

# Remembering Hope: Transnational activism beyond the traumatic

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/mss](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/mss)**Abstract**

This article argues for the need for memory studies to go beyond its present focus on traumatic memories and to develop analytical tools for capturing the cultural transmission of positivity and the commitment to particular values. Building on an emerging interest in the relationship between memory and activism, it puts its case for a re-orientation of memory studies through a close analysis of the commemoration of the Paris Commune which shows how the festive mode of commemoration itself turned the memory of defeat into a carrier of hope.

**Keywords**

Commune, conviviality, counter-narrativist remembrance, multiscalearity, social movements, civic memory

When memory studies was taking off at the end of the last century, Andreas Huyssen sounded a warning (Huyssen, 2000). He linked the intense societal and academic interest in memory to an inability to imagine the future, ascribing it to the final dissolution in 1989 of the grand narratives that had sustained utopian thinking in the twentieth century. The orientation towards the past went hand in glove with the fear of a future vacuum. Echoing Nietzsche's ([1874] 1997) analysis of the pathologies of historicism in his *Use and Abuse of History for Life*, Huyssen (2000) thus ended his article with an exhortation: 'Perhaps it is time to remember the future, rather than only worry about the future of memory' (p. 38).

Seventeen years on, Huyssen's words have taken on renewed resonance as the word 'future' has started to crop up in memory studies, with volumes like *Memory and the Future* (Gutman et al., 2010) and *The Future of Memory* (Crownshaw et al., 2010) and, more recently, the naming of the foundational event of the international Memory Studies Association as 'Thinking Through the Future of Memory' (Amsterdam, December 2016). The emphasis on 'futurity' on that occasion reflected the institutional need to set out a long-term agenda for the field. But it arguably also reflected a larger cultural turn towards futurity in a post-grand narrative world facing existential threats in the form of climate change, overpopulation and the depletion of natural resources. Fredric Jameson's (2005) *Archaeologies of the Future*, Amir Eshel's (2013) *Futurity* and Arjun Appadurai's (2013) *The Future as Cultural Fact* are indicative of this turn. In memory studies, however, the

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issue of futurity is particularly fraught, since it seems to undercut the very basis of our emerging discipline. As the introduction to *Memory and the Future* puts it: 'For those who study memory, there is a nagging concern that memory studies is inherently backward-looking, and that memory itself – and the ways in which it is deployed, invoked and utilized – can potentially hinder efforts to move forward' (Gutman et al., 2010: 1).

In order to address this 'nagging concern' head-on, rather than brush it under the theoretical carpet, we need to critically scrutinise our understanding of what constitutes memory and what should be the focus of memory studies. As is well known, there has been a close historical relationship between the emergence of the field and the atrocities that have marked recent history. While important work has been carried out within memory studies at large with reference to the practices and psychology of remembrance in more everyday situations, the field of cultural memory studies has unquestionably gravitated towards violence and its collective legacies. It has been dominated by a traumatic paradigm that both responds to, and feeds into, the predominance of mourning and memorialisation in contemporary cultures of memory. The idea put forward by Ernest Renan ([1882] 1947–1961) back in 1882 that 'suffering connects people more than joy' (transl. A.R.), has arguably become a guiding principle, if not indeed, a doxa. As Katriel and Reading (2015) have pointed out, the result has been a habitual and unquestioned focus on violence and victimhood in the exploration of collective memory.

To be sure, there are signs that scholars are slowly beginning to move beyond victimhood as their central operative concept. Recent studies of the figure of the perpetrator (Critchell et al., 2017) and 'implicated subjects' (Rothberg, 2013) are cases in point. But while these offer a welcome extension of the analytical repertoire, they continue to frame memory in terms of violence. History is where it hurts. This also seems to apply to new publications linking memory studies to the Anthropocene and to the long-term history of the planet. Thus Stef Craps (2017) has recently brought the concept of 'proleptic mourning' to the understanding of climate-change fiction. While his focus has shifted to what Craps evocatively calls 'the art of anticipatory memory', the traumatic paradigm of memory remains intact in his analysis of future losses. Going on this evidence, it would seem that cultures of memory – and the study of memory – are set for the foreseeable future to be about the bad stuff. In line with this, Baer and Sznajder (2016) have recently proposed an ethics of remembering in the form of a 'reverse Utopia' (p. 4) that is 'not geared toward the construction of a new man and a new society but toward fending off repetitions of horrific pasts' (p. 6). The future is again imagined in terms of the absence of something bad – *Nunca más, nie wieder*, never again – rather than in terms of the presence of something desirable.

This collective state of depression is arguably a symptom of the more fundamental sea-change marked by Huyssen and more recently by Enzo Traverso (2016): the collapse of the grand narratives that, since the onset of modernity, sustained utopian thinking and trust in the future. Against this background, memory studies as a critical discipline faces the challenge of exploring how the past and present can interact in producing scenarios for the future without falling back into grand narratives, but also without being wedded to the traumatic.

To be sure, there is still a lot of work to be done in understanding how practices of remembrance help with the working through of historical injustice, including atrocities that are now ongoing and set to be the subject of future remembrance. Nevertheless, it is time to think critically about the cost of this apparently natural link between memory and trauma, lest we become definitively locked into it. By now memory studies, because of its investment in the traumatic, has itself become implicated in perpetuating the idea commonly held in public debates that violence is the primary subject of collective memory and grievance the core of identity. More importantly, this fixation on violence forecloses an awareness of alternative modes of remembrance and alternative traditions of recall. More specifically, it leaves memory studies at risk of losing the ability to capture, wherever

it does occur, the transmission of positive forms of attachment. Memory studies is not inherently backward-looking, but may become overly presentist in its outlook if it fails to establish an archive of mnemonic practices that extends beyond current practice and its traumatic horizons. Reframing memory outside the framework of grievance has become all the more urgent at a time of a growing 'paranoid nationalism' that can be seen as a reaction to the 'shrinking' of a society's hopes for a better future (Hage, 2003).

## Hope against hope

By now, memory studies has developed very sophisticated conceptual tools for capturing the interplay between representation and 'unrepresentability' in cases of mass violence and suffering. But we still have a very limited repertoire of tools to capture the transmission of *positivity*, that is, of attachments to objects of value and ideas of the good life – what Sarah Ahmed (2014) calls 'objects of happiness' and Bruno Latour (2004) 'matters of concern'. Thematising such 'happy' memories (Hamilton, 2010) calls for critical concepts to make visible the mechanisms by which positive attachments are transmitted across space and time. If it is true, as Tolstoy suggested at the beginning of *Anna Karenina* (1873–77), that since all happy families are alike, it is the unhappy ones that generate stories, then happiness may be just as *unrepresentable* as traumatic events though for different reasons.

The promotion of a 'positive turn' in memory studies may appear naïve or even misguided in the face of historical injustice. Positivity also has a dubious track record. When linked to memory, it conjures up images of nineteenth-century or socialist realist happy-end monumental histories; the triumphalist mode of remembrance that has given bloated statues and larger-than-life heroes a bad name. So at first sight it seems like we are caught between a rock and hard place; between, on one hand, the danger of seeing memory only as traumatic and hence the legacy of the past as only negative; on the other hand, the danger of 'falling back' into narratives of progress or into an escapist optimism or a paralysing nostalgia. In what follows, I attempt to navigate between these extremes by putting the concept of *hope*, seen by Hage (2003) as the alternative to 'paranoid nationalism', at the centre of my analysis. I adopt Alan Mittleman's (2009) definition of hope as a 'civic virtue' and as a minimum condition for democracy: 'If citizens did not invest some measure of hope into their common institutions and initiatives, liberal society would lose its reason for being and collapse' (p. 12).

There has been a recent surge of scholarly interest, much of it rooted in Marxism, in the nature of hope. The turn to positivity is part of a growing preoccupation across the Humanities with the limits of critique as the terminus ad quem of cultural analysis (see Latour, 2004). It can also be seen as part of a post-1989 and post-2008 attempt to reboot utopian thinking and to grapple again, from a disenchanted perspective, with the legacy of Ernst Bloch's monumental work (see Thompson and Žižek, 2013). Within the broader framework of these discussions, the distinction made by Terry Eagleton (2015) between 'optimism' and 'hope' is particularly useful. Optimism is by definition *facile*, Eagleton argues, the cognitive smokescreen of those who are incapable of envisaging anything other than positive outcomes (see also Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011). In contrast, hope has an anticipatory logic, one that is not based on inevitability, but on mere possibility. It is life-affirming and future-oriented in a *minimalist* way: it indicates an enduring attachment to something of value in face of its present absence and past denial. It is precisely the uncertainty associated with it that invites action: 'Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty there is room to act' (Solnit, 2016: xiv). Seen in this way, hope is a specific 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1970: 128–135) which informs civic action and motivates

the struggle for a better life, if only in the form of small acts of resistance rather than of revolutionary transformations.<sup>1</sup>

While Dr Johnson's famous quip that marriage is the triumph of hope over experience suggests that memory and hope are polar opposites, Eagleton proves a bridge between them: hope is always against hope, and is thus intimately connected to the reality of defeat (Eagleton, 2015: 29). This is echoed in Traverso's reflections on post-1989 'left-wing melancholia'. The core of 'left-wing melancholia' is the acknowledgement of defeat accompanied by a refusal to abandon the struggle by consigning it definitively to the past (Traverso, 2016: 13). In this way, melancholia is construed in positive terms as a historical act of resistance to the march of history that, in future recollections, may provide a source of inspiration for posterity. Drawing inspiration from Walter Benjamin ([1942] 2010), Traverso links left-wing melancholia to a tradition of thinking about time in discontinuous terms, focussing on exceptional moments of possibility which if revisited in recollection can be 'redeemed' as it were, returning afresh as a *Jetztzeit* that stands free of what came later.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, 'the sight of the vanquished is always a critical reminder that things could have gone another way' (R. Koselleck quoted in Traverso, 2016: 13). Traverso's invocation of the Freudian opposition between mourning and melancholia might seem, once again, to gravitate towards the idea that history-is-where-it-hurts; and this is indeed the case. Yet, it also effects a crucial shift since the vocabulary used (defeat, the vanquished) helps to *reframe* historical violence as a *struggle for a cause* rather than as a matter of victimisation; as a matter of civic engagement rather than of paranoia.

Traverso's book is primarily a theoretical intervention that provides little detail on how this oppositional memory has been conveyed across space and time outside the official channels of memorialisation. Issues relating to transmission are central to memory studies, however, and will also be my concern here. The principle of 'differential memorability' (Rigney, 2016) posits that not all events are equally memorable because they do not equally lend themselves to the scarce number of cultural forms we have for talking about them (Rigney, 2005). Bearing in mind Tolstoy's comments on the difficulties of telling stories about happiness, the question arises through what cultural forms and practices has the exercise of hope been made memorable, if at all? And how has that memorability related to the dramatic reality of – often violent – defeat? In what follows I will explore these questions with specific reference to the cultural memory of activism.

In doing so, my analysis aims to extend the horizon of memory studies by offering a point of view outside of the present. It will do this by its thematic focus but also by its historical perspective. Where mainstream memory studies has focussed on the period since World War II, I propose to extend the archive of mnemonic practices on which theorizations are based to the period prior to World War I when the 'traumatic paradigm' arguably first took hold (Winter, 1995). The choice for a historical rather than a contemporary focus is a strategic one and is designed to ensure that theorizations of cultural remembrance are not based on too narrow an empirical range and on amnesia regarding alternative traditions.

## Memory of/with a cause

At first sight memory and activism may seem poles apart, with the former oriented towards the past and the latter towards the future. At second sight, however, they are deeply entangled. The Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, for example, acknowledged the recent Spanish Indignados and the demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square as a model (Castells, 2012). It also evoked the longer term memory of 1968 and of the Paris Commune (Ross, 2015), including a restaging of Brecht's 1948 play *Die Tage der Commune* (Siegert, 1983) that was later remediated as an exhibition and as video.<sup>3</sup> A half-century earlier, activists in 1968 had already invoked the Commune as an inspiration

(Bos, 2014), while the ‘original’ Commune of 1871 saw itself as a restaging of the 1792 Commune that in turn referenced medieval antecedents.

As this example indicates, the memory-activism nexus is a complex one, a vortex of recycling, recollection and political action that can be summed up as ‘civic memory’.<sup>4</sup> In linking activism to memory, this study joins a small, but growing number of publications in the field that have started to map this new research area. While building on these earlier studies, the analysis which follows will examine more systematically what can be called the memory-activism nexus. This means examining the interplay between *memory activism* (how actors struggle to produce cultural memory and to steer future remembrance, as described in Gutman, 2017), the *memory of activism* (how earlier struggles for a better world are culturally recollected, as described in Katriel and Reading, 2015), and *memory in activism* (how the cultural memory of earlier struggles informs new movements in the present, as set out in Eyerman, 2016). To echo Rigney (2016), the memory of a cause plays into memory with a cause, and this yields a complex temporal overlay rather than a linear progression from past to present to future. Remembering the past, shaping the future remembrance of the present, and struggles for a better future feed into each other in ways that still need unpacking along with the distinctive cultural forms and practices that are used in the transmission of civic commitment.

As the concatenating memories of the Commune suggest, the interplay between memory and activism is not a recent phenomenon. Research has indicated that an extensive archive of activist memory going back to the late eighteenth century can be recovered (Roberts, 2013; Tilly, 1995). This would include, for example, *The Commonweal* (1885–1892), the journal of the Socialist League, edited by William Morris between 1885 and 1892. Throughout 1888, *The Commonweal* published a ‘Revolutionary Calendar’, commemorating important antecedents in the socialist cause. It exemplified memory activism in print form. The calendar brought together within the same frame the memory of individual activists, reformers and revolutionaries; the memory of milestones in the realisation of greater liberties and social justice; and the memory of trials and executions bearing testimony to arbitrary rule and the suffering of those who resisted it. Each date is connected to a historical event that occurred on the same date sometime in the past.

In the week ending 24 March 1888, for example, readers are invited on the Sunday to recollect the beginning of the revolution in Berlin in 1848, the beginning of the Commune in Paris in 1871, as well as the death of the ‘Young Germany’ poet Freiligrath in 1876. On Tuesday, the death of Young Irelander John Mitchel is recalled and on Wednesday that of Goethe; Thursday recollects the end of a miners’ strike in Wales in 1873; Friday, the execution of radical journalist Hébert in Paris in 1794. A similar convergence of heterogeneous events and dates can be observed throughout the calendar year. Thus, on Sunday 11 November, readers are invited to remember the execution of Wentworth in 1640, the death of the economist J.R. McCulloch in 1864, the capture of Fenians in 1865 and the ‘murder by law’ of Engels, Fisher, Parsons and Spies in 1887 – the so-called Chicago martyrs whose execution had quickly become a key site of memory among reformers and revolutionaries (Streeby, 2013). Two days later, attention turned to the trial of the Scottish Chartists in 1848, the death of educationalist A.H. Clough in 1861, the trial of the Irish nationalist Pigott in 1871 and, finally, Bloody Sunday when in 1887 a demonstration for civil liberties in Trafalgar Square was violently dispersed.

Morris’ Revolutionary Calendar, modelled on a Chartist Revolutionary Calendar from 1842, is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, there is the temporal overlay of different moments which, thanks to the calendrical form, become retrospectively aligned as prefigurations of the present (though without the overtly Christian connotations of that term). Second, there is the salient presence of moments of defeat presented as sources of inspiration: while the events commemorated include the natural deaths of important figureheads, they pertain above all to trials,

executions and ruptures caused by state intervention foreclosing action. Third, the intersectionality of different causes is highlighted by their being placed in the same frame: civil liberties, workers' rights, Irish nationalism, socialism and anarchism resonate with each other as part of the same struggle. Finally, the calendar articulates a memory that is both localised and highly transnational: it includes French, German, English and Irish topics, but also American and, if other days in the calendar year are included, Italian, Polish, Russian, Austrian and Spanish. In bringing these elements together within the framework of the same calendar, *The Commonweal* used memory to make 'common cause' (Gandhi, 2014) across national borders. That is, it helped to create what I call 'emergent frameworks of memory'; that is, social frameworks (Halbwachs, ([1925] 1994)) that are defined, not by ethnic descent or other inherited identities, but by ongoing acts of affiliation based on common values and aspirations that offer a new perspective on the past.

*The Commonweal* thus illustrates how the remembrance of earlier activism could feed into later struggles. The calendar and related articles continued the work of predecessors by weaving together actions, achievements and defeats into a bigger picture that transcended national borders. Crucially, it mobilised ideas of agency rather than of mere victimhood, with the key actor being the 'active citizen' or what Ahmed (2014) has aptly called 'wilful subjects'. Nor were *The Commonweal's* practices of remembrance limited to paper. Commemoration in print worked in tandem with an intense programme of performances and live assemblies. On 10 November 1888, for example, in the same week that the Chicago martyrs were recalled in the Calendar, a commemorative event took place in Hyde Park at which the American anarchists were publicly remembered together with the victims of Bloody Sunday. Remembrance with and of a cause, the assembly in Hyde Park exemplified the interplay between memory activism and memory in activism: keeping the memory of the dead activists alive was also a renewed demonstration of commitment to civil liberty and of resistance to arbitrary rule.

Nor was this commemoration-cum-demonstration in Hyde Park unique. Since the onset of modern 'cultures of contention' (Tarrow and Tilly, 2015; Tilly, 1995) at the end of the eighteenth century, commemoration and public protest have regularly flowed over into each other, with anniversaries providing an occasion, and sometimes also a legal pretext, for people to take to the streets (see also Leerssen and Rigney, 2014). Many examples can be cited of commemorations that coincided with demonstrations or morphed into protests for related causes. The quinqucentenary of Bannockburn in 1814, for example, took the form of a demonstration of support for the French Revolution (Rigney, 2014); the commemoration of the death of Jan Palach in 1968 and of another student under the Nazi Occupation played into the 1989 Czech Revolution (Solnit, 2000); commemorations of the death of student demonstrator Francesco Lorusso in Bologna in 1977 fed into subsequent protests and renewed demonstrations for social justice (Hajek, 2013); most recently, the Egyptian Spring of 2011 was linked to public recollections of the killing of Khaled Said (Olesen, 2013).

Initial findings indicate that the memory of defeat and martyrdom has played a particular role in mobilising support for fresh demonstrations. Manuel Castells (2012) has argued in *Networks of Outrage and Hope* that outrage (regarding past injustice) and hope (regarding the future) make a powerful combination. The concept of outrage is closely linked to the idea of trauma in the sense that both are responses to injustice. Yet, outrage again frames injustice differently by making *reaction* more salient than the recognition of suffering as such. While Castells' concern was with recent social movements, his claim about the mobilising power of outrage combined with hope can also be applied to the field of remembrance. As I have shown with reference to the global afterlife of Bloody Sunday, massacres of peaceful demonstrators have a high degree of memorability because they melodramatically encapsulate, often in the form of iconic photographs, a structural tension between hope in the possibility of change, on one hand, and outrage at its foreclosure through state violence, on the other (Rigney, 2016).

In what follows, I explore further the interaction between hope and outrage with reference to an event whose concatenating remembrance has already been mentioned: the Paris Commune of 1871.

## Celebrating the commune

The Paris Commune began on 18 March 1871 and collapsed on 28 May of the same year, after its violent repression by government forces in the final *semaine sanglante* that left an estimated 17,000 Parisians dead, thousands deported to New Caledonia and thousands more in exile.<sup>5</sup> The Commune was a highly contested event that generated an enormous amount of commentary on the part of contemporaries, both supporters and opponents, who tried to control its meaning to fit their own political agendas. Important studies have been made of the attempts on the part of opponents of the Commune to define its legacy in terms of horror, with photographs of Paris in ruins presented as the ultimate outcome of anarchy and revolution (see especially Bos, 2014; Coghlan, 2016; Wilson, [2007] 2016). The amnesty subsequently granted to the Communards in 1879 was also aimed at eliding the memory of the Commune by promoting the imagined unity of ‘one France and one Republic’ (Léon Gambetta in Wilson, [2007] 2016: 1). As time passed, the stewardship of the memory of the Commune fell to the various groups (socialist, anarchist, communist) who actively identified with it and whose interest was served by keeping the story alive as a counter-memory.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the intense investment in negative representations characteristic of the early decades seems to have died off by around 1900, though it did not disappear: the intense anti-Communist rhetoric of the earlier years was so powerful that it inflected critiques of 1968 (Ross, 2002: 108).

As Dennis Bos (2014) shows in his richly documented account of long-term patterns, the Commune has been the subject of repeated appropriations over more than a century on the part of various left-wing movements, including official parties attempting to control its legacy and harness its charisma (see also Rebérioux, 1997). It became a point of reference as an ‘anticipatory communal utopia’ (Castells, 1983: 25–26) that exemplified an ecstatic moment of insurgency, a time out of time, a path that was briefly taken. As such it was invoked multi-directionally (Rothberg, 2009) as an event type, entering the ‘figurability of the present’ (Ross, 2015: 2) across the world with reference to events in Cartagena (1873), Mexico (1912), Shanghai (1927), Hungary (1956), Paris (1968), Chile (1973) and New York (2011).<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy as a further illustration of the principle of making ‘common cause’ that recent depictions of the Commune have highlighted its colonial dimensions: thus Peter Watkins’ movie *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* indicates through multiple visual signals the fact that the popular revolt in the French capital coincided with the Kabyle revolt in Algeria, while plays by Kateb Yacine (2004) and Paul Mason (2017) have highlighted the involvement of Louise Michel, one of the figureheads of the Commune, in the anti-colonial struggle in New Caledonia. Much more could be said about the ways in which different groups have sought to shape the meaning of the Commune by reinterpreting and appropriating it from different geopolitical perspectives.

For the purposes of the present argument, however, I want to ponder a general trend: the fact that in its long-term remembrance (if not in its immediate aftermath) the Commune has been a subject for celebration. The annual procession to the *Mur des Fédérés* at the Père Lachaise cemetery in France, where many were executed in May 1871, has been an important feature of the memory of the Commune in France (Rebérioux, 1997). But it is not the only tradition. Despite the Commune having involved such terrible bloodshed, it has been recalled as something positive by those invested in its memory. How to explain the fact that an event which ended in violent repression nevertheless left a hopeful memory rather than a traumatic one? Counterintuitively in view of the violence it unleashed, the Commune became something to be celebrated rather than mourned.

This view was articulated most polemically in the 14 theses *Sur la Commune*, signed on 18 March 1962 by the Situationist International to coincide with the anniversary of the start of the

1871 insurgency, and later published in the final issue of the *Internationale Situationniste* (Debord et al., [1962] 1969). The Situationists conceded that the Commune had been a massive failure in terms of its practical outcome. Nevertheless,

Theoreticians who examine the history of this movement from a divinely omniscient viewpoint (like that found in classical novels) can easily demonstrate that the Commune was objectively doomed to failure and could not have been successfully consummated. They forget that for those who really lived it, the consummation [*le dépassement*] was *already there* [emphasis in original].<sup>8</sup>

This view of the Commune echoes Benjamin's belief that certain moments of exception – his *Jetztzeit* – call a halt to the passage of time. By breaking loose from the continuum of events, they acquire the potential to become retrospectively the beginning of a different history (Benjamin, [1942] 2010). They are memorable in themselves and not because of what happened later. Thus the Situationists recollected the Commune as 'a positive experiment [*une expérience positive*] whose whole truth has yet to be rediscovered and fulfilled' (thesis 4). This mode of recollection challenges one of the central assumptions in memory studies: that memory is transmitted through narrative, the meaning of which is constituted by the ending rather than by the beginning (Kermode, 1967). Instead, the Situationists' recollection of the Commune 'un-does' the work of time and undoes the course of history by ignoring its outcome. The result is a counter-narrativist memory. Crucial in this regard, is the Situationists' linking of the Commune to 18 March (the date of its establishment) rather than to 28 May (the day of its definitive destruction). The preference for 18 March was part of a tradition as we will see, and it represents a specifically utopian mode of counter-narrativist remembrance that refuses to acknowledge what came later and seizes instead on the promise of the beginning and on what Guy Debord and his colleagues called the 'consummation' that 'was already there'.

All of this was crucially linked to the idea that the Commune was *festive* and that the most appropriate way to remember it was through a party. As thesis 2 put it, it was the 'biggest party [*la plus grande fête*] of the nineteenth century' (my translation). Kristin Ross's (2015) *Communal Luxury* has evoked the legacy of the Commune in similarly positive terms, linking it to the memory of the sharing of food and 'the sensual detail of a transformed everyday' (114). She explains this association by the fact that the Commune had not only succeeded in its first days and weeks in organising communal meals for a population on the brink of starvation, but that it had also successfully unleashed the belief that a more beautiful life – what she calls 'communal luxury' – was actually possible. Ross's highly original book is primarily concerned with reinterpreting the Commune as it unfolded in 1871 and with showing how it fed into various contemporary utopian projects to which the idea of a 'transformed everyday' was central.

I contend, however, that in order to explain why the Commune came to be remembered as a 'party' or 'festival', it is not enough to analyse the Commune itself as it unfolded in history. Attention also needs to be paid to the modes of transmission of its memory: how the hope it mobilised was carried over in the years *after* 1871. As Ross (2015) notes in passing, but without providing much detail, the Commune was remembered by its supporters in a predominantly celebratory mode (pp. 96–99). More recent studies have mapped the extent and nature of these celebrations, showing how in the decades after 1871, a vibrant commemorative culture emerged in which the beginning of the Commune was annually celebrated on 18 March (see especially Bos, 2014; Coghlan, 2016). Some of these celebrations took place in Paris despite public restrictions prior to the amnesty of 1879 on demonstrations of pro-Communard sympathies (Rebérioux, 1997). But the transnational distribution of the celebrations is especially remarkable, even as it begs the question of whether distance from the violence of 1871 might not have helped enhance the imaginative



charge of events in Paris for those located elsewhere. Be this as it may, annual celebrations of 18 March were certainly widespread in Europe and the Americas up to World War I, after which they became slowly sidelined by more recent events, including the first ‘successful’ Revolution in Russia. These annual Commune celebrations did not happen in isolation, but should be seen as part of the larger culture of commemoration, signalled earlier with reference to *The Commonwealth*, in which activist memory was kept alive by groups committed to intersecting causes and with a strong sense of international solidarity.<sup>9</sup> By the time the Situationist International proclaimed it the ‘biggest party of the nineteenth century’, the Commune had acquired a cumulative cultural presence – or what Gadamer (1960) would have called a *Wirkungsgeschichte* – through the reiterations of these annual celebrations.

In the first decades after 1871, celebrations of the Commune generally took the form of meetings, with speeches commemorating the Communards, but also music, eating, communal singing, games and dancing. In the immediate aftermath of the Commune when a virtual *damnatio memoriae* was still in force in the French public sphere, small-scale local commemorations took place in Paris in the form of communal meals that were themselves performative recollections of similar meals organised during the Commune itself (Rebérioux, 1997: 536). Michelle Coghlan writes with reference to the United States of the ‘annual cycle of lavish festivals, complete with oratory, tableaux vivants, music and dancing, that postbellum radicals staged each year to celebrate the start of the uprising’ (Coghlan, 2016: 82). Bos (2014) describes the celebration in Chicago in 1884 as involving a mass picnic at the lake, shooting competitions, lots of beer and music (p. 460; see also Goyens, 2007).<sup>10</sup> Reports indicate that these events were less about mourning the end of a dream than about coming together in the here and now to make common cause with each other and with the Communards. They brought together in emergent social frameworks local activists and foreigners from different countries whose political beliefs had driven them into exile. Those exiles included Communards, most notably Louise Michel, who attended various meetings as the living embodiment of the continuity between 1871 and the present moment (Bos, 2014: 769–777). In 1880, the anarchist Peter Kropotkin evoked the sense of connectedness generated by such occasions:

And yet it is still towards that date of March 18, 1871, that we turn our gaze, it is to it that our best memories are attached; it is the anniversary of that memorable day that the proletariat of both hemispheres intends to celebrate solemnly, and tomorrow night hundreds of thousands of workers’ hearts will beat in unison, fraternizing across frontiers and oceans, in Europe, in the United States, in South America, in memory of the rebellion of the Paris proletariat. (Kropotkin, 1971: n.p.)

The ‘beating in unison’ of hearts was no mere turn of phrase: evidence indicates that physical togetherness and conviviality – even touch – were central to the celebration of the Commune.<sup>11</sup> It was through embodied performance – often literally through eating and singing – that its legacy was recalled, reiterated and, to recall the Situationists, pleurably consummated. A late echo of this ‘sensational internationalism’ (Coghlan, 2016) can arguably be found in Karen Blixen’s (1958) story *Babette’s Feast*, where a Communard refugee to Denmark blows all her money on cooking a fantastic meal for her local friends; both the quality of the food and the fact of sharing it create an unforgettable moment in which history is suspended (Dinesen, 2013).

Using communal pleasure as a carrier of memory was not unique to the commemoration of the Commune. Ever since the first anniversary of the Taking of the Bastille, commemorative festivals had been an important feature of the revolutionary tradition (Ozouf, 1976), and communal banquets had also been a prominent feature of 1848 across Europe (Goldstein, 1983; also Roberts, 2013). The importance of eating, drinking and singing has been shown with reference to the annual commemorations of the radical poet Robert Burns and the argument advanced that

'embodied communities' at local level have long formed a counterpart to large-scale imagined communities (Rigney, 2011). The importance of conviviality to these movements illustrates the pleasure of politics (Hamilton, 2010): at such moments, social harmony is not just an abstract ideal but a lived experience.

The celebrations of Burns and the Commune were also similar in combining embodied co-presence with the sense of being part of a transnational community. Reflecting the multiscale of memory production (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014), embodied conviviality worked together with mediated networking. Telegrams were regularly exchanged as a way of confirming the sense that like-minded spirits were celebrating the same thing at the same time, but at multiple locations:

The working-men the civilised world over have been this week celebrating the Paris Commune. ... [A]t the Store Street Hall on Monday night, telegrams and letters of sympathy and greeting were read from Brussels; the National Committee of the French Workmen's Party, Paris; the Socialistic Labour Party, New York; the Federation of Socialists, Paris; Ireland (two); Glasgow, Dundee, and Edinburgh; Ryde, Isle of Wight, Birmingham (two), Hull, Norwich, Bolton, Nottingham, and others. (*Commonweal*, 24 March 1888.)

In a temporal overlay, these celebrations were thus pleasurable in themselves, commemorative of earlier moments and a hopeful prefiguration of future reiterations. As Eleanor Marx recalled the first anniversary of the Commune: 'despite the tragic horrors of that terrible year ... we were a merry party'.<sup>12</sup> The annual ritual of celebrating the Commune provided a framework for re-enacting hope through conviviality in a way that ensured its survival. This survival was not at a grand scale, to be sure, but was no less significant for its being carried, and hence reinvigorated, in the conviviality of small groups of activists.

## In conclusion

As my analysis has shown, the fact of loss and of bloodshed did not in itself dictate the memory of the Commune. This was the outcome, not only of what happened between March and May 1871, but of the cultural practices used in its transmission and the affective investment of those doing the remembering. Ernst Bloch once described hope in terms of 'the still undischarged future of the past' (in Eagleton, 2015: 32). I have shown how the 'still undischarged future of the past' could return as pleasurable practices of remembrance that were at once highly localised in their execution and transnational in their reach. In this case, the act of remembrance itself worked as counter-history. Such counter-historical practices and the emergent social frameworks they helped create among 'wilful subjects' trying to change the world have been occluded by the current overemphasis on memory as a matter of loss, victimisation and grievance. This case study will need to be expanded with reference to other cases and, more generally, to the historical interplay between commemoration and activism. But at the very least Renan's claim that suffering connects people more than joy stands challenged.

## Notes

1. This understanding of hope differs from that of Baer and Sznajder (2016), who emphasise not the possibility of a potential being realised, but the possibility of a negative condition being averted.
2. Traverso both claims that the memory of struggle was definitively destroyed in 1989 and dialectically challenges this claim by the work of recuperating left-wing memory, especially the work of Benjamin, which his own book performs.
3. *Days of the Commune* was directed as street theatre by Zoe Beloff, recordings of which were later made available on vimeo ([www.vimeo.com/55209376](http://www.vimeo.com/55209376)); the project also became the subject of an installation at the Slough Foundation, Philadelphia in May 2011; see <http://daysofthecommune.com/>

4. Among social movement scholars too, there is a growing interest in cultural memory with a specific concern with its impact on collective action: see Anton, 2016; Doerr, 2014; Harris, 2015.
5. Estimates of the death toll for the *semaine sanglante* have varied; the current consensus puts it at 17,000 (Merriman, 2014: 250). This analysis of the Commune is greatly indebted to discussions with the graduate students who followed my seminar on *Remembering Activism* in 2016–2017: Tom Browne, Maria Dijkgraaf, Susanne Duindam, Clara Vlessing and Samira Walle.
6. This may reflect a general principle in the politics of memory since a similar pattern has been noticed in the case of the Suffragettes: it is the view of themselves they promoted, and not that of their opponents, which ultimately prevailed in cultural memory; see Ongersma, 2016.
7. For details on Cartagena, Shanghai, Hungary and Chile, see Bos (2014: 1222); on Mexico, see Coghlan (2016: 104); on 1968, see Ross (2002) and <http://www.commune1871.org/?Mai-68-Memoire-de-la-Commune> (accessed 18 June 2017); regarding 2011 see especially Coghlan (2016: 1–10).
8. Translation from <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SL/Pariscommune.htm>
9. In Amsterdam in 1932, the annual commemoration was used to express support for blacks persecuted in Alabama; in later years, for solidarity with anti-colonial movements in Indonesia; see Bos (2014: 865–866).
10. As late as 1925 a multimedial pageant of the Paris Commune was organised in New York; Coghlan (2016: 130–131); for comparable events, see also Streeby (2013).
11. On touch, see Bos (2014: 862). On ‘conviviality’ as an alternative to grand narratives, see also Gilroy (2004).
12. Letter by Eleanor Marx, 17 March 1893, quoted in Bos (2014: 649–650). See also *Mother Earth* (1908): ‘and joyfully, hopefully the workers of to-day honor the memory of the heroes of the past, and prepare to emulate their example’ (quoted in Bos, 2014: 827).

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