

Thinking through time: From collective memories to collective futures

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Abstract

In this chapter I look at the links between collective memory and the imagination of collective futures. Drawing on works on imagination and autobiographical memory, I first discuss the role of past experiences in imagining the future. I then explore the consequences of such a perspective for collective memories and collective futures, which will lead me to argue that the former provides the basis for the latter. Three case studies are presented, each illustrating a different type of relation between collective memory and collective imagination: 1) collective memory as a frame of reference to imagine the future; 2) collective memory as a source of experiences and examples to imagine what is likely, possible or desirable; and 3) collective memory as generalisable experience from which representations of the world – Personal World Philosophies – are constructed and in turn used to imagine the collective future. This will lead me to the conclusion that representations of the world are characterised by “temporal heteroglossia”, the simultaneous presence of multiple periods of time, and that they mediate the relation between collective memory and collective imagination, allowing us to “think through time”.

Introduction

“It is change, continuing change, inevitable change, that is the dominant factor in society today. No sensible decision can be made any longer without taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be. [...] This, in turns, means that our statesmen, businessmen, our every men must take on a science fictional way of thinking.”

Asimov, 1978, p. 6

Being able to imagine the future, in a world in constant change, is more than a necessity for action. Imagining where society might be going or should be going can shed new light on the present: imagining, for instance, a world where men and women are fully equal can highlight the road left to travel and what remains to be done, while imagining the consequences of climate change can be a powerful drive to rethink our relation to the environment. The way we imagine collective futures – a form of political imagination (de Saint-Laurent & Glăveanu, in press; Glăveanu & de Saint-Laurent, 2015) – is thus of tremendous importance to understand how we act as members of society and how we represent the

world we live in. However, as we do for our personal lives, we do not imagine where we may be going solely based on inferences made from the present; we build on past experiences to construct a plausible image of what the future might hold. In the case of collective futures, then, this implies that the way we represent history – our collective memory – plays a fundamental role in the way we can imagine the future. It is precisely this relation between collective memory and imagination of the collective future that this chapter sets to explore.

Memory and imagination

The deep links between memory and imagination can be summarised by the idea of “Mental Time Travel”, as proposed by Tulving (2002). For him, memory and imagination both grant us the uniquely human ability to mentally travel through time, to experience events that are not anymore or that have not yet been. Although the notion of mental time travel is problematic in more than one respect – I will come back to this in the conclusion – it remains that imagination and memory are deeply associated processes: whether it is because they both involve scene construction (Mullally & Maguire, 2013), interacting with distal experiences (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015), or moving away from the present (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010), these processes are similar in many ways. To the point that some have gone to suggest that this is because they are one and the same process (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015), highlighting the complex relation between the two.

On the one hand, imagination does rest on past experiences: memory provides the ‘material’ transformed by imagination to produce something new (Vygotsky, 2004; Zittoun & de Saint-Laurent, 2015). Indeed, although we often suppose that children’s imagination is the most fertile, it is not the case: experiences add content, thickness and richness to our imagination, and children’s play cannot rival, for instance, with the works of proficient science fiction authors (Vygotsky, 1931). Furthermore, some types of imagination that anticipate the future can take the form of reminiscence of a past that is directly relevant to the situation, what Mattli, Schnitzspahn, Studerus-Germann, Brehmer, & Zöllig (2014) have called “prospective memory”. Finally, some imaginations can become so rehearsed that they blur the line with memory. It is the case, for instance, of some imaginations of the future during adolescence that are engaged with regularly as one plans for one’s life (Zittoun & de Saint-Laurent, 2015).

On the other hand, memory is not the mere repetition of the past but a reconstruction (Bartlett, 1932) that requires some form of imagination (de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press). This is because memory is not ultimately oriented towards the past, but towards the future: it allows us to adapt to what is and what will be by flexibly reconstructing past experiences (Bartlett, 1932). This prospective function of memory, nowadays considered its most important one (Dudai & Carruthers, 2005; Schacter & Addis, 2007), has been mainly studied in relation to autobiographical memory. It has been found, for example, that remembering one’s life gives it direction (Habermas, 2012); that autobiographical memory and future imagination develop in parallel and interdependently (D’Argembeau, 2012); or

that there is a continuity, for instance, between the way parents remember their past and imagine the future of their children (Cole, 2007). Moreover, memory itself can be imaginative: giving meaning to the past and integrating experiences in a coherent narrative also involves taking distance from what happened in a way that is very similar to the work of imagination (de Saint-Laurent, 2017b; de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press).

What transpires from memory and imagination research is that one of the primary functions of memory is to provide material for imagination and to help us anticipate the future. Furthermore, imagination as a process participates in the reconstructive nature of memory. How does this, however, apply to collective memory and collective imagination?

Remembering history and imagining the future

Before we turn to the relations between collective memory and collective imagination, it is important to make clear what we mean by ‘collective’. In both cases, the ‘collective’ aspects can refer to two different dimensions: memory or imagination can be about collective events or societal issues (e.g., remembering WWII or imagining alternatives to a political regime), or the dynamics underlying them can themselves be collective (e.g., remembering with friends where you were when you learned about 9/11 or imagining with colleagues the future of your organisation). Although one does not exclude the other, this chapter focuses more directly on the former, considering that imagination and memory are in any case social and cultural activities (de Saint-Laurent, 2017a; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). This means, however, that collective memory is not directly a mnemonic activity, as it does not exclusively concern *our* past but the past in general (de Saint-Laurent, 2017a). How do collective memory and collective imagination relate to each other in this context?

In collective memory studies, it is generally considered that representations of history shape how the collective future is imagined (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016), although little attention has been given to how and whether this actually takes place (Merck, Topcu, & Hirst, 2016). There have been, however, a few notable exceptions. Bresc  (2017, this volume), for instance, has adapted Cole's (2007) ideas on prolepsis to collective memory, to argue that it is the stories we tell about the past that in themselves ‘announce’ what will come next, a form of “end into the beginning” (Bresc , 2017) due, among other things, to the way we anticipate the end of stories with a well known narrative frame. Szpunar & Szpunar (2016), on the contrary, have argued that although collective memory serves as the basis for collective imagination, the relation is not unidirectional: the way we understand the past is shaped by how we imagine the future. They explain how, for instance, imagining a future characterised by technological progress vs. by pollution changes how people represent the invention of the car, either as a major progress or as the origin of unprecedented pollution. Such a mechanism has also been used in political campaigns, where the past is presented in such a way that it justifies the future candidates' vision (de Saint-Laurent, Bresc , Awad, & Wagoner, 2017)

Studies of collective memory from a sociocultural perspective have also focused on the role of imagination in remembering, insisting on the constructive – and creative – aspects of collective memory (Wagoner, 2017). Understanding global events, for which we often have only partial and indirect accounts, does involve some form of collective imagination to fill in the gaps of experience (de Saint-Laurent & Glăveanu, in press; Glăveanu & de Saint-Laurent, 2015). Moreover, imagining how one would have acted during historical events, or how it was like to live in a different period, participates in the creation of a sense of connection with the past and plays an important role in how it is represented (de Saint-Laurent, submitteda).

There have been, on the other hand, very few studies of collective imagination (Merck et al., 2016), and even fewer on the links between collective imagination and collective memory (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016). Nonetheless, we can infer from the existing literature on memory and imagination in both their individual and collective forms that: 1) collective memory (at least) sometimes relies on collective imagination (e.g., imagining how life was at a certain period of time); 2) collective memory provides the basis for collective future imagination (e.g., providing the experiences from which to imagine what could be possible for future societies), and 3) that collective future imagination in turn shapes how the past is remembered (e.g., by making some aspects of the past more relevant than others). It is on these two last points that the rest of this paper will focus (the first observation will be treated elsewhere; de Saint-Laurent, submitted). In particular, I will attempt to answer the two following questions: how does collective memory participate in the imagination of collective futures? And how does the resulting imagination affect how the collective past is remembered?

Collective memory to imagine collective futures

In order to better understand how collective memory provides the basis for how we imagine collective futures, I propose to now look at three cases illustrating different relational dynamics between these two processes. The cases come from previous studies that primarily focused either on collective memory and yet where collective imagination also played a central role. For the purposes of this chapter, a secondary analysis was carried out, looking at how collective memory is mobilised to imagine what the collective future will be or should be. Three main dynamics emerged: 1) history as a frame of reference, determining the main actors and the roles they should play in the future; 2) history as a source of experiences and examples from which we can draw to imagine what is likely, possible or desirable; and 3) history as generalisable experience from which global representations of the world can be built, which in turn inform the imagination of collective futures. Although these dynamics can be found in all three cases, albeit unequally, they are each illustrated in what follows with reference to the case they feature in most prominently.

Frames of reference in Parliamentary debates on immigration

The first role that collective memory can play for the imagination of collective futures is that of a frame of reference. Indeed, understanding the past as the interactions between different national groups that have at times cooperated and at others been at war will make it likely that the future is imagined as involving national states as central actors and their changing interactions as the main events. Understanding, on the contrary, nation states as a recent historical development, and thus their role as transient, will probably lead to a very different imagination of the future, possibly without nations but with very different actors. This is, for instance, what made Foucault's method so successful (e.g., Foucault, 1993): discussing the historical roots of categories that seem to us natural makes it possible to imagine a world without them, for they have not always been there. More generally, however, collective memory provides frames that determine what is 'normal', expected and possible, whether it is in terms of actors, events or the general circumstances of life. Using collective memory to frame the future does not mean, however, imagining the future as a perpetual repetition of the past, but quite the contrary: ideas of progress, evolution or development (as well as their opposites) are not only historically rooted but often used to organise the past as a crescendo (or diminuendo) that culminates in the more or less distant future.

One particularly prominent way in which the past frames the future is through the use of *grand narratives*, which are highly general historical narratives that cover broad periods of time (de Saint-Laurent, 2014). They differ from the *narrative templates* often found in collective memory: narrative templates are general story lines repeated over multiple historical events (Wertsch, 2008), while *grand narratives* are storylines used to bring together a multitude of events often spanning centuries. The narrative of scientific progress, for instance, is a *grand narrative* that can be made to start as early as Antiquity and that presides over the organisation of many 'sub-stories' about science. Although they are quite close to the notion of *charters* (Liu & Hilton, 2005), they diverge from them in the sense that *charters* are supposed to determine and underlie – in an almost unconscious way – how the past, present and future are understood, while *grand narratives* are general storylines constructed in discourse and mobilised in certain contexts for specific purposes.

Grand narratives were found, for instance, in a previous study on the use of collective memory in political discourses on immigration (de Saint-Laurent, 2014). This study explored the references made to history by French politicians during the parliamentary debates that led to the adoption of the 2006 bill on "Immigration and Integration". In particular, it examined how the way different political groups represent the past of the country changes how they see the nation and who should be part of it. Although the original analysis stopped there, it is possible to see how such representations change politicians' imagination of the future of the nation, particularly regarding immigration. This is reflected in the way they position themselves towards the bill and its many amendments. How do the *grand narratives* proposed by politicians, then, frame how they imagine the collective future?

In these parliamentary debates, two main grand narratives emerged, representing each side of the political spectrum, and both narrating the history of France since the Revolution. On the left side of the political spectrum (Socialists and Radical Left), the main narrative is one of on-going political struggle between ‘humanists’ and their opponents. This position is well illustrated in the following excerpt¹:

Jean-Pierre Brard (Radical Left): “Really, two Frances are in confrontation, as throughout History: the one of Coblenz against the one of the Revolution; [...] The one that supported Franco, Salazar, Mobutu (protestations on the Right’s benches) against the one that defended Grimau, Cunhal, Lumumba²,... [...] the France that supported the colonial wars against the France in solidarity with the oppressed populations! [...] We will fight you with every fibre and ounce of strength we have!” [02.05.2013, third session]

One of examples of such struggles evoked frequently in the debates and concluding this quote is colonisation. Many comparisons are also made between the Right’s desire to select immigrants based on “competencies and talents” and slavery or the WWII Vichy regime. However, the references to colonisation are the ones that the Members of Parliament (MPs) link most directly with how they envision the future of the country with regard to immigration. This is made clear, for instance, in an intervention from the same deputy, the next day:

Jean-Pierre Brard (Radical Left): “When I fight against your bill, I am faithful to my anticolonial tradition. That others remain faithful to the opposite tradition, agreed, but they must take responsibility for it! When you see the state of the countries who have been victims of colonisation [...] we evidently understand that France has a duty to redress the wrongs done and a duty of solidarity.” [03.05.2006, first session]

The Left’s representations of history define the main actors of history: humanists, oppressors, and victims. These are ‘traditional’ positions they wish to preserve, although with the hope that the humanists will win: there is a duty to redress, in the future, what was done.

The Right’s narrative of French history paints a quite different picture: it presents the French nation as the product of the Enlightenment philosophy, and more specifically as the result of

¹ All the transcripts come from the French Parliament website. The only additions are the political inclination in brackets after the name of the speaker, and [...] to signal that parts of the quote were removed to shorten it, although always while being careful not to alter meaning. Political affiliations were simplified for clarity (see de Saint-Laurent, 2014, for full details). All the transcripts are identified by date and parliamentary session, and all the translations were made by the author.

² All the names in the quote work in opposite couples, one representing humanist ideals and the other their oppressors. The original quote, rather long, can be found in de Saint-Laurent, 2014, and includes more of such oppositions.

a form of Republican or civic pact concluded between the citizens of the country. This is made especially clear when they argue for the bill they proposed. This “Immigration and integration” bill, discussed in these debates, was centred on two main proposals: prioritising immigration from “talented” people and creating an “Integration contract” immigrants would have to sign upon arrival, insisting on the need to learn French and to respect French values. In order to justify their positions, several right winged MPs referred to Enlightenment philosophers, and in particular Rousseau. One left winged MP argued that Rousseau would have been against these “integration contracts”, as he believed in the good nature of people, and here is how a right winged deputy clarified his position:

Christian Vanneste (Right): “Reread Rousseau! [...] It is precisely the social contract that is at the basis of good societies.” [04.05.2006, first session]

Similarly, when the Left reacted to the Right’s desire to prioritise “talented” immigrants – comparing it to a colonial plundering – here is how a right winged MP responded:

Thierry Mariani (Right): “Please allow me to remind you of the Article VI of a text you will probably recognise: ‘Law is the expression of the general will. [...] All citizens being equal in its eyes, they are equally admissible for all dignities, places and public employment, without any other distinctions than their virtues and talents.’ This is the Article VI of the Declaration of Human and Citizen Rights, dating from 1789. The idea isn’t new!” [04.05.2006, third session]

What they propose is a narrative that puts the French Revolution and its constitution – product of the Enlightenment – at the root of the French nation. If a Republican pact is what founded the country, and if this pact is now in danger because newcomers do not respect the “French values”, then a simple way to protect the country in the future is to ask immigrants to agree to such a pact. By the same token, it becomes acceptable – reasonable, even – to select only those deemed worthy of becoming part of this social contract.

In both of these examples, we can see how a broad historical narrative frames what kind of future can be imagined. In the first case, for the Left, the past tells a story of struggle between humanists and their opponents, who oppress populations for their own interest. The future, then, can only be imagined in terms of either reparation for the victims, which would mean a victory for the humanists, or as a continuation of the wrongs done – something comparable to past oppressions, such as colonial plundering and slavery – and thus a victory for their opponents. In the case of the Right, the *grand narrative* tells the story of a contract signed between different parties who wished to live together. Newcomers, then, have a duty to respect such a pact if they wish to join the country, because not doing so would threaten the future of the nation: without a social contract, we cannot be a “good society” anymore. In conclusion, the historical narratives found in these parliamentary debates frame the future, but they also make it look like the logical conclusion to the story being told. However, supposing that collective memory does more, in this case, than give

general lines – a frame – would be forgetting that these accounts were also constructed by the participants to justify the policies they were advocating for. Looking at how politicians referred to the French revolution elsewhere, for instance, revealed that although the general frame remains the same, the specifics of the story are adapted to the needs of the situation (de Saint-Laurent, 2014).

Analogies in historical reasoning

The second role collective memory plays for collective imagination is to provide examples and experiences from which to infer what is possible, probable or desirable for the future. Although there are many ways to build on past events to imagine possible future outcomes, one of the most frequent one is through the use of *historical analogies*. Analogies work by using a source, that is usually well known, and mapping out the similarities with a target – usually less known – in order to infer things about the target (Holyoak, 2005). They are thus particularly adapted to infer things about the future (the target) by mapping out similarities between the present and a past situation (the source), and looking at how the events unfolded in the past to predict what might happen. Research on the topic has found that we do use historical analogies to draw conclusions about present situations (Spellman & Holyoak, 1992), but it has not looked at how they are used to imagine the future. What has been found, however, is that although people are not always very efficient in finding analogies, they are very good at mapping existing ones (Holyoak, 2005). Once given an analogy between WWII and the first Gulf War, for instance, research participants were easily able to map out the correspondence between the two situations, although they did not all do so in the same way (Spellman & Holyoak, 1992).

In our own research, we found that historical analogies are very frequently used to infer information not only about the present and the future, but also about the past itself. Indeed, people employ historical analogies to reason about history, what I have termed elsewhere *historical reasoning* (de Saint-Laurent, submitted a, submitted b). This process does not only allow people to infer information about less known targets, but, perhaps more importantly, to transfer *meaning* from one event to the other, using history as a form of *symbolic resource* (Zittoun, 2006; Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Iverson, & Psaltis, 2003). For instance, in the examples presented in the previous section, comparing the bill proposed to slavery and colonisation is not just done to imply that it would have disastrous consequences were it to be adopted, but mainly to give value and sense to what is being done: a horribly wrong policy for which future generations will judge us. And although such processes are present in all three cases presented in this paper and used for quite various purposes, they become especially salient in cases where, similarly to the example above, participants are imagining where a present situation might lead.

And indeed, in a research on historical reasoning (de Saint-Laurent, submitted a, submitted b), analogies were regularly used by the participants to infer about the present and the future.

In this study, using a qualitative and dialogical experiment, participants from Poland were asked to react to statements about the Ukrainian conflict, illustrating different perspectives on the situation (see de Saint-Laurent, submittedb for a full description). One of the vignettes was about the presence of Russian soldiers in Ukraine, to which one of the participants replied by saying that she thinks Russia is invading Ukraine, and that people call Putin the “new Hitler”. I then asked:

C: where did you hear people call him “new Hitler”? Is it something that people say here?

I: yes, yes, and I heard it from some people, we... Often also on TV people compare Hitler and compare what happened before Second World War and compare the lack of reaction of other countries, of Alliance and it's very often said here that it's, it's new Hitler and it may be the same scenario, like... and I'm very, very afraid about it. And also my mother often recalls how her mother told that for years before the war, people were talking about war. And also in books like *Gone with the wind*... I remember Scarlett O'Hara says boys you are boring, you talk about the war all the time and it's not the war, yet. But they are talking, and talking and... I feel it's what we do now, we talk... We observe in the news and we are almost bored with news from Ukraine. But it happens and it's closer and closer to our borders and borders of European Union and I wonder what must happen to make us reacting and I'm afraid it will be too late to react. If we react. [...] I'm afraid it's the beginning, I hope it will be not the war as World War would be much quicker than Second World War and with nuclear weapons it would be quick and rather many people would die immediately. [...] I don't know but I'm afraid it will be that. The war.

In this excerpt, the participant uses the analogy proposed between Putin and Hitler to more broadly compare the situation in Ukraine with World War II. These successive analogies lead her to conclude that World War III may be coming, because of the similarities between what she knows of the discourses before World War II, the American Civil War, and the current situation. Four elements are particularly striking here. First, the interviewee refers to several historical analogies – Putin/Hitler, pre-WWII/discourses on Ukraine, *Gone with the Wind*/discourses on Ukraine – illustrating how widespread the use of analogies is, and how easily they can be mobilised and combined. Second, she borrows from different sources – books, TV, family narratives – either using the analogies proposed by others (for the comparisons with WWII) or that she constructs herself (*American Civil War*), showing once more their frequency and flexibility. Third, the use of analogies is in itself never justified by the participants, neither here nor in any of the data collected: although people do discuss and contest the use of specific analogies, the process is never questioned in itself. Fourth, the analogies are not just used to imagine what may happen, but also to “learn” from the past

what course of action may be desirable and thus to transfer meaning from one event to the other: when she compares the reactions of the European Union with the ones of the Allies during World War II, she is not just anticipating what may happen, but also, implicitly, how our own (lack of) actions may be judged in the future.

What we can conclude from this example is that collective memory provides a breadth of experiences from which people can draw to imagine the future, in particular by finding analogies between the past and the present and mapping out their consequences. These analogies allow the transfer of information between a past event and an unfolding one, but also of meaning and value. Indeed, history does not only provide examples of how things went in the past, but also of how, with time and distance, we came to judge what happened.

Generalisations: metamemory and Personal World Philosophies

The third way in which collective memory participates to the imagination of collective futures is through the generalisation from past events into *metamemory* or *Personal World Philosophies*. In the first case, representations of history are used to develop a general understanding of how collective memory works (de Saint-Laurent, 2017c). This is, for instance, what expressions such as “those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it” capture. Second, collective memory can be used to develop *Personal World Philosophies* (PWP). The term is derived from the notion of *Personal Life Philosophies* (PLP), which are maxims, philosophies and other wisdoms that people generalise from their life experiences. Although they often take the form of culturally shared ideas (such as “actions speak louder than words” or “after a storm comes a calm”) these become PLP when they take on a personal meaning for people, through life experiences (Zittoun et al., 2013). PWP work in a similar way: they are general understandings of the way the world works derived from past historical events and social experiences. They usually refer to commonly shared ideas about the world, but also take on a more or less personal form. For instance, one can generalise from history that “man is a wolf for man” (shared representation) or that, as one of our research participants did, wars were started when there was a deficit of jobs or of women (more unique construction). These beliefs are in turn used to imagine the future: in the first case, the future will necessarily be imagined in terms of violent relations between people; in the second, our participant imagined that a war would necessarily happen with China, because they had a “dude overpopulation”.

This second example comes from a study on people’s relation to history, where participants were asked, among other things, to describe their relation to history and how it had changed over time (de Saint-Laurent, in press, 2017c, 2017b). One of the final questions asked the participants to imagine where they thought the world was going. This is were Robert³, in the example above, explained being afraid of a war with China and justified his answer with the

³ All names have been changed.

idea that wars were started by unbalanced populations and by low employment rates. Another participant, Marc, replied to this question by saying that we are heading “straight into a wall”. When asked what would cause it, here is what he responded:

Marc: I think the economic stakes, and I think that the Middle Ages are a bit of a [...] turning point where ideals shifted. I don’t remember who said that but [...] let’s say that man before the Middle Ages is Homo Politicus. And after that, he truly becomes Homo Economicus. And I think we are still in this history primarily governed by trade. [...] I have the impression that maybe through trade we don’t have anymore the question of how to live together. Maybe during Antiquity we were wondering about living together. [...] It was not all pink, but we were thinking about it, and I have the impression that since the Middle Ages what connects us is only trade. [...] I don’t know where it’s going but [...] Maybe if we discovered another planet, for instance with other living people, who would not necessarily be human but who would have a conscience like us, maybe at the beginning we would wonder about how to live together, you see? We are here, in the Universe, but we are two now. And maybe once we would have found a kind of a compromise between our forms of intelligent life, maybe then we would start having commercial relations, and then, maybe at one point one would need to dominate the other or I don’t know.

In this excerpt, Marc proposes a very general understanding of history: while during Antiquity we wondered about how to live together, since the advent of trade in the Middle Ages mercantile relations are what characterises humanity. This representation of the world is shared with others (“I don’t remember who said that”) and yet Marc appropriated it (“Let’s say that...”) in a way that allows him to think about the world and its future, fitting our above description of PWP. Marc imagines first that we are going “straight into a wall”, but when asked to elaborate, he proposes an alternative: maybe if we encountered a completely new ‘Other’, then we would think about how we can best live together. However, his PWP leads him to conclude that even in such a case, we would possibly end up in the same situation as today, and one group would “dominate the other”.

In these examples, we can see how collective memory participates to the elaboration of representations of the world – PWP – that provide general understandings of how the world, societies and human beings are or should be. These can in turn be used to imagine what the future might hold. In a sense, PWP are a form of *hyper generalised grand narrative* – Marc’s narrative covers the whole of human history in two sentences – that may both employ and produce historical analogies – Robert’s PWP allows him to draw an analogy between past wars and the situation in China, but was also probably constructed by building analogies between multiple past conflicts. The three roles collective memory plays for the imagination of collective futures – framing, exemplifying and generalising – are thus interdependent and they all participate to the creation and maintenance of general representations of the world, in particular Personal World Philosophies.

Thinking through time: Temporal heteroglossia in our representations of the world

I have, in the three cases presented in this chapter, mainly focused on how collective memory shapes how the future can be imagined. What about our second question, then: how do collective futures shape how the past is remembered? Before attempting to answer this question, two shortcomings need to be clarified. First, it is difficult, both in discourse and in the analysis, to reverse the course of time. Even at times when what we imagine about the future directly determines what we remember from the past – as in prospective memory, for instance – there is a sort of natural logic in presenting our thinking as following the irreversible flow of time. Second, it is more convincing, both for ourselves and for others, to start from what we believe actually happened and go towards what we think might happen. The first carries the aura of truth, while the other stinks of speculation. I could, for instance, imagine a future with flying cars, and justify its probability by a consideration of the evolution of personal vehicles over time, when the truth is that I watched the Fifth Element too many times as a child. However, I would not believe everything I have seen in science fiction movies to be possible in the future. The idea of flying car fits quite well with my general representation that technological progress, especially if it leads to more autonomy and potential financial gain, is one of the characteristics of the societies we live in. But I would not imagine a future with light sabres as probable, because it does not fit with my representation of the world as building more and more violent and destructive weapons – I would, for that matter, more easily believe in a Death Star.

What this example points at is the fact that Personal World Philosophies, as general representations of the world, mediate the relation between the imagination of collective futures and the memory of the collective past by allowing us to alter the course of time. Indeed, what appears in the cases presented in this paper is that the way we understand the world is not bound to a specific period of time but, on the contrary, it is developed at the crossroad between multiple historical periods and temporalities. PWP are thus characterised by *temporal heteroglossia*, the simultaneous presence of multiple periods of time. Heteroglossia is a Bakhtinian concept (Bakhtin, 1981) that refers to how “any discourse contains the traces of previous discourses, is made of different genres (rhetoric, journalistic, literary, scientific, etc.), and echoes discourses (or voices) uttered by other people in different places at different times” (Grossen, 2010, p. 10). *Temporal heteroglossia*, then, refers to how discourses on the world, society, humanity, etc. are characterised by the simultaneous presence of multiple periods of time, and it is through this consideration of several temporalities that they are constituted. Indeed, even in cases where the representation seems to apply to only one period of time, it is done against the backdrop of other historical periods. For instance, current discourses on society and mass media seem to apply only to the present. However, they are built in contrast with other periods, where mass communication did not exist, and often in anticipation of a future of which we imagine they will be part. The alternative

representation – of a world without mass media, as we used to have – is thus part of the representation itself (Gillespie, 2008).

In the first case presented in this paper, the way the MPs represent French society is done, for the Left, by considering simultaneously the various periods of time when “two Frances are in confrontation”. Doing so is what allows politicians to develop a representation of the country as torn by a social struggle, and it assumes enough similarity between all of these periods for them to be comparable. For the right, the contrast is made between the period before the French Revolution and everything that came after, which still applies to the present. These representations of French society provide the basis from which the future can be imagined, but also the frame within which the past should be remembered – encouraging Left-winged MPs to focus on past oppositions in French politics and Right-winged MPs to overlook set backs in the constitution of the French Republic, for instance the Terror or Napoleon.

In the second study, a participant discusses the future of the Ukrainian crisis by comparing it to World War II, implicitly assuming that humanity has not significantly changed in the meantime. Indeed, what makes the comparison possible is the supposition that the behaviour of the different actors is today what it was in the past. This is what allows her to infer from the past – people talked a lot about the possibility of a war before WWII – something about the present circumstances – if we talk a lot about a possible war it may indeed be coming. Representations of how human beings behave in society and in the world in general are thus built on the assumption that we can learn about human nature from any given period of time and that our conclusions would globally be valid at any time. Although we usually accept that different circumstances produce different behaviours, it is still assumed that human nature remains generally unchanged, what Gergen criticised by calling social psychology “history” (Gergen, 1973). While we would generally agree that society widely changed with regard to authority in the past half century, Milgram’s findings do remain, for instance, an important part of how many people represent the “natural” relation of human beings to authority.

In the third study, participants similarly draw from multiple periods of time to build personal representations of the world and where it is going. In doing so, they assume that what happened in the past remains relevant to the present because humanity did not change in ways that would invalidate the comparison – making it irrelevant to the present or the future. PWP thus provide a sense of continuity across vast periods of time, making the past and the future not only familiar – the world and its inhabitants were essentially the same – but also a source of knowledge for the present. It is because the past and the future bear enough similarity that we can use them to know how to behave in the present, learning from the past and anticipating what may happen.

Would this be, then, a form of mental time travel (Tulving, 2002)? Quite the contrary, actually. Where the notion of mental time travel implies that we can leave the here and now, in a rather dualist fashion⁴, the temporal heteroglossia of Personal World Philosophies means that we can bring the past and the future in the present because our representations of the world are not bound to a specific time or a specific place. Representations of the world, crystallised into Personal World Philosophies, thus allow us to think through time and to use the past in answering one fundamental question: where are we going?

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⁴ The idea of time travel also employs a spatial metaphor, which has been shown to be deeply problematic for memory (Brockmeier, 2010).

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