

Foreword

Bruno De Wever
Universiteit Gent

Since the French Revolution the notions of 'left' and 'right' are part and parcel of political vocabulary. In the French *Assemblée*, the custom grew that advocates of political change and more political equality sat on the left, conservative advocates of a status quo sat on the right, while in the middle were representatives of the people who were looking for a compromise between the two points of view. The notions left – progressive - and right – conservative - gradually spread across the world together with parliamentary regimes. They appealed to the need for capturing political reality in a simple diagram. Since then, many authors have questioned the validity of the notions. One thing is for sure: the notions are indestructible in daily practical politics and in the use of language.

In Belgium the notions have been grafted on the three traditional fault-lines in Belgian politics. Left and right didn't always had the same meaning. Today on the socio-economic fault-line, left stands for more redistribution and solidarity, and right for market thinking and personal responsibility. On the philosophical fault-line, left stands for individual freedom and right for social control. That is not just the case in Belgium. What is specific for Belgium is that the notions left and right have also been embedded in the community fault-lines. Flanders is right, Wallonia left. Is this true? And if so, why is it like that and has it always been like that? That is what this e-book is about.

In his contribution, Henk De Smaele, historian at Antwerp University, demonstrates that as early as the 19th century Flanders voted right and Wallonia left and that it has not much to do with 'objective' socio-economic differences, but rather with a curiously persistent identity construction that is also an explanation for the current success of N-VA.

Jérôme Jamin, political scientist at the Université de Liège, studies the current right-wing political discourse in Flanders and Wallonia. He observes that a 'produceristic' discourse is gaining ground in Flanders, in which Flemings are identified with the hard-working - 'producing' - middle class that is threatened by a parasitic underclass (mostly workers close to the 'Etat PS', unemployed people and migrants) and an equally parasitic upper class (the 'élite' directly linked to the Parti Socialiste). Right-wing Flemish nationalism grafts this discourse onto Walloon compatriots who are described as an unproductive class taking advantage of the Flemish middle class by means of the Belgian state solidarity mechanisms. In Wallonia, a produceristic discourse does not find any firm footing in political and socio-economic reality.

Jaak Billiet, sociologist at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, reports on the findings concerning left and right standpoints in Flanders and Wallonia on the basis of large random samples. The latter were performed by the Institute of Social and Political Research on the occasion of the national elections between 1991 and 2007 and the European Social Survey in 2008. The left-right contrast is far less great than is often presumed in the public discourse. Perceptions of cultural and economic threats differ only very slightly between the two parts of the country, which show a strong resemblance with respect to this item in comparison with other European countries.