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ARE YOUR CHILDREN OLD ENOUGH TO LEARN ABOUT MAY '68?

RECALLING THE RADICAL EVENT, REFRACTING UTOPIA, AND COMMONING MEMORY

Max Haiven

To the Almighty Dead, into whose pale approaching faces, I stand and stare. . . . You are not and yet you are: your thoughts, your deeds, above all your dreams still live. So too your deeds and what you forgot—these lived as your bodies died. . . . Let then the Dreams of the dead rebuke the Blind who think that what is will be forever and teach them that what was worth living for must live again and that which merited death must stay dead. Teach us, Forever Dead, there is no Dream but Deed, there is no Deed but Memory.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Autobiography*

Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.

—Walter Benjamin, *“Theses on the Philosophy of History”*

This essay is a meditation of the problems of passing on the memory of radical events to forthcoming generations and the problem of making memory common. As the first generation of the twenty-first century comes of age amid multiple overlapping systemic crises (economic, social, ecological), the struggles of the momentous twentieth century pass into realm of memory and memorialization. But today, politicizing the memory of the past to thicken the radical imagination is more important than ever. Ours is a moment when a combination of material and cultural factors have conspired toward a forgetting or eclipsing of radical memories, where, at the so-called “end of history,” the past is recalled only to affirm the inevitability of the present. This

is no accident. It is an era when memory, imagination, culture, and subjectivity are more profoundly integrated into the occult chemistry of global capital accumulation than ever before, when so-called “immaterial labor” and “biopolitical production” not only discipline and shape time “at work” but increasingly all the times of life. As the global economy drills deep into the fabric of social cooperation, communication, and culture narratives of the past, memories of what was and what might have been take on a profound new politics. Memory today is big business, with nostalgia industries appearing all over the world, especially as the fateful “baby-boomer” generation passes into retirement, its systemic threat appearing today as a geriatric tide eroding the fractured welfare state. In a moment when public space is diminished and the sources of entertainment and information narrow precipitously under consolidated corporate management, history seems to increasingly take the form of regimented documentaries, formulaic “popular” history best sellers and a string of discrete textbook facts whose apprehension is easily measured by standardized tests.

These challenges will be met in the specificity of radical practices and there are many fine examples. In this essay, however, I want to offer a theoretical reflection on the problem of representing the radical events of the past by looking at two books which take up the matter: Luisa Passerini’s memoir of the Italian student strikes of the late-1960s and Kristen Ross’s reflections on the “afterlives” of the (in)famous French student and worker uprisings of May 1968. I am not interested in debating the politics of the events themselves but the conditions and politics of their memorialization as they relate to the question of the radical imagination. I begin by drawing a parallel between John Holloway’s reading of Marxist theories of alienation and Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” to suggest that both are concerned with the solidification and reification of social cooperation into rigidified narratives, categories, hierarchies, and commodities under capitalism. Drawing on Fredric Jameson’s work, I suggest that the “claim” that past social movements have on the present is the *unfulfillable but irrenouncible* demand for a utopia beyond this alienation. Radical events are moved by this utopian yearning and, in their aftermath, demand representation; yet they are impossible to represent because their animating, utopian aspect refuses representation. I argue that the “afterlife” of such a contradiction leaves participants haunted,

called either to recall or renounce the event and its profound impacts on their subjectivity and imagination. I conclude by sketching some aspects of what I call *commoning* memory as key to the radical imagination and an emerging site not only of cultural but also economic struggle.

MEMORY AND CAPITAL

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was.” . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

John Holloway’s reflection on his relationship with the Zapatista uprisings in *Change the World without Taking Power* expands fundamental Marxist insights on alienation into a useful language for talking about social-imaginary processes in the shadow of capitalist reification. In Holloway’s Adornoian reading of Marx’s notion of alienation, “doing” represents the “power-to” inherent to humans working together to change their worlds, the ephemeral but elemental creative power of cooperative activity. “Power-over,” on the other hand, refers to the way “power-to” is harnessed and controlled, the way cooperative creative energies are solidified into that which they have created, “the done,” and how the “done” comes to command future cooperation or “doing.”¹ For Holloway, this process is not limited to the sphere of material production but applies equally to the world of ideas and identities where the fluid negotiation of social reality hardens into tenacious ideologies or forms of status and hierarchy that proclaim themselves timeless and essential facts. Indeed, material systems of power only survive because they are symbiotic with the way the flow of ideas calcifies into orthodoxies and the play of human relationalities resolves into durable and fetishized subjects bound to the service of inequality and hierarchy.

While the struggle between doing and done occupies all human cultures, for Holloway capitalism is the elaboration of a complex system by which the “power-to” of people is transformed into *capital*: a particularly pernicious and powerful alienation of the “social flow of doing” into the particular “done” of the *commodity* (and the “ur-commodity,” money) that achieves a sovereign command over social

cooperation, beholden only to its own rapacious logic of accumulation. Capital names the autonomous power of the accumulated “done,” the dead-labor that represents itself as wealth and value, creating a system that further entrenches the subsumption of power-to under power-over and endlessly and limitlessly produces more of itself, a sort of virus or, in John McMurtry’s formulation, a cancer in the reproduction of the social.

But for Holloway, unlike many Marxist critics, the might of capital is not due merely to the success of the bourgeois class in establishing and maintaining a world system for the extraction of surplus value. It is also due to the way that, within capitalist society, the same processes that take place at the level of the material and at the heart of capitalist value, namely the abstraction of human cooperation (“doing”) into alienated labor-time (“the done”), is symbiotic with the solidification of “doing” at multiple levels of the social body. The system continues to function because the social flow of doing inherent to human subjectivity is frozen into rigidified narratives, patterns, and identities (e.g., jobs, ethnicities, genders) that divide doers from making common cause.² From a slightly different perspective, Silvia Federici (104–5) speaks of this as the “accumulation of competition” and divisions between subjects of capital-dominated societies, the way that, just as capital exists through the aggregate result of intercapitalist competition, so too does it necessitate the proliferation of competition between subjects across its “social body.”

But today’s form of capitalism has new features that force struggles to take new forms. While the underlying fundamentals of the system remain relatively intact, new information and transportation technologies have both fundamentally reshaped the ways most people on the planet cooperate and integrated ever more aspects of life and ever more global spaces into the circuit of capitalist production (see Dyer-Witheford). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri speak of this intertwining of the production of the material and the production of the subject as “biopolitical production,” a relationship always active within capitalism historically but that has become the pivotal battlegrounds and fabric of value in our age of globalization (22–41).

Living memory has borne witness to an unprecedented combustion of social life into the market, an unparalleled expansion of commodification to all corners of our lives. From the privatization and

market rationalization of public services to the swelling “service sector” to the proliferation of consumer products, new technologies, and cultural commodities, social life and relationships are increasingly disciplined by interlocking economic imperatives. As stable careers give way to precarious, episodic (under)employment and the last remnants of the “postwar compromise” and the welfare state crumble under the assault of neoliberal ideology or “economic necessity,” social vision and memory atrophy and an affective economy of individualism, fear, and isolation takes hold (see Giroux).

Critically, for Hardt and Negri the capacity for communicative and cultural (or “affective”) action is at stake in capitalist production as never before as, in a moment dominated by transnational flows of money and power, accumulation relies on human intellects and souls to facilitate its increasingly networked and nonlinear forms of power and production. Here capital, seemingly once satisfied to extract surplus value from the manufacture of physical commodities, seeks increasingly to intervene directly into social *reproduction* and the way we communicate and commune. In other words, today the *labor of representation* is more directly economic than ever before, not merely in the sense of the expansion of the culture industries but in the sense that the circuit of representation, action, and cooperation comes to be the prime target of capitalist intervention (see also Marazzi).

What has not been fully considered is the importance of memory to this situation. Recalling the past today occurs under the threat of the “end of history” where, in the dreams of a neoliberal cultural politics, all past events were merely stages in the development of present-day free-market globalization. At a time when capital’s Empire has no more geographical frontiers (and fewer and fewer cultural ones), Fredric Jameson (2003) notes the “end of temporality” and the collapse of historical narrative (and future potential) into an endless now. Where global capitalism depends on the formulation of subjectivity as never before, where, as Arjun Appadurai points out, the seemingly stable “traditional” moorings of identity, community, and belief are swept into the relentless current of global flows, the struggle over memory—that resource for the negotiating cooperation and formulating the imagination—becomes more important than ever. For example, today’s most successful social movements, neoconservative and reactionary religious or nationalist fundamentalisms, succeed to the

extent they mobilize a politics of memory that misremembers a mythical time when “things were better,” before the social collapse of society into the market, when other, “traditional” values ostensibly reigned. While critical voices have, for good reason, tended to refuse to mobilize nostalgia and base their political narratives in possible futures rather than idyllic pasts, it is critical that radical approaches to memory be formulated today.

COMMON MEMORY, ENCLOSURE, AND REDEMPTION

There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply.

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

The problem of *common memory* is pivotal to the question of how capital will reproduce its order of alienating the doing from the done. In Massimo De Angelis’s capacious formulation the notion of the commons draws on the memory of the shared lands expropriated or “enclosed” at the birth of capitalism or so-called “primitive accumulation” and applies this term to those spheres of everyday cooperation and common wealth that exist within and against global capitalism. Commons are both tangible and intangible spheres of life, from community gardens to families to neighborhood markets to literary circles, where the “social flow of doing” is negotiated on the basis of values beyond capital’s cyclopean logic of accumulation. “Common” is less a noun or adjective than a verb: we “common” all the time, whenever we build the structures of relationality, solidarity, and cooperation that make up our lives, from our most private moments to our most public engagements. For this reason, it is the key target of capital and the system’s vampiric source of nourishment. Capital seeks not only to appropriate that which is common but to influence *how* we common. As a result, almost all aspects of our lives are sites of struggle between the commoning of the “doing” based on (and reproductive of) values that matter to us (solidarity, friendship, love, sustainability) and the enclosure of social life under the “done” of capital’s logic of value, expressed by commodification and money.

In this frame, memory is not merely personal recollection but a commons: a shared landscape and meeting place that is constantly being reproduced by its visitors. And it is under constant threat of enclosure and subordination to capital's paradigms of value and/or the rigidifications, reifications, and abstraction of social narratives that ensure that the fabric of socially reproductive creativity is oriented toward the reproduction of social division, hierarchy, and oppression necessary for accumulation. By the same token, memory becomes a resource for convening and experimenting with the implications of the past in the present and extrapolating new collective futures. In this way, it is an essential component of resistance.

This, I would argue, was also the theme of Benjamin's meditations in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" where, amid the rise of fascism in Germany, the tragic critic reflected on the way struggles of the past lived on in the politics of the present. Benjamin's notion of establishment history, what he calls mainstream "historiography," could be said to echo Holloway's expanded theory of alienation and reification under capitalism because historiography does not read past events within the ongoing social flow of doing, but interprets each as a discrete and frozen moment with mappable causal connections to its past and future.³ It tells us the past is "done," that we can understand it as a series of self-contained events whose meaning, sources, and ramifications are intelligible only to ordained experts. For Benjamin, the vocation of the bourgeois historiographer is to illustrate the inevitability of the present by policing the meaning of the past and regimenting the "doing" of memory into the "done" of a unilateral history.

But for Benjamin, the past is never "done," it continues to "do" in the present. Past events live on and influence us, they guide our actions and supplement the reproduction of subjects and collectivities. Not only is this true in the psychological sense that memory is the fulcrum of the imagination (we imagine by piecing together memories to form future expectation, or presume something beyond our experience),⁴ but also in a materialist sense that human beings are products of the material environments they have created and that, in this way, the labors of the past shape the subjects of the future. In this sense, all economics is a relationship to the past: a relationship to those tools, social forms, communities, and modes of cooperation we inherit, for good

or for ill. Key to the elemental process of capitalist commodification, for Benjamin as for Marx, is precisely the *forgetting* of the origins of our social world (and the things and people that populate it) in shared labor. Instead, we take the reigning material and ideological structures of our day, whether they are the extant division of labor or limited notions of “human nature,” for timeless (and thus unchangeable) truths. Struggle, then, is a process of recalling the very “eventness” of the past: recalling the singularity of the moment-that-was so as to highlight how it was a momentary crystallization of possibility, rather than merely an inevitable link in a chain leading toward the glorified present. To re-recall how the present came to be through struggle, and to watch for how the past lives on in the present, is, for Benjamin, a key element of revolutionary politics.

For Benjamin, the capitalist social order that occupies the reproduction of our world and preoccupies the way we live, think, and act has, encrypted within it (and especially in its material manifestation, the commodity), the compounded yearnings of past generations for an end to the domination of the doing by the done. Our world is the residue of their alienated creative energies. Benjamin insists that the important work of the critical historian is to draw out of history this response-ability of the present to the past. He warns that the struggles, desires, and hopes of the past “have a claim” on the present that is “not settled cheaply” (254).

Benjamin borrowed from radical Jewish theology a notion of the messianic in which scripture and tradition instructs the “chosen people” to await the arrival of the Messiah at all moments, living in a state of spiritual and cultural integrity in preparation for a “judgment day” whose time of arrival would always be both indeterminate and immanent (264). For Benjamin, the messianic represented a means by which hope in revolution could be kept alive amidst the tide of Nazism sweeping across Europe. But the messianic was also a means of rescuing Marxism from an economic orthodoxy who had set themselves up as the police of history and the diviners of revolution. This was a tendency common to revolutionaries and social democrats, both of whom Benjamin admonished for failing to prevent (and in some ways inadvertently abetting) the rise of fascism. For Benjamin, the messianic refers to the coming redemption of past generations’ dreams of liberation and utopia that lie encrypted in the material world and that echo through

its objects and subjects. The Messiah comes to usher in a day when the past is no longer an archipelago of distinct “done” facts leading to an inevitable “done” present, but rather one where the past “become[s] citable in all its moments” and is redeemed as a vital part of the ongoing flow of social doing (254).

Benjamin (an atheist and materialist) refers to this messianic moment as “judgment day” to indicate that it is an impossible but also irrenouncible utopian event after which the past would be unintelligible as a past per se, when all the “doing” of the past would course through the unimpeded social flow of doing of the present, and when the future would open onto an infinite array of possibilities for collective becoming. In this sense, Benjamin is referring to the elemental animating feature of utopian thought: not merely a concrete plan for a better world or the vague dream of a better tomorrow, but the radical refusal of the present. This refusal of the given present opens onto what Cornelius Castoriadis calls the “radical imagination”: the raw and terrifying “magma” of potentiality that is the elemental substance of human cooperation but which must be hardened into durable social institutions for society and subjects to occur. “Judgment day” will never arrive, but it is always with us as a utopian horizon that helps us, in Darko Suvin’s terms, triangulate our historical and political “locus” and coordinate our radial “orientation.”

While we can and must imagine different worlds, large and small, we can’t fully imagine what these worlds would look like: we are creatures of a stolen past, the products of a world of alienation. Yet we can and must draw on what resources we have to imagine beyond the present. To do so, we can draw on the subdued and subterranean hopes and dreams of the past, of past generations and struggles. The dream of the redemption of history is crucial to radical politics, and stoking its spark from the glowing embers of what I am calling “commoning memory” is, for Benjamin, the vocation of the radical historian (255).⁵

Holloway refers to this always already impossible and irrenouncible messianic moment as the utopian objective of the form of struggle inherent to the ontology of doers against the subsumption of their doing under capitalism and other modes of domination. He writes:

The struggle now, as before, is the struggle for an *absolute present*, in which existence does not become separated from constitution [in other

words, where the social flow of doing is unfettered and humans can collectively constitute their world], a time-as-such where every moment is a moment of self-determination, a tabula rasa free from determination by the past—filled no doubt with dreams of the past, with the past not-yet redeemed in the present, but freed of the nightmare of [a scripted, “done”] history. (244, italics mine)

While the “absolute present,” or an absolute presence (the moment of pure, immanent, collective becoming) such as Holloway and arguably Benjamin dream is impossible,⁶ it represents the ultimate flight from capitalist power that everywhere seeks to harness and steer the social flow of doing, to direct the flows of socially reproductive creativity. It is the dream of unalienated labor and pure democracy, of the synchronicity of means and ends. And while it is utopian and its fullest implications are beyond the limits of the political imagination, it is critically important as the shared horizon that unifies past and present radical politics.

Without a healthy approach to this dialectic of impossibility and irrenouncibility—the obstreperous temporality that brings past, present, and future into a new relation—social movements suffer. They suffer either from a weary pragmatism that makes them susceptible to cooperation, exhaustion, or irrelevance, or from a naïve (if energetic) optimism that cannot survive its own failures. Sometimes they succumb to a tragic fetishism of their own ideology that demands a self-destructive fundamentalism.

For Fredric Jameson, developing this healthy relation to the past is at the heart of the politics of utopia, especially now at the “end of history” when merely to posit utopia is heretical to the economic-come-cultural orthodoxy of neoliberalism (2004, 40–41). While this utopia may be “impossible” in its fullest sense, the activity of (re)calling it to the common imagination instigates or invokes the utopian to come to work on the present, to summon the promise of unfettered doing to erode the hubris of the done. In recalling the past’s impossible future of unalienated social cooperation, we, for a moment, open a window in ourselves to that impossible future, if always in a partial, provisional, and tainted way. We channel or act as a medium for something beyond our imagination. Recalling the radical event beats a counter-rhythm to the regimented pulse of “history.”

THE OBSTREPEROUS TEMPORALITY OF THE RADICAL EVENT

As flowers turn towards the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn towards that sun which rises in the sky of history.

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible (“Be realistic, demand the impossible”)

—emblematic and anonymous Paris '68 slogan

Radical events of collective action are animated by and refract a “flash” of a utopia of unalienated labor. The very act of working together for a better world can be an expression of the desire to unfetter the social flow of doing and a living example of a moment when the grip of capitalism (or other systems of power like patriarchy, colonialism, etc.) on socially reproductive creativity or “doing” is less tight. Here collectivities, to the extent they are able to create temporary (ever partial and problematic) conditions of autonomy, create their own form of life and collaborate “biopolitically” on their own accord. These events are, at least in one valence, radical experiments with organizing social cooperation another way. As such, they (often inadvertently) open themselves to the raw “magma” of human cooperation or the “social flow of doing.” It is precisely this openness that marks the event as “radical,” as fundamentally at odds with a form of capitalist biopolitics that tyrannically seeks monopoly over the possibilities of social cooperation.

Of course, this is only one seam within such radical events that are always tainted by power relationships, inequality, oppression, exploitation, naiveté, isolationism, cliquishness, and misdirection. Radical events are always only partial escapes or liberations. But to deny the utopian thread that runs through them is, to my mind, extremely dangerous as it delivers them to what Benjamin called “mainstream historiography” as it should wish to receive them: evacuated of their obstreperous temporality.

Participants feel this utopian element deeply and affectively. Kristen Ross explores the memory of the worker and student uprisings of May 1968 in France, which by some accounts came close to toppling the paternalistic de Gaulle government and saw several months of militant activism. More importantly, the “Paris Spring” saw students and workers occupying universities, neighborhoods, and factories and

experimenting with ways of living and cooperating outside what Guy Debord the preceding year called “the society of the spectacle”: the way late capitalism solidifies into a whole way of life, the routinization of existence and the reduction of social existence to image and artifice to cover over fundamental and deepening disconnectivity and alienation.

Nearly a century earlier, speaking of another flash of the Parisian struggle for autonomy, Marx said that “the great social measure of the [Paris] Commune [of 1871] was its own working existence. Its special measures could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people” (Marx and Lenin, 65) indicating that the vitality of the event was less its durable achievements and more that it opened a space for radical grassroots social and political experimentation at the level of everyday life. This manifestation of a provisional commons punctured (if only briefly and, ultimately, tragically) the reification of history into a narrative of eternal and natural capitalist sovereignty.⁷ In this vein, Ross quotes Martine Sorti, a May '68 participant: “Was I aware of what has been called the ‘festival of May’? Yes, if it’s a festival to demonstrate every day or almost every day, or to believe it at last possible to change the world, to share with others that hope, and from a day to day to live in the kind of lightness of being I described earlier. . . . Everyone was living beyond their intellectual, emotional and sensorial limits: each person existed above and beyond himself” (100). In this memory, we recall something of the dream of unalienated labor, of the unfettered social flow of doing, of the liberated biopolitics when groups work collectively to change their form of life and their world. So radical is this moment that it exceeds “intellectual, emotion and sensorial limits,” indicating a hybrid temporality where the present is haunted by the spirit of a utopian imaging of a world so different from ours it defies representation. Ross reflects:

The “above and beyond” evoked in this description is the formation of a “one” who is not a self but rather the relation of a self to another, a “one” that holds individual and collective identity and alterity together in an unresolved manner. It is the “we” that emerges when one takes seriously Lucien Goldmann’s remark that the personal pronoun “I” does not, in fact have a plural—“we” is not the plural of “I,” but something else altogether. (101)

Ross highlights the utopian element of the event, the way in which the restoration of the “social flow of doing” liberates collectivities and

individuals from the “done” of their identities, allowing for the free play of ideas, performativities, and interpersonal relations. With regard to the inherent pleasure in this process, Ross paraphrases:

Jean-Franklin Narot links [the pleasures of May] directly to the temporal acceleration of those days, to unforeseen spiraling developments that catch up with and ultimately surpass the protagonists. May and June, he insists, had a temporality all their own, made up of sudden acceleration and immediate effects: the sensation of that *mediations and delays had all disappeared*. Not only did time move faster than the frozen time of bureaucracies; it also surpassed the slow, careful temporality that governs strategy or calculation. When the effects of one’s actions infinitely supercede one’s expectations, or when a local initiative is met with impromptu echoes from a hundred different places all at once, space compresses and time goes faster. (102, italics mine)

This passage reminds us of the alternative utopian temporality that is revealed when those institutions and forces that typically harness and impede the “social flow of doing” lo(o)se(n) their grip. The unmappable causality of action, the way the familiar division of the social flow of doing become confused, recalls the “absolute presence” to which Holloway refers: the desire to common (as a verb) and to communicate without the latency or misrecognition inherent to mediation and representation.

Similarly, Luisa Passerini, in her *Autobiography of a Generation*, relates the words of Luigi Bobbio, who speaks of his experience of the occupation of the university in Turin in 1968 and of the general milieu of activism as

[a]n all-encompassing universe, in which the public and the private got all mixed up. . . . Our objective was to put this all back together, and this made the private disappear. But the public was pregnant with the private: “because I put myself out there totally, when I do a public action; that is, the public is the expression of my subjectivity, it is my way of being myself.” In the course of that year it became a life choice that many of us did not question, at least for the next ten years. The personal costs went unnoticed, there wasn’t a sense of sacrifice, there was a sense of having a great time. (89)

Here we once again read of joy at the sense of possibility released in a moment where the systemic “dams” that harness the “social flow of doing” and regiment social cooperation fail to hold back the torrent

of potentiality. Further, as with the other quotations, Bobbio's comments indicate a period when, as Ross succinctly puts it, "the political imaginary becomes the everyday fabric of peoples' lives" (145). Here we have a sense of collectivity that is not satisfied merely with the expansion of a limited notion of the "public sphere," but one that strains toward forging new commons, driven by a utopian exhilaration: a "storm out of paradise" (Benjamin, 257–58) that is in excess of those categories such as public and private through which we and our society co-create each other. The utopia echoed here, the sublime utopian force that animates this affective collectivity, is one where there would be no need of "representation": neither of political representation nor of communicative representation, as these imply a latency or mediation to the social flow of doing which would have necessarily been overcome.

I am not arguing that all collective action brings into being a temporary utopia, nor that during episodes of collective action like these the social flow of doing runs unimpeded, nor still that the utopian horizon to which these movements gesture is in any way "possible" (or even always desirable). Clearly, these events are extremely complex and often hold as many (or more) stories of horror, betrayal, and disillusionment as they do joy, solidarity, and wonder. Further, amid these events the social flow of doing remains impeded by power structures and patterns that continue to operate (and often intensify), notably patriarchy and racism, unproblematized privilege, nauseating vanguardist posturing, and stated and unstated hierarchies.⁸ The social structures and patterns of behavior that structure the social imaginary and the divisions and hierarchies within capitalist society do not simply evaporate in the revolutionary moment. And as more structurally minded revolutionaries never tire of pointing out, the hyperbolic romance of episodic communal liberation all too typically comes at the expense of the discipline, maturity, and organization that would make them sustainable.⁹ Nevertheless, I am arguing that such events are *animated* by the spark of an impossible utopia where the social flow of doing is restored, where mediation and representation evaporate. And every so often, one can glimpse not the "flash" of this utopia in its naked brilliance, but the shadows of potentiality cast by that flash against the looming structures of everyday life. The space

of radical collective action is an alternative environment or a laboratory in which, for a moment, something approximating utopia can flash into existence, imprinting our imaginations and thereafter haunting our vision of the world. It is this haunting “double exposure,” the tenacious dissonance within us between the world-we-experience and the world-we-know-could-be, that is at the heart of the radical event’s irrenouncible but impossible demand for representation.

THE IRRENOUNCIBLE IMPOSSIBILITY OF RE-PRESENTATION

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

Fredric Jameson writes that “utopia would seem to offer the spectacle of one of those rare phenomena whose concept is indistinguishable from its reality, whose ontology coincides with its representation” (2004, 35). The notion of a concept that is at once the creative emanation of collective desire *as well as* the reality of that desire seems to well match my earlier discussion of the (often inadvertent) gesture of radical collective action toward a liberation of the “social flow of doing” both in its ideals and its practices. Indeed, the utopian “judgment day” itself would be one in which concept and reality are simultaneous, where the *latency* between presence (or ontology, as Jameson puts it) and representation collapse, or where, to recall Ross’s phrase “the political imaginary becomes the everyday fabric of peoples’ lives.” In other words, it is a temporality in which the done (ontology, being) and the doing (thought/communication/action) are no longer “deferred” or alienated but immanent within one another and evolving.

This impatience with the latency between presence and representation is evident as Passerini relates the contents of a ‘68 pamphlet from Turin that attempted to capture the spirit of the times with a hypothetical exchange between a paternalistic and dismissive parent and a rebellious daughter or son. She writes that a characteristic of the new language of which this pamphlet was symptomatic was that it “seems to be no longer wanting to separate speech from behavior in the confirmation of its own experience and the coherence of its own ideas” (74). Indeed, in both Passerini’s and Ross’s books, we are constantly

reminded of the flight of groups from any mediation or representation, of the desire to go beyond a world in which politics are a limited “representational” sphere, beyond even a world where the discrete public sphere (in the more liberal sense of the term) takes on a more important role. Rather, both authors indicate that these movements were driven by a struggle against the whole ordering of society, the whole division of labor, the primacy of leaders and hierarchies, the mediation of pleasure by ossified morality and mass culture, the distinction between private and public, and the logic of social categorization. I would argue all of these aspirations yearn for a life without mediation where we need no representation (understood as both formal political representation as well as mediated images and spectacles); a utopia in which the production and reproduction of reality is totally unalienated and monstrously democratic.

If it is the case that the utopian element of radical collective action yearns for the utopian collapse of presence (ontology) and representation, then the kernel of utopian potentiality that the radical event refracts is anathema to representation. That is, if the yearned-after utopia that flashes during collective action is one where *mediation* has been overcome, it cannot be *mediated* as such; no *media* are sufficient to relate it, no language (verbal, textual, or imaginary) exists to express it. Nor will such a language *ever* arrive, because it could only persist in a utopia that had no need of it, there being no need for any representation at all. Quite simply, we cannot *represent* the impossible utopian moment when all *re-presentation* collapses into *presence*. To the extent this impossible future illuminates the radical event, that event both calls for and refuses full representation.

This aporia is an affective and often physical anxiety for event participants. Any honest recalling of events of radical collective action are fraught, ambivalent, and dissatisfied with themselves, anxious about their own misarticulation, their inability to capture the fullness of the experience, an encounter half-remembered, forever “out of joint” (in Derrida’s terms) with our accounting of time and personal and collective narrative. In meditating on the difficulties of writing an “autobiography of a generation,” Passerini recalls the unease of her interview subjects who are uncomfortable with both their own recorded narration of their experiences, as well as the use she plans to make of them (2). There is something here of an anxious distrust of our

own representational abilities when it comes to recalling the radical event. Ross eloquently translates the anxious poetic recallings of Leslie Kaplan, a striking factory worker during '68 and, today, a novelist:

Something ungraspable, something difficult to grasp, that was there during the strike and the occupation. Something in the midst of happening, something is happening: just that, the feeling that . . . That something should come from outside, to meet you, to surprise you, to take you away, to raise you up, to undo you, it's there, it's now, we are beside it, we are with it, we feel the pressure and we create it, everything is happening, everything can happen, *it's the present*, and the world empties itself and fills up again, and the walls pull back, they are transparent and they pull back, they separate, they fade away, they leave room, and it's now and now and now. . . . Love can create this feeling, or art; it is rare to feel it in society, where one is almost always confronted with a kind of obligatory inertia, where the activity one pursues, the activity that one can pursue, and it goes almost always hand in hand with the painful feeling of its limitations. But during the strike we could touch it with our fingers, rub our hands across its back. (141–42, italics mine, ellipses in original)

"It's the present," Kaplan writes, as if to indicate the "absolute present" of the unalienated "social flow of doing." Rarely do we catch so compelling a representation of the event as it yearns for a utopia in which the sort of life hinted at amid the radical event would be the norm. And yet the passage itself is uncomfortable with its own language, it strains against its own textuality as something craves escape from the very medium, from the very representation itself. Grammar cannot contain the utopian flash to which the passage, in Ross's faithful translation, alludes. It is impatient, tripping over itself, cutting out words, hedging on a poetry that makes recourse to themes of love and art, the erotic act of skimming the skin with the fingers across the sinewy mysterious knotwork of the back (not, it is worthy of note, the expressive, empathetic and communicative apparatus of the Levinasian face).

This failure to represent is deeply ontologically uncanny. It implies the unbridgeable chasm of the sublime between perception and apprehension, between experience and representation. The ability to represent, to speak and be understood, is the very fabric of social cooperation, it allows for social doing and the formation of subjects. Its failure in the face of the radical event's irrenouncible yet impossible

demand for representation might be considered a form of trauma. In the accounts provided by Ross and Passerini we read again and again of event participants' desire to "go above and beyond" themselves, beyond their subjectivities. Ross writes of the joy of workers, students, peasants, and others escaping their rigidified social roles, destabilizing their own subjectivity, and refusing to be orderly under the biopolitics of state and capital. In this, there is something deeply haunting about the radical event and our recollection of it. It is as if to recall a moment when we were at once "not ourselves" and "more ourselves than we have ever been."

Jameson notes this particular aporia in utopian thought: utopia refers to a time when the present conditions of power and exploitation that form the subjects who dream of that utopia have ceased to exist (2004, 51–52). In other words, the most honest utopias are ones that imagine worlds where the imaginer her or himself is impossible. While the imaginer may be able to picture themselves in their utopia, that aspect that makes this dream truly utopian is that same aspect in whose presence the imaginer, as a subject formed within her or his own non-utopian world, would be radically transformed in unpredictable ways. The specter of this crisis of the subject then makes the fullness of utopia unthinkable to the present. Writing on the "plebianization" (a word salutatory for its evocation of the common) that would necessarily be part of utopian transformation, Jameson ruminates on "our desubjectification in the utopian political process, the loss of psychic privileges and spiritual private property, the reduction of the psychic gap or lack in which we all as subjects consist, but that we all expend a good deal of energy on trying to conceal from ourselves" (40).

For the utopian dreamer, this desubjectification is disquieting. Something alien emerges in the evocation of utopia: the going beyond ourselves as subjects, beyond the sublimation of desire at the basis of our subjectivity, beyond the complications and mediations that make us capable of social cooperation, that give rise to the language, culture, art, and love that hold us together as much as they frustrate us and bind us to one another. We are all seduced, by necessity, by the "done," by the stability and consistency of the world-as-it-is. We build our lives and perform ourselves and our bodies with the residue of past cooperation—as a result, there is something deeply uncomfortable about how we see ourselves as subjects in the stark light of utopia.

THE TRAUMA OF A LOST FUTURE

Je souffre du retard du communisme ("I suffer from communism's delay")

—Jean-François Vilar, Bastille tango

In the wake of the radical event, when the demonstration, the commune, the affinity group, or the sit-in becomes a memory, we resyncopate to the rhythms of the dystopian everyday of the capitalist order of the "done." To reflect back on who we were in those radical moments is to glimpse ourselves as very different subjects, whose potential was radically more open, whose future horizons were broader. We do not fully recognize ourselves in that mirror. Our recollections of the event are uncannily familiar and yet alien, as if they occurred in a dream, experienced by a person who is at once us and not us. There is a stagger or latency in the memory of the radical event, a disorienting double exposure: we are not the "we" who we remember we were. We are haunted by a memory of ourselves that glimpsed or felt the touch of what we might become, who experienced a breach in the ordering of potentiality and collectivity that has made us who we are. There is an ontological shock in this desubjectification: once we encounter it, the flash of utopia stays with us as a sort of trauma or wound that does not heal, because it continues to be irritated and reopened as the dissonance of the memory of the glimpse of the raw "doing" of social life irritates the "done" of the current order and the way we come to fit within it.

This obstreperous temporality has high personal costs. It is an unabatable crisis of subjectivity. And while I will suggest that commoning memory and working to rekindle the radical event is the best way to address this, there are other, darker techniques. Passerini, for instance, remarks on the emergence of a "culture of resentment" as the radically common life developed during '68 receded into the "tide of privacy" borne of separation, division, and latency, leaving only a residue of bitterness, loneliness, self-doubt, and even self-loathing at having survived the event and having returned to everyday life under the capitalist order of the "done" (133–34). Ross notes a number for literary and filmic attempts to capture this trauma (195–98). For instance, she examines a novel by Jean-François Vilar in which the trauma of loss of May is sublimated by one character, Marc, into a successful career in journalism and politics. But for another character,

Jeanne, the trauma is overpowering. Vilar writes: “She used to say, laughing, ‘I suffer from communism’s delay.’ Since I saw her infrequently, I could measure how quickly her features became undone. I never thought, as others did, that Marc behaved badly with her. No one acted well in the days after May” (qtd. in Ross, 196). Jeanne ends up taking her own life. Ross insightfully notes that she is represented as “a figure of May” in her very effacement (“her features became undone”), a person “struggling to attain representability and failing” (197). This struggling to represent the self forever marked by the unrepresentable flash of utopia is telling.

Ross illustrates another figure, captured on film as militant factory workers are being told by their “leaders” that their strike is over and that they must return to work:

In the brief footage a woman cries out against the decision to return to work, shouting that the vote to end the strike and resume work has been tampered with. Around her three labor management representatives—*gros bras*—try to “handle” her . . . as she continues to refuse their version of “the end of the strike,” the three men grow increasingly impatient, and increasingly physical in their attempts to pressure the woman back into the factory. (73)

This image of a pure refusal or negation, of what Holloway calls “the scream” (1–10), remains enigmatic and provocative. The identity of the worker herself is anonymous and lost to the filmmakers, but her refusal is a haunting and uncanny disruption of the narrative. The pulse of memory skips a beat. Ross comments that both this unnamable worker and Jeanne “may be taken as at once the figure of the undoing of collectivity and the corrosion that accompanies the forgetting of that collectivity” (198). Spectral figures, then, of the haunting of the memory of the flash of utopia in the moment of collective action.

But Ross goes further, arguing that, in Vilar’s novel, Marc’s post-May success under reimposed capitalist sovereignty comes *at the expense* of Jeanne, whose increasing invisibility facilitates his own monopolization of the now sutured memories of the Paris Spring (199). Marc helps place the event in the hands of Benjamin’s villainous “mainstream historiography” by disavowing its radical and utopian elements and implications and explaining it merely as youthful bourgeois folly. Earlier in her book, Ross, drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, refers to this maneuver as the “policing” of history: authority-invested

subjects insisting that the event was “nothing to see,” merely a momentary aberration in a just and productive biopolitical order (19–27). This is the other, more frightening response to the afterlife of the event: the denial of the importance of the moment of collective action, the insistence of its normality within history, the refusal to recognize the flash of utopia as anything more than a youthful illusion are, I would argue, symptomatic of the way in which, in the face of the desubjectifying memory of the event, a new, calcified, reified identity or subjectivity can be formulated. These subjectivities, like those of the police themselves, are almost totally subordinate to the sovereign order, and they rely on the order for their economic, psychic, social, and spiritual remunerations. In other words, they become cultural agents of capital, saturated by the logic of alienation who must deny not only the possibility of utopia but also the productive use that might be made of the obstreperous temporality of the flash of utopia in the recalling of the radical event. In policing the past they seek a cruel power over a radical future that they have glimpsed and by which they are haunted. Ross spends much of her book charting precisely how certain post-facto self-defined “heroes” of May ’68, the “New Philosophers,” have done just this, becoming key intellectual and institutional supporters of neoliberal restructuring in France by combusting their radical credentials for political mileage.¹⁰ But we all know these people, no matter where we live.

The haunting power of the radical event is not just intellectual, it is affective, psychological, and physical. Passerini’s entire book project is a sort of “therapy” for her own experience of separation from the event. She frequently mobilizes the theme of loneliness to express not only the condition of her life as she writes this history but to give another name to an existential angst that sits in contrast to the moments she describes in ’68. Of these she writes: “[F]or those who lived in that environment and breathed the air of the movement, loneliness no longer existed” (104). Loneliness: the triumph of mediation and separation over human relations, the “done” over the “doing.” In a word, alienation. Utopia: the end of mediation and separation, the simultaneity of social and individual being. Even after she has emerged from her loneliness she writes “there remains a regret for politics, *not for what was but for what could be*, as project, as communication and community” (159–60, italics mine). It is as if the individualized, present-day subject is insufficient

to contain the utopian refraction of a common, collective subjectivity, as if, without outlets for this haunting sense of once having been more than oneself, the subject crumples in on itself.

Perhaps because of this, recalling the radical event remains a compelling responsibility, especially for those who would, like Benjamin, see memory inspire thought and action toward a better world. Passerini notes her attraction to “memory’s insistence on creating a history of itself, which is much less and perhaps somewhat more than a social history” (23). Such a statement refers to the particular vexation of recalling in writing a radical event whose kernel is the inarticulable glimpse of the utopian potentiality yearned for and approximated in collective action but which cannot be fully represented. It is a profound calling to courageous failure.

But represent it we must. For, having been “touched” (as Roger Simon puts it) by the radical event, we become responsible to it: its afterlife demands a response. Because the event has left within us a kernel of futurity and a shadow of utopia that cannot be incorporated within the fold of the subject, and because the event haunts us with a ghost of our own possible selves and with the spectral sense of another world, we are compelled to re-call the event, to call upon it again and again, whether in our private reflections or in forms of common remembrance. The radical event is a living presence in the subject which, while it may be buried, denied, or intentionally forgotten (or purposefully misremembered) does not cease to call out for recollection and is never satisfied with its recalling. This is not only because it has imprinted itself affectively on our lives but because its radicality was based on an absolute refusal of the material conditions of the present. When these material conditions once again embrace us, the obstreperous temporality of the event chafes against the done.

There is no cure. We, like our ancestors, dream of the utopian flash, yearn for it. We add our passion to the arc of history, become part of the swarm of the dead to whom the living owe such a heavy debt. Part of us always yearns for that lost almost-moment of utopia, for the touch of unalienated life that we looked over our shoulder to see but that we missed by a split second, catching only its evaporation. The most honest thing, then, is to make this memory common: to both articulate these memories together, and to do the hard work of finding what is common and uncommon about them.

COMMONING MEMORY

Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it.

—Frantz Fanon, “On National Culture”

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

In this paper I have sought to contribute to an understanding of the memory of the radical event in a neoliberal moment when such memories are all too often disavowed, denigrated, or dismissed. The political stakes for memory today are high. My call for commoning memory echoes Roger Simon’s call for a “transactional sphere of public memory,” a form of unceasing “doing” of remembering that eschews the solidification of memory into a “done” history and opens the past up to a polyphony of critical and often dissonant recallings. For Simon, the objective is to create multiple critical public and pedagogical spaces where memories of events (his example is the early colonial settlement and genocidal foundations of northern Canada) can speak to one another; speak, but also listen with an acknowledgement that we are all implicated in the past and the past is implicated in our present. Such spaces would evoke a further cognizance that we are always already insufficient to fully comprehend the memory of the Other, but also demand of us a courage to keep trying, and to understand this trying as the basis of solidarity. For Simon, these practices of public memory are not merely aimed at correcting the facts of history, although they do seek to set the record straight on historic injustices. Rather, they are pedagogical in the sense that they interrupt our knowing of the past and our own sense of who we are based on that past. As such, they seek to open new vistas of agency and solidarity. In recognizing that we share the experience of “the touch of the past” and a shared existential ancestry in past events (which we might remember very differently), we can not only recognize that there are other perspectives on the past, but also reflect on what stands in the way of us acknowledging and being touched by those other perspectives and memories. In other words, we gain not only a sense of the structures of authority, power, and identity that seek to define the

past, but also of how these structures shape our present and ourselves. And this can help inform how we co-create our shared future.

While Simon contrasts radical transactional public memory with a more homogeneous, scripted, and conservative “common memory” that insists on singular and exclusive historical meanings, I prefer to frame the question of radical memory in terms of what I call “*commoning* memory.” This is a process that sees the past as a commons: both a radically open field of possibility, but also a call for the profound and unceasing work of negotiating *responsibility*: our responsibilities to each other, to the past, and to the future. In this sense, commoning memory is an always already unfinished process of recalling the past as a means toward solidarity and toward the horizon of a common memory. But, critically, it is a form of shared remembering that is cognizant and courageous in the face of the impossibility of accurately or completely representing the past. There will never be a common *common enough*. A radical approach to memory, one that both recalls the utopian flash of the past and yearns for its impossible future, can instigate a relentless optimism toward the labor of social justice. Commoning memory is a form of co-memorialization that takes as its challenge not the accurate representation of previous events but the rekindling of the spark of past utopianisms in the present. Its purpose is not to police the meaning of the past but to mobilize its obstreperous temporality in order to provoke future radical events. It is to mobilize the past in the search for what is both common and uncommon between an “us” that is always being reformulated. Commoning memory works toward overcoming the “latency” between presence and representation, but does so without the expectation of success. It takes mediation seriously as a key part of how we cooperate as social beings and seeks to render that mediation more transparent, democratic, and just.

Importantly, commoning memory is a materialist project. History is a social product, the solidification of “doing” into “done.” It may even be worthwhile to speak of the “means of memorial production” as a critical site of struggle. In an age of so-called “biopolitical production,” where capital’s circuit of value increasingly incorporates the way subjects are formed and the way people think and act socially, memory becomes a key resource for the binding and unbinding of affinities, the territorialization of bodies, and the (re)forging of a sense of what is common and what is possible.¹¹ In other words, memory is

a critical component of cooperation, of doing: it is a commons of shared understanding and of narrative resources for re-weaving relationships and social life. The capitalist economy functions as an unquestionable social reality and necessity because we have “forgotten” that it is “merely” an abstraction of our own cooperation. Capital is a perverse way of remembering the flow of social doing in the form of a commodified “done.” The neoliberal paradigm succeeds to the extent that we fail to remember the radical possibilities of other ways of living. Accordingly, concrete struggles over the past are inherently material: it is a struggle over schools and curricula, over public spaces, over the nature of community and entertainment, and over social narrative, a struggle that is taking place everywhere that social life is combusted into fragmented commodities.

The commoning of memory can take a great many forms. Notably, it is a project that animates both Passerini’s and Ross’s books, neither of which seeks closure on the radical event. Rather, both books operate as venues for shared recalling, and as critiques of the solidification of the past into a “done” history. Both insist on the radical event’s power over the present, whether in terms of its effects on its participants, its implications for contemporary struggles, or its political afterlives. What sets the concept of commoning memory apart from other recent theories of politicized memorialization is that it takes memory’s role in the production of the world very seriously and sees it not merely as a crucial part of who we are as people, as communities or as nations, but who we are as cooperating subjects, as “economic forces” in the broadest sense of the term. In the face of a form of global capitalism that, in spite of its recent systemic crises, continues to sacrifice the future on the altar of an endless neoliberal “now,” this task is more important than ever.

Notes

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highlight the act of creating memory as a cultural politics that is a never-neutral act of recognition (xxxiv–xxxvi).

1. Other theorists, drawing on the work of sixteenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, have articulated this contrast between “power-to” and “power-over,” between “doing” and “done,” as (respectively) *potenza* and *potere* (see Balibar; Negri).

2. There is much that is salutary in Holloway’s strong anti-essentialism and insistence on the materialist basis of identity. However, his approach may risk defaming so-called “identity politics,” which are often the basis of the radical refusal of capitalism and domination. And it is all too easy for those with access to the forms of gender, race, or class privilege that “identity politics” (at their best) struggle against to declare such politics dead or subordinate to a broader project.

3. Rejecting this notion of a history was the impetus for Michel Foucault to develop his now widely used methods of “archeology” and “genealogy.” In *The Political Unconscious* Fredric Jameson (1981), following Althusser, also suggested that control over the resources for mapping historical and social causality is key to ideological power.

4. This relationship between memory and imagination is a pivotal philosophical question dating back to Plato and is well summarized by Richard Kearney.

5. For an excellent but slightly different approach see Roger Simon’s considerations of the “touch of the past” and the politics of “a transactional sphere of public memory.”

6. The theme of the impossibility of presence has a long history in feminist, postcolonial, and French “postmodern” thought. See, for instance, Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*.

7. An excellent example of the “commoning memory” of which I speak, in regard to the Paris Commune, is Peter Watkins’s epic filmic recreation of the everyday life of the uprising in his 2001 *La Commune, Paris 1871*.

8. Passerini relates a number of such tensions in her work that focus explicitly on the women and other marginalized participants in the events. Other feminist criticism has pointed out similar issues: see for instance the work of Marge Piercy and Mariarosa Dalla Costa. It is also notable that the post-event nostalgia seems to be a relatively privileged genre. Paul Cronin’s 2009 documentary *A Time to Stir* on the occupation of Columbia University in 1968 contrasts the testimonies of white and black occupiers, with the latter relating far more ambivalent, mature, and generally less romantic accounts than their white contemporaries.

9. See for instance Marx and, later, Lenin’s reflections on the “failure” of the Paris Commune (Marx and Lenin). A more recent example is Murray Bookchin’s blistering critique of so-called “lifestyle anarchism.”

10. For a more general, and socio-theoretical analysis of how the critiques of ‘68 became the “New Spirit of Capitalism,” see Boltanski and Chiapello.

11. Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis provide an excellent theory of the “situated imagination” to speak to the ways our understanding of what might be

possible is deeply rooted in our bodily experience of our place within the intersecting flows of power and privilege that make up our lives. They call for the work of “transversal” practices of imagination that do not seek to unify or synchronize imagination but to create imaginative commons in the overlapping spaces of solidarity. This approach is broadly consonant with the way I am thinking through commoning memory.

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