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Andersen, Tea Sindbæk; Ortner, Jessica

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Introduction: Memories of joy

Tea Sindbæk Andersen

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Jessica Ortner

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Memory Studies

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Abstract

This introduction argues that the field of memory studies needs to pay more attention to the role of joyful and positive types of memory. Quoting recent discussions, we propose that the dominant focus on traumatic and dark pasts within memory studies carries the risks that the research field ignores important aspects of collective memory and eclipses group memories that differ from societies' hegemonic discourse about the past. Contemporary societies also need positive or hopeful memories in order to create alternative imaginaries for the future. This special issue sets out to explore what memories of joy may look like and how they can be studied.

Keywords

Joy, memory, trauma

When the British historian Dorothy Thompson was interviewed in 2010 about her time in the Yugoslav youth work brigades in 1947, she concluded the conversation by thanking the interviewer for asking about this, because it had been a joy to talk about and remember what it was like, as she put it, 'to have lived through the bliss of that time'. To a historian of socialist Yugoslavia, this could seem a bit puzzling, as the late 1940s are often thought of as the period when the Yugoslav communists were constructing a Stalinist police state, and the work brigades of the 1940s are associated with a significant amount of force and oppression. Yet, for Thompson this was a thoroughly pleasant memory, completely penetrated by the joy and enthusiasm for the project of building a better future (Sindbæk Andersen, 2018). While the original aim of the interview had been to uncover narratives about experiences of coercion, this ambition had to be abandoned, since what was clearly at play here was a thoroughly positive and joyful memory.

It certainly made matters more complex by somehow both challenging and expanding the dark history of oppressive communism. Indeed, without in any way justifying the elements of coercion that were certainly there, this joyful memory seemed a crucial part of the story. It had to be included,

Corresponding author:

Jessica Ortner, Department of English, Germanic and Romance Studies, University of Copenhagen, Erik Holms Kanal 6, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark.

Email: ortner@hum.ku.dk

not only to construct a fuller picture of the 1940s and memories of them, but also to make visible the good and positive sides of an otherwise problematic and painful past. This interview certainly underlined the need to include memories of joy in our general attempt within memory studies to explore the relations between past, present and future.

This special issue of *Memory Studies* is an attempt to address this challenge. It asks what memories of joy could be, which roles they play in collective and cultural remembering and how we may study such memories. We have selected five rather different essays that investigate the topic from a variety of disciplinary, methodological and theoretical approaches, and we believe they constitute collectively a rich patchwork of the complex multidisciplinary texture that memory studies is today. Most importantly, of course, they all try to focus on the importance of joyful, enthusiastic or simply positive memories.

By focusing on memories of joy, we and the authors of the essays are trying to challenge the dominant role that trauma and traumatic memories play within memory studies as the field looks today. In a recent issue of *Memory Studies*, Ann Rigney warns against the tendency among memory scholars to focus on violence and victimhood. 'It is time', she argues,

to think critically about the cost of this apparently natural link between memory and trauma ... 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. (Rigney, 2018: 369)

The dominant position of trauma and violence within the field of memory studies was also one of the topics of the introductory panel 'The Horizons of Memory Studies (n.d.)' at the Memory Studies Association's second annual conference in Copenhagen in December 2017.¹ As Jeffrey Olick pointed out,

memory and the sense of a shared past is a way of underwriting identity and underwriting the future, yet it seems that in the actual work we do we have become traumatologists, that is, we are focusing almost exclusively on the dark side, necrology, victimology, trauma, atrocity.

And indeed, as Carol Gluck emphasized, the titles of the papers in the conference programme were primarily about traumas: war, genocide, dictatorship and the disappeared; traces of bad twentieth-century pasts with their consequent focus on victims, injustice, identity and repress, plus a concern with transgenerational memory of these bad pasts. A text-mining study based on participant data and abstracts accepted for the conference confirms this observation as it clearly identifies 'trauma' as a core concept, connecting much of the research presented in Copenhagen.² Although the focus on trauma is characteristic of only one part of memory studies, as Astrid Erll rightly pointed out during the Horizons of Memory panel, it is certainly a dominant part.

The 'traumatic paradigm of memory' (Rigney, 2018: 369) causes a double risk with regard to the role of memory studies. One is that our research becomes monotonous and predictable, unable to uncover other types of memory. The 'fixation on violence' makes researchers of memory unaware of alternative modes of remembering and alternative memory traditions (Rigney, 2018: 369). The other risk is that memory scholars, by focusing on victimhood, genocide and trauma, contribute to very dark views on the past, which can support nationalist victim narratives and different types of aggressive or xenophobic mobilization. As pointed out by Carol Gluck in the Horizons of Memory panel, the current coin of nationalist memory is victims, suffering and injustice. To counter this, we need to think about what we can do with our memories to move in a constructive direction for the future. Echoing Rigney (2018) again: in a time of growing

paranoid nationalism ‘reframing memory outside the framework of grievance has become all the more urgent’ (p. 370). As memory scholars, we are well aware that mediations of the past are used in the present and supply the material for imaginaries of the future. Having only dark memories, we are left with few constructive options for the future. Thus, we need memories of hope (Rigney, 2018), and also memories of enthusiasm, positivity and joy.

This special issue does not advocate a paradigmatic shift away from traumatic memories or towards an exclusive interest in joyful memories. Rather, we want to encourage scholars of memory to pay attention also to the subtle entanglement of joy, hope and trauma, and perhaps to contribute to a more differentiated understanding of the nature of memory. One of the most surprising examples of this entanglement between trauma and joy is the statement by the former inmate of the concentration camp Buchenwald and Nobel prize winner Imre Kertész, at the very last page of his novel *Sorstalanság* (1975, Eng. *Fateless*, 1992). Describing the experience of a boy who is deported to Buchenwald, he writes that even in the concentration camp ‘next to the chimneys, in the intervals between the torments, there was something like happiness’ and declares that the next time he will be asked about his experiences, he ought not to talk about the atrocities but about that, ‘the happiness of the concentration camps’ (Kertész, 1992: 91).

A more contemporary and less extreme example of this entanglement can be found in the autobiographical novel of Katja Petrowskaja, *Vielleicht Esther* (*Perhaps Esther*, 2015). In the novel, the protagonist recalls how her parents took her to annual tours to the Babij Yar park in Kiev and how she used to experience these tours as a joyful, ‘life-affirming ritual’ (Petrowskaja, 2015: 189). Later, she became aware that the site used to be a canyon which the German army used as a mass grave for the more than 30,000 Ukrainian Jews they executed in 1941 – among them Petrowskaja’s own grandparents. Despite her newly obtained knowledge about the reason for her parents’ annual visit to Babij Yar, the traumatic legacy of the genocide that took place there becomes entangled with a joyful childhood memory connected to that same site.

This brings us back to the question of how to include positive, constructive and hopeful memories into memory studies. The first task is to challenge ourselves and our field to think more systematically beyond trauma and outside of trauma, and to pay attention to the existence and functions of positive, hopeful, enthusiastic and joyful memories, often in coexistence with or parallel to traumatic memories.

Second, we need to take positive and joyful memories seriously as an essential part of our mnemonic landscapes. Whereas this comes easily with memories of pain and trauma, memories of joy may seem less important, more banal or ephemeral. There has been a tendency, we think, to disregard or dismiss joyful memories as ‘nostalgic’ and thus, by some misunderstood association, unserious and irrelevant to memory studies. Indeed, the concept of nostalgia is often used dismissively, as to describe memory without pain or history without guilt (Boym, 2001: xiv). Yet, as Mitja Velikonja (2008) reminds us, nostalgia is not simply a naive selection of ‘pleasant memories of an idealized past’, it can also be ‘a strong social, cultural and political force... By glorifying the past, it criticizes the present, telling us more about what is wrong now than what was better in the past’ (pp. 27–28).

A striking example of such pleasant memories that alleviate the truth of suppression and suffering is the nostalgic relationship to the Socialist regime that materialized in a fetishization of East products (Ostprodukte) 10 years after the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). This ‘Ostalgie’, so Jonathan Bach (2017), ‘became a major social phenomenon characterized by the neologism that combines the German word for East and nostalgia’ (p. 9). Opposing state-funded museums, such as Zeitgeschichtliches Forum that according to its website has the mission to ‘offer an insight into the history of dictatorship and resistance in the Soviet Occupation Zone and Communist East Germany’ (Leipzig Forum for Contemporary History, 2018), a growing number

of amateur museums of everyday life began to display East products with the declared aim to present an alternative narrative about the ‘lived experience of millions of GDR citizens’ (Bach, 2017: 64–65). The dissolution of the GDR did not just liberate the GDR citizens but also deprived them of their life-world, instantly making all everyday objects ‘culturally obsolete’ and thereby also devaluating any joyful memory of a life under the regime of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED). Thus, everyday objects, with the words of the private collector Jürgen Hartwig, became ‘anchors for a ‘reservoir of memories ... about the positive side of the GDR and one’s own lived past’ (quoted in Bach, 2017: 53). However, to display East products in museums is not only a private activity but also a highly political one as it turns nostalgia into a subversive power that undermines the officially accepted version of collective memory.

The examples mentioned above remind us that we need to develop ways of studying positive, joyful, hopeful memories that are in danger of falling out not only of memory studies but also of official discourses about the past. To quote Rigney (2018) again, ‘happiness may be just as *unrepresentable* as traumatic events though for different reasons’, and the task of tracing and studying memories of joy, hope or happiness is made even more challenging by the fact that ‘we still have a very limited repertoire of tools to capture the transmission of positivity’ (p. 370). This special issue of *Memory Studies* aims both to study what memories of joy may look like and to explore ways of studying such memories.

In the Oxford English dictionary, the word Joy refers to ‘a vivid emotion of pleasure arising from a sense of well-being or satisfaction; the feeling or state of being highly pleased or delighted; exultation of spirit; gladness, delight’. It is closely related to happiness, but whereas happiness may also refer to a general condition of life, joy seems to more often refer to an emotional reaction to something really good. A recent psychological study summarized the understanding of joy as ‘clearly a very pleasant hedonistic response to a positive object’, yet ‘it can also be experienced as a more subtle enduring state’ (Watkins et al., 2018: 534). Thus, memories of joy could refer to remembering experiences of pleasant, happy and elated emotions. Literature published about these and similar themes have looked at literary representations of joy and pleasure during warfare (Welland, 2018), psychological analyses of memory and happiness (Lieberman et al., 2009) and memories of hope (Rigney, 2018).

In this special issue, we opt for an inclusive idea about what memories of joy could be. Thus, the articles collected here have very different suggestions as to what may constitute memories of joy. Whereas we do not wish to simply reproduce classic patriotic glorifications of national memory, though they may certainly be joyful to some, both the article by Tracy Adams and Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and the one by Tamara Trošt are looking at ways of representing joy within the political frames of nation and state. Both of these papers challenge and expand our understanding of what could characterize such political memories of joy. For Vinitzky-Seroussi and Adams, studying representations of memory in American presidential speeches, the analytical category becomes ‘positive memories’, of which memories of pride are dominant, and memories of joy constitute a small but important minority. In her study of representations of national history in school textbooks in five Southeast European states, Trošt identifies both ‘hot’ nationalistic memories of joy, often based on heroism and military valour, and joyful memories of everyday life, frequently characterized by cultural achievements and socio-economic improvements. Sébastien Fevry’s study of activist uses of memories of the Paris Commune suggests that joyful memory may well be understood as an enthusiastic and jubilant sense of a revolutionary moment, which conveys a feeling of agency and possibility for the future. Silke Arnold-de Simine proposes that memories of joy may be sought for not only in simply memories of pleasure, but in playfulness and in the possibility of challenging the idea of traumatic memory as the main source of identity and personality. Finally, Diane Wolf points out the complexity of family memories by demonstrating how children of Holocaust survivors can

sometimes remember aspects of their parents' traumatic experiences as life-affirming memories of joy. Wolf points out the agency of the parents in deciding how and when the intergenerational transmission of their experiences should take place, and illustrates that the parents' narrations could take the shape of humour, of a fairy-tale or of facts that not necessarily traumatized the children.

The articles collected in this issue also offer a number of different methodological approaches to how we may study memories of joy. In doing so, they testify to the fact that memory studies is a truly multidisciplinary field of research. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Adams have selected a classical source of memory transmission in the ceremonial rhetoric of political leaders. Analysing both quantitatively and qualitatively a large data set of 860 speeches by American presidents, held over a period of 72 years, they are able to point to differences between political parties, historical changes in commemorative rhetoric and structural patterns with regard to the rarity of joyful memories, when they occur and which aspects of the past they recall. Trošt examines a broad corpus of school history textbooks used in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia during 2016–2017. This choice of source material allows her to study the deliberate choices made by these states with regard to which memories they want to expose to the school children and how. She combines coding and detailed context analyses to identify when and how joy is conveyed through national myths and everyday memories. Fevry uses discourse analysis of a selection of documents written by an activist group in the early twenty-first century to show how a joyful and empowering memory of the Paris commune is being written into a narrative of revolutionary protest. Arnold de-Simine draws on the science-fiction film *Blade Runner 2049* to discuss the role of trauma in our understanding of memory and identity in contemporary culture. Based on readings of the film and fan group discussions, she points to the possibilities of playing with memory and imagining different possibilities as potentially joyful and liberating. Wolf uses oral history and life history interviews with 35 children of Holocaust survivors to make a qualitative investigation of family memories and 'postmemories'.

We are grateful to the authors for taking up our invitation to address the challenging question of joyful memories. We hope that this special issue will constitute but one step in the direction of more research into the complex roles and entangled character of joy within memory, thus contributing to broadening the landscape of memory studies beyond the theme of trauma.

Notes

1. See the introductory panel 'The Horizons of Memory Studies (n.d.)', MSA second annual conference, Copenhagen, 14 December 2017, available at the MSA homepage: https://www.memorystudiesassociation.org/copenhagen-conference-2017-program/#Intro_video
2. These data have been produced and kindly made available to us by Sarah Gensburger (CNRS), Mathilde de Saint Léger (CNRS) and Sara Dybris McQuaid (Aarhus University). The full results will appear in an article to come titled 'Where do memory studies come from?'.

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Author biographies

Tea Sindbæk Andersen is Associate Professor of East European Studies at the Department of Cross-cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen. Tea’s research focuses on the contemporary history of Southeastern Europe, especially on issues related to uses of history, cultural memory, identity politics and popular culture in the Yugoslav area. She is the author of *Usable History? Representations of Yugoslavia’s Difficult Past from 1945 to 2002* (Aarhus University Press, 2012) and, with Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, editor of *Disputed Memory: Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe* (De Gruyter 2016) and *The Twentieth Century in European Memory: Transcultural Mediation and Reception* (Brill 2018). From 2012 to 2016, she was vice-chair of the European research network *In Search of Transcultural Memory in Europe* funded by EU/COST. Tea is a member of the executive committee of the Memory Studies Association (MSA) and co-hosted the MSA annual conference in Copenhagen, December 2017.

Jessica Ortner achieved her PhD degree in May 2012 with a thesis on the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek, focusing on Jelinek’s literary strategies of representing the Shoah and broaching Austria’s national socialist past. She received a grant from the Carlsberg Foundation for a project on Holocaust literature written by the second and third generations – a project that included a wide corpus of German and Austrian writers. Financed by a grant from the Danish Council for Independent research, she currently works on a book project which scrutinizes imaginations of Europe in contemporary German-language migrant writing. Her latest publications include ‘Flight, expulsion and resettlement in contemporary German literature’ (2018), ‘The reconfiguration of the European Archive in contemporary German-Jewish migrant-literature – Katja Petrowskaja’s novel *Vielleicht Esther*’ (2017) and *Poetologie ‘nach Auschwitz’: Narratologie, Semantik und sekundäre Zeugenschaft in Elfriede Jelineks Roman Die Kinder der Toten* (2016).