

IMPRESS

Beyond ideological conflict: religion and free-thought in the Belgian medical press (1840-1914)

DURATION
15/04/2017 – 15/04/2021

BUDGET
496.691 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

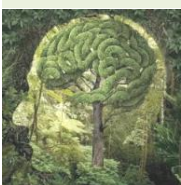
The project will work towards two integrated aims to highlight the scientific potential of 19th-century medical heritage and stimulate future (digital) research. First, by digitizing a corpus of three important Belgian medical journals, issued between 1840 and 1914 (*Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Médecine de Belgique*; *Journal de Médecine, de Chirurgie et de Pharmacologie*; *Journal des Sciences Médicales de Louvain*), the project aims to serve as a test case and methodological model for both the digitization and the digital analysis of historical scientific texts. Secondly, interdisciplinary PhD research into these medical journals will focus on ideological conflict, and more in particular on the role of religion and free-thought in 19th-century medicine. Combining insights and approaches from the fields of medical history, the history of religious and political ideas, and linguistics, the researchers will use text mining and linguistic methods.

In line with the second objective, the project will reconsider the role and the later memory of ideological conflict in 19th-century Belgian medicine. While Belgian political historiography has stressed the fundamental role of ideological conflict in 19th-century society, the role of ideological conflict has hardly been studied within the history of Belgian medicine. The main image which has come to the fore in contemporary memory constructions is an image of the medical profession as an almost homogeneously liberal and anticlerical body, which derived its identity from rather polemical representations of the physician as a modern substitute for the priest. Paradoxically, however, most physicians in 19th-century Belgium were Catholics.



Postcard: Geel - Infirmerie, the central hospital of the state colony, build in 1862

In order to reconsider the position of physicians in the public memory of the ideological conflict, this project will answer two sets of research questions. First, it will study both the clashing ideological views of Catholic and liberal physicians, and their willingness to bypass ideological disagreements within scientific exchange. To answer this question, the research will focus on four medical subfields where ideological difference was clearly at play: mental health, gynecology, family medicine ('médecine de famille') and public health. The second set of research questions concerns professional identity formation and fits in with recent scholarly attention for scientific personae and academic identity. The project will add to this research strand by studying how and when physicians developed both common and ideologically specific professional and/or scholarly identities.



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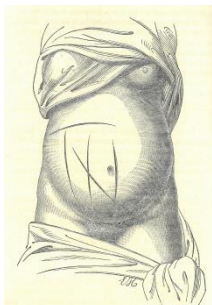


Gent, Hospice Guislain, Dortoir des déments, 1887

The project will apply a set of text mining and digital linguistic tools with a focus on the historically evolving use of concepts, arguments and discursive strategies. Specific computational applications, in particular automatic information retrieval will allow to quickly distillate in the large medical corpus relevant topics and passages for further scrutiny. Further text mining operations will be combined with conventional in-depth hermeneutical analysis of selected passages in an iterative interaction;

The proposed project aims to offer a well-informed historical perspective to actual debates in the fields of public health and bioethics in which religiously and/or philosophically inspired divides are at stake. With the advent of a multicultural and multireligious society, religious-philosophical divides have gained a new prominence. Bioethical questions concerning euthanasia, abortion or the boundaries of medical research arouse controversy. In these debates, memories of the 19th-century 'culture war' continue to play a role. It is therefore important to study this ideological divide in terms which are both historically accurate and accessible to today's citizens who want to orient themselves historically.

To disseminate the research results, the project will ensure that all research data are retrievable, accessible and comprehensible for academic researchers and broader audiences in the long term. The digitized journals will be integrated in BELGICA (KBR Digital Library) and its future thematic dissemination channel dedicated to periodicals (BELGICA Periodicals) where both full text and calendar searches will be made available for the general public. The project will result in two PhD dissertations, a database, a website with an introduction into the used methodologies and the research results, five academic articles and some short written contributions with the most important research findings in journals or newsletters of Belgian heritage organizations and/or bioethical organizations.



Louis Hubert, Cours d'Accouchements, 1869, p. 130

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LINKS

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