

***Shifting Ethnic Boundaries in Post-war Brussels* John Lary**

I. Introduction

In *Shifting Ethnic Boundaries in Post-war Brussels*, I examine the linguistic politics of post-war Belgium and the impact that the arrival of immigrants had on this divide. Belgian scholars have written substantially on issues of immigration and on language politics (such as Anne Morelli's *Histoire des étrangers et de l'immigration en Belgique*, 2004 or the influential dossiers published by the *Centre de Recherche et d'Information Socio-Politiques*, CRISP, on Flemish-Walloon relations). However, the topics are generally treated as unrelated to one another. Within American scholarship, there is almost no treatment of either issue.

My thesis aims to demonstrate one cannot understand postwar Belgian, or even European, identity formation and contestations without examining the impact of 'new' immigrants on nationalist debates. More specifically, I argue that immigration and Flemish nationalism are competing reflections of the same new political reality, the power of identity politics in forming anti-state cleavages in Belgium. My thesis will analyze very closely how each respective group achieved a voice, with stress on the similarities of their appeals and arguments.

The history of Flemish nationalism and 'new immigration' in the period under consideration is shaped, first, by the arrival of the *Volksunie* on the political scene in 1958. The *Volksunie* was Belgium's first post-war 'communitarian' party, and as such it steadily challenged socialists, liberals and Christian democrats alike. By 1978, when the *Volksunie* splintered into competing camps, it had altered the political landscape. All

political parties, with the notable exception of the small Communist party, had split along communitarian lines.¹ Thus, there was the Flemish socialist party (SPA or *Socialistische Partij- Anders*) and the French socialist party (*PS* or *Parti Socialiste*) etc. An additional, political development was that the ideology of Flemish nationalism for some of its adherents became increasingly ethnic based and less civic based by the late 1970s. Constructing identity along regional lines in an ethnic manner emanated, to a degree, from trans-national influences. Jean-Marie Le Pen from France, throughout much of the 1970s, influenced the new far-right Flemish nationalist party, the *Vlaams Blok*, with his call for a 'return' to a time of imagined 'grandeur' and imagined 'purity' in France. The *Vlaams Blok* would take this model and apply it to Flanders.

The 'new immigrants' arrived in Belgium roughly in the same time period the *Volksunie* began shaping Belgium's political landscape. From 1964 until 1979, there was the arrival and then the slowly increasing visibility of immigrants in the cultural and political spheres. Many came from Muslim Mediterranean countries. In 1974, immigration to Belgium was officially stopped, but in fact this resulted in family reunification which increased substantially the immigrant population. By 1979, three important factors influenced the lives and the identities of the immigrant population. First, the economic crisis of 1973-74 was over but then again so were what the French termed the '*trentes glorieuses*' (the thirty golden years or economic boom from approximately 1945- 1974). In short, immigrants were not needed in Belgium (or in

¹One example of political parties which became divided along linguistic lines was the separation from the broader Socialist Party of the "Rode Leeuwen" (Red Lions) or Flemish Socialists within Brussels. Page 26, Monteyne, A. (1977). Le monde flamand de Bruxelles (2). Bruxelles, Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques (CRISP).

much of Western Europe) as they had been before. Second, a second-generation ‘immigrant’ was being born. This second generation was on the one hand not facing the dire economic deprivation that some of their parents had faced. Yet on the other hand, they were born without the possibilities of significant economic advancement. Third, the Iranian Revolution was offering the very beginnings of political Islam (or *Islamism*) as a way of constructing identity. Here, too, as in the case of Flemish nationalism, there were trans-national influences encouraging a ‘return’ to a time of imagined ‘grandeur’ and ‘purity,’ in this case that of early Islam.

Belgium has very often been a society of serious cleavages, but compromises are usually found. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, ‘unitary Belgium’ broke down on an unparalleled scale. The two main significant challenges to the cultural and political *status quo* in Brussels were, as noted, Flemish nationalism on the one hand and ‘new immigration’ on the other. In the process, Brussels, and by extension, Belgium was transformed into an increasingly pluralistic but also increasingly fragmented society.² By

² Generally speaking, the larger narrative presented by Francophone Belgian historians is one of a state (Belgium), much like any other, until it disintegrates into an increasingly fragmented society in the latter half of the twentieth century. This sense of a ‘breakdown’ is apparent for example in the chapter divisions of Mabilie, X. (2003). La Belgique: Depuis la seconde guerre mondiale. Bruxelles, Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques, where one of the primary chapters (Chapter 2) is entitled, “The End of Unitary Belgium”. On the other hand, Flemish Belgian historians tend to present the larger narrative as one of an obviously ‘artificial’ state (Belgium) grudgingly allowing for greater democracy on the part of the Flemish nation as they fight for their rights (cultural, linguistic, political etc.). This too can be noted immediately in the chapter headings alone. See Witte, E. a. V., Harry Van (1999). Language and Politics: The situation in Belgium in an historical perspective. Brussels, VUB University Press where chapter 4 is entitled ‘Language laws in an *emancipating* (my emphasis) Flanders’

understanding the nature of these two challenges, one begins to understand the ‘new Brussels’³.

This thesis also challenges the notion that prior to the arrival of ‘new’ immigrants; there was a basic homogeneity of ‘ethnicity’ or a consensus on questions of identity. Instead, this thesis will posit that immigrants attempted to use pre-existing communitarian divisions to their advantage. Even if at times, immigrants fell victim to these pre-existing divisions as well.

Three, this thesis argues against the idea that questions of nationalism are either only attributable to inter-war Europe (as some have argued in support of an aberrant ‘parenthesis’) or only existed in under-developed southeastern Europe during the post-war period. Rather, this thesis aims to show that nationalism and questions of ethnicity are at the heart of the capital of post-war Western Europe and by extension the West in general.

Four, this thesis questions the existence of a dichotomous ‘clash of civilizations’ between Islam and the West. Instead, this research posits that there is something about the time period of the 1960s and 1970s which encouraged the move from class-based or traditional party based cleavages (as was often the case in the inter-war period) to new, more demanding identity based cleavages. The development of these new identity based cleavages appears to be quite similar to what was occurring in other parts of the world at this time period. For example in the Middle East, the concept of Arab socialism on the

³ In terms of a well-written local history which chronicles the shifts of identity over time in a modern-era European city, one of the most influential (and one which I am especially indebted to) is that of King, J. (2002). Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

part of Abdel Nasser lost its influence to the message of the Muslim Brotherhood and *Islamism* (political Islam). Attempts will be made to explain the very specific origins of these new transformations in the context of Brussels, but with an eye for the broader political and cultural currents shaping the world in this era.