

How 'real' is Right-Wing Flanders ?

Discussion paper for Re-Bel's Fifth Public Event: Thursday 9 June 2011

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I

As the author of a book titled *Rechts Vlaanderen* (de Smaele 2009), I am of course supposed to answer with a straightforward 'yes' to one of the central questions of this session: 'Right-wing Flanders, left-wing Wallonia? Is this so?' I will indeed argue that right-wing Flanders is a reality, ever since the second half of the nineteenth century. As the reviews of my book have demonstrated, however, it is easy to misunderstand its principal arguments, including my stress on the 'reality' of right-wing Flanders. One of the more critical reviews deserves special attention in this context, because it rises some interesting problems that are relevant for the problem we discuss today. Paul Wynants, professor of history at the University of Namur (FUNDP), has examined my study critically in *La Revue Nouvelle* (Wynants 2010). I am quoting here only the first and the last sentences of the essay:

« Apparemment, certains historiens flamands sont de plus en plus sensibles aux différences qui ont ou auraient existé entre la Flandre et la Wallonie, durant les trente années de gouvernement catholique homogène (1884-1914). En pointant ces différences, ils tentent d'accréditer l'idée d'une Belgique duale, dont la cohésion aurait été affaiblie dès avant la Première Guerre mondiale. »

« En fin de compte, parce qu'elle est trop systématiquement binaire — Flandre *versus* Wallonie — et pétrie d'idéologie, une telle appréhension du passé est simpliste et anachronique : elle projette dans le passé une vision du Sud du pays qui ne correspond pas aux réalités de terrain. »

Indeed, the insistence on the electoral and cultural split between the French and Dutch speaking parts of Belgium since the middle of the nineteenth century might be interpreted as underscoring the assertions of Flemish nationalists that there are very few reasons to prolong the life of the divided country. Paul Wynants suggests that a new generation of Flemish historians like myself are involved in a project of rewriting national history and are

(consciously or unwittingly) constructing a useable past for a new Flemish autonomous nation. Wynants even charges me with ‘anachronism’, one of the most serious (although common) reproaches a historian can make to a colleague. I am accused of projecting the contemporary and ideologically loaded image of the split nation onto the nineteenth century.

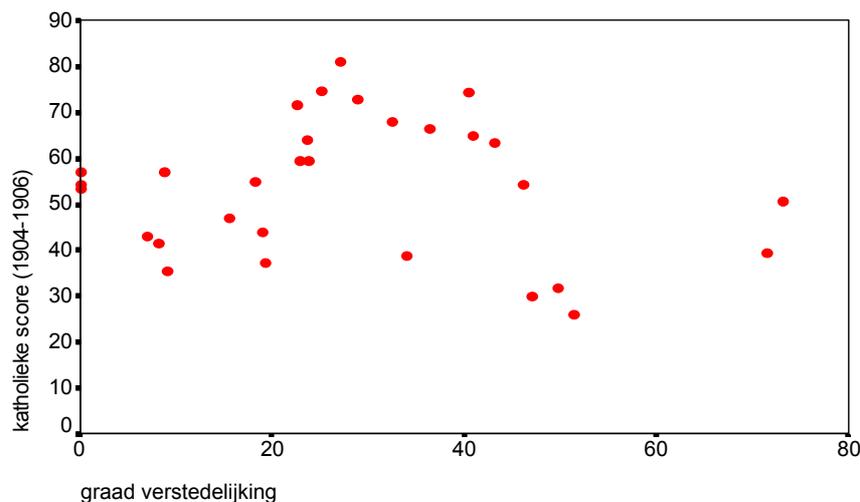
Wynants suggests that, if more Flemish voters opted for the Catholic Party before World War I, this should be explained by an ‘objective’ cause: the lesser degree of industrialisation in Flanders. He therefore argues that Flanders was *really* different from Wallonia (or that the differences in electoral outcomes should be explained by ‘real’ differences). Flanders voted differently, only to the degree that that Flanders was different from Wallonia (or vice versa). If no regional differences in economic development had characterised Belgium in the nineteenth century, no electoral differences could have come to the fore. For Wynants, voting for a specific party is necessarily linked to the social characteristics of the voter; voters with the same characteristics vote in the same way. What I have tried to demonstrate in my book is that differences in political identities and electoral preferences are not necessarily grounded in ‘real’ differences. Contrary to Wynants’s accusations, I do pay attention to the heterogeneity of Wallonia and of Flanders. I also show, however, how certain discourses *construct differences* and *unities*, differences and unities that are – in Wynants’s sense – not ‘real’. My book therefore, is a plea to take the linguistic, cultural turn in the history of politics (and in political studies more broadly) seriously.

Before I turn to the empirical support for my thesis, let me say something on the more philosophical, ‘ethical’ aspects of the question. Showing how the current electoral pattern has a long history is not contending that Belgium has no future. As a left-wing voter in a right-wing region, I forcefully defend the position that electoral or political homogeneity is not required or desirable in a sound democracy. Both the far right Vlaams Belang and the nationalist N-VA maintain that the gap between the Flemish and the Walloon public opinions are unbridgeable. It is impossible to be at the same time a nationalist and a radical defender of pluralism. Every form of nationalism inevitably contains monist tendencies. I have had the opportunity to explain my anti-monist view on politics in several essays (de Smaele 2002, de Smaele 2006). My book on *Rechts Vlaanderen* does not, in any way, contribute to a Flemish nationalist logic.

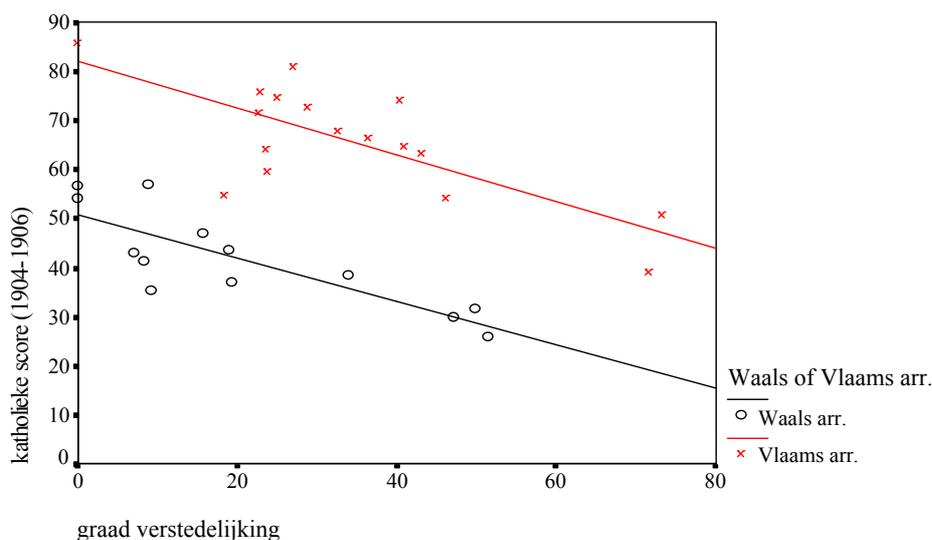
II

But let me now turn to the empirical base of my thesis, an empirical base that is weak according to Wynants (without, however, discussing the validity of the evidence I offer or adding information that contradicts my findings). Of course, historians working on nineteenth-century elections do not have the research possibilities that political scientists have. Individual polls are not available; only aggregate data can be analysed. This restriction directs researchers into some form of ecological, geographical analysis. In my book, I therefore calculate for every electoral constituency the ‘degree of urbanisation’ (the percentage of the population living in municipalities with at least 10.000 inhabitants) and relate this ‘independent variable’ (on the horizontal X-axis) with the catholic score as the ‘dependent variable’ (on the vertical Y-axis); the dots represent constituencies. As chart 1 shows, no significant relationship can be demonstrated between the two variables (elections of 1904-1906). However, if the difference is made visible between the Flemish and Walloon constituencies (as in chart 2), it becomes instantly clear (confirmed by the linear regression analysis) that there is a significant relationship, but only when considered in the two groups separately. In both groups of electoral districts, the catholic score is negatively related to the degree of urbanization. In a Flemish constituency the catholic score will be on average 30% higher than in a Walloon constituency with the same level of urbanization.

Graph 1: relation between degree of urbanization of the constituency (X) and catholic score (Y)



Graph 2: relation between degree of urbanization of the constituency (X) and catholic score (Y); division of Flemish (x) and Walloon (°) constituencies

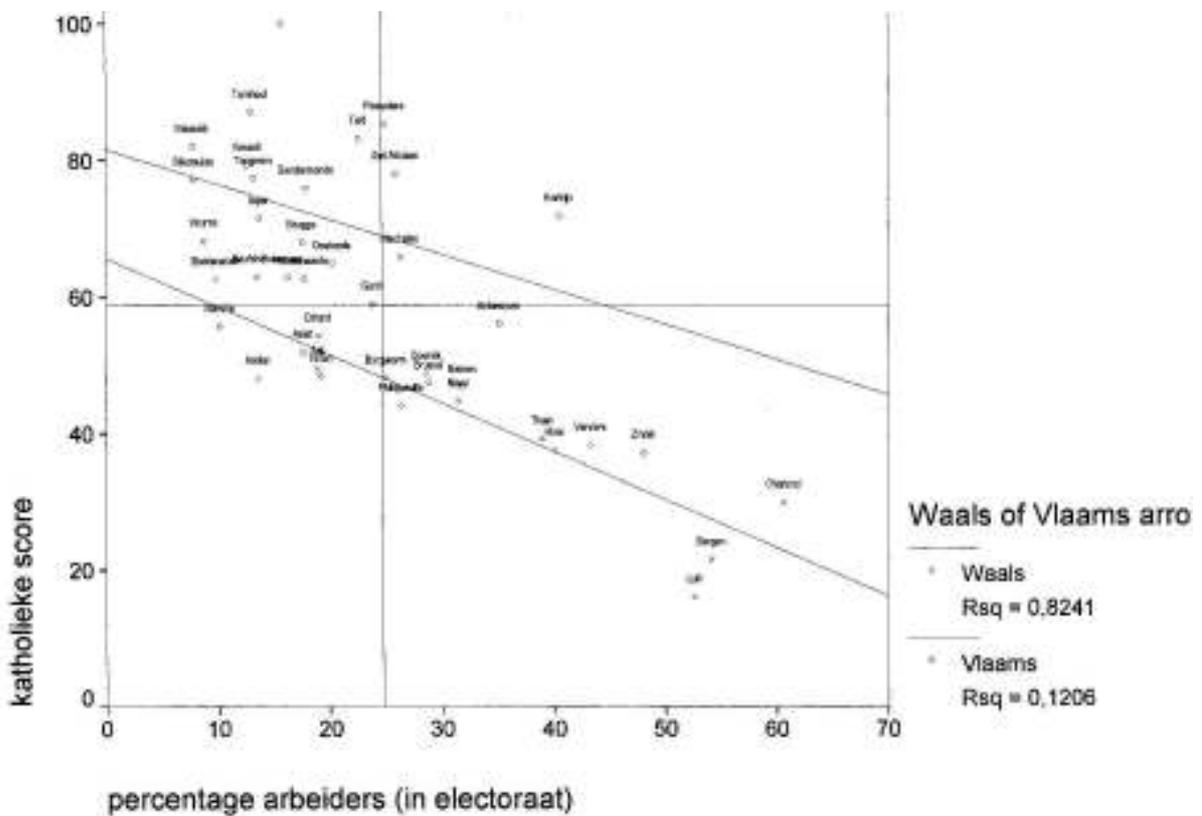


Somehow, these results do not convince Wynants, who deplores that I do not make the same calculations with an independent variable that is more directly related to industrialisation. He states:

« Rétif à l'explication des différences de comportement électoral par des variables socioéconomiques, de Smaele ne soumet pas à vérification l'hypothèse d'un lien direct entre choix politiques et degré d'industrialisation. Ce ne sont pas les sources qui manquent en la matière, ni les indicateurs pertinents : on pense, notamment, à la production énergétique par des machines à vapeur, au nombre d'entreprises de grande taille, à la proportion de travailleurs de l'industrie dans la population active, au pourcentage d'ouvriers dans l'ensemble du corps électoral. De telles données sont évoquées à l'appui d'une analyse des représentations mentales réciproques de la Wallonie et de la Flandre, mais elles sont évacuées lorsqu'il s'agit de scruter les relations entre le comportement électoral et le milieu. Bref, contrairement à ce que de Smaele affirme, on peut douter que les paysages politiques aient été dissemblables, de part et d'autre de la frontière linguistique, essentiellement à cause de différences culturelles et « affectives », et non de différences socioéconomiques : à défaut d'avoir suffisamment pris en compte les réalités économiques et sociales, l'intéressé n'a pas mené à bien pareille démonstration. »

It is true that I have not included any graphs in my book that relate the catholic score to the kind of variables Wynants is asking. I will therefore provide the required chart here (graph 3). It seems obvious that this graph underscores my central thesis: the catholic score is inversely related to the percentage of labourers in the electorate, but the difference between the Flemish and Walloon constituencies is incontestable. A Flemish constituency always has (without exception) a higher catholic score than a Walloon constituency with the same proportion of labourers.

Graph 3: relation between proportion of labourers in the electorate (X) and catholic score (Y)



Confronted with this consistent evidence (that I had not expected), I had to find an explanation for the divergence between the Flemish and Walloon voting patterns. In my book I address two more or less common explanations: the thesis that Flanders was ‘backwards’ and therefore conservative, and the thesis that the Flemish voted in greater numbers for the catholic party because that party was more eager to promote the Flemish interests once in power. I argue that both theses are flawed, and offer a third one instead. Right-wing Flanders came into being once the citizens of Flanders’ provincial towns (like Bruges, Louvain or Ypres) turned away from the liberal party and gave up their urban cultural dreams, and created the myth of rural Flanders instead. Townsmen everywhere in Flanders (one of the more urbanized regions of Europe since the Middle Ages and more urbanized than Wallonia, even on the eve of the First World War) now celebrated the uncultivated peasant as the true Flemish man. It is the time that the Flemish middle class *litterati* studied Dutch to be able to produce Flemish novels on the life of the peasants, and the painters migrated to villages to paint farmers and pastures. Even in Antwerp, Flemish writers and artists lost their interest in the bustling city life and directed their attention to the rural Campine area. Culturally, Flanders consisted only of meadows, picturesque villages, and dead, medieval cities.

I maintain that this shift in Flemish middle class identification and the cultivation of a new discourse on ‘rural Flanders’ is vital in the explanation of the electoral history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Belgium. I believe that it can explain why in socially comparable Flemish and Walloon constituencies, the electoral outcomes could be so different. I admit that my thesis on the ‘cultural ruralisation’ of Flanders cannot be ‘proved’ or ‘falsified’ in any straightforward way, and Paul Wynants certainly has a point when he argues that my analysis of the rise of left-wing Wallonia is based on fewer sources and therefore perhaps less convincing. So far, however, my critics do not seem to be able to offer any convincing counter-evidence.

III

When I say that ‘right-wing Flanders’ is a *reality* since the nineteenth century, I am not referring to a *real* difference (in the classical, mainstream, ‘social’ significance of the word) between Flemish and Walloon voters. What I try to show is that the political orientation of Flanders (observable in all parliamentary elections since the second half of the nineteenth century) cannot be explained by reference to some ‘deeper’, ‘pre-political’ or even ‘ideological’ *real* cause (in the sense of Wynants). Voting for the right has become one element in the *performance* of Flemish identity. And a remarkably stable element as well. Although the economic balance has shifted dramatically since the nineteenth century, and notwithstanding the shift in the significance of the term ‘right-wing’ itself, the Flemish voters still opt in great majorities for right-wing parties. Most interestingly, voting for right-wing parties in Flanders still has the same tinge to it of ‘anti-establishment protest’ it had in the nineteenth century, when the middle classes in the provincial towns chose to vote for the party that was depicted by the progressive circles of the cities as ‘backward’, ‘reactionary’, ‘obscurantist’. Again, today, in the discourse of Bart De Wever, Dedecker and the likes, voting for the right is represented as a rebellion against the all powerful old school ‘Left Wing church’ that supposedly governs Belgium. In their discourse, voting for a right wing party is being recalcitrant, a ‘brave’ form of resistance against the overwhelming forces of ‘progress’ and ‘change’ (and e.g. the ‘spirit of the sixties’). Although Flanders has become a rich, post-industrial region, the nationalist right-wing parties still cultivate the image of an oppressed Flanders, a Flanders that is belittled and ridiculed, the victim of condescension and arrogance. Going to the ballot box and voting for a right-wing party is still a ritual of expressing Flemish pride in its ‘backwardness’, in its stubborn resistance against the Spirit of Change, supposedly incarnated in the cosmopolitan, French-speaking elites in Brussels. They feel like *kluwaerds*, facing the King of France on the battlefield of Groeninghe.

- H. de Smaele. 'De beroepspoliticus. Waarom de aristocratie onvermijdelijk is', in H. de Smaele and J. Tollebeek eds., *Politieke Representatie*, (Leuven, 2002), pp. 109-122.
- , 'De retorische verstrengeling van Vlaanderen met "rechts"', *Ons Erfdeel*, 49 (2006), pp. 67-76.
- , *Rechts Vlaanderen. Religie en stemgedrag in negentiende-eeuws België* (Leuven, 2009).
- P. Wynants, 'Rechts Vlaanderen Ou une certaine idée de la Wallonie, de Henk de Smaele', *La Revue Nouvelle* (2010), 5/6, pp. 134-136.