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Lieux de mémoire and the (de)construction of "identities"[1]

In 2002 the national research fund (FNR) launched a programme entitled *Vivre demain au Luxembourg* (Living tomorrow in Luxembourg) to tackle environmental and societal problems the country was expected to be confronted with in the near future. On the basis that "identity crisis" posed potential danger to "social cohesion", the FNR accepted to finance a three year research project on the role of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) in the construction of identities. I have participated in this project, entitled "Histoire, mémoire et identités", for almost three years now, two of which as a full-time researcher. The fact that I won't be able to do a completely objective analysis of our project, may be a substantial drawback, but since complete objectivity is unattainable at any rate, I can at least offer some insider information and personal experiences, which would otherwise be related through yet another distorting lens, namely that of the hypothetical analyst.

As our project nears completion, this paper will assess firstly the institutional framework, within which the project took shape; secondly it will present the methodology that was developed, originally based on Pierre Nora's concept, briefly taking into account its critics and new approaches, notably that of the cultural sciences developed by German and Austrian scholars, and eventually trying to find if not an earth-shatteringly novel way of dealing with the issues of memory and identity, at least a workable methodological synthesis, appropriate to the Luxembourg situation. This situation, linked to the afore-mentioned institutional structure, obliged us to make the results of our research not only accessible to the scientific community for peer review etc. as it is the case in bigger countries, but also to present them to the wider public, in the form of a permanent museum exhibition. The third part of

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[1] Presentation held at the Sixth European Social Science History Conference, 22-25 March 2006 (Amsterdam), in the Section J-1 – THE02: "Lieux de mémoire" in Europe: National Receptions and Appropriations of a Historiographical Concept (22 March 2006)

my presentation will thus deal with the political expectations to have us participate in the creation of national and European "identities", and the project's response to the societal challenge of the so-called identity crisis.

I. institutional framework[2]

Following the launch of the EU's first research and development (R&D) programme in 1984, with the objective "to strengthen the scientific and technological bases of European industry to make it more competitive internationally", the Luxembourg government decided in 1987 to further the professionalisation of research (framework law on research dated 9 March 1987). Since 1999 there has been a ministry for research and the annual public budget spent on research has risen from 11 million euros in 1999 to 34 million in 2003, which represents 0.18% of its GNP (the objective is to eventually spend 1%, according to the Lisbon declaration). One could compare this to the 542 million the private sector has invested in R&D projects from 1993 till 2003, mainly in the industrial processing of metals and synthetic materials as well as subcontracting in the automobile sector. Research came to be seen by the political decision-makers as the driving force behind "economic and social progress, economic competitiveness, sustainable growth, respect of the environment and the cure of previously thought incurable diseases", according to the Service Information et Presse. In order to improve the management of public (and private) funding and to encourage R&D in the public sector, the Fonds national de la recherche was set up in 1999 (law dated 31 May 1999). Although it is by name a "national" research fund, the FNR promotes international "mobility" and the insertion within European research framework programmes. Its priorities were clear from the outset: the first two multiannual programmes were cut out for the financial economy (SECOM) and metal industry (two thirds of the NANO programme); the following two were orientated towards the environmental (EAU) and medical (BIOSAN) fields and the fifth, launched in April 2002, was to "fill a gap in the area of social research and humanities". Compared to the previous four, this programme VIVRE *Living tomorrow in Luxembourg* was relatively well endowed with 12 million euros; it was, however, not limited to one field of research, but was open to applications from all of human and social sciences. The self-avowed aim of VIVRE is to "prepare the country's future", to develop strategies to cope with population changes, human resources, communication and socio-spatial transformations in the context of globalisation and urbanisation. Multidisciplinarity is encouraged, as is the cooperation between all actors, that is between researchers, economic and political decision-takers and the larger public. Society is thus considered not only the object of research, but also the judge over research's achievement in "preparing the country's future", that is in securing and/or improving its living standards. While this may not be so different from the strategies of other countries public research funding, it does confirm a general trend towards the commodification of research.

When VIVRE was launched in 2002, the University of Luxembourg was just about to be created. There was a complete limbo concerning research infrastructure that had previously existed at the Centre Universitaire and other institutes. Since it was not even sure that the humanities would be part of the new university, joining VIVRE became a matter of academic survival. For Michel Margue, professor for medieval history, historical methodology and historiography at the Centre Universitaire, the way to have history participate in the research programme was to offer a reflection on the interplay between memory and history in the construction of collective identities. His proposal had in mind the first "axe de recherche" of the VIVRE programme, which

> "in terms of social cohesion [seeks] to find a solution to the question of the definition of a collective identity, which rallies for instance around the monarchy, the constitution or a shared ethic, while being at the same time open to the future".

This is considered "a vital question for our country", which is said to have been confronted with profound economic, cultural, educational and identity changes in the last thirty years and which is expected to face even more profound changes in the future due to globalisation, the European integration process and inner European migrations towards Luxembourg. Not just the population's living standards, but its cultural identity is considered to be at stake, caught in a "dilemma" between the "national" – considered to be "irreplaceable" –, the regional (Grande Région) and the global. Nonetheless identity changes appear to be unavoidable, and it is thus requested that research in this domain should highlight the "potential benefits of cultural pluralism".[3]

Our project agreed that there was a potential conflict of identities, not only between the dominant identity discourse and that of minorities, but also between generations and social groups, and cited as example the polemic surrounding the monument of national remembrance (*Gëlle Fra*) in 2001. This controversy had been particularly disconcerting for the Ministry of Culture and Research and the argument that historians may be able to defuse it *a posteriori* by historicizing it and to prevent such clashes of memories in the future may have played a certain role in securing political support for the research project. However important political support may have been in Luxembourg's traditional academic landscape, it seems to have at least been diluted in the context of the FNR's decision process. The scientific evaluation of the project was made by foreign experts, one of whom saw the socio-economic interest of our project not in its potential stabilising influence on a looming identity crisis, but in the tourist and heritage sector. After a feasibility study (March till Dec. 2003), the project was finally accepted for three years of research (May 2004 till October 2007) with a total budget of 316,472 euros. According to Michel Margue, the fact that we had in the meantime concluded a cooperation deal with the national heritage institute (Service des Sites et Monuments Nationaux) may have been a further argument for the societal "usefulness" of the research project.

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[2] Based on: Service Information et Presse, «about … research» <http://www.gouvernement.lu>, last checked on 13 Feb. 2006; Fonds national de la recherche <http://www.fnr.lu>, last checked on 13 Feb. 2006.

[3] Vivre I (2002-2007), annexe 3, p. 6. <http://www.fnr.lu/SIML_FNR/Channel/FNR.nsf/fs_Root? OpenFrameset>, last checked 6 March 2006.

II. Methodology

Originally, the plan was to do a genealogy of representations and usages of the past in the 19th and 20th centuries. To deal appropriately with these "images of the past" three historians were asked to participate in the project: Pit Péporté, a medievalist starting his doctorate on that particular subject and two post-docs, Benoît Majerus, who had mainly worked on the first and second world wars and me, who had previously worked on early modern times. After some initial work into the work edited by Nora, as well as his critics (Jay Winter, Nancy Wood, James A. Leith, John Bodnar, Hue-Tam Ho Tai), on the concept of nationhood and minority identity claims, we concluded firstly, that our aim was not to perpetuate the memory of something that was disappearing, but to analyse why certain things were so malleable and refused to disappear. Who was – time and again – awakening them, for what purpose and to what effect? Secondly, the inclusion of non-dominant memory discourses or counter-memories was of prime importance to us. Still, the way to proceed was to start with a series of Nora-style case studies of *lieux de mémoire*, defined as signifiants (material, symbolical, ideal or functional), in which a certain group can recognise itself, its values, its memory. The emphasis was put on the fact that one and the same signifier could mean different things to different people and/or could change considerably through time. It did so through various media (*vecteurs*) and on behalf of various social actors. We also decided to focus on the production of meaning and not on the reception or consumption of meaning.

This series of about 60 *lieux de mémoire* could not be undertaken by our research team alone. Through personal contacts and previous professional working relations we found 32 researchers from various disciplines, less than half of them professional historians, willing to cooperate. Just a brief example to illustrate how we work on specific *lieux de mémoire*: the *Klëppelkrich*, literally war of the clubs, a name given to a peasant insurrection that took place in 1798 against the French Republican regime. The only sources that survive represent the Republican view; it is very difficult to know to what extent the uprising was motivated by religious resentments against anticlerical laws or triggered by the forced enrolment of young men into the French armies. After the suppression of the insurrection and the public execution of 29 men in the capital city, silence was imposed. The events resurfaced in the 1840s under the double impulse of the newly founded "society for the research and conservation of historical monuments", known as Société archéologique, and the revival of the Catholic Church, which began to set itself against the liberal bourgeois elite. The *Klëppelkrich* became a symbol for religious resistance against a blasphemous regime and the dead were celebrated as martyrs. On that religious image was grafted a patriotic one, notably in the historical relation by Jean Engling, a priest and president of the Société archéologique. This patriotic-religious message found its visual expression in the monument of Clervaux, inaugurated in 1899. Local and national pride in the *Klëppelmänner* were expressed forcefully in the 1930s, notably in the parades organised in 1939 for the centenary of Luxembourg independence. During the German occupation the *Klëppelkrich* was celebrated as a part of the continual Germanic struggle against French domination. A film scenario by Norbert Jacques put it in a bigger context and assimilated it to uprisings that had taken place around the same time in Flandres, Campine and the Eifel. After the Second World War, this bigger frame was dropped again and the *Klëppelkrich* was reclaimed as a national event. Continuities were put forward between the military levy in 1798 and the forced enrolment in 1942, both of which had encountered strongest opposition in the north of the country. Stubbornness and loyalty were made a distinctive feature of the local people, fitting in with the landscape of the north (Oesling) celebrated as rough and "authentic". At the same time, the fact that steel workers from the south had also participated in the strike against the enrolment in 1942 had to be woven into the narrative to make the strike "general" and the *Klëppelkrich* meaningful for the nation as a whole. A monument erected for the *Klëppelmänner* in the capital in 1972 is made of (southern) steel and (northern) slate to demonstrate national unity. The connection with World War Two is further emphasised by the close proximity to the main memorial for the Luxembourg resistance (*Hinzerter Kraiz*) and its location on the corner of the Allée des Résistants et Déportés, a name it received in 1979, the same year as a postal stamp was issued with the combined monuments of Clervaux and Luxembourg-city. More recently, two trends can be observed: a heroification focusing on the figure of the shepherd of Asselborn and a transborder cooperation (*Islek ouni Grenzen*) for the celebrations of the bicentary in 1998.

This example illustrates that the concept of the *lieux de mémoire* is related to that of Roland Barthes' mythical concept. It is open to interpretation, because the knowledge contained within it is muddled, made of bendable, unlimited associations. It is a shapeless, instable, nebulous condensation, which derives its unity and coherence mainly from its function. The fundamental characteristic of the mythical concept is thus that is appropriated by one particular group and not by that other one. It is intrinsically ephemeral and linked to a specific historical context, yet transforms history into nature. It has to make a selective usage of its components (in the aforementioned example: the religious connotations or the broader regional context), because giving the total picture, following Barthes, would exclude the myth.[4] Our job is not to condone the myth or to prove it wrong, but to work with it as both true and unreal, to show how myths are made "natural", to show what they are trying to blend out and the multiplicity of meanings they embody.

The list of *lieux de mémoire* included in our study is far from being exhaustive; it is a mere selection based on a survey of the best known Luxembourg historical figures and events[5] and on discussions with Luxembourg colleagues. From an initially much larger pool of *lieux de mémoire*, we could only take into account those that could be covered either by one of our team or by a competent outsider. The 57 *lieux de mémoire* that will be examined may be, for convenience sake, be divided into several categories. It is important to keep in mind that the categories overlap significantly and that they are not definite.

1. National emblems such as the red lion, the colours red/white/blue, literary icons such as Michel Rodange and Edmond de la Fontaine, the Luxembourg language itself (a national language since 1984). Luxembourg beer and wine are also

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[4] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris, 1957), p. 226, 228, 265.
[5] Survey by ILReS for the research project FNR VIVRE 02/05/06 directed by Fernand Fehlen, nov. and dec. 2004.

commercialised as national products, though it will be shown how much their codification differs.

2. Religious symbols such as the dancing procession of Echternach (which is about to become UNESCO patrimoine mondial); Saint-Nicolas, Notre-Dame de Luxembourg (known as the *Consolatrix afflictorum*) and the Virgin of Fatima, worshipped today mainly by the Portuguese community in the town of Wiltz.

3. Mythical concepts relating to the foundation and/or independence of the country: count Siegfried (acquiring Lucilinburhuc in 963), his mermaid-wife Melusina, countess Ermesinde (who gave the freedom charter to the city of Luxembourg in the 13th century) and the emergence of a nation-state in 1839.

4. Myths relating to foundation of national wealth: the 'red soil' of the Minette; the industrialist Emile Mayrisch, the Arbed, now Arcelor and maybe soon Mittal Steel enterprise; RTL; the banks and European institutions.

5. Foreign occupation myths: the so-called 400 years of foreign domination, the presence of the fortress as a symbol of occupation (Gibraltar du Nord, Vauban), the previously mentioned Klëppelkrich, the figure of the "Prussian" (including the Nazi), and – to a certain extent – the European institutions.

6. National heroes such as John the Blind, Prince Henry and the Tour de France-champion Charly Gaul.

7. Symbols of national resistance in World War Two (Grand-Duchess Charlotte, the concentration camp Hinzert, the general strike, the Gëlle Fra)

8. Symbols of openness of spirit and the image of being "natural" Europeans (the concept of *Mischkultur*, Aline Mayrisch as a cultural mediator, the integration of Italian migrant workers, Robert Schuman, Schengen).

9. Symbols of a "lost world" (the peasant, the miner, the steelworker, slate, landscapes of the Moselle, the Oesling and the Minette)

The aim is to show how, within one lieu de mémoire, there is a constant negotiation of meaning, of different memory contents, clashing or complementary, and a constant reshaping of sense by various actors, depending on their social and geographical milieux, gender and generation. *Lieux de mémoire* may also be influenced by external memory discourses (such as Auschwitz, which has considerably transformed the memory of the Second World War) and internal shifts due to migration for instance (Fatima of Wiltz).

Based on these case-studies of particular *lieux de mémoire* we attempt to reach some conclusions on the role of language, time (the periodisation of history), space (boundaries and territory) and power relations (the topos of the "fidélité monarchique"). We have tried to broaden our understanding of the theoretical implications behind the concepts of memory and identity through a number of interdisciplinary workshops and exchanges with the university of Nancy and the SFB "Erinnerungskulturen" of the university of Giessen. Their analysis of the various media (*vecteurs*) in the construction of memory has been particularly fruitful for our research, as has been the transnational approach of the "Orte des Gedächtnisses" of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. The processes of collective remembering

have changed a lot in the past 200 years (the period we are analysing) and they keep changing as the cultural osmosis between societies is gaining in importance. It has been argued that the ever-speeding flows of images, information, ideas and people generate new hybrid cultures, which are largely unremembered by the existing institutional representations (museums, books, law etc.).[6] Hybrid cultures, overlapping identities and so-called contaminated languages, are nothing new. Borders have never been ironclad and at least in the case of Luxembourg all *lieux de mémoire* point into the direction of a multitude of influences, imported topoi and currents of thought. It is in that context that we are organising a colloquium entitled *'Lieux de mémoire' revisited. An interdisciplinary and cross-national approach* in November 2006. We thus depend not only on a whole host of authors to help us analyse the Luxembourg *lieux de mémoire*, but also on international scholars to enlighten us on cross-influences and transfers of culture. During our initial feasibility study, it became clear that our team was too small to tackle all these issues at once. We decided thus to focus, for our own work, on cultural memory, expressed in language, image and performance, and not to include communicative memory, unless it imposes itself, which indeed it sometimes does. The distinction between cultural and communicative memory has been elaborated by Jan Assmann on the basis of their relation to every-day experiences. Cultural or storage memory is characterised by its distance from every-day life; it represents a group's knowledge reservoir, organised in libraries, museums, the law etc.; it is clearly defined and set against the Other; it is reflective of the group's values, its view of its history and its sense of "identity".[7] There is no central mnemonic agency for collective memory, but there is textual mediation (external symbolic storage).[8] What Maurice Halbwachs called the social frameworks, *cadres sociaux*, of collective memory has been translated by Astrid Erll as *cadres médiaux*, mediational frameworks.[9] This is, I think, what we have to focus on: an analysis of the media (*vecteurs*) used to construct consensual or dissenting memories. The fact that historiography is one of these media, and not the least, makes the task doubly challenging.

What we should also pay particular attention to are diverging memories, clashes between and within the media, resistances and omissions. Originally, we hoped to include a whole series of paradoxically termed "forgotten lieux de mémoire". This proved to be very difficult, since there is no immediate access to the past, and therefore mediational references are needed in order to detect what has been "repressed" or "neglected". By working on well-established *lieux de mémoire* we realised that every single one of them contains elements of difference, of silence and of deformation. By retrieving them, and by calling upon them while drawing our conclusions on language, power, temporal and spatial representations, we will try to show the heterogeneity of cultural memory and the inner differentiations of identity constructions. Group identification cannot be reduced to a normative,

6   John Urry, «How societies remember the past», in: *Theorizing Museums*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Oxford, 1996), p. 46.

7   Jan Assmann: «Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität», in: *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, ed. J. Assmann and T. Hölscher (Frankfurt a.M., 1988), p. 9-19.

8   James V. Wertsch: *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 24-9.

9   Astrid Erll, «Medium des kollektiven Gedächtnisses», in: *Medien des kollektiven Gedächtnisses*, ed. A. Erll and A. Nünning (Berlin, New York 2004), 3-22, p. 7.

socially regulated process, the Other which is used to define a group's cohesion is not outside, it is – as the notion of hybrid identity suggests it – present within. This internal co-presence and polyphonic discursive interdependences, as Aleida Assmann calls them,[10] are difficult to represent in cultural memory. And our research is therefore but the first part, a follow-up is planned and has submitted to the new VIVRE call for projects, tackling communicative and what Harald Welzer has termed social memory.

III. Representing identities in a museum context

As I mentioned before, our project was accepted on the condition that it would not be "too academic" and that it would make its results accessible to a broader public. When Michel Margue was asked by the then director of the SSMN in 2003 to work on a permanent exhibition on "Luxembourg cultural identity", planned for the top level of the Musée de la Forteresse, then under construction, there were some hesitations, but the opportunity to have both our research project accepted by the FNR and our analysis of "identity" presented in a museum space had to be grasped. The hesitations we all had were due to the fact that the museum had been a hotly contested project for over a decade, and that several historians, professionals and expert amateurs, had already been asked to cooperate and had either declined or given up. The debates that had raged surrounding the destruction of Fort Thüngen, the only remaining fort of the old fortress of Luxembourg, by the construction of a museum of contemporary art had resulted in the creation of two adjacent museums, one for contemporary art, the other one for the history of the fortress, the country and its cultural identity. Put like that, there was a clear intention to construct a Luxembourg identity, based on historical continuity, common religious and linguistic heritage, shared traditions and values. This was diametrically opposed to the constructivist approach we had chosen, but we considered the very contestedness of the site and all the debates it had attracted an interesting starting point. The increasingly politicised notions of heritage and contemporary art; avant-garde and "nostalgia for the present"; xenophobic undertones in the criticism of the Sino-American architect Ieoh Ming Pei; opposition to the reconstruction of the fort, described, half-ironically, as a violation of the 1867 treaty, which based the country's neutrality on the dismantlement of its fortress; and the ambiguous notion of "European fortress" (built by engineers and artisans from all over Europe, or creating a closed European space of heightened security): all this complex interweaving shows that the Musée de la Forteresse is, like most museums, a "contested terrain". Recent museological studies emphasise that museums are not simply agencies of social control, but tend to negotiate a nexus between cultural production and consumption, between the scientific community and lay audiences. Yet museums are never just spaces for the playing out of wider social relationships: they are also a creative agency and increasingly have their own research and training sites.[11] Thus historical or anthropological research which used to take decades to filter down from highly specialised scientific journals to the information giving by touring guides, tend now to be rapidly assimilated by research oriented museums, such as the Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg for instance.

The creation of such a research center is one of our desiderata, although it is not clear whether this request will be granted in times of budget expenditure restrictions. What we hope to have secured is the abandonment of the essentialist reading of identity and the integration of our research in the permanent exhibition. The exact museographic implementation is still under discussion, one of the challenges is that there will be few artifacts, and thus less "cultural objectivation" than in other museums.[12] Visitors are to be engaged more directly, to respond and dialogue with the "contested identities" that are presented. Of course, it remains a site of knowledge production and it will probably continue to play a role as a symbol of a community, but the authoritative status of the museum has long been undermined, and our purpose is not to reinstate it, but to create a "contact zone", in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact, a place where walls are being made and unmade.

[10] Aleida Assmann und Heidrun Friese, «Einleitung», in: *Identitäten. Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität 3* (Frankfurt a.M., 1999), ed. A. Assmann and H. Friese, p. 11-23, p. 23.

[11] Sharon Macdonald: «Introduction», in: *Theorizing Museums*, ed. S. Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe (Oxford, 1996), p. 1-18.

[12] Richard Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec* (Madison, 1988), p. 14.