

FIVE

The enclosure of history, the debt of the past, the commons of memory

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. DUBOIS

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

What do we owe the past? Such a question may seem abstract, but in this chapter I want to suggest that, if we are to reimagine the commons as a militant and powerful force, and if we are to awaken and cultivate the radical imagination, we need to value memory and dwell with the difficulties of the bonds of radical history.¹ Radical social movements of the past century and a half have had difficulty honouring memory and passing on intergenerational knowledge, for a variety of reasons. We

live in a culture addicted to the illusion of newness – an illusion to the extent that the same structures of capitalism, alienation and exploitation persist, though in different forms and in new fashions. This can make us believe that the methods and strategies of struggle mobilized by our parents and grandparents are outdated and insufficient to today's challenges. Perhaps, at times, this is true. But we must also account for the way that, in a system which seems stubbornly resilient to our efforts to change it, we find cold comfort in imagining that the past has nothing to teach us.

Indeed, we live in a moment of what we can call the enclosure of history. By this I mean a situation where, both materially and conceptually, capitalism lays claim to, surrounds, hedges in, frames and privatizes the past. On the one hand, this occurs through conventional means: history books that continue to sideline, belittle or defame radical movements; historical documentaries that likewise ignore or falsely contextualize radical experiments and uprisings as peripheral or anecdotal to the 'real' history comprised of the actions of states and capital; or the 'everyday life' of historical amnesia as it informs people's often ill-informed and cobbled-together narratives of how 'now' came to be.²

More generally still, this process of erasure and enclosure of history resonates with and is reinforced by the insistence that the present global order is the necessary, natural and unquestionable culmination of human history. Sometimes this implies the inevitability of corporate-led globalization, framed as the direct result (and also the producer) of the march of technological progress, as if the invention of the microprocessor, the automobile and refrigeration must, by necessity, accompany

the spread of (ostensibly) free markets and the destruction of the planet in the name of profit.³ At other times this narrative of inevitability stems from some unscientific, hackneyed and self-serving sense of biological necessity, which would insist that competitive, free-market capitalism is simply the most civilized method of channelling and organizing the human animal's allegedly 'natural' proclivity for competition, violence and greed.⁴

Slightly less offensive, yet more influential, has been the narrative most cogently put forward by Francis Fukayama a few short years after the fall of the Berlin Wall: with the collapse of state socialism in the Eastern bloc, the marginalization of Cuba, and the slow (and violent) transition of China into a state-led capitalist superpower, we have arrived at the 'end of history'.⁵ Taking up G.W.F. Hegel's theory of world history (a theory as bombastic and arrogant as its name would imply), Fukayama suggested that capitalism, now unfettered by the need to battle its ideological enemies, is free to put all of humanity of a level playing field. If human history in the past (and here Fukayama is largely interested in European history) could be narrated as the struggle for recognition and power between political blocs (factions, countries, empires), today each individual can achieve his or her own maximal potential in the meritocratic utopia of the free market. History, driven as it was by dramatic masculine clashes between world-views, is to be a thing of the past in a world where success and failure are the responsibility of each individual.

Fukayama's breathless neo-Hegelian prognostications were belied by the rise of the War on Terror and the vengeful return of fundamentalism, militarized nationalism and

neoconservatism, although interestingly these supposedly anti-market forces **have proven to work** hand-in-glove with the globalized capitalist market. In spite of that, the idea that somehow we have in the dawning years of the twenty-first century entered some new historical era defined by the (perhaps regrettable) supremacy of capitalism remains extremely strong.⁶ The perceived ‘failures’ of state-led Communist experiments (and, we are told, of the socialist approaches *tout court*) have left the world bereft of some sort of counterweight to the inevitability of the market (even if, as many thoughtful anarchists and communists argue, the state-heavy and bureaucratic Soviet Union was never all that different from the capitalist order it claimed to oppose⁷). We are all too often seduced into a narrative that insists that all past events were either necessary steps towards our inevitable present, or insignificant. We are encouraged to read history as a series of successes and failures, as discrete events with distinct causes and effects.

It is not surprising, then, that those ideas, movements, institutions and ideologies which don’t neatly fit into this narrative are belittled, ignored, decontextualized or individualized. We are not taught, for instance, that many elements of public infrastructure in the West, including libraries, hospitals, roads and schools, were first created by trade unions and community associations, long before the state had any interest in providing for the care of its citizens or before the philanthropy of the rich became fashionable.⁸ We are not taught the long, inspiring and tragic history of slave revolts, peasant uprisings, wildcat strikes, interracial solidarity, community autonomy, mutiny and intellectual endeavour that have roiled throughout the last 500 years of capitalist crisis.⁹ When these histories are revealed in

mainstream books, media and narratives, they are all too often framed as moments of mass hysteria and group-think, or as anecdotes that punctuate and perhaps (at best) inspire the politics and ideas of the central historical figures: great white men.

So, for instance, we may learn of the importance of the thought of our friend Hegel, but not of the influence of the Haitian Revolution on Hegel's thought.¹⁰ Nor do we learn of the way the Haitian Revolution influenced the abolitionist movements in Europe and the Americas, nor of the way it inspired slave revolts elsewhere.¹¹ Nor do we learn of the fate of Haiti in the wake of the revolution when, after multiple successful campaigns to fight back the armies of Napoleon and other European warlords eager to re-enslave what had once been France's most profitable colony, the nation was forced by an unprecedented alliance of world powers to pay France reparations for effectively stealing its own people from slavery. Nor are we taught about the odious debt of 150 million gold francs (roughly US\$22 billion in today's currency) imposed upon Haiti in the early nineteenth century,¹² and its link to Haiti's present-day status as the Western hemisphere's poorest nation, nor the role of this debt in leveraging neocolonial pillage, facilitated by a series of brutal, Western-backed dictators.¹³ Nor do we learn the way this history influences the contemporary politics of AIDS, of disasters like the Haitian earthquake of 2010, or of the transformation of Haiti into a low-wage textile production zone and sex tourism destination.¹⁴

As the last example indicates, we are all too accustomed to reading the flow of history in ways that justify and normalize the status quo, and in ways that do not challenge or question the forms of power and authority that enclose the globe today.

Where we do learn these histories of struggle, they are all too often framed as either isolated historical anomalies or as driven by individuals, moves which separate radical history from its ancestors and discontents and which translate a common, collective experience into the isolated, private property of singular (usually male) individuals.

In the case of the former, events like the Haitian Revolution, or the Paris Commune of 1871, or more recent events like Occupy Wall Street or Canada's Idle No More indigenous movement, are framed as responses to the status quo, as isolated instances of emotionally driven rebellion. These accounts fail to show how each of these events is like surface lakes being fed by and feeding underground reservoirs; the way, for instance, the Haitian Revolution built on generations of African and indigenous spiritual, political and social organization and knowledge, or the way the Paris Commune brought together renegade tendencies and ideas that had, until they were materialized in the streets and assemblies, been scattered throughout society in the realms of political writing, neighbourhood associations and arts and culture. When history is enclosed, we also fail to see how these events, even though the historical record identifies them as defeats or abortive struggles, continue to inspire, to inform and to enliven the radical imagination of both their participants and future struggles. Instead, when these events are not denigrated as merely the irrational or poorly articulated outbursts of the mob, they are valued only to the extent that they contribute to the present order. So the Haitian Revolution is presented as a tragic and regrettable skirmish on the road to modern capitalist development, a premature gesture of resistance to slavery which could only be consummated through

the work of white European abolitionists.¹⁵ And the Paris Commune is seen as the consequence of the terrible starvation and poverty in Paris at the close of the Franco-Prussian War, a sort of unreflexive response of the mob to its own hunger, one which eventually resulted (after a brutal crackdown where tens of thousands of communards were murdered) in the return of France to the path of 'democracy'.¹⁶ In both cases, and also more generally, the events of the past are enclosed so as to offer up history in commodified form: discrete chunks of knowledge and fact that, like today's allegedly 'creative' toy sets (such as increasingly branded Lego kits), can only build one model.

Alternatively, radical events of the past come to be remembered as the private property of heroic individuals. So the Paris Commune is recalled with reference to the sympathies it evoked in the novelist Victor Hugo, or the involvement of French Realist painter Gustav Courbet, or even the reflections of Karl Marx. True, the past is always a collection of stories and, if they are to be good stories, they need strong characters. But this method of narration once again delivers the past up as a packaged, enclosed commodity that fits neatly within the narratives that animate our present order: that history is made by great white men; that the common or the mob or the crowd is merely an inspiration, a limitation or a frustration for these personages; and that the resonances of these events are limited to the way they were inspired by the actions of prior individuals and the way they influenced subsequent individuals. Such an approach reaffirms the notion of the capitalist End of History, where the past is merely an accumulation of trials and errors that inevitably led to the present, and the idea that the present order is the best of all possible worlds because it provides

maximal freedom for the individual. Valorized in history and in the present, the individual becomes the most valuable and significant actor, and it is only natural that such a figure should be lionized in the past and exalted in the present, and become a beacon for the future.

The doing of memory, the done of history

This idea and ideal of the individual maker of history brings us to the tension between history and memory. As we are accustomed to imagining it, history is the past ‘as it actually was’, whereas memory is the past as inflected through the imagination of the individual, which may be prone to vagary, misremembrance, ideological clouding and selective editing or fabrication. But it is perhaps more accurate, as we shall see, to imagine all history as made up of memories. What is the past except the accumulated residue of its meanings for the present? History exists, but is constantly in the process of being *recalled*, called up or called out. Memories overlap, compete, disagree, flow into one another and mesh. The past did occur, of course. But even when we have ample documentary evidence (such as writing, photography, even film) the influences, impacts and resonances of those events are a matter of struggle. However, certain memories become authoritative, usually because they frame the past in ways that help reproduce the status quo today: they reaffirm or render ‘natural’ the present order.

This struggle over the truth and meaning of the past is one that occurs not only in the classroom, the textbook and the media, though attempts to ‘set the record straight’ and return the history of radical struggles to the mainstream historical

record are extremely important. Rather, the struggle is over how the past will ‘live’ in the present; that is, it is a politics of active remembrance in movements, communities and networks of common feeling and solidarity. Remembering and re-remembering, and remembering in public and in common, are important to the extent that they allow us to revisit the question with which I began this chapter: how can we respond to the debt of history? How can the struggles of the past become more than an inspiration to us today, or teach us important lessons, and begin to resonate with the dreams, the passion and the power of our ancestors?

In order to explore this further, I shall borrow some terminology for the social critic and philosopher John Holloway, whose 2002 book *Change the World without Taking Power*¹⁷ was influential and controversial in its insistence that any and all attempts to ‘take power’ (such as getting elected to government or seizing the state through revolution) were doomed to reproduce oppression, exploitation and violence. Influenced by the radical grassroots militant community-building and military self-defence of the Zapatista uprisings in Mexico, Holloway proposes a radical horizontalism where revolutionary change would be based on the free association of individuals and a radical rejection of all established institutions, paradigms of thought, codes of identity and forms of work. Compelling and provocative, Holloway’s book resonates with social movements and radical thinkers eager to imagine new radical horizons beyond both state socialism and Keynesianism.

Holloway’s approach is deeply indebted to both the work of mid-century German philosopher and social critic Theodor Adorno and various traditions of Autonomist Marxism. From

the former, he takes the concept of ‘negation’: the idea that a new world, new thought, new ideas and new politics can emerge from refusal and critique. For Holloway we, as both individuals and movements, need to return constantly to the existential ‘no!’ that resonates through our bodies and souls in a world of exploitation, injustice and inequality. Equally, Holloway insists we expand and open up our concept of labour. Like the Marxist feminists whose work we explored in Chapter 1, Holloway wants us to understand labour as all those aspects of our life that see us reproduce society. For Holloway, the political tensions of labour and life can be understood as the struggle of the doing and the done. The doing is our capacity to change the world, together and as individuals. We are constantly in the process of redoing our world, or reproducing ourselves as physical and social beings, and of reproducing our material and sociological environments as a cooperative, creative species. Holloway calls this elemental power to ‘do’, writ large, the ‘social flow of doing’. Yet, in this doing we create the ‘done’. Part of this done is those physical objects we create, which in turn shape our doing. When we create a tool, it transforms the way we work; if we create a law, it changes the way we relate to one another. More broadly, social institutions, structures and objects fundamentally change how and what we do. So social ranks, hierarchies and identities are also, for Holloway, the done, which in turn influence how we cooperatively do. Capitalism, from this approach, is a particularly pernicious and successful rule of the done over the doing. Capital is the accumulated wealth of human labour that, through various means, comes to control and command the doing of humanity and orient that doing towards its endless and pathological reproduction.

Take, for instance, machines. As George Caffentzis¹⁸ explains (drawing on the insights of Marx on the subject), machines, from dishwashers to car-building robots, from iPhones to hammers, are the accumulated product of cooperative labour. A machine demands that many humans collaborate to design and refine it, to draw the raw materials from the earth, to transform them into products, and to bring these to market, and all these individuals further rely on the cooperation of others to feed, house, clothe and care for them. The end result of all this doing is a done object. In turn, done machines transform the nature and character of human cooperative labour. A computer transforms the way future computers will be made, both in terms of the way it enables the highly complex programming and design process and also in terms of the way it enables an ever more complicated and intricate coordination of global labour and resources. This approach applies not only to hard-and-fast commodities like machines, but also to the social institutions and formations that make up our daily life and social order. So the social institution of monogamous heterosexual marriage is not a hard-and-fast thing; it is a 'done' set of ideas and norms which influences the way we cooperate, even on the most intimate level. This immaterial 'machine' is reproduced, day to day, by the doing of social actors: the way we, through our actions, expectations, dreams, identities and norms reproduce a certain pressure that demands people conform to the heterosexual/monogamous ideal, and/or judges the success or failure of individuals based on that ideal (such as conscripting queer liberation movements under the banner of access to marriage). This doing creates a social formation that is done (the institution of marriage), and this ideal in turn

influences further doing to the extent that it informs, disciplines and shapes how we act and cooperate.¹⁹ In this sense, capitalism is a particular formation by which the done begins to take command of the future doing. Workers transform the world through their labour (doing), producing (done) commodities. But this process is overseen by capital, and oriented towards the production of surplus value and the expansion of capital and its power. Capital, in this sense, is the perverted product of doing, which in turn shapes future doing towards its own endless reproduction.

Although there are, of course, limits to such a perspective, it is able to reveal the affinity between the system of capitalism, based as it is on the enclosure of our doing by the done, and the politics of memory (and, perhaps, of culture more broadly). With this approach, we can understand memory as a process of doing. When we remember, we do not recall the past as it really was, but re-create it as a story in the present. Whether we intend to or not, we do memory as a collective venture. We are always reconstructing that past in dialogue with other stories, be they presented in history books, in testimony or in conversation. In contrast, 'history' represents the 'done' form of memory, the solidified and objectified remnant that influences and shapes the flow of 'doing'. Our remembering of the past courses through channels cut by written or other histories, or it flows between, around or against the currents of what is taken to be the authoritative narrative.

So, for instance, when we recall the Haitian Revolution or the Paris Commune of 1871, or more recent events like the Occupy movement or the Arab revolutions, we do so within a world made up of multiple, competing narratives, some held to

be more authoritative than others by virtue of the institutional force behind them.

It would be tempting here to aim to set the record straight, to replace the done of history with some other, more authoritative, version that revealed and lionized (rather than hid and devalued) radical histories, and that rendered visible the otherwise subterranean influences and inspirations that flow into and out of each event and in and out of our lives and doing. Such work is important, but there may be a more radical approach still, one that would see us cultivate ‘common memory’ and think carefully and critically about how to breathe life back into the past in the present towards the cultivation of different futures.

As the prior discussion indicates, there is something seductive about the done. And, indeed, we can’t do without it. While it might be tempting to imagine a world made purely of doing, where no authority, institution or convention restrained our creativity and our activity, such a thing is impossible. Holloway’s approach to the doing and the done is one where we are always using the done to enable and shape our doing. So we use the tools we have developed to create new things. We create social organizations and identities in order to make our lives liveable and meaningful, in order to build community around norms, rituals, ideals and institutions. While ideally these ‘done’ formations can be created in such a way as to be non-coercive and egalitarian, it is easy for them to be built on and to reproduce hierarchies, forms of exploitation and unfair habits and patterns. Those familiar with anti-authoritarian organizing and social justice movements will be only too aware of the way avowedly anti-hierarchical and egalitarian

groups, which seek to be the change they wish to see in the world, become the hosts of cryptic and unspoken hierarchies and inequalities, norms of behaviour and value systems. This does not, in and of itself, represent a failure. But it does indicate that the solidification of the doing into the done cannot be avoided, just worked on and through with intentionality, patience and compassion, alongside an acute attentiveness to power (see Chapter 2).

So when we imagine the idea of radical memory, it is not simply to say that we should value all perspectives and memories equally. It is, rather, to open up memory as a site of radical struggle. It is not to attempt to achieve a purity in either the doing or the done, but instead to set forth on an endless path. The reason is that, like the past, our society and our lives are made up of that tension between the doing and the done. And our goal can be neither to liberate doing completely (which is impossible) nor to devise a perfect system (a better, perfect done within which all doing can occur). Rather, it is to do the constant work of reproducing our society differently, in ways that dismantle and contest exploitation and oppression. That is, the horizon of the struggle for the commons is not some transcendental state when all conflict or disagreement or difference has come to a blissful utopian conclusion. Rather, it is to create the sort of society that is open to change and reflexive, that we can structure ourselves through our cooperative efforts.

Memory is a key part of this work. The idea of commoning memory is one of mobilizing our conflicting, dissonant ideas of the past as a way to reflect on and transform our present. How we remember the doing of the past, the work of our ancestors (real and imagined), influences and shapes our doing in the

present. Coming to common understandings of the past (which does not necessarily mean agreeing on how things really were) can shape our doing in the present. In this way, the past comes to live again in the present, and to shape our common futures.

Recalling the radical event of May '68

This rather abstract and philosophical discussion can be grounded with a particular example: the uses and abuses of the memory of the events of 1968. These events, and the generation who were their key protagonists (the baby boomers), are of particular interest, in part because, at the time, their activism was imagined as a rupture or break with previous forms of militant agitation, and in part because they are, today, at their height of their economic and social power, their legacy shaping the destinies of younger generations and those yet to come. In particular, I want to focus on two works.

In her 1988 book *Autobiography of a Generation*²⁰ Luisa Pesserini conducts something of a retrospective autoethnography of the activism among young students and workers in 1968 Turin and other Italian cities. Italian radical history is generally known outside that country for its pre-war manifestations and the rise of the *Autonomia* movement in the 1970s. The baby-boom generation there, as elsewhere, came of age in the late 1960s, and the political culture of that era was built on a residual frustration with the failures of pre-war generations and would lay the groundwork for the radicalism and militancy of the later *Autonomist* and post-*Workerist* manifestations to come.²¹ Passerini's account is moving, personal and insightful. It includes interviews with prominent activists thirty years after

the uprisings, which saw the occupation of factories, universities and high schools and a profound challenge to the existing order, including a challenge to the parliamentary left and the established Communist Party, which had held sway over the political imagination since before the Second World War. Passerini's book also includes the author's own remembrances, as well as notes from her psychotherapy sessions. She approaches the topic with a deep honesty regarding her own feelings and emotions. We are left with a sense that the generation of '68 recall their past in a wistful and nostalgic register, but one coloured by a sense of loss and of present loneliness. While many of the interviewees (and Passerini herself) would go on to take up positions on the radical left, or become writers, broadcasters or academics, Passerini's account brings to the fore a certain melancholy resonance to the memory of events.

This quotation, from interviewee Luigi Bobbio, crystallizes in many ways the tone of the bulk of the remembrances, and of Passerini's book. The year 1968, he recalls, was

an 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)

This is an experience of what I want to call the 'radical event'. This idea, borrowed from the Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou, refers not simply to *a* particular event, but to the way

any given event is part of a flow of history, the culmination of a whole variety of intersecting histories, and a moment that gives birth to a whole variety of new histories as its influences reach far and wide.²² In this sense, events can be both single happenings and sustained movements. They can overlap; they can last a few minutes or a year. The radical event is one that punctuates time and memory, that transforms the participants, as Bobbio illustrates. They create new, temporary worlds, alternative micro-spheres of social reproduction. They become spaces and times where a different sort of doing becomes possible, when the done order of society, economics and work to which we are accustomed is, momentarily suspended (or partially suspended), when we can form new relationships, identities and modes of engagement and communication based on needs and desires, rather than on conventions and expectations.

This sense of a revolution on the level of everyday life is echoed by the testimony of other participants in the uprisings of 1968, this time in Paris, as recounted in Kristen Ross's 2002 book *May '68 and its Afterlives*, a brilliant attempt not to 'set the record straight' on the events of those heady months, when factory and university occupations and civil unrest in the streets of Paris and other French cities almost brought down the de Gaulle government, but to examine the uses and abuses of memory in the subsequent decades.²³ She paraphrases Jean-Franklin Narot, who links the 'pleasures of May '68'

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 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 supersede 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)

Once again, we read of the radical event as one where the sense of time and convention are disrupted and where individuals cooperate and reproduce their lives, identities and relationships on different grounds, perhaps more freely. Something fundamentally changes in the texture of the 'social flow of doing'. What was once enclosed within the private becomes common. Ross translates the memoir of poet Leslie Kaplan, a striking factory worker in 1968, who recollects the almost magical and surreal nature of the radical event as

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. (141–2, ellipses in original)

Of course, anyone who has actually experienced radical events such as these and has any degree of honesty will concede that they are far from utopian. While such breaks in history

may indeed feel like cracks in a glacier, when the social flow of doing might move slightly more freely, and be less impeded by the conventional done, these events are by no means free of the done. Not only can we recall the way that hierarchies, cliques, authority, convention and inequality continue to exist even (sometimes especially) in groups and events that officially disavow them, we can also note the way the overarching structures of inequality, exploitation and oppression continue to operate within radical events. For instance, the second-wave feminist movement was to emerge from the events of the late 1960s as women and female-identified people continued to experience sexism, misogyny, alienation and exploitation within these movements.²⁴ Likewise, many feminists, people of colour and indigenous people, as well as queer and trans activists, quickly became frustrated with the false universalism proclaimed by the Occupy Movement, which, in its zeal to proclaim itself a space of equality and freedom, neglected to recognize that it existed within and sometimes reproduced the structures and patterns of domination in society as a whole.²⁵

Yet, with all that said, and notwithstanding all there is to critique and deconstruct in the case of the movements of the late 1960s, I also want us to recall, through the passages quoted above, the sort of utopianism that was at work. While by no means perfect, these radical events became spaces and times where participants heard a faint echo of the social flow of doing, whose haunting, alien yet intimate melody is usually drowned out by the traffic of the done in our everyday life. This flow of raw potential, of humanity's unrefined cooperative power, is for Holloway the substance of all social reality, all social institutions, all labour, all value, all identity. I am suggesting

that in the radical event the social flow of doing can not be experienced directly (for, as we have seen, that's impossible), but recognized or glimpsed, as a flash of movement caught in the corner of one's eye. I'm not seeking to be needlessly romantic or poetic. Rather, I'm attempting to account for the power and resonance of the radical event in the imagination, both at the time of the event itself and long after, both among participants who experienced it and among those who will only experience it as a common memory.

The exposure to a different order of doing, to a radically different paradigm of reproduction, and to the eery promise of a radically different world, then, has a haunting quality. It transforms us. If we, as social beings, create ourselves based on the relationships, values, institutions, norms, ideals, conventions and social structures that surround us, how do we re-create ourselves amidst the radical event, when these fall away or when they seem more malleable, supple and changeable?

The empire strikes back

More tragically, how do we re-create ourselves to conform once again with the world as we knew it before the radical event? While many of such radical events have had important and lasting impacts on the structures of everyday life, social institutions, relationships and values, these changes are usually not immediate. When the event ends, how does the one recalibrate oneself to the order of the done? How does one reconform and once again take up one's place in the reproduction of the status quo?

It is for this reason that Passerini is concerned with depression, melancholy and psychoanalysis. She writes that, for her and

those she interviewed, ‘there remains a regret for politics, not for what was but for what could be, as project, as communication and community’ (159–60). In contrast to the intensity of human connection and solidarity experienced amidst the radical event, Passerini writes eloquently of a haunting loneliness experienced in its aftermath, for some still years, even decades, later.

Likewise, Ross quotes a variety of memoirists, interviewees and fictionalized accounts that address the months and years following the events of 1968, which concur that feelings of deep melancholy, depression and loneliness were common. This was due not simply to a feeling of defeat, the effects of withdrawal from the narcotic power of radical political adrenaline. It can be understood, I would suggest, as a symptom of a certain dissonance within us as the person we were in the radical event fails to match the person we had to become afterwards. There is a mourning for a lost future, ‘not for what was but for what could be’.

It is here that memory and remembrance become deeply political. Ross’s book not only recounts the personal and artistic recollections of the events and their subsequent resonance within French culture; it also traces the way certain influential ‘leaders’ of the ’68 movements ‘cashed in’ their radical credentials and used their falsified or selective remembrance of the events of ’68 to leverage themselves into positions of power and influence in mainstream French society. Here Ross draws on the French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s concept of ‘the police’, by which he means not only those authorities in uniform but also the way that society is governed by a policing of history and meaning. The policing of memory is one that attempts to force memory to conform to official histories which, as we saw

above, render the past as merely the unavoidable precedent of the inevitable present. Policing history is the process by which the radical event is domesticated and defanged, held to have distinct and discrete causes and effects, and reduced to vignettes in the biography of individuals.

Policing the memory of 1968, Ross argues, typically takes the form of relegating it to the realm of youthful folly, a hormone-driven explosion of rage and resentment. For many '68ers who would go on to occupy positions of fame and fortune in the media, in mainstream electoral politics or as writers and intellectuals (many on the political right), May '68 was publicly recalled (in interviews, memoirs and theoretical texts) as an important moment of personal and perhaps national growth, a youthful dalliance with radicalism that taught them, in hindsight, to appreciate the reasonableness and justice of the existing system. A similar policing of memory and history is common among those of the post-war generation throughout the global North, especially as many former radicals, through any of a thousand routes, re-created themselves within the system they once so publicly condemned and sought to overturn.²⁶

The disavowal of the radical event, the enclosure of its meanings within the overarching policing of history, not only normalizes the conventional understandings of history (and its supposed 'end' in our era of free markets). It also demonstrates the way that the politics of memory is a politics of reproduction. The policing of the meaning of '68 and other radical events is a policing of that event's claim on the present. If it can be explained away as youthful folly, or as an unfortunate or wistful episode in one's personal biography, we need no longer take seriously the dreams and hopes that resonated through the

event, which were fed by – and, in turn, fed – that subterranean reservoir of radical history. The memory of the event becomes a resource by which the recaller can refashion their identity and place within normative and mainstream capitalist society. Memory becomes a means by which they can come to grips with and normalize their adherence to the order of capitalist social reproduction that they once rejected, and the absence of which they once experienced.

Conversely, the recaller's enthusiasm for policing the meaning of the past and enclosing their memories within the frame of conventional histories, in turn, contributes to the cultural and the material reproduction of capitalist social relations and relationships. The 'doing' of memory here seeks to conform to, and reinforce, the 'done' of official history. By rendering the memory of the radical event a resource for the reproduction of the capitalist order, these memoirists seek to reproduce themselves within that order, on its terms. As in their response to radical events undertaken by their descendants or by new generations of activists today, which are viewed as merely rehearsals of the mistakes of the past. In this interpretation, as Ross notes, subsequent radical events are doomed both to fail to live up to the authenticity, passion and calibre of previous events, and at the same time to 'repeat all the mistakes' of events of the past. The condemnation of present-day radicalism serves as a means to displace anxieties over the claims that the radical event of the past might have on its former participants. By dismissing and belittling the struggles of the present, the power of the past is tamed and domesticated.

In addition to all those who, in France and in Italy, renounced their youthful activist folly and used this renunciation to propel

themselves into mainstream politics, we can also register the way that today's hegemonic form of capitalism recalls and internalizes themes of freedom, individuality, flexibility and creativity within its operating logic and rhetoric. As we shall see in the next two chapters, sociologists like Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, as well as radical social critics like Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and Angela McRobbie, have noted the way that, in the wake of the protest movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, capitalism as a system expanded and diversified to incorporate these movements' demands, but in ways that helped reproduce the system in an age of globalization.²⁷ An example might be seen in the culture of Silicon Valley, where the world's largest reactor of high-tech development is underscored by the labour and passion of many who came of age amidst the peace and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s. At least in part, the form of casualized, creative and collaborative capitalism that has driven the computer revolution since the 1980s is the residue of these struggles, now translated into a hyper-individualist 'Californian ideology' where a sober appreciation of free markets and the horizon of individual fulfilment replace the collectivist idealism of youth.²⁸ The hip, 'no collar' workplace reflects, in skewed form, the desires and dreams of a generation.²⁹

Of course, many participants in radical events of the past try, in various ways, to hold true to the radical power and implications of the event, rather than attempt to police and enclose it to insulate themselves from its claims; many become lifelong activists, or translate their radicalism into different realms like art, education or institutionalized activism. But doing so is no easy feat. The power of the radical event, I am

suggesting, is that it is animated by the echo or glimpse of the unfettered 'social flow of doing' of a world and life beyond alienation, exploitation, loneliness and futility. What gives the event such a power over our imaginations is the way it allows us to glimpse, as if from the corner of one's eye, our raw potential as cooperative beings, unmitigated or unorchestrated by the structures of capital and daily life. We glimpse our own unalienated selves.

That animating force or spirit resists representation. The sense of possibility and potential cannot be captured on film, but nor can it be painted, described or sung. It is too alien, too fierce and too unimaginable to be captured in poetry or art or in a documentary or a memoir. This is why all these forms of public remembrance ultimately fail to capture the gravity and spirit of the radical event. Again, it is not that such events were or could be utopias, but that, amidst the event, the infinite possibilities for human cooperation, of doing, seem slightly closer at hand to the extent that the accumulated 'done' is momentarily suspended or its grip on our lives, relationships and senses of self is weakened.

And yet the power of the radical event is such that, unless we disavow it and seek to police and enclose it, we are called to the impossible task of representing and recalling it. We yearn to make it common, to express its potential, to come to terms with its power and its implications. That is, in spite of the fact that the radical event was a profound and transformative experience, we can't quite recall it in all its detail and magnitude. And yet its power over us is such that we are compelled to recall it, and fail in so doing. There is something haunting and tragic here, but also something hopeful and important.

The debt of history

Walter Benjamin is a tragic figure in the history of radical writing. An intellectual, author and broadcaster active in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany, Benjamin is believed to have committed suicide in 1940 while attempting to flee Nazi-occupied France into Spain, whence he hoped to join other radical German intellectuals in exile. One of Benjamin's last writings was his haunting 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', a poetic collection of observations and theories about the politics of history and historical interpretation. Here, Benjamin makes a distinction between what he saw as a flawed approach to history, which understood it as the passage of concrete events with distinct causes and effects. He wrote that '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.'³⁰ That is, Benjamin encouraged making use of history not as a hard and fast narrative, but as something alive and active in our present world.

It is also in the 'Theses' that Benjamin advances his famous vision of the angel of history as driven out of paradise and forced to watch the destruction it leaves in its wake. Benjamin here also condemns the German left for inadvertently helping to usher in the Nazis by creating a culture of historical memory where the German working class was encouraged to see itself as tied to a notion of progress, rather than driven by the desire to avenge capitalism's injustices past and present. In so doing, the left opened the door for a fascist populism that, in times of dire poverty and hopelessness, could make a more convincing case that they could deliver the progress the left had once

promised. For Benjamin, history lives on in the present. ‘There is no document of civilization that is not also a document of barbarism’, he wrote, indicating that every great work of culture and art has been the product of unjust and unequal societies, and that this injustice and exploitation silently haunts even the most majestic and sublime of masterpieces.

Importantly, Benjamin wrote that ‘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.’ Here Benjamin (an atheist) was inspired by his friend Gershom Scholem’s theological writings on the Jewish notion of the messianic, which holds that the arrival of the end of time and the salvation of the Chosen People could arrive at any time, and so demands that all believers render themselves ready for the Messiah’s arrival at all times by being in a constant state of spiritual purification. ‘Judgement day’ is, in this sense, always just around the corner. Benjamin, a Jewish Marxist intellectual writing in the heart of Nazi-occupied Europe, found in this theological puzzle a hint about how to keep hope alive in the darkest of times, and also an important lesson about the claim of the past. In this sense, the ‘weak messianic power’ is the power to redeem the forgotten dreams of past generations, to rekindle the radical events of the past and their aborted revolutionary power to totally transform society. This power is bestowed on us not merely by virtue of the power of the social flow of doing, which is the basis of all social orders and which, in its solidified done form, represents the structures of society that enclose us. Rather, Benjamin wants to remind us

that the done is not purely the domain of the established order: it is also made up, in part, of the residues of past struggles. Just as all works of civilization carry within them the ghosts of the barbarisms of the society that rendered them, so too is our whole social reality made up of ideas, institutions, values, norms and relationships haunted and influenced by the (often forgotten) struggles of the past. As such, we as individuals forged within that society, and as social movements built within that done, are also haunted by the ghosts of past struggles, even though we may not know or recognize them. In this sense, we inherit, whether we want to or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, the dreams, hopes, angers and passions of past struggles: they are there amidst the bricks and mortar, the stories, the images, the social norms of our world.

It is fitting to speak of debt today, in a moment when it has become, for many, the key disciplinary whip of an increasingly disorganized, chaotic and decentralized form of capitalism.³¹ As we saw in Chapter 3, the financialization of society is driven largely by the massive expansion of personal and public debt levels, debts typically incurred to pay for services in the gaps left behind by the neoliberal evisceration of the welfare state and the privatization of social life. In other words, debt makes us borrow against our individual, private futures (and, thus, conscripts us further to the capitalist economy) to purchase those things we once provided or held in common (education, health care, housing, etc.). The magic of debt, culturally speaking, is that it privatizes what is in fact a social and common problem, enclosing individuals and their sense of their own self-worth and future potential within a highly isolating and lonely sphere of self-doubt and blame. Debt is construed as a

personal moral failing, even though it represents the backbone of the neoliberal economic system.

For this reason, recent anti-debt campaigners have adopted an anti-colonial struggle developed first in Third World nations' responses to the odious politics of national debts incurred by dictators or through the politics of 'aid' in the post-war period.³² Here, debt is not seen as a matter of individual profligacy and overspending, but is reframed as a systematic weapon intended to reproduce the reigning order. While imperialist nations may point to Third World debt levels as evidence of political and economic instability or immaturity, the radical anti-colonial response was to return the proverbial serve, showing how debt has been used to leverage politicians and whole societies into the reproduction of the world system, forcing Third World nations to adopt disastrous social and economic policies at the expense of their own people, policies which usually result in a net flow of wealth to the imperialist nations. Likewise, anti-debt campaigners in the anglophone North Atlantic have sought to break individuals out of the sense that they are personally responsible for being immature economic subjects and instead show how the debt system forces them in desperation to accept poorly paying jobs or succumb to a sense of lonely isolation.³³

More profoundly, anti-debt campaigners have taken the example of a debt-driven financialized system as an opportunity to draw more radical and revolutionary conclusions and implications. They point out that debt is an ancient human custom across cultures, but that it takes many different forms.³⁴ At its best, debt becomes a means of expressing and understanding social bonds, those links of obligation, respect, relationality and connection that, between them, suspend society.³⁵ Put slightly

differently, the social flow of doing is enabled and enlivened by our debts to one another. That is, the social flow of doing never runs unimpeded but is always shaped by the accumulated ‘done’ of history, by the bonds of memory, obligation, relationality and reliance that make up our world. Debt becomes a radical concept of connection and cooperation. This is not to suggest that we simply accept our credit card debt or student loans as our natural obligation to society, as many free-market pundits would have us believe. Rather, it is to say that the radical imagination and radical possibilities can emerge not simply out of a rejection of all debts (as in some libertarian fantasy of total freedom and no responsibility) but out of a reimagining of debt as the fabric of the commons.³⁶

It is within this frame that I think we can best understand what Benjamin had in mind when he suggested that we have a debt to the past that cannot be settled cheaply. Our debt to the past, of course, cannot be settled at all. We are the product of past labour, past cooperation, past doing. We are what our forebears reproduced. How could such a debt ever be repaid?

The task, then, is not to amortize the debt of history by arriving at some utopia worthy of those labours. This is the hubris of Fukayama and others who assume that our current neoliberal global order is the culmination of history, the end of mass struggle, as good as it will ever get. Rather, answering the debt of history is a matter of *keeping history alive in the present*, of seeking to be true to the subordinated and forgotten dreams of struggles of the past. It is not to freeze history into a set of causes and effects, but to see it as an ongoing process. More concretely, it is about cultivating practices of remembering, and remembering together, in common, that don’t simply

seek to police history or enclose its meanings, but try to open up its meanings and implications for us today. It is to use memory as a means to reweave our social bonds, to 'do' the unending work of building solidarity, and to constantly reproduce our commons, both in the sense of material institutions and relationships and in terms of those more ephemeral and existential things (like memory) that we hold in common.

When Benjamin wrote that the debt of history is not settled cheaply, he left us with a riddle. The debt can never be repaid, except in the act of repaying of the debt.³⁷

Commoning memory

Let's return, then, to the question of rekindling the past radical event in the present. What might it mean to common memory?

As I have indicated, this would not mean an attempt to police history or reconstruct some authoritative version of events, although it may, necessarily, occasionally take the form of books (fiction and non-fiction), documentaries and other durable stories, which transform the 'doing' of memory into the 'done' of history. Yet these cultural forms can be 'done' in such a way as to enable and empower future doing, rather than in ways that police history and enclose its meanings and resonances. Ross's and Passerini's books, each in a unique way, illustrate how this might be accomplished: neither book attempts to offer an authoritative version of the radical event but, instead, seeks to open up the questions of its causes and effects, to shed new light on what we might not have imagined or explored. They do not seek to offer a singular history of the event, but rather open up the event as an opportunity to build

memory in common. They do this not only by interviewing many participants and drawing on many different (sometimes conflicting) sources of historical evidence; they do it by undermining the ideal of a uniformed, enclosed history and by inviting participants (interviewees and readers) to recognize that they are, together, 'doing' memory and building a common history. In this way, these books don't merely reproduce the status quo; they help us recognize and come to terms with the fact that we are reproducing social life together. In other words, at their best, these books (unlike those that police history) do not insist that the present is inevitable, but instead awaken our imaginations to our collective creative potential, and the way this potential is built on past struggles. They awaken us to the debt of history.

This is not the same as suggesting that history is a myth and that, therefore, all voices are of equal weight in the commoning of memory. There remains an important place for the rigours of historical research and the marshalling of reliable evidence, so long as such approaches do not seek to rigidly police history's meaning and so long as they accept their partiality and fallibility. By the same token, just because a space is opened to common memory as a process doesn't mean that all voices are equally true. The history of the events of '68 can be told as a romantic and triumphant narrative, but there is a great deal of value in also hearing about them as the scenes of sexism, racism, oppression, informal hierarchy, interpersonal violence, heartbreak, anxiety, confusion, antagonism and injustice. The promise of commoning memory is that it would open up spaces where we can share and hear the full range of memory, and in so doing come to new understandings of how the present was

reproduced through the actions of the past. This becomes all the more important when we re-remember the confusion, the contradictions and the perpetuation of injustices and exploitations even amidst such events. It means that the practice of commoning memory must begin by privileging and making space and time for those whose voices and memories have been marginalized, policed and enclosed: women, people of colour, indigenous people, trans folks, migrants, those with disabilities. It is in the privileging of these memories and the disjunctive way they interfere with the established, policed narratives (even those that circulate in radical milieus), that the radical imagination can emerge and the practices of memory can be opened up to enable us to reproduce different futures together. In other words, memory is a common 'doing' that creates provisional, changeable and useful 'done' common memories which, in turn, facilitate our future doing based on the values we hold in common.

More practically speaking, commoning memory means the practice of creating and reproducing intentional and well-constructed spaces and times for remembering. All too often, the transmission of memory between individuals, collectivities and generations occurs in a haphazard way, or flows through the formalities of publishing memoirs or other media. Festivals and events to commemorate and highlight history from below can serve as vehicles for commoning memory. But these alone do not fulfil its promise. The commoning of memory also needs to be woven into the fabric of community practice and demands that we develop skills and talents for sharing histories without being didactic, and for hearing and listening without being passive. Just as it is all too easy for recent generations to

imagine that their struggle are fought on a completely different terrain than those of the past, so too is it all too easy for elders to imagine that more recent generations are failing to honour their predecessors or learn the lessons of history. Common memory is not about reconciling these tensions, but about being aware of them, opening them up, making them useful, and recognizing that memory is not about what happened in the past but about how we negotiate the present, and how we, together, shape the future.

Nor should we limit our imagination of memory to the idea that it only encompasses intergenerational tensions. It also animates the processes of 'debriefing' from recent radical events and of building solidarity between communities and across differences. It is a sensitivity to the fact that we all reproduce ourselves and our communities based on the residues of the past, but that those residues are experienced very differently by different people. Once again, such an approach demands a keen and persistent attention to the various forms of privilege and power that intersect us. Our experience of a common radical event will differ by virtue of the way our bodies and our minds are gendered, raced, classed and divided by ability, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality and so on. The practice of commoning memory is not an attempt to synchronize our experiences but to open ourselves up to the breadth of experience. Recalling the event, together, helps us come to terms with our plurality, and to search for the common 'we' nascent among us.

In this sense, commoning memory is not a particular practice or strategy but an orientation, a sensibility or a set of values-in-practice.

Beyond the radical event

The radical event is only the gateway into a broader discussion of the power of memory and its importance to the process and practice of creating the commons and fostering the radical imagination. I have suggested here that the radical event's power stems from the fact that some dimension of it hints at or echoes with the possibility of an unimpeded social flow of doing, or resonates with the incredible power and potential of human cooperation in its rawest form. But it is not only in the radical event that we might glimpse of our power. As Kaplan writes, 'Love can create this feeling, or art.' Perhaps the power of love and art, like the power of the radical event, stems from the way these experiences, while never perfect, in their very imperfections suggest something beyond their particularities and circumstances. As we shall see in the next chapter, we misunderstand creativity and art to the extent that we see them as the singular, eternal and otherworldly manifestation of individual geniuses. As Benjamin reminds us, even the greatest artistic treasures carry, encrypted within them, the residue of history. As other critics note, art requires not only the genius behind the canvas (who is a product of their time and place), but also the creative genius of the audience, who bring with them their own sensibilities created and cultivated within the society of which they are a part. Art, to the extent it moves us, moves us in part because it speaks to the world that brought it into being, and to our own worlds. In it we glimpse not merely the power of the individual, but the power of social cooperation, the social flow of doing, of which the individual artist and their work is a done part. And in this way, the done work of

art becomes part of our doing; it becomes an artefact of our reproduction, as individuals, as communities and as society. This is not to diminish the importance of gifted individuals, nor the profound personal resonance that a given work of art might have within each of us. But it is to say that even these most intimate and personal responses are contextual.

The process of commoning, then, is not only about building alternative structures of social reproduction. It is about a constant work of coming to terms with, of negotiating, of questioning, of unenclosing in our social, psychic and aesthetic life. I would not presume to say anything insightful about love except that recent radical theories of love point to it less as a quality of individual relationships and more as a common horizon.³⁸ Based on the thinking of seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, recent commentators have suggested that a politics of love is not based in some idealistic notion of romantic fulfilment but, instead, emerges from our existence as beings-in-common. That is, a society built on love wouldn't just be about loving one another like some caricature of a hippy commune, but about recognizing that we are all 'always already' helping to reproduce one another in common. Love, then, would be the recognition of this deeper relationality, and the cultivation of practices and processes of care and intentionality amidst it. These practices and processes would imply not only changes to personal outlooks, conduct and relationships, but also changes to the whole economic and social order. In this sense, these approaches have a great deal in common with feminist attempts to reimagine politics in terms that focus our attention on care, collaboration and equality and away from the idioms of competition, individualism and hierarchy which

animate not only the reigning capitalist paradigm but also, all too often, movements of resistance and rebellion too.

In other words, that force (the social flow of doing) that animates the radical event is not limited to that context alone. Yet in the radical event, and perhaps in art and in love, that force is slightly more resonant, slightly closer.

Systems of power are also always systems of forgetting. Capitalism is based on the erasure of the common labour that is necessary to create the commodities that we value and, more broadly, the forgetting of the tremendous power of that common labour and our place, as individuals, within it. For Marx, alienation and 'commodity fetishism' are the process whereby we forget that those things we value in life are, in actuality, the product of our own efforts, and the radical imagination, as such, is a process of remembering that power and potential. Likewise, colonialism is a process whereby we are taught to forget the violent and exploitative origins of our system and come to imagine non-Western societies as impoverished and underdeveloped because of their own cultural latency or retardation. Anti-colonial politics is, in part, a process of common remembering. Likewise, the politics of gender liberation, both in terms of feminist and in terms of queer politics, is based in part on a remembering of human potential in the face of a system that encourages us to forget the ways bodies and relationships are policed through convention and violence. In all these cases, the radical imagination (the subject of Chapter 7) is animated, at its core, by a politics of remembering.