

# The duality of public opinions as a democratic asset

*Confessions of an historian*

Marnix Beyen (Universiteit Antwerpen)

---

As most of the Belgian historians of my generation – both Francophone and Flemish – I was brought up with the idea the Flemish nation, in spite of its own alleged secular existence, was more recent than the Belgian nation. The Belgian nation, it was told, had its roots in the Burgundian rule of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and had afterwards continued to develop under the Spanish, Austrian, French and Dutch rulers. From the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the existence of a Belgian (proto-)nation was obvious for anyone. The revolution of 1830, therefore, was not an incident, as Flemish nationalists wanted to make believe, but the logical outcome of strong national feelings. In this same line of reasoning, the success of the Flemish nation building itself was turned into some kind of incident: it was presented as the product of Flemish middle classes, who felt the dominant use of French as an obstacle to their upward social mobility, and therefore construed an alternative national identification. Not popular feelings, but the selfishness of a small social class lay at the basis of the Flemish nation, according to this line of reasoning. The ultimate proof of this vision was found in the history of the First World War, when a small group of Flamingant intellectuals were lured by the German occupier into a radically anti-Belgian engagement; and in the fact that these same intellectuals were not cured from their ambition by the German defeat, but instead continued to hope for German support in their struggle against Belgium. The second Flemish nationalist collaboration was, within that same view, unavoidable. According to historians such as Lode Wils and Jean Stengers, therefore, the opposition between Belgium and Flanders was a sort of cuckoo's egg laid by the German occupier into the Belgian nest, and taken care of by a small, but ambitious Flamingant élite. The further development of an anti-Belgian Flemish Nationalism, which would eventually lead to the process of federalization, was interpreted within this scheme as an internal dynamic driven by the will of power. The process of federalization, thus the reasoning goes, was wanted by nobody but by the politicians themselves, for whom strong Flemish institutions implied more opportunities to obtain powerful positions. The underlying assumption of this thesis seems to be that Flemish nationalism has gained political force without the existence of a truly Flemish, let alone of a Flemish nationalist public opinion, and that Belgian public opinion, on the contrary, has been dismantled from without. This appeared to be a strong historical argument against the claims of Flemish Nationalism.

Today, some fifteen years later, I have become familiar, through research and readings, with several aspects of the political and cultural life in nineteenth and twentieth century Belgium, and I am less and less convinced whether this thesis still holds. Whatever part of Belgian civil society one studies from an historical perspective, one seems to find stark differences between the Flemish and the Francophone part of the country. Particularly the way that was reacted on international tendencies could be utterly different. These differences are so striking, and pertain to such a wide variety of fields, that they cannot be entirely ascribed to the agitation of a small political group. I give only three examples, taken from different fields and from different periods, in order to illustrate my point.

One very obvious example can be found in the electoral behavior of the Belgian population since the 1880s. Although none of the existing parties was organized according to 'subnational' lines nor waged a subnational propaganda, the gap between a 'right-wing' (read 'confessional') Flanders and a left-wing (read 'anti-clerical') Wallonia became very striking since that time. As my colleague Henk de Smaele has convincingly shown in his doctoral dissertation (which will soon be published), no social or economic differences can be found which suffice to explain the width of this gap. De Smaele searches the ultimate cause in cultural factors, and more specifically in the strength of a Flemish – and to a lesser degree, a Walloon – self-image. In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the association between Flanders and rural or provincial values became widespread, and the Catholic party, as the defender of the peasants' interests, profited most from this self-image in the Flemish regions of the country. In Wallonia, which in many ways was more rural than Flanders, this same association never became dominant. In the Walloon self-image, the modernity of the industrial towns became much more prominent, which was translated into electoral gains for the anti-clerical left.

That these images could become so powerful that they were able to influence electoral behavior, does suggest that there existed two different public opinions to convey them. It is certainly no coincidence that this evolution occurred in the same period during which the popular press knew a rapid development.

A second context in which the dissimilarity between the Flemish and the Francophone public opinions struck me, was that of the cultural avant-garde of the 1920s. Whereas the Flemish avant-garde of that period was heavily influenced by the formal experiments of German expressionism and, to a lesser degree, Dadaism, Francophone cultural élites turned out to be much more attached to a classical aesthetics. One of the reasons for that difference certainly was that the First World War had aroused much stronger anti-German feelings in the Francophone part of the country than in Flanders. That in itself is surprising, since the so-called 'German atrocities' had not hit the Walloon provinces so much harder than their Flemish counterparts. At a more structural level, however, these differences between the Flemish and the Francophone avant-garde find their roots in long term differences between the Dutch speaking and the Francophone cultural traditions of nineteenth-century Belgium. Even if some Francophone authors did appreciate German romanticism or the 'Nordic culture' as a 'healthy' alternative to the decadent French culture, they did not entertain equally close contacts with German intellectuals as many of the Flemish authors did. Without yielding in any way to the racial connotations that these terms can arouse, it is hard to deny the fairly self-evident fact that the Dutch speaking culture of Belgium was nearer to the Germanic sphere of influence, whereas the Belgium's Francophone culture was (and is) part and parcel of the larger French culture (even if it occupies a somehow eccentric place within that culture). The traditional defenses of Belgium as a place where cultures merged, which could be heard already in the 1830s and which resonated again during the Belgavox concert of May 17 2009, are primarily the product of wishful thinking by cultural élites with fairly little resonance among the population at large.

A third episode in Belgian history that I want to touch upon in this context, is the rise of the 'new social movements' and of second wave-feminism in the early 1970s. As movements which claimed to pay attention to the 'real concerns' of 'real people', and which therefore entertained a problematic relationship with institutionalized politics, one could have expected them to have taken their distance from the process of federalization. And yet, nearly all these movements split up fairly quickly into a Flemish and a Francophone wing. Sometimes, this scission was based on diverging perspectives on society – as was the case for the peace movement – sometimes it seems to have been caused rather simply by the fact that both parts of the movement experienced difficulties in finding a common language. That was evidently the case at a sheer linguistic level, but much more problematic was the fact that entire sets of references diverged. Symptomatic in this regard were the names of the most radical groups within second-wave feminism. Flemish neo-feminists were quick to name themselves after their Dutch examples De Dolle Minas (the name itself a reference to Dutch

first wave feminist Wilhelmina Drucker), a name which was senseless to the Francophone militants of feminism. The latter preferred to call themselves Marie Mineur, after a nineteenth century working class woman in the industrial town of Verviers. Although Flemish and Francophone neo-feminists would entertain good contacts during the following years, and even undertake some common actions, their paths were separate from the start.

I could easily extend this list by focusing, for example, on the history of the Boy Scouts movement in Belgium, or on the history of history writing itself. They would all reveal very diverging patterns in Flanders and Francophone Belgium. The conclusion of all these examples must unavoidably be that the duality of public opinions in Belgium by far predates the process of federalization of the political institutions. Probably, it is not very hazardous to claim that they exist as long as one can speak of modern, democratic public opinions as such. By this, I mean a framework of references and orientations shared by members of different social classes within the population of a given territory. In this sense, 'public opinion' could only see the daylight with the birth and rapid spread of modern mass media, and with the fulfilling of other democratic conditions, such as widespread literacy. If one can rightly state that a 'Belgian' public opinion existed before this date (maybe as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century), this was a public opinion of a totally different kind. It was confined to the upper classes, who had, since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the latest, opted for French as their language of culture and politics, and who shared in very broad terms a 'liberal culture' in spite of political differences between them. The multifaceted democratization of society since the last decades of the nineteenth century pushed this kind of culture nearly unavoidably to the margins, and turned it into a subculture (though with still strong access to the levers of power).

In the light of these findings, it becomes impossible to present the process of federalization as the product of an ambitious political class. We could even assert that politics in Belgium has been one of the last domains to become federalized. Maybe it is for that very reason that this process has been so radical, and has so utterly neglected to give a proper role to the central institutions. The federalization of the institutions does show some features of an improvised and hurried attempt to catch up with federalization of the minds, which had long been accomplished. The currently often repeated complaint that "Flemings and Walloons don't know each other any more" can be countered by the question "did they ever know each other?" Although there has been very little historical research to underpin this view, it seems unlikely that a substantial part of the Flemings ever read Francophone newspapers, or listened to French programmes on the radio. The situation today in this respect is probably not so much worse than one hundred years ago.

History, for that very reason, can hardly be invoked by those who want to defend Belgium against the claims of Flemish and Walloon sub-nationalists (unless by those who are nostalgic towards an elitarian *Belgique de papa*). Flanders and Wallonia are certainly not *older* than Belgium, but they probably are more firmly embedded in the modern and democratic society of the last century. At the very least, they can be legitimized by history equally well as Belgium.

### *Reflections of a citizen*

Does this historical insight mean that we should say farewell to Belgium, and happily engage in the sub-national projects (with maybe a sort of international statute for Brussels)? I don't believe this should be the case. It should only make us aware that the existence of Belgium should be legitimized by arguments referring to the present and the future rather than to the past. First of all, the question should be asked whether the existence of two (or more public) opinions needs to be a fundamental problem for a democracy. If the answer to this question were affirmative, all attempts to create a democratic Europe would immediately be reduced to vain illusions. There is no hope at all, that ever there will be one European public

opinion, and yet we try to let all Europeans partake into one single democratic process. Why couldn't we try the same for Belgium?

If we take the argument one step further, we can ask whether the existence of more than one public opinion in a given country can be an advantage for a democracy. That would not be the case if we would equal 'democracy' - as many Flamengant intellectuals do today - with a political system in which 'the public opinion' is translated into political measures. In my view, such a definition is not only false, but also dangerous. It denies the homogenizing, and potentially anti-democratic aspects of the notion 'public opinion' itself. Even if public opinion cannot be simply considered as the product of political elites hungry for power, we cannot deny that it is always to a certain degree constructed, and that in this construction power relations and hierarchies do play an important role. Much rather than as a simple top down process, we should consider 'power' here as a highly circular 'regime' - to use the Foucauldian term - in which the mass media form an important mediator. By functioning as gatekeeper of information - and, more recently, by publishing the results of all kinds of surveys -, the mass media determine to a high degree what belongs to the public opinion and what is excluded from it. As such, they offer politicians an instrument to strengthen their claims by presenting it as congruent with 'the public opinion'. On the other hand, public opinion reduces the politicians' autonomy in representing opinions or interests falling outside of it. As such, public opinion can become a tyrant sitting on the throne which in a true democracy, according to Claude Lefort's much often-cited phrase, should remain empty. A democratic system, therefore, should be organized in such a way that it can resist to the homogenizing pressure of public opinion, and listen to alternative or eccentric visions.

Seen from this perspective, the duality of public opinions in Belgium appears rather as an asset for democracy than as an obstacle to it. Public opinion in this country is automatically de-centered, which could be seen as warrant for the openness of democracy. If Belgian democracy shows serious deficiencies nonetheless, this is not due to the existence of two public opinions in the first place, but to the fact that the homogenizing forces within each of these public opinions prevail over their potential to de-center one another. One of the reasons for this tendency can be found in the institutional setting that has been created over the last few decades. The federalization of the representative and executive institutions has been accompanied by the scission of all the political parties. As a consequence, the electorate has been radically divided into two entities, which have no reason whatsoever to be informed or concerned about one other. The recent decision to create community-wide constituencies for the federal institutions (notably for the Senate) has worsened this situation, because it engendered a direct confrontation between the two communities about the future prime minister .

If the homogenizing of the two public opinions would only be caused by recent institutional constellations, the solution could be relatively simple. The Swiss electoral procedures could in that case be considered as an example to follow, since Nenad Stojanović in his lead paper convincingly argues that direct democracy can help to overcome the disadvantages of a dual public opinion. At this point, however, it is the historian's task to warn against such an easy and optimistic conclusion. That the public opinions in Belgium are more homogenized *and* more antagonistic to one another is not solely due to recent institutional arrangements, but has very deep roots in the political history of the two countries. The fact that Belgium was (and largely still is) a bilingual instead of a multilingual society should be noted from the outset. Probably the most crucial difference between the two countries, however, is that Switzerland, unlike Belgium, has never attempted to be the most modern nation-state of the European continent. That ambition was from the very start imbued with contradictions. On the one hand, the architects of independent Belgium wanted their construction to be a centralized nation state, based on the idea of a homogeneous popular will. Hence, they constructed a strong central power. By giving this state at the same time an extremely liberal character, they immediately weakened this power base in a very fundamental way. The Liberal premises, indeed, implied the freedom not only for individuals but also for social identities to develop into autonomous forces which could eventually threaten the state itself.

In other words, the Belgian state construction created from the start the possibility for the Francophone bourgeoisie to monopolize state power *and* the possibility for the subaltern groups to contest this monopoly. In the course of the nineteenth century, this second possibility was used above all by the Catholic segment of society, since the end of that century the Flemish movement has taken over that role. Hence, the relationship between the language groups was much more politicized in Belgium than in Switzerland, where central state power was relatively weak, and therefore did not become the object of struggle.

In this context, I would believe the institutionalization of a referendum in the Belgian context could hardly play an integrative, and therefore democratizing role. Even if it would be organized nationwide, the debates surrounding it would probably soon be recast in sub-national terms and used to step up the differences between the two language groups. Aren't there any institutional or political arrangements, then, which might further Belgian democracy in spite of the cleavage between its two public opinions? According to me, any institutional change should go into two, seemingly opposite directions. On the one hand, it should be aimed at the decentralization of power, bringing democracy at the lowest possible level (local communities, but also enterprises and institutions themselves). Some federalism in the proudhonion sense of the word could help, according to me, to free the federal system in Belgium from the pressure of sub-nationalist opinion-makers and re-direct it to the true needs of people in their specific contexts; on the other hand, the central state level should be made the object of democratic debate once more, not by installing a referendum, but by creating a federal constituency for the existing institutions of representative government (and next to the existing, provincial constituencies). By such a double move, we might hope to bring about a multilayered form of democracy, reflecting the complexities and the multiple identities of modern life. In that case, the duality of public opinion in Belgium could turn out to be a democratic asset.