler, 1986; Zolberg, 1972), and assumes that the meanings and consequences of events are not *a priori* clear. How many consequences an event has, how radical they are, how long an event remains significant, what issues will be attached to it - the approach's central proposition is that it is best to look at all of these questions as openly as possible, because doing so will likely result in surprising research outcomes. This, in turn, provides room for performing 'abductive analyses' (Timmermans and Tavory, 2014), to make sense of these surprising results (Chapters 4-6).

I applied this approach by ways of chasing the direct associations that were made with 9/11 in the American, French, and Dutch public spheres during the first two decades after its occurrence (2001 – 2021). Chasing direct associations is an effective way to analyze the meaning-making processes of an event as openly as possible: the event can be whatever an actor – in the case of this book, participants in a public sphere (politicians, journalists, writers) – makes of or relates to it. To be able to both investigate general framing patterns and guarantee depth of inquiry, I chose to examine associations with 9/11 using a mixed methods combination of quantitative and qualitative forms of text analysis (Bergman, 2010; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004): topic modeling, word counting, largescale handmade coding, and precise interpretation of specific citations. I employed these methods to study a wide variety of data sources: national newspapers, legislative speeches, election manifestos, and policy documents. This has resulted in a range of empirical and theoretical contributions.

Empirical Contributions

My book's most concrete, empirical contributions lie in augmenting the body of research regarding recent political developments in the United States, France, and the Netherlands, with a specific focus on the role that those accord to 9/11. We can discuss these contributions by country.

The United States: A Shocking Safety Event

In the United States, 9/11 is usually considered a shocking experience for American citizens and public actors. Scholars characterize it as a watershed moment: there is an America before, and an America after September 11, 2001. They claim that it has been a pivotal event in launching the war on terror, passing the Patriot Act, initiating the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, and increasing discrimination against Muslims (see Bakalian and Bezorgmehr 2009; Blalock et al., 2007; Entman, 2003; Ewing, 2008; Garg et al., 2018; Gershkoff and Kushner, 2005; Hoffman, 2002; Jackson, 2005; Peek, 2011; Woods and Arthur, 2014).

My findings to a large extent corroborate these claims. In Chapter 3, we saw that, in the first days after 9/11, many public actors expressed the urge that security inside and outside the United States should be increased drastically. In Chapter 4, I delved deeper into this call for action and discovered the occurrence was a shock event regarding American safety perceptions. This shock was so great that comprehensive policy changes such as introducing the Patriot Act appeared sensible responses to many public actors.

We also saw that 9/11 figured prominently in American debates about going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq (Chapter 5). The shock of 9/11's occurrence was a collective focal point in speeches made in Congress regarding whether or not to go to war, in both cases. Nearly all American politicians – regardless of whether they were proponents or opponents of invasion – interpreted it as an astonishing sign that the United States was not as safe as they had thought. The element of shock is of relevance here. For American public actors, 9/11 has become an event in accordance with Sahlins' (1985) and Sewell's (2005) event conceptions: an occurrence that entails a radical revision of existing interpretative structures and policies.

Such a revision I find to a considerably lesser extent, though, when it concerns public attitudes about American Muslims. Yes, they had to face a backlash in their everyday lives during the direct period after 9/11; for instance, their mosques were damaged more frequently than before the event (Bakalian and Bezorgmehr, 2009; Cainkar, 2009; Ewing, 2008; Peek, 2011). However,

such a backlash was hardly explicitly visible in the discourses of American public elites. To the contrary: American politicians, also those belonging to the right, stated that Muslims living in the United States should not be stigmatized for the attacks (Bail, 2014a, p. 135; Ibrahim, 2014, p. 117 – 119; Nacos and Torres-Reyna, 2004).

This does not mean that this group was not publicly stigmatized in implicit ways. Such forms of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) may remain unnoticed when using the research methods I have used, which focus on explicit associations between the event and groups/issues. However, the fact that such explicit forms of Muslim stigmatization were nearly absent from the American public sphere directly after 9/11 is interesting in and of itself – and is in sharp contrast with what happened in the Netherlands (see below).

Beyond this, at least until September 2021, explicit stigmatizations of American Muslims have not been a dominant element in the overall framing of the event in the United States, notwithstanding the fact that negative discourses about them have become more mainstream (Bail, 2014a) and the political presence of Donald Trump. When American public actors at the end of the 2010s and early 2020s problematized Muslim citizens, they used more recent acts of Islamic terrorism to do so, thus providing a more topical picture of the problem and avoiding the taboo of using 9/11 for ‘political gains’ (Simko, 2012).

France: A Non-Domestic Event

With regards to 9/11 in France, we encounter a very different pattern. In the literature, it is assumed that the event was rather unimportant in the French public sphere, because the country had experienced many incidents of Muslim terrorism before the year 2001 (Bowen, 2009, pp. 442 – 444) and its public actors had already intensively discussed the role of Islam in French society (De Wenden, 2011, p. 90). My findings partly corroborate these views. They indicate that the level of ‘event domestication’ in France has been low during most years of research (Chapter 3). Consequently, it seems, for instance, implausible that the spectacular 2002 election result of National Front leader Jean Marie Le Pen – he reached the second round in the presidential elections for the first time – was related to the occurrence of 9/11.

However, my results also show that the event has still received a significant amount of French newspaper attention, and not only in articles that solely covered reactions in the United States or other parts of the world. In Chapter 5, we saw that French politicians have been heavily

involved in the international political response to 9/11. They expressed concern over what had happened to their ally and supported it in its plans to invade Afghanistan.

Chapter 6 indicated that this pattern is certainly not unique to the case of 9/11. It seems to be part of a more generally applicable cultural repertoire (Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Thévenot, 2000), which French public actors employ concerning foreign events. The Southeast Asian Tsunami (2004), the Arab Spring (2011), and the first Trump Election (2016) have not only been experienced as distant events, to which France should not relate. French politicians have also expressed a desire to participate internationally as part of their aspiration to perform *French Grandeur* (Gordon, 1993) on the political world stage. For instance, in the first weeks after 9/11, France was actively involved in debates about changes in international terrorism policies. Furthermore, during the Arab Spring President Sarkozy was the main international leader seeking to liberate Libyans from their dictator Gaddafi. French public elites of all political colors actively supported these actions.

The Netherlands: From Focusing to Shocking Islam Event

The Dutch framing of 9/11 has included substantial domestication. Though not as much as in the U.S., over the years the domestication level has been higher than in France. The issue that time and again occurs in these framings of 9/11 as a domestic event is the integration of Dutch Muslims (Chapter 3). Whereas American public actors were careful not to explicitly blame Islamic practices and values for what had happened, Dutch ones on both the left and the right frequently proposed such a frame (Entzinger, 2006; Van der Veer, 2006).

This pattern continued in subsequent years: 9/11 was often mentioned in connection with a series of Islamically inspired terrorist attacks that occurred in Western Europe during this period (e.g., bombings of the Madrid train station, the murder of Dutch moviemaker Theo van Gogh, the Charlie Hebdo attack). For a large number of Dutch public actors, this series indicated that the relationship between Islam and the West/the Netherlands was not very easy, if not to say very problematic.

However, while the American framing of 9/11 as a safety event was the result of an experience of shock, the framing of it as an Islamic problem in the Netherlands was the consequence of a process of confirmation (Chapter 4). Most Dutch public actors saw it as significant proof of the problematization of Muslim immigrants, which they had already developed

during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, my analysis supports work by scholars who claim that in the Netherlands the event has been only one of the various important moments in a gradual discursive development towards an increasingly assimilationist view of immigration, specifically concerning Muslims (van Reekum, 2024; Uitermark, 2012).

Yet, many of the Dutch public actors that initially accepted this picture of 9/11 as a focusing event regarding Muslim integration soon changed their perspectives. A few months after the fact, right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn started to rise in the opinion polls. Many actors considered his electoral success, as well as the death threats against Ayaan Hirsi Ali (fall 2002) and the van Gogh murder (fall 2004), indicative that 9/11 could not have possibly been a focusing event regarding Islam debates. Thus, 9/11 was soon enough framed as a shocking domestic Islam event.

More may be said about the high degree of domestication of 9/11 in the Netherlands. As with the low degree of domestication in France, it seems to be part of a national cultural repertoire that is present in meaning-making processes about a variety of foreign events. Chapter 6 indicates that after the Tsunami, the Arab Spring, and the Trump Election, the degrees of domestication in articles printed in Dutch newspapers were also higher than in French ones. My interpretation of this finding is twofold. On the one hand, the higher Dutch degrees of domestication are the result of public elites holding a modest view of what the country can accomplish in the field of international politics (Hellema, 2009). They already consider it quite something if the Netherlands joins the ‘big boys’ in foreign affairs meetings. On the other hand, there is also a strong tendency in the Netherlands to ‘absorb’ foreign events into the own lifeworld. Chapter 6 shows that every event, wherever in the world it takes place and whatever characteristics it has, for Dutch public actors can become a reason to reflect on the domestic state of affairs.

Some Cross-National Similarities

In addition to this wide range of cross-national differences, I have also found several similarities among the three cases – mainly when it comes to the central international issues associated with 9/11. In all three countries, the event has over the years been used as legitimation to change international terrorism and aircraft policies (Hoffman, 2002; Jackson, 2005). Beyond this, links between the attacks and the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars were made in each country. The implications for warfare present in these discussions, however, differed (Chapter 5). In the period before the War in Afghanistan, the central argument in each of the three national legislative debates

was similar: 9/11 was considered a legitimate reason to invade. Yet, during the months before the Iraq War, only in America was the event still used as justification for war. In French and Dutch debates, it played a background role. Thus, even when the event in all three countries was attached to the same issue, the main arguments to make this link differed significantly.

Another key similarity is that each of my three public spheres of analysis has produced substantial degrees of *national uniformity* in the framing of 9/11. This uniformity manifests itself concerning the *time period* for which actors treated it as an event (longer in the United States than in France and the Netherlands), the *territorial level* at which the main political responses to it occurred (in the United States mainly nationally, in France almost exclusively internationally, the Netherlands both) and the *central domestic issues* to which 9/11 was linked (safety in the United States, Islam in the Netherlands). The important discussions in each country have concerned *what* the transformations around these central (domestic/foreign) issues should be and how *radically* they should be applied. For example, to what extent should privacy be sacrificed in the name of safety (the United States), and to what degree do native Muslims have to justify themselves for the attacks (the Netherlands)?

Even when Dutch public actors did not want to turn 9/11 into a Muslim issue, which might have been the preference of a considerable proportion of those on the left, they had to relate to the dominant framing to participate meaningfully in the larger debate. The excerpt from the Green Party's 2002 election manifesto in Chapter 3 is an illustrative example. Although the manifesto aims to diminish the conflict between immigrants and the native Dutch population by linking 9/11 and this conflict, it nevertheless reinforces the framing of the event as an Islam/immigrant integration issue. We could call this phenomenon the effects of the *discursive pressures* that accompany participation in national public spheres.

Four Event Lessons

From these concrete, empirical insights, we can move up a level of abstraction and review what my book adds to sociological knowledge concerning events. These contributions can be summarized as four central event lessons.

Differing National Contexts, Differing Framings (and Degrees of Domestication)

The first lesson is that *the framing of events can differ substantially among national contexts*. This lesson follows logically from the overall empirical conclusions outlined above. As much as 9/11 was a “historic world event” (Habermas in Borradori, 2003, p. 28), experienced intensely in many countries, it has received considerably varying framings in three countries that politically and culturally resemble each other closely. Earlier research on cross-national event framings indicates similar results (Hoffman and Durlak, 2018; Legewie, 2013; Semetko et al., 2003; Sendriou, 2022; Snow et al., 2007; De Vreese, 2001), although most of these studies deal with occurrences that were probably experienced less as global events than 9/11.

Yet, when it comes to varying domestication patterns, this cross-national distinction is – if this is understood as the degrees to which an event is linked to domestic issues, and not as the same event being ‘colored’ differently in differing national contexts (Alasuutari et al., 2013; Gurrevitch et al., 1991; Joye, 2015; Olausson, 2014) – to the best of my knowledge a new point in event literature. Other analyses show that the extent to which cultural products find their way in different national contexts can vary significantly (Heilbron, 1999; Janssen et al., 2008; Kuipers, 2015; De Swaan, 2001), and this also appears to be true for events. In France and the Netherlands, this difference is not only apparent for 9/11, but also for three other foreign events, which are considerably distinctive in terms of location and type of occurrence (Chapter 6). This indicates that such characteristics have little effect on processes of event domestication, but that mainly national interpretative structures are important. Public actors in differing country contexts live with varying cultural repertoires, which guide them in responding to foreign events in the context of either foreign or of domestic affairs. That, in turn, produces rather consistent national degrees of event domestication.

Long, Structured Lives

The second central event lesson this book offers is that *events can have long, structured lives*. Not only in the first weeks and months following September 11 2001 the Twin Tower attacks were considered an important event. Many years after its occurrence, politicians and writers continued to mention it as a legitimate reason to initiate transformations. This happened most often in the United States. Barack Obama famously referred back to 9/11 in his 2012 campaign slogan, which summarized his most important accomplishment during his first term: “Bin Laden is dead, General Motors is alive”. However, in France and the Netherlands, it also returned from time to time as an important point of reference. The Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), for instance, mentioned it in its 2010 election manifesto to claim that Islam is threatening the Netherlands and/or the West.

My findings add nuance to existing event concepts, such as those that describe them as “breaks with normal life” (Sewell, 2005), “unsettled times” (Swidler, 1986), and “moments of madness” (Zolberg, 1972). These concepts depict events as occurrences that are only considered a cause for transformation for a short period, just after they have taken place. My analysis indicates that even though the biggest ruptures occurred in all three countries during the first month after 9/11, it continued to have salience as an event long afterwards. Thus, these scholars have formulated an idea regarding the working of events which is too static.

Wagner-Pacifici (2010, 2017) has already proposed that events can have long lives. She typifies them as “restless,” and argues that their significance and the issues connected to them can shift over time. My findings, however, indicate that the long-term meaning-making processes related to 9/11 have been rather structured. In the period 2001 – 2021, in each country, a specific set of prominent issues was consistently associated with 9/11. Furthermore, the number of implications that were inferred from the event decreased gradually each year in all three cases. Only after the occurrence of new events to which the Twin Tower attacks could be easily discursively connected (the Islamist Madrid and Charlie Hebdo attacks), did big calls for change recur in each country. The old event, 9/11, and the new event were then jointly used in pleas for transformation. These patterns paint a picture of the evolution of event framing which is less fluid than the term ‘restless’ implies.

Two Paths of Transformation: Shock and Focus

To further explore the relationship between events and interpretative structures, I developed a typology (Chapter 4) that offers my book's third event lesson: *changes in response to events take place either through shock or confirmation*. Theoretical approaches to explaining political and cultural differences and similarities between national contexts – “cultural repertoires” (Lamont, 1992; Lamont et al., 2016), “cleavage structures” (Kriesi et al., 1995; Kriesi et al., 2008) and “discursive opportunities” (Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Koopmans et al., 2005) – do not offer a satisfactory answer to the question of when happenings are the catalyst for transforming interpretative structures, and thus become events, and when they take on the color of those structures, and remain ‘ordinary happenings.’

On the basis of event literature, I offered an answer to this puzzle. Happenings become ‘shock events’ (Sahlins, 1986; Sewell 2005) if they indicate a radical refutation of dominant interpretative structures. As I described in the last section, this turned out to be the case for the American experience of 9/11 as a safety event: it broke with the existing belief that the country was a secure, military impregnable territory. Happenings turn into ‘focus events’ (Kingdon, 2011 [1984]) if they constitute significant confirmation of existing interpretative structures. As mentioned, 9/11 became such an event in the Netherlands, since many public actors saw it as further proof of their opinions about Islam, opinions they had already been developing for several decades.

With the introduction of this typology, a bridge is also created between the notions that depict events as *self-evident turning points* and *corollaries of structures*. In Chapter 2, I explained that both notions fall short of being sociological theorizations of events in their entirety because they lack important elements regarding their constitution (either their origins and consequences or their surprise effects). The typology combines both elements. It assumes that events do not have an automatic, natural impact, but that this is mediated by the relationship of the event to a specific interpretative structure. Yet, it also indicates the specific conditions under which a change in that structure can occur as the result of an event, namely when it is a significant refutation or confirmation of dominant convictions.

Changes of Meaning: Hard Work, With Early Interventions Paying Off

Chapter 4 brought up another lesson, concerning the development of event meanings over time. As lesson 2 already indicated, I came across many instances of continuity in the framing of 9/11 in each of the three national contexts, even when change might have been expected. Neither the increase in anti-Islamic public discourses in the 2000s and 2010s (Bail, 2014a) nor a disruptive, Islam-critical Trump presidency (Holland and Fermor, 2020; Lamont et al., 2017; Wagner-Pacific and Tavory 2017) was enough to turn the attacks into a domestic Muslim event in the U.S.. The occurrence of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan attacks in Paris similarly could not create a shift in the French long-term trend of non-domesticating 9/11. And the Covid crisis seems, up to the year 2021, to be following the country-specific 9/11-framing patterns of the last two decades (e.g., in terms of domestication), instead of transforming them.

The only case in which I detected a clear change is the Dutch framing of domestic Muslim affairs (Chapter 4), which transformed from a focusing event into a shock event. There seem to be two explanations for how this change happened (and why a similar one did *not* under the first Trump presidency). The first is that Dutch right-wing populists were very eager to transform the event status, which was part of a bigger project: claiming that political elites in the 1980s and 1990s had been ‘looking away’ from integration problems with (Muslim) immigrants (Prins, 2002; van Reekum and Duyvendak, 2012). Secondly, the populists were ‘helped’ by the occurrence of various events shortly after 9/11 that could all be easily connected to this debate (Fortuyn’s electoral rise, death threats of Hirsi Ali, the Van Gogh Murder), which suggested to many public actors – also leftist ones – that they had underestimated both anti-immigration sentiments among the Dutch population and the dangers of radical Islam.

These developments stand in sharp contrast with the reality in the United States during the Trump presidency. For him, Muslims were only one of his many targets to stigmatize (Lamont et al., 2017; Silva, 2019). And in his effort to stigmatize Muslims, it made more sense to cite recent terrorist attacks because they were more topical and less imbued with taboos than 9/11. In other words, it took determined public actors (*Cf.* Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015; Kuipers, 2005), along with a context in which the event meanings had not become so ‘inert’ (Becker, 1995) or ‘locked in’, (Mahoney, 2000) to change the Dutch framing of 9/11. Thus, event lesson four is: *changing an event’s meanings is hard work, with early interventions paying off.*

Sociological Theory and Social Change

We can still go up a level of abstraction by considering how my findings contribute to sociological theory, or more precisely, to theories of social change. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the inductive event research approach that I have employed does not make *a priori* empirical claims about the working of events, but rather leaves their meanings open.

Open Meanings in Theory, Structured Ones in Practice

Indeed, an important contribution of this book is that the meanings of events are open *in theory*, in the sense that they are not naturally associated with certain issues or implications. Actors can always apply a wide range of frames to them. Yet, *in practice* I find – as outlined in the last sections – rather structured meaning-making patterns for the case of 9/11.

Perhaps this is a more common pattern in social life: although in principle nothing is natural for people and they are constantly constructing things socially, these constructions often *appear* to them as self-evident, which in turn results in considerably fixed meaning-making processes. Indeed, Berger and Luckman (1966) concluded in their classic that reality is socially constructed. However, they also added that constructions can become so heavily institutionalized that people consider them normal, logical, and/or objective. Bourdieu developed the concept of “habitus” to explain this phenomenon: “through habitus, we have a world of common sense, a world that seems self-evident” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 19).

The story, though, is somewhat more complicated. For while actors immediately after an event occurs often state that it is natural that it should have a certain impact – see the quote from Bush, who on September 12 already knew he was going to start a war in response (Entman, 2003; Kellner, 2007) – they usually *also* believe that ‘everything’ is possible. That a period of open debate will arise, in which a whole horizon of new options will reveal itself. However, in practice, this horizon might be limited. In my research, most national public actors from day one after 9/11 are very much in agreement about what the event ‘stands for’ in their country context. The respective interpretative structures in each of the three public spheres were already so compelling that if, for instance, in October 2001 some French public actors had aspired to turn 9/11 into a topic of domestic importance, they would have had a hard time accomplishing this. They probably would have marginalized themselves – earlier in this chapter, I already referred to this phenomenon as *discursive pressure*.

Thus, we might conclude that the ideas of “breaks with normal life” (Sewell, 2005) or “moments of madness” (Zolberg, 1972) do not only need nuance because they imply that events can only be considered reasons for transformation during a short period. They also overestimate how open the situation is in that initial post-event period. After 9/11, in each of the three countries, there were only a few discursive paths that could have been taken. There was a rupture, but this was already strongly directed toward a certain path, and it would probably have been very difficult to change it. See again the excerpt from Bush’s memoir: he describes a situation of chaos, in which the event’s core implication was crystal clear (starting a war with terrorists). To relate these findings more concretely to the concept of ‘agency’: I come across very little room for individual actors to influence or maneuver around the discursive paths that were taken in response to 9/11.

My book thus confirms Durkheim’s theory of events as moments of “collective effervescence” (Durkheim, 2001[1912]), during which people merge in ritual, and almost automatically, instructed by dominant national interpretative structures, introduce new political ideas or radicalize their existing ones. This is in contrast with the idea that in reaction to an event people are going to reflect comprehensively on their existing interpretative schemes, which they then, after a few weeks or months, when the “break with normal life” (Sewell, 2005) or the “moments of madness” (Zolberg, 1972) come(s) to an end and all viewpoints have been exchanged, are going to adjust.

Originating from Compelling Structures, Major Consequences as a Result

But if these meaning-making processes have been so strongly structured, why is it then that there was such a great rupture in response to 9/11? Do structured framing processes and controversy not conflict with each other? My conclusion is that happenings become events precisely because they touch strongly upon the most fundamental aspects of existing interpretative structures. In the U.S., 9/11 turned into a safety event since: 1) Americans believed that they were living in a military impenetrable country; 2) they inferred from the event that this idea was not as true as they had believed. The attacks became an Islam event in the Netherlands as a result of the fact that: 1) the Dutch attached great importance to progressive, ‘Western’ values such as individual freedom and tolerance towards a diversity of attitudes and lifestyles; 2) 9/11 confirmed for them the idea that Islam poses a potential threat to these values.

Thus, it is exactly because the interpretative structures are so compelling that happenings can turn into events. Deep societal convictions, or “semiotic codes” (Swidler, 2001), are significantly disproved or confirmed by them. These compelling structures mediate to a large extent the consequences that are going to follow from the event. Because 9/11 invalidated the semiotic code of the United States as a safety utopia, the direct implication was that the American government ought to come up with a powerful solution to this tragic conclusion. This solution had to specifically concern the issue of safety, and not another issue that theoretically could have been linked to the event, such as the (in)compatibility of Islamic and Western values or the dominant position of the United States in world politics. If a happening does not touch upon a semiotic code, a fundamental aspect of existing interpretative structures, it will rarely turn into an event.

Does this mean that this book wipes the image of events as possible reasons for major changes from the map? And is it therefore a confirmation of the structuralist event notion that I outlined in Chapter 2? No is the answer to both these questions. My analyses show that 9/11’s occurrence has been a key element, and perhaps even the decisive one, in starting the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, the introduction of the Patriot Act in the United States, and the reinforcement of anti-Muslim sentiments (and the rise of right-wing populist parties) in the Netherlands. Indeed, another event might have taken place that could have had equally major consequences. Thus, 9/11 was not the *only* possible way through which these transformations could have happened. But there was *an* event needed that touched upon these specific deep societal convictions, to initiate similar rapid changes. If not, then each country’s national interpretative structures would have evolved slowly, and perhaps even in a different direction.

The consequences of an event can therefore be great, while their main discursive directions are more or less fixed from the moment of its occurrence. They provide limited pathways for change. Thus, it is, to a certain extent, possible to predict the changes that will follow from it. This can be done by taking the typology from Chapter 4 in hand: indicate the dominant national interpretative structures around the time of the event’s occurrence – which issues are salient and what self-images or discursive norms are compelling – and observe the extent to which it is a significant refutation or confirmation of them. If it is a refutation, then it may turn into a shock event (Sahlins, 1985; Sewell, 2005), resulting in radical transformations of the existing structures. If the happening is a remarkable confirmation – an occurrence that fits existing expectations, but

is an extreme case of them – it can become a focusing event (Kingdon, 2011 [1984]), with reinforcement of already existing political and cultural trends as an outcome.

The Limits of Looking Through the Lens of 9/11

I propose that events provide limited pathways for change. But what are the limits of using 9/11 as this book's central case study? Case study designs always prompt questions of generalizability. As outlined in Chapter 1, 9/11 might have been the “first world-history event” (Habermas in Borradori (2003, p. 28)). Event lesson 1 therefore appears to be robust (also because of all the supporting evidence that I highlighted above): if even this iconic, very global case has had such varying effects and domestication levels across countries, then this will probably hold for most events.

However, the other three lessons could be met with more skepticism, much of this being related to the fact that 9/11 is such an extreme case. The Twin Tower attacks have had long lives (lesson 2), yet events that are less visually spectacular or happen in more marginal countries than the U.S. might not produce notable effects 10 or 20 years after the fact. Furthermore, many observers perceived 9/11 in highly shocking terms, making it an ideal case of a shock event (lesson 3). Yet, even this case became a focus event in the Dutch public sphere regarding domestic Muslim affairs. This probably means that there are many more cases of focus than of shock events out there. Concerning lesson 4, the question is whether the meanings of smaller event cases are easier to transform. It seems likely that, for major events such as 9/11, the interpretative structures will be most compelling because they come with a fierce mobilization of semiotic codes. If, in response to smaller events, this mobilization is not so intense, then the pathways for change will also be less limited (more open), and actors will have more agency to guide event meanings in more diverse directions.

I consider all these points matter-of-the-degree issues, meaning that the lessons I draw from my 9/11-analyses will apply *to a substantial extent* to many other event cases. Yet, the validity of this claim for now remains an open empirical question that demands further investigation.

Future Event Research

Other Methods, Different Data

Apart from calling for such investigations, this book also paves the way for a range of other types of future event analyses. New research could, first of all, make use of other methods and different data. Doing ethnography is an excellent method for investigating the ruptures that are part of events (see Van Dooremalen, 2017, and Koch, 2023). Being present at their locus can bring the researcher close to the emotions of the moment, which are much harder to grasp by (just) examining public data sources. At the same time, it is difficult to conduct an ethnography of one event at different locations over a long period. For instance, to investigate the effects of 9/11 in three countries over 20 years ethnographically would require a great deal of research time and money.

Another interesting data source for event analyses is the opinions of ordinary citizens. One reason not to use these data for this study was related to reliability problems (see Chapter 1): how do we know that citizens can many years later still give an adequate picture of what they were thinking about 9/11 in 2001 or 2003? In the years following the attacks, however, the attendance of the internet as a dominant form of communication has ensured that people's opinions have become increasingly accessible and can be preserved for long periods. The existence of social media such as Twitter/X and Instagram means that today, not only are the opinions of elites available (in newspapers and legislative debates), but also those of ordinary citizens (Bail, 2014b; Boy and Uitermark, 2023). The inductive event approach that I developed can also be used to chase events within these data sources. What do ordinary citizens, for example, say on social media about the two Trump Elections or the Covid crisis, over several years, in different national contexts?

The Historic and Institutional Construction of Events

It would also be illuminating to do more with the aspect of time. The notion of the event itself could be *historicized*. Events are socially constructed, so this also holds for the societal modes of thinking (the cultural repertoires) about the boundaries of what is an ordinary happening and what is an event. Therefore, depending on dominant societal modes of thinking, the number of events that occur can differ substantially across social contexts and periods (*Cf.* Cabane, 2023; Strolovitch, 2023). If people are socialized with the idea that history can be divided into periods that are ushered in and out by events (the turnings points-notion), this might imply that they

experience more events than when they grow up with a more gradual notion of historical development (the corollaries of structures-notion).

Following such a constructionist reasoning, we can also wonder whether there is an institutional aspect to the origin of events. Most media are nowadays actively involved in the creation of events. Alexander (2009, pp. 83 – 86) calls this the transition from *old to new media reflexivity*: instead of describing political developments as natural processes, media have started to raise awareness about the fact that those include streams of spinning and framing. Consequently, they have adopted a more performative function in the political field. For example, during election time, they search for ‘game changers,’ the electoral equivalent of events, which could suddenly shift popularity from one politician or party to another. The Belgian sociologist Elchardus (2002) coined the term “drama democracy” (*drama democratie*) to point to a similar phenomenon: the contemporary urge of the media to view political affairs from a compelling perspective, full of spectacle.

The consequences of this trend present an interesting topic for event research: does the media’s increased appetite for events actually cause more events, and do social changes therefore occur more often, happen more quickly, and have more radical outcomes?

Future Framings of 9/11

Seen from the perspective of world history, 9/11 has only taken place recently. The famous 1972 statement of the Chinese prime minister Zhou Enlai about the French Revolution – “it is yet too recent to oversee its impact” – is a reminder of modesty concerning the empirical robustness of my conclusions. Perhaps the ‘real’ implications of 9/11 will only become visible many decades from now, when the event has merged into a more general political judgment about the beginning of the 21st century. At the same time, a central point in this book is that the framing of events by definition has an open character, so basically, there is never a right moment to make up the final balance (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010, 2017).

The bandwidth of the possible future framings of 9/11 is therefore broad. What we can say based on this book is that it all depends on how the dominant interpretative structures develop. Their substance is, however, by definition open too. We cannot make any sensible predictions about their evolution that extend beyond one or two decades (s). Therefore, a few hundred years from now, 9/11 might still count as an important event in many locations across the globe, which,

like the French Revolution today, keeps on serving as a source of inspiration for all sorts of political discussions and policy choices. Yet, it is equally plausible that it will be regarded as an occurrence that should be seen in the context of its time: big and significant at the beginning of the 21st century, but in the year 2301 or 2701 not really something to take into account when considering one's worldview.

For a Public Sociology of Events

Most sociologists deem it important to conduct societally relevant research. However, analyzing events usually means lagging behind the societal facts. Even if the researcher starts chasing an event immediately after its occurrence, it usually takes at least a few months before the results are ready and published. At that point, the rest of society is usually already captivated by other events.

While I was working on this book, a wide diversity of occurrences took place, which were very topical for a while, but then more or less disappeared again from the general public's eye. The most prominent example is Covid. For quite some time, it seemed societally relevant to reserve a prominent spot in this book to highlight the connections that have been drawn between that event and 9/11. Yet, as I am writing these concluding words, in August 2025, more than 5 years after Covid became a global event, the societal interest in the topic has died down considerably. Pierre Bourdieu reflected on this dynamic in his book *Homo Academicus* (1988):

The researcher can only arrive after the show, when the lamps are doused and the trestles stacked away, with a performance that has lost all the charms of an improvisation. The scientific report, constructed in counterpoint to the questions arising from the immediacy of the event, which are riddles rather than problems, and call integral and definitive action rather than necessarily partial and arguable analyses, lacks the advantage of the fine clarity of the discourse of good sense, which has no difficulty in being simple, since its premise is to simplify (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 160).

From this quote, one might conclude that sociologists, if they want to do societally relevant research, would do better by focusing on more structural, long-term phenomena such as inequality, identity formation, or globalization. However, these phenomena can also be turned upside down

in response to events. As I argued in Chapter 2 as a critique of sociologists who conceptualize events as corollaries of structures: there is always the possibility that a shock event will occur, which will radically change society, and with it existing sociological theories. While I am writing these words, a constant flux of political events is taking place in the United States, which shakes existing, longstanding understandings of this country (for example, about the stability of its democracy) to its foundations. A tendency of sociologists with a continuous notion of social life may be to ‘explain away’ such events by arguing that they fit quite well into existing theories. Bensa and Fassin (2002) gave a critique of this tendency in an introduction to a special issue on social scientific event approaches:

The more media want to know about events, the more the social sciences tend to ignore them. Our disciplines will most often prefer to show that an event is actually not an event: the novelty is not so new, its emergence is part of a historical perspective, a cultural tradition, a social logic. We will try to reduce the surprise of the event: what happens already happened in the past, in an immediate or distant way – everything had already played out. A posteriori, we could have foreseen the event... (Bensa and Fassin, 2002, p. 5)

A core point of my book is that it is the surprise element of events that makes it important to study them (Chapter 2). The task of sociology should therefore, in my view, be both to analyze long-term trends and to include the possibility of rapid, unexpected change in response to events.

This does not have to imply that sociologists will remain on the sidelines during their aftermath. Another central point of my book is to deduce several generally applicable event lessons from my case studies. These offer concrete predictions of what kind of changes might follow from events (is it a case of focus or shock?), how quickly their meanings are usually locked in, to what extent individual actors can influence their impact, when domestication will (not) occur, and more. This also means that these lessons can be used to make sense of newly occurring cases for non-academic audiences, such as the media or policymakers, without having researched them yet. As such, further pursuing the exploration of events not only serves the discipline of sociology in itself. It can also help sociologists to be better informants of the public at large – “public sociologists” (Burawoy, 2005) – during key historical moments.