CONCERTED RESEARCH ACTIONS - RE-MEMBER

The transmission of memories related to stigmatisation: Official and family memories related to collaboration and colonisation in Belgium

Abstract: Conflictual contexts often lead to contentious memories. Protagonists negotiate for the recognition and acceptance of their interpretation of a disputed past, as well as for its preservation as an official narrative. In some cases, commemorative landscapes and public accounts exacerbate conflict within a community. But with the passing of time, the socially constructed nature of memory allows for the possibility for change — even if change is neither easy nor systematic — and, therefore, creates opportunities for conflict transformation. New generations may appropriate this past in light of their own understanding of history and their knowledge of their family’s involvement. As a result, the interest here lies in the liminal space family and official narratives, especially when dealing with personal stories from people who have found themselves on the “wrong side of history”.

In this research project, we aim to conduct analyses of the official and family narratives of two controversial episodes in the Belgian national past: the repression of collaboration after WWII and the return of Belgian colonists to Belgium in 1960 (after the independence of Congo). As we will demonstrate, these events have led to divergent memories. The project has two major objectives. First, it will explore the inescapable tension between public and private practices of remembrance, and between official and underground memories. Second, it will examine the transmission of memories across three generations. This innovative multilayered analysis will be possible thanks to the interdisciplinary dimension of the research team (political sciences, history and psychology).

The project will determine and articulate the role of three main variables in the construction of these controversial pasts and their consequences for individuals and groups: (1) the degree of stigma (contextual variable), (2) the linguistic community (French speakers vs Dutch speakers), and (3) the generational dimension (G1: one of the children of the collaborator/colonist, G2: one of their grandchildren, G3: one of their great-grandchildren). From a methodological perspective, we will combine three main approaches: discourse analysis of a corpus of official speeches; interviews with families affected by the repression of collaborators or the return of colonists (across three generations); and experimental studies. Each of these methods will be conducted by two researchers from different disciplines working in tandem.
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