

Academic Research Program: 'Representing the experience of migration' (2016-2018)

International Conference
MSHS de Poitiers, Salle des conférences
November 7-9, 2018

Organizer: Frédéric Detue (FoReLLIS, B3)

Partners: Research Labs FoReLLIS and Migrinter
and the ANR Research Program **MECMI**

Conference Academic Committee

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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

**Documenting 'shock experiences' of migration: towards a
transformation of social representations?**

This international conference closes the Academic Research Program untitled 'Representing the experience of migration', which began in March 2016 with a workshop on 'Exiles' Narratives'. After studying the narratives of people in exile, which are sources for our understanding of migration, we examined the question of its representation using two other approaches: that of the images which exiled people produce in large quantities in order to

document their migratory journey (workshop, November 2016); and that of discourses, narratives and images which, for a century, have represented in various and conflicting ways the figure of the “refugee” (workshop, April 2017).

The conference aims both to deepen and broaden reflections initiated along these various steps, all while keeping in sight the notion of experience: by giving voice both to the primary actors involved in migration, the migrant people themselves, and by equally giving voice to researchers, journalists, artists and activists, it will situate itself alongside people undertaking migration who, most often exiled and “made illegal”, have lived through experiences “where shock has become the norm” (Walter Benjamin).

[Approach 1: Analysis and critique of social representations]

The starting point of the conference will be a critical analysis of the most widespread social representations, which all too often present the migratory phenomenon as a problem in itself – against which we ought to fight. We will try to put into perspective these representations by determining where they come from and how they circulate between spheres of political and/or economic power, national and European organizations dedicated to immigration and asylum issues, the judiciary, the media... Case studies, in particular concerning institutional representations, are welcome; we could ask whether these representations produce or, on the contrary (alternatively?), are the product of institutional mechanisms, *e.g.* in asylum procedures. We will aim at analyzing, from a historical, geographic, sociological, political, judicial, economic, etc., standpoint, how these representations have been constructed and how they have been incorporated into social practice. We will ask to what extent they are informed by ideology, understood here in the sense of “a falsification – in general organized – of the facts”; to what extent they are also channels for emotions and to what extent they instrumentalize them. In addition, we will look at their historic power in different contexts, not only regarding how they spread across the public realm, but also, at the same time, the role they play in determining politics of control. Lastly, we will study how these social representations are articulated in our knowledge about migration, given these are produced by multiple actors and that they are used by certain actors to justify such security policies.

[Approach 2: Analysis and critique of the collection of documentary sources]

We will then study the representations that attempt to counter these forms of negation by documenting and analyzing what migrant people actually experience. Here too, we must be careful to put these representations into perspective, which will require the participants to reflect on their own position. What truths are we trying to establish, how are we going about it, to what end and from what angle? How do researchers, journalists, artists and activists without experience of migration position themselves with regard to migrant people, and, as the case may be, how do these representations relate to one another? We will place a particular – but not exclusive – emphasis on documentary projects from the

various social actors that have resulted in artworks – whether in literature, cinema, theatre, photography, graphic novels, in fine art or cartographic art. We will analyze and critique this corpus by asking ourselves if aesthetic production always straightforwardly serves the ethical project of telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth surrounding the migratory experience – whether individual or collective. Because, under the pretext of challenging the demonization of migrations, works of art can fall into the other extreme of idealizing these new “Odysseuses” and other new “heroes and heroines”, and thereby leave the field of history to enter into that of legend.

[Approach 3: Analysis and critique of violence]

This conference rests on the notion that the critical value of the representations of these migratory experiences can be judged against the task of documenting the violence suffered by migrant people. Violence, which is a defining condition of exile, necessarily illuminates the representations aiming to allow people to imagine this experience. Yet in the light of these representations, does the notion of violence mean the same thing to all of us? More specifically, does documented violence always correspond to what is covered by the notion of “persecution” in the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees? These forms of violence take so many forms that they affect in these representations other stages of the migratory journey than simply the move into exile, and thus tend to be equally linked to the definition of migration itself.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we must reflect on this considering the numerous deaths of migrant people at the borders of the European Union and the Schengen area, which are for example documented in the accounts of those who survived, whether edited in books or collected in films. But does this contemporary documentation – on a scale never seen before – mark a turning point in the history of representations of the migratory experience? What is the form, the place and the function of the theme of violence in these representations across different historical eras? Is it possible that these representations invite us to imagine earlier migrations as experiences that were collectively less subject to violence? Drawing from these representations, one of the tasks of the conference will be not only to describe the specific forms of violence linked to the border controls, but also to theorize them, given their function as an apparatus. Is it a “war on migrants” (Migreurop)? A “conflict of mobility” (Charles Heller)? A “crime of peace” (Maurizio Albahari)? A “thanatopolitics” (Achille Mbembe)?... Is there space to invent a new judicial offence so that these acts of violence do not remain unpunished?

[Approach 4: Analysis and critique of the use value of documented representations]

Documenting the “shock experiences” of migration is a pressing need when faced with social representations that deny them. To understand how pressing this need is, we must be especially attentive to personal documents: the stories and the images produced by migrant people and what they communicate that is concrete and discernable, given the importance

the authors of these documents place on attesting the facts. However, what is at stake is not only highlighting that documented representations disprove other, deceiving representations. The essential problem here relates to the responsibility of repulsive representations in the forms of violence that are committed. Indeed, representing migrations as a problem in itself often relies on a legal argument: it is based on the fact that, notwithstanding the freedom of movement inscribed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the era of nation states, migrations have been rendered illegal. There are numerous documented representations that denounce precisely the judicialization of the migratory experience, with migrant people forced to go through police, administrative and judicial procedures that are becoming ever more sophisticated. From there, we will examine the use value of the knowledge accumulated, for instance through this conference: what are the repercussions of this social activity in the public domain, whether it is an attempt to critique politics or the justice system at a national or international level?

[Approach 5. Analysis and critique of victimizing representations]

The conference's final problematic shifts our attention away from the representation of migrations towards migrant people themselves. Beyond the question of whether or not they obtain refugee status, the prevailing representation of them is that of the victim. In one respect, this may legitimately constitute a recognition of the violence they have endured before and during migration. However, this social representation has a drawback, which the legal status as a refugee confirms through its ambiguity: that of the essentialization of the migrant person as a victim or pariah, through which it unmoors itself from the historic and all too real experiences lived by the people concerned. An essentializing representation such as this is paradoxically not only the domain of xenophobic, racist and/or colonial prejudices. It also sometimes appears in an aestheticization of the "exiled condition", in which migrant people are depicted as metaphysical figures who represent a universal condition. We must then ask ourselves to what extent representations of the migratory experience are distinct from this victimizing representation, all while documenting the violence that is inflicted. Is migrant people's fight for their survival, their dignity, their truth, their rights, also – when they bear witness – a fight to transform this social representation?

The abstracts for the contemplated papers (maximum 300 words) will be accompanied by a biobibliographic notice of the author and will be sent to the email address frederik.detue@univ-poitiers.fr by Tuesday, May 15, 2018. They will be reviewed by the Conference Academic Committee, which will respond by the second half of June.