

## Party and opposition formation in Belgium

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Though the concept « political party » traditionnally refers to « discord », « conflict », « opposition », the parties have grown into essential factors of political mobilization, and they play an important part in the integration of local and social groups into the nation. In order to come to an insight into the political structure, and what is more, into the plot of the political conflicts in a nation, it is consequently, necessary to know the lines according to which the political antitheses and separations have been formed.

The purpose of this article therefore is twofold :

— To examine the integrating role of the political parties : how far was the political system stabilized by the coming about of generally recognized channels through which the possible conflicts could be expressed ? How far were the ruling classes willing and capable to make room for nascent new classes and to save the political balance in this way ?

— Which controversies gave rise to enduring party formation ? Does a definite hierarchy exist in the political conflicts, of which some lead to final political separation, while others did not ?

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The starting point for this second objective was the fourfold scheme of Talcott Parsons (1), as it has been worked out by S.M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan in *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments — An Introduction* : they distinguish a territorial and a functional dimension in the structure of national conflicts.

Each of these conflictual dimensions produced its own revolution : the territorial lead to a national and the functional to an industrial revolution.

## I. THE NATIONAL REVOLUTION

According to the scheme of S.M. Lipset and S. Rokkan this revolution has been the result of a double conflict :

— The conflict between the centralizing and standardizing national State and the historically grown privileges of the Church.

— The conflict between the central state-building culture and the increasing resistance of a certain subculture (ethnic, linguistic, or religious).

### 1. The conflict between Church and State.

During the first decennials after the Belgian independence this conflict lead to the rise of the *Liberal* and later of the *Catholic party*.

Belgium, during the first years of its existence, had remained faithful to the political *Unionism* that had come about in 1828 between the Catholic and the Liberal mental attitudes, based on de Lamennais' liberal-catholicism, which was not yet condemned at that moment and had a rather considerable number of supporters in our country, and on the evolution within the Liberal opinion towards recognition of the principle of sovereignty of the people and parliamentary democracy. Their unanimous opposition against the policy of William I resulted in 1830, rather accidentally than consciously, in the splitting of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, established in 1815. But the controversies with Holland being solved and the Belgian independence being consolidated, the internal political antitheses became increasing again. In this period they had been centred — just as in other European countries — round the matter of the influence of the Church on public life and mainly on education. In spite of the rise of international social-

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(1) T. PARSONS, R.F. BALES and E.A. SHILS, *Working Papers in the Theory of Action* (Glencoe, Free Press, 1953), Chapters III and V.

ism (Belgium was a refuge for all kinds of revolutionaries at that moment), political life in Belgium was scarcely disturbed by the social question, not a least because as a result of the restricted suffrage the political scene was dominated by an elite that had little interest for the needs of the politically inconsequential population.

The conflicts between Liberals and Catholics grew sharper, because the Church did not surrender its centuries old privileges and still could not reconcile itself to the evolution towards secularization of the political and social life and to the separation of Church from State : the pontifical condemnation of de Lamennais and the liberal-catholicism in 1831 had made the loyalty of the Belgian Catholicism against the Liberal constitution (in which the liberty of religion and of education had been promulgated) more or less a problematical one. Because the majority of the Belgian Catholics, in the first decennials of the independence in all respects, were of opinion that the constitution served the ecclesiastical interests on the tactical level, their collaboration remained complete. Moreover, for analogous tactical reasons, namely to avoid a conflict between the young State and the privileges of the Church by melting the interests of both the parties as much as possible, they were the most faithful stalwarts of Unionism, and they therefore hesitated a very long time to found an own confessional party. From this point of view the denunciation of Unionism and the foundation of an own party was the only possibility left for the Liberals to break through the status quo, of which the Church took advantage, and to guarantee the priority of the civil over the ecclesiastical authority. The first Liberal congress of 1846 according by made an end to the Unionism and to the partyless existence of Belgium ; the election results of 1847 affirmed this evolution to a parliamentary regime with a two-party system, in which one group bears the whole government responsibility and is checked by the other party, as the so-called opposition. The new government was exclusively composed of Liberals and wanted to realize the Liberal program, that mainly came to the secularization of the State. But at first they did not want to do so in a climate of anti-religiousness (the majority of the Liberals were still Catholics); in this respect, the statement of a prominent Liberal is significant : « Les libéraux veulent que l'Eglise soit dans l'Etat et non pas l'Etat dans l'Eglise... Nous ne voulons pas que la Belgique devienne une province romaine ».

From 1857 to 1884 homogeneous governments succeeded each other ; at first the Liberals held the reins. This preponderance was also determined by the fact that they only had the disposal of a party apparatus and a platform. The Catholics still stucked to the myth of

Unionism and shrank from founding an own confessional party; for the time being they confined themselves to electoral associations, that were active only in time of election.

The Liberal secularization policy, however, resulted in an aggravation of the conflicts between Liberals and Catholics. An even more profound malaise arose after the publication, in 1864, of the encyclical *Quanta Cura* and the *Syllabus*, in which the Liberal liberties were flatly condemned: the liberal-catholicism, that up to then had been the leading policy in Belgium, was in a hole by this pontifical sentence. Moreover, this sentence lead to the labelling of the Catholics by the Liberals as bad citizens, because they could no longer bring the Belgian constitution and its Liberal liberties in agreement with their faith. Differences of opinion among Catholics also increased, since the Ultramontanists felt themselves strenghtened from Rome in their denunciation of the Liberal principles embodied in the Belgian constitution, and in their striving for the establishment of a wholly Catholic State (but the Ultramontanists always remained a minority in the Catholic party).

The Catholics made no use of their electoral victory in 1870 to put an end to the secularization started by the Liberals. This moderation, however, could not prevent the political climate from getting worse: Ultramontanism, that naturally could bring in only little comprehension for the liberal-catholic policy of the government, predominated in the Catholic ranks outside parliament, while the anticlericalism of the Liberals became more and more aggressive. The implacability of the Catholics and the Liberals extended from parliament to the street, where the political struggle was continued with other means.

The fanaticism of the Ultramontanists, who regularly attacked the Catholic government, played into the Liberals' hands, who gained a big electoral victory in 1878 and for the following six years lead governments which took the offensive for the supremacy of the State over the ecclesiastical privileges. In contrast with the Catholic governments of the preceding decennial, their aim was not the moderation of the political antagonism, but they had a very definite objective in view, namely the withdrawing of education from the influence of the Church (in most West-European countries, schools were indeed the battlefield where the conflict between Church and State was fought out). The school struggle broke out against the Liberal bill proposing that each commune would have at least one public school, which in fact would be run by the State, and that the lessons of Catholic religion would be struck off the time-table. The school struggle grow to the most emotional dispute in the existence

of Belgium : the influence which the Church had exerted up to then on primary education (2) was completely nullified by this bill. The reaction of the episcopate was of course very violent. In a pastoral letter the believers were forbidden to teach at public schools or to send their children to such schools. Against these « schools without God », an own Catholic institution, endowed by the Catholic community, would be founded in each parish. The direct result of this uncompromising Catholic resistance was that a year after the passing of this Education Act, there were only about 300,000 pupils in the public schools, while nearly twice as much went to Catholic schools : especially in the agrarian Catholic Flanders public education was almost deserted.

In spite of this actual disapproval of its secularization policy, due to the still undisputed moral authority of the bishops over the Catholic part of the nation, the Liberal government proceeded in following the same direction, among others by severing the diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

However, this policy directed to the radical coming out of the status quo in the relations between Church and State, in favour of the latter, was not accepted by the electorate : the election results of 1884 were a real mishment for the Liberals, with the consequence that the Catholics returned to power. Till the outbreak of the First World War, the parliamentary majority remained in their hands, at first the Liberals and later the Socialists being the opposition. As a first result of this transfer of power, they made an end to the Liberal secularization policy, and they altered the so-called law of woe on primary education in such a way that all primary schools, except some in the big towns, again got a merely confessional character, and that the conflict between Church and State was settled in the advantage of the Church. The fact that the Catholics assumed alone all government responsibility during thirty years favoured this tendency. It should be noted, however, that Ultramontanism has never obtained the majority within the Catholic party (among others as a consequence of the more progressive pontificate of Pope Leo XIII), so that it never tried to touch the political system, in this case the Liberal liberties embodied in the constitution. On the other hand, it tried to use these liberties for retaining the ecclesiastical privileges and succeeded in this

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(2) The Unionist compromise effected by the Act of 1842 recognized the principle that religion had to penetrate through the whole education and would thus be the basis for every education. The Catholics, however, got less supervision of the appointment and programme policies than they had hoped.

way to leave a confessional mark upon the Belgian State (the Education Act of 1914 that contained the subsidization of free primary education by the State was a clear expression of this).

Besides this partial victory of the Church over the liberal, secularizing State, the school struggle also resulted in the foundation of a confessional, Catholic party in 1884 : the first phase of the national revolution consequently was closed by the splitting of the electorate and the consolidation of the political conflicts according to the dividing line clerical-anticlerical, in a sharply bordered bimodal polarization. From 1884, however, this polarization was already pushed aside by other political conflicts, which from that moment came clearly to light, namely the social question.

## 2. The conflict between central culture and subculture.

In the period of national revolution there rose a conflict between the French culture, incarnated in the young Belgian State, and the Dutch or Flemish subculture. The European language border running straight across Belgium, certain linguistic difficulties and frictions between the northern Dutch-speaking and the southern French-speaking people were inevitable. The Belgian situation, however, was rather complex from the beginning, since the language border presented not only a geographical but also a social aspect : in Flanders the bourgeoisie, that as a result of the suffrage called « censitaire » (voting on the basis of taxes paid) exercised the political power, was mainly French-speaking, while the politically inconsequential population was culturally locked up in Flemish dialects.

From the viewpoint of the founders of the Belgian State, it was therefore no more than logical that the national culture would be the one of the French-speaking (Flemish and Walloon) bourgeoisie. Their liberal mentality, however, made them embody the freedom to use either language in the constitution, but this was more semblance than reality, because French was the only official language (in the perspective of that time the official unilingualism was an essential factor for the political unity).

The reaction of the Flemish subculture against this supremacy of the French central culture started very slowly, and remained very faint for a long time. In contrast with the conflict between the centralizing State and the Church, this reaction did not result in the formation of a party — at least not in the period of national revolution. A great number of reasons can be alleged for this fact. They can be summarized as follows :

— This conflict between the national culture and the subculture could only be expressed on the political and parliamentary level if the bearers of this subculture, namely the Flemish population, had a share in the political life by means of the franchise. This being limited to the French-speaking bourgeoisie, it was almost impossible for a potential conflict between the national and the subculture to attain the political level, the more so as the Flemish people — politically — was completely apathetic at that moment, as a result of its very great material misery, and did not have the disposal of a capable political elite that was willing and able to defend its interests on this level.

— The so-called Flemish movement, that started shortly after the Belgian independence, was in essence a romantic-literary and no political movement. The political objective was only secondary for its leaders and, what is more, it had been embodied little concretely. The foundation of a Flemish party that would valorize the subculture was not their aim at all.

— The first so-called *flamingants* were good patriots, and wished no conflict between the national culture and the subculture. At first they did not question the principle of French being the official language, if it was only completed by the recognition of Dutch — besides French — in Flanders.

Flamingantism only became a political movement *after* the political antitheses had begun to grow firm according to the conflictual lines described under 1, with the result that it was made subordinate to the clerical-anticlerical controversies and did not lead to the formation of an own party. The flamingants tried in this period to valorize the Flemish subculture by campaigning *within* and *above* the framework of the existing political parties, without disturbing the existing bimodal polarization. These tactics were only partly successful : the use of Dutch was authorized in the courts and in the provincial and municipal administrations, but the recognition of the Flemish subculture on an equal footing with the French national culture could not be obtained during the 19th century.

### 3. Conclusion.

The national revolution lead to a strictly competitive two-party system, in which elections were decisive as well for the formation of the government as for the policy to be pursued : the antagonistic

school policies of the Catholic and Liberal governments are significant in this respect. This rigorous bimodal polarization of the political antitheses was made possible by the fact that only a limited elite took part in the political process. This elite was only concerned with one category of conflicts : those between the Church and the State. The conflicts between the national culture and the Flemish subculture on the one hand, and the struggle between employers and employed on the other hand, were not yet valorized politically, so that the political game was almost entirely centred on this emotional question. The internal cohesion of the two parties remained rather strong as a second result of this situation.

The industrial revolution, which lead to new political antagonisms (between employers and employed) and to the rise of the Belgian Workers' Party, did not only bring about the end of the two-party system, but also that of the strictly bimodal polarization, because it severely affected the internal cohesion of the Catholic and the Liberal parties.

According to the scheme by R.A. Dahl (3), the forming of oppo-

(3) R.A. DAHL, ed., *Political Opposition in Western Democracies*. New Haven and London, 1966, p. 342.

The author distinguishes in the light of their objectives 7 forms of opposition.

TYPES OF OPPOSITION	Opposition to the conduct of government in order to change (or prevent change) in:				EXAMPLE
	personnel of government	specific policies of government	political structure	Socio-economic structure	
<i>Nonstructural opposition:</i>					
1. Pure office-seeking parties . . . . .	+	-	-	-	U.S. Federalists 1815-1830
2. Pressure groups . . . . .	-	+	-	-	U.S. Farm Bureau Federation
3. Policy-oriented parties . . . . .	+	+	-	-	U.S. Republican Party
<i>Limited structural opposition:</i>					
4. Political reformism (not policy-oriented) . . . . .	+or-	-	+	-	Britain: Irish Nationalists; U.S.: Women's suffrage movement
<i>Major structural opposition:</i>					
5. Comprehensive political-structural reformism. . . . .	+	+	+	-	France: RPF
6. Democratic social-structural reformism . . . . .	+	+	-	+	Dem.-Socialist parties
7. Revolutionary movements.	+	+	+	+	Communist parties

Symbols: + = yes, - = no.



sition in that period may be defined as a « non-structural » one, exclusively focused on the alteration of the political management and the specific government policy. The political regime itself was not assailed. The only opposition that could possibly take on a « limited structural » form (namely that between the Flemish subculture and the national culture) was not organized. Moreover the Ultramontanists, who attacked the very principles of the Liberal state, remained a minority in the Catholic party, that — in spite of certain pontifical utterances — went on supporting the Liberal constitution for it could use that constitution for its own benefit because of its quantitative superiority.

## II. THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Through the national revolution the enfranchized population was forced to make its stand in conflicts about fundamental values and — though to a minor extent — about its cultural identity. The industrial revolution, on the contrary, threatened to traverse these communities, that were based upon *philosophical judgements*, by forcing their members into a choice on their *economic interests*, as a result of the development of a new technology. These conflicts of interests came through in a double dimension : on the one side the conflict between rural and urban population, on the other side the conflict between employers and employed.

### 1. The agrarian interests against those of the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie in the towns.

The spectacular increase in world trade and industrial production in the 19th century enhanced the stress that existed between the agrarian sector and the industrialists and merchants in the towns. This conflict of interests between town and countryside was already centuries-old, but was now pushed to extremes by the industrial revolution. Unlike the Scandinavian countries, it did not lead to enduring party formation in the Latin countries, in Belgium and in the Netherlands, chiefly for the following reasons :

— The contrasts between clericals and anticlericals were so radical that they did not leave room for party formation on another basis,

the more so as the conflicts between agrarian interests on the one hand and industrial and commercial interests on the other hand were largely obviated by the contrast between the Catholic (conservative) and the Liberal party : the former recruited its followers chiefly on the countryside, the latter was a typically urban phenomenon. Consequently, the deep-lying division between secular and ecclesiastical interests greatly coincided with the one between town and countryside.

— As universal suffrage had not yet been established, the conflicts remained restricted to the urban and agrarian *elites*, that had access into the centres of power, and that consequently were not in want of an own party formation to stand up for their specific interests.

## 2. Employers versus employed.

In contrast to the conflicts sub 1, the growing disputes between the employers and the workers in all European countries resulted in the establishment of specific Labour Parties. It should be noted, however, that these parties only came into being at a moment when the proletarians' working conditions had already been improved considerably, and that no direct relations between their material misery and the awakening of their political consciousness existed. The proletariat did not pass on to political action in the famine years 1845-1849 ; it lasted until 1886 before the workers' protest took a more or less definite shape. The economic crisis was the immediate cause of spontaneous revolutionary strikes in the Walloon country, that could be repressed by the army only with difficulty. But they were more a result of growing political and social consciousness than of material decline (5). The *Belgian Workers' Party*, established a few months before, was not directly involved in these riots, but was indirectly favoured by the events that brusksly confronted the dominating political elite with a new dimension in political conflicts. In the Liberal system with restricted suffrage (*suffrage censitaire*), there was no room for the proletariat, that was up to then politically inconsequential. So the young Workers' Party could possibly be a menace for the

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(5) S.H. SCHOLL, ed., *150 jaar katholieke arbeidersbeweging in België (1789-1939)*, Brussels 1965, Part II, pp. 16-17.

It is demonstrated by means of budget studies that the standard of living of the working class in 1886 was much higher than in 1850, and that the strikes of 1886 could not find their primary origin in material conditions of life.

existing parliamentary democracy, if it would proceed to a completely structural opposition.

Yet this young party very soon limited its opposition to the socio-economic structure of the State and accepted from the beginning the main principles of its political structure (namely the parliamentary democracy), in spite of the absence of universal suffrage.

There is a complex number of factors to be given for this rapid integration :

1. In spite of the very deep and the emotionally vividly coloured political conflicts, the political system had proved its efficiency by the fairly strong political stability it had realized. The social problem was only posed in its full acuteness at a moment when the school struggle was almost fought and when the contrasts between clericals and anti-clericals had passed their culminating point.

2. From this first factor results that the dominating political elite could cope with the new political problems by taking a number of positive measures.

a) The strikes of 1886 formed the starting point for the first social legislation in Belgium. So far every labour regulation had been turned down on the principles of a strict liberalism. For example, measures had been taken to face the economic crisis of 1845-1849, but little or no attention had been paid to a possible improvement of the workers' condition. Between 1886 and 1894, on the contrary, a great number of social laws were adopted. Parliament and government, stimulated by the menace of socialism, tried in this way to take the wind out of its sails.

b) In 1893 the socialist and radical-liberal demand for an *extension of suffrage* was partially fallen in with. The initiative emanated from the left wing of the Liberal party, supported by a few progressive Catholics and mainly by the young Workers' Party, whose action methods inevitably remained non-parliamentary, as it still had no representatives in the legislative assembly. To force parliament to compliance with this claim, the Workers' Party was obliged to declare a general strike that passed off peacefully as contrasted with 1886, and that resulted in a compromise : universal suffrage, with plural voting for electors fulfilling certain conditions as regards age, property, education and marital status. From the fact that the socialist leaders immediately accepted this compromise, may be concluded that they did not want a tug of war with the dominating elite, and that they did not aim at a revolutionary overthrow of the regime.

This initial moderateness was doubtlessly promoted by the strong personal and fundamental bonds between some socialist leaders and some radical liberals. From its origin there was an active progressive wing in the Liberal party. It had a large interest for the social question and it was zealous for the extension of electoral rights. After the subsiding of the school struggle the disagreement of this radicals with the so-called doctrinaire liberals grew sharper, whereas their contacts with the emerging socialism and with the socialist intellectual leaders (J. Destrée, E. Vandervelde) increased. This interaction between radical liberalism and socialism undoubtedly stimulated the relative moderateness of the latter. Moreover, the conservatism of the Catholic party was moderated by the rise within its fold of a Christian-democratic tendency, that forced it to have a certain sympathy for social matters in view of the unity in its own ranks.

### 3. Consequences of the industrial revolution for the evolution of opposition formation.

1. The rise of the Belgian Workers' Party could contain a serious menace for the adequate functioning of the Liberal parliamentary democracy, for this new political group had no access either into parliament or into any kind of power-centre at all. Consequently, it was inevitably committed to non-parliamentary action methods. The adoption of universal (plural) franchise at this crucial moment and the success of the Workers' Party at the following elections (it got 28 seats at once in the House of Representatives, the Catholics kept 104 seats and the Liberals fell back to 20) introduced this young party in the parliamentary game and deprived it at the same time of one of its most important grievances. Moreover, it should be noted that from the beginning the Workers' Party itself was less concerned about the transformation of the political than of the economic (capitalist) regime. According to the Marxist Socialists the transformation of the political regime was secondary indeed. They were of the opinion that they would be able to get the parliamentary majority through further industrialization and universal suffrage. This majority would give them access to the full political and economic power. The relatively conciliating attitude of the political elite towards the workers' most urgent claims stimulated of course the Belgian Socialists to persevere in their policy of moderation and realism.

2. The wholesale entry of the Workers' Party in parliament put a definite end to the two-party system and to the existing bimodal polarization. However, the operative majority system contained the

danger of a new bimodal polarization formed on an economic instead of an ideological dividing line, because in the long run it would lead to the Liberal party's political death (as in Great-Britain). To counter this danger, the dominating Catholic party introduced a system of proportional representation, that made the Liberal party again a rather strong political formation, although it considerably cut down the Catholic party's parliamentary majority (in 1900 the Liberal party got 33 seats as against 20 in 1894; the Workers' Party only rose to 32 seats). This was an apparent manoeuvre of the political leaders against the rising Socialist movement. Result of this measure was not only that the two-party system came definitely to an end in Belgium, but also that the polarization of the political conflicts became much more complex: the old bimodal polarization between clericals (Catholic party) and anticlericals (Liberals and Socialists) remained, but was now crossed by the new polarization of conservatives (the majority in the Catholic party and the doctrinarian Liberals) and progressists (Socialists, radical Liberals and the rising Christian democracy within the Catholic party).

3. In spite of its moderateness and its speedy integration, the Workers' Party introduced a new method of action, namely the *general strike*. This, however, was confined to a politically rather limited objective: universal equal suffrage.

The use of this revolutionary method was in fact a consequence of the relative exclusiveness of the Belgian society, of the misconception of a part of the political elite about the workers' demands and of its attempts to isolate the Socialist movement (6). A comparison with the more open attitude of the political elite and the reformism of the Socialist parties in Great-Britain and Scandinavia is interesting in this connection.

Its revolutionary style did not prevent the Workers' Party from playing the parliamentary game loyally from the beginning and from expecting the reform of the socio-economic structure almost exclusively from parliamentary political action. For this purpose it was indispensable to democratize the election system and to allow the proletarians to take in parliament the place they had quantitatively right to. Hence the stress which the Socialists laid on the establishment of

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(6) The attitude of the Catholic politicians and dignitaries versus the social question after 1886 is characteristic: their sudden interest and activities were greatly inspired by the fear of the Socialist successes, which they wanted to neutralize by means of their Catholic workers' associations.

universal equal suffrage. Therefore, however, the Liberal party's support was almost indispensable. The alliance between these two parties, stimulated by the anticlericalism they had in common, regularly led to cartel lists at the elections, based upon a progressive programme that also contained the demand of universal equal voting. As this Liberal-Socialist co-operation did not bear the expected fruits, and as the Catholic majority kept firmly in the saddle, in 1913 the Workers' Party reverted to its revolutionary means of general strike to force democratization of suffrage through. At that moment a very strong opposition against the use of this method already existed within the party. E. Vandervelde, the Socialist chairman, vainly tried to refrain his troops when the prime minister signified him that the government would soon be willing to introduce universal equal suffrage.

4. This development towards closer relations, that was attented by a moderation in the socialist radicalism, has been accentuated and consolidated by the outbreak of the *First World War* and the violation of the Belgian neutrality. In vast majority the Belgian Socialists proved their loyalty as well to the interest of the Allies as to the Belgian government, that was transformed into a national one, in which also Liberals and Socialists (E. Vandervelde) were received. In 1918 the Belgian Workers' Party was no longer a menace for the Liberal parliamentary democracy : on the contrary, it felt responsible together with Catholics and Liberals for the national recovery and for the building up of a new future. This loyal attitude and the closer relations between the three parties led to the adoption of universal equal voting and of a whole series of social laws.

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After the First World War, when also the national and industrial revolutions came to an end, the existing parties consolidated themselves round the party structures and ideologies grown at an earlier date, and consequently round the earlier conflictual lines, although these had lost a great deal of their actuality. The forming of opposition became chiefly non-structural because the Workers' Party gradually integrated itself and because the structural opposition parties (namely the Communist party, Rex and to a minor extent the Flemish nationalist parties) remained rather marginal. This tendency undiminishedly continued after the economic crisis of the thirties and after the Second World War.

## I. AFTER 1919

## 1. Universal equal suffrage.

a) *Multipartism and coalition governments.*

To avoid every revolutionary outbreak and to ascertain the indispensable support of the working classes in national reconstruction, the political leaders in 1918 were willing to admit a great part of the Socialist claims, and especially the establishment of political democracy through the adoption of universal equal suffrage. Moreover, they drew the Socialist leaders into political resolutions by the formation of a government of national unity, and they stimulated a social legislation that met the most important grievances of the working classes. A general increase in the standard of living also resulted in liberating the working classes and the Socialist movement from a lot of frustrations, so that they became willing to identify themselves greatly with the national interest.

Next to this growing integration of the Workers' Party, the extension of the franchise meant the definitive end of homogeneous governments : the Catholic Party lost its absolute majority, the Workers' Party became the second party. The formation of coalition governments had two important results on opposition forming :

— The election results became less important for the formation of governments than mutual negotiations and agreements among the parties, because only coalition governments could secure a majority. From this logically resulted a weakening of the rivalry among the parties (although they mostly began the electoral struggle separately). Because of the impossibility of forming a homogeneous government they attached more importance to their weight as negotiators than to the strengthening of their parliamentary position. Through this procedure the quadrennial plebiscite lost a great deal of its significance.

— With coalition governments the opposition was less clearly defined as with homogeneous governments, not only because it often consisted of more than one party, but also because it cut right across the parties themselves. Especially in the Catholic party the internal cohesion got weak, as a result of the increasing conflicts between conservatives and christian-democrats. But the Liberal and Socialist parties too had to reckon with a weakening of their discipline and unity.

b) *Aggravation of the conflict between national culture and Flemish subculture.*

The establishment of parliamentary democracy did not only valorize the working classes, but also the Flemish population as a whole, which up to then had little influence in parliament as a result of the existence of the so-called social linguistic frontier (7). After the First World War the conflict between Flemish subculture and national culture grew sharper: the Flemish were no longer satisfied with small concessions, but required the total equality of their subculture with the (French) national culture. To this end the removal of the social language barrier and the recognition of the linguistic homogeneity of Flanders and the Walloon country seemed a first requisite.

Politically, however, the Flemish subculture largely integrated itself in the existing party system (the Flemish nationalists never got more than 8 per cent of the votes between the two world wars). For this may be given a threefold reason:

— The conflict between Flemish subculture and national culture took its definite shape only at a moment when the Belgian party-system already had consolidated itself, namely after 1918. A Flemish nationalist party as a permanent party formation would only have had a chance if it had come into being in the period of national revolution, before the entrance of the Workers' Party into the political arena and before the political mobilization of the masses. This thesis is confirmed by the fact that Flemish nationalism between the two world wars was most successful in those districts where the traditional parties and trade unions had not yet obtained a foothold in 1918.

— Through the existence of a social language barrier, there was no specific Flemish elite, that could participate in political decision-making. In contrast with the Belgian Workers' Party, the Flemish movement thus missed a great opportunity of winning gradual concessions without interfering significantly with the existing interests. The Flemish interests, on the contrary, were defended by the Flemish politicians, who had risen in the traditional party frameworks and who naturally valued the own party interests higher than those of the Flemish subculture.

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(7) In Belgium there exists not only a geographic linguistic border between North and South, that divides the country in a Dutch-speaking and a French speaking part, but the Dutch-speaking part itself is crossed by the so-called social linguistic frontier (although it crumbles of in the latest decades): the upper classes dissociate themselves from the population by the use of French.



— The conflicts between several subcultures, or between national culture and subculture are mostly so explosive and full of emotion, that they are seldom taken up by a normal parliamentary opposition that is willing to negotiate and compromise. Under these circumstances, one can imagine that some people try to find a solution *outside* the traditional procedures, and even outside the framework of parliamentary democracy (as happened after 1932), by which a peaceful solution is naturally made still more difficult. Moreover, the linguistic problem never took the first rank in the hierarchy of political conflicts. The social conflicts between clericals and anticlericals always counted more heavily than the language controversy.

It appears from the Flemish realizations between both World Wars that an own party formation was no *conditio sine qua non* to solve the conflicts between the Flemish subculture and the national culture: the equipollence of both cultures and the linguistic homogeneity of Flanders (8) and Wallonia were recognized in principle. The contribution of the Flemish Nationalist Party of these realizations was only indirect: by its existence and radicalism it goaded the existing parties into action, but it was not involved at all itself in the decision-making in this field.

## 2. Structural opposition after 1919.

As a consequence of the growing integration of the Workers' Party into the parliamentary democracy, and of the weakness of the Flemish Nationalist Party, along with its limited structural opposition, the image of the political game changed somewhat after the First World War. While the Catholic party had been leading homogeneous governments since 1884, from 1918 onwards it had to share power, alternating or together, with the former opposition parties, the Liberals and the Belgian Workers' Party. The really structural opposition was limited to marginal parties: the Communist Party and, after 1936, Rex.

### a) *A weak Communist Party.*

There are three reasons to be mentioned for the weakness of this party, and analogous to it, of the revolutionary left wings within the Belgian Workers' Party:

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(8) This implied the abolition of the social language barrier in Flanders, and the necessity for the traditional French-speaking elites in Flanders to identify themselves with the Flemish subculture; from this angle it was an important democratic victory.

— Notwithstanding its well-established organization, the Belgian Workers' Party was no social ghetto party in the proper sense of the word, i.e. a strongly ideologically coloured movement, striving after its members' isolation from influences of the social surroundings; it has been mentioned before that it was never politically isolated, thanks to its relations with radical liberalism. The absence, before 1917, of a strong left wing with acknowledged leaders, could but slow down the development of a Belgian communism.

— The First World War had brought about a lively patriotism in the Belgian Workers' Party; the communist movement, on the contrary, manifested itself from the beginning not only as a revolutionary reaction of a certain class, but also as an external menace to the nation (cf the unsympathetic attitude of the Workers' Party towards the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and its feeble reactions upon the allied interventions in Russia), and also for this reason it ran up against the scepticism of the Belgian working class.

— A potential revolutionary movement was taken much wind out of its sails by the numerous social realizations right after the First World War.

#### b) *Fascism in Belgium.*

Save in some Flemish Nationalist groups, fascism has never obtained a foothold in Belgium. Only *Rexism* did mean at a certain moment a threat for parliamentary democracy: grown out of the Catholic action, Rex none the less gained its first big election victory only *after* the economic crisis (namely in 1936), and shifted towards a fascist movement in the proper sense of the word *after* passing its summit (after the partial elections of 1937). This anti-movement was the first mass reaction of the isolated citizen, who felt threatened and powerless in front of the everspreading might of the bureaucratic organizations (9).

It had, however, a temporary character; the existing political parties still appeared sufficiently capable of mobilizing the voters in the existing formations, and of maintaining the Liberal parliamentary democracy in this way. In spite of the impotence of rapidly succeeding and unstable governments, which turned out not to be up to their ever more complex tasks, parliamentarism was maintained without

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(9) J.M. ETIENNE, *Naissance et évolution du mouvement rexiste jusqu'à la guerre*, Paris, 1966 (unedited thesis submitted to the « Fondation nationale des Sciences politiques », and prepared under the direction of J. Touchard).

essential changes in the period between both world wars. During, and even after the economic crisis, the belief of the political elite in the liberalizing political and economic regime remained almost unshaken.

## II. AFTER THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

### 1. Evolution towards the Welfare State and actual general coalition-mindedness.

The economic crisis of the thirties, the Second World War and the reconstruction gave opposition formation in Belgium a new dimension, which was, moreover, theoretically based on Keynesianism, that aimed at uniting the previously opposed social and economic interests in one common action programme. In Belgium the first impulse to the rise of the so-called Welfare State was given by Hendrik de Man's *planisme* in 1933 (10) : the purpose of this *Plan* was not only a neutralization of the economic crisis by abandoning the policy of deflation, but still more the general acceptance of capitalism by increasing State intervention in the economy. Before 1940, however, only very little of this was achieved because of the resistance and lack of understanding H. de Man met with, as well in his own party (that stuck to orthodox Marxism and actual reformism at the same time), as in the Liberal and Catholic parties, and in the world of industry and finance.

But after the Second World War the premises of the Welfare State (11) were accepted almost generally : the most evident proofs of this were the extension of social legislation, i.e. Social Security, and the integration of the trade unions in the economic (capitalist) order through the legal organization of the economy.

An important consequence of the economic thought in the Welfare State was the weakening of the traditional class struggle between employers and employed : the former became convinced of the necessity to rise total wages so much that they could lead to an increase

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(10) P. DODGE, *Beyond Marxism: The faith and works of Hendrik de Man*, The Hague, 1966, pp. 124-173.

(11) The definition used is that by P. THOENES in his work *De elite in de verzorgingsstaat*, Leyde, 1962, p. 124: « The Welfare State is a form of society characterized by a democratically organized system of government services which, while maintaining the capitalist production system, guarantee the collective social well-being of the citizens ».

in sales, while the trade union leaders, on the other hand, remained no longer insensible to the argument that wages which are too high would not leave enough funds for investments and could result in unemployment. Although there are still considerable differences of opinion about the « how » and « how much » of the wages and the distribution of national income, the oppositions of interests between both groups have been solved for the greater part, at least *in principle*. This development lead unavoidably to a technicalization of the political discussions and to a weakening of the political struggle, which — in spite of the terminology — was no longer a struggle about principles and purposes, but about *means*, within the generally accepted framework of the existing economic system.

This actual evolution, however, did not give rise to new political structures. Parliamentary democracy was untouched and the old controversies between parties remained open : the Socialist party changed its name and structure in 1945 (*Belgian Socialist Party* instead of *Belgian Workers' Party*), but in the meanwhile it kept expressing its attachment to the party programme of 1894, without adapting this to the new political and especially socio-economic situation. The re-organization of the Catholic party into a — theoretically a-confessional — *Christian Social Party*, did not attenuate appreciably the old antagonism between clericals and anticlericals. An attempt to found a new party on a « travaillist » basis (*Union démocratique belge*) failed miserably. Only the transformation, in 1962, of the Liberal party into a *Party for Liberty and Progress* (and the abandonment of its traditional anticlericalism) appears to have had a more profound influence on the political dividing line — in so far as the successes in the latest Parliamentary Election already permit a definitive judgment.

## 2. Conflicts behind apparent consensus.

It may be asked whether present-day party oppositions still correspond to real conflicts, and whether present-day party ideologies and party supporters are no tradition inherited from the past. The management, indeed, has become greatly a-political as a result of the almost general consensus between the various parties concerning the goal to be pursued. From this point of view, it may even seem anachronistic to talk about structural oppositions in Western democracies, which would rather belong to the political thought of the 19th century.

It is to be observed, however, that important conflicts lurk behind this apparent general consensus. Although the Belgian governments

since the Royal Question have been characterized by a fairly strong stability, they regularly had to cope with very sharp political outbursts, among which only the school struggle (12) fell within the existing party relations. All other conflicts arose outside the existing parties, and were even directed against them.

— The *revolutionary strikes during the winter of 1960-1961* broke out among Walloon, i.e. Liège workers: the Socialist party and trade unions took the lead only afterwards and rather reluctantly (13). These events started a period of general discontent in the Walloon working-class, alarmed by Wallonia's economic recession, and this dissatisfaction could be absorbed only partially within the framework of the Socialist party. It was attended by a more general criticism of the evolution of the Welfare State and, more in particular, of the Socialist party, which was said to evince more interest in the general (i.e. capitalist) well-being than in the specific interests of the (Walloon) working classes. This malaise led as well to several left wing disruptions from the Socialist Party, as to a crisis within the Socialist Party itself, which still keeps clinging to the Marxist class-struggle scheme, but has in fact become an indispensable pillar of the Welfare State.

— Notwithstanding the numerical majority and the undeniable economic progress of Flanders, conflicts between the Flemish subculture and the national culture did not fail to come; on the contrary they tend to increase, and to concentrate on the *problem of Brussels, the capital*, the incarnation of the national culture and the centralizing power. There is, moreover, a conflict between the existing (French-speaking) elite and a rising Flemish elite. Although a thorough inves-

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(12) This second school struggle (1954-1958) was in fact a repetition of the one in the previous century: the Liberal-Socialist coalition wanted to pursue a policy of secularization by stimulating the public schools and imposing (financial) limitations on the confessional schools. Notwithstanding the stout resistance of the episcopacy, the Catholic public opinion and the Christian Social Party, the coalition used its parliamentary majority to impose its views. But just as in 1884, the electorate of 1958 condemned this governmental policy aiming at a sharp separation of Church from State. The Catholic minority government formed in 1958 reached a compromise concerning this vexed question with the Liberal and Socialist opposition. The three parties signed the so-called *Schools Pact*, by which the State recognized in fact the equality between the confessional and public schools, with all its (financial) consequences.

(13) See among others R. DEPREEZ, *La grande grève (décembre 1960-janvier 1961). Son origine, son déroulement, ses leçons*, Brussels, 1963.

(14) The sociological backgrounds of the Flemish-Walloon relations are thoroughly explained in A. van den BRANDE's *Elements in the Belgian Macro-Structures for a Sociological Analysis of the Ethnic-cultural Opposition*.

tigation of this question falls outside the scope of this article (14), one cannot go by the fact that it has become a very important factor in the determination of the political climate, and a source of discord in all political parties. Besides, the differences of opinion in this connection are so emotional and fundamental that it appears to be utmost difficult to find a solution acceptable for the various tendencies.

In addition to these disputes, with their very complex political and sociological background, one should also remember the tragic events in the Limburg coalmines (in February 1966 a totally unexpected revolt came about among — traditionally quiet — Limburg miners, when they were informed about pit closures, without sufficient security for new employment, and the Flemish students' anticlerical reaction against the Belgian bishops' decisions regarding the structural remodelling of the Catholic University of Louvain. Both events are still too fresh in mind to permit a more or less definitive conclusion, but they seem to point at a fairly high degree of discontent in important strata of the population. At any rate, it is symptomatic that they fell completely outside the traditional party frameworks, and that even the structural opposition parties (the communists and — although to a lesser extent — the Flemish Nationalist Party, i.e. the *Volksunie*) proved not to be in a position to catch this dissatisfaction. The major political parties have developed into very complex organizations, with paid officials and administrators who regard politics as a career, as a specialized profession. These parties became part and parcel of the modern public services. In this way, however, they lost contact with a substantial proportion of the population. Indeed, the growing technicalization and bureaucratization of the political functions give the citizens the impression to have no hold on the direction or formulation of policy. This situation inevitably results in a decrease of political interest and in unorganized eruptions of discontent, which are in fact the unmistakable signs of a search for new channels of political expression.

Recent events abroad suggest that Belgium is not the only country confronted with this craving for a new form of political participation (cf the Amsterdam riots in the summer of 1966, the success of the « Democrats 66 » at the latest elections in the Netherlands, and — at a completely different level — the NPD's one in Germany). An answer to the question whether these undeniable tokens of dissatisfaction and unrest are either necessary growing pains of the modern Welfare State, or the starting point for an entirely new form of opposition against the modern State with its insusceptible political organs, is very difficult to give.

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