

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT IN FRANCE BY COGNITIVE MAPPING

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In geography, representations enable an analysis of the way people represent the world, or a part of it, from very specific pieces of information to sometimes imaginary ones. In cognitive geography, the main idea is based on individuals live according to their representations, no matter their truthfulness. Most of the time, representations are comprehended through experienced spaces such as local neighborhood, city, etc. If these representations are then rich and personal, soon they turn common and analogous when dealing with the rest of the world.

The analysis will here focus on representations of a non-experienced territory scene of a conflict since the middle of the 20th century: representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict viewed from France. Foremost, in France, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict arouses a particular interest among media - with almost daily coverage - and among individuals as international events. Then, the study of this conflict through spatial representations proceeds from its very nature: this is a territorial conflict. The inadequacy of one land for two people leads to overlapping territorialities, should they be real or planned and inevitably, the ensuing representations illustrate this complexity.

In France, the Middle East territories constitute for most of the population an "out of practice" space from which they get information mainly through media, but also through education, conversation, etc. Although each individual has its own perception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it seems that, for such kind of non-experienced territory, common images are going to be important.

Thus, this paper aims to determinate collective representations of the conflict by using cognitive maps. Those maps attempt to constitute a representation of people's representations but they should rather be apprehended as a tool to convey geographic knowledge. Usually regarding non-experienced spaces, cognitive mapping work focus on regional or world scale, for example regarding population mobility (Fuller and Chapman, 1974) or subjective divisions of the world (see EuroBroadMap project; Laponce, 2001).

This paper proposes an empirical work with cognitive maps concerning the territory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict thanks to a survey conducted on undergraduates studying geography/history. Participants have been chosen because they seem to constitute introduced people. The survey was carried out during April 2009 on all undergraduates registered in history and geography at the University of Montpellier, 221 participants in all. Two base maps were successively submitted to the students - both of them with the territory's boundaries partly drawn but the second one more detailed. Then a data processing was made by qualitative analysis and to a lesser extent by an analysis with a Geographic Information System.

Results certainly show inadequate and distorted knowledge but above all emphasize the existence of collective representations. This empirical cartography work shows that using mental maps helps, much more than traditional questioning, to get information about non-experienced spaces. Thus, even if we can easily infer a significant lack of knowledge on this kind of issue, it seems important to reveal what people "don't know" but also what they "think they know" and, to a larger extent, the results of this study can be worth thinking over for journalist.