

Sub-state nationalism and the left–right divide: critical junctures in the formation of nationalist labour movements in Belgium*

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ABSTRACT. Despite their similar political agendas, sub-state nationalist movements in the industrialised West align themselves on different positions along the left–right spectrum. Through an analysis of Belgian sub-state nationalist movements, this article proposes an explanation for this phenomenon by focusing on critical junctures. In particular, the focus is on the difference between Walloon and Flemish nationalist labour movements. Walloon nationalism has historically been led by socialist trade unions, while Catholic trade unions form a core part of the Flemish nationalist movement. The article seeks to explain this pattern by analysing the critical political alliances formed during the introduction of universal suffrage. The elections of 1894 established socialists as the dominant force in Wallonia and Catholics as dominant in Flanders. The emerging pillarised social structure ensured the reinforcement of the initial choices.

Introduction

A major subfield of nationalism studies focuses on sub-state nationalist movements in the industrialised West. The cases of Québec, Catalonia, the Basque country, Scotland, Wales, Flanders and Wallonia are often grouped together as leading examples of sub-state nationalist movements in the Western world. There are many similarities between these cases in terms of their external demands for political recognition by the host state and the

* All translations from Dutch and French are the author's. Original texts can be made available upon request. The article was completed while the author was Hoover Research Fellow at the Université Catholique de Louvain. He would like to thank Philippe Van Parijs, André-Paul Frogner, Sophie Weerts, David Robichaud and the anonymous reviewers of the journal for their comments. The author would also like to thank Jeffrey Kopstein, Luc Turgeon and Steve White for their suggestions on an earlier version of this article.

parallel project of internal cultural rejuvenation. But despite almost identical issues facing them, the common discourse of past grievances finds expression in different political colours as sub-state nationalist movements align themselves on different positions along the left–right spectrum. For example, Scottish nationalism is generally seen to have a broad left-wing character (McCrone 1992: 211–45). Similar left-wing tendencies can be observed in Québécois nationalism (McRoberts 1999: 253–8; Milner and Milner 1973) as well as Welsh nationalism (Fevre and Thompson 1999: 3–24; Davies 1989: 18, 91–4). Catalan nationalism, on the other hand, is often interpreted as a Christian Democrat movement on the political right (McRoberts 2001: 68; Conversi 1997: 26–7, 119). An important question, therefore, is how otherwise similar sub-state nationalist movements acquire their varied political colours. In Belgium, Flemish nationalism is on the political right, while Walloon nationalism is on the left. This divide is reflected in the nationalist labour movements as well. The Flemish nationalist labour movement is closely associated with Christian Democracy, while the Walloon nationalist labour movement is a socialist one.

Most studies tend to interpret nationalism as a distinctly modern phenomenon (Newman 1991: 451–78; Smith 1998; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990). This perspective is useful to approach its sub-state variant as well since the course of these nationalist movements tends to run parallel to the emergence of modern mass politics. This is especially the case for nationalist labour movements since they cannot be studied separately from political and economic modernisation. However, the theoretical relationship between modernisation and nationalism is too broad, which still leaves room for fine-tuning in order to explain the positions sub-state nationalist movements occupy on the left–right spectrum of modern politics. Through an analysis of Belgian sub-state nationalist movements, this article seeks to tackle this question by focusing on the formative moment of modern politics. Limiting the analysis to nationalist labour movements allows for a focused comparison of political movements that are almost identical apart from their distinctive left–right attributes. It is argued that the alliances forged at the critical juncture of universal suffrage set the nationalist labour movements on certain paths. The notion of ‘critical juncture’ is explained by James Mahoney in the following terms:

Antecedent historical conditions define a range of options available to actors during a key choice point. This key actor choice point, or what can be called ‘critical juncture’, is characterized by the selection of a particular option (e.g. a specific policy, coalition, or government) from among two or more alternatives. The selection made during the critical juncture is consequential because it leads to the creation of institutional or structural patterns that endure over time. (Mahoney 2001: 6)

Paul Pierson employs a similar point of view in his description of path dependency: ‘Specific patterns of timing and sequence matter. . . Particular courses of action, once introduced, can be virtually impossible to reverse; and

consequently, political development is often punctuated by critical moments or junctures that shape the basic contours of social life' (Pierson 2000: 251).

Path dependency in political science was first explicitly formulated by Sidney Verba in his work on political development (Verba 1971: 308). The current use of the concept, however, follows the trail left by economists who used path dependency to explain the notion of technological lock-in that follows the choices made at critical junctures (David 1985: 332–7; Arthur 1989: 116–31). Its current use in the social sciences tends to stress the importance of the decisions made during crucial turning points and how these choices determine the direction for political processes by foreclosing alternative paths. Path dependency has increasingly become a major analytical tool in comparative historical social science (Mahoney and Rueschmeyer 2003). Ira Katznelson defines this field as 'the enterprise of apprehending, understanding, and accounting for tremendous change and sharp shifts in the direction of human affairs at key junctures' (Katznelson 2003: 273).

The path dependency perspective is not without its critics however. A common criticism contends that deterministic tendencies are inherent in the path dependency mindset (Sabetti 1996: 20). Another criticism concerns the reproduction of past choices. For example, Margaret Levi believes that '[these choices] must be continually reproduced to have the same effects they had in the past' (Levi 1996: 46). A similar point is made by Kathleen Thelen, who argues that the path dependency literature neglects to explain the reproduction of the initial choices over time: 'Where this literature has generally been weaker is in specifying the mechanisms that translate critical junctures into lasting political legacies' (Thelen 1999: 388). However, these criticisms tend to underestimate the impact certain momentous choices can have. The formative moment of modern politics in Belgium was such a fateful juncture that set the two halves of the country on separate tracks of no return. Even after the disappearance of the initial terms characterising the divisions of the late nineteenth century, these divisions have persisted. The formative politicisation of the newly enfranchised masses played a central role in the perpetuation of the pattern. Ensuing pillarisation provided an additional reinforcement mechanism. The following empirical account will show how the important choices made at this critical juncture ensured reproduction over time.

With the introduction of universal male suffrage in 1894, the size of the Belgian electorate increased tenfold from 137,000 to 1,370,000 (Coenen 1998: 101; Dumont 1977: 436). The configuration of the political landscape during this moment when mass politics materialised was a critical turning point shaping the future of both Flemish and Walloon nationalisms. Facing the simultaneous threat of a modernising *jacobin* state, liberalism and socialism, the Catholic Church in Belgium entered mass politics and tried to recruit the support of the newly enfranchised masses. The Church capitalised on class, religion and language divisions in order to combat the anti-clerical alliance of liberals and socialists. Placing itself against French-speaking, liberal-socialist

elites, the Church successfully tapped into Flemish discontent. Subsequently, Flemish nationalism was internalised into the Catholic/secular cleavage of Belgian politics, while the secular left increasingly became associated with French-speakers. Church activism ended up cementing the liberal-socialist alliance.¹ The explanation for the left–right alignment of Walloon and Flemish nationalist movements lies in this critical juncture when modern mass politics in Belgium came of age. By focusing on the choices made by the Catholic Church in Belgium, this article tries to redress Katznelson’s criticism that purposive action and preferences often get neglected in comparative historical social science (Katznelson 2003: 270–301).

The well-known ‘freezing hypothesis’ put forward by Stein Rokkan and Seymour Martin Lipset is a variation of the path dependency theme (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 1–64). Rokkan and Lipset argued that the West European party systems of the 1960s reflected the cleavage structures of around the turn of the century. Their explanation was based on the twin processes of a national revolution and the industrial revolution that altered the face of European politics during this time period. Stein Rokkan continued to expand on the idea of critical junctures in subsequent works (Flora 1999). There is, however, an important difference between the Rokkan and Lipset argument and the one this article pursues. For Rokkan and Lipset, the historical sequence of the two revolutions determined the political cleavages that would prevail until the 1960s. This article credits the choices made by the Catholic Church at a crucial moment rather than a pattern determined by the timing of the Belgian national revolution and the arrival of the industrial revolution. The choices available to the Church were not predetermined, but once made, they led the two nationalist movements on particular historical paths and gave them their ideological colouring along the left–right spectrum.

Language, class, religion and sub-state nationalism in Belgium

The new Belgian state created in 1830 was dominated by a French-speaking elite. Even in Flanders, the northern half of the country where various Dutch dialects were spoken, upper-middle and upper classes were predominantly French-speaking. The expectation at the time of creation was that Belgium would gradually become a French-speaking state (Senelle 1999: 46). The linguistic cleavage, however, was not a politically salient divide in the early decades of the Belgian state. In a political system where only a few had the right to vote, the most salient political division was between the two opposing camps of liberals and Catholics. The overwhelming majority of Belgians were Catholics – at least in nominal terms – including the liberals, but the elites were divided into two political groups. The creation of formal political parties along these lines would come much later, but throughout most of the nineteenth century Belgian politics was divided along the liberal-Catholic axis of French-speaking upper-middle and upper classes. Based on the criteria

of property and education, less than five per cent of the population had voting rights.

For the rest of the population, however, language remained an important social dividing line, and demographics were on the Flemish side. Constituting more than half of the Belgian population, Flemings had the numbers to put brakes on the process of French cultural domination. This was the case not because there was an obstinate Flemish nationalist reaction, but simply because Flemings constituted the overwhelming majority of the uneducated working class and peasantry; and being left out of the secondary education system, they were not accessible for cultural assimilation. Educated middle-class Flemings, on the other hand, assimilated into the French culture which opened up the path towards upward social mobility. While it remained the language of administration and business, even in the predominantly Dutch-speaking cities of Ghent and Antwerp, French failed to become the sole language of Belgium.

In contrast to bilingual Flanders, Wallonia was unilingually francophone. Flanders not only provided the Belgian middle classes with new members, but it also exported labour to the industrialised southern half of the country. Many Flemish working-class families who moved south seeking employment in Wallonia assimilated into the francophone culture. During most of the nineteenth century there was a continuous population flow to the capital Brussels and the industrial centres of Wallonia. Dutch language thus came to be identified with the small farmers of Flanders and the poor migrant workers in the industrial centres (Fonteyn 1997).

Starting with the late nineteenth century, however, the process of the assimilation of middle-class Flemings into French would first halt and then reverse. The turn of the century witnessed a burgeoning Flemish nationalist movement seeking to maintain the linguistic distinctiveness of Flanders. But this linguistic nationalism was, ironically, a by-product of the political involvement of the Catholic Church which had initially tried to discourage the use of Dutch fearing that it would open up avenues for Calvinism to infiltrate the southern Low Countries. The emergence of modern mass politics during the closing decades of the nineteenth century altered the political landscape and led to strategic political realignments. The expansion of universal suffrage was a critical juncture where the face of future Belgian politics would crystallise.

Industrialisation and new political ideologies had begun to challenge the insular and elitist political system of the Belgian state around the mid-nineteenth century. Industrialisation, accompanied by urbanisation, was transforming the social fabric. The Church was losing its social dominance over the lower classes as the displaced working class was increasingly becoming receptive to socialist ideas that provided answers to its pressing concerns. Meanwhile, the urban bourgeoisie had already embraced the secular teachings of liberalism and republicanism. It was a time of heightened political activity as electoral franchise steadily expanded to all social groups.

Universal male suffrage seemed imminent. The Belgian Catholic clergy feared that they were losing their constituency, yet the Vatican was still forbidding Catholics from engaging in politics. Encyclical letters, like the *Quanta Cura* of 1864, were asking devout Catholics to boycott godless democratic politics. But this was only helping the liberals and socialists to proselytise the newly enfranchised groups into their secular and free-thinking creeds.

Belgium was the first continental European country to undergo industrialisation, experiencing all the horrors associated with early industrialisation. The general de-christianisation of the working classes went parallel to, but was separate from, the ideological anti-clericalism of the liberals and socialists.² However, in many cases it created an environment conducive to ideas criticising the Catholic Church for its regressive social teachings. The plight of the working classes led the burgeoning socialist movement to seek measures to tackle the problems. The socialist labour movement, which would later unify under the Belgian Labour Party (*Parti ouvrier Belge/Belgische Werkliedenpartij*), established workers' associations, mutual aid societies which provided health care to their members, various insurance schemes and pension systems. The strength of the socialist movement and its staunchly anti-clerical stance greatly worried the Catholic Church. The Church was similarly sceptical of the modernist leanings of the Liberal Party.

Between 1848 and 1884 the Liberal Party dominated Belgium. Liberals mostly ruled on their own, sharing power between the more conservative *doctrinaire* and the radical/progressive wings, although the 1855–57 and 1870–78 governments included Catholic members. In a political system where only a small percentage of property owners could vote, the Liberal Party lacked the mass support to implement its modernist agenda. However, Liberals found an ally in the socialist movement which had its origins in the radical/progressive wing of the Liberal Party. The first reflection of this alliance was their joint support for civil burials through the Rationalist Burial Societies (*Sociétés Rationalistes Funéraires*). Until then free-thinkers (*libré penseur*) used to be buried in the so-called 'dog pits' (*trou de chien*) of cemeteries together with suicide victims and criminals: 'Yet on many occasions there was cooperation between the two wings of the anticlerical movement, that is to say, between the proletarian republican and socialist burial societies, and the more moderate, bourgeois, liberal societies and Freemasonry' (Kittel 1962: 642).

A number of free-thinking societies brought liberals and socialists together. On 21 August 1854, one of the most important anti-clerical associations, 'Liberation' (*L'Affranchisement*), was set up in Brussels. According to Jules Louis:

[L'Affranchisement] recruited its members mostly from the labour aristocracy, but one also came across radical intellectuals from the lower middle class and the middle class, French exiles, victims of the Napoleonic coup d'état of December the 2nd, radical and Proudhonian students from the [secular] Free University of Brussels, and young progressive members of the bourgeoisie. (Louis 1989: 35)

Another influential anti-clerical association was 'Solidarity' (*Les Solidaires*), set up on 29 July 1857. In 1860 *Les Solidaires* became a more radical association under the name of 'The People: Association of Militant Democracy' (*Le Peuple: Association de Démocratie Militante*). In the meantime, the Belgian Masonic Lodges decided to openly join the ranks of the anti-clerical alliance in 1854. On 19 January 1863 the association 'Free Thinkers' (*La Libre Pensée*) was formed which would later become one of the most influential anti-clerical organisations in Belgium. The following year witnessed the creation (on 26 December) of the 'Education League' (*Ligue de l'Enseignement*) to campaign for secular public education. On 13 January 1875, radical elements from *L'Affranchisement* formed the uncompromising 'Cosmopolitans' (*Les Cosmopolitaines*). According to Els Witte, 250 such anti-clerical associations were formed in Belgium during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century mostly in the Walloon provinces of Hainaut, Brabant and Liège (Witte 1982: 46). These free-thinking societies which brought the growing socialist movement and the liberals together were dominated by French-speakers. Within this alliance, socialists turned out to be a much more potent political force than the liberals as the franchise was extended to the lower classes. In turn, the socialist labour movement further radicalised the stand of the anti-clerical alliance:

The labour movement acquired its anti-religious character through *L'Affranchisement* and *Les Solidaires*. The anti-religious sentiment, which went much beyond the traditional anti-clerical struggle against the power of the Church in public life, for various reasons grew into a characteristic of the radical labour movement. (Daelemans et al. 1983: 139)

The 5 October 1858 edition of the socialist newspaper *Le Prolétaire* displays this anti-religious radicalism: 'Religion is an immoral, monstrous, anti-human institution created by rascals to exploit imbeciles; it is the rejection of everything that is great and everything that is just. Religions are the cover for all vices and crimes' (in Puissant 1988: 139). The following comment by the future Minister of Education of Walthère Frère-Orban's cabinet, Pieter Van Humbeek, in 1864 is an indication that similar views were held by the liberals: 'There is a corpse in the world of progress blocking the road. That corpse of the past, to call it by its name, is Catholicism' (quoted in Louis 1989: 39).

As the first Belgian Minister of Education, Van Humbeek replaced the 1842 law on primary education with a new system that introduced full secularisation. In response, the Church urged Catholics to boycott public schools and send their children to Church-controlled free schools. The ensuing tension between free-thinkers and Catholics led to a so-called school war (*guerre scolaire/schoolstrijd*). Catholics went on the defensive and built an alternative educational system to that of the state. The school war lasted from 1879 to 1884, deepening the already existing divisions between the two sides. According to its members, the anti-clerical alliance of liberals and socialists represented the side of liberty and modern science: 'Free-thinkers proclaim

free reasoning against religious authority, independence of men against the despotism of the state and the Church, the solidarity of peoples against alliances of princes and priests, free schools against education by clergy, law against privilege' (Arnould 1870: 14).

In nineteenth century Belgium, this alliance of the left was almost exclusively French-speaking. As we have seen before, the urban middle classes that provided the Liberal Party its constituency, tended to be French-speakers. The core of the industrial working class, on the other hand, was situated in the valleys of French-speaking Wallonia along the rivers Sambre and Meuse where the booming metallurgical industry was situated. In addition, republican ideas from France were accessible to Belgian francophones but for Flemings no similar literature was available. In the meantime, thousands of French republicans and socialists had sought refuge in Belgium after Louis Napoleon's coup, adding numbers to the anti-clerical camp (Kittel 1961: 424). Belgium would continue to be the first destination for radical republicans fleeing the Second Empire in France (Lalouette 1997: 30–1; Lory 1979: 303). In addition to numerous French expatriates, socialist and liberal elites of Belgium came almost exclusively from the francophone middle classes and campaigned in French.³ French was thus the language of the anti-clerical front. This linguistic division would be the basis for the Catholic Church to wage its defensive war against the secular tide.

For a long time the Church had refrained from political activism. In fact, the Vatican had continuously prohibited Catholics from taking part in liberal democratic politics. The papal encyclical *Quanta Cura* and the accompanying *Syllabus Errorum* of 1864 had even condemned liberalism and democracy across the board. Most Catholics, however, were aware that action at the political level was necessary to check the anti-clerical movement sweeping through Europe. In 1863, 1864 and 1867, three Catholic congresses were held in Mechelen, the seat of the Belgian Episcopate. The Church decided to support the formation of an anti-socialist Catholic workers' movement (De Maeyer 1991: 20). This resulted in the formation of the Union of Workers' Organisations (*Fédération des oeuvres ouvrières/Verbond der Volkswerken*) in 1867. The name was changed to the Union of Catholic Workers' Societies the following year (*Fédération des Sociétés Ouvrières Catholique Belge/Verbond der Werkmanskringen*). Three large Catholic groups joined forces as the Catholic Party in 1884 (*Federatie der Kiesverenigingen, Bond der Katholieke Kringen*, and *Fédération des Cercles Catholiques et des Associations Conservatrice*), but this was still not a truly mass party. The Belgian People's Union (*De Belgische Volksbond/La Ligue Démocratique Belge*) formed in 1891 played a more important role in mobilising a Christian mass movement.⁴ Such political activism was supported by the new Pope Leo XIII. The papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 15 May 1891 allowed the Catholic Church to engage in political activity in the era of modern mass politics. One of the main targets was to offset the socialist gains among the working classes. After criticising the deplorable conditions the workers had to endure, *Rerum Novarum* called

for the creation of Christian workers' associations in response to the anti-clerical socialist trade unions:

Under these circumstances Christian workingmen must do one of two things: either join associations in which their religion will be exposed to peril, or form associations among themselves – unite their forces and shake off courageously the yoke of so unrighteous and intolerable an oppression. (reproduced in Freemantle 1956: 191)

Under the guidance of *Rerum Novarum*, the Belgian Catholic Church actively encouraged an emerging Catholic labour movement to carry out recruiting activity. Their efforts mirrored the actions of the socialist trade unions. Mutual aid societies, insurance schemes and pension plans were set up for the workers. A number of Christian trade unions were formed which would later be united under the 'General Association of Christian Trade Unions' (*Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond*). But socialists were ahead in the game and they had already made considerable progress in expanding their membership. The workers of Wallonia's metallurgical industries had embraced socialism *en masse*.⁵ Socialists had made some inroads in Flanders as well, particularly in Ghent and Antwerp, but according to Emmanuel Gerard and Paul Wynants: 'due to its very apparent connection to free-thinking and its foundations in the Walloon and francophone culture, socialism could not permeate the Catholic dominated Flemish movement' (Gerard and Wynants 1994: 359). The textile industry workers of small Flemish towns, and the farmers and agricultural workers of the devout north were alienated by the anti-clericalism of French-speaking liberals and socialists. The early stage of industrialisation was ripe for the Catholic labour movement in Flanders. Working-class discontent and Catholic piety were thus combined. The third leg of the Catholic labour movement was the Dutch language (Deprez 1999: 139). In its attempt to counter the growth of anti-clerical liberalism and atheistic socialism, the Catholic labour movement endorsed a mild form of Flemish nationalism. As Strikwerda puts it:

Catholic unions used one other tactic to win workers to their cause: that of linguistic nationalism. The Catholics specifically recruited Flemish workers as a linguistic group oppressed by the French-speaking upper class. By contrast, socialist leaders in Brussels rarely used Dutch, and socialists in both Ghent and Brussels almost never appealed to the Flemish workers' linguistic grievances. (Strikwerda 1988: 355)⁶

There were some additional factors which helped the Catholic labour movement in Flanders. In addition to the linguistic barrier, the nature of industry in the northern half of the country did not create an environment convenient for socialist ideas. The main industry of Flanders, textiles, did not come with the by-product of urbanisation and population displacement as was the case in Wallonia. Metallurgical industry in the south had produced new working-class neighbourhoods for the migrant workers in Charleroi, La Louvière, Mons, Verviers, Seraing and Liège. But the textile industry was spread over Flanders and did not require urban concentration. In addition, the textile industry developed in Flanders at a later time compared to the south of the

country. By that time, the completion of an extensive railway network and special train passes for workers allowed Flemings to continue to live in the small towns dotting the Flemish landscape and commute to the textile mills. This led the Catholic Church to retain influence over its parishioners. In parallel to the recruiting effort among the working classes, the Catholic Farmers' Union (*Boerenbond*) was set up in 1890 to bring devout Flemish farmers together. But even the Flemish cities became strongholds of the Catholic labour movement. Lode Wils notes the support the movement had in the two largest Flemish cities: 'The strong connection between the Flemish movement and Catholic opinion in Antwerp and even more in Ghent led to the emergence of a labour movement in the third quarter of the nineteenth century which found its voice in the Christian workers' movement' (Wils 1991: 37). According to Paul Gérin: 'All this together explains the relative power of Christian trade unionism in Flanders in comparison to Wallonia: the "Flemish-minded" leadership of Christian trade unionism and a certain interconnectedness between the Christian workers movement and the Flemish movement' (Gérin 1994: 113). The liberal/socialist alliance of the time was aware of the strong links between the Flemish movement and Christian trade unions. The 1878 'handbook' of Belgian liberalism explains the conservatism of Flanders by the linguistic isolation and the part the Church played in fostering this division:

The Walloon population of our country and the upper classes in Flanders have managed to avoid this type of Catholic activism because they speak French, and as a consequence, they have access to the liberal ideas presented to the world by eighteenth century French literature and the revolution of 1789. (Voituron 1878: 78)

Ultimately, the Catholic labour movement established a strong foothold in Flanders by consciously employing the Dutch-language in an effort to win over Flemings. In the course of the process towards mass politics, Catholicism and Flemish nationalism became intertwined. Dobbelaere and Voyé explain higher Church attendance in Flanders by stressing this interconnection: '[Higher Church attendance is] accounted for by Flanders' relatively later industrial development and the fact that the lower clergy was very supportive of the Flemish cause against the Belgian establishment' (Dobbelaere and Voyé 1990: 3). In the end, the strategic choices made by the Church paid off. The elections of 14 October 1894, held under universal male suffrage and multiple franchise, produced a resounding victory for the Catholic Party. Of the 72 seats Flanders was allocated, 71 went to Catholic deputies and one seat went to the Social Christian candidate Daens. Francophone Belgium, on the other hand, provided the opposition with its seats. Of the 62 seats allocated to Wallonia, 48 went to the Socialist-Liberal alliance. As two prominent leaders of the Belgian Labour Party noted at the time: 'Following the elections of 1894, a very large part of industrial Wallonia, with its coal industry, its glassworks, its metallurgical industry, its factories and its quarries, seems to have oriented decidedly towards socialism' (Destrée and Vandervelde 1898:

208). This was also the formative moment binding socialism and Walloon identity, a point noted by Pierre Gillis: 'The emergence of Walloon national sentiment is inextricably linked to the affirmation of being part of the workers' movement' (Gillis 1998: 371). The continuity of this bifurcation was cemented by the social pillars set up by these opposing world-views (Huysse 1970: 141–3). Once in place, these pillars managed to reproduce themselves over time by performing lay functions in society. Politically affiliated newspapers, sports clubs, co-operatives, social clubs, mutual aid societies for insurance, even bakeries and pharmacies, ensured continuity.

In sum, choices made by the Belgian clergy during the late nineteenth century ended up giving the Flemish nationalist project a Christian Democrat colouring. The expansion of suffrage was a key formative moment that shaped the future of Belgian politics. The process towards mass politics forced the Church to take drastic measures in order to hold back the flow of anti-clericalism. The Catholic Church feared that the socialist movement might give the secular cause led by the liberals the vital mass support it needed. Alarmed by this threat, the Catholic clergy decided to take an active role in Belgian politics. In due course, Flemish nationalism was incorporated into the Catholic labour movement in order to win over the Flemish lower classes. By championing the cause of Catholic Flanders during a time of industrialisation and the expansion of political suffrage, the Church gave the nationalist project its right-wing character. Be that as it may, Flemish nationalism was not invented by the Catholic labour movement. The Catholic labour movement only internalised elements of Flemish nationalism and provided the numbers necessary to turn it into a broader social movement, but Flemish nationalism was already making an appearance on the national political scene when the Church decided to use linguistic nationalism for its own ends. In fact, in its early stages, Flemish nationalism was espoused by the anti-clerical and liberal *flamingants* (Witte and Craeybeckx 1987: 94). The alliance of Christian Democracy and Flemish nationalism was only cemented during the late nineteenth century as socialist and liberal Flemish nationalists were increasingly marginalised. In other words, the course of Flemish nationalism was initially separate from political Catholicism although its mass support would later come from the Catholic pillar and dominate the movement.

By the turn of the century, the rift between the two communities had hardened to the extent that the Walloon socialist leader, Jules Destrée, would write to King Albert an open letter on the divisions in 1912: 'Sire, let me tell you the truth, the great and horrifying truth; there are no Belgians . . . You rein over two peoples. In Belgium, there are Walloons and Flemish; there are no Belgians' (Destrée 1912). World War I was an important catalyst for Flemish nationalism. During the war the Belgian army, cornered in the southwest flatlands of the country, suffered heavy losses. The officer corps was exclusively French-speaking while eighty per cent of front-line soldiers were Dutch-speaking Flemings (Joye and Lewin 1967: 196). Thousands of

Flemish soldiers died on the banks of the river Yser fighting the Germans without understanding what the French-speaking officers ordered them to do. Many Flemish soldiers found solace in a mix of Catholic mysticism and Flemish nationalism. Based on the poems of Cyril Verschaeve, the soldiers began to inscribe *Alles voor Vlaanderen, Vlaanderen voor Kristus* (AVV-VVK; Everything for Flanders, Flanders for Christ) on the gravestones of their fallen comrades. In 1921, a collection of Flemish groups under the banner of the Catholic Union of Nationalists (*Katholieke Verbond van Nationalisten*) began an annual pilgrimage to Yser. In 1930, a monument proclaiming *Alles voor Vlaanderen, Vlaanderen voor Kristus* (AVV-VVK) was erected on the battlefield in Dixmude on the banks of the Yser to honour the slain. The decision undertaken by the Catholic Church decades before to incorporate Flemish nationalism into the agenda of the Christian labour movement had given nationalism a Christian character (Erk 2003a). This was all the more pertinent because the francophone establishment against which they had directed their claims for cultural and political redistribution was secular and bourgeois. Walloon Christian Democrats were first in line to lose from this rift. The following excerpt from an article written in 1936 shows the discomfort within Catholic francophone circles:

It is unfortunate that present circumstances lead francophone Catholics to oppose the Flemish movement as an adversary grasping for conquest; while it is also unfortunate that the same circumstances present a barrier to the Flemish movement in developing the Catholic Party in Wallonia and Brussels. The future of Catholicism in Belgium will be tragic if Catholic proves to be synonymous with Flemish. (Gérin 1936)

In 1936 leading members of the Catholic Party established a separate Catholic Flemish People's Party (*Katholieke Vlaamse Volkspartij*) committed to the Flemish cause. In the interwar years, Flemish nationalism produced a number of far-right offshoots. These groups would later collaborate with the Germans during World War II. Following liberation, a bitter retribution was unleashed against collaborators. Many Flemish nationalists were arrested, tried and imprisoned. Meanwhile, Flemish Christian Democrats decided to rename the Catholic Party the Christian People's Party (CVP; *Christelijke Volkspartij*). At a time when hardline Flemish nationalism was discredited, Christian Democrats became the sole voice of Flemish nationalism. The first major political conflict of post-war Belgium was over the return of Leopold III to the throne. Incensed by his feeble wartime record, francophones strongly opposed his return. The remarks made by the leader of the socialist trade union FGTB (*Fédération générale du travail de Belgique*) in Charleroi, Arthur Gailly, is a good example of the prevailing mood in francophone Belgium:

In this battle, the Walloon people are ready to withdraw to Wallonia, their true homeland . . . Wallonia red [socialist] and blue [liberal], the capital red and blue, will never submit to black [Christian democrat] Flanders. Leopold will never become the king of the Walloons, not ever of the workers. (in *La Wallonie Libre*, 8 August 1950, cited in Moreau 1984: 61)

In a referendum seventy-two per cent of Flemings voted for his return but due to francophone opposition, Leopold III was forced to abdicate in favour of his son Baudouin. Once again conservative Flemings felt marginalised by the francophone liberal-socialist alliance. The second major conflict post-war Belgium faced was once again over education. In 1955 the Education Minister of the Van Acker Liberal-Socialist coalition government, Léo Collard, introduced a comprehensive education reform increasing the public school network at the expense of independent Catholic schools. Catholic protests brought the country to a standstill as both sides faced one another in the second school war. Flemings constituted the bulk of the Catholic camp while francophones led the anti-clerical alliance. After extensive rounds of negotiations, on 20 November 1958 a compromise was reached and an agreement was signed between the three traditional parties and the Catholic Church, which would become law on 29 May 1959 as the school peace (*pacte scolaire/schoolpact*).

Following the school peace, religion began to lose the political centrality it previously enjoyed. Political parties began to cross confessional lines in their appeal to voters. In 1961, Liberals changed their name to the Party of Liberty and Progress (*Partij van Vrijheid en Vooruitgang/Parti de la Liberté et du Progrés*) and officially dropped anti-clericalism from the party programme. Settlement of the religious division helped bring the linguistic issue to the forefront of Belgian politics (Erk 2003b: 208). The post-war years also witnessed the socio-economic transformation of Belgium. A country once characterised by francophone domination over the numerically greater but rural and underdeveloped Flemings witnessed the rapid economic growth of Flanders while Wallonia's traditional industries faced decline. The Walloon nationalist movement accordingly adopted demands from the centre different from what the Flemings were after:

The federalist demand does not therefore rely on cultural injustice as it is the case with the Flemish movement, but of course on socioeconomic injustice. The regional conscience in Wallonia is thus firmly anchored in an economic 'class' consciousness and not in a cultural consciousness of the 'people' as in Flanders. (Van Dam 1998: 81)

Francophones were no longer reacting to Flemish nationalism, but they were now taking the initiative. Liègeois socialist trade union leader André Renard was the leading voice of Walloon discontent at the time. Before the Walloon National Congress on 27 March 1950 Renard stated:

If we want to bring the working class into the struggle they would want to know what they are fighting for. Federalism yes, but with a recognition of the working class. We want the liberty of Wallonia but also our liberation as a social class. In a free Wallonia, we want economic democracy and social democracy. (in Leton and Miroir 1999: 63)

In 1960 the government introduced austerity measures to deal with the economic difficulties that Belgium was facing after the loss of Congo. The so-called Unity Law (*Einheidswet*) included increases in taxes and cuts in social services. Walloon-dominated socialist trade unions called for a general

strike, but the mainly Flemish Catholic trade unions did not join. During the strike, the francophone trade unions became openly hostile towards what they labelled the clerical Flemish camp. An example is the declaration made by the regional coordination committee of the francophone FGTB: 'Based on its support among the Flemish people, the Christian Democrat Party is threatening to turn Belgium into a clerical, Flemish, conservative hegemony' (FGTB 1961). The general strike ended up turning the winter of 1960–1 into a violent one with riots engulfing Wallonia and Brussels. A compromise was reached during late January, but the strike ended up accentuating the polarisation of the country between francophones and Flemings. The strikes also led to the emergence of a Walloon separatist movement, *Mouvement Populaire Wallon*, under the leadership of André Renard (Renard 1961). His proclamation at a Walloon nationalist meeting in Charleroi on 17 November 1960 indicates how intertwined socialism and Walloon nationalism were: 'I am a socialist and a Walloon at the same time and I stand for Walloon positions because they are socialist' (in Moreau 1984: 119).

In 1964 the Democratic Front of Francophones (FDF; *Le Front démocratique des Francophones*) was created with the aim to defend the rights of the Brussels francophones. It became the strongest party in the capital between the years 1971 and 1981. Meanwhile the Walloon Union (RW; *Rassemblement Wallon*) was created in 1968, campaigning to protect Wallonia's rights at a time when the Walloons were becoming disillusioned with the ability of the Socialist Party to defend their rights. The RW-FDF alliance became the main voice of francophone reaction to Flemish nationalism, but politically RW was closer to the socialist and FDF was closer to the liberal pillars. RW became the second party in Wallonia in 1971; however, it gradually blended into the Socialist Party and disappeared from the political scene in 1985. FDF, on the other hand, allied with the renamed Liberal Reform Party PRL (*Parti Réformateur Libéral*) in 1979 became a partner in the francophone liberal pillar. The party is still part of the francophone liberal alliance.

In the north of the country, Flemish nationalism was no longer within the monopoly of the Christian Democrat CVP. The People's Union (VU; *Volksunie*), which had started off as the Christian Flemish People's Union (*Christelijke Vlaamse Volksunie*) in 1954, became a strong advocate of federalisation. In 1977, hardliners left the *Volksunie* over concessions given to francophones in Brussels and the Flemish Brabant and formed a party on the far-right fringe of Flemish nationalism under the name of *Vlaams Blok* (recently renamed *Vlaams Belang*) combining anti-foreigner sentiments with anti-Belgian separatism (Erk 2005).

Wallonia on the left, Flanders on the right

As the preceding historical analysis shows, the defining moment when modern Belgian politics congealed carries the answers to the present day position of

Flemish and Walloon nationalist movements on the left – right spectrum. It has to be noted, however, that Walloon nationalism remained much weaker than its Flemish counterpart throughout much of Belgian history. During the nineteenth century, French speakers in Belgium were dispersed throughout the country without much internal cohesiveness. In addition to the inhabitants of Wallonia, middle and upper classes throughout Flanders spoke French, and Brussels had a French-speaking population. French-speaking middle classes in Flanders have since disappeared, French-speaking upper classes in Antwerp and Ghent, on the other hand, are too small to warrant attention. But Wallonia and Brussels continue to pool their resources in a francophone partnership. As a French-speaking enclave within Flanders, residents of Brussels have a somewhat separate Bruxellois identity, albeit less consolidated as a ‘national’ identity than that of Walloons and Flemings.

Walloon nationalism is probably best described as a regional movement mobilised around a linguistic core that has been dominated by its most powerful subgroup, the socialist trade unions (Erk 2002: 504–5). In 1992 the Belgian weekly newsmagazine *Le Vif/L'Express* had a special edition on Wallonia where they asked Walloons what they believed characterised their region. Seventy-seven per cent of the respondents stated the labour strikes to be the key determinant of Wallonia's identity.⁷ The socialist trade union FGTP dominates Wallonia. The largest mutual insurance society is a socialist one (*L'Union nationale des mutualité socialistes*). In addition, the socialist pillar has many affiliated consumer co-operatives. Walloon national identity is thus inseparable from the socialist pillar. In many ways, the French-Belgian, and in particular the Walloon identity, started off as a defensive reaction to the onslaught of Flemish nationalism, but it has since acquired its own dynamic. The Socialist Party is the strongest party in Wallonia and Walloon nationalism finds its voice through the socialist pillar. The 1980s witnessed the birth of a strong environmentalist movement in Belgium. The francophone green party, *parti écologiste (Ecolo)*, has since emerged as a strong player in the political scene. Despite their disagreements over the future of Walloon industries, greens and socialists are bound together by the same left-wing progressive discourse and the various auxiliary associations of the socialist pillar.

Francophone liberals have changed a lot since the nineteenth century. Especially after the settlement of the religious conflict in 1958, they have toned down their anti-clerical radicalism. The party tried to reinvent itself as a neo-liberal party committed to the market economy during the 1960s. In due course, they have come to be seen as a party of the centre-right. In 1998 the liberal FDF-PRL alliance joined forces with the Citizens Movement for Change (MCC; *le Mouvement des citoyens pour le changement*). In 2002, the alliance was renamed the Reformist Movement (*Mouvement Réformateur*; MR), but they are colloquially referred to as the liberals. Between the liberals and socialists, the influential Centre for Secular Action (*Centre d'action laïque*), which functions as a political forum for Walloon nationalism, forms a strong link.⁸

Until the 13 June 1999 elections, Christian Democrats dominated Flemish politics. The party recently changed its name to Christian Democrat and Flemish (CD&V; *Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams*). Under different names, the political party of the Catholic pillar has been in government in all but six years between 1884 and 1999. The strength of Christian Democracy in Flanders is a much broader phenomenon than a political party however. Various Christian trade unions are united under the General Association of Christian Unions (*Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond*), in addition to the Christian Labour Union (*Algemeen Christelijk Werkersverbond*).⁹ The powerful farm lobby *Boerenbond* plays a big role in Flemish Christian Democrat politics as well as the Christian Union of the Middle Classes (*Het Nationaal Christelijk Middenstandverbond*). The Union of Christian Employers (*Verbond van Christelijke Werkgevers en Kadern*) is also a part of the Catholic pillar that dominates Flanders. The Christian Democrat mutual insurance company (*De Landsbond der Christelijke Mutualiteiten*) is the largest in Flanders and in cultural affairs the arm of the Catholic pillar is the ubiquitous *Davidfonds*. Confessional Catholic schools prevail in primary and secondary education and are managed by the Flemish Secretariat for Catholic Education (*Vlaams Secretariat van het Katholieke Onderwijs*). Christian Democrat newspapers have control of the Flemish press as well. Five of the seven major newspapers in Flanders (*De Standaard*, *Het Volk*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, *Het Belang van Limburg* and *Het Nieuwsblad*) have Christian Democrat editorial policies. The remaining two, *Het Laatse Nieuws* and *De Morgen*, represent neo-liberal and left/progressive views, respectively.

To sum up, the fateful year of 1894 when universal suffrage was introduced carries the key to understanding contemporary Belgian politics. As a result of the choices made by the Catholic Church during the expansion of suffrage, Flemish nationalism and Christian Democracy became intertwined, while French became the language of the modernist/secular world-view. In other parts of Europe, the choices made during the emergence of modern mass politics did not turn out to be as sticky as is the case in Belgium. Political issues and ideological alliances have proven to be more malleable in other Catholic countries, especially as the main religious/ideological left–right axis was joined by a socio-economic left–right axis in the twentieth century. Alliances on the political left between liberals and socialists lost their centrality in Italy, France and Austria in the second half of twentieth century. But in the Belgian case, language had set the world-views on paths of no return. Thus Walloon nationalism is on the left, Flemish nationalism is on the right.

Notes

1 According to Nathalie Schiffino this had in fact started with the involvement of the Church in the 1878 elections which incensed the liberals and the growing radical socialist wing within the party (Schiffino 2003: 50).

2 For details of the de-christianisation of the population, see Witte and Craeybeckx (1987: 134).

3 According to Patrick Pasture, leading socialist leaders like Jules Destrée and Emile Vandervelde were indifferent to Flemish concerns (Pasture 1998: 110).

4 It is interesting to note that the names of these institutions are different in French and Dutch. This might be due to the different constituency the Catholic movement had across the linguistic divide. In Wallonia, where the socialists had a strong base, the francophone support for Christian causes tended to be more upper class, while there was a more conscious attempt to appeal to a broader constituency in Flanders. According to Jan De Maeyer, the Belgian People's Union was visibly stronger in Flanders than in Wallonia (De Maeyer 1991: 51).

5 The strength of anti-clericalism in Wallonia was duly noted by Catholic politicians of the time. For example see Verhaegen (1906: 310).

6 In his masterful three volume study on the Flemish Movement, Lode Wils also points to the strong interconnection between Christian Democracy and Flemish nationalism (Wils 1985: 145–155).

7 *Le Vif/L'Express*, 10–16 April 1992, results reproduced in Kesteloot (1997: 66). The role strikes have played in Walloon identity is also the topic of a collective effort by Bruwier *et al.* (1990).

8 Secularism still plays a strong role for francophone socialists. For example, see the recent work by the leader of the Francophone Socialist party, Elio Di Rupo (2003: 159).

9 Patrick Pasture shows the strong relationship between the contemporary Christian Labour movement and Flemish nationalism (Pasture 1992: 276–277).

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