

“I would rather be hanged than agree with you!”: Collective Memory and the Definition of the Nation in Parliamentary Debates on Immigration

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Abstract

*This paper explores the meaning attributed to the national group as an entry point into how boundaries between the in-group and the out-group are formed. To do so, it focuses on the representation of the past of the group, taken as a symbolic resource able to produce a *raison d'être* for national groups, and does so within a dialogical framework. Using the transcripts of the French parliamentary debates on immigration from 2006, it proposes a qualitative analysis of collective narratives of the past along three axes: 1) what meaning do they give to the nation, 2) how is such a meaning produced, and 3) how do the stories told by different groups reply or relate to one another. By identifying the main narratives found in the data and how they relate to each other – within and between groups – it proposes to see collective memory as itself the product of symbolisation processes and, therefore, as a cultural tool especially powerful to produce meaning about the present. This paper also argues that collective memory is a situated construction negotiated with – or contested by – others, made possible by the presence of common historical benchmarks to which different meanings may however be attributed. Finally, it proposes to understand “immigration talk” as potentially the product of the identity questions faced by the national group, rather than the other way around.*

Introduction

The definition of the nation, who may belong to it and what is the essence of its members, has become a central question in the management of immigration in most Western countries, especially in Europe. The resurgences of nationalism, the multiplication of bills to limit immigration, the apparition of extreme right parties in European parliaments, are

all raising the question of how we define national group boundaries and on what ground. Much research has been done in the past decades on how groups are defined in opposition to an out-group, from Tajfel's first findings (e.g. Tajfel, 1970, 1978) to Reicher's model of the processes by which the in-group is sacralised and the out-group demonised (Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008). Here emerges the image of a "natural" drift of group organisation: if we are together, it is against others who are not like us and will never be.

Far from trying to endorse or oppose such a conception of intergroup relations, this paper aims at approaching this issue through a slightly different angle: the question of the meaning we attribute to the existence of the groups we belong to – and to the fact that we belong to them – and those we do not. Following Dahinden & Zittoun (2013), it proposes to explore how meaning is produced for the group, considering it as interrelated with the question of its boundaries, as "it is impossible to create a meaning without actually creating the boundary between that meaning and what differs from it, and reversely" (Dahinden & Zittoun, 2013, p. 202). From this perspective, "in-groups and out-groups are [...] the result of symbolic and social boundary work of actors. Social differences – the distinction between "us" and "them", thus in-groups and out-groups – and corresponding boundary processes are historically constructed in specific contexts and are variable, hereby involving a broad range of actors" (Holtz, Dahinden, & Wagner, 2013, p. 234). In the case of nationalism, this implies that the meaning we build around "the nation" will produce a symbolic boundary that may be turned into a social one (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). It will thus have repercussions on the line we draw between who is allowed in the country (and will obtain a visa or work permit) and who is not, as well as how outsiders are perceived.

It is not my aim, then, to define what the nation is, but to consider how the meaning of this particular 'object' is constructed and negotiated, and the implications it may have in people's life. Indeed, what Dahinden & Zittoun (2013) express about religion can be applied to the nation as well, that is that "it is not a natural, substantivist cultural difference with regard to religion which is the *raison d'être* for the existence of religious groups, but that subjective mobilisation of such ideas and symbols by actors – in terms of meaning making and boundaries – produce the groups in question" (p. 201).

This also implies, in the case of groups such as nations, that the meanings we produce and use do not only determine the limits of the group, but the relevance of the said group in organising and explaining the social world for its actors. Indeed, not all memberships unleash passions, nor do they take on the same dimensions for all the members of a given group. Group memberships, as the groups themselves, are multiple, dynamic, historical and contextual (Gillespie, Howarth, & Cornish, 2012). However, it seems that some of them "stick", whether in time (becoming part of history) or for those who hold them (becoming part of their identity). Their perspectival nature does not prevent them from becoming hegemonic elements of our social environment. In such a context, I believe it is worth asking what meaning we attach not only to the delimitations we draw in the social field – the "us" against "them" – but to the existence of the group itself. Exploring the meaning attributed to the nation to produce its boundaries – and how it may be contested – may therefore be a step towards a better understanding of the increasing importance of immigration in political discourses.

To explore such processes, parliamentary debates on immigration can be a good starting point. Indeed, they constitute the place where the boundaries of the group are officially

discussed, negotiated and defined. If boundaries tend to be at times blurry and are perpetually renegotiated in social interactions (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Pachucki, Pendergrass, & Lamont, 2007), then focusing on the moment where symbolic boundaries are turned into legal social boundaries through a public debate may shed light on how their meanings are constructed. Although parliaments may not be the place where decisions are actually taken (Manin, 2008), they remain a solemn public arena, where different positions are officially discussed and contested. As such, they constitute a form of ‘political show’ (Landowski, 1977), where publicly taken positions may become part of history¹. They are also the place where public opinion – as an artefact created by the media and supposed to represent the spirit of the time on a specific issue (Landowski, 1989) –, as it is represented by the members of parliament, is crystallised to produce the rules the group is going to live by.

What is interesting here is the idea that parliamentary debates *should* be the place where the nation is represented in its plurality, no matter whether this is really the case and, for those debates on immigration, where the nation discusses the right for outsiders to enter the group. The following is therefore an analysis of the meaning given to the national group in French parliamentary debates over a bill on “Immigration and Integration” from 2006².

It is important to note and explain, from the start, the absence of two elements from this paper. First, the notion of power will implicitly appear here and there in the analysis, but it will remain a ghostly shadow compared to its importance in intergroup interactions and the management of immigration. Far from denying the importance of power in the understanding of such situations – or any situation, for that matter – it is here taken for granted. Indeed, immigration *is* a question of power, of how a group may impose barriers – material and symbolic – to prevent others from entering its territory and of how powerful groups may become attractive to outsiders. Democratic politics is often but the tussle to obtain the power conferred by the adhesion of the nation to the ideas of the party, power that legitimates the tentative of the group to create a world in its image. And social representations, with the specific point of view on reality they stand for, position actors in relation to each other and may grant power and legitimacy to those able to impose their vision of the world (Jovchelovitch, 2007). As such, every element of discourse analysed here, every meaning produced, every argument, contestation, silence, etc., is, without a doubt, also a matter of power. It thus will remain the background against which this study rests, although one mainly implicitly referred to.

Similarly, racism – and other forms of discrimination – will not be discussed here. How political discourses create and sustain racial and religious discrimination has been discussed elsewhere (for studies on French parliamentary discourse, see Van Der Valk, 2003; Van Dijk, 2001), and it will be taken as a given here that parliamentary debates have the potential to do so - and in the case of debates on immigration, often do. And that, unfortunately, it is commonly what is at stakes with immigration policies.

¹ See for instance the name of the journal in which the official transcripts of the debates are published, which is simply called “Journal Officiel”.

² The data comes from a master dissertation done under Alex Gillespie’s supervision at the London School of Economics (de Saint-Laurent, 2012), a dissertation which is used here for background information as it presented a preliminary analysis of the data.

In this paper, first, I will present the lens that was used to explore meaning-making – collective memory as the collective imagination of the past – and attempt to build a theoretical framework for its study in group interactions. From this, three questions will be defined: 1) what meaning do the stories told about the past produce for the group? 2) how is such a meaning produced? and 3) how is such a meaning negotiated with the others present in the debate? A method to explore these questions in relation to the data will then be proposed, and the results of this analysis presented. Finally, an attempt to draw their practical and theoretical consequences for boundary work will be made.

Collective memory and meaning making

If “meaning making designates the process by which human beings make the world readable, valuable and actionable, through the use of semiotic means” (Dahinden & Zittoun, 2013, p. 187), then focusing on the apparition and utilisation of such semiotic tools in the discussion of the boundaries of the national group may provide an interesting entry point into the way meaning is produced.

With this idea in mind, what is proposed here is an analysis of the references made to history in a specific set of parliamentary debates. Indeed, the way the group represents its past and organises it along culturally shared story lines is part of the group’s identity and confers meaning to its actions and existence (Wertsch & Batiashvili, 2012; Wertsch, 2002, 2008). What we, collectively, choose to forget, to sacralise or to question is never left to chance (Ergur, 2009), and the stories we decide to tell relate what we believe about ourselves and the groups to which we belong (Halbwachs, 1950). Such stories may therefore play a central role in social identification (e.g. Liu & Hilton, 2005; Liu, Wilson, McClure, & Higgins, 1999) and in present group interactions (Delori, 2011). Indeed, “if history can subjectively shape social imagination and be reinterpreted depending on the present conflicts and needs, it can also provide the temptation to reproduce the patterns of the past” (Leveau, 1994, p. 159). The negotiation of the narratives of the past is thus also a political issue (Rahman, 2010), where what is said is a reconstruction that may be used to shape national identities (Gavriely-Nuri, 2013) or to give meaning to present issues (Lee, 2014).

Moreover, as expressed in the definition of meaning-making proposed above, the possibility offered by representations of the past to play an important role in identity construction is not simply due to the direct justifications of the existence of the group. Indeed, as culturally shared symbolic elements, they may constitute symbolic resources. That is, they can be used to produce meaning for the ruptures experienced in the present (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003; Zittoun, 2006).

In the case of the nation, transitions between historical periods, where old meanings cannot stand anymore, may involve a specific use of the representation of the collective past as a symbolic resource, as it may be the case today with the transition from local organisation to globalisation. A world where multicultural contacts are in constant augmentation, where the existence of the nation may be experienced as threatened by others – be it in economic, cultural or territorial terms – potentially leads to the renegotiation of the permeability of the group and its *raison d’être*. As a result, exploring the references made to history as possible traces of such movements, participating to the rewriting or strengthening of national myths, may constitute a valuable entry point into the

meaning given to the nation and how its borders are delimited. This paper thus adopts a socio-cultural psychological perspective on memory, considering that discourses about the past carry with them “a series of momentous suppositions about the world”, and giving it meaning (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 10).

It is worth noting that representations of the past will be grouped under the heading of *collective memory* in what follows. However, *collective memory* originally referred solely to the history of the group as it is remembered by those who lived it (Halbwachs, 1950), while the rest of the past of the group falls under the heading of *cultural memory* or *collective imagination of the past* (Rautenberg, 2010). Many authors have already taken the liberty to do so – as it is the case for the vast majority of the studies quoted here – and although such a distinction is no doubt of a great interest, it is this general sense of collective memory that will be used here.

Collective memory in interactions

Part of the interest in data such as parliamentary debates is that it allows us to study collective memory in interactions, and therefore to analyse it along with the contestations it may lead to. However, it also implies that a framework is needed to take into account such a dynamic. In this regard, dialogism can be a good theoretical and methodological tool.

Dialogism as a theoretical tool: intersubjectivity in meaning-making

As a theoretical orientation, dialogism allows us to understand the multiplicity of knowledge and of how culture may be used to build different meanings or types of knowledge. Indeed, it stands on “the assumption that human nature and human life are constituted in interrelations with ‘the other’, that is, in *other orientation*” (Linell, 2009, p. 13). Drawing on the works of Vygotsky, it also considers that every use of tools and signs is mediated by others (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994), making the basic unit of analysis a triangular relation between self, other and object. As a result, every idea produced contains its alternative (Billig, 1987; Gillespie, 2008). If mental life exists in relation to an “other”, real or imagined, then ideas emerge at the interplay of sameness and difference with the other.

In the case of collective memory, which may at times seem to reduce discourses to a single voice by downplaying “ambiguity and doubt” (Wertsch & Batiashvili, 2012, p. 38), this means that the stories told about the past have to be understood as part of a larger conversation – here again, real or imagined – where what is said can always be contested or renegotiated (e.g. Kulyk, 2011; Rosoux, 2001). Indeed, what we say is always a reply to someone else, and an anticipation of the reaction of the person to whom the speech is addressed (Bakhtin, 1986). Insisting on specific actors’ intentions, historical causalities and significance are also meant to indicate the perspectives from which ambiguity, doubt and opposing representations are conceived as possible.

Therefore, collective memory has to be taken as a co-construction between several perspectives on historical events. Moreover, if representations always include in some way their alternative, it suggests that mobilising the associated meaning also mobilises a network of opposed significations, contributing to the dynamic of meaning making

processes. Although research on collective memory tends to give a static and unified picture of its content in a given population, careful longitudinal analysis shows that the accounts people give of the past are dynamic and multiple (Fasulo, 2002; Gavriely-Nuri, 2013), and thus that it is necessary to take into consideration the context within which remembering occurs in order to understand the stories being told (Brockmeier, 2002; Fasulo, 2002).

Dialogism as a methodological tool: identifying traces

The above theoretical considerations have methodological implications for the study of meaning as emerging from intersubjective interactions, and especially for how it can be traced in discourse. Indeed, central to dialogical analysis is the idea that the voices of others can be found in speech: as words and their meanings are not learned from dictionary definitions, every speech act is in a way a quote from someone else (Bakhtin, 1986).

Analysing the main voices present can thus help us understand what the speech is a reply to, to whom it is addressed and therefore which “larger conversation” it is part of. Because of this, voices may also constitute the clearest traces of the social and historical context of the utterance (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). And if meaning emerges in relation to another and is dependent on social, cultural and historical context, then analysing these voices may be indispensable to understand meanings and their associated processes.

Moreover, the issue here is that naturally occurring data, such as parliamentary debates, only offers traces of phenomena like the use of symbolic resources. It would be foolish to expect people to naturally engage in lengthy conversation about the meaning of events such as World War II, and even more on how they produced such meanings. To overcome this issue, Gillespie’s genealogical method proposes to analyse dialogic overtones, or traces of past uses of the utterance, to go “beyond the presentation of recorded data” (Gillespie, 2006, p. 156) and “reconstruct the complex social processes through which [the discourse] has been forged” (p. 157).

Here, such a method would allow for the reconstruction of the processes by which meaning was attributed to the nation through collective history using relatively fragmented data. To do so, Gillespie proposes to search for *referenced traces* of the object we wish to study, *symbolic resources* or cultural elements that are being brought in to make sense of the situation, *echoes* or implicit traces of voices. And, last but not least, *voices*, or direct quotations.

Adapting such a framework to the data and the study of the use of symbolic resources, several elements were added or modified. First, indirect references to historical events were added to direct references, with for instance expression like “the foundational principles of the Republic” indirectly referring to its foundation, that is, the French Revolution. Second, collective memory being itself a symbolic resource, it is the elements in relation to which it was evoked that were coded – that is, the elements that were justified or made sense of by using a reference to history. Third, echoes, usually referring to unmarked quotations, included references to the words of historical speakers even when no quotation was made, such as when an MP said about the parliament: “where Jaurès expressed himself”. Here, a voice is evoked, that of the 19th century French politician, although his words are not uttered – possibly because they are supposed to be known by all. Finally, quotations did not only include quotations of historical speakers, but also

evocations of the use by others of references to the past, whether they were indeed made or they were supposed. For instance, a Right-winged MP told a Radical Left colleague that: “your remarks as those of someone nostalgic for communism, Mister Brard”. Here, it is the past use of the symbol of communism that is assumed and interacted with, which fits with the aim pursued when identifying voices.

The data: French parliamentary debates on immigration and integration

The data used consisted of the official transcripts of fifteen sessions of parliamentary debates, which took place in France between May 2nd, 2006 and May 17th 2006, as well as the vote session of June 30th, 2006, all made available to the public on the parliament official website. This constitutes the whole of the examination of the bill n°2986 on “Immigration and Integration” by the National Assembly, one of the two organs of the legislative power in France and, here, the first one to officially discuss the bill, for a total of one hundred and seven hours of debates.

Parliamentary days are usually organised in three sessions – morning, afternoon, evening – lasting around 4 to 6 hours, and often finish in the middle of the night. For these reasons, and because an impressive number of bills are discussed every year, only a limited number of deputies – the members of the National Assembly – participate in the discussion of a bill (here, around 20, out of 577 deputies).

The transcripts contain the participants’ whole interventions and interruptions from the opening to the end of the sessions, as well as general reactions of the Assembly – such as laughter or exclamations – which are usually attributed to a whole parliamentary group. These groups are central to the Assembly’s structure, as speaking times and turns, seats, places in commissions, etc., are allocated to a parliamentary group and not to specific members. Furthermore, the allegiance to one’s group is necessary to run for the next elections, and therefore taken very seriously by the MPs (Abélès, 2001)

The Right side of the hemicycle, author of the bill and constituting the majority, was represented by one parliamentary group, the Union for Popular Movement, whereas the Left was represented by the Socialists (Socialist Party, second group of the parliament) and the Radical Left (Communist and Republican Deputies), although both groups defended a very similar line. The last parliamentary group was constituted by the Centrists³.

The aim of the bill, proposed by the Right-winged majority, was to drastically reduce the number of long-term visas accorded to foreigners through a tightening of the delivery conditions for illegal migrants, migrant’s families and those married to EU citizens. Although the bill contained several important measures to reach such a goal, the most symbolic one – which is also the one that was discussed the longest – consisted in the annulation of a law from 1997 which allowed illegal immigrants who could prove that they had lived in France for at least ten years to apply for a resident permit. As the measure had always concerned a very limited number of people (3,000 a year, in a country counting more than 65 million inhabitants), those opposed to the bill saw there a populist

³ In the interest of clarity, the organisation of the French political groups, the parliaments and the French political system as a whole have been simplified here. The original analysis was however made without these truncations.

decision from Sarkozy⁴ to satisfy his most radical electorate, and its reinstatement was the first decision on immigration taken by the Socialist government⁵. For the defenders of the bill, however, it was considered as a proof that the previous system was encouraging illegal immigration.

The context of the bill was one of great political tension and this law – the second one proposed by Nicolas Sarkozy on immigration – polarised the French public sphere and became a symbol of the ideas defended by its author during the following campaign for the presidential elections (Girier, 2007). As a result, the parliamentary groups were, in the debates, mostly organised around the notion of majority (Right) and opposition (Left), with the exception of the centrist minority and a couple of Right-winged deputies (de Saint-Laurent, 2012). However, the deep *clivage* between Right and Left – so central to the French political life that it shapes “the individual political identifications and the processes of politicisation which underlie them” (Haegel, 2005, p. 46, our translation) – started much earlier to these debates (Rose & Urwin, 1970).

Method: reconstructing narratives

The analysis of the data took place in three steps. The genealogical method presented above was used as a first step to identify the excerpts relevant for the investigation of the role of collective memory in giving meaning to the national group; the software used for this segment of the analysis was Nvivo. In order to preserve the dynamic nature of interactions, the coding included whenever possible also the elements to which participants replied as well as the reactions to their reply.

To define what would constitute historical time without entering in a debate only remotely relevant to this study, it was decided to stop at the most recent events among those mentioned that would conventionally be considered as part of history in France, namely decolonisation. It amounts to 65 intercepts, all of which are rather short (between 15 and 1 lines, with no more than 3 participants, excluding general reactions from the Assembly) except for a lengthy (and heated) conversation on World War II (around 250 lines, with 12 participants).

Because of the length of the debates and the evolution of my own sensitivity to indirect references, the extraction of the references was done in two times: first through careful readings of the whole of the debates, second through a key-words research. The key-words were chosen from the 49 excerpts obtained within the first step, and aimed at pinpointing indirect references made through expressions clearly linked elsewhere to history. 16 excerpts were added, mainly referring to the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. Unfortunately, several implicit references certainly have eluded me, a pitfall impossible to avoid.

The second step consisted of coding the extracts thereby obtained along two axes. First, the events referred to were thematically coded (do they talk about World War II, the French Revolution, colonisation, etc.), trying to map out the historical periods represented and regroup similar references. Second, the groups the speakers belonged to

⁴ President of France from 2007 to 2012, who made of immigration one of the main topic of his 2007 electoral campaign.

⁵ “Circulaire Valls” dated November 28th, 2012, that actually reduced the necessary presence to five years.

were coded, with two categories: political party and side of the political spectrum. The categories proposed here not only follow the groups that seem, as seen above, to be central to the representations of the MPs (and are the only ones they evoke for the in-group in the debates), but, as will be seen, are also relevant to the analysis.

For the third step, the concept of “schematic narrative templates” (Wertsch, 2008) was used to reconstruct the narratives of the past present in the data. Narrative templates are general story lines common to several stories within a given cultural-historical context, and they are especially present in collective memory, where national groups tend to use a single story line to narrate a multitude of historical events (Wertsch, 2002, 2008). This concept was thus used to reconstruct the narratives from the very heterogeneous and fragmented excerpts obtained. For this purpose, the different fragments of stories present in the data were superposed, with the aim of finding the common general narrative. Following the findings presented above on symbolic resources, it was considered that elements of the past that are used similarly in discourse probably have a similar meaning for their user, facilitating the superposition of elements from different stories.

Table 1: Example of the use of “schematic narrative templates” to reconstruct the narratives underlying the references made to history.

	Historical event	Main elements of the story		
1. References in the data	<i>Colonisation</i>		Comparison of colonised populations with today’s immigrants	Comparison of the Right’s policy with the one of the colonisers
	<i>World War II</i>	Quotations of French “resistants” presented as defending the same ideas as the Left	Comparison of the immigrants to those oppressed by Nazism	Comparison of the Right’s policy with the one of the Vichy regime
2. Underlying stories	<i>Colonisation</i>	<i>The Left defending...?</i>	... the populations oppressed by colonisation...	... against the colonisers
	<i>World War II</i>	The resistants...	<i>... defending the victims of World War II...?</i>	... against the Vichy regime.
3. Common narrative templates		The Left-winged ⁶ hero...	... defending oppressed people...	... against the defenders of oppressive ideologies.

Table 1 offers an illustration of how this reconstruction was made for a limited segment of the data. In row 1, the references made to World War II and colonisation by Left-winged

⁶ All the resistants quoted were associated later with Left-winged political organisations.

deputies are synthesised and then superposed according to how they were used (e.g., the Right is compared to both the colonisers and the Vichy regime⁷, all three being presented as classifying men on unfair grounds; it is therefore assumed that the colonisers and the partisans of the Vichy regime play the same part within the schematic narrative templates). In row 2, the underlying stories are reconstructed (sections not in italic) and in row 3 a possible common narrative is proposed. Finally, the missing parts of the stories, in italics in the table, are hypothesised from the narrative template. Whenever a story could not be reconstructed this way – because the general narratives did not match – the main story lines found in the data were still used to shed light on the underlying story, as collective memory tends to organise the past along a continuous line (Wertsch, 2002).

Because of this very reconstructive aspect of the analysis, all the interpretations were checked against complementary sources (systematic research in French newspapers for references to similar events by politicians, consultation of the different participants' blogs and websites, consultation of some of the history books used in political schools, etc.) and involved multiple excerpts and data sources.

The analysis that follows, carried out on all of the data, presents 1) the stories told by the Left, 2) how they were contested by the Right, 3) the stories told by the Right, and 4) the contestations they led to from the Left. The interpretation of the meaning these stories give to the national group and how it may have been produced is proposed at each step, in order to render clearer how such propositions were built. A similar aim underlies the ordering of the data, starting each time with the most frequent reference. However, two remarks deserve to be made about their initial organisation in the data. First, the references to history are spread throughout the debates, although the three sessions that followed the opening statements – where public attention tends to diminish – showed a higher concentration. Second, the contestations usually happened during the same session – or at least the same day – as the original reference, with the evocation of the USSR being the only exception.

The ethnographic and historical elements that were used to interpret the references are added along the way. These are based on my experience of the stories surrounding history in France, heard in the media, at school, known from popular culture or political discourses, and were confronted to those of several French colleagues. They however remain subjective, as would any interpretation of such cultural elements⁸. Because the focus of this study is on the dynamic aspect of the use of collective memory, I do not believe this to be a major shortcoming: what matters here is the journey, notwithstanding the doubts that may surround its starting point.

⁷ The Vichy regime governed Southern France during World War II and collaborated with the Nazis. This part of French history is however often minimised and the Resistant movement is brought to the forefront.

⁸ However, as already stated, all the interpretations made here were checked against secondary sources.

Stories and meanings

The Left: the Revolution, Colonisation, Slavery, Third republic, World War II & decolonisation

The Left's references to history concern a rather wide array of events, from slavery to the Vichy regime during World War II, and go back as far as Leonardo da Vinci and François I^{er} (king of France during the Renaissance). Most of them concern World War II and/or colonisation (17 references), and are used to defend the idea that the treatment of immigration by the Right resembled the logic of these periods, as one of the aim of the bill was to increase the number of qualified immigrants and restrict access to the country for unqualified ones.

Excerpt 1⁹:

Jean-Pierre Brard (Radical Left): I can very well picture him, filling up his basket on the international market [...] plundering the developing countries of their life forces! You want to plunder them today like the colonial troops did yesterday!

03.05.2006, first session¹⁰

Excerpt 2:

Arnaud Montebourg (Socialist): An immigration that you decided to abuse by making resurface the shadows of a neo-vichyssoise ideology of sorting men out.

03.05.2006, third session

Excerpt 3:

Jérôme Rivière (Right): I suffer when I receive, at the Strasbourg Court, lessons on the respect of Human Rights by judges coming from the Ukrainian, Azeri, Turkish or Georgian systems, to quote only a few of the countries [that signed the treaty on the European Court of Human Rights].

Several Socialist and Radical Left MPs: This is scandalous!

Bernard Roman (Socialist): Soon with the yellow star!

Jean-Pierre Brard (Radical Left): This is Gobineau!

03.05.2006, first session

Gobineau was a French intellectual from the end of the nineteenth century, considered as the father of racial demography and as an important source for Hitler's ideology, and

⁹ Because of the heterogeneity of the data and its interpretation as a whole, the excerpts presented here should not be considered as either representative nor as summarising the data, but as illustrations.

¹⁰ All quotes from the debates are designated by author, date and parliamentary session. The transcripts do not contain page or paragraph numbers. The political affiliations of the participants were added in brackets for clarity, [...] replaces the parts of the interventions that were removed. Comments about the reactions of the assembly, in italics and in brackets, are part of the original transcripts. All translations were made by the author.

“neo-vichyssoise” refers to the Vichy Regime, Petain’s regime in Southern France which collaborated with the Nazis.

What appears here is the use of the past by the Left – and more specifically the meaning attributed to it – to make sense of the present. The proposition of the Right to focalise on qualified migrants is interpreted as “colonial plundering”. This differentiation between “qualified” and “unqualified” (to which excerpt 2 seems to be a reply, although it is not clear in the transcripts) and the one between democratic and undemocratic cultures (excerpt 3) is attributed a similar meaning as the one of World War II: the application of an ideology – such as Gobineau’s – that differentiates between men on unjustifiable grounds.

The analogies made between different historical periods seems to be made possible by the identification by the Left-winged deputies of recurring actors across history: the Right is seen as comparable to the colonial troops, because the aim of their actions is represented as similar, and similar also to the the Vichy regime, because of its ideology. This is especially visible here:

Excerpt 4:

Jean-Pierre Brard (Radical Left): Really, two France are in confrontation, as throughout History: the one of Coblenz¹¹ against the one of the Revolution; the one of Paul Reynaud against the one of the Popular Front; the one of Napoleon and Josephine against the one of Toussaint Louverture and Victor Schoelcher [...] The one that supported Franco, Salazar, Mobutu (protestations on the Right’s benches) against the one that defended Grimau, Cunhal, Lumumba,...

Several Right-winged deputies: And Stalin! And Stalin!

Jean-Pierre Brard (Radical Left): ...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.

The country is here divided in two sides, the oppressors and those defending the oppressed, that are associated throughout history not only because they defended the same things, but also because they opposed the same people. This continuity of historical characters, allowing for history to go on as an uninterrupted story of social and political oppositions, can also be found in the multiple references connecting the World Wars –

¹¹ All the historical figures evoked here work in opposing couples: 1) Coblenz was the city where many noble men, accompanied by the king’s brothers, took refuge during the Revolution. 2) Reynaud was a French politician known for his economically liberal positions during the social movement of the Popular Front. 3) Toussaint Louverture and Victor Schoelcher are important figures of the anti-slavery political fight, during the 18th century in the French colonies for the former, and in the 19th century metropolitan France for the later. Napoleon I (evoked here with his wife Josephine) reinstated slavery in the French colonies by the end of the 18th century. 4) Franco, Salazar and Mobutu, 20th century dictators in Spain, Portugal and the Republic of Congo, were opposed to by Grimau (Spanish politician executed during Franco’s dictatorship), Cunhal (Portuguese politician, major opponent of the Estado Novo, Salazar’s party) and Lumumba (Congolese independence leader, executed shortly after Mobutu’s putsch).

especially the second one – and colonisation. The idea defended by the Left when referring to both events is that of a debt towards the former French colonies. For instance, after arguing against the tightening of the conditions to obtain a visa, a socialist deputy said:

Excerpt 5:

René Doisière (Socialist): Because, Mister Vanneste, the colonised came in the cold, mud and rain to fight and often die so that France could live!

03.05.2006, second session

This association of past actors with current ones, of those who died “so that France could live” with the current immigrants – condition under which Doisière’s argument can hold – is here made possible by a generic “the colonised”. The reference is not to their ancestors or their fellowmen – some of which indeed died in the conditions described – but to a term encompassing all the population that have been at one point or another victims of colonisation.

It therefore seems that, for the Left, history is a continuous line able to explain the present because it is populated by the same characters. These characters perpetually confront each other along the same story line: that of oppressed people (the colonised, the Jews, the starving farmers of the Revolution, the factory workers of the Popular Front...) confronted with the ideologies of their tyrants (the Vichy Regime, the colonial troops, Napoleon, Franco...). This aspect of history is presented as forgotten by the Right: the interpellation of Vanneste (Right-winged deputy) in excerpt 5, just after he made a discourse, seems to be an echo of his words, and for the Left it justified a reminder of the past.

In this story, the role that the Left aims at filling (already hinted in excerpt 4) can be found in the voices they are ventriloquing, through quotations and echoes: the World War II resistant René Char as well as Jean Jaurès, one of the most famous Left-wing French politicians of the end of the nineteenth century. The importance of the words of the latter is highlighted in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 6:

Jean-Yves Le Bouillonnet (Radical Left): How can you, at the National Assembly tribune...

Jean-Pierre Brard (Radical Left): Where Jaurès expressed himself!

Jean-Yves Le Bouillonnet (Radical Left):...evoke the European Human Right Declaration in such terms?

03.05.2006, first session

Without entering in details, Jaurès was, with Zola, one of the main defenders of Dreyfus in the affair of the same name (which led Zola to write his famous “J’accuse”), which polarized the French political world between Right and Left at the beginning of the twentieth century, and revealed itself to be due to the anti-Semitism of an important part of the French population. These events, with the Popular Front, constitute landmarks of the Third Republic, a period characterised by an important political instability in France but one that also led to the development of the French social model (employees’ protection, right to strike, paid holidays, etc.).

In this excerpt, the Right is seen by the Left as violating the principles of the National Assembly: the Right-winged deputy Jérôme Rivière had just given a speech implying that the European Declaration of Human Rights was encouraging unwanted immigration and should not be respected in the same way by countries from Western Europe as it was by those from Eastern Europe, speech of which excerpt 3 is the conclusion. The reference to Jaurès at this moment, and especially to the discourses he made at the exact place the members of parliament are nowadays performing theirs, seems to indicate that for the Left he is one of the historical figures who gave the institution its sanctity, and therefore the former deputy that should be followed. It seems here, quite logically, that the role the Left-winged deputies aim at filling is the one of defenders of the oppressed – like Jaurès here, and the resisters in the case of World War II – faced with the partisans of the oppressing ideology.

A model of how collective memory is used to produce meaning for the Left seems here to emerge, fitting with Wertsch's perspective on collective memory where a single general story line is used to organise the past. Here, what is at stake in the various historical events presented is seen as similar to what is at stake in the debates, and the meaning of one event is transferred to the others by the identification of similarities between the characters, whether in terms of ideologies defended or groups they belong to. This interpretation is made all the more plausible by the fact that more than a third of the references to history made by the Left concern several historical periods that are evoked as equivalent (such as in excerpt 4). Thus, this bill is given the same meaning as these events did: that of a social and political struggle between the defenders of the oppressed and those collaborating with the oppressors. It is the story of humanists (Jaurès, French resisters, those "in solidarity with the oppressed populations"...) defending the victims (colonised, factory workers, Jews...) against oppressors. Or, more exactly, those who collaborated with them: it is not the colonisers that are present here, but their troops and supporters; the Nazis are never directly mentioned, but the Vichy Regime and Gouin are. Furthermore, all the collaborators referred to are French: it is thus the national group that is seen as divided along the line humanist/non-humanist, at least since the Revolution, the first event to be mentioned by the Left and that fits well into this grand narrative.

The Right's contestations: dictators and mere traditions

Such a representation of history by the Left is, of course, not left uncontested by a Right casted out in the role of the internal tyrant, in the same vein as the Nazis, Napoleon and Mobutu are. Its contestations take mainly two forms: the delegitimisation of the Radical Left MPs through references to the USSR, and of the Socialist through the contestation of the importance and meaning of the Popular Front.

The USSR, either directly referred to or through evocations of Stalin, the Soviet Union, the Gulags or the KGB, is the historical period, with the French Revolution, to which the Right-winged MPs refer to the most, with 14 spontaneous references. These are only addressed to Radical Left deputies, and it therefore is the only historical argument of the debates intended for a specific parliamentary group instead of a full side of the Assembly's hemicycle. It also is the only one made from the very first session of the debates and attributed to part of a parliamentary group in the transcripts (shouting "And Stalin!" in excerpt 4). These comments are mostly made when a Radical Left member condemns the positions of the UMP as anti-humanist, although it concerns a rather wide

array of topics, and usually take the form of “what about Stalin?”, or are expressed as in the following extract:

Excerpt 7:

Jean-Pierre Brard (Radical Left): when I fight against your bill, I am faithful to my anti-colonial tradition. [...]

Christian Vanneste (Right): You are talking about the soviet colonies?

03.05.2006, first session

It seems that these references are made to support two arguments. The first one, found in the above excerpts, is that the Radical Left is not qualified to make comments about the Right's policies, especially in terms of Human Rights, because it supported a dictatorship, of which Stalin is the symbol. A second argument can be found in the following extract:

Excerpt 8:

Jean-Pierre Brard (Radical Left): Le Pen doesn't need to have a seat here: he is represented by his adepts!

Christian Vanneste (Right): So is Stalin!

03.05.2006, first session

Here, the FN – Extreme Right party of which Le Pen is the leader – and the Radical Left are put at the same level by the Right-Winged MP, when numerous declarations of the Right had insisted on how necessary it was to make sure that the FN would not reach the parliament. The reason invoked by the Right is that the FN is the line on the right not to be crossed, notably because it is not a Republican party. The argument appearing here is therefore that not only that the Radical Left is not legitimate in its comment, it might not be legitimate at the National Assembly either because its underlying ideology runs contrary to the Republican principles of the parliament, close as it is to a despotic regime.

Another line of contestation of the stories told by the Left consists in comments on the Popular Front, last major event of the Third Republic – which terminated in World War II and of which Jaurès was an MP – and that opposed employers and factory workers over the access to social rights. One form of contestation consists in recasting this event as a mere tradition:

Excerpt 9:

Patrick Braouezec (Radical Left): besides, Sir Minister, I believe that it would be appropriate for you to watch some of your words. I completely agree with you when you say that every person living on the French territory must accept the values and principles of our Republic. I am not, however, when you start evocating the French traditions, which, I believe, foreigners do not have to adhere to.

Claude Goasguen (Right): The Popular Front, it is a tradition!

04.05.2006, first session

As will be seen later, the events central to the history of the country for the Right are presented as creators of "principles" for the Republic, and the Right-winged MP's comment can therefore be read as an attempt to undermine the importance given to the Popular Front by the Left. Moreover, because the Popular Front ended with the access to numerous social rights, it is also possible to see here a "reminder" by the Right that such rights are a custom, not an obligation. However, some other references to this period shed another light on this contestation:

Excerpt 10:

René Doisière (Socialist): France has been, ever since the Revolution, considered as the country of Human Rights, and it has, except during the period of the Vichy Regime...

Jérôme Rivière (Right): Which has its origins in the Popular Front!

René Doisière (Socialist):...been a safe haven for all the persecuted.¹²

03.05.2006, second session

This causal link between World War II and the Popular Front comes from the idea – actually defended by the leader of the Vichy regime himself (Milza & Bernstein, 1987) – that the Third Republic ended in great political instability and with a country weakened by years of social protests, and therefore left France unable to defend itself at the beginning of World War II. The argument here seems to be double. First, as it is implied in the excerpt, if the Vichy Regime – associated to the Right in several occasions, such as in excerpt 2 – has existed in the first place, it is because the Left had left the country drained. The second argument, lurking behind the first one, is that the Left's insistence in pursuing what is but a mere social tradition did already cost the country a humiliating defeat and an anti-Semitic authoritarian regime. Pursuing the same aims today would be naive as it could lead to a similar situation. If the Right delegitimises the radical-Left through references to the USSR, doubting that it should even be present in the parliament, here it delegitimises the principles of the Left at large, through the contestation of the event that for the Left led to the implementation of its values.

The Right's Republican Pact

These two forms of contestation, both leading to the delegitimation of the Left-winged participants, go alongside the defence of a competing narrative by the Right. However, their references to the past, although concerning a much reduced array of events, are significantly less explicit and much more varied in their content than those of the Left. The following is therefore an attempt to reconstruct the general narrative, and special attention was dedicated to making these interpretations as congruent as possible with the rest of the debate and the additional data collected on the participants. Because of the heterogeneity of the data, and to keep this section to a reasonable length, only part of it presented here.

The main reference to history made by Right-wing MPs, besides the USSR, concerns the French Revolution (14 spontaneous references), although it is often done indirectly

¹² « Un lieu d'asile », literally: "a place of asylum", expression that thus has more direct links with immigration than "safe haven", although it is the closest translation.

through two main topics. First, Right-winged MPs refer to or quote Rousseau on numerous occasions, the ideas of the Enlightenment philosopher being often considered – with Voltaire’s – as the roots of the French Revolution¹³. The first reference to him is made on the afternoon of the first day of the debates, and is therefore one of the first references made to history in the debates:

Excerpt 11:

Alain Marsaud (Right): [...] Thus it is not the world offering itself to France, but France offering itself to the world as long as it has the capacity to do so.

This conception, noble and imminently rousseauist, is however very naïve: its only short-term consequence will be a race to the bottom for our social organisation.

02.05.2006, third session

At the same time, this is the only reference to the philosopher that is a critique of his ideas, most of the others resembling the following one:

Excerpt 12:

Christian Vanneste (Right): You say that immigration is a fact. But a fact does not make a right.

Jérôme Rivière (Right): Very good!

Christian Vanneste: And you know who said that? Jean-Jacques Rousseau!

Thierry Mariani (Right): Very good!

04.05.2006, first session

The main idea kept from Rousseau by the Right is that of a civil pact, already hinted at in excerpt 12, and in the following raised to the rank of a “common sense principle”:

Excerpt 13:

Richard Mallié (Right): There is no need to go back as far as Rousseau’s civil pact to understand that living together comes with rights, but also duties. This common sense principle is all the more true when it concerns the foreign nationals that we welcome.

04.05.2006, first session

Except in the first reference, Right-wing deputies present themselves as in line with Rousseau’s ideas. The original opposition to Rousseau, presented in excerpt 11 and commonly found with Right-winged MPs (Julliard, 2012), and the shift towards this second position – that remained the one taken throughout the debates – may be explained by the fact that this argument could be seen as all the more convincing by the Right-winged MPs as it uses ideas usually associated with the Left (Julliard, 2012). However, it

¹³ Idea that can be found in the official high-school programs in history and philosophy, for instance.

may also be a form of contestation of the stories told by Left: it insists on how similar their ideologies are, whereas the Left presents them as profoundly different. And it is a sign that collective memory is indeed constructed in the situation – and thus evolves with the interactions that are taking place – although this is the only clear trace found.

Another set of references from the Right is linked, indirectly, to the French Revolution, and specifies the grounds for this pact: it consists of quotations from the Declarations of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen made in reference to the “foundational principles of the Republic”. The later expression is linked – at least on the French Republic official website *vie publique*¹⁴ – to the maxim “*liberty, equality, fraternity*”, and both are important products of the French Revolution. The idea defended here by the Right-winged MPs is that the bill needs to respect those principles, and only those, and that it does (see for instance excerpt 3). Human rights are evoked frequently in the debates, but only the Right refers to “the Rights of Man and of the Citizen”, a direct product of the French revolution, while the Left always refers to its “Universal” or “European” versions. Such a difference in point of view is best illustrated in the following extract. It is a reply to the Right-winged MP Christian Vanneste, who defended the idea of establishing a contract with newly arrived immigrants that includes their obligation to respect and follow “the French principles”.

Excerpt 14:

Patrick Braouezec (Radical Left): When Mister Vanneste affirms that the French law needs to be obeyed, nobody is saying the contrary, but let’s not ask more from foreigners, not matter what their situation is, than from the French.

Serge Blisko (Socialist): Equality!

Christian Vanneste (Right): The Rights of the Citizen are not just the Human Rights!

Patrick Braouezec (Radical Left): To obey to the Republican principles, nobody in this hemicycle would think of questioning this principle. However, obeying “French principles”, I admit that I don’t know what this mean. I know universal values, but I don’t know French values. I know some Republican principles, I know the French law, but I don’t see why France would have specific values.

Jacques Myard (Right): French specificity does not exist?

04.05.2006, first session

The first reply by a Right-winged MP, Christian Vanneste, makes a distinction between two kinds of rights: the Human Rights, which concern everyone, and the Rights of the Citizen, which concern only the French population. This remark seems to advocate that foreigners do indeed have more duties and fewer rights than the French population, being a reply to an MP arguing the contrary. The second intervention, by Jacques Myard, shed light on why it is believed to be so: France is a singular country. The Right-winged deputies thus resist the reduction of the rights of the French population to the Human Rights and of the French values to that of the rest of the world.

A story of the “French specificity” can be drawn from this: what made France is a pact that followed the Revolution. It is the central event in the history of the country – the only

¹⁴ www.vie-publique.fr

national event lengthily referred to – whose associated political ideology, seen as its origin, refers to a ‘civil pact’. The opposition between universal rights and those specific to the French can be read as a necessary condition for the existence of the group: in excerpt 11, for instance, the opposite is presented endangering social organisation; in excerpt 14, the Rights of the Citizen as a protection from foreign values; and in excerpt 3, its European counterpart – more universalist – as an obstacle. Then, the Right-winged MPs may consider this pact as built to protect the interests of the group, and therefore that its principles do not concern outsiders. A Right-winged MP, for instance, presented this bill as necessary to stop “desperate populations” from massively migrating to France, point immediately followed by “it respects the French history, its traditions, and it defends its foundational principles” (Guy Teissier, Right, 05.05.2006, third session). And for outsiders to be accepted into the group, the original pact needs to be reiterated: the bill they defend proposes a contract with immigrants (excerpt 14), which aims at insuring that the duties coming with the pact are respected (excerpt 13).

Two other specifications of this pact are worth noting. First, the group seems to be seen as an indivisible and sovereign whole, idea that stems from the French Revolution as well (Debbasch, 1988). This appears in the last event mentioned by the Right, World War II, evoked through the symbol of the “yellow star”. Julien Dray, a socialist MP, had just countered a Right-winged MP by telling him to go back to the circonscription where he was elected. It was taken as major insult, and the Right’s reply triggered a lengthy and heated argument:

Excerpt 15:

Claude Goasguen (Right): I would like to remind my colleague that, in this Chamber, there is no deputy of Levallois, Saint-Denis or the 16th arrondissement (“*Yes, there is*” on the benches of the Socialists and Radical Left). Here are only representatives of the national sovereignty. Therefore, you do not have to assign yellow stars to one or another! (*Exclamations on the Socialists’ benches.*)

05.05.2006, second session

It seems that what was undermined by Dray’s comment is the idea of the country as an indivisible whole represented by the MPs, idea profoundly insulting for the Right-winged MPs (the session was suspended twice and six points of orders were raised in relation to this incident), possibly because this wholeness is linked to the question of national sovereignty. This interpretation seems to fit with the reference to the “yellow star”, reminder of the last period during which France lost its sovereignty on its territory, and during which it was split in two parts: World War II.

Second, it seems that what does not directly follow from the Revolution is either considered as a mere tradition (see excerpt 9 with the Popular Front), or as being irrelevant to the definition of the nation:

Excerpt 16:

Arnaud Montebourg (Socialist): A third of the French population has an ancestor, a grandfather or a grand-mother, a foreign parent, and the French Republic always worked this way: as a mix!

Jérôme Rivière (Right): So did the monarchy!

02.05.2006, third session

Here, the argument of the French cultural “mix” is countered on the grounds that if it was also true of the monarchy, it is not a specificity of the Republic and thus no a valid argument to defend immigration.

The French Revolution is interpreted as the “founding act” of the nation: it is the establishment of the Republican Pact, a meaning produced with the use of the French Enlightenment philosophers. It organises how other historical events are interpreted and attributed meaning in turn: the Popular Front becomes a mere tradition, the USSR the proof of the lack of republicanism of the Radical Left MPs, and colonisation is attributed “positive aspects” (Christian Vanneste, Right, 10.05.2006, second session) because it does not fall outside of the rules of the nation: to protect its members, first and foremost. Conversely to the Left, then, the Right does not use a single narrative repeated over multiple events, but a ‘grand narrative’ from which all the others are derived.

The Left's contestation: the universality of Human Rights

This story line is rarely contested by the Left directly, except in the case of Rousseau, where it led to a few reactions, all presenting his ideas as misunderstood by the Right:

Excerpt 17:

Serge Blisko (Socialist): I find you a little bit rigid and hard for a Rousseauist, Mister Vanneste.

Christian Vanneste (Right): Reread Rousseau, you will see that he was far more rigid than I am. [...] He defended the death penalty, do not forget about that!

04.05.2006, first session

However, indirect contestations can be found. Indeed, where the Right refers to the Declaration of the Right of Man and of the Citizen, product of the French Revolution, the Left refers exclusively to Human Rights in general or to the European Declaration of Human Rights in particular – except when quoting the Right – as can be seen for instance in excerpt 6. With the insistence of the Right on the importance of the specificity of ‘French values’, it can be seen as a tentative contestation by the Left, on the ground that Human Rights are universal (see for instance excerpt 14). It seems that although the Left also considers the French Revolution as a central event in French history – see for instance excerpt 10 where it is implicitly presented as the beginning of democracy – the meaning attributed to this event is rather different for these groups. For the Right, it is a founding act that lay the rules for the future, whereas for the Left it is where the fight for democracy started (see Julliard, 2012 for a similar interpretation). It is the first event evoked by Brard, Radical Left member, in his litany of social or political struggles (excerpt 4), but it is certainly not over: the Popular Front, the World Wars, decolonisation, and now this bill,

followed. Similarly, none of them seem to deny the importance of Rousseau's philosophy, nonetheless they argue about what his words actually meant. Where the Right's contestations included a tentative to unify the Socialist and their ideology under the banner of the Enlightenment, the Left here insists on what makes them different, and considers that if the Right-winged MPs think otherwise, it is because they misunderstood their ideas, whether it is Rousseau or how Human Rights are universal. The importance for the Left not to see its ideas reduced to that of the Right is well highlighted in this reply of Radical Left member to a Right-winged MP:

Excerpt 18:

Jean-Pierre Brard (Radical Left): "I would rather be hanged than agree with you"

06.05.2013, first session

Epilogue

The bill discussed in the debates analysed here was adopted on the 24th of July 2006, with very little modifications, and was followed by further restrictions on immigration in July and November of the same year. In May 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy created the ministry of "immigration and national identity". In reaction, 8 out of the 12 historians of the soon to be "National City of the History of Immigration" immediately resigned. In their official statement, they accused the state of trying to define the identity of its members, adding that this new ministry "is in line with a discourse that stigmatise immigration. The aim of the National City for the History of Immigration was to bring people together and orientated towards the future, around a common history that everyone could have made his" (our translation). This rapprochement between the management of immigration and the question of the national identity made them consider their mission impossible.

Discussion

It is now possible to return to our three original questions: 1) what meaning do the stories told about the past produce for the group? 2) how is such a meaning produced? and 3) how is such a meaning negotiated with the others present in the debate? Because the two first questions are extremely interrelated, they will be treated together.

Meanings in construction

It appears that some of the stories told about the past are indeed used to produce meaning about the nation, as well as about other historical events.

For the Left, the numerous fights for the Human Rights that took place in the history of the country give to its existence the sense of an on-going struggle for the implementation of a humanistic ideology, perpetually endangered by the ideologies of oppressive others, of which the Right is a representative. What matters about the past are the various actors' intentions – oppressing, defending ... – and how they made the different groups relate to each other.

For the Right, the past, read as the establishment of an exclusive contract between equal citizens, makes of the nation a place where civic life can go on, on the basis of a mutual agreement, one that only its members are legitimate to negotiate. Here, the past is used to define a starting point where the rules have been laid down and that gives legitimacy to the group's existence. Stepping out of such rules would imply creating "something else", something that would not be the French nation anymore.

This transfer of meaning from past to present seems to be done, in the case of the Left, by analogies, where the meaning of one event is transferred to another one because they are seen as similar. It allows the organisation of multiple events along a single line, shown by the rather wide array of historical periods they refer too, thus offering a sense of continuity. For the Right, a historical event is turned into a founding act, creating a form of 'grand meaning' that organises how other events are going to be understood. It permits the production of several different meanings for the past – from a threat to national sovereignty with WWII to the 'battle' for Republicanism with the Cold War – that follow from a single original meaning: the Revolution as the signing of a Republican pact.

And it appears here that collective memory is not simply potentially a symbolic resource, but may also be considered as the product of such a meaning-making process itself. Using, as done in these parliamentary debates, one historical event to give meaning to others – whether it is because they are seen as being fundamentally similar or because one gave rise to the others – is indeed a way to use cultural elements to make sense of the past. Then, it is not only the present that is given meaning through the use of collective memory, but the past itself is given a sense of continuity and a specific meaning (see Favero, 2010, for an illustration of a similar process).

If symbolic resources allow participants to link past and present, to organise experiences along a meaningful line (Zittoun & Grossen, 2013), then the fact that collective memory already is the result of the use of other cultural elements to make sense of a disrupted past is not at all that surprising. And this makes of collective memory an especially interesting symbolic resource in producing meaning, for this entails that it can itself be renegotiated in the process.

Moreover, organising the past along a meaningful line is one of the functions of narratives (Bruner, 2003). One of their characteristics, pointed out by Aristotle (quoted in Bruner, 2003), is that they are always based on the structure 'familiar-rupture of the familiar by a *peripetia*' or there would not be a story (a *peripetia* being an incident or turning point usually taking place in a dramatic story). Then, if symbolic resources are cultural elements used to make sense of ruptures, and if stories are themselves about such ruptures and how life-like characters reacted to them, they are especially fitted for such a role. It may thus be because stories are themselves the product of a symbolisation of the unexpected that they can in turn help us to produce meaning around present ruptures (see Zittoun, Cornish, Gillespie, & Aveling, 2008 for an illustration of a similar case).

The stories told here are indeed about ruptures: with the monarchy, with the ideologies previously defended, with an "other" that threatens the life of the group or its ideology, etc. Therefore, it is possible to see collective memory as a construction in a specific situation that aims at giving meaning (Bartlett, 1995) by inscribing it into an on-going chain of events that would go beyond the experienced rupture (de Saint-Laurent, 2014). The way meaning is produced may also change how collective memory is used as a symbolic resource, by attributing a different "momentum" to the flow of historical time.

Indeed, using analogies seems to provide meaning for a rather wide range of events. However, it does not open up new possibilities for the future, as it is the eternal replay of the same story. As for the use of a ‘grand meaning’, it seems on the contrary to allow the production of a range of meanings, provided that they fit with the original one. However, it excludes elements that do not seem to fit with the general story line.

Negotiation of meanings

Although each side of the political spectrum seems to organise the past around its own specific narrative, the groups also seem to reply to each other through a series of oppositions. To a founding act (Right) is opposed the idea of a fight that seems to never end (Left); to a unifying contract (Right), incompatible ideologies (Left); to French specificities (Right), universal values (Left)...

The stories they tell may call for such oppositions. In the case of the Right the other’s views, perspectives, and voices are considered as either similar to the ones of the rest of the group or illegitimate, limiting recognition to similarity and leaving no space for the expression of the other’s singularity. As for the Left, the dichotomy operated does not go without a judgment on the validity of the other’s knowledge: what differentiates the opposed sides of the conflict is here judged in terms of respect for desirable values, as expressed in the various Human Rights Declarations. For the other, the only options are either to agree, or to be cast out as the “bad guy” in the conflict.

What we have here are also two types of discourses that may reinforce each other: one may react to the tentative to turn the debate into a monologue, such as the Right does, by insisting on what makes them profoundly different, which seems indeed to be the reply of the Left. And the other may try to demonstrate that they believe in the same things – and therefore think similarly, such as what is done by the Right through references to Rousseau – as a way to refuse to be considered as the “villain” of the story, position in which the Left is casting out its opponents.

Such an opposition can also be understood through the different aims pursued by the majority and opposition in parliamentary debates. Indeed, we do not remember by reading fixed traces of the past, but by reconstructing what was perceived along more or less socially shared story lines and in order to serve a specific interest (Bartlett, 1995).

For the Right, representing the majority at the time, the aim seems to be to persuade the other of the validity of its position, which is after all often the purpose of a debate, parliamentary or not. The evolution of the Right’s position on Rousseau, for instance, seems to fit with this objective: from a characterisation of Rousseau’s ideas as naïve and endangering social order, the Right moves to argue that its bill follows the ideology of the Left’s favourite philosopher.

For the Left the situation is rather different: it represents the opposition, and the overwhelming majority of Right-winged MPs in the parliament very attached to this bill makes persuasion a quite unrealistic aim. The objective that the Left seems to pursue is in line with its official name in the parliament: the opposition. Indeed, in the stories they tell, the Republican pact and the Revolution are quite left out, and an important number of events are highlighted instead. However, in many other circumstances, the “foundational principles” of the Republic were made central by Left-winged politicians. For instance, the socialist Education Minister and former member of parliament, Vincent Peillon, proposed shortly after taking his function the creation of “moral and civic teaching”

classes in every high school where the same principles would be taught¹⁵. Where in other circumstances both sides could agree on the importance of these principles¹⁶, in the debates the Left oppose them by insisting on other principles and other events.

Senses and significations

In spite of the profound oppositions between the two main parliamentary groups, common symbols exist, making communication possible between them. Indeed, the emergence of signs and meaning in the triangular relation self-other-object allows for a distinction to be drawn between what they mean for the person and what is assumed to be common in relation to the other. That is, between the socially shared meaning of a sign (signification), and a personal one taken when it is associated with experience and given an emotional tonality (sense) (Abbey & Zittoun, 2010).

Here, the different groups share common signs – the ‘yellow star’ as a symbol of discrimination, the French Revolution as the creation of modern France, etc. – that enable communication by ensuring the existence of a common ground. However, the sense given to them may widely differ. For instance, the Revolution may be presented by both sides as the act that founded the French Republic, but the particular sense given by the Right is that of a contract making life in common possible. As for the Left, it is the beginning of a ‘humanist fight’, which has yet to be won.

If “by establishing some shared semiotic systems, group of people can also agree on certain interpretations of the world and then generalise them into values or full *Weltanschauungen* which then ground the organisation of the civil society” (Zittoun & Dahinden, 2013, p. 187-188), this discrepancy between the meanings given the nation goes hand in hand with a different vision of the world and of the future of the group. However, the common sign may give the MPs the impression that this is not the case, and it gives a place where to ground their oppositions.

This opposition may also be a product of the French political organisation. The cleavage between Right and Left, accentuated by an electoral system privileging bipartism (Rose & Urwin, 1970), rests on this paradox: to be on a “side” implies the existence of another side, which at the same time belongs to a unique “whole”. The parliament then becomes more than an “electoral show”, and is also the place where differences can be re-enacted to justify the existence of such an opposition.

In this game of “who am I”, where each side is defined as much by what its members say than by what it refutes in the other, it is the object of the discourse that tends to disappear. Occupied as they are in defining who they are, what the nation is and is not, what defines their political ideas, one character, which yet should be central to the debates, is surprisingly mute. In spite of how often MPs infer the mental states of immigrants – to ask whether they want to “integrate” themselves to French society or not, mainly – they are at

¹⁵ Proposition made in September 2012, with a first application in September 2013 (see *Le Monde*, dated 09.09.2013 “*Vincent Peillon présente sa “charte de la laïcité”*”).

¹⁶ A research in the French newspapers « *Le Monde* » (centre left) and « *Le Figaro* » (centre right) for the period between the 1st of January 2013 and the 1st of September 2013 showed that it had been defended by both Left-winged and Right-winged politicians, but that it concerned the latter more than 70% of the time.

most referred to as victims to be protected, not as agents of their own, and often as a foreign body to be excluded from the national group.

Meanings and boundaries

These meanings produced around the nation in these parliamentary debates may have significant implications for the boundaries of the group. Defining the group as united by a republican pact signed several hundred years ago, that ensures that a set of values is respected by all, allows limiting the access to the group to those who accept the pact and its values. It presents ‘being French’ as the access to specific rights, and makes of the inclusion into the national group an honour that implies respecting the duties defined by the original group.

On the contrary, defining the group as the place where a constant struggle between defenders of the oppressed and collaborators of the oppressors takes place renders another boundary more salient: the one between humanists and non-humanists. Not only the nation cannot be reduced to the desired group – for some of its historical members would then be left out – but this new group includes members far outside the national group. In that case, the nation is not a relevant group to organise the social world.

These divergent visions also produce different separations in the National Assembly: between Right and Left and between Republican parties and the ‘extremes’. And it is indeed the two separations that can be found in the discourses of politicians and the political media in France. Thus, it is not only the boundaries of the group that are negotiated here, but the very possibility to impose some inside the national group.

The stories told and the meaning they produce also seem to attribute legitimacy to the various groups. Where the Right recognises the place of the Socialists in the “national representation”, the various “extremists” have no right to speak. For the Left, the Right seems to be legitimate only as an adversary of its ideologies.

However, perhaps more interesting are the groups whose voices are not delegitimised – which implies considering the possibility of the alternative – but who remain silent in the stories of the MPs. The immigrants are notably silent in these stories, if not completely absent. Even in the case of the Left, where they are presented as a group to be protected, they do not appear as full characters, but as the object over which the ‘heroes’ and the ‘villains’ fight. The Right and the Left discourses about immigration may often be deeply opposed, but paternalism and discrimination are two faces of the same token that essentialises differences (Costa-Lascoux, 2001, p. 129).

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to analyse the meaning given to the nation as a producer of specific boundaries. It focused on collective memory, as it provides justification of the group’s existence and identity for its members. This has led me to argue that the meaning given to the group may not only determine where its boundaries are placed and how permeable they are, but how relevant they may be for its members. Here, the stories told by the Left renders the national group relatively irrelevant in explaining the social world – because no relevant characteristics unify its members. On the other hand, the stories told by the Right

make the national group relevant because it defines its members as holding certain common values that are necessary to the common good of the group.

In the multiplicity of the memberships displayed here – parliamentary group, side of the political spectrum, national institution, country... – it seems that the meaning given to the groups may determine how important they are in organising the world of those who hold them. If for the Right the nation allowed the existence of all the other groups, for the Left it made the political oppositions more salient than the nation.

Although boundary work is often understood as a perpetual renegotiation between dominant and dominated groups (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), this study highlights how, even within the majority, opposing discourses around the meaning of the group foster the reinforcement of boundaries, their mobility, call them into question, delegitimise actors, etc. It also points to the fact that, beyond the question of the meaning of the nation, also lurks the question of how we represent culture. In one case, it is represented as a unified group where each member holds a set of values similar to those of the rest of his group and, in the other, as people in contact with a common set of values and who choose between them, positions commonly found even in psychological studies of culture (Valsiner, 2007, p. 10).

This paper also argued that the ruptures experienced in the past of the group are given a meaning through their narration, and that such a meaning seems to be applied to the present crisis. Identifying the events of the past that are represented as bifurcation points, and opening a dialogue to render explicit the meaning given to them, can therefore be a step forwards towards the imagination of a collective future.

However, the existence of common benchmarks is necessary for such a dialogue to take place. In the specific case of immigration, the relative lack of symbolisation of one of its last turning points may be where lies the rub: decolonisation is only indirectly evoked in the debates and, in spite of a growing interest for the remembrance of the independence wars, it often leads, in official discourses (e.g. Lang, 2001), to a certain paralysis (Blanchard & Veyrat-Masson, 2008).

But retribution and the recognition of past crimes are not all that is at stake in the construction of a common narrative of colonisation and decolonisation between the French population and the immigrants from its former colonies. To invent a common future, in a multicultural society marred neither with discrimination nor with paternalism, may require writing a common past, and producing a meaningful narrative.

Finally, and although the analysis proposed here does not allow us to generalise these conclusions to the problem of immigration in Europe or to the increase of “immigration talk”, it does point towards an interesting possibility.

Indeed, the importance of immigration in political discourses, at least in France, cannot be explained by an increasing number of foreigners migrating to the country. For the period evoked the most in the debates, from 1998 to 2006, the absolute number of immigrants may have increased, but the proportion of immigrants out of the total population living in

France did not change¹⁷. And what appears in the data is not a strong focus on the immigrants themselves, or how they may threaten the country, but on what it means to be French, and the place of the country in the world – expressed through the question of its specificity.

If one cannot deny that parts of the population may indeed *feel* a stronger presence of immigrants in their countries, the question arises of whether immigration prompts the debate over identity in societies becoming increasingly multicultural or, on the contrary, whether national identity becomes at times problematic enough for groups to perceive outsiders as a threat because they reactivate this unresolved issue?

As stated at the beginning of this paper, nations are not “natural” categories, but products of histories, discourses and practices embedded in specific socio-cultural contexts. One may then wonder if the current transformations in the global order, whose origins can be found in globalisation, the financial crisis or the ecological challenges that await us, are not forcing us to rethink the place of our countries in the world. And therefore, for us to wonder, once more, who we are.

¹⁷ And in some categories only. In others, a reduction can even be observed. See for instance the 3rd governmental report on the “General orientation of the immigration policies” (Secrétariat général du comité interministériel de contrôle de l’immigration, 2007).

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