

## A study on the social representations and social memory of Brest, a French city destroyed during the Second World War<sup>1</sup>

*Um estudo sobre a representação social e memória social de Brest, uma cidade francesa destruída na Segunda Guerra Mundial*

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**ABSTRACT:** We studied the socio-spatial representations and collective memory of Brest, a city that was heavily destroyed during the Second World War, among a sample of young residents. The methodology used combined word associations, open questions in the form of a questionnaire, and cognitive maps. The results show that participants' representations of Brest are situated in the present because the city is the context in which they experience important (personal and professional) life stages. The painful past of the war is remembered superficially, as if the urban monuments – the physical symbols of history – do not hold much significance for the city's young people. We conclude by formulating several hypotheses on the social representations of this "old and forgotten" Brest by new generations, alongside a discussion on two major issues: the trauma of the war and the city's military function as a naval base.

**Keywords:** social representations; city of Brest; alceste; Second World War; social memory.

**RESUMO:** As representações sócio espaciais e a memória coletiva de jovens acerca de Brest, uma cidade destruída na Segunda Guerra Mundial, foram estudadas. A metodologia usou tanto associações livres de palavras quanto perguntas abertas inseridas em questionário e mapas cognitivos. Os resultados mostram que as representações dos participantes acerca de Brest se situam no presente pois a cidade é o contexto onde vivenciam importantes etapas de suas vidas (pessoais e profissionais). O doloroso passado bélico é lembrado superficialmente, como se os monumentos urbanos – símbolos físicos da história- não significassem muito para os jovens desta cidade. Concluímos com a formulação de algumas hipóteses sobre a representação social de novas gerações sobre esta "antiga e esquecida" Brest, também discutimos duas grandes questões: o trauma da guerra e a função militar da cidade ao acolher a base naval.

**Palavras-chave:** representações sociais; cidade de Brest; Alceste; Segunda Guerra Mundial; memória social.

### Introduction

Every city has its own history which is anchored in the near or distant past and which determines the city, its name, its identity and its meaning. For Halbwachs (1950), collective memory is sustained by collective, social frameworks that are in accord with the predominant thoughts of the society. The territory, the city, its neighborhoods, monuments and great names are some of the memory frameworks that help individuals and groups to build their memories, and to pass these down from generation to generation through various means such as legends, oral history, archives, documents, and museums.

Wars, genocides, and the destruction of historical and cultural heritage are events that should not be forgotten by societies, even though recollection is extremely painful. The

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Second World War is one particular example and France is one of many countries in which it is difficult to imagine a city or village, however small, without a dedicated “memorial site” (*“lieu de mémoire”*, Nora, 1984).

As for Brest, it is one of the French cities that suffered the most from the ravages of the Second World War, as its geographical location made it a strategic and military position. Throughout its history, Brest has been defined as a maritime and military city. From the Roman era, the Château (where the National Maritime Museum is now located) held a strategic defense position because it was located at the most western point of France in the region of Finistère (“land’s end”, in English). During the First World War, the port of Brest played a very important role as soldiers from different countries were billeted there: Americans were the most numerous, operating many military convoys, and they were installed in a provisional military camp in the Pontanézen district from 1917 to 1921 (Galliou, 2007; Le Gallo, 1976). The French government offered the United States a dedicated area on the Cours Dajot boulevard to build a tower to commemorate American efforts in the First World War. The original tower (American Naval Monument) was destroyed during the Second World War, but a replica was rebuilt and this now serves as a symbol of the American help given to France during the two world conflicts (Hascoët & Kerdraon, 2012).

Most of the city of Brest, including its historical center, was destroyed in the Second World War as a result of the Allied bombardment against the German occupation in 1940 (Bienfait, 1976). The city center was rebuilt according to modern and hygienist urban principles and there are almost no traces of the ancient city in the central district of Siam, except for the Château, a few buildings, some walls, and the American Naval Monument on Cours Dajot boulevard. It would appear that the French navy also played an important role in the definitive destruction of certain historical constructions such as the castle’s fortifications and the penal colony (*“le bagne”*), whose stones were reused for the reconstruction of the new city (Le Goïc, 2001; Newsome, 2009). Jean-Baptiste Mathon managed the reconstruction project in 1943 (Bellat, 2013), which was imposed on Brest without the local population’s consultation or consent.

Our main objective is to contribute to theoretical reflection on the socio-spatial representations linked to Social Memory Theory, using the case of the city of Brest. We will analyze university students’ social representations of the city in the aim of answering the following questions: What social memory of Brest do young residents construct when there are no obvious signs of the past in their everyday lives? What places evoke the destruction of the city during the Second World War? And how are these places perceived by young residents?

### **Considerations on the socio-spatial representation and the social memory**

This work forms part of a wider investigation into the social representations of Brest. It is part of a long tradition of studies on the social representations of urban spaces (Chombart de Lauwe, 1971; de Alba, 2002, 2011; Haas, 1999; Milgram & Jodelet, 1976; Dias & Ramadier, 2015, Marchand, 2005), which makes use of a varied methodology (interviews, map drawing, questionnaires, tours, etc.) and shares certain theoretical assumptions:

1. Subject-territory dialectical relationship: because individuals and groups build and manage their living places alongside history, the territory becomes a reflection of society and a frame for a collective memory that maintains individual and group cultural identity (Halbwachs, 1950).

2. Social dimension of the symbolic construction of territorial images (Jodelet, 2015): this is provided by the individual's collective belonging and the social construction of space;

3. Social representations of the space are expressed in different forms: through discourse, practices, and visual artifacts and graphics that intend to objectify a complex urban experience;

4. Heuristics: social representations of what and of whom? In answering this question, urban spaces are transformed into objects of social representations constructed by specific subjects or groups.

Based on these assumptions, we suppose that the history of Brest, like any other city, frames the social representations formed by its inhabitants and the meaning they give to that space in their lives. In their daily routines, they give a series of meanings to the urban space in a symbolic game between the present and the past.

Many authors have highlighted the theoretical proximity of the concepts of representation and social memory.<sup>4</sup> This interrelationship is based on the assumption that memory is a symbolic construction – a representation of the past – that operates in the present, and is widely influenced by collective belonging, ideologies, beliefs, social practices, collective emotions and traditions.

Studies carried out on urban memory in relation to social representations highlight the importance of the meaning that groups and institutions give to places so that these places form part of a socially constructed memory (de Alba, 2010; Haas, 2004; Haas & Jodelet, 2007; Haas & Levasseur, 2013; Jodelet, 2010, 2012).

### **The cognitive map: instrument of memory and social representations**

The cognitive map (Kitchin, 1994) is an important tool for the study of socio-spatial representations and collective memory anchored in urban space. There are various techniques for studying mental maps, such as drawings, outlines of places and routes on printed maps, observations of real routes, and the development of three-dimensional mapping (Ramadier, 2010).

In this paper, preference is given to drawings because we consider that through the symbolism of naïve geography, a resident creates a sketch in which lines and strokes materialize their social representations of the territory. Such representations are a result of a resident's daily use of the space.

Mental maps, as a projection of the urban experience transmitted through drawing, illustrate all the riches of "the act of inhabiting" (Avry, 2012) a city: travelling through it, enjoying it, appreciating its aesthetics, feeling deep affection for it as a place of origin, and appropriating it as a place of residence, study, work or socialization. Regardless of the person's drawing skills, the lines and forms that shape the sketch establish relationships and hierarchies between the represented places: presence/absence, size, location, and relative distance between one and the other. The individual's relationship with the city is portrayed in such drawings. In the sketch, the city is a meaningful place; every element is converted into a code, a recognizable symbol to members of the same culture. The collection of drawn

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<sup>4</sup> See compiled work in Sá (2005); Laurens and Roussiau (2002); Rosa, Bellelli and Bakhurst (2000); Haas and Jodelet (2007); Jodelet (2012; 2013, 2015); Banchs, Agudo and Astorga (2007).

elements or symbols can be interpreted as a visual language that is significant to its creator or reader. The act of drawing is an act of communicating (Barthes, 1982) and as such, the decision to draw a monument or a street is a conscious decision to give meaning to the selected urban elements. Such selection is not only rational, it also follows emotions and affections (Cruz & Pol, 2005) and a collective memory that is rooted in the architecture and urban structure (Jodelet, 2015). The spaces represented in the sketch are places of personal-emotional memories and, at the same time, places that allow the reconstruction of a social and historical memory.

## **Methodological aspects**

### ***Participants***

The corpus was collected between September and October 2012. The sample is made up of one hundred and twelve psychology students (112) (second year of university studies) and composed of 92 women and 17 men (three participants did not declare their gender). The average age is 20.55 years old. The sample's composition is representative of psychology students, that is, mainly young women.

The majority of participants (78) came to Brest to study and have been living here for up to three years. Eleven (11) of the participants have lived in Brest between four and 10 years; seven have lived in Brest for more than 10 years; and sixteen participants were born and raised in Brest.

### ***Material: word association, mental maps and open questions***

The first task was word association, a method often used in social representations studies (e.g., Abric, 1995). Participants were asked to give spontaneous answers to a stimulus word: "What does the word "Brest" make you think about?" Participants were then invited to go over their associations and explain them. This task aimed to explore not only the socio-spatial representations of Brest, but also the meaning generated from these associations, which is what allows us to understand the representations produced.

The second task was a mental map. The participants were asked to draw a map of Brest and then to mark down the most important places for them and to explain their importance.

The third type of material was a questionnaire, but we will not go into further detail here as it is beyond the scope of the article. In this study, we explore the open questions that asked participants to express their views on their liked/disliked places in Brest, and their social representations of the city ("What places do you like in Brest and why?", "What places do you dislike in Brest and why?"), and the important places in Brest ("In your opinion, what are the most important places for the city of Brest and its inhabitants? Can you explain why?"). Additionally, the questionnaire contained questions linked to the study variables (age, gender, place of residence and duration of residence in Brest).

### **Analysis: textual data analysis (Alceste) and frequency of the listed places**

The corpus of text underwent two complementary types of analysis: Alceste and frequency calculations. An Alceste analysis (Reinert, 1993) was first carried out on the text. This software performs textual data analysis and produces statistical indices such as a

descending hierarchical classification. This method is often used in the social sciences field and in social representations research (Geka & Dargentas, 2010; Kronberger & Wagner, 2000), and urban studies (de Alba, 2012, 2004). A frequency analysis was also carried out.

Four different analyses were carried out using the software: the first explored the word associations produced by participants; the second focused on the places presented in the mental maps; the third was devoted to the liked and disliked places; and the fourth concentrated on the places that participants had identified as the most important.

In addition to these four analyses, we also calculated the frequency of the places mentioned in the drawings, in order to identify and locate emblematic sites of Brest.

## Results

As mentioned previously, the city of Brest has been marked by a traumatic past due to the Second World War. Nevertheless, our results show that participants only marginally refer to this past: the Second World War and its consequences are only touched upon and when they are evoked, it is mainly in an urban perspective (its destruction, reconstruction and as a result, its current state).

### *Everyday life and personal projects*

The results show that respondents organize their social representations of Brest based on their everyday activities, which were divided into two spheres of action: spare time and university. Spare time is used to explore the city's cultural and commercial sites such as cinemas, shopping malls, and music festivals, with participants frequenting different bars, especially on Thursday nights (student night). University life revolves around the Faculty of Humanities (the place of study for all participants) and the other main university campus site (Le Bouguen) where other faculties, central administration, halls of residence, and sports and cultural facilities are located. Their city representations are based on their young life experiences.

Table 1 presents a list of five different classes (and their representative words) from the Alceste analysis based on the free association words related to the term "Brest".

Table 1 - Results of the Alceste analysis on the free word association for the term "Brest"

Class	Representative words	(%)
1 Everyday life: shopping, cinema, university, enjoyment	Malls, Thursday, evening, go, cinema, faculty, school of humanities, pass, good, moment, apartment, and summer.	50%
2 New life, new friends, projects	Meeting, new, people, learn, know, sun, year, principal, culture, project, navy, life.	20%
3 War and National Navy	War, National Navy, military, destruction, sailing, think, commerce, present, port, Breton, harbour, important	10%
4 Brest geography	Find, Finistere, Brittany, end of the World, maritime	10%
5 Gray and sad: architecture, weather, and residents.	Architecture, sad, living, building, rain, gray, people, cold, weather, sky.	10%

Most of the word associations about Brest are related to university studies, leisure activities, and the participants' daily life and personal projects (50%, first class and 20%, second class). The third and fourth classes deal with the following associations, respectively: war, the destruction of the city, the presence of the French navy in Brest, and the city as a military and defense place (10%), the city's location in the Finistère *département* and its meaning (land's end) (10%). The fifth class covers a city that is gray and sad, which is in line with the urban skyline and a natural cloudy and rainy environment (10%).

Table 2 presents the frequencies of places mentioned in response to the following: the sketch maps of Brest, questions on the city's most important places, and the liked and disliked places.

Table 2 - Frequency of the places in Brest mentioned in four questions

	Sketch / maps <sup>1</sup>	Which places are the most important for Brest and its inhabitants? <sup>2</sup>	What are your favorite places in Brest? <sup>3</sup>	Which are the places you do not like in Brest? <sup>4</sup>
1. Jean Jaures Street	80%	29%	24%	9.50%
2. Liberté Square	80%	42%	18%	8%
3. Siam Street	77%	26%	22%	2%
4. Port of Commerce	72%	46%	30%	9.50%
5. UBO School of Humanities	71%	1%	9%	0%
6. Railway and Bus Stations	58%	9%	1%	2%
7. Recouvrance Neighborhood	46%	0%	0%	16%
8. Strasbourg Square	41%	1%	0%	8%
9. University Campus Le Bouguen	38%	7%	8%	0%
10. Morvan Hospital	34%	1%	2%	0%
11. Saint Martin Neighborhood	30%	0%	13.60%	7%
12. City Hall (Hotel de Ville)	29%	14%	0%	1%
13. Albert I Square	26%	0%	0%	0%
14. Recouvrance Bridge	23%	1%	1%	0%
15. Multiplex Cinema	21%	1%	1%	0%
16. Leclerc Supermarket	20%	1%	0%	0%

1: % = place frequency / 112 sketches made

2: % = place frequency / 97 people replying

3: % = place frequency / 110 people replying

4: % = place frequency / 84 people replying

Figure 1 presents the city map provided by the Brest Tourist Information Office. The sites highlighted in red are the sixteen most frequently drawn places (from 80%–20%) in the sketches, and the blue line shows the walking tour that the Tourist Information Office proposes. From this map, it can be seen that participants' representations of Brest are concentrated around the Place de la Liberté, and the rue de Siam–rue Jean-Jaurès axis.



Figure 1 - Frequently drawn places in Brest.<sup>5</sup>

These results appear to confirm the word association analysis since they prove that the students' everyday life revolves around the cultural centers (e.g. Multiplex cinema), leisure centers and shopping malls (e.g. E.Leclerc supermarket, Saint Martin district and its bars and restaurants), and proximity to the streets rue Jean-Jaurès and rue de Siam (e.g. bars and restaurants). These two streets offer both commercial and entertainment/leisure activities. Place de la Liberté, which connects these two streets, is also an important meeting place for students since it is an activity and transportation hub. This square, where the City Hall is located, is a cultural and political location for demonstrations, student festivals and fairs). These places are regularly mentioned in the sketch maps because students consider them to be important for the city and they like to visit them.

Port de commerce is also another important location for participants, not because of its commercial activity, but because of its cultural activities and public festivals that take place every year, such as *Jeudis du port* (a series of free open-air music and entertainment events held on Thursday evenings in the summer) and the International Maritime Festival held every four years.

Places representing university life are as follows: UBO Faculty of Humanities, Le Bouguen campus, Place Albert 1<sup>er</sup> (an essential place for students as the roundabout located here is on the students' journey from the university campuses to the city center), and the University Hospital Morvan (located opposite the Faculty of Humanities, a central place in Brest that is regularly frequented by inhabitants). It can be assumed that the rail and bus stations – often present in students' drawings – are a major part of the representations of university life for most of the students who live in Brest during the week to attend university and travel back to their home towns on weekends and in the holidays. Therefore, these stations are highly frequented places.

<sup>5</sup> Tourist map available at: <http://www.brest-metropole-tourisme.fr>, 2013

Furthermore, it seems that in their maps, young residents describe their daily activities/travel in the city (e.g. travel from the faculty to the station, entertainment-related travel (journeys that start from the top end of rue Jean-Jaurès and go through rue de Siam in the direction of the Recouvrance district; travel to and from the port area).

It must be mentioned that these results are very similar to those found in a study using cognitive maps of Brest that was conducted 30 years ago, among 400 university students with quite similar characteristics to our sample (Peron, 1993). The drawn elements with a higher frequency (83% to 30%) in 1993 were as follows (in descending order): the streets rue Jean-Jaurès and rue de Siam, Place de la Liberté, City Hall, the rail and bus stations, Boulevard Clemenceau, Place de Strasbourg, Recouvrance bridge, Port de commerce, and the Quartz Concert Hall.

It was expected that representations of Brest would be concentrated on daily life since the majority of students live in the city to study. For them, Brest represents an important stage in their life story, marked by a separation from their family in order to live by themselves. Respondents were satisfied with this experience, as it enabled them to experience autonomy and to manage their finances and free time.

The life experience of the university student respondents translates into the construction of social representations of Brest that are highly concentrated in the present moment and in their activities, as was the case in the 1993 study (Peron, 1993). Nevertheless, these results do not explain the absence of other important aspects of the city, such as urban history and the major monuments and historical places.

Not many participants referred to any major pre-war monuments in Brest, i.e., the tourist sites/places recommended by the local Tourist Information Office such as Tanguy Tower, the Château, Cours Dajot and the American Naval Monument.

### ***The Brest that is forgotten by new generations***

Previous analyses suggest that Brest is a university city that only offers shopping, movies and nightlife (bars and night clubs). However, any tourist will soon realize that visiting the city is much more than the Recouvrance-Strasbourg Square axis. If we analyze the Tourist Office map (Figure 1), it can be seen that a large part of Brest is not seen in the sketch maps drawn by students. This forgetfulness is even more surprising when it becomes apparent that the “missing” part is the historical heart of the city.

The places corresponding to Old Brest are the Château, the naval port and the naval base (all located on the banks of the River Penfeld), the Recouvrance district and Tanguy Tower, the Siam district (as it corresponds to the old walled city), and the Saint Martin district (not destroyed in the war).

We expected that such places would become a central node in inhabitants’ social representations and city memories, however, the respondents did not mention these sites when asked to identify the most important places in Brest/places they liked to visit. This is also applicable for respondents’ maps of the city.

The Château and Tanguy Tower are rarely mentioned in sketch maps (9 and 2% respectively), despite their historical and architectural importance. Participants explained the importance of the Château by associating it with the National Maritime Museum or by



representing it as “the part of Brest before the war”. Neither the Tanguy Tower nor the Château are among the most liked places.

The naval port is located on the banks of the Penfeld River, but the river is only included in 13% of the drawings. Only two participants said that it was one of the most important places for the city and its inhabitants, and four included it among their favorite places. Penfeld River was never evoked in the word association task and this highlights its minor place in the socio-spatial representations of the city. This outcome is surprising as the River Penfeld runs through the city.

There are conflicting representations for the Recouvrance district: it is known as an entertainment place, but participants also associated it as a disliked place, and it is never cited as one of Brest’s important neighborhoods. Students believe that rue de Siam and the Saint Martin neighborhood (see also rue Jean-Jaurès which runs through this neighborhood) are important for the city of Brest and they are also among the “liked” places of the city. In their explanations, it can be seen that participants only evoke commercial, living and festive characteristics (bars, restaurants and stores) and only make reference to rue de Siam and not the entire neighborhood. No respondents included the American Naval Monument in their maps, nor in their evocations of the city. Cours Dajot was included in only three of the 112 sketches, and Jardin Kennedy in two. These places are part of the walking tours recommended by the tourist office as they are sizeable green areas that provide agreeable surroundings for walking and are aesthetically pleasing.

### **Final discussion: manifestations of social forgetfulness**

The outcomes of the research show that it is the everyday life of participants (university students) that governs the representations of the city, and that few elements form part of a social memory of Brest.

It is difficult to provide accurate explanations or definitions for the forgetfulness of Brest’s history and places related to its past, but it is possible that this “forgetfulness” is related to the participant’s duration of/reason for residence in the city. For example, most participants live in Brest in the week to study and spend the weekend in their home towns located somewhere outside of the city in the Finistère region. The social meaning of Brest is governed by the university and the students’ social life. Results show that participants overlook the major monuments and historical places.

Another possible explanation for this lack of attention or social forgetfulness of the old Brest is related to the city’s current and historical specificities: the extensive military base. Over the centuries, the city has been organized around this base, with focus on its use as a military defense site. The city has experienced two traumatic events: the war that disfigured it and the reconstruction that erased it by burying it under a new 1950’s modernist city that left almost no trace of the original Brest inside the historical center (Siam neighborhood). Some researchers have questioned the city’s reconstruction policy that set out to build a new city with none of the problems of the old and unhealthy one, a city in which the monuments were absent, displaced, or underemphasized (Bienfait, 1976; Galliou, 2007; Le Gallo, 1976, 1992; Le Goïc, 2001).

The urban plans for Brest during its reconstruction were shaped as a space to almost permanently erase the old city, thereby discouraging or preventing its inhabitants, and

particularly its new inhabitants, from thinking about the past. It would appear that this project was also an attempt to forget or to dismiss a very painful and traumatic event for the city and its inhabitants. For instance, our sample of students does not refer to the history of Brest; most likely they are unaware of it. One hypothesis is that they cannot appropriate the city in terms of social memory because its history is not imprinted on its buildings and landscape.

Our research offers interesting clues to theoretical questions. We believe that it contributes to reflection on types of social memory and social forgetfulness, particularly in cases of past traumatic experiences that have led to the destruction and reconstruction of a city's urban space.

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