

Success Stories

Exploring identities and memories in Luxembourg

History, Memory and Identities

"When Benoît Majerus, who worked at the Centre d'Etudes et de Documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines in Brussels, invited me in 2002 to put together a research project to investigate the construction of memory in Luxembourg, I did not hesitate", recalls Professor Michel Margue, who has been interested in the construction of memory for political ends since a number of years.

5 years later, Professor Margue, with the help of Benoît Majerus, Sonja Kmec and Pit Péporté are about to complete their research project entitled "History, memory and identities", a project which explores the role of the "places of memory" (lieux de mémoire) in the constitution of Luxembourg collective identities. The project is carried out at the research unit "Identities, Policies, Societies, Spaces" (IPSE) at the University of Luxembourg.

The approach of French historian Pierre Nora was adapted to the project in order to study the manner, the ways and the mechanisms through which the past is brought up to date and enters into memory. The goal of the research project was to examine the mechanisms of the production of collective memory - to study all the media and all the vectors which make it likely for a historical element to enter the memory of a collectivity. Thus, in order to study something like a national memory, "official" media has to be examined: speeches, State monuments, textbooks, official publications, emblems, names allotted to public buildings and streets, and so forth. Yet, the research project was not limited to a simple inventory. The goal was also to investigate the sense, the symbolic meaning that is given to these "places" in official discourse. The Roude Léiw, the Gëlle Fra, and perhaps the Nei Breck or the Grengewald are all recent illustrations of this process.

A couple of points seemed crucial for providing an "open" methodology. First, the sense of a "place of memory" is never fixed: it changes within historical and political contexts; it is object to negotiation, to opening or withdrawal, and can thus cause violent debates about memory. Second, certain elements of the past are forsaken; researchers should thus not forget them a second time. Finally, the research was also comparative: the specificities for Luxembourg were also situated within other European projects analysing national histories.

A study of the "places of memory" centred on the dynasty, the language, the notion of "foreigners", the symbolism of the State, Europe, and "minorities" is extremely revealing of the evolution of the Luxembourg society. Such a study helps to understand the fundamental stakes which will have to be confronted in the near future, such as debates on Europe, the role of the dynasty within the State, nationality, heritage, migrations,... The current and increasingly polarized discussion around the Luxembourg flag is very revealing here.



No Pardon, ra' de Léiw
Le lion rouge luxembourgeois vainqueur
The victorious Luxembourg Red Lion



In terms of content, the project has contributed to foster an important development for the historical sciences in Luxembourg, namely to conceive of history as a science which studies the present and not the past, as is sometimes too naively thought.

The FNR initially granted a modest financing for the development of the project. Then, in 2003, the FNR agreed to fund two post-doctoral researchers for two years. The FNR also covered for all the stays abroad of the research team, the assemblage of a specialized library, the expenses for organizing workshops and conferences and the expenses for publications. "Apart from the financial contribution", Professor Margue explains, "it was especially the encouragement for the initiative and the recognition of the work provided that seemed fundamental to me. In this sense, and in our field of research, the FNR is a pioneer in Luxembourg".

The first publication stemming from the project is a collective work aimed at a large audience. The research team also contributes to the development of the future Museum Draï Eechelen. There have been many interventions outside academia through conferences, public standpoints, participation in exhibitions, press articles. Two more scientific publications are due to come out by the end of 2007.

After the study of the collective memory - which is far from being completed - several projects aimed at investigating memory at the level of reception were launched at the University of Luxembourg. There is an obvious gap between official discourse and the reception of this discourse. The identity that a nation state or any other community would like to convey does only partially correspond to the consciousness of an identity developed at the base - which makes the term "identity" rather random, or even dangerous.

The analysis of the evolution of the dominant discourse will thus be further developed whilst paying more attention to the identity consciousness of Luxembourgers. A current research project funded by the FNR is thus exploring, amongst other things, the evolution of the historical consciousness inside families in relation to immigration, life on the countryside, iron- and steelworkers or those who suffered during World War II.

On a wider scope, it was possible to gather researchers around questions on social cohesion and identity within the IPSE research unit at the University of Luxembourg. At the moment, there still are important constraints and time and trust is needed for research teams to be able to work in good conditions. "Collaboration between the FNR and the University is for us the key for future success", Professor Margue declares.

*For the FNR,
Morgan Meyer*