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Politics of Memory and Identity Concerning Colonialism in France

This paper explores the role of law in memory conflicts concerning colonialism in present-day France. While post-colonial memory mobilisations are prevalent and most visible in France, there is still nostalgia for colonialism in the French society, in particular for its alleged civilising mission. This paper examines how these contradictory public memories concerning colonialism have been transformed into so called memory laws. The law Taubira, enacted in 2001, depicts slavery as a crime against humanity, while another French law of February 2005 aimed to draw attention to the alleged positive aspects of colonialism.

Regardless of their actual societal position during colonialism, what is characteristic to different groups that were affected by colonialism is that they aim to display themselves as victims of colonialism/decolonisation in the present. We can thus depict French memory politics concerning colonialism as competition over identity of victimhood. It is maintained in this paper that law is a strategic instrument for different groups through which the past is constructed as injustices in the first place, and through which one's victim identity is affirmed.

Using the French example, this paper problematises the idea of law as a reconciliatory mechanism in cases of 'belated transitions' and maintains that it is more useful to see law as a strategic instrument for different actors with a variety of history political causes and claims. It is maintained in the paper that law can hardly resolve memory and identity conflicts. Instead, legal involvement tends to fuel the debates further.

Finally, through the discussion of politics of memory relating to colonialism in France this paper wishes to draw attention to the following phenomena that are increasingly important in the field of memory studies: Colonialism as an increasingly relevant memory theme in Europe; 'Legalisation' of memory; The formation of identity and memory claims on the basis of past victimhood.

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