

The Left and Flemish Nationalism: Living Apart Together in Belgium

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Only time will tell to what extent the electoral victory of the nationalist New Flemish Alliance [N-VA] in 2010 and the institutional crisis that followed were a turning point in the political emancipation of Flanders. But it is clear that times have changed and the end of the Belgian state is no longer considered a piece of political science fiction. Nevertheless, the Left in Flanders continues to behave as it always has for over a century during which it has defined the demand for greater Flemish independence as a right-wing project that deserves no sympathy from social democrats. Why is that?

Bad Timing

Nation formation as such is not a right-wing project. In the 18th and 19th centuries, when most of the European nations emerged, nationalism was often an emancipating force directed against the Ancien Régime in favour of equal rights for all citizens. In the 20th century, nationalism was one of the driving forces behind decolonisation, directed against the exploitation of non-Western societies.

Nation formation and nationalism must be seen in their historical context. The Czech historian, Miroslav Hroch's model of nationalism offers a framework that throws light on why the Left has not played an active role in Flemish Nationalism. Hroch developed his theory of small nation-formation in the 1960s. Wider academic acclaim followed after an English translation appeared in the 1980s¹ and the validity of his model is now universally accepted. According to Hroch, the Flemish nation can be considered historically as a 'small nation' within the territory of 'large' – i.e. dominant – Belgian nation. For a long time, Flemish language and culture had been subordinated to a dominant francophone Belgian culture. The Flemish movement wanted to change all that and combined its cultural struggle with a campaign to create a greater sense of unity among the Flemish. Its significance and impact has been determined to a large extent by how far it could appeal to the labour movement. Indeed, that will ultimately be the decisive factor in the successful creation, or otherwise, of a Flemish nation.

The degree to which the labour movement commits itself to the goals of the small-nation builders depends on the timing of the political and social changes associated with the collapse of the Ancien Régime and the rise of industrial capitalism. Three stages can be distinguished: *stage 1*, the struggle against the Ancien Régime through civil and social revolution and the rise of industrial capitalism; *stage 2*, the breakthrough of industrial capitalism and the emergence of the working class; *stage 3*, when economic expansion occurs and mass communications become important. The process of national transformation which the devotees of small nations have in mind also has three phases. *Phase A*, when a small group of passionate intellectuals take an interest in the culture of the small nation; *phase B*, when intense nationalist agitation is sustained by associations, periodicals, national congresses etc.; *phase C*, in which the national movement is consolidated and integrates the working

¹ M. Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: a Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, Cambridge; London; New York, 1985.

class. Depending on the time in which the three phases of national transformation develop in relation to the stages of social and political change, different types of national movement will result.

The activists of the Flemish movement had to deal with bad timing. The transition from phase A to B occurred after the industrial and bourgeois revolutions were completed, and the transition from phase B to C happened after the rise of an organised labour movement had taken place in the territory of the dominant nation. According to Hroch, that was why the formation of the small Flemish nation could not be completed and why it remained subordinated to the larger nation.

Labour Movement and Flemish Movement

Hroch's analysis raises the question how the Flemish Movement related to the labour movement and the struggle for social and political rights. The first generation of Flemish 'language lovers' [taalminnaars] as they were called, showed more interest in philology than in the social conditions of the Flemish population. Also after 1840 when the Flemish Movement became politicised – the transition to Hroch's phase B – a deep gulf remained between the demands of the linguistic campaigners and the social needs of the people. The linguistic demands primarily reflected the immediate concerns of the largely lower middle class Flemish activists themselves. In their daily activities as teachers, lecturers, office workers, minor civil servants and clerics they were confronted by a mainly French dominated society and often had 'shop floor' experience of French-speaking competitors who would walk off with the better jobs.

In theory, there were enough points of contact for the Flemish Movement to link the language issue with a package of socio-economic demands. The Belgian economy was developing at different speeds and Wallonia in particular had been able to benefit from industrialisation. This opened up the possibility of giving the language campaign a social dimension that would have made it attractive to the labour movement. The conditions were therefore present for the consolidation of the national movement (phase C) to coincide with the development of the labour movement. However, the petty bourgeois Flemish Movement turned its back on the social struggle. Most of them were Catholic and had strongly conservative and paternalistic views on social issues. They saw their fight for the Flemish language as part of a Catholic programme designed to protect the people from the ideas of the French revolution. The Catholic Flemish movement defined itself as the catalyst of a Flemish social movement and a bulwark against socialism.

When the Belgian Workers Party (BWP), a well-organised socialist party, was founded in 1885 it assumed that it would operate within a Belgian framework in spite of its internationalist programme. It was outspokenly hostile to the middle-class Flemish movement which they criticised for remaining neutral in the struggle for greater social and political rights.

Nevertheless, Flemish socialist workers did identify with Flanders and supported the Flemish movement's demands for 'dutchification'. This was shown by some interesting research by historian Maarten Van Ginderachter.² After the BWP had exacted universal suffrage in 1893, there was increasing interest in Dutch as means of political communication. Partly because of that, the Flemish

² M. Van Ginderachter, *Het rode vaderland. De vergeten communautaire spanningen in het Belgische socialisme voor WO I*, Tiel;Gent, 2005.

Movement at the end of the nineteenth century had grown into a broad, social movement with enough representation to give it political weight. The conditions for integrating the Flemish and labour movements also became more favourable. Antagonism between Flanders and Wallonia was becoming sharper. Little progress was made in granting equal rights to Dutch speakers. Although the official recognition of Dutch as of equal standing to French in 1898 [*Gelijkheidswet*] made it theoretically possible to establish bilingualism throughout Belgium, it encountered fierce resistance from French speakers. A Walloon movement emerged in defence of the French-speaking integrity of Wallonia, which also demanded the retention of bilingualism in Flanders. Active members of the movement in Flanders demanded the right to continue to operate in French as before. They were usually middle management and white collar workers in language-sensitive sectors. The campaign for French language facilities in Flanders and the denial of the same rights to Dutch speakers in Wallonia was seen by the Flemish movement as fundamentally unjust and led to the demand that Flanders should become entirely Dutch-speaking. Because French was still regarded as an essential characteristic of the Belgian nation, that was perceived by the Belgian elites as a threat to the country's unity. This elitist perception was not entirely unfounded. The Flemish Movement's transition from a pressure group wanting linguistic equality to a movement striving for monolingualism within a clearly defined region (Flanders) belonging to the 'Flemish people' was, after all, a major step in the direction of Flemish nationalism (which in the long run might rival that of the Belgian nation). Boundaries, literally and figuratively, have a fundamental significance for the process of national identity. The added territorial dimension put down markers for the Flemish nation and turned the Flemish Movement into a genuinely national movement. However, real consolidation would require it to be integrated with the labour movement.

The power of the people

The territorial element made up only a part of a process of ideological deepening and enrichment. The Flemish Movement evolved from a linguistic movement into a movement with a broad social programme expressed in national terms. The process was influenced by fundamental social changes that provided opportunities as well as dangers for the cause. On the one hand, there was the so-called second industrial revolution which led to the growth of industrial activity in Flanders and the expansion of the service and transport sectors. On the other, there were social and political changes, such as democratisation and the rise of the 'social question' which the pro-Flemish used to link language rights to a socio-economic programme. Discrimination against the Dutch language was given as one reason why Flanders was trailing socio-economically and offered a potential point of contact with the social democrats. However, the opportunity was not taken because the Flemish Movement had an agenda that was aimed explicitly at class reconciliation and social pacification. By removing the social barriers created by language, a future Dutch-speaking elite would contribute to the social integration of the Flemish people. 'Bloodletting', such as the massive outflow of Flemish paupers to the industrial centres in France and Wallonia, had to be stopped in order to maximise the power of the Flemish people, with an eye to future Flemish economic domination within the Belgian state. This vision of class reconciliation within an organic, corporatively structured Flemish community

under elite leadership fitted the existing elite's broader fears of dislocation in the wake of industrialisation, agricultural crisis and democratisation³.

But the Flemish Movement could not simply be reduced to an instrument of class reconciliation. The Flemish programme appealed to the social aspirations of important groups in society who had to confront continually the experience of language inequality. For these groups, the struggle for their own language signified genuine emancipation. Socio-economic developments during the *Belle Époque* ensured that the social appeal of the Flemish Movement was greatly broadened. The second industrial revolution brought an expansion of industrial activity in Flanders and growth in the service and transport sectors. That created a class of Flemish white collar workers who in language-sensitive areas experienced language discrimination on the shop floor as well as competition from immigrant Walloon middle management. This meant that on the eve of the First World War, the Flemish Movement had long ceased to be a network of 'language lovers'. The struggle for the recognition of Dutch had fanned a sense of solidarity among the Flemish who identified themselves with the language. There were also leaders and militants within the BWP who actively gave a Flemish twist to their policies. The pre-war alliance with pro-Flemish liberals and Catholics to make Ghent a Dutch-language university shows that they were even prepared to step outside their ideological differences in order to promote the Flemish Movement. But Flemish (sub)nationalism developed most strongly among the Catholics. In ideological terms they felt most comfortable when intertwining their pro-Flemish feelings with (social) Catholicism, based on a shared belief in class reconciliation.

Here is our blood; where are our rights?

Wars create but they can also destroy nations. In the history of the Belgian nation the First World War provided an important momentum. With the German invasion of 1914, the people of Belgium experienced a major war for the first time in their history. It was a litmus test for Belgian solidarity. Originally the paths of the Flemish Movement and Belgian socialism ran parallel. Both political movements rallied behind the Belgian fatherland both on the front and under occupation. Socialists and Flemish activists alike presumed that a grateful fatherland would meet their political demands. Universal suffrage and a Dutch-speaking Flanders were the least that Belgium owed them. But in both cases, counter-movements developed that broke the national consensus. So-called 'minority socialists' placed the international solidarity of the working class above the war between nations and campaigned for an end to the war. However, their influence was limited and the nomination of the BWP's chairman as a Minister of State in 1914 clinched the 'Sacred Union' and the input of the socialists. Through the influential national Commission for Help and Nourishment [*Hulp- en Voedingscomité*], which had branches in every district, socialist organisations were able, often for the first time, to gain some influence in Flanders.

Within the Flemish Movement, under pressure from the German occupiers, a movement arose that was prepared to break with the Belgian fatherland to achieve Flemish demands. In particular, when Ghent University was made Dutch-speaking in 1916 a number of Flemish activists were persuaded to cross the line. Even on the Front some of the pro-Flemish were radicalised and an anti-Belgian

³ D. Luyten, 'Economie', in: *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Tielt, 1998, pp. 1028-1031.

movement arose demanding 'Home Rule' for Flanders. Both on the front and at home these Flemish radicals formed a small minority. But their impact in the long run was considerable because, unlike the minority socialists in the BWP, they created a permanent break. That was mainly a consequence of the way in which the Belgian political elite reacted to the Flemish challenge. Whereas immediately after the war the BWP was able to obtain universal suffrage and carry out some of its social programme, the Flemish Movement was left empty-handed. Flemish militants who had remained loyal to Belgium, shared the odium of treason. This created a fertile soil in which anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism could flourish. The fate of a group of pro-Flemish soldiers at the Front, trudging through the mud of the Ijzer valley, gave an existential significance to Flemish nationalism. 'Idealistic Flanders' engaged against a Belgium that had dishonoured the 'Flemish sacrifice' in the interests of the French-speakers. 'Here is our blood, where are our rights?' became a powerful and mobilising slogan whereby even convicted collaborators might be exonerated.

Social democracy between Flemish nation-formation and extreme right-wing Flemish nationalism

The implementation of universal suffrage for men and the fact that in government the BWP was able to push through important social legislation, deepened and broadened the identification of the socialist rank and file with the Belgian nation state. But in Flanders, the process was complicated by the Flemish Movement. According to the Leuven historian, Lode Wils, the rejection by the post-war governments of greater equality for Dutch was a fatal blow to the continued loyalty of the Dutch-speaking population to a unitary Belgium. 70% of the war dead had been Flemish, yet they were denied equality.⁴ It generated a pro-Flemish undercurrent among the population which the Belgian centres of power failed to recognise sufficiently.

That Flemish public opinion was in turmoil is illustrated by the fact that in 1928 in an Antwerp by-election, the voters elected a collaborator who had been condemned to death. It not only reflected the bitterness about the continuing inequalities but also showed that Flanders was taking precedence over Belgium. That sentiment particularly affected the Catholic population in Flanders. Flemish heroism at the Front had been bathed in Christian mysticism. The connection between Flemish nation formation and Catholicism was strikingly expressed in the motto: 'All for Flanders – Flanders for Christ' that was placed on the graves of Flemish soldiers who had died at the Front. Lode Wils ascribes an important role to the Flemish Christian democrats who saw in the Flemish nation a mobilising potential for attracting the support of Flemish workers. Phase C of Hroch's model – the consolidation of the national movement – was completed, even though it was limited to the overwhelmingly Catholic population of Flanders. With the backing of the General Christian Workers Union, Flanders in the 1930s saw linguistic equality established by law and Dutch was made obligatory in all the major social domains.

In principle the socialist BWP was in favour of a monolingual Flanders, although for a short time it was prepared to consider Flemish francophones as a historical minority with a right to cultural autonomy.

⁴ L. Wils, *Frans Van Cauwelaert afgewezen door koning Albert I. Een tijdbom onder België*, Antwerpen; Amsterdam, 2003.

This was laid down in the so-called 'Compromise of the Belgians' which francophone and Flemish socialists produced in 1929 on the language question. But in the 1930s a new generation of Flemish socialists developed a more explicitly Flemish profile. In 1937 a Congress of Flemish socialists argued for cultural autonomy, and even in non-cultural matters the Flemish socialists developed different policies from their French-speaking and Walloon comrades. Everything indicated that a process of nation formation was taking place among the socialist rank and file.

The electoral popularity of anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism must also have played a part, but its impact was ambiguous. Flemish nationalism developed into an anti-democratic movement with undisguised sympathy for the Fascist New Order. It strove for a right-wing front against socialism, which it stigmatised as an ally of Communism. In this way it was able to challenge the Catholics not only in their pro-Flemish sympathies but also in their right-wing ideology, leading in 1936 to a split in the Catholic Party along language lines and the creation of a right-wing cartel for the elections of 1938. This further emphasised the fundamental ideological differences between socialism and anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism. While Flemish nationalists linked their dream of nationhood to the horrors of national socialism, the socialists committed themselves in the resistance to an explicit Belgian nationalism. It became a blood-drenched conflict. On both sides, families mourned the premature loss of relatives in the violence of war, either as members of the resistance or as collaborators on the German front or the so-called 'home front'. It created a mutual aversion between the two sides which was perpetuated after the war by the political disagreements over whether the Belgian king should be allowed back on the throne. Leopold III, who had attempted to strike a compromise with Hitler during the occupation, became the subject of a confrontation between Left and Right. But the right-wing Flemish majority of over 70% had to surrender to the left-wing anti-Leopold camp which was quickly branded as 'Walloon'. In that context Flemish nationalism attempted to excuse its national-socialist past as an act of desperation provoked by an anti-Flemish Belgian state. It prevented any serious examination of political conscience and allowed former collaborators to play an important part in post-war Flemish nationalism, which with the Volksunie [Peoples Union, VU] enjoyed an electoral revival after 1960. For many socialists this confirmed their suspicion that the Peoples Union was no more than a party of collaborators.

From unitary BSP to socialists in Flanders⁵

The experience of the Second World War slowed down the process of Flemish nation formation. The injection of Belgian patriotism had raised the prospect of a revived Belgian nation state. Belgian socialism became a buttress of a unitary Belgium. The Belgian Socialist Party (BSP) became a party of government and from within government was able to build up a system of social security. A neo-Keynesian welfare state with an important role for the trade unions and mutual benefit societies was continued within a Belgian framework. Nevertheless, it was not long before inter-community

⁵ Based on G. Van Goethem & W. Pauli, *De droom van een betere wereld. 125 jaar socialistische partij*, Gent: Amsab-ISG; Tijdsbeeld & Pièce Montée, 2010 and G. Vanschoenbeek en H. Defoort, 'Socialistische partij', in: *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Tielt, 1998, pp. 2,777-2,789.

issues were back on the party agenda. This time the impetus came from Wallonia where the Walloon Popular Movement (MPW), a left-wing regional movement, was formed in response to economic developments that saw Flanders enjoy an economic boom while Walloon industry suffered a structural crisis. The MPW demanded Walloon-oriented socio-economic policies. On the Flemish side there was also a revival of regionalism, but mainly in the demand for an administrative level dealing with culture and language. The Belgian Socialist Party (BSP) adjusted to this. Already in the 1960s the Flemish and Walloon federations were holding separate congresses and in 1971 after the first Belgian constitutional reform the party introduced a dual presidency. At the end of the 1970s the Flemish socialists made common cause with the other Flemish parties, a development which the Walloon federations could not accept. In 1978 they set up their own Parti Socialiste (PS) thereby breaking up the BSP. In 1980 the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) was founded. Although the proposal to include the word 'Flemish' in the name was rejected, the identification with Flanders kept raising its head. It was not made easier by the emergence of a new extreme right-wing Flemish-nationalist party, which drained away the SP's supporters with a xenophobic programme directed against Moroccan and Turkish immigrants. The Flemish Bloc [Vlaams Blok] attracted more voters than the SP in the Federal and Flemish elections of 1999. A decade later the Flemish Bloc was in turn overshadowed by another new party, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a successor to the Peoples Union [Volksunie], in one of the biggest electoral upsets in Belgian history. In 2010, N-VA won nearly 30% of the Flemish vote with an anti-Belgian, centre-right programme. Taken together with the Flemish Bloc, over 40% of the Flemish electorate support separatism, while support for the Flemish social democrats has reached an all-time low. The party stands at the crossroads. Should it accept Flemish nation formation and wholeheartedly embrace a Flemish state with a left-wing programme? Or will it become the standard bearer for the reconstruction of Belgian solidarity? If the latter, it will be a long and arduous road.

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