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Title of the paper:

**Discourses, Social Representations and Political Decisions about Cremation in
Greece: Analysis of a Press Data Corpus**

Key-Words :

Social Representations of cremation, discursive strategies, political decision, identity
threat, press analysis

Abstract

Through a press data corpus, relevant to the practice of cremation, we attempted to examine the evolution and the dynamics of the following topics: the discursive strategies used by the different agents involved and the stages in the political decision, which appeared in the debate about the institutionalization of this practice in Greece.

Cremation is characterized by its novelty in the Greek context. It is, at present, forbidden in Greece. However, its institutionalization seems to be necessary given the problems caused in a practical level by the traditional way, i.e. burial, of treating the dead bodies. Thus, it turns out to be the focus of a debate between citizens, the state, and the church.

The theoretical framework, adopted for this research, is that of social representations and their dynamics (Moscovici, 1984; Jodelet, 1989; Abric, 1994); it belongs to the field of social psychology. This framework allows us to study and to account for matters relating to social change, cultural dynamics and identity issues, emerging from our research. Our research also included the tradition and modernity conflict, which seems to define contemporary Greece (Lipowatz, 1996).

The press data sampling that we studied was conducted using the computer program ALCESTE (Reinert, 1986). Other complementary treatments were also realized through a content analysis approach. We also introduced a temporal variable

in our analysis, which permitted us to carry out some comparative studies on the evolution in the production of the discourses.

The results of this research allowed us to understand the role of the religious authority regarding mentalities and politics, and the specificities of the political decision. At the same time, these results explained the conditions on the production of discourses in relation to the threat of the identity. We also compare these results with those of another study (Dargentas, 2002) to provide a more in depth answer to the identity question.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGICAL POINTS

We would like to specify that this paper is a part of a larger research on social representations of death in Greece, conducted in the field of social psychology. In this paper we refer to the theory of social representations, in the way that was developed by researchers at the EHESS¹. In this theoretical framework, we are interested in the dynamics of social representations, linked to identity issues (Abric, 1994 ; Jodelet, 1989 ; Farr, 1987). Our aim is to study a social object, that of cremation, presenting an identity threat, and to explore the evolution of the discursive strategies of the actors involved in this issue, and the specificities of the political decision. Let us explain the interest of this object in our research.

The practice of cremation is interesting as it questions traditional rituals and social representations (Déchaux, 1997; Pharos, 1989; Thomas, 1985) existing after death; it is also a source of conflicting positions. In fact, this practice is currently forbidden in Greece; its institutionalisation seems however necessary, partly due to practical reasons. A first press review that we have compiled has shown that cremation lies at the centre of a debate between citizens, the State and the Church, a debate relative to its institutionalisation. Moreover, in a previous paper we compared 3 different ways to talk about cremation; we have shown that cremation is mainly viewed negatively when people talk about its institutionalisation; this is due to issues around religious and to ethnic identity (Dargentas, 2002)².

¹ Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris. = School of High Studies in Social Sciences.

² Sample of 123 respondents.

This social object's study has a number of theoretical implications in the social representations' theory, which we do not intend to develop here. Rather, this paper's aim is to present the forms of the socio-cultural dynamics around a problematic social object. Furthermore, contextualizing our object in Greece, will serve to emphasize the importance of the orthodox identity in the social objects' elaboration, as well as the ambiguity of Greek identity, torn between novelty and tradition. Among the characteristics defining Greece's national identity, given by Lipowats (1996), we draw attention to "society's modernization failure by internal forces", the "compliance between the State and the Church", the "displacement of internal problems on an international level", the "identity shared between Europe and the East". A number of researchers claim that the orthodox religion and nationalism influence the evolution of Greek identity and mask the Greeks' difficulty to face modernization and cultural adjustment.

The press plays an interesting role in our study as it reflects the existing tendencies in a social environment surrounding an object. It is likely to inform us of the different dynamics around cremation: for example, the actors intervening in the debate and their positions; the evolution of their discourses and positions over time. In this manner, the press constitutes a sort of mirror of the representations conveyed in the public sphere (Bourdieu, 1966 ; Grawitz, 1996).

Our corpus spans 13 years and consists of 99 articles, published between 1987 and 2000. They have been collated using a search where the key-word was "cremation of the dead"³. Cremation appears in the press, due to exterior circumstances: problems in cemeteries, political or associative initiatives about promoting its institutionalization, legal problems related to fetus cremation, religious people's reactions. Apart from these situations, there are no published articles on the issue of cremation. The articles that concern it are written for particular reasons, or during specific periods. This incomplete list of circumstances that provoke the debate on cremation, coincide with different periods of time; this fact is at the origin of our study on discourses dependant on the time factor. We have divided those 99 articles

³ Actually we used 2 different expressions in this search : cremation=αποτέφρωση and "act of burning dead people"=κάυση νεκρών. This second expression is the one that is used more frequently in the press.

into 6 groups, according to their publication date; a date that corresponds to different contents and concerns, depending on external events. This is the way in which the 6 periods are delimited, as well as the external events linked to them:

1st period 31/7/87-11/2/90	-practical problems (heat wave, limited space in cemeteries...) -pro cremation association, court decision concerning its legitimacy -cremation seen as a possible solution
2nd period 23/9/92-13/6/93	-1st communal demand -conflicting views -examining the issue, positive and negative aspects
3rd period 22/3/94-3/12/94	-2nd communal demand -conflicting views, divisions -reactions of the clergy
4th period 1995⁴	-affair of stillborn babies/foetus that were illegally cremated in some hospitals
5th period 11/1/96-6/12/97	-3rd communal demand -conflicting views -examining the issue, positive and negative aspects
6th period 11/11/98-12/3/99	-bill and amendments introduced by politicians -conflicting views -divisions inside the Church, conflict between 2 priests

Besides the time factor that allows us to study the discourses' evolution, our approach involves examining the actors' discourses that intervene in the debate on this practice and on its institutionalisation. The actors involved in the press are the following: representatives of the Orthodox church, representatives of the law, politicians, members of the associations defending cremation, people against or in favour of the practice, and the press itself.

The corpus has been treated according to 2 complementary methods: the computer software ALCESTE⁵⁶ (Reinert, 1986) and the traditional content analysis, each method covering different aspects of our approach.

⁴ This 4th period will not appear in our results, as it consists of a small number of articles and the themes are marginal.

⁵ ALCESTE=Analyse des Lexèmes Co-Occurents dans un ensemble de Segments de Texte.

The theoretical and methodological choices we have made involve an epistemological conception relevant to the discourse. This is considered dynamic in structural, discursive strategies and depends on social agents. Thus, its interpretation relates to the social, temporal and historical factors underlying its production and influencing its evolution (Maingueneau, 1987; Potter, 1987); considering the discourse in its dynamic dimension agrees with the theoretical principle relative to the dynamics of social representations. The treatment of data, in terms of methods used, or variables examined, are found to be in agreement with such a conception of the discourse.

RESULTS

Positions on cremation and specific arguments for each one. Link to the actors

Our analysis enabled us to find out the contents associated with the different attitudes to cremation and to establish a link with the actors. It is a question of seeing the argumentation used when rejecting or defending cremation and seeing the groups of actors involved.

The rejection of cremation. Critics and religious representatives

The rejection of cremation is justified by religious arguments, ethnic identity, Greek tradition, the importance of the burial ceremony for the dead and for the bereaved, negative statements and various arguments concerning obstacles in the institutionalization of this practice.

After establishing a hierarchically descending order in the themes used to justify the rejection of cremation, we find out that these arguments involve:

- 1-the religious institution that is opposed to the practice

⁶ The treatment has been conducted using the version 4.5 of this computer programme, available in the social psychology lab at EHESS.

- 2-religious texts that appear to be against it
- 3-the obstacles (for example, cremation being against financial interests, views opposed to cremation, etc)
- 4-tradition and religious identity
- 5-the importance of burial for the soul of the dead
- 6-Greek identity and tradition
- 7-the Church and its enemies
- 8-the importance of burial for the bereaved
- 9-statements concerning this practice

By examining actors evoking those themes, it is the opponents of the practice (namely: religious representatives, legal representatives, critics) that are concerned; the dominant players are nevertheless the religious representatives, a fact that underlines their active role in the Greek society. Here, the group defending the project, politicians, and the press feature lightly in this discourse of opposition to cremation.

The acceptance of cremation, advocates

Actors who accept the practice of cremation evoke arguments and discourses that derive from religious beliefs, practical problems needing a solution, positive evaluations of the practice, its benefits (for both the dead and the bereaved) and the question of rights and the modernisation of society; other arguments concern a re-assertion of cremation through various situations.

In this positive discourse on cremation, dominant arguments by a descending order concern:

- 1-space problems
- 2-the relativity of religious positions
- 3-the relativity of religious practices
- 4-the freedom to choose
- 5-the democratic and legislative dimension
- 6-problems related to hygiene and pollution

7-some comments on the modernization of society

To a lesser extent, people in the press mention :

8-countries practicing cremation

9-the social demand

10-the importance of cremation for the well-being of the dead

11-some theological problems

12- the importance of cremation for the bereaved

13-assertions concerning other social objects that encourage and enhance the practice of cremation (for example: well known people who followed the practice – Maria Callas – the use of cremation in ancient Greece and donating organs)

14-the cost of burial

15-some positive comments on the practice

Therefore, it seems that this discourse insists on the practical necessity of cremation and responds to the arguments put forward in the opposition's discourse. Its actors defend the compatibility of cremation with the religious belonging and practice, and with a greater respect for individuals, both dead and living, than in burial. This discourse, except for these aspects, seems to give an ideological dimension to the institutionalisation of cremation. Defending this practice involves a variety of themes, compared to the previous attitude.

Amongst the actors of this discourse we find the advocates of the practice (namely: association, people in favour), politicians and the press. Advocates and politicians are concerned by all of those themes to a great extent. As for religious representatives, they hardly feature in this discourse and when they intervene it is in an ambiguous manner: for example, they refer to religious relativity, but at the same time they will insist on the incompatibility of cremation with Orthodox practices. More than a dogmatic problem, it seems to be a question of practices.

Decisional and political aspects

Our analysis has also enabled us to study the conditions of the political decision related to the institutionalisation of cremation, the actors involved in those issues, as well as their temporal evolution. This approach allows us to define the functioning of the political and religious authorities, in relation to the institutionalisation of cremation. We may distinguish 2 attitudes, conservatism and openness. As for the actors, their intervention is carried out for different motives from the 2 previous discourses that we examined, of rejection and of acceptance.

Conservatism

The attitude of “conservatism” involves :

- underlining the optional and non-obligatory character of the practice.
- the fact that the bill should not concern the Orthodox, but only other religions and dogmas,
- the duty to take into account the Church’s position concerning the institutionalisation of the practice, and to endorse it only if the church gives its agreement

Those themes are mainly put forward by politicians and religious representatives. Advocates of the practice are missing in this thematic group. Here, we should note that argument about submitting the political decision to the Church’s position is mainly evoked by politicians. Moreover, the latter are the only ones to affirm that the bill should not concern Orthodox people. These results stress on the dependency between the 2 authorities, political and religious. Actually, those results do not truly involve a pressure imposed by religious institutions, but rather a condition set by some politicians.

Openness

The attitude of openness related to the practice of cremation consists in enlarging the bill to other populations; it also concerns some flexible conditions relevant to the political decision. It consists of following themes:

- the bill should also concern Orthodox people

-to denounce the role of the Church in the political decision ; the State should take its decisions independently of the Church.

-the State should be audacious and take this decision without paying attention to political costs

-the Church should be logical and help the State

-Greek people seem to be undecided, but should adjust to novelty.

Unlike the previous attitude, these themes underline the need for independence between political and religious authorities. They are mainly evoked by advocates of the practice of cremation (namely: associations and individuals in favour) and by politicians. The press is also involved. Moreover, concerning the need for independence between the 2 authorities, the religious representatives are deeply involved, whereas politicians are barely represented. This finding confirms once again the dependency of the political decision on religious institutions.

The evolution in the conditions of the political decision

We found out that the political and decisional attitude is that of openness during the first 2 periods of our corpus. During the 3rd period, it is conservatism that dominates. As for the last 2 temporal periods, they are marked by 2 kinds of political attitude, that of openness and that of conservatism. Therefore, we can see an evolution towards submitting the institutionalization of the practice to some constraints, and at the same time, to a diversification in the debate with the coexistence of both attitudes.

CONCLUSION

We saw through the above findings that discourses in favour and against cremation are associated to different groups of actors without ambiguity. Those discourses seem to be well elaborated and to establish a dialog between them. In the level of political decision, we have pointed out that the main actors that remain reticent about the bill are politicians and religious representatives.

It seems to us that this issue relevant to ethnic identity threat, existing in the debate on cremation, constitutes the main obstacle to its acceptance: this issue is

difficult to be removed from the debate, since it is also relevant to an existing logic in Greece concerning ethnic identity, traditions or religion. As for the conflict between tradition and modernity, we discover that different specific groups of actors are associated to each attitude on cremation, positive and negative, without possible evolution. Moreover, we saw that instead of the religious representatives, it is politicians who claim conservatism in the political decision around cremation. On the one hand, religious institutions seem cultivate identity issues. On the other hand, the political authority remains ambiguous regarding decisions about issues linked to ethnic identity. In a scientific level, the development of this approach is consistent to a demand in the field of social psychology relevant to the cultural dynamics' study (Kashima, 2000).

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