WHAT MATTERS?

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ABSTRACT

What matters?

This paper takes as its platform a body of work which often draws upon - or rather, is located at the intersection of - philosophy, feminist theory and science studies and which frequently deploys concepts such as materiality, ontology, process, and performativity in order to offer non-reductionist accounts of the material world. It seeks to shift the focus of attention in this work slightly in order to ask not <u>how</u> something comes to matter, or <u>what</u> it is that materialises, but rather: what matters? It begins by briefly exploring the ways in which three different theoretical interventions, interventions which might loosely be described as 'post-constructivist', seem somehow to lose slight of the very thing that is at the heart of their analyses (the very things that matter to them). These are: events, in Deleuze's account of the difference between a fact and an event in <u>The Fold</u> (2001); values, in Latour's account of a fact and a value in <u>Politics of Nature</u> (2004b); and (political) difference/transformation in Law and Urry's account of the constitutive power of social science research methods in 'Enacting the Social' (2004). The paper goes on to argue that the concept of event holds some potentially useful orientations with regards the question 'what matters?' and also, importantly, that insofar as this concept overlaps with theories of materialisation, it neither compromises nor betrays the valuable contributions of work in this area.

WHAT MATTERS?

> We do not have to invent ourselves as radically different from what we are, for we are already very different from what we believe ourselves to be (Stengers 2000: 164.5).

There have been a lot of things that matter in contemporary theory over the last fifteen years or so. I mean matter here in Judith Butler's two senses: matter in the sense that there has been a lot of work that seeks to address materiality, and also matter in the sense that materiality is seen to be connected, in one way or another, with power and with some kind of politics.

In 2002 I published an article called 'What is the matter of feminist criticism?', which explored how a number of feminist theorists, 'post' critiques of essentialism, understood concepts such as materiality, ontology and substance. Judith Butler's <u>Bodies that Matter</u> (1993a), which focuses the delimiting and schematising role played by processes of materialisation and dematerialisation on bodies and identities, was (and remains) important. The political significance of her argument is expressed in the title, which suggests that some bodies matter, while others do not. I also addressed Karen Barad's work, especially as it builds on Butler's. Acknowledging the 'powerful analysis of the <u>discursive</u> dimensions of the materialization of real flesh and blood bodies' (Barad 1998: 91) that Butler offers, Barad nevertheless proposes, perhaps alternatively, an account of 'how matter comes to matter' (Barad 1998: 108). It would be a challenging task, today, to gather together the diverse work on matter and materiality in feminist theory and 'beyond'. If one had to identify one thing that they have in common though, both then and now, it is perhaps a shared desire to 'rescue', as it were, matter 'from its location as both prior and passive with regard to the notion of production' (Kirby 1997: 104) and to explore the political implications of this move.[1] This often, although not always, involves engaging with the natural sciences.

This of course is familiar terrain in science studies, which also seeks to link issues of materialisation and 'realisation' to politics. Latour's rearticulation of matters of facts in terms of matters of concern has been of particular interest to me recently (Fraser 2006a and 2008). This distinction, as Latour explicitly notes, is designed to circumvent the problem of the (political) use and abuse of some of the main tenets of the claim that all facts are 'socially constructed'. In his words: 'Should I reassure myself by simply saying that the bad guys can use any weapon at hand, naturalized facts when it suits them and social construction when it suits them?' (Latour 2004a: 227). Latour has undoubtedly been influenced by Isabelle Stengers, and particularly by her work on the philosopher and mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead. Drawing on Whitehead, Stengers argues that the endurance is an achievement, 'the achievement of what goes on mattering' (Stengers REF). While this achievement might well be hard won, the sheer existence of a thing cannot, Stengers argues, be provide a basis either for politics or ethics. For example:

> specialists of human sciences who take advantage of the endurance of what they describe in order to claim resemblance with the lawful objects of natural sciences are doing a bad job. Each time they use their knowledge in order to claim that they know what humans and human societies may or may not achieve, they contribute to give to what exists the power over what could be (Stengers 1999: 204).

It is precisely the power of specialists, and their relation to 'reality', that motivates John Law and John Urry's argument in the article 'Enacting the social' (2004). Based, interestingly, both on theories of performativity and science studies, Law and Urry argue that the methods of social science investigation and enquiry are performative, that is, that social science methods 'have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover' (Law and Urry 2004: 393). And because they do this, Law and Urry continue, social researchers are necessarily obliged to ask questions about the realities that they participate in: 'to the extent social science conceals its performativity from itself it is

pretending to an innocence that it cannot have. … If methods are not innocent then they are also political. They help to <u>make</u> realities. But the question is: which realities? Which do we want to help make more real, and which less real?' (Law and Urry 2004: 404).

The (somewhat arbitrary) contributions and interventions that I have introduced briefly here are clearly differently motivated, have different roots and routes, are located in different contexts and speak to different audiences. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that all are engaged with the question of how things comes to matter, and with the question of how that very 'how', shot through as it is with power relations, shapes what it is ('entities') that materialise. In this paper I want to focus less on <u>how</u> things come to matter, or on <u>what</u> it is that materialises, in favour of the question 'what matters?'. For example: Barad argues that her work enables her to address not just how the contours or surfaces of bodies come to matter, but how 'even the very atoms that make up the biological body come to matter' (Barad 1998: 106). But in what way, I want to ask, do atoms matter? In what way are they a matter of concern? Concern to whom? Because while I do certainly appreciate my atoms in an abstract kind of way, in other respects I am actually rather indifferent to them. This calls to mind Denise Riley's (1988) question, a question that she asked nearly twenty years ago: Am I that name? When exactly, she was asking, do I experience myself as a woman? There are of course different moments at which different things matter, as Riley herself points out. Contemporary anti-ageing products have brought the matter of molecules to my attention in a very real way. But the example that I have just given is symptomatic of the potential 'danger' of asking the question what matters?: I have immediately called up a linear model of ageing and identity, and in doing so have betrayed the important lessons, about time and temporality for instance, that at least some of the theorists I have already mentioned teach.

In other words, the question what matters? seems a bit risky insofar as it comes 'perilously' close to a return to a politics understood only and exclusively in terms of human subjects, their identities, their consciousness, and their agency. Indeed 'human' might be said to have acquired something of

the tarnish that 'essential' once had, all those years back, when one could only talk about essentialism <u>strategically</u>. In view of this, I will begin to answer to my own question using the term 'event'. I have chosen this term, evidently, because I think it holds some potentially useful orientations with regards the question what matters? I have also chosen it however, because it overlaps with theories of materialisation and 'realisation' and thus neither compromises or betrays the valuable contributions of recent work in this area.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

As I said, the concept of event is often associated with notions of materialisation and realisation (for want of better descriptions). It serves, in Deleuze and Whitehead's work for example, as an alternative to a positivist conception of facts, things, entities, happenings. Consider, for instance, Whitehead's definition of a molecule: 'a molecule is a historical route of actual occasions; and such a route is an "event"' (Whitehead 1985: 80). In line with a number of contemporary theories, this definition highlights singularity (the specificity of the route in defining the nature of the event) and historicity (the historical route). With regards to historicity, it is worth noting that Whitehead offers a particularly well-developed theory of time (his atomic theory of time). He argues that an event (such as a molecule) does not move <u>through</u> time and space and nor do changes occur <u>in</u> space and time. Instead, motion and change are attributable to the differences between successive events, each with their own durations. 'There is a becoming of continuity,' Whitehead writes, 'but no continuity of becoming' (Whitehead 1978: 35). Whitehead's work is also associated with relationality. Elsewhere for example, he defines the 'actual occasions' that make up an event <u>as</u> relations. For Whitehead, an actual occasion is a coalition into something concrete, a novel concrescence (or becoming), of relatedness or prehensions.[2] A prehension, understood in terms of relationality, is by definition constituted by its prehension of and by other prehensions in a nexus (an event). Thus, Deleuze writes, '[t]he eye is a prehension of light' (Deleuze 2001: 78), and 'seeing' is an achievement conditioned by the event.

Already there are several levels or dimensions at work (or at play, rather) here: there is the molecule, there are the actual occasions, there is the route that these actual occasions take, there is the event which is constituted by the route. There is duration. And then on top of this, or below it, or in it, there are the prehensions or feelings that coalesce into actual occasions. In other words: this is a rather technical, if not a rather exhausting, description (even Latour, who clearly has a lot of stamina, admits that Whitehead 'is not an author known for keeping the reader awake' (Latour 2004a: 245)). It is a description of which one might ask: what does it matter? Certainly, it does not have to matter in any 'objective' sense. As Isabelle Stengers notes, one does not have to 'believe ... that actual occasions do "truly exist", as a matter of fact, just as physicists have successfully claimed that atoms exist' (Stengers 2004: 7). Indeed Stengers believes that it is a <u>mistake</u> to believe in Whitehead's speculative metaphysics, and certainly a mistake to 'apply' it to the world, for in doing so one is likely to be led into an adventure, as Whitehead himself would put it, in misplaced concreteness.

Although I agree that 'application' is usually neither desirable nor successful, I am not especially concerned about the uses and abuses of philosophy by social scientists. The importing of concepts from a wide variety of disciplines - from art and science, as well as from philosophy - has enabled sociologists to think creatively about sociological problems, and sometimes to transform not only the problem but also the concepts deployed to explore them. This does not mean, however, that it is not worth examining some of the quite difficult implications that 'novel' concepts - I'm thinking here of terms like performativity, relationality, process, continuity, materialisation - sometimes raise. In the next section, I want to briefly explore the ways in which three different theoretical interventions, interventions which depend on such terms, make it difficult to discern precisely what it is that <u>does</u> matter. It is striking, and probably no accident, that these contributions seem somehow to explain away the very things that are at the heart of their analyses, the very things, that is, that seem to matter to them. These are: the relationality of facts, of values, and of (political) difference or transformation. They are found, respectively, in Deleuze's account of an event in <u>The Fold</u> (2001); in Latour's

account of subjects and objects in <u>Politics of Nature</u> (2004b); and in Law and Urry's account of the power of social science method in 'Enacting the social' (2004).

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In <u>The Fold</u>, Deleuze draws on Liebniz and Whitehead in order to emphasise the constant enfolding, unfolding, and refolding of matter, time and space. 'The unit of matter,' he writes, 'the smallest element of the labyrinth, is the fold, not the point' (Deleuze 2001: 6). In arguing thus, Deleuze delivers a profound blow to any philosophy that rests on a distinction between the knowing subject and the object for knowledge (for details of why this is so, see Fraser 2006b). In Deleuze's 'objectless knowledge' (Badiou 1994: 67), the object refers not to a spatialised relation of form-matter, but to a temporal modulation, a variation, in a continuum. Correlatively, the subject, which also represents variation, is a 'point of view'. This does not mean that the subject 'has' a point of view (which would imply a pre-given subject), or that the truth varies from subject to subject (which would imply that the truth is relative), but rather that the point of view is 'the condition in which the truth of a variation appears to the subject' (Deleuze 2001: 20). For Deleuze, truth is variation. And, as an immanent inflection of the continuous, the event is the condition of truth, the condition of what is possible to be true in any local situation (thus the opposite of the truth, in Deleuze's account, is not the false but the absurd, or that which is neither true nor false). Which is precisely the problem for Alain Badiou. The event, understood by Deleuze as that which emerges out of an ontological univocity, 'as what singularizes continuity in each of its local folds*'* (Badiou 1994: 56, emphasis omitted), is too much <u>of</u> the world, is so much a part of the world, in fact, that Badiou feels obliged to call its singularity into question: how is it possible to distinguish an event from a fact if 'everything is event'? (Badiou 1994: 56). Deleuze's concept of the fold is so profoundly antiextensional, Badiou argues, so labyrinthine and directly qualitative, that he unable to account for the singularity of an event or rupture at all.

Latour, like Deleuze, owes a debt to Whitehead. While their work is very different and cannot be mapped on to each other, it is notable that a problem very similar to the one I have just outlined in Deleuze - with regards to facts - finds resonance in Latour, with regards to values. Interestingly, Latour does not seek to dislodge the fact/value distinction, or even to conflate it. Instead, he attempts to replace the vocabulary that describes facts and values, and to re-coordinate the axes on which they turn. I will not rehearse the details of Latour's position here, which is comprehensively laid out in his chapter on this subject (2004b, see especially chapter three). Suffice it to note that Latour begins by drawing up a list of requirements that any replacement of the terms facts and values must meet, and reorganizes these requirements under two headings (or houses, as he calls them): the 'power to take in account: how many are we?' (which is the task of the upper house) and the 'power to arrange in rank order: can we live together?' (which is the task of the lower house). The key point about this reorganization of public life is that by laying out the stages by which a candidate for existence becomes natural, Latour seeks to extend 'due process', to extend and enroll in other words, as much of the collective as possible in the fabrication of the common world.

Unlike in the old constitution then, where the definition of nature required that facts be established before values are introduced, we all (and this 'we' includes nonhumans as well as humans) participate in the tasks of the two houses, where some of these tasks refer to questions of fact, and some to questions of value. So far, so unsurprising. If Latour's life work can be characterized as an exploration of the lengthy and complex ways in which facts are made, created, fabricated, and invented, of the ways in which they are <u>not</u> given in the common world, then the idea that ethical questions are to be raised only <u>after</u> the facts have been established is bound to be a matter for critique. For Latour, it cannot be possible to build the best of possible worlds when the question of values (the common good) is separated from the question of facts (the common world). He argues instead that these questions must be conjoined - as the term 'the good common world', which Latour claims is synonymous with Stengers's 'cosmos', indicates (Latour 2004b: 93).

The shift that Latour proposes, from the 'the normative requirement from foundations to the details of the deployment of matters of concern' (Latour 2004b: 118), is arguably not a pushing-aside of ethics but rather an extension of it to all who/that are involved in world-making. In his words: 'All our requirements have the form of an imperative. In other words, they <u>all</u> involve the question of what <u>ought</u> to be done. ... The question of what ought to be, as we can see now, is not a moment in the process; rather, it is coextensive with the entire process (Latour 2004b: 125). Just as Deleuze strikes a blow to any philosophy that rests on the subject/object distinction (and thus has a special relevance to the philosophy of science), Latour strikes a blow to any ethics that rests on the distinction between a subject who is active, moral, and able to conceive of and establish value and an object which is passive, mute and indifferent, and which usually has no call on value at all. The most unquestionably valuable dimension of this thesis for me - the extension of value, indeed of value-making activity, to all entities (human or not) - is also the most problematic: if all praxis, all fabrication, is ethical, then it becomes difficult to understand what it might mean to think and act ethically, as opposed to what it might be to think and act at all. Ethics, in short, can hardly be distinguished from due process.[3]

My final example concerns Law and Urry's claim that social science methods are performative. I will keep my comments brief here, since the point is essentially the same. The general thrust of Law and Urry's argument is towards a more modest sociology, one that takes into account what feminists (for example), as they themselves note, have been saying all along, which is that any knowledge (of the world) is partial and that in knowing or seeking to know one is also 'interfering' (hence their reference to 'ontological politics'). The authors seek to redress, for instance, the idea of social science as 'a source of special power' which holds 'the theoretical or methodological key to the universe' (Law and Urry 2004: 391). This, problematically they argue, not only implies that the social world exists 'out there' and can be properly known and understood with the right, rigorous, methodological tools but also that social researchers are not implicated in (shaping) the world they investigate. Despite this ostensible modesty, there is nevertheless something discomforting, I

think, about the power that Law and Urry attribute to social scientists by way of a response. What should one make, for instance, of a sentence like this?

> The Euclidean compartments and categories of social science, and perhaps especially sociological method, were more or less productive of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century realities (Law and Urry 2004: 399).

Of course some social science has sometimes played an important role in some societies. Law and Urry give several persuasive examples of this, including Durkheim's work on suicide, which made comparative suicide rates a fact in French society at the turn of the twentieth century, and the processes of deviant labelling which became a fact in the 1970s. Whether these specific examples - either then or now - can be turned into a more general account of the power of social science and its method, however, is another matter. But power is, ultimately, what Law and Urry are concerned with. 'This paper', they write, in the first line of their abstract, 'is concerned with the <u>power</u> of social science and its methods. We first argue that social inquiry and its methods are productive: they (help to) make social realities and social worlds' (Law and Urry 2004: 390, my emphasis).[4] Clearly, Law and Urry are urging social researchers to be mindful of what matters. And yet, again, if every research project enacts the social world, how are we to distinguish between a social science research project and a project that uses social science research methods? (And perhaps uses them better, or is better resourced, than the social science that is located in the university?). Or: if everything is political, if everything matters or comes to matter, how are we to identify those projects that make a difference?[5]

The three theoretical contributions that I have been discussing, contributions to which I am especially sympathetic and indebted, invoke notions of continuity and especially relationality, of process and performativity, in order to offer non-reductionist accounts of the material world. In doing so however, the very notions that they seek to redress sometimes come close to slipping out of view. Each of them, in their different ways, beg the question as to how

one might situate, evaluate, perhaps even measure singularity (Deleuze), value (Latour), and political difference (Law and Urry). They make it difficult, in other words, to retain a sense of what matters. I want now to explore Isabelle Stengers' minimal understanding of event - as something that makes a difference between a before and an after - in a little more detail, as a way of holding on to this question.

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The definition of an event, as something that makes a difference, implies that not all things <u>do</u> make a difference. Indeed unlike Latour, who often implies that all scientific experiments are events (Latour 1999: 306), Stengers distinguishes between an experiment which makes a difference, which is an event, and sophisticated observation (personal correspondence). So how would one recognise an event? There are (at least) two ways of answering this. One quite common response is to claim that an event makes a difference to the experiences, identities, relations, that acquire their definition through it and which also constitute it. As Stengers puts it:

> [An event] has neither a privileged representative nor legitimate scope. The scope of the event is part of its effects, of the problem posed in the future it creates. Its measure is the object of multiple interpretations, but it can also be measured by the very multiplicity of these interpretations: all those who, in one way or another, refer to it or invent a way of using it to construct their own position, become part of the event's effects (Stengers 2000: 66-67).

This, then, is a measure; it offers a way of assessing the 'strength', as Law and Urry put it, or the viscerality of a 'reality'.[6] 'What other definition can we give to the reality of America,' Stengers writes, 'than that of having the power to hold together a <u>disparate</u> multiplicity of practices, each and every one of which bears witness, in a different mode, to the existence of what they group together' (Stengers 2000: 97). To whom or to what America makes a difference, and how it makes a difference, is a matter of empirical

investigation in which the methods and theories deployed will themselves play a role, as Law and Urry suggest, in shaping (the reality of) what the social researcher seeks to investigate. America has physical dimensions, but it is also an idea, it is many ideas, and these no less than its physicality constitute the materiality of the reality America. In a similar vein, one might argue that Butler's theory of the performativity of sex and gender contributes to the reality of the sex and gender event (_if_ sex and gender is an event). It does not explain the sex and gender event in its 'entirety' however, because this event is brought into being (or not) in many different ways. Event-thinking, as Adrian Mackenzie notes, foregrounds contingency, 'without basing contingency on some specific ontological foundation (such as language, discourse, the body, or materiality)' (Mackenzie 2005: 9). Thus while language, discourse, the body, materiality _may_ be relevant to sex and gender, they may also not be. No account of sex and gender, in other words, 'can have the status' - and here I am quoting Stengers on event - '_of_ explanation, conferring a logically deducible character to the event, without falling into the classic trap of giving to the reasons that one discovers a posteriori the power of making it occur, when, in other circumstances, they would have had no such power' (Stengers 1997: 216). Just as Butler's theory of performativity is only one account of the way in which sex and gender are brought into being, so the performativity of social science methods is only one way in which these methods make a difference.

The foregrounding of contingency in event-thinking arguably institutes an orientation, perhaps even an obligation, towards modesty in social research. While Butler's analysis of sex and gender _might_ be applied to identities that are not only sexed and gendered - her dazzling analysis of the Rodney King video (1993b) would be an example here - it is not necessarily relevant either to all identities or even to some identities in the same way, as Saba Mahmood's (2005) (limited) critique of Butler in her analysis of Muslim piety illustrates. Insofar as entities, identities, relations, happenings, acquire their definition _through_ the event and as such are impossible to identify, _by_ definition, in advance, event-thinking might be said to be an invitation to suspend knowing, for a while, in favour of the risk of learning. Event-thinking

gives way, in other words, to a moment of hesitation or uncertainty; and this uncertainty is important, for it is in that moment that something newly recognised, or something entirely new, might unexpectedly be brought to the event. So here (almost inadvertently, as is often the case in accounts like these) I have introduced a second familiar dimension of event-thinking: as well as offering a way of understanding a 'reality' (where 'reality' itself is the thing that makes the difference, that matters), the concept event is also often associated with the transformation of a reality, through novelty. In Deleuze's work for example, an event, because it is not bound by a particular space or time, may be actualised in multiple ways and, as such, retains an openness to re-inventions (or re-eventalisations). The concept of the event (informed by the concept of the virtual) not only contributes to an explanation of the relations between things therefore, but also, for Deleuze, accounts for the inexhaustible reserve or excess that produces novelty.[7]

I have a suspicion that the question of what matters often slips through, or falls between, these two dimensions of event-thinking. Thus in a tentative attempt to 'rescue' the question of what matters from the rescue of matter from the insensate place often ascribed to it, I want to pause a while, between these two dimensions, and to emphasise the other side of the term event, the side that speaks not to novelty but to endurance, not to difference but to indifference, not to relevance but to irrelevance, and not to that which connects but to that which is held apart. For while event-thinking is often associated with novelty, it is not always. It is notable for example that it is in the context of the unlikelihood of novelty and transformation that Whitehead talks about power, about the power of what he calls 'inherited ancestry', the heavy weight of inherited patterns to which emerging relations are obliged to conform, and which become more weighty the further a historic route of like occasions is prolonged (Whitehead 1978: 56).[8] This is what, I think, Butler illustrates so forcefully well in her analysis of sex and gender. Of course Butler does not use the term 'historic route' but rather performative or reiterative citation; and, not least on account of the different models of temporality that inform Whitehead's and her work, these terms cannot be collapsed. Nevertheless, they are both addressing the 'cumulative' effects of power over

time (or in duration). As Butler notes, the body 'is not a mere positive datum, but the repository or the site of an incorporated history' (Butler 1997: 152). It is because Butler illustrates this history so effectively that her claim that 'the temporary totalization performed by identity' is a 'necessary error' (Butler 1993a: 230), that identity is never fully achieved (which is the point of entry for her theory of resistance), appears to me to be far less convincing than her account of the oppressive efficacy of the heterosexual matrix. The reworking of the (materiality of the) signifier in novel ways, 'in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes' (Butler 1993a: 228), seems a daunting challenge.

It is on this basis, on the basis of the persuasiveness of Butler's theory of sex and gender, that one might argue that while the theory matters, while it is itself performative (to use Law and Urry's term), while it contributes to the reality of the sex and gender event, it does not make a <u>difference</u>. This is quite an uncomfortable position to adopt, not least because this theory has been so influential, particularly with regards to feminist and other theories of identity. To be more specific, then, I am suggesting that it does not make a difference to the actual everyday <u>experience</u> of sex and gender. Indeed, it is arguable that if it did make such a difference, Butler would consider it to have failed in its purpose. For the purpose of the theory of the performativity of sex and gender is not to enable the subject to experience, for example, the profound temporality of matter. On the contrary, it is an account of why we do <u>not</u> experience sex and gender as constituted in and over time through a series of performative acts. (Because reiteration 'conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition' (Butler 1993a: 12)). It was the (mistaken) view that, in <u>Gender Trouble</u> (1990), Butler was proposing a voluntaristic notion of the performativity of gender - the notion that gender is a potentially conscious performance - that led her to clarify and develop her argument in <u>Bodies that Matter</u> in relation to sex (Sandford 1999: 25). It is not performativity that the individual experiences, but its constitutive effects. Or more accurately, and in an even more attenuated relation to individual experience, it is the material effects of performativity that constitute the subject.

My claim that Butler's theory of gender and sex does not make a difference is rhetorical; it is made in order to illustrate the work that has to be done in order for it to make a difference. That work cannot be underestimated. One can only wonder at the historical route - which must enfold into it language, education, feminist theory, a relation between theory and practice and between theory and embodiment (to name only a few dimensions) - that would have to be taken in order for this theory to make a difference to your or my daily experience of sex and gender. Whitehead takes up this point himself, in relation to the question of relationality. 'All we know of nature', he writes, 'is in the same boat, to sink or swim together' (Whitehead 2006). This speculative metaphysical proposition - that everything is connected - may or may not, Whitehead writes, make a theory of causality possible: 'The waves as they roll on to the Cornish coast tell of a gale in mid-Atlantic; and our dinner witnesses to the ingression of the cook into the dining room' (Whitehead 2006). But even if the privileging of relationality enables causal relations to be established, this is not, for Whitehead, what matters. For him, a relation - a relation, say, of causality - is interesting only insofar as <u>it</u> is interested in experience. (And just to note again here that 'experience', for Whitehead, is understood to be both subjective and objective, human and non-human, resource for novelty and source of endurance). This is, to return to a term that I mentioned briefly earlier, the point about prehension - that there are no things <u>qua</u> things that are grasped in an event, only <u>aspects</u> of things:

> The things which are grasped into a realised unity, here and now, are not the castle, the cloud, and the planet simply in themselves; but they are the castle, the cloud and the planet from the standpoint, in space and time, of the prehensive unification. In other words, it is the perspective of the castle over there from the standpoint of the unification here. It is, therefore, aspects of the castle, the cloud, and the planet which are grasped into a unity here (Whitehead 1985: 87).

It may well be, therefore, that the cook is 'a certain dance of molecules and electrons', but this fact has only a 'general' bearing on the cook that you can

'see … touch … and hear' in the kitchen (Whitehead 2006). 'Situation', for Whitehead, is a relation, and not a position in space. And it is a relation that must be distinguished from the relation that he calls 'influence'. Of the cook and her molecules, Whitehead writes: 'The situations of the perceived manifestations of her bodily presence [visible, tangible, audible] have only a very general relation to the situations of the molecules, to be determined by discussion of the circumstances of perception' (Whitehead 2006). Some events in other words, as Whitehead bluntly puts it, are 'quantitatively irrelevant' (Whitehead 2006).

To recap: the concept of an event contributes both to an understanding of how entities are materially constituted, and to how they might be transformed. In order to privilege the question of 'what matters' though, I think that it is worth holding these two dimensions apart, so that the former (the contribution that event-thinking makes to conceptions of reality) does not absorb, subsume, or render irrelevant the latter (which pertains to transformation). Or to put that differently, it seems worth remembering that not only are experiences constitutive of the event but also that the boundaries of an event are defined by its relevance or irrelevance to experience. 'Only indifference', as Stengers puts it, '"proves" the limits of the scope of the event (Stengers 2000: 66-67).[9] I draw attention to this point in order to soften or qualify it, for while it may be the case that some events, as Whitehead underscores, are irrelevant, they are so only from some perspectives, and their 'irrelevance' is neither inevitable nor permanent. Making things matter to each other is the burden that 'perspectival measure' brings with it. Thus it is not that my molecules are never relevant to my experience of myself, 'only' that they must make themselves relevant, or must be made relevant. Clearly 'making-relevant' can occur in numerous ways. The relevance of the cook to Whitehead's dinner may become perceptible only when she is not in the kitchen (maybe she is on strike, or maybe, like her molecules, she is dancing).

I find it fascinating, in the light of the overwhelmingly esoteric character of his work, that the ultimate test of Whitehead's speculative metaphysics is experience. In fact however, this should come as no surprise since Whitehead

was driven to develop his 'natural philosophy', was motivated to script an entire metaphysics!, precisely because <u>he</u> was discomforted by the discrepancy between a potentially totalising explanation of the world (abstract scientific materialism) and the experiences (or more specifically, the values, and especially the aesthetic values) that this excludes. Unlike modern science, Whitehead argued that natural philosophy 'may not pick up and choose. For us the red glow of the sunset should be as much a part of nature as are the molecules and electric waves by which men of science would explain the phenomenon' (Whitehead cited in Latour 2004a: 244). This does not mean that the purpose of speculative philosophy is to act as a corrective, nor is it to devalue what scientists value (continuity, for instance). When Whitehead asks what it is that Wordsworth finds in nature that 'failed to receive expression in science', he does so, he underscores, 'in the interest of science itself; for one main position in these lectures is a protest against the idea that the abstractions of science are irreformable and unalterable' (Whitehead 1985: 103). It is in this respect that Whitehead's critique is relevant to all (disciplinary) abstractions. It serves as a reminder of what the training of professionals (and the training of experience) excludes, a point that Whitehead often underscored in order to produce both to 'a restraint upon specialists, and also ... an enlargement of their imaginations' (Whitehead 1978: 17).

Science studies shows us how stubbornly enduring the realities of the social world are and how unlikely it is that participation in their constitution will in itself make a difference. In other words, we are more likely to be enrolled into events than we are to create or transform them. Probably we may have very little choice in the matter. And it is <u>because</u> we might have very little choice that the conscious decision to contribute to the constitution of some realities rather than others seems at once both too ambitious and too limiting. It is too limiting because, as Law and Urry note, social science researchers (along with all other participants in a reality), 'enact' any number of events through their participation in them. We contribute to a 'reality', in other words, whether we are conscious of or sensitive to the implications or not. While it is certainly

worth being conscious and sensitive to this - responsible, in other words - enlarging the sociological imagination might be the more ambitious task.

I have argued in this paper that the speedy collapse of 'realisation' with novelty, difference, or transformation mitigates against this task because, to put it crudely, if everything matters, then it is potentially also true that nothing matters, or that there is no basis on which to answer the question 'what matters?'. Making something matter (in this sense) does not necessarily occur, however, by way of a conscious assessment, from the 'outside', of the different realities which are to be strengthened or not, as Law and Urry argue, nor is it about building bridges between two realities (as if they were external to each other). It does not mean bringing a new fact (say), or a new value to the event. It concerns, rather, the work of connecting internal connections, of connecting the relations, realities and problems within an event. This is why I have prefaced this paper with Isabelle Stengers' claim that '[w]e do not have to invent ourselves as radically different from what we are, for we are already very different from what we believe ourselves to be' (Stengers 2000: 164.5). The notion that 'we are already very different from what we believe ourselves to be' orients social research, I think, towards modesty: it suggests that, rather than becoming overly preoccupied with the invention (or not) of new realities, we might instead spend time inventing new practices, and new ways of thinking and feeling about the events we are already unavoidably in. One way of doing this might be to exploit the uncertainty that the role of contingency in event-thinking invites; to understand Whitehead's 'test' (of experience) in such a way that demands more than a confirmation of what is already known and more than an affirmation[10] of existing experiences. 'Test', quite differently, could pertain to relevance: to what is relevant, and how; to what it is possible to make relevant; to what it is impossible to make relevant, and why. And where relevance seems impossible to achieve, where indifference is the only 'response', it could be to ask what is it that holds the connections apart. To make something relevant to an event is to truly transform it. Real transformation, I would guess, is rare, and it may not even be the desired goal of a piece of research.

ENDNOTES

[1] As in Marxism for example, where like nature, Haraway argues, 'sex functioned analytically as a prime matter or raw material for the work of history' (Haraway 1991: 132).

[2] 'There are not "the concrescence" _and_ "the novel thing": when we analyse the novel thing we find nothing but the concrescence. "Actuality" means nothing else than this ultimate entry into the concrete, in abstraction from which there is mere nonentity' (Whitehead 1978: 211).

[3] This is why the ascription of a specific role to moralists is one of the most confusing aspects of Latour's work in this area. Why is this necessary, if _every_ question posed to the world, by whoever or whatever poses it, is always already ethical in character? Latour's answer - that moralists, in contrast to scientists, politicians and economists, do not have an investment in bringing closure to the discussion as to what should be taken into account - is hardly inherent to the profession. Indeed, in view of the many controversies that surround those who work in this field, and the complex networks of power that are invested in the institutionalisation of ethics (and bioethics in particular), one might argue that there are others - artists, for example - who are far better qualified for the role, as its requirements are defined by Latour.

[4] For the sake of brevity, I am not going to engage here with the social, historical and institutional conditions that shape social research both inside and outside of the university. Instead I am going to indulge in a bit of speculation, and ask: Is this emphasis on the 'interfering' character of social science modesty, or is it the response of a discipline that no longer accrues the same kind of social power that it believes it once did in part on account of the authority attributed to its methods to investigate the reality of the social world? Is it not 'timely' that social scientists should draw attention to the power of their research methods at the very same moment that those methods are being replicated and amplified a thousand-fold by marketing companies and commercial industries which have amply demonstrated how good they are not just at collecting data, but at performing and enacting realities?

[5] It is not my intention to suggest that social researchers _do not_ have power. There are certainly power relations at work within any individual research project and, above and beyond the ethical guidelines that are issued by professional bodies (such as the ESRC) to protect both the researcher and the researched, such power relations, rightly, have been and continue to be explored and analysed extensively by social scientists. Whether this means that social researchers have the power to _make_ social realities, however, is another question.

[6] There is considerable overlap here with some science studies' understandings of 'reality'. For Latour, for example, reality is extracted 'not from a one-to-one correspondence between an isolated statement and a

state of affairs, but from the unique signature drawn by associations and substitutions through the conceptual space' (Latour 1999: 161-162). It is for this reason that Latour is 'able to talk calmly about <u>relative existence</u>' (Latour 1999: 156), 'to define existence not as an all-or-nothing concept but as a gradient' (Latour 1999: 310).

[7] For Deleuze, the relation of events to states of affairs is not that of the possible to the real, but of the virtual to the actual. The world is actual-virtual, and as such maintains the power of virtuality, the capacity of a thing to become differently. This point is particularly well expressed by the infinitive verb, which has two dimensions: on the one hand it is virtual and incorporeal, it is a potentiality or becoming, while on the other hand it indicates a substantive relation to a state of affairs which, as noted above, takes place in a physical time characterised by succession. This is why the infinitive is so important to Deleuze's conception of the event.

[8] The ancestry in Law and Urry's piece is interesting. While Butler's approach leads her to privilege a philosophical explanation of sex over and above a scientific explanation, Law and Urry's use of performativity – somewhat unexpectedly, given that sociology has distinguished itself from the natural sciences on the grounds that it is obliged to address multiple variables that cannot be subjected to the controls that scientific experiments promise – enables them to find a model for sociological investigation in scientific theories of complexity (this point is both qualified and developed in Urry 2003). They liken the performativity of social science method to scientific experiment: 'Heisenberg wrote about a version of this problem in physics: "What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning." There is little difference between physics and social science here: theories and methods are protocols for modes of questioning or interacting which also *produce* realities as they interact with other kinds of interactions' (Law and Urry 2004: 395).

[9] I would guess that Stengers uses the term indifference here in order to mark a contrast (rather than an opposition) with the term difference (as that which is constitutive of or constituted by an event). It is quite possible however, that indifference may aso be a way of establishing a relation to an event or of being defined by it. It is partly for this reason that, with regards to the question of the 'edges' of an event, I find the terms relevance and irrelevance to be more robust. It is arguable, for example, that a feeling of indifference follows from perceived irrelevance. However, since my intentions in this article are not to define or proscribe a vocabulary for event-thinking but rather to enter into the spirit of the problem, I will use these terms somewhat interchangeably in this article.

[10] As I noted in the above endnote, indifference may be a way of being constituted by/constituting an event. In a similar vein, it is quite possible for 'affirmation' to take the form, say, of refutation.

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