

# Looking Beyond Belgium? A Walloon Regionalist Viewpoint<sup>1</sup>

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Considering the end of Belgium may seem an exercise in political fiction. While it seems clear that the Belgian State has been in a phase of permanent reorganization for about fifty years now, with phases of acute crisis, it is not obvious that this process must necessarily lead to the dismantling of the State. The Walloon viewpoint developed here seeks to be anchored in pragmatism. It is not situated in a radical “After-Belgium” (Who knows if and when that will happen?), but within the context of what is foreseeable in the medium term: a Wallonia constrained to emerge in a period of economic difficulties, in a Belgium which is undoubtedly breaking up, but which is not likely to disappear quickly <sup>2</sup>.

Any observer of Belgian political life knows that the driving forces of many of these successive rearrangements are located in Flanders. However, Flanders, the current economic driving force in the Belgian State, while having demanded and still demanding institutional reforms, hesitates between two strategies: either obtaining an increasingly broad autonomy with, on the horizon, the constitution of a Sovereign state; or preserving its leadership in a Belgium that can further serve its development. And it is probable that this hesitation will go on as long as the Brussels question has not been solved in a manner that is satisfactory in the eyes of the Flemings, for whom the independence of Flanders is not worth the cost of abandoning Brussels.

The Walloon regionalist viewpoint developed here on the Belgian question seeks to be as open and irenic as possible, avoiding all virulent polemics, and embodying a maximum of understanding for the Flemish positions. In wishing the best development for the human community that supports and nourishes us, one does not necessarily become the adversary of the neighbouring community.

A fundamental point should be made from the start. A Walloon regionalist viewpoint is not necessarily reducible to a French-speaking Belgian viewpoint, as if the official linguistic component exhausted the entire Walloon reality, as if Wallonia and Brussels' fights to survive were identical. The diversified human community living in Wallonia does not define itself solely by the official language. Unlike some of our Flemish neighbours, we do not take to heart the expression : “De taal is gansch het volk” <sup>3</sup>.

The present reflections turn on four points. First of all, we should point out some milestones in the history of Belgium and the rise of the Flemish and Walloon movements in the context of European nationalisms. The second point is a reflection on present-day facts. The third point evokes illusory solutions to the Belgian malaise; it closes some doors leading to dead ends. The fourth point tries to define realistic options for the Walloon future and the reconstruction of a Belgian State facilitating a flourishing of its regional components.

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<sup>2</sup> The point of view developed here dates from March 2010. Subsequent political negotiations can obviously change the reality.

<sup>3</sup> The language is the whole people.

## I. Milestones in history

### 1. Nations and nationalism

Everyone knows that States are transitory forms in the organization of human beings in society. All States have a beginning and an end; they only have a mid-range lifespan. Belgium will not be the only State to escape from that destiny.

The Belgian State is a creation of the 19th century. That creation in 1830 benefited from an international conjecture; some have said that the English wanted it in the context of competition with France and in the framework of European balances of power. Few believed in its viability at the time, not even the first king of the Belgians, who still wrote, twenty-eight years after assuming the throne: “Belgium has no nationality and considering the character of its inhabitants will never be able to have one”<sup>4</sup>.

European nationalisms were born in the 19th century, in the same breath with the people’s coming to awareness of their sovereignty, an awareness resulting from the philosophy of Enlightenment, the French revolution and the rise of democracies. Sovereignty belongs to the people and the people’s right to look after themselves was proclaimed. The romantic movement of the 19th century fuelled the growth of nationalisms, exalting the idea of a fatherland. National poets and historians invented and exalted the “soul” of peoples. The great European nationalisms go back to that period: Poland, Russia, Serbia, etc. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, which extended over the whole centre of Europe, was literally undermined in the 19th century by nationalist surges; subsequently collapsing in the 20th century. Germany, on the other hand, unified itself at the same time on the basis of Germanic nationalism.

For its nationalist construction, Belgium also benefited from the romantic conjecture: its historians crafted a “Belgian soul” which, going back to Antiquity, was supposed to have lasted over the centuries<sup>5</sup>. The two fathers of Belgian historiography, Godefroid Kurth and Henri Pirenne, exerted a strong influence on the Belgian national consciousness. For them, Belgian unitarism relied on a bilingual Flanders, a microcosm of Belgium and Europe (a meeting place of Germanic and Latin cultures)<sup>6</sup>. After 1918, in the wake of World War I, the victory and ambient nationalism lent those theories new vigour. Speaking globally, those nationalisms exasperated one another during two world wars, developing a veritable culture, almost a sacralization of violence, in the name of the fatherland.

### 2. Birth and development of the Flemish movement

The Flemish movement was born in the mid 19th century as part of that same Romantic Movement that exalted peoples. But, whereas in Wallonia that movement worked in the sense of exalting Belgium, in Flanders it worked in the sense of exalting Flanders. Why? Because the Flemish romanticism was based on a popular movement born in reaction to a threefold inferiority situation.

Initially, it was a situation of economic inferiority. Flanders, which had known prosperity in the Middle Ages, experienced an unprecedented economic decline in the mid 19th century. The flax and potato crop crises were catastrophic for these primarily agricultural regions. Driven out by misery, many Flemings then found permanent employment in prosperous industrial Wallonia.

Added to this, there was a cultural inferiority. Flemish, as a language, was then divided into a multitude of dialects, whose unification would only come much later. To have access to the culture, the Flemings were thus required to take the step of learning another language, French in fact.

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<sup>4</sup> Letter of Leopold I<sup>er</sup> to Jules van Praet, 19 Nov. 1859.

<sup>5</sup> It was Edmond Picard (1836-1924), a jurist and socialist parliamentarian, the creator of *Pandectes belges*, who discovered the “Belgian soul”, resulting from the mixture of two cultures.

<sup>6</sup> Godefroid Kurth (1847-1916), an admirer of the German historical school, introduced research seminars into our universities. With regard to our concerns, he preached bilingualism and saw a prefiguring of Belgium in Brabant, via its resistance to French influence (G. KURTH, *La nationalité belge*, Namur, 1913). Better known, HENRI PIRENNE (1862-1935) published his *Histoire de Belgique* in seven volumes, from 1900 to 1932, a vast fresco in which a prestigious Flanders plays a leading role (the importance of the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302, which marked the refusal of French influence). The formation of contemporary Belgium is not fortuitous, but is the natural culmination of a long evolution (Belgian finalism). Economic interests pushed the principalities to rapprochement, creating a community: their union under the dukes of Burgundy and later developments consolidated that unity. Pirenne’s brilliant construction fails to take sufficiently into account various realities, like the resistance and the particularity of the principality of Liège, or the French Revolution’s role, exploding the echelons of the ancien régime and setting the scene for the country’s unification. It is, moreover, guided by a nationalist conception.

However, in Flanders itself, the bourgeoisie had long since been Frenchified; the people speaking the Flemish dialects were thus cut off from their elites.

Finally, there was a political inferiority. The Belgian democracy born in 1830 was very incomplete at the beginning. Not all citizens had the right to vote. By the censal electoral laws then enforced, only those who paid very high taxes voted. However that small minority (i.e. the grand bourgeoisie), in Flanders itself, was long since Frenchified (Fransquillons). It follows that the officials elected to Parliament, Flemish as well as Walloon, were all French-speakers. Legal Belgium thus gave the impression of a French-speaking country overlying two types of popular dialects: Flemish dialects in the north of the country and Walloon dialects in the south.

Let us notice that the Walloon population was not to blame, as is sometimes said, in this situation of subjugating the Flemish people; the Walloons were above all victims of their own ruling class.

The year 1840 marks the beginning of the Flemish movement. It is the date of petitioning in favour of the Flemish language, launched by some intellectuals to promote recognition of Flemish as a language; that petitioning only met with the contempt of the Flemish bourgeois, long since Frenchified. On the other hand, the movement met with success among the low clergy close to the people and among romantic litterateurs. The novelist Hendrik Conscience (De Leeuw van Vlaanderen, 1838) and the poet Guido Gezelle, inter alia, count among those awakening a Flemish national mystique. Others, like the liberal J.R. Willems (1793-1846), fought for the place of Flemish in public life<sup>7</sup>. The movement spread little by little and met the approval of a downtrodden minority, victims of a cultural injustice. The 19th century was marked by that movement's rise to power, going from conquest to conquest in gaining the recognition of its rights: the use of Flemish in judicial matters (1873), in administration (1878), in official secondary teaching (1883), in corrective procedures (1889), in legislative acts (the De Vriendt-Coremans law, 1898), etc.

The two world wars particularly ignited Flemish sentiments and widened the gap between the two parts of the country. During World War I, the occupant set up a policy favouring Flanders, known as *Flamenpolitik*. At the front, in the trenches, a frontist movement was born (*Frontbeweging*) among Flemish soldiers dissatisfied with getting orders in French. During World War II, Nazi Germany renewed its policy of favouring Flanders; for example, in 1940, 106,000 Flemish prisoners of war were repatriated, while 65,000 French-speaking prisoners remained in captivity until 1945. Additionally, collaboration with the occupant seems to have relied on a more widespread consent in the north than in the south; thus, the UTMI, a trade union based on the New Order's principles, and founded during the war by H. De Man, numbered only 17,000 Walloon members out of a total of 109,000; another example, during the occupation, out of 11,500 press resistants, 9,400 were Walloon. It should be said that since the interbellum period, part of the Flemish movement had been contaminated by fascist ideology, particularly with the birth of VERDINASO (*Verbond der Dietse Nationaal-Solidaristen*), founded by Joris van Severen in 1931, and especially the VNV (*Vlaams Nationaal Verbond*), a party created by Staf De Clercq in 1933. That contamination is still perceptible in the current *Vlaams Belang*.

Cultural at the beginning, the Flemish movement became political, and then economic: here we have all the ingredients of a romantic and integral nationalism, which was modernized with Flanders' economic rise to power from the 1960s on. Currently, an economically strong region, political Flanders claims an ever increasing autonomy, affirming itself as a nation and providing itself with an increasingly State-like symbolic system.

### 3. *A Wallonia Nostalgic for Belgium*

In Wallonia, the question of languages was perceived differently. An analogous situation of domination by French-speaking elites led to radically divergent positions as compared to Flemish regions. We have seen how the Flemish party reacted in unifying its dialects and promoting its language in public life. In Wallonia, romanized since Antiquity, the Romance dialects (Walloon,

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<sup>7</sup> With the creation of the *Willemsfonds* in 1851. The Catholic side saw the creation of the *Dauidsfonds* in 1875.

mainly, but also the dialects of Picardy, Lorraine and, to a lesser extent, Champagne) remained confined to the domain of private exchanges without there really ever having been a question of making them emerge in official sectors. Public life was dominated by the French-speaking elites of wealth, power and knowledge.

It must be said that Wallonia too was affected by the European Romantic Movement, which, in the mid 19th century, from Friesland to Catalonia, in passing through Flanders and Brittany, caused a flowering of associations seeking to develop the traditions of the people, their dialectal and historical heritage. The most famous of these initiatives was *Félibrige*, created in Occitania in 1854<sup>8</sup>. The founding, in 1856, of the Liège Society for Walloon Literature (since 1909, the Society for Walloon Language and Literature) illustrated the will to cultivate what was specifically Walloon: their language and their traditions. Other initiatives conformed to that pattern: in 1889, in Liège, E. Monseur and G. Doutrepont created a Society of Walloon Folklore; from 1893 to 1914, the review *Wallonie* appeared in Liège, directed by O. Colson, J. Defrecheux and G. Willame; the orthography of the Walloon language was established in 1899 by J. Feller. For that matter, even the name “Wallonia” goes back to that period<sup>9</sup>. However, those movements never envisaged raising the dialects of Wallonia to the rank of a unified language, rivalling French and imposing it on Belgium as an official language.

In fact, the frustration of the lower classes of the Walloon regions did not relate to questions of languages but to social demands. The working populations of Wallonia directed their combativeness towards social conquests. However, the Walloon speakers were often just as ill at ease in front of an employer handling French correctly as in front of a judge not knowing the dialects. This hiatus is serious and we can ask ourselves whether historians have sufficiently perceived the consequences of that alienation. Going further back in history, was there ever an attempt to measure the burden that situation of rupture between a people and its elites placed upon Walloon cultural creativity? The need for changing languages in order to accede to culture and power, combined with the developments in instruction in French, led to a clear regression in spoken Walloon in the 20th century. In daily practice, until the mid 20th century, schools contributed to targeting and inhibiting Walloons from childhood on by reprimanding them for their expressions and regional accents as being incorrect or coarse. Walloon speakers began an underground life a century ago, reserving for themselves the world of intimacy and voluntarily remaining in the background of public or cultural domains.

In Wallonia, unlike the Flemish regions, the Belgium ideology had penetrated spirits profoundly. The “historical assembly” and the theory of the “Belgian soul” had functioned well and been propagated in schools. Moreover, since the 19th century, the industrial regions of the Walloon valley (Sambre-Meuse) had been the economic driving force of a successful Belgium, with which the elites of Wallonia were flattered to be identified.

Thus, when the Flemish movement was born, it was perceived in Wallonia and Brussels as a divider of the Belgian fatherland. In reaction, the first Walloon movement, born at the end of the 19th century, was not at all Walloon autonomist, but was centred on the defence of Belgium against the Flemish activism. During the 20th century, the Walloon movement only gradually became aware of the scope of the Flemish factor and, not without ambiguity, came to be directed towards what was then called the “administrative separation” of the north and south of Belgium.

However, it was only in the 1960s, with the perception of the twilight of Wallonia’s heavy industry that a gradual awakening of the Walloon consciousness, hitherto rather confined to bourgeois or intellectual milieu, really penetrated into the population. Facing industrial decline, facing too an awakening Flanders that seemed to be gaining hegemony in Belgium, the Walloon movement increasingly concentrated its efforts on obtaining a decision-making capacity in economic matters. In

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<sup>8</sup> Founded near Avignon by seven poets, among whom Frédéric Mistral, the ‘Félibrige’ sought to stimulate a renaissance of Occitan language and literature. Among other associations, we mention: the ‘Association bretonne’, 1843; ‘Selskip for Frysker Tael’, 1844; ‘Willemsfonds’ in Flanders, 1851; and ‘Jeux floraux’ in Barcelona, 1859.

<sup>9</sup> If the word “Wallon” is older, the word “Wallonie” dates from 1844 (François Grandgagnage), but remained confined to philological circles. The word “Wallonie” didn’t really enter the public domain until 1886, with the creation of the review, *La Wallonie*, by Albert MOCKEL, belonging to the symbolist poetic current of the French language. See A. HENRY. *Histoire des mots « Wallon » et « Wallonie »*, Mont-sur-Marchienne, 1990 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).

this new awareness, the role of the great strike of the winter of 1960-61 was decisive, with the action of the Liège union leader, André Renard, founder of the *Mouvement populaire wallon*.

We shall not point out here the innumerable adventures that took Belgium from being a unitary State towards Federal State status after the political crises of the past half-century. In 1962, one of the first milestones was the fixation of the linguistic border, until then a mobile line, and increasingly considered by the Flemings as inviolable, equal to a State border. The fruit of compromise and a complex institutional engineering developed in the stress of acute crises, the Belgian style federalism thus developed over a half-century appears as a quite incomprehensible hybrid (a chimera in the proper sense). After various phases of adjustment, a revision of the Constitution and a vote of reform laws were adopted by the Parliament on July 14th, 1993<sup>10</sup>. Henceforth, article 1 of the Constitution clearly affirms: “Belgium is a Federal State which is composed of communities and regions”. However, the institutional architecture of this federal Belgium remains complicated; some institutions that are rather incomprehensible for the citizen overlap, nourishing a chronic dissatisfaction.

As for Walloon consciousness, despite an increasingly clear break-through, and also despite the sting of the Flemish movement's victories (like the move of the French-speaking university of Louvain to Walloon Brabant, achieved in 1968), and finally despite the progressive installation of Walloon and French-speaking community regional institutions at the end of the 20th century, it must be said that the feeling of belonging to Wallonia remains rather weak compared to the Belgian feeling. Whereas a great many Flemings are concerned about promoting their own heritage, many Walloons, on the other hand, link all the elements of their heritage to Belgium. Even now, Walloons rather spontaneously pin the epithet “Walloon” onto companies in difficulty or the painful legacies of their industrial past, but seldom onto the exploits of the athletes, the inventions of scientists or the works of artists, who naturally come along enriching the Belgian heritage. Moreover, the media often reflect this usage and contribute to further anchoring it, despite the present-day existence of an increasingly perceptible Walloon reality on the institutional landscape.

Are the Walloon people cut off from their collective memory, as some claim? Do they forget the richness of 12th and 13th century Mosan goldsmithing, the brilliant musical school lasting from Roland de Lassus to Guillaume Lekeu or, further, the contributions of litterateurs and painters, “hennuyer” (from Hainaut province) notably, to the surrealist movement? Are they unaware of the brilliant period of Walloon blacksmiths in Sweden in the 17th century, creating in that country one of the most efficient metallurgies of the time and earning a reputation there that is ever dynamic<sup>11</sup>? Aren't there a good number of more or less unconscious mechanisms, complex and hard to define, at work, occulting the Walloon heritage? Should we blame a teaching of history placing little emphasis on Walloon cultural wealth? Or is it the result of the absence of a major attractive cultural centre within the Walloon perimeter? Or is it a spontaneous attitude of reserve on the part of Walloons, leaving their creations modestly hidden? Or is it, finally, the elites and writers' disaffection, scorning Walloon realities as skimpy and provincial? One thing is sure, and we will come back to this, the absence of cultural competencies within Walloon institutions contributes greatly to the lack of visibility of Wallonia and to the symbolic deficit described previously<sup>12</sup>.

We should add one crucial element in this absence of a strong image; a paradoxical absence when one realizes that Wallonia was the economic driving force of Belgium at the time of its prosperity. The fact is that the Walloon economic elites very quickly established themselves in Brussels, where they were to some extent “Belgicized”, losing their Walloon rootedness and promoting an industrialization lacking any real development<sup>13</sup>. More concerned with international diversification than regional dynamization, Brussels was where “Belgian” financial institutions concentrated their capital: wealth produced in Wallonia was not sufficiently reinvested there, whereas the Flemish

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<sup>10</sup> In February 1994, a grooming of the revised and amended Constitution led to a new numbering of its articles.

<sup>11</sup> See L. COURTOIS, M. DORBAN and J. PIROTTE (eds.), *De fer et de feu. L'émigration wallonne vers la Suède au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Histoire et mémoire (XVII<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, in: Publications de la Fondation Wallonne P.-M. et J.-F. Humblet, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2003 (Série Recherche, V) and L. COURTOIS and C. SAPPÀ (eds.), *De Fer et de feu. L'émigration wallonne vers la Suède. Histoire et mémoire (XVII<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, in: *Exposition au Parlement Wallon, Namur, 19-29 février 2008*, Publications de la Fondation Wallonne P.-M. et J.-F. Humblet., Louvain-la-Neuve, 2008 (Série Études et documents, V).

<sup>12</sup> See L. COURTOIS and J. PIROTTE (EDS.), *L'imaginaire wallon. Jalons pour une identité qui se construit*, in: *Publications de la Fondation Wallonne P.-M. et J.-F. Humblet*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994 (Série Recherche, I).

<sup>13</sup> See M. QUÉVIT, *Les causes du déclin wallon. L'influence du pouvoir politique et des groupes financiers sur le développement régional*, Brussels, 1978, and ID., *La Wallonie: l'indispensable autonomie*, Collection Minorités, Paris, 1982. See also F. BISMANS, in: F. JORIS (ED.), *Une odyssée économique*, in *Wallonie. Atouts et références d'une Région*, Namur, 1995, pp. 145-175, and Ph. BOVEROUX, P. GILISSEN et F.-L. THOREAU, *50 ans d'histoire économique de la Wallonie*, Liège, 2004.

bourgeoisie adopted an opposite attitude. Indeed, the Flemish movement very rapidly enriched its linguistic struggle for an overall social vision, integrating intellectual development (with the question of the Flemishization of the University of Ghent) and promotion of an economic “flamingantism” (of which Lodewijk De Raedt can perhaps be seen as the founder, at the turn of 19th and 20th century), placed at the service of an integral emancipation of the Flemish people. It was that movement which led to Flanders acquiring powerful instruments of development, notably with the Vlaams Economisch Verbond (1926) and the Kredietbank (1935), etc. In Wallonia, the absence of a politico-financial “centre” – a part played by Brussels – has also nourished a sub-regionalism, which has long obfuscated an awareness of the economic destiny of the region as a whole. The domination of an “acculturized” Belgian bourgeoisie (“we’re from nowhere”) in Wallonia, coupled with the emergence of a strong Flemish bourgeoisie, has also resulted in privileging Flanders in terms of investments, both public and private.

In closing this look at history, we can say that Wallonia has been putting its trust in Belgium, has placed all its bets on it, and has refused to see soon enough that Flanders, in the meantime become prosperous, has been withdrawing from the game. As a result, Wallonia has found itself in a profound symbolic destitution, in a solitude that it did not see coming and that it often still continues to deny. It was phagocytized by its mother Belgium.

## **II. PRESENT-DAY FACTS**

Since the elections of 2007, Belgium’s institutional and political present has been largely conditioned by tensions between the communities. A majority in the Flemish political opinion demands important institutional adjustments in order to increase competencies (and thereby the autonomy of Flanders) and to increase the regions’ responsibilities. A majority in the Walloon political opinion refuses such adjustments, as some of them would be unfavourable to the French-speakers of the outskirts of Brussels, while others could destabilize the social security system, or even put the equilibrium of Belgium in danger. We shall formulate three considerations on the Belgian institutional present.

### *1. The Flemish movement is not giving up the fight*

The persistent sentimental attachment of many citizens of Wallonia to the Belgian project sometimes makes them refuse to assess the Flemish factor. For them, each phase of appeasement is thus interpreted as a halt in the Flemish movement’s march, a prelude to a return to what they consider to be the harmony of yesteryear, that of the unitary Belgium.

If it is true that the past does not allow us to trace the lines of the future with precision, some facts deserve reflection. Born of a small seed in 1840, the Flemish movement has enjoyed 170 years of growth. In ceaseless amplification, it has diversified its goals, passing from the phase of linguistic demands to the cultural phase, then to the economic phase, and then to a more political phase of leadership in the Belgian State, coming finally to the more global phase of an increased autonomy in view of a Flemish national destiny. Despite notorious political divergences, the Vlaamse Beweging has succeeded in always redefining a common platform of demands. Despite tactical retreats imposed by circumstances, it has always managed to push up its platform. Flanders has irresistibly increased its external visibility and is completing its symbolic construction (including road signs in black and yellow, the colours of Flanders).

There can be no question here of blaming the Flemish movement. Nor will we try to blame Flemish economic and political leader’s short memory. At a time when there are talks of transfers of wealth between the north and the south of Belgium to the advantage of Wallonia, have we ever seen a Flemish historian or economist rigorously tally up the transfers which took place formerly in the opposite direction, at the time of the serious crisis that afflicted the Flemish regions during the 19th

century<sup>14</sup>? In the period of Walloon prosperity, the Walloon populations of the industrial valley welcomed a good number of workmen coming from the north, as the many Flemish family names in Hainaut and Liège testify<sup>15</sup>. Neither economy nor politics are primarily matters of good heartedness.

Let us simply try to understand the dynamics of the Flemish movement in its dialectical relationship with Walloon opinion. For 170 years, a good many Walloon political leaders, having met Flemish demands, have naively believed that the latest request would be the last. At the time of the long governmental crisis following the June 10th, 2007 elections (149 days without a government and then formation of a “temporary” government by Guy Verhofstadt in December 19<sup>th</sup> 2009), several of them affirmed not having seen any of it coming; yet, the Vlaamse Raad had defined a clear and broad majority position on all the demands. Many Walloon political leaders were deluded because they often refuse to look straight at truths that disturb them. It is simpler to blind oneself in attributing the Flemish demands to politicians eager to win elections and misleading the good people, rather than seeing the obvious: the Flemish separatist project, far from being only a few surface ripples, is born of a popular ground swell. Denying it stems from blindness, naivety or bad faith.

The community lull of the year 2009 is not definitive. It was undoubtedly due to the urgencies of the banking and economic crises. A doctrine currently gaining grounds in Flanders is based on the wearing effect of time. Let issues that the French-speakers regard as important get bogged down. Let the economic situation of Brussels and Wallonia degrade in order to make the political officials of those regions start *quid pro quo* negotiations: the means of Walloon survival against an increased autonomy for Flanders.

## 2. *Belgium is being emptied of its substance*

Since 2007 the question of the scission of the electoral constituency of Brussels-Hall-Vilvorde (BHV) has been the focal point of Flemish demands and French-speaking resistances. A new bout of fever is brewing for spring 2010. In whatever way the evil is rooted off, it is certain that this burning question will not be the last and that the Belgian State will continue its progression towards an increase in the competencies of the federal entities. Political Flanders insistently asks for this increase in competencies. Social security seems to be the last bastion of solidarity among the regions, a bastion so far bitterly defended by the French-speakers. Yet it is predicted that arrangements will be made on the sly.

As to a good number of the contentious issues, in the long run and in good democratic style, the representatives of the Belgian French-speaking people (40% of the country’s population) will not be indefinitely capable of opposing the emancipatory will of a majority of the Flemish elected representatives (60% of the population). A stubborn refusal to do justice to their institutional demands will simply humiliate the Flemings, exasperate them and swell the ranks of the independentists. It would be suicidal to scorn the will of the Flemings to that point. Sentimental nationalist wounds can become dangerously infected. One does not put a heavy cover on a boiling pot. Tito’s Yugoslavia had wanted to pour a cement slab over the various Yugoslavian nationalisms; the country exploded in violence.

Often put forward by Flemish politicians, the word “confederation” indicates the constitutional status towards which some of them want to head. For our purpose, it is useless to enter into the legal details on the differences between a federal State and confederated States. Everyone knows that, in the first case, a State remains with important competencies and that, in the second case, various Sovereign states unite to entrust a given number of competencies to the confederation. Let us just remember the essential: if the competencies of the confederated entities increase substantially, the Belgian State

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<sup>14</sup> We should moderate this assertion. In recent years, economists have taken interest on this matter for the most recent period, but only after 1955. For studying this reality since 1830 raises complex problems, as well for the sources as for the methodology, see O. MEUNIER, M. MIGNOLET et M.-E. MULQUIN, *Les transferts interrégionaux en Belgique*, in: B. BAYENET, H. CAPRON, P. LIÉGEAIS (eds.), *L’espace Wallonie-Bruxelles. Voyage au bout de la Belgique*, Bruxelles, 2007, pp. 283-305, more specifically point 4, *Les transferts interrégionaux en Belgique ont-ils historiquement toujours bénéficié à la Wallonie ?*, pp. 292-300. Only one study was published, but its contents is subject to serious criticisms (*ibid.*, pp. 293-294) : see J. HANNES, *De prijs voor België was altijd Hoog*, in: *Secessie. Kwartaalblad voor de studie van separatisme en directdemocratie*, 2, jan.-feb.-mar. 2001, pp. 25-37. One shall refer also to M. QUÉVIT, *Flandre-Wallonie: Quelle solidarité. De la création de l’État belge à l’Europe des régions*, Charleroi, 2010, just published, which provides some details on the most recent years.

<sup>15</sup> On Flemish emigration to Wallonia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, see Y. QUAIRIAUX, *L’image du flamand en Wallonie (1830-1914): essai d’analyse sociale et politique*, Brussels, 2006.

will end up resembling an empty shell. Without making forecasts or drawing conclusions on an unknown future, we will limit ourselves to noting that the two major cultural communities of Belgium pay less and less attention to one another and follow divergent paths.

Let us observe that the rise of Flanders and its exigencies do not necessarily imply the disappearance of Belgium. On the one hand, the Flemish nationalists may perhaps be satisfied with an increasingly broad autonomy, because total independence would probably imply their losing Brussels. On the other hand, and paradoxically, one should take into account that Belgium has a certain level of political stability: whereas, over the past two centuries, the majority of neighbouring countries changed regimes and constitutions several times (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria, and Greece), Belgium still has its Constitution of 1830, certainly modified on several occasions, but never abandoned. A weaker State politically, Belgium has always privileged a culture of ideological, political and linguistic compromise. It has often privileged institutional creativity, a complex engineering by which none of the partners loses face, over direct confrontation.

There are thus chances that the Belgian State will remain, even with reduced federal competencies. Its explosion is probably not set for tomorrow and, rather than towards divorce, Belgium may be heading for a separation of assets under a hybrid regime. For that matter, what would each partner do if it were forced to part with its confrontation-compromise dialectic, a two centuries old well-worn habit?

### *3. Wallonia is ill-served by its institutions*

Summoned into existence with the 1971 constitutional revision, this is the political uncertainty the Walloon region must emerge in, as well doing so within a degraded economic and social environment. However, the current institutions do not favour Walloon reorganization. Deprived of cultural competencies, Wallonia lacks the symbolic means for building an enhancing and dynamic image for herself<sup>16</sup>. The population of a Wallonia in economic decline for half of a century is rather unsure of itself and, in fact, has taken to heart the image of itself as a lazy and decadent people which a triumphalist Flemish press often throws in its face. An injustice of history for a region that until the mid 20th century made the prosperity of industrial Belgium! ... How can one get out of this vicious circle without putting cultural and mental resources to work? Can we imagine a business obliged to enter the market, deprived of its symbolic means: a heading, a logo, a trademark?

A small reminder is called for here. Born the same year and shortly before a Walloon region competent in the economic region, the French Community (la Communauté française) of Belgium received competencies in cultural and social welfare matters<sup>17</sup>. The fruit of a laborious compromise, the Constitution was revised in 1971 in a semi-federal direction. It was a compromise between federalism with two parties (Flanders-Wallonia) and federalism with three parties (Flanders-Wallonia-Brussels). Generally speaking, the communities' cultural autonomy was more a response to the Flemings' wishes (a federalism based on two major cultural communities); whereas the economic autonomy of the regions corresponded more to the Walloons' wishes (a federalism based on three economic regions). This is also the context in which the German-speaking Community of Belgium (Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft Belgiens) was created, exerting Community competencies over nine mainly German-speaking communes belonging to the "German language region" and integrated into the Walloon region as regards regional competencies<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> The regions' competencies are exercised in a well delimited territory and relate more to economic aspects: economy and credit, foreign trade, territorial management and urbanism, housing, environment, rural renovation, agriculture, water management, supervision of provinces and towns, employment, public works, transport, energy, scientific research, as well as the international relations for those various areas. Moreover, certain competencies of the French Community have been transferred to the Walloon region (health policy and assistance to persons).

<sup>17</sup> Use of languages, culture, education, audiovisual, medicine, child protection and scientific research, as well as the international relations regarding these various areas.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, the reality is more complex than is often thought: 1) in administrative matters, the towns of the German language region must propose linguistic facilities for the French-speaking minority living in the German-speaking Community; the 2) adjacent towns located in French language regions must offer certain facilities for the German-speaking citizens: resulting in two towns with veritable facilities in German (Malmédy and Waimes) and three towns with German and Dutch facilities only in the area of education (Baelen, Plombières and Welkenraedt); 3) moreover, in the German language region, the German-speaking Community exercises certain competencies transferred by the Walloon region: monuments and sites (1995), employment policy and archaeological excavations (2001), supervision over towns and police zones (and, since 2009, over the *intermunicipals*), the implementation of subsidized works, towns financing, public administration of churches and assimilated establishments, funerals and graves (2005).

Leaving aside this German-speaking Community for a moment, such bicephalous institutions (Community and Region), which should contribute to the construction of Wallonia, in fact do it ill service. The territories and interests of these two institutions do not entirely overlap and their interests are not always convergent<sup>19</sup>. To undertake an economic recovery, the Walloon region can neither use cultural leverage nor count on symbolic capital. Its institutional duality is not suited to clarify the symbolic landscape of a Wallonia suffering from a failure to understand itself. In 1983 and 2003, two Walloon Manifestos put their finger on the problem... unsuccessfully, for the French Community of Belgium benefits from the support of the French-speaking Belgian cultural establishment<sup>20</sup>.

Independently of the necessary bond of solidarity it preserves between the Walloon and Brussels regions, the French Community of Belgium has fostered a still-born cultural plan. That institution expresses the aims of the heirs to the bourgeoisie of 1830 who formerly built a unified Belgian State on a French-speaking base. With the Flemings having refused to adopt that model, the French Community is pursuing the Belgian dream without them. This residual State thus counts a capital city, Brussels, and a province, Wallonia, whose name and aspirations are blotted out. The French-speaking establishment has named its ideology: “belgitude” (Belgianness), a current term launched in the 1970’s in French-speaking Brussels circles. A catch-all and narcissistic characterization, functioning for the exclusive use of the French-speaking part of Belgium, this “belgitude” is just a fallback concept...

The coherence needed in dealing with economic, social and cultural questions, as well as the clearness and visibility of institutions requires that Belgium should recompose itself around its regional components: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, without forgetting the German-speaking community, which may inherit Walloon regional competencies for the “German language region” already defined by law for the exercise of its community competencies... Each of these regions should thus have “packages” of homogeneous and complementary competencies. It should be recalled that the Walloon movement historically privileged that form of federalism.

### III. MIRAGES AND DEADLOCKS

Before drawing some pragmatic paths for the Walloon future, it seems important as a preliminary, to close a few doors which seem to lead only to mirages or impasses.

#### *1. Nostalgic solutions*

We have sufficiently shown that a pure and simple return to square one, the “lost paradise” of a unitary Belgium, was unrealistic. For that matter, that solution is only envisaged by a handful of nostalgic individuals ill-advised of the real evolutions. On the other hand, mitigated variations of this solution surface regularly: generalized Belgian bilingualism, bilingualism for the province of Brabant, or a single electoral constituency for some of the elected officials of the federal Parliament. Roughly speaking, such rather unrealistic, watered-down misadventures result from over-simplification along the lines “all we have to do is”. However, there is no salvation in nostalgia. Nostalgic Belgians will undoubtedly have no alternative to converting to a new type of cynicism brought on by regionalization.

- **Generalized Belgian bilingualism.** It is sometimes said that generalized bilingualism would arrange all Belgium’s problems, as if such a generalized bilingualism were even possible and as if the Belgian malaise were only linguistic. And, while they are at it, the Walloons are made to feel guilty in holding them responsible for rejecting that bilingualism at the time of a vote on laws governing the

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<sup>19</sup> A defect of the French Community is a lack of precision as to its territorial limits, owing to the fact that Brussels is a bilingual region. It also suffers from not having economic competencies. Additionally, the fiscal power belonging to the French Community is hardly applicable, because in Brussels the two communities (Dutch-speaking and French) are competent for the same territory. Finally, composed artificially by two socially and economically very different regions (Brussels and Wallonia), united to one another simply by the language, the Community proves to be a hybrid with little mobilizing power for the populations.

<sup>20</sup> Manifeste pour la culture wallonne (1983) and Manifeste pour une Wallonie maîtresse de sa culture, de son éducation et de sa recherche (2003).

use of languages in 1932, which in our view leads to a concealment of the Walloon historical reality and, upon analysis, to a paradoxical reasoning<sup>21</sup>.

If everyone agrees in saying that knowing languages is an asset and even a pressing need at certain levels of responsibility, the idea of a “generalized bilingualism” appears to us as surprisingly ingenuous. Without going back to the tower of Babel myth, the whole history of languages shows that integral bilingualism is always - and can only be - “diglossic”<sup>22</sup>. Historically speaking, the generalized cohabitation of two languages has always been the result of a “necessity” which leads a population to have to learn another idiom than its original tongue, with, as a corollary, an unavoidable relationship of domination: the second language is learned because it is “dominant”; the other is threatened in the long term because it is “dominated”. That was the case with the Walloon languages, practically eradicated today, as would have been the case with Thiois (Diets) speakers if the Flemings had not opposed it... It is nevertheless surprising to have to recall, in the debate, which concerns us, the example of Flanders! Initially, the Flemish movement, wanting to save its language and its culture, demanded the use of the language of the people, parallel to French: that was the time of bilingualism, which was expressed, for example, in the creation of the bilingual University of Ghent (the Nolf law, 1923). Almost immediately, in a second phase, they necessarily ended up calling for unilingualism... Indeed, in the Belgian society of the time, the recognition of Flemish as an official language in Flanders, alongside French, changed nothing: French, the dominant language, continued to be a necessity for anyone wanting to legitimize him/herself, “to rise” in society, and the Flemish oral dialects continued their slow relegation to private space. It was the same in Canada. The official bilingualism of the Federation never fooled anyone: only the French-speakers are really bilingual and if the inhabitants of Québec had not voted Law 101 (August 26th, 1977), the continuous erosion of French would have continued there inescapably. Applied to today’s Belgium, where the Flemings are demographically, economically, politically and socially dominant, the choice of generalized bilingualism would necessarily lead to making French in Wallonia a dominated language - - as it already is in all bilingual organisations, both public and private -, condemned to slowly fade away, before disappearing.

The idea of generalized bilingualism raises another objection. If it would incontestably oil the machine a bit, it would nonetheless solve nothing. It could not stop the rise of Flemish nationalism nor the identity search in progress for 170 years. In contrast to what is often said, the Belgian malaise is not a simple linguistic matter, it is much more important: it is economic, sociological, behavioural, and cultural in the deepest sense. The French historian Jules Michelet had already noted this at the dawn of an independent Belgium. On his first visit in 1832, he showed sensitivity to the reality of the linguistic border: “Waterloo, a beautiful route via the forest of Soignes, with its tall beech-trees. The French language begins after Brussels. The route from Liège to Brussels forms the separation of languages, according to our driver. Waterloo, a Flemish name, beside Mount-Saint-Jean, a French name”<sup>23</sup>! But in its spirit, this duality is not only linguistic: in connection with an innkeeper in Ypres, he notes, “she was a marvellous example of the practical universality of this former population of the Netherlands, ardent like a Walloon, laborious like a Fleming”<sup>24</sup>. Granted, this is of course a stereotype, but involving cultural membership. There is even better: an early expression of community economic concerns: “We left Bruges at eleven, for Lille [...] Spent two hours in Courtrai. Read the newspapers [in French, then]: the Flemings complain that the Walloons are always favoured in road building, etc, that the government finances”<sup>25</sup>. Nothing new under the sun.

The idea of generalized bilingualism is not just a pipedream or an erroneous (linguistic) answer to a (community) question. During an interview granted to the Newspaper *Le Soir* during the governmental crisis of 2007, former Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene developed an argument

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<sup>21</sup> See M. LIBON, *Lois linguistiques*, in: P. DELFORGE, Ph. DESTATTE and M. LIBON (eds.), *Encyclopédie du mouvement wallon*, II, pp. 942-959, especially pp. 945-948.

<sup>22</sup> The word diglossia was originally synonymous with bilingualism, before being used by socio-linguists to characterize a linguistic system where two languages cohabit one and the same territory and end up being in competition, often fatal for one of them. This is one of the sources of the “linguistic insecurity”, we shall return to later. Besides the references cited note 27, see, for French: G. LÜDI, *Französische Diglossie und Polyglossie*, in: G. HOLTUS, M. METZELTIN and Ch. SCHMITT (eds.), *Lexikon der Romanistischen Linguistik*, V, I, *Le français*, Tübingen, 1990, pp. 307-334.

<sup>23</sup> J. MICHELET, *Journal*, in: VIALLANEIX (ED.), I, 1828-1848, Paris, 1959 (5<sup>th</sup> ed.), p. 107 (7 September 1832). And he moreover adds in relation to the linguistic realities of the Walloon populations: “Yet, the Waterloo guide says that the French spoken there [in Waterloo] is real French, and that there they don’t understand people from Liège. [the patois speakers]”...

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338 (26 Jul. 1840).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249 (16 Jul. 1837).

making the Walloons responsible for the current Belgian malaise: “If Wallonia had accepted the bilingualism system in 1932, Belgium would not be where it is today”<sup>26</sup>.

In fact, this accusation fails to take into account historical realities that are systematically clouded over, starting with the unitary Belgian, French-speaking bourgeoisie, supposed to have defended the interest of Walloons, to whom it in fact never paid any attention, as well as to the Flemings: under the French-speaking elites’ ideological domination, the 1830’s Belgian project was indeed intended to “belgicize” the lower classes, Flemish as well as Walloon, who, at the time, did not speak French. From that point of view, the linguistic situations of Wallonia and Flanders were hardly different: with Frenchified elites on both sides, with the people speaking, here Romance dialects, and there Thiois (Diets) dialects. With a notable difference however: whereas from the Middle Ages on, the Walloon country had taken part in a linguistic unification of the domain of the Oil languages, which gave birth to French (with a generalized use in Wallonia for everything written as of the 16th century), the wars of religion were to cut the Thiois dialects off from the Dutch unification movement (while continuing to employ those languages in written usage). Thus the result, in 1830, was asymmetric: while the Walloon people spoke its dialects in daily life, they had been indebted to French for all written usages for centuries (and thence a phenomenon of diglossia); while the Flemish people spoke their dialects, there existed a longstanding scribal tradition for their dialects (and thence, certainly, a different reaction to Frenchification). Grafted onto this linguistic asymmetry came a class reaction, different too: in Flanders, remaining rural, lower class opposition to the French-speaking bourgeoisie played a role on the terrain of languages; in Wallonia, industrialization led to an opposition of a social nature, where French, moreover the language of the Revolution and human rights, seemed a tool of emancipation.

In 1932, the common Walloon folk were actually still confronted with the laborious task of learning French, oral and written, of which it had little mastery at the time: in a survey carried out in November 1920 by the Walloon Assembly, for example, among “Justices of Peace” (62% answered), 76% of those questioned declared “that judges must understand Walloon”, and 65% added “that judges must be able to speak Walloon”. Compulsory schooling, voted in 1914, was still far from having instilled a sufficiently fluid and correct knowledge of the official language. World War II is often cited as a moment of a generational cleavage: orality shifted from spoken Walloon to French. How, under these conditions, would it have been possible, in 1932, to impose on all Walloons while they were learning French, the additional task of learning another language, Dutch, which moreover had not terminated, at that time its unification process? This is even truer since, again, the historical yet completed heritages were different: French had been spoken in Flanders since the Middle Ages (with a movement of spontaneous Frenchification of the “elites”, which was accentuated in the 18th century), whereas Flemish has only been introduced in Wallonia for a few decades, and only through teaching.

Finally, we cannot help being astonished by the paradoxical character of such an invocation of the 1932 laws in the person of Jean-Luc Dehaene. For let us return to the facts. What was the goal of the 1932 laws for the Flemish movement? Precisely to put an end to French-Flemish bilingualism in Flanders, which - diglossia oblige - did not manage to stop the erosion of Thiois (Diets) dialects, and to impose Flemish unilinguism on it, the only thing capable of saving the people’s language. How can one then blame Wallonia for not having done precisely what the Flemings were fighting? And what would have happened on the assumption of a Belgian Dutch-French bilingualism? Simply the beginning of a slow and inexorable movement of linguistic unification to the advantage of the dominant language: undoubtedly French at the outset (which would have caused a Flemish reaction), and then, with the rise in power of Flanders, Flemish (which would have caused a Walloon reaction)...

- **Brabantine bilingualism.** Little brother of generalized bilingualism, that of the former Province of Brabant poses the same problems and seems hardly more realistic. Just imagine, in Brabant, abruptly imposing bilingualism in all public employment, even among subordinates? What would be the real utility and what type of linguistic examination would you have to take, even for a modest, unqualified public employment? Concretely - and to say nothing about the Wavre firemen, whom cannot be

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<sup>26</sup> *Le Soir*, 3 Aug. 2007.

recruited any longer, as is the case in Brussels -, one would have to explain to us how, for example, we are to “bilingualize” the municipal administrative management of Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve. Perhaps in hiring Flemish civil servants, considered more bilingual than the Walloons (which is explained by the historical context and yet turns out to be less and less often the case)? Let’s not fool ourselves; from that situation with all the town’s bank accounts being concentrated in the Kredietbank or the policemen coming from Alost or Hasselt every morning, there would be only a short step away...

- **A unique electoral constituency.** Creating a unique electoral constituency in Belgium to elect some of the members of the federal Parliament is a solution which is sometimes considered and which was even discussed publicly at the time of the crisis in 2007<sup>27</sup>. Some of the representatives would thus be elected by the entire Belgian electoral body (Dutch-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking altogether). Seen from afar, this solution might appear able to inject a bit of cement among the various Belgian entities: it would enforce the legitimacy of the federal central authority, moderating a federalism that political scientists unanimously see as centrifugal.

Yet we wonder whether it is advisable to further complicate the institutional landscape by such electoral assemblies, designed to glue back together human communities, which anyway are moving away from one another. The glue might not hold. Eager for increased autonomy, would the Flemings accept a regression that would further tighten their bonds to Wallonia? As for Walloons aware of their region’s ‘lack of visibility’ problems, as well as of the nostalgia of many French-speakers for Belgium, would they agree seeing a part of the Walloon electorate orientating its electoral choice towards Flemish political personalities, with the risk of worsening Wallonia’s subjugation? And finally, how would the elected officials of that federal district behave during the inevitable conflicts of interests opposing north and south? In fact, it was the distancing of these communities that led to the explosion of the national parties, and then to a centrifugal federalization of the country, and not the reverse. In other words, the community conflict is not the consequence of a centripetal federal system: thus “correcting” the system will not change a pre-existent reality. Dictated by Belgian good will, but complicated and taking little account of realities in the field, this solution appears illusory.

## 2. *The Wallonia-Brussels Federation*

The common name “Wallo-Brux” indicates a more integrated Federation of two regions: Brussels and Wallonia. Recommending such a solution has the advantage of proclaiming strong bonds between Wallonia and Brussels. It also has the advantage of proclaiming a strong Brussels region, exercising its prerogative of federating itself with the Walloon region.

On the other hand, this proposal presents the great disadvantage of appearing as a union of the French-speakers, a union based more on cultural aims than on economic and social realities. Among some of its advocates, one suspects a will to continue the Belgian dream without Flanders, which would reject it. This solution suffers from an enormous disadvantage, that of recomposing the Belgian State on the basis of two major communities which are likely to clash permanently, rather than on the basis of three economically and socially different regions. In this respect, a strong union of Wallonia and Brussels seems to be an inexhaustible source of potential conflicts.

Additionally, from a Walloon viewpoint, what will be the destiny of Wallonia in a Federation one might describe as “Belgium without the Flemings”? What it has always been in the Belgian State: a province deprived of a sense on its own, at the service of a centre, Brussels, which is supposed to capitalize on the “wealth” of the whole in what is supposed to be the general interest. This project of Federation is to some extent a “French-speakers” recycling of the unitary Belgian model, which is in fact at the origin of the Walloon decline. Indeed, the mechanism producing a “Belgian” elite implies not only the Frenchification of populations, but also a centralization process - (remotely resembling the Versailles model) aimed at attracting the Frenchified “elites” to a centre of the two regions, in order to create a dominant “Belgian” class transcending the traditional “elites” on their way to “provincialization”. The consequence will be an absence of a Walloon bourgeoisie, who will be

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, K. DESCHOUWER and Ph. VAN PARIJS, *Une circonscription fédérale pour tous les belges*, in *La Revue Nouvelle*, 4, Apr. 2007, pp. 12-23. All the elements of the discussion are to be found at <<http://www.paviagroup.be>>.

straight away replaced by a Belgian bourgeoisie whose “territory” is Brussels, and who are certainly worried about Belgium, but not at all about Wallonia. The Flemings rejected Belgium, there is a strong temptation to continue Belgium without them, but without changing anything else: this would be a Wallonia-Brussels Federation, in which Brussels will continue “to capitalize”, as well as for investments as for profits, to the detriment of its Walloon “province”.

Let us note finally that Flanders would not give up Brussels easily on the assumption of a dismemberment of Belgium. If it decided to leave the Belgian State, which it dominates politically and economically, Flanders would obviously make arrangements to guarantee a situation, both on the Belgian and international level, whereby its prerogatives would be safeguarded and locked in. Dreaming of a strong and recognized Wallonia-Brussels federation for now seems confined to fiction.

### 3. *The rattachiste solution*

Fastening Wallonia to France might seem an attractive solution, having as assets a cultural community and an economic anchoring to a large country. Generally, the advocates of this proposal are divided around two options: either purely and simply attaching the current Walloon provinces to France, thereby becoming French departments; or negotiating an association preserving a certain Walloon autonomy within France, a possibility envisaged by the Constitution of the Fifth Republic.

We might first of all wonder about some of the postulates justifying such a proposal, which seem so obvious, but which can actually seriously be called into question. Doesn't presenting its partial or total dissolution into another State as an enviable solution show a lack confidence in Wallonia, in its real existence and in its potentialities? The patient is in convalescence, and what he is offered is just a “treatment of symptoms”! In addition, while it is true that Wallonia has shared more than its language with France for centuries, it appears reductionist to us to purely and simply identify community of language with “cultural community”, as some occasionally do. The “culture” of a human community - in the broad sense of a shared way of feeling and acting - is also explained by a spacial and historical rootedness. Mosan art, for example, cannot be described as a “French-speaking” creation, but, in this case, represents a specific and open territorial dynamic, having multiple influences, which are not only French. And, for example, the respective conceptions of laicity, which were worked out on opposite sides of the border in institutional distinct contexts and historical heritages, do not match, despite a debate which was largely shared between them, authorized by the common language.

In concrete terms, what would be the Walloon future within a French scenario? The question is far from simple! It is obvious that if it were really on the agenda, the answer provided there would be the fruit of vast, Belgian and international negotiations, with thorny problems to be solved, like the fate of Brussels, the take over the national debt, etc. The negotiated solutions would necessarily be between the two hypotheses mentioned above. On the hypothesis of an association with an autonomous regime, the alternative could be the following: either Wallonia works things out on its own and doesn't really need France; or it “needs” it and its autonomy will be as weak as its need is great, which in fact brings us back, if Wallonia does not take charge of itself, to the scenario of a pure and simple absorption. And what about that second hypothesis? Concretely, we wonder whether those proposing this fastening to France have ever thought seriously about it and whether their position doesn't simply represent a prolongation of the 1945 Walloon Congress dealing with the future of Wallonia, wherein the organizers foresaw a two-stage vote, initially “sentimental”, in which a majority chose the *rattachement* to France, and, then, “realistic”, which decided almost unanimously for a “Walloon autonomy within a Belgian context”<sup>28</sup>? If the absorption of Wallonia by France would incontestably provide advantages for its inhabitants, in terms of openings and mobilities, etc, of a large country, it would also mean an erosion of their identity in the long run, with the risk - real despite the emergence in France of genuine regions - of a perpetuation of the process of “provincialization”.

That being said, whatever terms of this proposal might be, such a solution could only be carried out if the Belgian State disappeared beforehand. However, that explosion may not be for tomorrow and, additionally, such a *rattachement* to France could only be achieved with a broad consensus in the Walloon populations. Taking into account the sentimental attachment of many Walloons to Belgium (perhaps irrational, but real), it seems foolish now to try to drive this message in their mindsets.

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<sup>28</sup> See Ph. RAXHON, *Histoire du Congrès wallon d'octobre 1945. Un Avenir politique pour la Wallonie ?*, Charleroi, 1995.

Moreover, the French solution encounters enormous elements of resistance, instinctive but strong, in broad layers of the Walloon population, nourishing a small neighbour complex in relation to France. This love-hate relationship is undoubtedly partly conditioned by a linguistic feeling of insecurity, well analyzed by socio-linguists<sup>29</sup>. This reticence is also fed by all sorts of stereotypes about “the Frenchman”, declared to be chauvinistic, Jacobin and condescending. Advocates of the French solution systematically minimize this psychological aspect. However, according to an expression attributed to Einstein, it is harder to disintegrate a prejudice than an atom.

As long as Belgium survives and Wallonia is not up against the wall, it thus seems foolish to dream of an institutional rattachement of Wallonia to France or even to negotiate with the French Republic a status making provision for a broad Walloon autonomy. How can one mobilize the masses to answer a question which has not been raised, and which will perhaps not be raised for a very long time, or which will perhaps never be raised?

One of the principal reproaches Walloon militants sometimes make to advocates of a rattachement to the French Republic is that of having their eyes turned more towards France than towards the Walloon populations. It is said that to get their way, some pro-France militants would go so far as wishing the Walloons the worst: a total degradation of the Walloon situation in a dilapidated Belgian State; all the better for expressing the relevance of their proposal. A passionate attachment to France cannot justify plunging the Walloon populations into a social debacle. Given the circumstances that Wallonia has known for more than forty years, there would be a certain element of irresponsibility in accelerating the disintegration process of Belgium.

Lastly, in the field of culture, the integration of the French-speaking populations of Belgium into the French Republic would reduce by one the number of partially French-speaking countries, which would inevitably weaken the position of francophony in the world.

#### IV. OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

No one knows the future. The Walloon option for which we are trying to prepare the ground here intends to be realistic, in the sense that it is based on what currently exists and what is relatively controllable in the near future. After defining two lines of action which should take priority, we will sketch out some features of the future architecture of a Wallonia within the context of a decreasingly unitary Belgium. If Flanders does not appear in this scheme, it is quite simply because it is not up to Walloons to present their options for a neighbouring region. It is up to the Flemings to determine their own future.

##### 1. *Two lines of action*

- **Making up for a clear symbolic deficit.** There is a flagrant imbalance in the Belgian State between a Flanders conscious of itself and promoting its own image and a Wallonia whose populations are still mourning for a unitary Belgium that is fading away. For the Walloons, the importance of a symbolic appropriation is striking. Earlier we showed how harmful the absence of cultural competencies was for the Walloon Region. For a society, the possibility of recovering its capacity to create and the control of its future necessitates the construction of a self-image combining past, present and future visions coherently. Deprived of the symbolic means of building a valorizing self-image, Wallonia ends up only being seen through the misadventures of a tough economic reconversion and in no way via the Flagships of its past and present know-how. Working on the mentality of the Walloons is urgent, to reconcile the Walloons with themselves and with their region. We might reflect on one of

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<sup>29</sup> Created under the auspices of Université catholique de Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve, for some years now, the VALIBEL research group has been studying the sentiment of linguistic insecurity felt by many Walloon speakers in relation to the French, thought to express themselves more fluently and correctly in French. See, among others: M. FRANCARD, J. LAMBERT and F. MASUY, *L'insécurité linguistique en Communauté française de Belgique*, in: collection « Français et Société », 6, Brussels, 1993; M. FRANCARD, G. GERON and R. WILMET, *L'insécurité linguistique dans les communautés francophones périphériques*, in: Cahiers de l'Institut Linguistique de Louvain, 19-20, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1993-1994; etc.

Antonio Gramsci's principles, for whom there can be no political takeover without a preliminary seizing of cultural power. It is thus imperative that the Walloon Region be in possession of cultural competencies.

- **Building a common platform.** The history of the Walloon movement has been marked by fractures, whereas the Flemish movement, despite dissensions, has had the wisdom to assert itself on the basis of a common platform, in placing the bar a little bit higher after each success. If the Walloons want to avoid the curse of their militant disagreements, it is paramount that they cease the mutual anathemas sometimes exchanged between regionalists, independentists and Francophiles. It would be suicidal to bring the Walloon movement into these ruptures, given that the Walloons themselves do not have that healthy a recognition of Wallonia as a region. Reason dictates a tactical union around the emergence of Wallonia, in order to develop its potentialities, so that it might have the full means of its development at its disposal, along two lines of action: one economic and the other cultural.

Yet a common platform would simply be to obtain the maximum for Wallonia and to make it a strong and coherent Region whatever the future political context might be. The goal would be a maximal valorization of the real potentialities for autonomy that its current institutions provide and also those that future reforms will provide. In this sense, it is imperative to exhort Walloons to reinvest in the political scene, to once again become full-fledged actors in the development of Wallonia, prime actors in what they will become.

If Walloons do not have the intelligence, the courage and simple good sense to mute their dissensions, then the future is seriously compromised. If Walloons do not manage to stop their writers, their men of power and their entrepreneurs denigrating themselves, then the future is likely to be dark: the region will become the insignificant toy of an increasingly self-confident Flanders.

Whatever the long-term future of Wallonia, the short-term need is to work towards a Walloon awakening, towards a harmonious "living together" in a common space. That "living together" is not an ethnic question; it involves all citizens living in Walloon institutional space, whatever their origins. It is not a question of Walloon nationalism, but of political realism, an awareness of the sense of history: inhabitants of Wallonia, of old stock or of recent migration, must imperatively invent a dynamic and attractive "living together". They must learn the lessons from recent evolutions and, rather than staring at the phantom of a Belgium which evaporates from year to year, they must reinvent new solidarities and turn resolutely towards the world.

## *2. The Walloon institutional option*

Arriving at the end of this argumentation, let us risk presenting an institutional sketch based on the Walloon regional option, on the assumption of the maintenance of a federal Belgium. It is important to delineate these Belgian institutions and lend them more coherence and clarity.

- **An emphasis on the regions.** Only institutions called regional, having a defined territory on which they can exert their competencies, are apt to make this clarification. A fusion of institutions cannot be carried out on the basis of cultural communities because that would sooner or later lead to cultural confrontations between the country's two major communities (the "French-speaking nation" standing against the Flemish nation) and would perpetuate the provincialization of Wallonia and its decline. This is not the case with regional institutions, centred on the economic and human development of the citizens living in their territory, whatever their origins or their language. The desire of the Walloon Minister-President, Rudy Demotte, formulated in spring 2010, to rebaptize the French Community (Communauté française) as the "Wallonia-Brussels Federation" seems to move in the direction of recognizing two autonomous, but associated entities.

- **A Walloon Region controlling its culture.** To emerge, Wallonia must recover its competencies in everything having to do with its symbolic image and culture. Rudy Demotte's proposal to change the Walloon Region's name at the same time as the French Community's is not a simple lexical fantasy: talking about "Wallonia" instead of a "Walloon Region" in fact fits into the perspective of erasing the

petty connotations linked to the term “region” and providing a more valorizing self-image. How can Wallonia recover in relying on economy alone, without being able to use the cultural leverage? Creating a “democratic living-together” on a “common territory” calls for a mobilization of every energy. How could an economic revival blossom in a region in difficulty without its having the cultural tools of its own brand image in hand? Compared to Flanders, unceasingly polishing its brand image on the international level, Wallonia is penalized because it has no tools to ensure its visibility. Earlier we showed how the “French Community of Belgium” (the community of French speakers), the heterogeneous institution, mostly cut from realities on the ground, was not able to fulfill its function and overlooked Walloon realities. Notwithstanding, it has the merit of maintaining a cultural bond between the Walloons and French-speaking Brussels inhabitants. Without necessarily destroying what exists, that institution’s wingspan can be reduced. Removing it would perhaps be harmful and would require long political negotiations on the federal level. The least costly solution would be to proceed either to transfers of cultural competencies between the French Community and the Walloon and Brussels Regions (as was already undertaken for questions of inheritance or social security, more related to a territory), or to “delegations” of competencies (for example in the domain of education, the budget, or the status of personnel, etc, would remain largely common, but the Walloon Region and the French Community Commission of Brussels (COCOF) <sup>30</sup> would exercise these competencies in their region in fully autonomous fashion.)

- **A full-fledged Brussels Region.** The same applies to the “Brussels-Capital-City” Region. Its citizens must have all the assets needed for building a multi-cultural and democratic “City-Region”. That by no means implies abandoning some forms of solidarity freely agreed between the two regions, Brussels and Wallonia. The operation of trimming the French Community of Belgium, while maintaining the bonds between Wallonia and Brussels, would also allow the Brussels region to present itself in the form of a full-fledged region, with a better profiling of its particular image as the European Capital City. The COCOF is capable of managing the cultural competencies recovered from the French Community for the Brussels region.

- **A German-speaking Region free to choose.** A small community often neglected in Belgian debates, the German-speaking Community, must obviously keep the control of its cultural development. Currently forming an integral part of Wallonia for economic questions, it is recognized as having cultural rights equal to those of the other two major communities. The choice of its destiny, in Wallonia or outside it, must be left to the inhabitants of this community. But it is a safe bet that, in the Belgian context, the German-speaking Community will choose a German language Region where they will exercise both their current competencies and the territorial competencies of the Walloon region. What is taking shape, from this point of view, is a Belgium with four regions defined on a territorial basis, the only one viable in our view: Republics (*Res publica*) only recognize territories where laws apply in an equal way; a right which applies to persons is always feudal by nature... The debate here, opposing advocates of “territorial law” to partisans of “personal law” is actually obscure: the Flemings, who defended territorial law in linguistic matters, were elsewhere promoters of the concept of “community”, allowing them to include the Dutch-speakers of Brussels; the Walloons, who were promoters of the concept of “Region” with a view to their economic recovery, finally entered a logic of creation of a “French Community” liable to defend the interests of “French-speakers” vis-à-vis “Dutch-speaking” interests <sup>31</sup>, a Community which nonetheless reproduces the domination structures of a unitary Belgium! Only territory can guarantee the principle, fundamental in democracy, of equality regarding taxes and the political responsibility resulting from it: “I pay, I decide; I decide, I pay”. The French Community’s still-born project,

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<sup>30</sup> The French Community Commission is competent for French-speaking, uni-community institutions of the Brussels Region, in cultural, educational and welfare matters. Since January 1st, 1994, like the Walloon region, it moreover exercises competencies delegated to it by the Council of the French Community (private physical education infrastructures, sports and outdoor life, tourism, social advancement, professional retraining and recycling, school transport, health policy and assistance to persons).

<sup>31</sup> We will underline here the problem posed by the names of our institutions: if we have chosen “French” Community, given that “logic”, why haven’t we opted for “Dutch” Community and “German” Community? It’s much more than a question of “terminology”... On this subject, read J.-M. KLINKENBERG, *Citoyenneté. Des mots pour la dire*, in: *Toudi*, VI, 1992, and ID., *Enfin le temps des projets ? Quatre langages pour la Wallonie*, in *Pour la Wallonie. Fondation wallonne P.-M. et J.-F. Humblet. Vingt ans d’action wallonne (1987-2007)*, Publications de la Fondation wallonne P.-M. et J.-F. Humblet, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2008, p. 51-61 (Série Recherche hors-série).

because impracticable, of introducing a community tax in Brussels, under the Executive committee chaired by Bernard Anselme (1992-1993), illustrates this principle perfectly. In the same order of ideas - but that is another debate – we understand the Flemings’ irritation in dealing with certain peculiarities and oddities of our current State: ‘the Federal State’ pays unemployment, but the regions are responsible for employment policies...

## CONCLUSION

The regionalist Walloon point of view developed in this paper seeks to be pragmatic and realistic: it takes into account the facts of current policies and the sensitivity of each component of Belgium; it only requires a few institutional rearrangements. And yet the route seems long, for the real, major obstacle to overcome is of a mental nature. Rather than wearing themselves out in resisting Flemish surges in seeking to save a unitary Belgian dream, Walloons and French-speaking Brussels inhabitants would be better advised to build their own image, a positive image, attractive and open. Walloons must begin by referring to themselves with kindness. What is not named has no existence. In their vast majority, the media forming public opinion in Wallonia do not “teach” Wallonia in a constructive way. The current conformism of spokesmen and writers consists in being ironical about a Wallonia that has trouble recovering but nonetheless provides them with a living. They certainly do not improve their stature in addressing sarcasms to people suffering from unemployment but manage to keep their heads high. We have to make them understand that Wallonia needs their solidarity as well as their talents.

Wallonia sits between two chairs: unitary Belgium that will not come back, and “after-Belgium” that has not started yet. No one knows if this “after-Belgium” will ever come. Today, in this unstable situation, the only certainty is that the Walloons (and the Brussels inhabitants for their “Capital-City-Region”) must organize themselves and reinvent their Region, making it operational and consistent, and providing it with an image of dynamism and openness to the world.