

The Producerist Narrative in Right-wing Flanders

Dr Jérôme Jamin

CEDEM – Ulg

May 25, 2011

The balance of power between political parties differs and has evolved differently in the North and in the South of Belgium, nevertheless, this will not let us saying that “the North has turned toward the Right and the South has turned toward the Left”, mainly because of the many complexities and the multiplicity of potentially essential factors that need to be gathered to go in this way.

However, if we were to focus exclusively on discourse, which is what we are going to do, we would believe quite convincingly that much of the political discourse in Flanders leans more to the Right than the political discourses found in either Wallonia or Brussels. And when asked, “Why is it this way?” we would likely explain it by identifying certain notions of responsibility and of merit in political discourse, and their particular and effective use found in Flanders.

Finally, when asked to provide an answer to the question: “whether the aforementioned is a problem,” our response would be “No” within the context of a region looking for competition with other regions inside the European Union, but deeply “Yes” if we stay inside the federal context of Belgium. In this paper we will argue that the Right in Flanders is promoting a curious partnership between *settling* (inburgering in Dutch) and *merit* in order to maintain the standard of the neoliberal credo in an inequitable Europe in crisis¹.

The Left/Right Divid

The Left / Right split yields only a simplified analysis of political phenomena. If one believes Rémond (2002), the question of criteria “which separates infallibly the Right from the Left is the very type of question that does not and may not contain an adequate response for the mind.” In the absence of a unanimously agreed upon term and definition, explains the

¹ I would like to thank my colleague at CEDEM Joe Costanzo, from University of Maryland, for its support in the writing of this paper in English.

historian, “there is no other way than to search the past for signs from which to build a concept of Right and Left.” And if you follow this path, he adds, it does not take long “to discover that every, or almost every, major theme has been a subject of ideological controversy and was, in turn, the prerogative of the Right then the Left, and visa versa, and then back again.” (Author’s translation of Rémond, 2002: 30 and 31).

If Rémond has France in mind when he is writing his article, we believe this fact fits also with the Belgian situation, all the more if we take into account the coalition systems in Belgium, France and several Western countries. In fact, people from differing political points of view have had to work closely and collaboratively in the establishment of centrist policies, sometimes leaning slightly toward the Left, sometimes slightly toward the Right, according to the agreed-upon terms of those in government. In explaining the French-speaking Belgian Socialist Party (*le Parti socialiste, PS*), Olivier Bailly (2010) suggests that even “while in power, the [Socialist] party manages to embody the contestation and resistance to neoliberalism represented by the Belgian federal state.” This discourse, he adds, is “facilitated by an electoral system where the necessary alliances let the parties avoiding responsibilities for the policies put in place.” Ultimately, the “PS accomplishes its *tour de force* by being both seasoned and youthful, rebellious and in power, Leftist in its discourse all the while implementing Right-leaning decisions in practice. The PS engages in the liberalisation of public services, in drastically controlling the unemployed and in lengthening the duration of careers.” (Author’s translation of Bailly, 2010, 3).

If we focus exclusively on the analysis of discourse and not on actions to address a Right-leaning Flanders or a Left-leaning Wallonia, the challenge would be different and in many ways it would be more plausible to identify clear differences between the rhetorical style of the Left and the Right. That said, from the outset, we think, and here we attempt to demonstrate, that it is worth emphasizing the discursive movement to the Right in the political rhetoric in Flanders as opposed to some hypothetical political discursive movement to the Left in the southern part of the country.

Let us examine the work of Bobbio who attempted to differentiate a Right from a Left discourse as it related to Equality (Bobbio, 1996). We pursue this line of inquiry because the rhetoric that we will analyze in the next section is based in part on the perception that people can have of their peers—in terms of equality between individuals (“Are we equal?”)—and, in

part on the distribution and the criteria for the distribution of resources between individuals deemed equal, and between them and others deemed to be unequal, especially in terms of responsibility and merit.

For the man on the Left and the man on the Right, the fact that men are equal or not equal, Bobbio says, depends solely on the fact that “in the observing, judging and drawing of conclusions, we place more emphasis on what they have in common or on what distinguishes them.” The difference between Left and Right rests on the fact that there are those who think that men are “more equal than unequal,” and then there are those who believe that men are “more unequal than equal.” Thus, the “egalitarian” discourse on the Left stipulates that “most of the inequalities that provoke its indignation—and those that the Left would like to see disappear—are of social origin, and as such, are able to be overcome, regardless of an individual’s inherent qualities (intelligence, merit, responsibility, physical strength, etc.). While the discourse of the Right (the “inegalitarian”) specifies instead that inequalities are “natural and, therefore, inevitable,” and there will always be the strong and weak; the intelligent and unintelligent; the courageous and the lazy; and the responsible and irresponsible.

Further on Bobbio concludes: “on behalf of the natural equality,” on behalf of the fact that under normal and similar circumstances everyone should follow the same path, the egalitarian would condemn social inequality, and “in the name of natural inequality, the inegalitarian would condemn social equality.” But why condemn equality?

De Coorebyter offers us a closer look: the Right does not condemn equality but accepts it “conditionally.” It “calls for equal rights or even equal opportunities, equality of citizens before the law, but it considers that a certain amount of inequality is inevitable and even desirable.” Why? Because these inequalities reflect the “inequality of effort and merit.” And by virtue of a “meritocratic principle (...), those who work more or work better should be rewarded” (Author’s translation of de Coorebyter, 2010, 17). We should remember here the importance of *merit* and *accountability* in the analysis. It is these two criteria that allow the Right, not in its actions—which is too difficult to verify—but in its rhetoric, to distinguish itself from the Left. If men and women deserve equality at the start, nothing justifies they should be equal at the finish, in particular because this may disappoint and discourage the

meritorious among them, and further it could also limit the freedom of those who would “turned down” against their will for the sake of harmonization in terms of equality. In the rhetoric from the Right, merit and accountability are established as criteria that are likely separate workers from slackers, the brave from the fearful, the (individually) responsible from those on welfare, these criteria help establish a hierarchy and disparities in behaviours that do not only reveal differences, but also inequalities. And as stated above, the discourse on the Right could establish a wealth distribution system based on these inequalities, following the assumption that those at the top of the hierarchy (the deserving) should have access to collective resources more easily than those at the bottom of the hierarchy (the lazy). Here, *merit* and *accountability* offer a way of rank ordering and a criterion for distribution.

“Producerist” Analysis

If political discourse is clearly tending to the Right in the North and possibly to the Left in the South, then why is this so? To answer this second question, we propose analysing these discourses in light of the “Producerist” rhetoric found in the United States which revolves around notions of equality and inequality, of merit, of courage or honesty and of straightforwardness. In many respects, we believe that, unlike in Wallonia, this type of discourse has all of the ingredients to ensure its success and effectiveness in Flanders.

The English word “producerism” should not be translated either into “productionnisme” or “productivisme” in French because those two concepts refer to other concepts entirely. According to Berlet and Lyons (2000), producerism is one of the most basic structures of the populist narrative in the United States. Producerism suggests the existence of a noble and hardworking middle class that is constantly in conflict with malicious parasites which are lazy and guilty, and found at both the top and bottom of the social order. The characters and the details have changed repeatedly, but the main features of this conception of things have remained unchanged for nearly two hundred years (Berlet and Lyons, 2000: 348 and 349).

Theorized in the American literature on political groups present in the United States during the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, Producerism, as described by Berlet and Lyons, refers first to the idea of a productive people, “the people of producers” (the *producers*). In broad terms, these “producers” are those responsible for producing all of the wealth of the nation, from

growers (farmers) to workers (craftsman), etc. Value creation and the idea of hard work are central tenants here; these producers are identified with the workplace, and hence efficiency, intelligence and especially merit.

The “producers” are represented in the rhetoric of Producerism as being crushed by a set of “parasites” made up of individuals who exploit these producers and the fruits of their labour without themselves participating in the production of the wealth in question. Producerist discourse has the distinction of presenting the productive people as being crushed by two major categories of parasites, “parasites from above” and “parasites from below.”

With few exceptions, the parasites from above correspond to the elites as represented in various populist discourses in Europe and throughout the world, “capitalists” for Chavez, “globalists” or “internationalists” for Le Pen, “bureaucrats and judges” for Berlusconi, “corrupt trade unionists” for Thatcher, etc. For their part, the parasites from below refer to a “clique” of lazy people who profit from the system: foreigners, immigrants, welfare recipients, the unemployed and “fake” unemployed, but also “outsiders” of all kinds who also benefit from State resources: subsidized artists, homosexuals, abortion activists, feminists, secular organizations, etc.. Parasites from above and from below the social order are at the heart of the rhetoric of Producerism; they stifle the people who produce the wealth, and they live off of them and at their expense.

The third characteristic of Producerist rhetoric: Producerism maintains the idea that there is solidarity, or failing this, some sort of collusion or tacit agreement between the “parasites” from above and those from below. These are sort of objective allies who do not know each other but who share common interests and a certain complicity. The elitist discourse found in major cities (e.g., Brussels, London, Paris and Washington), who aspire to a cosmopolitanism and a globalization at the same time when immigrants and “bogus” refugees aspire to the disappearance of borders and the free movement of people, illustrates this connivance because these two claims involve different objectives, but which in the end refer to the same reality. The rhetoric of Producerism presents the “parasites” as the protagonists of the same more or less orchestrated bi-product. In this vision, the political elites of Brussels, London and Washington exploit “economic” refugees and all the wretched of the earth to encourage migration, and hence the emergence of multicultural societies. However the narrative is constructed—and they are many—it is every time a question of interests and shared goals

between the “parasites” from above and from below; these common interests are contrary to those of the people (the producers).

The Producerism rhetoric found in the United States is a particular category, a specific kind of populism. It borrows from populism the image of an historical and perpetual conflict between those who have power and those who have not; between the financier and the small farmer, between the industrialist and the line worker, between the “over-educated and amoral bureaucrats” and the little people (Kazin, 1998: 1), but the American-style Producerist rhetoric also adds to this image (and to this conflict) a new category of enemies situated at the bottom of the social order.

The rhetoric of Producerism calls into play the figure of the American producer and independent farmer. Historically in the United States, Producerism has glorified the so-called “rural radicals” against the “big capitalist monopolies” (Stock, 1996). Today it is the Tea Party Movement that best embodies the front-and-center return of this rhetoric. The Tea Party emerged at the beginning of the Presidency of Barak Obama; it is a self-identified radical opposition to the federal government, its expenditures, taxes and charges. Their argument is based both on wasteful spending by government leaders and on unearned benefits used by the many recipients of state aid. For example in 2010, the Tea Party was successful in limiting the debate to the American people’s real needs in the area of health around the issue of freedom, including freedom to choose or not a health insurance plan and especially of an insurance company of their choice. In doing so, Republicans close to the Tea Party were able to give President Obama a Communist label and put in jeopardy his health care reform bill that has now partly, or completely, failed depending from where we consider the changes.

Producerism revolves around the idea of an imminent threat that may be *economic*: “the parasites threaten jobs and plunder the government resources, health coverage and social security.” *Political*: “the parasites are the instruments or the protagonists of a hidden agenda that would undermine the unity and homogeneity of the nation. *Moral*: the decadent school, the media, “contemporary artists,” the Liberals (in the American sense of the word) and progressives of all stripes are challenging tradition and moral values. The threat may ultimately be *ethnic*: the mixture of cultures and the multiculturalist ideology threaten identities.

The Producerism model is useful for analysis because it places the value of “merit” and the principle of “responsibility” at the centre of its architecture and in many ways, it can work outside of all forms of radicalism condemned by the law, including racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia. The discourse of Producerism does not challenge people as to what they are (traditional racism) but for what they do; and it does not reject equality for what it stands for, but for the constraints that it can potentially place on meritocratic ideals and on fair distribution of wealth based on merit and accountability. In other words, Producerism glorifies discrimination but skilfully and through the use of criteria that are not prohibited by law: merit, courage, intelligence, responsibility, etc.

The discourse of Producerism is a discourse of the Right that do not condemn equality, but one that assumes it “conditionally” to the extent that certain inequalities reflect the “inequality of effort and of merit,” and that in terms of the meritocratic principle, “those who work more or work better should be rewarded” (de Coorebyter, 2010, 17). In revisiting Bobbio on this last point, we see that the strength of Producerism lies in its ability to go and find not one but two “enemies” in the hierarchy of the traditional Right: the one who is at the bottom for being lazy, and the one at the top who managed to make others believe him to be courageous and hardworking, but who actually owes his success to his ability to manipulate. Adding to the justification for the rejection of the lazy benefactor of collective resources is, with producerism, the rejection of the “fake wise guy” who has managed to pass himself off as exceptionally hard-working, but who in fact is merely a profiteer.

Producerism is a meritocratic doctrine that threatens the weak, lazy and welfare recipients who are unequal and, therefore, are at the bottom of the hierarchy, but also the elite who are as deserving as they are manipulative owing their only salvation to the political machine (clientelism) that they have developed with the weakest members of society. This discourse is an extremely powerful discourse of the Right, but it has no links to the far Right! In that it is intelligent, attractive and dangerous, and, as we will show, proves incredibly effective in the North of Belgium.

The Producerist Discourse in Flanders

The merit of the hard-working people, the endeavours of the Flemish vis-à-vis the Walloons, accountability and the pursuit of effectiveness against waste are omnipresent in the discourse

of the N-VA; for some time they have structured their discourse notably through including the question of transfers². On January 7, 2005 a journalist from *La Libre Belgique* reported that twelve “trucks (...) took to the roads of Hainaut, allegedly filled with 50 euro notes for a total of €11.3 billion—the amount of transfers North-to-South as the result of a study by the Abafim (Administratie Budgettering, Accounting en Financieel Management), a service of the Ministry of the Flemish Community.” The journalist explained that the spokesman “of the N-VA denied wanting to question the very principle of solidarity with the Walloons, but ‘would rather replace the current system by a real solidarity of Community to Community.’ This would be based on objectivity, transparency and efficiency using the same criteria as those used for the allocation of EU structural funds.”³

If transfers are organized based on criteria related to merit, efficiency and objectivity and are under the control of Flanders, they pose no problems, *a fortiori* if we allow the N-VA to “assist and mentor” the Walloons so that they learn to become independent and that they also make an effort. If, however, it is simply a matter of automatic transfers without any quality assurance and inspection, then it’s a question of a “subsidy tap” and “cash cow”. At the N-VA Policy Forum (Planning Conference) of May 19-20, 2007, Bart De Wever stated that Belgium “requires great undertakings by the Flemings for this alleged solidarity. The flow of money from Flanders to Wallonia is like a permanent blood transfusion which goes to a patient who is still considerate enough to squeeze our veins. We have had enough.”⁴

The metaphor of the “parasitic patient” refers to a sickened Wallonia whose demands undermine Flanders and, but without killing it, whose survival is a detriment to Flanders; this is characteristic of a parasite. This metaphor is sometimes coupled with the metaphor of the child who is not independent and who needs to learn to be accountable. For example, when De Wever was elected to the Flemish parliament on June 7, 2009, he explained that the Francophones were being “bottle-fed by the State.” Speaking of a baby’s bottle instead of a transfer, of solidarity, or of funding is not by accident even if Geert Bourgeois employs a vocabulary with fewer connotations: “The annual financial flow from Flanders to Wallonia has increased to almost 10 billion Euros or 342 billion BEF—an amount far greater than the entire budget for education in Flanders. That too is the tax levied on Flanders, and what does

² I would like to thank Olivier Starquit who helped me to identify and translate the Flemish press sources which I have used here to make my argument.

³ “Les poids lourds de la NV-A à Strépy,” *La Libre Belgique*, 07 January 2005.

⁴ Quoted on the Union belge website : <http://www.unionbelge.be/?p=263>.

Flanders get in return for that? The blocking of Flemish jurisdictional authority in ‘time credit’ and ‘assurances of autonomy’. Flemish solidarity gets in response a negative solidarity.”⁵

Besides the working (“producing”) people, there are also some discourses that bring to mind parasites living off of the Flemish people! And Karel Dillen, MEP and chairman of the Vlaams Blok, previously explained in March 1991 that the “Walloon parasite has had a custom of being parasitic for over a century and a half.”⁶ More recently, the Deputy Mayor for Finance in La Panne (Belgium), Serge Van Damme (Open VLD) referred to the arrival of increasingly massive numbers of “Walloon parasites” many “CPAS tourist”⁷ who are “second generation unemployed, without the slightest sense of responsibility or work ethic.” The Deputy Mayor went on to say that “parents of these tourists have never worked. They themselves do not work. They will never work. These are parasites of democracy. They live off of the CPAS and simply take advantage of the benefits of social security.”⁸

Accused of anti-Walloon racism, the Deputy Mayor hastily explained that his comments were taken out of context, and that he only considered as “parasites” those who abused social security and solidarity. This is an important point because it refers to the power of the discourse of Producerism that can evoke discriminatory notions of work and merit while escaping accusations of racial or ethnic stereotyping. This item also refers to Bobbio and to inequalities as criteria for establishing the distribution of wealth toward the deserving: “For them,” that is to say the parasites, “we should have no solidarity” added Van Damme.

In *Der Spiegel* Bart De Wever indirectly associated Walloons with the parasites, explaining that the money transfers could never be like “a drug injection for a junkie.”⁹

The rhetoric of Producerism evokes also the parasites situated in “high social order.” In this regard, for some elected officials on the Right in Flanders, it is no longer Wallonia or Francophones who are the target, but the elected members of the PS—the face *par excellence*

⁵ Source: <http://www.n-va.be>.

⁶ *Vlaams Blok Magazine*, March 1991.

⁷ CPAS (or *centre public d'action sociale* in French) provides social assistance and various other forms of support to people residing in Belgium with the goal of giving them the tools to reintegrate back into Belgian society. (<http://www.cpasbru.irisnet.be/>)

⁸ Among others, see *Le Vif* and *RTBF* on the web (2010 30th and 31th of December).

⁹ *Der Spiegel*, 13 December 2010.

of the corrupt elite; the rich Francophones living in the suburbs of Brussels; and the “Brussels elite” who work on Flemish soil, but who dreams of a soulless and rootless cosmopolitan city, where English or French are spoken. The first parasite at the top of the social order is lazy, accused of wasteful spending, and threatens the Flemish worker; the other two types of parasites are accused of endangering Flemish identity and the physical borders that protect it.

As the parasite at the top of the social order, the elected PS is accused of laziness, of corruption and inefficiency, but above all it is accused of allying with the aforementioned parasites at the bottom of the social order. It supports them while owing its survival to the latter through their patronage (clientelism). Here, what is central is the collusion between, on the one hand, the unemployed (or welfare recipients), and on the other, the corrupted official who gives small favours in order to be (re)elected.

For example, as recent as 2010, the website of the N-VA maintains some older quotes like the one of November 1, 2006 entitled: “We pay for the rotten PS system.” Interviewed in *P Magazine* on the scandals affecting Wallonia and the fact that the PS was not sanctioned, Bart De Wever responded: “It absolutely does not surprise me. You should see the number of Walloon voters who have an interest in keeping the PS in power. In Seraing, 28 percent of the population lives in public housing. In Charleroi, almost half the population lives on welfare; only 53 percent of the population is currently working, and of those 53 percent, 39 percent work in public service. The PS system is based on a political patronage similar to that of Eastern Europe. And Walloon voters applaud as the bill is paid by the Flemish...We Flemish pay for this system. We maintain it through our annual transfers to Wallonia. It's like bringing water to the sea. It is noble to reach out to those weaker than us and help them through a bad patch, but the PS does not wish to improve the situation; it wants the situation remains as it is. It has an interest in having many people depend on the state, and, therefore, the PS.”¹⁰

The rhetoric of “the PS State” (“L’Etat-PS”) is highly developed in the rhetoric of the Right, especially in the VB (*Vlaams Belang*). Thus, in an “Open Letter to Bart De Wever,” Bruno Valkeniers (current president of the VB) explained on October 16, 2010 that the deadlock had “never been so pronounced, simply because the true motives have become clear: the PS-State will never tolerate the Flemish cash cow to have its own stable; the milk will always flow

¹⁰ Source: www.n-va.be/citaten/wij-betalen-voor-het-rotte-ps-systeem.

southward through an artificial pipeline.” The following year, on January 27, 2011, Guy D'Haeseleer (*Vlaams Belang*) and his associates filed a motion for a resolution on the resolution of the division of social security: “Only then will Walloon politicians feel the need to drastically reverse the current trend and, eventually make some difficult decisions. This will free Wallonia from the iron rule of statism and cronyism that characterized the PS-State and will return State pride to the people of Wallonia.”¹¹

The principle of solidarity between the parasites of the top and of the bottom is fundamental in the rhetoric of Producerism, and demonstrates a highly effective discourse on the Right. It has the quality of explaining and linking, in a simple and clear manner, complex ideas which may otherwise be unrelated. Thus, the reasons for the electoral success of the PS; the difficulty of internal party reform; the nature of North-to-South transfers; the problems of unemployment, (job) insecurity and poverty in Wallonia; economic redevelopment in Wallonia; and other issues are being assembled behind a single and compelling explanation.

In a statement entitled, “The Socialist Party is having a party at Flemish taxpayers’ expense” (August 6, 2006), not without cynicism, Frank Vanhecke of *Vlaams Belang* illustrates in detail the waste of public money by PS politicians in the name of electioneering and cronyism: “Tomorrow is the start of the Giro, the Tour of Italy beginning in...Wallonia (in Seraing). Seven Walloon cities will be visited in all. According to the Walloon Region, the cost is no less than €1.317.500. The choice of starting and stopping points is at least interesting. Many Italians live in Seraing. Charleroi is the basis of the Socialist Jean-Claude Van Cauwenberghe. Namur is the capital of Wallonia. Chairman of PS Elio Di Rupo lives in Mons. Wanze is the municipality of Gaston Gerard (PS), MPP of Liège in charge of sports. Perwez is the municipality where André Antoine (CDH), Walloon Minister of Economy, is the *bourgmestre*. Finally, Hotton is where Philippe Courard (PS), the Walloon Minister of Internal Affairs, lives. These and other dignitaries of the Walloon PS State will be all smiles at the podium in the coming days. They will be celebrating with the money that comes mostly from Flemish and European taxpayers; money that should be helping the bankrupt Walloon economy to bounce back, and not to put politicians in the limelight. These Walloon stages of the Giro are an obscene form of monetary waste. (...) With the exception of the catering industry in seven Walloon municipalities—each for one day—the Giro is of no economic

¹¹ Source: <http://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/pdf/53/1127/53K1127001.pdf>.

importance in Wallonia. Vlaams Belang will ask the European Commission if EU funds were used for this ‘bread and circuses’ project.”¹²

The rhetoric of Producerism on the Right in Flanders calls to mind elected PS officials as well as the Francophones of wealthy Brussels suburbs, and the elites of the European Union. If the first is wasting public money for “their clients”, the other two types of “parasites” are accused of endangering the Flemish identity and physical borders that protect it. Here, it is no longer the concepts of accountability, efficiency and merit that are mobilized to discredit the “PS State”, but the Flemish notion of *inburgering* (settling) used to “protect themselves” against the French-speaking and European elites who covet some municipalities. The local integration strategy introduces a special condition for the sale of certain lands and buildings constructed upon them. Only people with a “sufficient connection” with the municipality can buy the land and buildings: “A person is considered to have a sufficient connection with the municipality if they meet one or more of the following conditions: (1) Have been a resident of the municipality or a neighbouring municipality for at least six years without interruption (provided that the municipality is on the list of municipalities where a policy of local integration is applied); (2) Perform activities (an average of at least half a working week) in the municipality; (3) Have built a societal, familial, social or economic relationship with the municipality on the basis of a substantial and long-term nature.”¹³ If the criterion of merit enables the exclusion of the lazy elite, the “local integration strategies” are able to exclude French speaking citizens and European elites.

All elements of the rhetoric of Producerism are present in the political discourse of the Right in Flanders. We find the parasite from below, the parasite from above, the solidarity between them, the idea of hard work, the idea merit and the idea of responsibility. All this refers to the idea of people being squeezed; a people suffocating, according to the slogan of the N-VA: “Laat niet verstrikken Vlaanderen,” literally: “Do not let Flanders choke.”

Previously we saw that the rhetoric of Producerism found in the American Tea Party (Movement) skilfully made references to communism. Bart De Wever has had several opportunities to also make this type of reference. Thus, he could say (as seen above) that “The

¹² Franck Vanhecke, former Vlaams Belang Chairman. Source : <http://www.doorbraak.org/nieuws/34/met-ons-kun-je-praten>.

¹³ The *inburgering* decree : <http://www.rwo.be/Default.aspx?tabid=12339>.

PS system is based on a political patronage similar to that of Eastern Europe.” And in *Het Nieuwsblad* of October 21, 2004, he denounced the financial flows “from Wallonia to Flanders [which] are higher than we thought.” He added: “We Flemish, give [to Wallonia] more than West Germany gave to the GDR.”¹⁴

We indicated at the beginning of this text that it was not so far the discourse in Wallonia that was turning to the Left than the discourse in Flanders that was turning to the Right. All that we have presented here has indicated a move rightward in the political discourse in Flanders, and it is legitimate to ask why we are witnessing such a difference between the South and the North in Belgium.

First observation: The fact that it is very difficult to stir up a discourse of Producerism in the South of the country explains a great deal. If the idea of the parasite profiteer such as the unemployed or the immigrant is not absent from some political discourses in the South, notably that of the *Mouvement réformateur*, *Parti populaire* and in small political parties of the extreme right, it is very difficult to position in Wallonia such a discourse in a more complex logic of collusion with their fellow parasites of both the top and bottom of the social order, and further to integrate the whole in the context of the “conflit communautaire”. The argument of a “PS State” exists in some of the discourses found in the South, but it is less effective because it implicitly discredits different coalition partners—that is to say, the other major parties which work with the PS— regarded as incapable to change the course of politics, and under the tutelage of the powerful Socialist Party (PS) : talking about “PS State” for a coalition partner means admitting its own weakness or dependency. On the other hand, the argument of a “PS State” can, under no circumstances, be used by politicians in the South as an argument to justify the responsibility of the Flemish vis-à-vis a fair number of problems. It simply does not work.

The mounting rhetoric of Producerism is significantly less effective in a French-speaking Belgium satisfied with the status quo regarding state reform and, by its increasingly francophone nature, concerned little with Brussels and its periphery.

¹⁴ Source: <http://www.nieuwsblad.be/article/detail.aspx?articleid=GPO9LL21>.

Second observation: the discourse of Producerism works better in Flanders than in Wallonia because it can take advantage of populism's classic formula. As a discourse praising the people against the elite, populism has the distinction of replacing the so-called "artificial Left / Right divide" with an opposition between those who adhere to the system and those who reject it. With the idea of "big government spending," and the idea of a federal government "against" Flanders, the Flemish Right can seamlessly integrate communitarian issues in classic opposition found in populist discourse ("the people" against "the system"). However, this approach is fundamentally impossible in Wallonia, where the "federal state" is considered as the guarantor of a number of mechanisms of solidarity and hence stability. The federal system is perceived of as the protector of the South, and can in no way be part of a populist-styled discourse.

Conclusion

Does this line of argument pose a problem? Not if we restrict ourselves to the Flemish context. However, it would be a problem if we expand this argument to the entire Belgian context, particularly in terms of solidarity and redistribution of wealth based on responsibility, courage and merit.

The Producerist model that drives the discourse on the Right in Flanders aims to propose solutions to the adverse consequences of the market without calling into question the very principles of the market, of free competition or globalization. It is a model that attempts to protect Flemish cultural and linguistic identity as well as the well-being of its people in terms of access to resources without yielding to an expensive and wasteful "state egalitarianism" found in the socialist model of Belgium's South. By limiting the (potential) number of beneficiaries of solidarity on the basis of criteria linked to attachment or integration (*inburgering*), merit and accountability, the discourse of Producerism offers to maintain broad individual freedoms, particularly economic freedoms, while providing a range of protections in terms of access to resources, but also protecting language and culture. The "integrated worthy people" can then play it both ways: playing the game of international competition while benefiting from a social security system; enjoying a strong free enterprise all the while being covered by a sort of regional solidarity accessible only via strict criteria.

The Producerist model limits the (potential) number of beneficiaries of social protections without eliminating them all together, while leaving the liberal strand within the reach of the strongest, the most daring and most deserving. It is the Right's advocacy of this strange marriage between attachment (*inburgering*) and merit in Flanders, the latter which preserve the standard neoliberal credo in an unequal Europe in crisis. If it hopes to have a future in the regional Flemish context in the heart of Europe where there is increasing competition between regions, in its current form it is fundamentally incompatible with the Belgian federal system and the mechanisms of solidarity which characterize it today.

Books and articles :

- Bailly, O., « Une terre éternellement socialiste » in *Le Monde diplomatique*, (supplément Wallonie), Décembre 2010, p.2 et 3.
- Berlet, C. & Lyons, M. (2000), *Right-Wing Populism in America*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Bobbio, N. (1996), *Droite et Gauche*. Paris: Seuil.
- De Coorebyter, V., « La droite (et la gauche) – Entretien », *Le Soir*, Mardi 5 janvier 2010, p.17.
- Kazin, M. (1998), *The Populist Persuasion. An American History*. London: Cornell University Press.
- McNicol Stock, C. (1996), *Rural Radicals. Righteous Rage in the American Grain*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Rémond, R. (2002) 'Droite-Gauche: où est la différence?', *Les collections de l'histoire* 14, p.30-33.