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The collective memory of historical debates: remembering others

How does the past weight on the present? How may present interactions be affected by how we perceive the history of the groups we belong to? How are conflicts embedded in history, and history used to justify present conflicts? Starting with the question of how dialogue may be prevented by the context within which the interactions take place, this paper proposes to focus on the role of collective memory in constructing such a context. Alongside Wertsch (2002, p. 172), I will first consider remembering as a form of action, where actors build on cultural tools to represent the past. Second, drawing on the work of dialogism, I will propose to analyse the produced discourses as a conversation between various perspectives, not only between current actors but also with those present in the stories told. Finally, I will consider collective memory as a form of symbolic resource, able to give meaning to the present by allowing analogies to be drawn with the past. Applying such hypotheses to a set of French parliamentary debates, I will argue that the stories told about the past by the groups of Deputies illustrate types of interactions that may mirror the relations between the different political groups.

Dialogues in context

There are as many definitions of dialogue as there are authors who focused on this thematic, and I will consider here the tradition that sees it as a “favoured ideal” of communication (Gergen, Gergen, & Barrett, 2004, p. 41). Although it is not my aim to propose a definition of what dialogue might exactly designate, I will consider it here as a form of communication where the perspective of the other is acknowledged and recognised as valuable, drawing on Jovchelovitch (2007) proposal for non-conflicting knowledge. As such, it seems to be a useful enough tool in preventing, limiting or revolving conflict (Cooper, Chak, Cornish, & Gillespie, 2013; Heath, Barnett, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006). However, in reality, we may be force to conclude that it is often far from being what is happening. In the situation I propose to analyse – the French parliamentary debates on immigration of 2006 – the parliament may even be considered as the institutionalisation of public deliberation and, thus, the place where dialogue is necessary to guaranty that democracy is, indeed, democratic (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974). However, even in cases where the participants declare that a dialogue occurred, that it was necessary and that the democratic process was respected, we may be forced to conclude otherwise. Indeed, the debates analysed here may have resulted in grand declarations

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about their quality by the diverse members of parliament, moments of dialogue between the participants remained extremely rare and limited (de Saint Laurent, 2012).

The context within which these parliamentary debates took place may have played an important role in preventing the instauration of a dialogue (de Saint Laurent, 2012). Indeed, there is in France a deep political *clivage* between Right and Left, to the point that it shaped the whole electoral system (Rose & Urwin, 1970) as well as there is a progressive displacement of the debates towards media and political meetings (Manin, 2008). Moreover, the bill of 2006 on immigration – aiming at tightening the conditions to obtain a visa and removing the possibility for illegal immigrants to be regularised after 10 years of uninterrupted stay in France – polarised the French public sphere between its defenders and opponents (Girier, 2007). If the context precluded so much the instauration of a dialogue, why make such declarations about the quality and the necessity of a dialogue? Why keep parliaments? Why debate when there is already a majority? And, taken the other way around, if the aim of democratic parliaments is to foster open debates to revolve social and economic issues, and if the participants declared that they were ready for a full debate, how come it resulted in such a dialogue of the deaf?

I believe that to get past this paradox, it is necessary to consider that interactions are not only a product of the environment in which they took place, but also constitutive of it (Linell, 2009). The above considerations of the French political context do not simply restrain the possibility for dialogue, but are also a product of the present interactions, where they are reiterated and reified. The National Assembly – the organ of the French parliament which produced the materials analysed here – may be part of a highly historical institution, each of the debates taking place in it writes its own piece of history and decides what is to be kept from the long past of the institution. Therefore, if context and interactions are co-constructed, the opposition between a dichotomised political life and a democratic imperative is not a pre-given to the situation, and thus cannot be taken as an opposition between a political context and the actors' intentions.

In order to understand how this interdependence between context and interactions may take place, and produce such an opposition, I propose to focus on the role of history, and especially how references to the past and their use may construct a representation of the present situation. The reason for such a choice is double. First, history is both a pre-given to the situation – and therefore can be likened to the context – and subject to interpretations, selection of the facts seen as

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important, etc. – thus a product of the present situation and interactions. Second, were present in the debates multiples references to historical events only remotely linked to their topic – the link between immigration and the French Revolution, for instance, is not really straightforward – but which we cannot consider as coming out of nowhere. I therefore propose to see these elements as traces of this co-construction.

Collective memory and group identity

Scrutinising our past is never a mere mental replaying of events that may be long gone: what we choose to forget, to sacralise or to question is never left to chance, and the stories we decide to tell relate what we believe about ourselves and the groups to which we belong (Halbwachs, 1950/1997). As such, collective memory – or the group’s representations of historical events – tends “to reflect a single, subjective, committed perspective of a group and its identity project”, by downplaying “ambiguity and doubt about the past and the motivations of actors” (Wertsch & Batiashvili, 2012, p. 38). It may therefore play a central role in social identifications (e.g. Liu & Hilton, 2005; Liu, Wilson, McClure, & Higgins, 1999) and in present groups interactions (e.g. Delori, 2011). Indeed, to project myself into the future – whether it is mine or other’s – is also to look back upon my experience of the past to find what may be desirable, efficient, unwelcomed or counterproductive (Cole, 2007), for experience is the basis on which imagination is built (Vygotsky, 2004).

However, the place of the collective in this form of memory is certainly not limited to the use of cultural resources, for the individual does not stand alone in front of history, and two consequences can be noted here. First, collective memory position actors in relation to each other, as any form of knowledge, and may grant power and legitimacy to those able to impose their vision of history (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Indeed, present interactions can foster a renegotiation of what is believed of the past (e.g. Rosoux, 2001) or competing versions of history (e.g. Kulyk, 2011). Second, groups themselves cannot be considered as static: they appear and disappear, and their meanings, conditions of membership, social valorisation, and so on, change as history unfolds (Gillespie, Howarth, & Cornish, 2012). Moreover, people move in and out of them, hold multiple memberships, and relate differently to them in different social spheres: hybridity and movement may be the only unchanging characteristics here (Ibid.).

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One of the notable consequences of such a dynamicity is that although collective memory, with its focus on groups, can be a powerful tool to understand the representations of historical events by a given group at a given time, and their role for collective identities, it may be less adequate to the analysis of those processes in actual intergroup interactions. In the case at hand, the deputies belong to the same state body, while belonging to a specific political group, side of the hemicycle of the National Assembly and various commissions and other parliamentary offices, which can all in turn become relevant to the construction of collective memory. If such a memory plays a role in group identities, it means that what is needed here is a model that allows us to consider knowledge as multiple and individual as able to navigate through such diversity. As I believe dialogism to be best suited for such a task, this is now where I turn.

Dialogism and multiplicities of knowledge

Dialogism 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 considers that every use of tools and signs are mediated by others (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994), making of the basic unit of analysis a triangular relation between self, other and object.

This triangular relationship implies that any piece of knowledge exists in a tension between alternative representations of the world (Gillespie, 2008; Marková, 2000), between one’s representation of an object and the one of the other. Every statement or belief about the world necessarily implies the presence of its opposite or alternative (Billig, 1987), or it would not need to be stated (what would be the interest of a declaration such as “water is wet”?). In the case of collective memory, this means that although it may seem to reflect single minded representations of history – as stated by Wertsch and Batiashvili (2012) – alternative stories always exist. Insisting on specific actors’ intentions, historical causalities and significance is also to indicate that perspectives from which ambiguity, doubt and opposing representations could be produced are conceived as possible. Indeed, collective memory has to be taken as a co-construction between several perspectives on historical events. If its content may seem “monological” (reflecting a single perspective), it may be because it is part of a larger conversation with other groups, that therefore needs to be included in discussion.

Although this tension is present at any given moment, it also unfolds in time, making of any utterance a part of a larger conversation, or *speech chain* (Bakhtin, 1986). Indeed, the words we use

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and the topics we evoke are never neutral: they are always a reply to someone else with words we have heard from others (Ibid.). In the case of collective memory, it means that what is told about the past is always addressed to someone – or a group, or a community – making of it a conversation about the past and with the past. It also implies that to understand the meaning of an utterance, one cannot limit the discussion to what is directly said, but has to understand as well to whom it is reply, and about what. Identifying such movements may therefore help us understand the place given to historical references. In order to build a proposal of how such references might work and the purpose they might serve, I now propose to examine aspects of the notion of symbolic resources that might be of help here.

Symbolic resources and meaning making

Symbolic resources are cultural elements – books, movies, music, stories, religion, etc. – that may be used to give meaning to the ruptures experienced in the present (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003). For instance, a young woman may use a movie about a loving couple unable to live together to give meaning to her parents separation (Zittoun & Grossen, 2013), while another may give sense to her experience of World War II through the discourses she had heard on World War I by her father, mother and teachers (Zittoun, Cornish, Gillespie, & Aveling, 2008). Indeed, symbolic resources are used “to represent facets of past experiences, to co-present current events, and to pre-present possible futures” (Zittoun, 2006, p. 178), and bring a sense of continuity between past and present (Zittoun & Grossen, 2013). As such, it may be especially fitted to understand the use made of elements of collective memory.

Symbolic resources are, however, more than simple identifications between elements of experience and cultural artefacts. In other words, a book is never the story of a character to which nothing happens, but is always the tale of how someone relates to others and to the world. Using a story as a symbolic resource may be, at the same time, identifying similarities in existing relations (e.g. “these people could not live together like my parents did”) and using the connections made in the story (e.g. “the love story is happily lived at the next generation”) to apply them to the situation (e.g. “there is an alternative end to my parent’s story”). Nonetheless, this process is often not as conscious and unconstrained as these examples might make believe (Zittoun, 2006), and the use of symbolic resources by “analogies” is certainly not the only one that could be identified, although I believe it to be central in the case of stories.

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Historical references in the debates

The above considerations on symbolic resources imply that collective memory, as a cultural element, may be used to give sense to the situation and therefore that its analysis may help us understand the meaning given to the debates. Moreover, the relations represented in the historical event by the MPs may indicate what type of interactions they think are in. In other words, the events they evoke and that are, one way or another, for them important enough to be mentioned in a debate on another subject, tell a story of interpersonal relations. Analysing this story may help us understand what they believe about the present interactions and why they are unable to have a dialogue, and I propose to see such an analogy in terms of relational patterns.

Moreover, the work of dialogism highlights that this analysis cannot be limited to individually or collectively held homogenous representations of history, but that they need to be understood as in relation with what others may say about it. Thus that present interactions may, in turn, give form to how history is represented. I therefore propose here to analyse the references made to historical events as a dynamic conversation between the various groups present in the parliament that may construct and be constructed by present interactions.

Data

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 10th, 2006, as they were 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. The aim of the bill, proposed by the right-winged majority, was to drastically reduce the number of long-term visas given to foreigners through a tightening of the delivery conditions for long-term illegal migrants, migrant’s families and those married to EU citizens. The transcripts contain the participant’s whole interventions and interruptions from the opening to the end of the sessions, unless the president of the session has accepted for one part to be removed. The deputies are organised in official groups, which 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

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seriously by the MPs (Abélès, 2001). The groups present in these debates were the UMP (Union of a Popular Movement), right-winged party of the majority and of the executive power, only party of the Right to have a parliamentary group and author of the bill; the PS, or Socialist Party, main opposition party of the Left; the DCR, or Communist and Republican Deputies, second group of the opposition; the UDF, Union for the French Democracy, only French centrist party represented at the time; and the “unregistered deputies”, regrouping all the parties having less than twelve deputies and mainly represented by the Greens in the debates.

The context of the bill was one of great political tension, as this law – the second one proposed by Nicolas Sarkozy on immigration – polarised the French public sphere and became of 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 UMP deputies (de Saint Laurent, 2012). Indeed, the deep *clivage* between Right and Left is 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).

Method

If we are interested in the study of collective memory and how it may shape – and be shaped by – current representations and interactions in the situations at hand, a “dialogical narrative analysis” may be particularly relevant. Indeed, it “understands stories as artful representations of lives” that may “reshape the past and imaginatively project the future” (Frank, 2012, p. 33). However, and although such a perspective may be extremely interesting here, carrying on such an analysis on parliamentary debates may prove difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, such data may present the advantages of naturally occurring data – that is that the phenomenon under study is not created or deformed by the research process even before any analysis has taken place – it also provides a limited number of fragmented occurrences of the concerned phenomenon. Moreover, directly focusing on the narrative structure of the references made by the MPs to history would be to assume that the collective memory we want to study is directly available to them, reported as such and analysable unambiguously.

To overcome such an issue, I decided to draw on Gillespie (2006) genealogical method, who proposes to analyse dialogic overtones, or traces of past uses of the utterance, to go “beyond the presentation

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of recorded data” (p. 156). Indeed, each of our utterance is populated by the words of others, for we do not learn language through dictionary definitions but through their use by others (Bakhtin, 1986). Moreover, as each speech act is a reply to a previous utterance and an anticipation of the next one (Ibid.), voices may constitute the clearest traces of the social and historical context of the utterance (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). In addition to direct quotations, Gillespie (2006) proposes to search for *referenced traces* of the object we wish to study (here: explicit mentions of history), *symbolic resources* (in our case, other cultural elements that are being brought in to make sense of the events referred to), and *echoes* or implicit traces of voices (or here unmarked quotations that may be identified through their recurrent use in the debates and expressions typically linked with a specific historical event). It is therefore these four types of references to history that I coded, using the software Nvivo. It amounts to 49 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 conversation on World War II (around 250 lines, with 12 participants).

The data was then coded along three axes, on top of the categories proposed above. First, I thematically coded the events referred to (do they talk about World War II, the French Revolution, colonisation, etc.), trying to map out the historical periods represented. Second, I coded for the type of evocation: does it seem spontaneous (was not provoked by a previous reference)? Is it a reply to another MP’s evocation of the same event? Is it used to reply to the mention of another historical period? Which ones? The aim here was to be able to analyse the dynamic underlying the construction of collective memory.

Finally, I also coded the data according to the side of the political spectrum the speaker belonged too, as well as his political party. Even though researchers need to be aware of their presuppositions on the categories that are made, for it tend to reify and naturalise what is but a social, cultural and historical phenomenon (Gillespie et al., 2012), the categories proposed here not only follow the groups that seem, as seen above, to be central to the representations of the MPs, but, as will be seen, are also relevant to the analysis.

Two lines of events seem to appear in the debates: those linked to internal French political matters and the history of their institution, such as the Enlightenment, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Third Republic on one side, and major international events and those linked more

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directly to immigration on the other: World War II, the Soviet Union and colonisation. In the interest of clarity, these two lines will be analysed separately, although it remains but a practical artifice.

When necessary, the analysis will include how the references are used as arguments in the debates, with the aim of clarifying the sense that may be given to the historical events, as well as ethnographic elements to clarify the place of these events in France.

Narrative templates

In order to interpret what these evocations might mean in term of relational patterns, I now propose to look at the narrative structure of these recollections. Wertsch (2008) considers that they can be understood at two different levels: the one of specific narratives, which involve a single event or set of events that is “uniquely situated in time and space” (p. 122), and schematic template narratives, which “produce replicas that vary in their details but reflect a single general story line” (p. 123). Aiming to look at how such stories may shape current relations by the interactions they may symbolise, I will now focus on the second level, namely the general structure of these narrations. However, for our analysis to remain dialogical, these will have to be understood as a co-construction of the different actors in which several voices interact (Grossen, 2010), even those who contest such stories.

The following interpretations draw inevitably on implicit content and therefore have to be taken as mere proposals, with alternatives always possible (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). It is also important to note that these interpretations are made in reference to my explicit and implicit knowledge of the French culture and how those historical events tend to be discussed and presented in the public sphere. And, of course, a different experience of France would certainly produce a different perspective on the data.

Stories of social and political struggles

Common to all the stories told by the Left is the idea of a struggle for the defence of Human Rights: whether it is World War II, the Third Republic or colonisation, all are presented as an opposition between two sides. Moreover, such an opposition is conceived as coming from “inside” the nation, as is confirmed by the following intercept:

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Jean-Pierre Brard (DCR): Really, two France are in confrontation, as throughout History: the one of Coblenz 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 [...]

Several UMP deputies: And Stalin! And Stalin!

Jean-Pierre Brard (DCR): 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.

Such a representation is contested by the Right in two ways. First, as in the above extract, it is challenged on the ground that some left-wing politicians have defended regimes that were humanly condemnable. However, such remarks are limited to DCR members, potentially indicating a refusal for the Right to dichotomise the Assembly between Right and Left. Second, several remarks are made to defend, often indirectly, colonisation by highlighting the benefits it may have in the present. Underlying both types of replies remains the refusal for the Right to be cast in the role of the enemy of Human Rights, while the Left shows itself as its eternal defender. Such contestations may be relatively limited – most are addressed to a minority in the Left (DCR) and concern only colonisation – nonetheless, one tentative to reverse the roles can be seen in the UMP deputy reference to “Yellow Stars”. Here, the Left is the one presented as on the oppressors’ side, and it led to a lengthy argument about which side of the Assembly represented the oppressed. It is interesting to note that in the conflict that followed the MP’s comment, the argument was not about who did what in the referred situation, but which story mattered more in defining the groups relations: is it the story of the communist resistance during World War II or the present defence of Israel over Palestine?

Moreover, even left-wing MPs referring to their families being persecuted during the war insist on the role of resisters in saving their lives, and the “other side” is not the Nazis, but the Vichy regime: collaborators, but not instigators. The opposition is therefore here made between the “defenders of the oppressed”, not the oppressed themselves, and the “collaborators of the oppressors”, not the oppressors themselves. The formers are given a voice through the Left (quotations of resisters, references to Jaurès’ discourses, etc.), as a reply to the imagined perspectives of the other side, read in the light of the fights for Human Rights of the past (e.g. “a neo-vichyssoise ideology”).

Stories of social contracts and outsiders

The stories told by the Right are less numerous than those of the Left, and usually told with either the idea that they should all agree (Revolution, Rousseau) or that part of the other side is not

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legitimate in their comments (references to the Soviet Union). The underlying narration is therefore here double. First, the basis of the group is a form of social contract, on which they should all agree. Second, the opponents lie outside of the present nation and should not be represented in it. Moreover, all were defeated by the Republic, whether it is monarchy or the Soviet Union – referred to here only in terms of dictatorship – and now belong to the past.

This story line is rarely contested by the Left directly, except in the case of Rousseau, where it led to numerous remarks about his ideas being misunderstood by the Right. However, the evocation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Third Republic can be seen as a way to challenge such representations of history. It seems that the references to the Revolution are not the issue for the Left, but the limitation of history to it. Although it is not clear what is exactly meant by the UMP MPs when they reply to these evocations by saying that it is simply a “tradition”, the contrast they make with the “foundational principles of the Republic” may indicate that for them such elements are not part of the “republican pact” and therefore do not need to be agreed on.

It is also notable that the stories told are done in reference with “monological” voices: Rousseau is deprived of his traditional nemesis Voltaire, the only “character” of the Soviet Union is Stalin, the basis of the state is to be traced to a single event, and the Revolution led to a contract on which nobody seems to have disagreed. Those who fall outside of the group are either gone (Nazis, monarchists, etc.) or do not belong to the nation-group the MPs should represent because they do not accept the republican pact (communists). This limitation of the views of the Assembly to a single voice is highly contested by the Left throughout the debates, leading a DCR member to say to a UMP MP “I would rather be hanged than to agree with you” (Jean-Pierre Brard, 06.05.2013, first session).

(Hi)stories of dialogues

Understood in terms of dialogues, the above narratives can be said to describe on one side a monologue, and on the other a confrontation of two voices that cannot interact. Indeed, in the first case all discourse seems to be reduced to the one and only voice of what the group has agreed on (the social contract), and anything that falls out of it is either a misunderstanding of the terms of the agreement or illegitimate (because not republican). In the second one, all discussion appears to be limited to a dichotomised world view, where the two voices should not interact, for one represents moral (defence of the Human Rights), while the other one is inspired by non-humanist ideologies (colonialism, fascism, etc.).

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In both cases, such representations may produce a form of conflictive interrelations. In one case the other's views, perspectives, and voices are considered as either similar to the ones of the rest of the group or illegitimate, therefore limiting recognition to similarity and leaving no space for the expression of the other's singularity. In the second case, the dichotomy operated does not go without a judgment on the validity of the other's knowledge: what differentiate the opposed sides of the conflict is here judged in terms of respect of desirable values, as expressed in the various Human Rights declarations. For the other, the only options are here either to agree, or to be cast out as the "bad guy" of the conflict. It is possible to see here how both stories reply to each other: one may react to the tentative of turn the debate into a monologue by insisting on what make them profoundly different, while the other may try to demonstrate that they believe in the same things – and therefore think similarly – as a way to refuse to be considered as the "villain" of the story. Therefore, it is not only the representations of the past that may give shape to present interactions, but the conversation with those of others may also construct the representations we have of the past.

Another aspect of these representations of the situation may participate to the difficulties in the instauration of a dialogue: the people to who their speech is addressed. Indeed, defining the group in terms of "republicanism" or "humanism" may lead to very different views on who should be included in the discussion. In the first case, it might drive the MPs to divide the Assembly between extreme parties – and might explain their occasional differing treatment of the communist MPs – and the republican ones. In the other the difference that might be made between humanist ideologies and more capitalist ones would reinforce the Right/Left clivage. Although such an interpretation is built on limited aspects of the analysis, it is indeed the two types of categorisation of the French political parties that can be usually found in the political media.

Conclusion

Starting with the question of the quasi absence of "ideal" dialogue in parliamentary debates, the aim of this paper has been to propose an understanding of how the context and interactions may co-construct each other.

To do so, I have proposed a dialogical analysis of the traces of collective memory present in the debates, taking such representations as a symbolic resource that may be used to give meaning to the present situation and therefore participate in its construction. This has led me to argue that the

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events evoked have a recurring underlying narrative structure that illustrate certain types of intergroup relations, and that those can be used to provide new interpretations about the way present interrelations are understood by the MPs. The aim here has not been to demonstrate that the traces of major historical events that can be found in the deputies' speech are indeed there because they were used as symbolic resources, but to explore whether looking at them as such may create new points of reflexion about the present – and therefore open up potential new ways to think about the future (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009).

This analysis highlighted the presence of two series underlying narratives in the debates: one representing monologised versions of interpersonal relationships, and the other an opposition of two irreconcilable world views. Although the two sides of the political spectrum seem to tell different stories about the groups – and may not even talk about the same ones – a specific emphasis has been put here on understanding these as a co-construction. Indeed, not only each story is built in interaction with what others have to say about it (what is contested, agreed on, ignored, etc.) but the stories told also echo each other (Wertsch, 2002). Insisting on the presence of two opposing versions of the world could be a way to refuse to see history reduced to a single voice, and therefore what can be told about the present. In the same manner, claiming that there is a general agreement about the values inherited from the past may be a reaction to a dichotomised view of history, which cast the other in the role of the villain of the story, here by picturing him as the collaborator of the oppressors throughout history. This therefore shows that present interactions can also give shape to our representations of the past. Moreover, the contradiction inherent to the French parliamentary debates – between political *clivage* and desire for dialogue – may thus be understood as the product of the tension between what the deputies believe (here the stories told) and the resistance of the other to it, both reified by the present interactions.

However, such positionings may also be seen as a by-product of the organisation of the French political institutions, which defines clearly a majority and an opposition in its regulations. Indeed, it is possible to wonder whether it is being termed as the majority that leads to attempts to reduce discourse to one voice, while being the “opposition” encourages viewing the Assembly as a dichotomised universe. If the positions were reversed, would the MPs call on other events, tell different stories about them, use them to define other group boundaries?

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The importance of the references to history in the data, as well as the inscription of the debates in a highly historical institution, is what have driven me to such an analysis here. However, it is worth asking whether such a way to look at the work of the representations of the past would be relevant elsewhere, even if similar references were made. Would interpretations in terms of definitions of the role of the groups of actors still be plausible? Would the narrative structure of the events recalled appear so homogenous within the groups? As Craig (1999) argues, is it a specificity of modern nations to rest in such a way on narratives? And, maybe more importantly here, would taking traces of collective memory as indicators of its use as a symbolic resource prove to be relevant? The question of the validity of this assumption has been here left out, and it would certainly deserve further attention and to be explored in other situations and contexts.

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