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Collective Memory: Objectification or Anchoring?[1]

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Collective memories are shared representations of a group's past, based on a common identity. In this short commentary, based on two examples from previous research, I reflect on the tension between two approaches to collective memories: a neo-Freudian approach according to which the past weighs on the present; and a neo-Durkheimian approach according to which the present weighs on representations of the past. The theory of social representations can account for both aspects through the processes of anchoring and objectification. Because they are anchored in pre-existing social representations of the group's past, and because they objectify the present concerns of group members, despite their frequent historical inaccuracy, collective memories convey a truth that deserves to be taken seriously.

Keywords: Collective memories, objectification, anchoring, weight of the past, choice of the past.

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[1] *This article is based on the conference given in 2021 at the 15th CIRS (International Conference on Social Representations) online: https://remosco.hypotheses.org/news-nouvelles/cirs-2021-programme-videos*

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Let us start by presenting two examples from our research on collective memories of Belgian colonialism in the Congo and on the Belgian linguistic conflict, respectively[2].

Example 1: During our surveys about colonisation carried out among Congolese people or people of Congolese origin living in Belgium, the theme of the “severed hands” regularly came up. For example, one respondent confided: “The Congolese were mistreated by the Belgians, they were made to work like slaves by cutting off their hands if they did not make the effort required by the white man” (Licata & Klein, 2005, p. 265). In a more recent survey (Figueiredo et al., 2017), another respondent explained: "They tell you ‘You have to produce’, that’s an example I give, ‘You have to produce 5 bags of cotton a day or a week, you have to make 10 bags of cotton and, if you don’t do it, they come, they cut your hand off’". It is well known that the first period of Belgian colonisation of the Congo – from 1885 to 1908 – was subject to strong criticism (Hochschild, 1998). In this context, the practice of ‘severed hands’ struck a chord in the late nineteenth century, during the first international campaigns against the Congo Free State led by King Leopold II. The reality of these brutal practices is attested to by historians (Goddeeris et al., 2020; Vangroenweghe, 1986), but they circumscribe them to a specific historical - between 1893 and 1900 - and territorial context - the rubber production zones. Yet, these atrocities often appear when interviewees describe the relations between Belgian colonialists and Congolese people during colonisation, often without any temporal or spatial limits, or by situating them in a context with no real link to history (such as the cotton harvest).

Example 2: In 2010, Flemish politician Jan Peumans, a member of the N-VA (a separatist political party), stated his belief that “Flemings died because they did not speak French”. This memorial story is well known in Belgium: during the First World War, Flemish soldiers (often from the working class), under the orders of French-speaking officers (often from the bourgeoisie), were allegedly given their orders in French, leading to misunderstandings that were fatal to many of them. This image was conveyed in Flemish nationalist circles between the wars and throughout the 20th century, and it remains today. However, Belgian historians, both French- and Dutch-speaking, dispute the veracity of these accounts (De Vos & Keymeulen, 1989; Klein et al., 2012). As a matter of fact, there is no trace of it in the archives of the war years (official documents, press from the front or ego-documents

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[2] This paper is a translation and adaptation of Licata, L. (2016). La mémoire collective: passé objectivé ou présent ancré dans le passé ? In G. Lo Monaco, S. Delouvée, & P. Rateau (Éd.), *Les représentations sociales* (p. 553-556). Bruxelles: De Boeck.

– correspondence or diaries); it only appears after the war, in the context of a radicalisation of the Flemish Movement.

In both examples, people describe a past event, although their version of history differs, sometimes significantly, from the ‘historical truth’ as established (always provisionally, as in any science) by historical research. How can we understand these discourses?

Collective memories are shared representations of a group's past, based on a common identity (Licata & Mercy, 2015). One of the fundamental questions at the heart of theoretical questioning and research about collective – or social – memory is the direction of influence between the past and the present: Are the mental states of social group members – their present affects, attitudes, representations or behaviours – influenced by their past? Or, conversely, might it not be the current mental states of the group members that influence their representations of this past? Prager (2001) distinguishes between two approaches, which he describes as neo-Freudian and neo-Durkheimian, and which can be compared with the distinction between ‘weight of the past’ and ‘choice of the past’ proposed by Lavabre (1991). In the former, the tensions currently experienced within a community are interpreted as deriving from inevitable intrusions of a traumatic past into the present. In contrast, in the neo-Durkheimian approach, the past is interpreted as a symbolic resource that members of a group can mobilise to reduce a present tension. Collective memory is then understood as a complex process of social construction linked to the present identity of the group. This implies that different versions of the past can be elaborated at different times in the life of a group, or from one social group to another.

What dynamics are we dealing with in our two examples? Are the Congolese respondents and the Flemish politician dealing with ‘a past that does not pass’ or, on the contrary, are their discourses on the past “distorted” by their current psychological states? Our aim here is to show that social representation theory can help us answer these questions.

This theory, as we know, has claimed the Durkheimian heritage since its origins (Moscovici, 1976). However, it would be simplistic to limit its potential contributions to the study of collective memories to the neo-Durkheimian approach described here. Indeed, as we shall see, through the processes of anchoring and objectification, the theory of social representations allows us to account for the way in which "the present is haunted by the past" as well as for the way in which "the past is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present" (Assmann, 1997, p. 9).

It is undoubtedly through the anchoring process that the contribution of the theory is most evident, since it relates to the integration of the new into a system of representations that is already well established. Thus, any new situation, provided that it is sufficiently important to give rise to exchanges of views within the community confronted with it, is apprehended in the light of the already known. As Moscovici (1984/2000) wrote: “So our representations make the unfamiliar familiar, which is another way of saying that they depend on memory” (p. 54). Old representations therefore necessarily influence the psychological states of group members. In our two examples, any current discriminatory behaviour of Belgians towards Congolese living in Belgium can thus be linked, by analogy (Ghilani et al., 2017), to the cruel treatment suffered by their ancestors, and any sign of contempt on the part of French speakers will remind Flemings of the way their great-grandfathers were treated in the trenches of the Great war. Of course, a distinction must be made between historical truth and social representation of history. Such representations do not have to be true to serve as anchors. However, even if they are biased, they can reveal a truth of another kind, as we shall see later. In short, the past – represented – can thus ‘weigh’ on the present (Liu & Hilton, 2005).

The role of objectification in the dynamics of collective memories is probably less obvious. However, from our point of view, it is at this level that the theory of social representations sheds the most light on these processes. The statements “They cut off your hand” or “Flemings died because they did not speak French” evoke very concrete representations, vivid images. In both cases, however, these representations probably convey a much more complex message, which can only be grasped if one shares a common repertoire of representations with the speakers. Indeed, as Moscovici (1976) has proposed, figurative structures such as these must be understood as signifiers. By *describing* a historical event, the subject expresses present feelings, or takes a position in a current debate.

Thus, when people of Congolese origin recall the episode of the severed hands in Belgium today, or when Dutch-speaking Belgians evoke the fate of the soldiers of the Great War, it is not enough to confront their statements with the work of historians to point out the inconsistencies - at least if, as social psychologists, we are interested in what these people *mean*. Recalling the cruel treatment of the Congolese more than a century ago provides information about the feeling of non-recognition shared by some of the Congolese residing in the ex-metropole. Indeed, we have shown that the more respondents with Congolese origins expressed current feelings of non-recognition and discrimination in Belgian society, the more negative were their recollections of colonial history (Figueiredo et al., 2017). Similarly, by referring to the relationship between Flemish soldiers and French-speaking officers, the Flemish nationalist politician takes a stand in the Belgian linguistic conflict. He suggests that this image is still relevant for interpreting current intergroup relations. This allows him to legitimise his political project of distancing the Flemings from a Belgian state still perceived as being in the hands of the French-speaking elites.

In both cases, an image is substituted for a discourse about the present. These discourses seem to describe past events; in fact, they denounce a present situation. Therefore, beyond the historical inaccuracies, they carry a truth. Collective memories are chosen, by analogy and anchoring, according to the present motivations of social actors. These memories are then used to interpret current situations. Clothed in the illusion of historical truth that their iconic qualities confer, they legitimise current positions. They often do so by drawing attention to the continuity of the outgroup (Klein et al., 2012; Licata et al., 2012). Thus, they suggest that Belgians have always been dominant, or that Francophones have always been, and continue to be, contemptuous. However, our research on the Belgian linguistic conflict has shown that the collective victimhood memory tends to fade among the younger Flemish generations, and that this fading is accompanied by a weakening of separatist attitudes (Rimé et al., 2015). In fact, the economic situation and political autonomy that their group has enjoyed for several decades no longer have much to do with the situation of economic domination and cultural contempt that the image of the soldiers of the great war symbolised. When a representation of the past ceases to be relevant, it fades away (Halbwachs, 1980).

However, it would be unfair to discredit these discourses by saying that they are, after all, only the product of a collective process of reinventing the past. Indeed, if the above reasoning is valid, we must take seriously the fact that collective memories, which constitute in part the representational system of a group and thus serve as an anchoring support, are always already the product of a process of objectification through which this group has, in the past, symbolised its experience. They therefore inform us, indirectly, about this collective experience. After all, the Congolese were really dominated by the Belgians during colonialism, and the Flemings were really despised by a part of the Belgian French-speaking elites ...

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