The interplay between collective memory and the erosion of nation states – the paradigmatic case of Belgium: Introduction to the special issue

Olivier Luminet
Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium and Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FRS-FNRS), Belgium

Laurent Licata and Olivier Klein
Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Valérie Rosoux
Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium and Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FRS-FNRS), Belgium

Susann Heenen-Wolff, Laurence van Ypersele and Charles B. Stone
Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium

Abstract
The main goal of the special issue on ‘the interplay between collective memory and the erosion of nation states: The paradigmatic case of Belgium’ is to examine the erosion of the Belgian State as an exemplary illustration of the way memories of past events can influence current attitudes, emotions, representations and behaviours. We believe that the recent political crisis in Belgium, with no government for more than one year after the 2010 general elections, could be partly illuminated by the diverging and sometimes contradictory memories each linguistic group (Dutch- vs. French-speakers) in Belgium holds about the past. These issues will be examined through different disciplines from the social sciences and humanities: social psychology, history, psychoanalysis, political sciences, and literature.

Keywords
Belgium, collective memory, collective emotions

Corresponding author:
Olivier Luminet, Research Institute for Psychological Sciences, Université catholique de Louvain. 10, Place Cardinal Mercier B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.
Email: Olivier.Luminet@uclouvain.be
Throughout the world, we are currently confronted with the erosion of nation states as independentist or separatist movements question the consensus on national identities. Many explanations for these changes can be put forward. One such explanation may stem from diverging collective memories. Collective memories may play a crucial role in these conflicts as they serve to justify conflicting parties’ motives and aspirations. By defining what the nation was, it also projects an image of what it should be (Hilton and Liu, 2008). Thus, political conflicts surrounding the integrity of nation states systematically involve conflict of memories (e.g. Licata et al., 2007; Rosoux, 2004). As we will see below, these conflicts most often include the ignorance – or the rejection – of the other group’s memory. Beyond its scientific interest, understanding these conflicts of memories is practical as well: such an understanding may lead to a better understanding of the processes and factors that impede or facilitate the outburst of violence as a result of these mnemonic conflicts.

Belgium: Some history and background knowledge

A fruitful strategy for addressing the complex relations between collective memory and political conflicts surrounding the viability of modern nation states involves considering these relations in a specific national context. In this respect, Belgium is a particularly relevant country for examining this question. Independent since 1830 (see Hirst and Fineberg, this issue, for a more extensive historical overview), Belgium is a relatively small (approximately the size of Massachusetts), but densely populated, western European country composed of two main linguistic groups, the French and the Dutch speakers, plus a small German-speaking population. The definition of Belgium as a nation, and identification with this nation, have fuelled debates and conflicts between the two main linguistic groups for decades. The erosion of Belgium’s nation state is therefore a long process. From being a purely centralized state at its start in 1830 and until 1970, Belgium became a federal state through a series of steps in which the cultural/linguistic communities and political regions progressively obtained an extensive control over key domains such as education, environment and economy (for a more detailed view of these changes, see Klein et al., this issue).

Alongside these institutional changes in the structure of the state, the representations and attitudes in the two communities also changed. The attachment Belgians have to their country is relatively low compared to other European countries (Eurobarometer, 2010). Patterns of identification with their region, the nation and Europe tend to differ as a function of linguistic group, with French speakers expressing stronger attachment to Belgium than to their region, whereas the opposite trend is often found among Dutch speakers (Maddens et al., 1998). However, what’s remarkable about the Belgian case is that, despite fierce debates between the linguistic groups, physical violence has remained exceptional. For these reasons, Belgium constitutes an ideal laboratory for examining the mutations of national identity in a peaceful context.

We would first like to present a map of Belgium to show the distribution of the different linguistic groups throughout the country (Figure 1). Flanders (pop. 6,161,600) represents the northern part of Belgium, where people speak Dutch. Wallonia (pop. 3,456,775) is located in the south and is French speaking. In the middle of the territory and surrounded by the Flanders territory is the region of Brussels, the capital of Belgium (pop. 1,070,841). This is the only region that is officially bilingual, meaning that all the public administration assists people in either language, while in Flanders and Wallonia the administration is unilingual. On the eastern side of Belgium there is also a German-speaking community (pop. 73,000). We will not develop issues related to that community as it is not involved in the current conflict and it represents a very small proportion of the population. Besides these official numbers based on geographical criteria, it is very difficult to know the exact number of French-speaking and Dutch-speaking Belgians. First, although officially unilingual, Flanders and
Wallonia comprise inhabitants who speak the language of the other main region. This is mostly the case in Flanders, around the Brussels region where in some local communities there is even a majority of French speakers (for a more detailed review of this question, see Klein et al., this issue, which includes a detailed map of the region surrounding Brussels). Second, Belgian law now forbids enquiring about a person’s mother tongue. This means that, although it is clear that a large majority of Brussels inhabitants are French speaking, the proportion of Dutch- and French-speaking inhabitants is unknown and can only be approached from the point of view of election results because most political parties put forward candidates that are either French speaking or Dutch speaking (see Klein et al., this issue).

Against the backdrop of the ongoing evolution of the conflict, memories of the past intergroup relationships are still vivid and impact the political positioning of both groups. A central goal of the current special issue is to examine the erosion of the Belgian State as an exemplary illustration of the way memories of past events can influence today’s politics and intergroup relations. Regarding the current political situation, Belgium is confronted with the longest crisis in its history. The last general elections took place in June 2010 and more than one year later (August 2011), as we are writing this introduction, there is still no new government, with the previous government still managing the current affairs. We would like to suggest that the current political crisis can be partly understood by the diverging and sometimes contradictory memories each linguistic group in Belgium holds about the past.

When some of the current French-speaking political leaders give interviews to the Flemish media, either only in French, or in a very poor Dutch, it probably reminds many Dutch-speaking inhabitants of stories they have directly experienced or have heard about the dominant class in Flanders who only speak French. They then tend to view these politicians as contemptuous towards Flemish culture. As we will detail below, there is a vivid memory of the contempt and humiliation felt during
the domination by the French-speaking elite (Vaes, 2006). Interestingly, the high success of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA (Nieuwe Vlaamse Alliantie, or New Flemish Alliance) during the general elections in 2010 may be partly explained by this resentment grounded in the past. For instance, a recent study (Swyngedouw and Abts, 2011) showed that many left-wing Flemings voted for the N-VA party, even though, on socioeconomical issues, this is clearly a right-wing party. This seems to suggest that the linguistic issue currently dominates the Flemish votes as compared to the more traditional ideological issues between left-wing and right-wing. The N-VA nowadays represents the popular sentiment of dissatisfaction and resentment a part of the Flemish population holds towards the French speakers.

Many French speakers also ignore the poverty and economic difficulties Flanders faced during the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. At the same time, they maintain glorious memories of Wallonia as one of the strongest economical powers in the world, with huge coal mines and the steel industry. This inability to forge a cohesive collective memory prevents Belgians from developing a strong identity and a clear sense of belonging.

Recently, the Flemish senator Rik Torfs declared to a French journalist that ‘the real problem between Flemings and French-speakers is not the disagreement, it is the indifference’ (Fralon, 2009). Contrary to other ethnic conflicts such as in Northern Ireland or in the Balkans, there has been, so far, hardly any violence between French speakers and Dutch speakers, and there is little evidence of hatred between the two groups. Besides important disparities in terms of political attitudes (e.g. more left-wing among French-speakers, more right-wing among Dutch-speakers), they simply do not share the same references to the past. And, as the Belgian media tends to focus coverage on its own region, Belgians are often ignorant of the events occurring in the other regions (Sinardet and Hooghe, 2009). Only sport events seem to activate any sense of a Belgian pride.

Collective emotions and collective memories

These different memories are also associated with different emotions towards the past. As suggested by Laszlo and Fülöp (2011), ‘historically evolved group identity involves emotional processes that can only be explained from the group history itself’. In other words, people’s emotions are not independent from their collective memory; some of the individual emotions shaped by the group memory held by Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians will help illustrate this point.

Take for example, contempt and humiliation. As already mentioned above, the economical prosperity of Wallonia in the 19th century as well as the domination of the French-speaking elites generally and the extreme poverty of Flanders easily reactivates feelings of humiliation among Flemings as well as feelings of being despised by the French speakers. This former humiliation strengthens the current ideas among many Flemings that the Dutch language and the Flemish culture are threatened and that Flemish identity must be protected (Vaes, 2006).

These two emotions may also help to explain why Flanders still feels frustrated, despite its current economic prosperity. The Flemish journalist Paul Goossens noted that this frustration is currently undermining the soul of a rich, dynamic and prosperous region. It appears that many Flemings simply cannot forget the past, in particular, their economically difficult years at the onset of the Belgian State. Although some of these memories are not related to true historical events (see Beyen, this issue), they remain firmly grounded in the Flemish collective memory (Laporte, 2008). According to the journalist Pascal Verbeke (Lorent and Bourton, 2010), neither Flanders nor Wallonia assimilated the shift in economic prosperity during the 1960s (see Klein et al., this issue). Flanders sometimes appears to behave as if it was still being oppressed, a victim of the Belgian State, despite the economic power residing now in Flanders. At the same time, some French-speakers have not accepted
this fact. Verbeke concluded that a large part of the current ‘hysteria’ about the linguistic conflict comes from this discrepancy.

A second group of emotional states include shame and resentment (see Brems, this issue and Heenen-Wolff et al., this issue). Shame was elicited in Flanders by the political collaboration with the occupiers during the two world wars. This feeling is still experienced today and leads to the avoidance of discussions about those times. However, simultaneously, there is an important level of resentment against the Belgian State as some Flemings believe that the collaborationists were too severely condemned after the two wars. These old feelings also have current outcomes. For instance, many Flemish political parties consistently lobby for a law that would grant amnesty for collaborationists, as occurred in other European countries. But all French-speaking parties strongly reject the idea of any amnesty for those they consider as traitors, and even refuse to discuss it. This refusal on the part of the French-speaking minority may help explain the current rise of Flemish nationalism, eliciting on the part of some Flemings intense feelings of injustice, which are often associated with feelings of anger, spite and grudge. As noted recently: ‘The radical stance in Flanders has many causes, but the absence of reconciliation with the past of collaboration and repression might be the most sensitive one. There is real peace or reconciliation only when a purification of memory takes place . . .’ (Kieboom, 2010). By failing to provide opportunities for collectively assimilating the past, the Belgian State has let these feelings of spite and grudge subsist and flourish.

These various examples demonstrate how discrepant collective memories on the part of Flanders and Wallonia help shape the emotions they hold towards each other. Emotion theories also suggest that before experiencing an emotional feeling state, there is a cognitive appraisal that determines the type of emotion elicited (e.g. Leventhal and Scherer, 1987; Smith and Ellsworth, 1987). For instance, appraisal of a situation as unfair elicits anger. With regards to Belgium, there are also some strong appraisal differences among Belgian citizens when assessing the same past events. To illustrate, we will describe a recent study conducted among French-speaking and Dutch-speaking Belgians who were students in Leuven in 1968 when the university was split into two linguistic separated entities (Mercy et al., 2011).

A rapid summary of the historical context is necessary before describing the results of the study. In 1962–63, linguistic laws were voted in. They made official the principle of unilingual areas and the ‘territoriality principle’1 defended by the Flemings. However, one place was in disagreement with the new law: the city of Leuven where the old catholic University of Louvain, founded in 1425, was established. In Leuven, Dutch-speaking and French-speaking students and staff members still worked and lived together and French was still used as an official language of the university. Despite dividing every faculty and central administration into two sections: one French speaking and one Dutch speaking, the situation of a city in the Flemish territory where people could still officially use French was no longer tolerable for a number of Flemings. The Dutch-speaking student movement started to endorse the departure of the French speakers from Leuven. Numerous demonstrations led to the departure of the French-speaking section of the university and the creation of a new campus in Louvain-la-Neuve (i.e. in the French-speaking part of Belgium).

The study revealed not only that different emotions were associated with these memories (fear for the French speakers vs. joy for the Dutch speakers), but also that different appraisals were elicited. The French speakers viewed Flemish actions as inspired by ethnic motives and judged them as illegitimate, whereas Dutch speakers saw the conflict as a legitimate collective movement for the social emancipation of the Flemings. French speakers experienced the conflict as individuals undergoing unexpected events, whereas Dutch speakers experienced them as part of a planned collective movement. Interestingly, these mnemonic differences were also reflected in their language use. Dutch-speaking interviewees used more collective pronouns such as ‘we’ and ‘us’ compared to the French-speaking interviewees who used more ‘I’ and ‘me’. 

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An interdisciplinary outlook on Belgian collective memory

In this issue, we will examine how memories of past conflicts such as the splitting of the University of Louvain may fuel and interact with attitudes towards the current linguistic conflict and how the use of memory of the past can facilitate the understanding of the current political landscape. For instance, the article by Klein et al. will analyse stereotypes held by both groups and show how their evolution is mapped with the political and economical changes during the last decades.

Addressing the interaction between collective memory and the evolution of nation states necessitates the use of various disciplines (e.g. psychology, political science and history) in order to better understand the nuances inherent in such complex interactions. One original contribution of this special issue is precisely that the issues at stake will be examined through different perspectives: social psychology, history, psychoanalysis, political sciences and literature. In doing so, different axes of analysis are provided. First, this special issue contrasts research attempting to provide both objective and subjective viewpoints. History attempts to provide a narrative of the past as it actually happened. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, examines the subjective dynamics within the individual that explain their current feelings, fantasies, motivations, behaviours and memories. Social psychology occupies an intermediate position between these two poles as it attempts to integrate a collective level of analysis (e.g. political science and history) with the individual (e.g. psychoanalysis). The methods considered throughout this special issue include quantitative and qualitative surveys, analyses of official speeches and newspaper articles, individual narratives, novels and semiotic analysis.

We believe that an interdisciplinary approach to the study of collective memory is too rare and we hope that through contributions gathered in this special issue we will demonstrate the potential of such an approach. Although we know of no previous attempts to examine how past events shape current memories, attitudes and emotions in a specific geographical context (i.e. Belgium) from the vantage points of five disciplines, there have been more modest attempts. For instance, when examining nationalism in current democratic states, Smith (1995: 5–6) noted the benefits of extending his analysis to both political science and history:

Rather than viewing nations and nationalisms as obsolete survivals of an earlier, more insular era, or as inevitable products of global modernization and late capitalism, or as perennial and natural features of human history and society, we must trace them back to their underlying ethnic and territorial contexts; we must set them in the wider historical intersection between cultural ties and political communities, the processes of administrative centralization, economic transformation, mass communication and the disintegration of traditions which we associate with modernity. Both the longer time-frame and the recovery of the ethnic susbstratum are needed if we are to make sense of the ubiquitous appeal and enduring hold of national ideals at a time in history when other forces seem to presage, and hasten the obsolescence of nationalism.

The benefits of integrating both a history and political science perspective is further illustrated in the article by Rosoux and van Ypersele about the memory of the First World War and Congo in this issue.

We firmly hope that this special issue will show how future work can fruitfully combine different theoretical and empirical approaches in order to show how past memories affect current attitudes, emotions, representations and behaviours through different emotional and cognitive processes.

Throughout this special issue, we can note some important changes that deserve attention for a more integrated and multidisciplinary study of collective memory. For example, take psychology. There is currently a new trend examining how public events from the past and their associated emotions can affect current memories (e.g. Berntsen and Thomsen, 2007; Bohn and Berntsen, 2007; Brown et al., 2009; Hirst et al., 2009; see also Hirst and Fineberg, this issue). There is also a
growing interest in cognitive psychology to integrate constructs from social psychology. To illustrate, for more than 30 years scholars have been examining both the emotional and cognitive factors explaining the level of consistency in memories of public events and for memories of their reception context, or flashbulb memories (Brown and Kulik, 1977). Recently, however, social factors that could explain differences in the processes involved in the formation of these memories were also systematically investigated. For example, by activating individual and/or social identities, different variables predicted the formation of both event and flashbulb memories (e.g. Luminet and Curci, 2009). Similarly, Sahdra and Ross (2007) reported that social identity influences individual-level memory processes by affecting the schemata that individuals possess about their in-groups.

Similarly in political science and, in particular, the field of conflict resolution, practitioners and scholars are increasingly examining the importance of trauma (Brudholm and Rosoux, 2009; Pouligny et al., 2007; Stover and Weinstein, 2004). Traditionally studied by psychologists and psychoanalysts, this notion of trauma has revealed itself to be critical in understanding the true impact of any international and/or intercommunity conflict. The progressive focus on individuals and communities, rather than on state-to-state relationships, calls for input from not only historians, but also psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists. Similarly, researchers are no longer considering official representations of the past as the exclusive object of analysis. Most scholars instead concentrate on vivid memories of the conflicts. In doing so, they attempt to understand the interactions between the public narratives of the past and the lived and/or transmitted experiences. Many questions arise from this shift in academic practice. For instance, do the political strategies and rhetorical postures correspond to the representations and traces of lived experience? What are the scope and limits of the instrumentalization of history for political purposes? To what extent does the population adhere or resist the ‘official’ narrative of the past (Jewziewicki, 2004; Lavabre, 2008)?

These new perspectives suggest that more empirical work is needed in order to understand the processes involved when individuals and groups remember the past. In particular, researchers interested in collective memories face two important challenges: articulating the processes through which memories are constructed, and the actual content of these memories. Often, researchers in their respective fields focus on one aspect or the other without integrating them. For example, cognitive psychologists have long studied the hindsight bias, i.e. the tendency to view past events as predictable (‘I knew it all along’), but no research has examined how this bias may contribute to the elaboration of collectively shared memories. We hope that that the current special issue could fill this gap by examining both processes and actual content.

We will now turn to a brief overview of the different contributions of this special issue.

**Summary of the contributions**

The contributions start with an article by Klein et al. showing how collective memories can serve various functions with regard to social identity. The authors provide a social psychological interpretation of the current conflict between Flemish and French-speaking groups in Belgium. Their assumption is that various aspects of intergroup relations are based on a competition over resources, being either material, symbolic or procedural. The principles allowing the allocation of these resources are not shared between the competing groups: each group defends a justice principle that best safeguards its interests. Applying this framework to the Belgian case, the authors argue that two major dimensions of the conflict organize current representations of the two groups: the linguistic policy that is applied and a preference for autonomy and responsibility vs. a solidarity principle in the economic domain.

These dimensions of the conflict are more or less available, depending on contextual determinants. Some authors suggest that there is a recent shift from purely linguistic and cultural claims in the 1970s...
towards more attention to economic issues in recent years. Following Bricman (2011: 100–2), the French speakers are not so much felt by Flemings as arrogant aristocrats that they want to expel, but rather as the burden of having to assist lazy neighbours. Klein et al. deliver an analysis of in-group and out-group dominating stereotypes as being either related to a conflict over language/territory or over economic autonomy. They show how collective memories validate these stereotypes by presenting them as anchored in the past and, in turn, legitimize the justice principle at stake.

We then move to an historical contribution by Beyen, who shows how the Belgian patriotic memory has been vulnerable, being regularly threatened by a Flemish Nationalist (or Flamingant) counter-memory, which eventually became the dominant one in Flanders, the Belgian one being almost eradicated.

Among the heroes that were re-appropriated, the example of Tijl Uylenspiegel is very illustrative. Uylenspiegel occupies various – often antagonistic – roles in 20th century Flanders. The most notable literary adaptation of this myth was published in French at the end of the 19th century by the Francophone journalist Charles de Coster. Uylenspiegel lived in the 16th century in what is now the Belgian territory. The story describes his fight against the French kingdom as a citizen of a place where references to ‘Belgium’, ‘Flanders’, or ‘Wallonia’ did not exist. But the story has been re-appropriated in the 20th century by Flemish activists who transformed Uylenspiegel into part of the Pantheon of Flemish nationalist heroes, the task being facilitated by the fact that De Coster’s novel is no longer read by anyone in Belgium.3 Another change was that the Liberal struggle against catholic obscurantism, central to the original book, was re-appropriated by Flemish activists, who were able to overshadow Uylenspiegel’s harsh anti-clericalism.

Beyen also describes how most of these heroes were not only flamandized, but also ruralized and catholicized. Beyen uses a parricide metaphor to show how many figures originally conceived by the Belgian historical culture were ‘killed’ and re-appropriated by the Flemish National collective memory. Beyen then tries to explain why Belgian national memory turned out to be so vulnerable to usurpation by referring to some features of Belgian memorial discourses, and to the political, intellectual and social contexts in which they occurred.

Beyen also discusses the current political situation in Belgium by analysing the characteristics of the young Belgian State in 1830, including the most liberal constitution in the world and a total freedom for all the sub-national identities to develop. This favoured the raising of Flemish claims regarding language use, which were never repressed by the totally French-speaking authorities at the time. This was a situation very different from other countries such as France, where all dialects and the minority languages were severely repressed and forbidden. An important contribution of Beyen’s work is through his analysis of how memories of shared past events are so different between Flemings and French speakers that they provide extremely powerful dividing forces on the current social and political cohesion of Belgium.

In the next contribution, Rosoux and van Ypersele examine the gradual deconstruction of Belgian national identity through the lens of political science and history. By comparing two major events of the recent past, the First World War and the Belgian colonization of Congo, they suggest that while the First World War provides the template for many current memory conflicts in Belgium, the memory of the colonial past remains much more consensual among Dutch and French-speakers. Their analysis is based on a corpus of official speeches, parliamentary documents, news articles and commemorative monuments. However, these sources are part of the official memory and do not necessarily represent the collective memories shared by the general Belgian public. Thus, it is crucial to detect inconsistencies between the official version and individual representations of the national past.

Regarding the First World War, the authors show how an initially homogeneous national memory was transformed to the point where myths started to arise depicting many Flemish soldiers dying
in the trenches for a cause that was not theirs and that those who collaborated with the Germans were martyrs for the Flemish cause. As already illustrated by Beyen, Flemish nationalists started soon after the end of the First World War to define Flemish identity as something contrary to Belgian identity. Simultaneously, the Flemish started to feel that the Belgian State was unduly harsh vis-à-vis the Fleming collaborationists.

Regarding the re-assessments of Belgium’s colonial past, the authors analyse different steps that explain attitude changes of the Belgian authorities towards the colonial past by referring to the coming to power of a new generation of political leaders, and changes in the Belgian institutional and diplomatic contexts. Through many examples Rosoux and van Ypersele show how past events, often initially appraised as embarrassing, may turn out to be politically useful. They conclude by showing how the Belgian federal authorities, invested with the role of keeping an official version of the country’s history, have different objectives in mind. One striking, and probably unexpected, objective is therapeutic, i.e., the idea that time heals the wounds of the past.

The fourth contribution is from three clinical psychologists, with a psychoanalytical background. Through in-depth interviews with Flemish and French-speaking Belgians, Heenen-Wolff et al. emphasize some emotional states that were prevalent among the two groups: shame and humiliation for the Flemings, disdain and contempt for the French-speaking Belgians. They suggest that these contrasted affects led to different defence mechanisms (repression and dissociation) that could be found in their discourse. Both defence mechanisms helped individuals forget the past, but the negative affects remain vivid and are transmitted to subsequent generations. Thus, the emotions associated with these past events keep affecting the current emotional and relational life between Dutch- and French-speaking Belgians. Another theoretical contribution of the article is to introduce the psychoanalytical term ‘retroactive resignification’ (or ‘après-coup’) suggesting that a traumatic event from the past (e.g., a child being separated from his parents in order to be hidden and escape Nazi persecution) may remain silent for a long time. Only when a second event occurs, which may share some similarities with the first one despite appearing benign at first sight (e.g. a neighbour leaving his house), is the first event re-interpreted and more fully acknowledged in the light of the present. It is only during the second event that a full range of emotions and clinical symptoms (mental and physical) in reaction to the first are visible. Retroactive re-signification may be a useful construct to consider for future studies involving acute traumas that may not be understood or assimilated at onset. Starting from a perspective that is mainly intrapersonal, the authors argue that such principles can be applied to group situations. They suggest that Flemings experienced an historical trauma through the successive war experiences leading to ‘après-coup’ reactions in their current daily life and, among other things, in their way of dealing with the current political situation in Belgium.

The final contribution by Brems shows the recent success of the genealogical or ‘roots’ novels in Flanders, a literature genre that tells stories about the past in order to enlighten the present. These novels became very popular in Flanders in the 1970s, which coincided with major political changes in Belgium towards more autonomy for the regions.

A first obvious interpretation of these novels would be the emphasis on origins strengthening Flemish identity (a territorializing approach). That is, knowing one’s roots and origins is essential to building a sense of self; a self that is not only personal but also collective, in which history becomes a central tenet for the construction of identity. Indeed, as emphasized by Brems (this issue): ‘One of the most persistent ideas about identity in western thought seems to be indeed that our identity lies in our past, and especially in our memory of that past.’

Brems presents a selection of Flemish novels in which ‘a literary quest for the personal identity and individual past of the narrator goes hand in hand with a broader reflection on the collective identity of Flemish and national history’. Interestingly, the territorialization tendency never emerged
in the Netherlands, which shares a common language and some cultural background with Flanders, nor in Wallonia, although the changes in the political landscape of Belgium could have raised a similar tendency. Thus, an obvious question is whether this development of ‘roots’ novels in Flanders is related to a need in Flemish society for building a distinctive identity through literature.

However, through the description of these novels, Brems suggests that they can also be interpreted as much more critical by showing a stereotypical image of Flanders and its ‘roots’ and being a sharp criticism of the idea of cultural identity (a deterritorialization approach). Het Verdriet van België (The Sorrow of Belgium) published by Hugo Claus is probably the best illustration of this tendency. Brems explains how, within the same book, the two tendencies (territorialization and deterritorialization) can be expressed, which first reflects the ambiguous relationship Claus had with Flanders. But more generally, the ‘root’ novels would reveal how Flemings are preoccupied with their identity, but without finding a clear answer. Claus’s novel is also a way to illustrate how history is not only a form of knowledge but also a tool, which can be used in everyone’s discourse.

Finally, Brems discusses how many root novels include narratives of difficult times in the history of Flanders, such as the Second World War. Interestingly, shame appears in these novels as a prevalent feeling, which can be related to the high frequency of shame expressed in the interviews conducted by Heenen-Wolff et al.

In the last section of the special issue, William Hirst, a renowned scholar in the field of collective memory studies, provides a discussion of the five articles described above (see Hirst and Fineberg, this issue). The perspective put forward by Hirst and Fineberg is particularly interesting because they hold an external observer perspective (i.e. not Belgian) on the different issues at stake, while all the authors of the special issue are Belgians or have been living in Belgium for a long time. The discussion also offers an interesting way to integrate the more specific aspects related to Belgian history into a more general framework within the field of collective memory, with a special emphasis on the psychological processes at work.

**Final comments and acknowledgments**

The proposal for the special issue was made by Belgian researchers who have been pursuing an ongoing collaboration on an interdisciplinary approach of collective memory since 2004 (Susann Heenen-Wolff, Olivier Klein, Laurent Licata, Olivier Luminet, Valérie Rosoux, and Laurence van Ypersele). We are grateful to the Belgian Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS-FRS) for its constant support for this endeavour. The special issue also offered the opportunity to ask other Belgian researchers interested in Belgian collective memory to provide a contribution (Ariane Bazan, Marnix Beyen, Elke Brems and Anne Verougstraete). We would like to thank them for their help and support in this project.

We are also particularly grateful that William Hirst and Ioana Apetroaia Fineberg agreed to write a thoughtful discussion of this special issue from the perspective of psychological theories. Each contribution was reviewed by two experts in the respective field. We would like to thank these reviewers very much for the time and energy they have invested for insuring the scientific quality of these contributions. The reviewers were (by alphabetic order): Jean-Luc Brackelaire, Willem Doise, Willem Frijhoff, Stéphane Gerson, Chantal Ketseloot, Reine Meylaerts, Karen Phalet, Sonja Vanderlinden, Gertrudis Van de Vijver, and Louis Vos.

For each article, we also requested, from among the contributors, one reviewer from a different field in order to ensure that each contribution would remain easily accessible by avoiding the use of scientific jargon. We also believe that this procedure ensured a more coherent and integrated set of articles. This integration is sustained by regular cross-references within each contribution. We would
also like to thank Marianne Bourguignon for her help in the editorial preparation of this special issue. Finally, we thank Philippe Bernard, Vincent de Coorebyter, Gilles Condé, and Pablo Medina Lockhart for their help in designing the maps.

Notes

1 This conflict is a major illustration of two antagonistic views prevalent in Belgium: the ‘personality principle’ defended by the French speakers vs. the ’territoriality principle’ defended by the Dutch speakers. Following the ‘personality principle’, each person has the right to deal with their local administration in their own mother tongue, wherever they live. Thus, a Walloon who moves to a local Flemish entity around Brussels should be allowed to complete any type of administrative form in French. However, if we follow the ‘territoriality principle’, all the areas of Belgium -- except in Brussels -- are unilingual. This means that, although in some areas around Brussels a large minority, or even sometimes a majority, of the population is French speaking, the administration, which is situated in the Flemish territory, will only deal with the inhabitants in Dutch (for more details, see Klein et al., this issue).

2 Depending on the circumstances, the individual’s personal identity (self-definition derived from close personal relationships and idiosyncratic personality attributes) or social identity (self-definition in terms of the properties of a specific group and the strength of an individual’s identification with this group) will be more highly activated. Broadly defined, a social identity is a categorization of the self into more inclusive social units (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987).

3 See also in the contribution by Brems (this issue) a similar situation for the novel by Hugo Claus, The Sorrow of Belgium. In November 2005 the novel was elected as ‘the most unread novel’ on Flemish radio, which suggests that people know the novel by reputation more than by reading.

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Author biographies

Olivier Luminet is a professor of psychology at the Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium. His research interests include the moderation of personality factors in the link between emotional reactions and memory processes and the interplay between individual and collective factors explaining the formation of flashbulb memories. He recently co-edited a book on this topic published by Psychology Press.

Laurent Licata is a lecturer at the Social Psychology Unit, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium. His research interests include collective memories, intergroup relations, and national and ethnic identities.

Olivier Klein has been teaching social psychology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles since 2001. His research interests include intergroup relations, collective memory, sexual objectification and the social psychological aspects of food consumption.

Valérie Rosoux is a Professor of International Negotiation at the Université catholique de Louvain. She has a licence in Philosophy and a PhD in Political Science. Her research focuses on memory and conflict resolution, after international and inter-community conflicts.

Susann Heenen-Wolff is Professor of Clinical Psychology at the Université de Louvain, Belgium, and is a psychoanalyst and a training analyst of the Belgian Society of Psychoanalysis (IPA). She recently led a research project on the traumatic memory of hidden Jewish children in Belgium.

Laurence van Ypersele is a Professor at the Université catholique Louvain, Belgium. Her research focuses on the World War One memory in Belgium. 

Charles B. Stone is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Psychological Sciences Research Institute, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium. His research interests include autobiographical memories, collective memories and social aspects of memory.