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# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 63

### **‘Scientific’ Nationalism**

### **N-VA, banal nationalism and the battle for the Flemish nation**

by

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## **‘Scientific’ Nationalism**

N-VA, banal nationalism and the battle for the Flemish nation

Ico Maly

### **Abstract**

This paper investigates how the discursive battle for the Flemish nation is waged by politicians of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA (New Flemish Alliance) in Belgium. More specifically, it analyzes the ways in which the N-VA tries to establish a banal Flemish nationalism in the context of a super-diverse Belgium (Blommaert, Rampton & Spotti (eds.), 2011). We thereby focus on the use and role of social sciences in the nationalist construction and deconstruction of the Flemish nation state. Anderson, Gellner, Hroch and Billig are being integrated in the discourse and strategy of the party to establish a Flemish nation. Especially the work of Billig plays a major role in the (communication) strategy of the party. It will be argued that N-VA uses the famous work of Michael Billig – Banal nationalism – as a manual for the construction of the Flemish nation state.

**Keywords: N-VA, De Wever, the Flemish nation, banal nationalism, media, ideology, hegemony, Hroch, Anderson, Billig.**

### **Introduction**

Nation-building, especially in its early stages, has always had a direct connection with intellectuals, and, more specifically, with committed intellectuals in the Marxist sense of the word (Sternhell, 2010). Hobsbawm (1992) stresses that in the first decades of its existence the nation was a (petit) elite-affaire par excellence. The nation was born, constructed through and reproduced by the writings of intellectuals such as Edmund Burke, Johann Gottfried Herder, Ernest Renan, and Hippolyte Adolphe Taine. That’s why Hobsbawm (1992) discarded most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century literature on nations and nationalism. It is in this context that we should understand the harsh and by now famous words of this renowned historian:

*‘[...] I cannot but add that no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist [...] Nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not so.’ (Hobsbawm, 1992: 12)*

This qualification by Hobsbawm receives a new dimension if we contrast it with the present-day political developments in Flanders, i.e. the northern part of Belgium. Since 2004, we have seen a new Flemish nationalist party, namely N-VA (The New Flemish Alliance), rising under the leadership of an intellectual, and, more specifically, under the leadership of a historian specialized in the study of nations and nationalism. This chairman of the party, Bart De Wever, not only presents himself as a politician, but is also active in the public debate as a columnist and explicitly positions himself as a historian and intellectual. What is more, De Wever regularly quotes several leading scientists on nationalism and even defines his political project by employing concepts used by the most eminent scientists in this field.

In this paper I analyze how the Flemish nationalistic political party N-VA uses insights from social sciences in their battle for the establishment of an independent Flemish nation state. This will be explained in detail below, but for now we can say that the chairman of N-VA,

Bart De Wever, is obviously familiar with the literature on nationalism. In a former life he was an assistant at the history department of the University of Leuven, Belgium, where he was working on a PhD on Flemish nationalism after the Second World War. Although he didn't finish his PhD, he still uses, as I shall demonstrate, the insights he gathered during his study in the political battle for the Flemish nation state. For now we can say that De Wever, in his frequent columns in the mainstream Belgian media, regularly quotes Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Miroslav Hroch, and Michael Billig. Especially insights from Billig's work concern us here the most, because De Wever quotes him several times when he describes the goal of his party establishing a banal Flemish nationalism (De Wever, 2011b & 2011e).

Before we can focus on this battle for a banal Flemish nationalism, we need to go back in time. To understand this battle waged by N-VA, it is useful to sketch a brief history of the party within the general tradition of Flemish nationalism.

### **Belgium, Flemish nationalism and N-VA: a short history**

When Belgium was established in 1830, it was, in line with the Herderian paradigm, established as a monolingual state with French as the official national language (Reynebeau, 2009). In reality the new nation was multilingual. The elites in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia spoke French, but most of the common people in Flanders only spoke Dutch. In that sense the Flemish dialects can be seen as a proto-national bound as Hobsbawm (1992) defines it. This doesn't mean that the Flemings saw themselves as a different people or as constituting a different nation. In fact, in 1830 there were no Flemings or Walloons (Wils, 1992; Vos, 1994; Reynebeau, 2009). Rather, at the time Belgian nationalism was the dominant sound as all Belgians were united in their battle against the common enemy: the Dutch ruler Willem I. However, it did not take very long before the one language-regime –all the official communication was limited to French- in Belgium would lead to the establishment of a Flemish Movement. That Movement was not initially directed against the Belgian nation; rather, cultural and language rights of Dutch-speaking Flemings within the framework of a single Belgian nation were the goal at the time (Wils, 1992). This Movement was for the most part a movement of the liberal and progressive Flemish petit bourgeois. This underlines the point made by Hobsbawm (1992) that nationalism is initially carried by the (petit) elites, not by the common people.

This new Flemish elite in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is engaged in a battle for political hegemony (Blommaert, 2011) and to fight that battle a whole range of organizations have been established that function as an ideological apparatus in the Althusserian (1971) sense. We have witnessed the birth of Flemish theatre companies, literary circles, student unions (Vos, 1994) and Flemish magazines and papers (De Bens, 2001). From 1870 onwards, the Flemish cultural battle has not only given birth to the idea that the Flemings are one people, but also established a much wider institutional base. Not only was there a fairly broad movement constituted out of several cultural civic organizations, but the movement also became integrated in the dominant Belgian political parties (the liberals and after 1870 mostly within the Catholic party). This growing institutional support is paralleled with an ideological shift within the Flemish movement towards a linguistic, cultural and organic nationalism. However, the success of this Flemish nationalism in the next decennia isn't just based on its demands in the fields of language and culture. Blommaert stresses that "*The nationalist elite could thus ride on the waves of social unrest and demands for social, economic and political enfranchisement of the masses of the population [...]*" (Blommaert, 2011: 246) Even though the Flemish movement became more political and more radical at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it wasn't yet directed against Belgium. On the contrary, the

Flemish identity was still embedded within the Belgian national feeling (Vos, 1999). But this was all about to change.

Within a couple of decennia, roughly between 1870 and 1930, we see that the Flemish Movement changes into a full-blown Flemish nationalist movement with “the language is the whole people” as its central slogan (Roosens, 1981). This change translates into a collaboration between a small fraction of the Flemish Movement and the German occupiers between 1914 and 1918. This collaboration is rather small-scale, and so are its consequences for the Flemish movement after the war, however, with the exception of one crucial element. According to Wills (1992), one lasting consequence of the collaboration during the First World War is the idea that Flanders is disconnected from Belgium; even more so, within parts of the Flemish movement the idea was established that the two ‘identities’ are in contradiction with each other.

In the interwar period we see the further growth of the impact of the Flemish Movement. The Catholic party was an important advocate for the Flemish nationalist demands. They realized the so-called minimum program entirely before the war: higher education, administration and justice in Flanders became monolingually Dutch. But that didn’t prevent the steep electoral rise of several nationalist and even fascist parties in Flanders (such as the Verdinaso and the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV) (Flemish National Alliance). During the 1930s it is clear that the anti-Enlightenment-ideology (Sternhell, 2010) dominated within the Flemish Movement and in the end even a fascist Flemish nationalism became dominant (Wils, 1992; Sternhell, 1995). This again led to collaboration, this time with the Nazi party during the Second World War. Because of the depth of the collaboration and the high number of collaborators, the consequences for the Flemish nationalist cause were devastating. Whereas before the war the minds of many were ready for the far-reaching demands of the Flemish Movement, after the war the Flemish Movement equaled collaboration with the Nazis in the minds of many.

This wasn’t the end of the Flemish Movement and its political strive for a Flemish nation, on the contrary. As a result of a quite harsh repression of Nazi collaborators and what is known as the Royal Question<sup>1</sup>, the Flemish Movement rises from its ashes in the fifties (Wils, 1992; Reynebeau 2009; Blommaert, 2011). And with this resurrection, it didn’t take long before the demand for political autonomy for Flanders was again on the table. With the founding of the Volksunie (The People’s union) in 1954, these political Flemish nationalistic demands would stir all political parties towards more Flemish autonomy. The Volksunie was established after The Second World War as a nationalist party aiming at a federalist Belgium with a high degree of autonomy for Flanders and striving for a general pardon of the Flemish nationalist collaborators with the Nazis. The Volksunie would become the most successful Flemish nationalist party in Belgian history (Blommaert, 2011). When the Volksunie fell apart in 2001 it had fully accomplished its federalist aims. Their first major breakthrough already came in the sixties with the introduction of the famous language frontier. This frontier, while in essence a pragmatic political solution, meant a major shift towards a Herderian nationalism in Flanders because it introduced territoriality into the strategy of the Flemish (and Walloon) movement (Blommaert, 2011). In the meanwhile Flanders has become the wealthiest part of the country.

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<sup>1</sup> The Royal Question refers to the political conflict surrounding the question whether King Leopold III should return to Belgium after World War II. This question was part of a referendum in Belgium. A small majority of the Belgian voted for his return.

The defining of the language frontier was just the beginning of a whole series of different agreements on further federalization of Belgium (in 1980, 1988-1989, 1993, 2001-2003 and in 2011). These reforms in Belgium have resulted in extensive autonomy for the regions and communities in Flanders. What is more, they not only deepen federalism, but they also create national Flemish state structures such as a Flemish government and a Flemish parliament. These developments have further fuelled a Flemish nationalism. The Volksunie lost support, simply because all its political goals were realized and it finally ceased to exist in 2001. The party split in a 'left' wing (Spirit) and a 'right' wing: the N-VA (The New Flemish Alliance).

N-VA was thus born out of the ashes of the Volksunie and is just like the Volksunie a Flemish nationalist party. Even though N-VA is relatively new in Belgian politics, it thus has quite a long political tradition. That doesn't mean that N-VA has the same demands and political goals as its mother party, the Volksunie. To name just one example, where the Volksunie strived for and established a federalist Belgium, N-VA sees this legacy from the mother party as ultimately problematic. In contrast, N-VA strives for a 'confederal' Belgium in the short run and an independent Flanders in the long run. In the last decade this right wing nationalist party has gained a lot of success and anno 2012 the party has become the biggest political party in Flanders.

The discourse of N-VA is not only a radicalized version of the Flemish nationalist discourse of the Volksunie, but is also a radicalization of the discourse that is also being used by the other Flemish mainstream parties such as the Liberals of Open VLD or the CDV (Catholic Democrats) (Maly, 2012). Moreover, N-VA is not a Flemish nationalistic party that pretends to be open for left- and right-wing activists like the Volksunie did. On the contrary, N-VA, and certainly its chairman Bart De Wever, position N-VA as a right-wing, conservative Flemish nationalist party. N-VA's nationalism is an updated version of an organic nationalism in the sense of Burke and Herder (Maly, 2012). What is more, just as in the writings of these main theorists of nationalism, the ideological nationalism of N-VA is filled with what Sternhell (2010) calls an anti-Enlightenment ideology. That means concretely that the N-VA nationalism is combined with a battle against the main values of what Israel (2001 & 2010) calls the Radical Enlightenment, namely equality, freedom and democracy. Just like all anti-Enlightenment thinkers, N-VA positions itself as virulently anti-individualist, anti-materialist and anti-socialist in particular (Maly, 2012).

### **N-VA and the multilayered communication of moderation**

Even though N-VA promotes an anti-Enlightenment ideology and a radical separatist agenda (Maly, 2012), the party contrasts itself successfully with the extreme right Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest). This self-image of the N-VA is picked up by the mass media in Flanders who portray N-VA as a moderate, centrum right and democratic nationalist party. This perception of the party and its electoral success is mainly due to its focus on smart and professional (mass)media communication. The communication of the party is characterized by what Kenneth Burke (1939) called the efficiency of the one voice, implemented through a total organization. The whole party speaks with the voice of De Wever (Maly, 2012). That's no coincidence, as we learn from the book '*De Ware De Wever*' (The True De Wever), but a well-considered political strategy. The journalist Kristof Windels who wrote this book while following De Wever daily during his election campaign for the local elections of 2012, mentions that all local N-VA candidates are trained and coached to avoid the freewheeling of one or more local sections of the party (Windels, 2012: 103). All communication by the party is pre-formulated, and nothing is a coincidence (Maly, 2012; Windels, 2012: 90). This pays off, as N-VA keeps all possible dissonance within the party behind closed doors.

This 'one voice'-strategy already makes it clear that N-VA is quite conscious of the importance of mainstream media for their political project. The party has a multilayered communication strategy that not only focuses on the hard news, but also integrates performances in talk shows, quiz-shows, popular magazines and so on. N-VA, and especially its chairman, are omnipresent in all these media. In the more serious programs we see the dominance of De Wever as the great communicator of the party. His own rhetoric and that of his party is carefully constructed and avoids radical or racist connotation. The central instrument in this rhetoric is the packaging of the message in metaphors and euphemisms. For example, De Wever will never speak of the need of separatism (De Wever, 2010a) but instead speaks of the *'high heteronomy costs of the blocked democracy of Belgium that can only be fixed if we go for confederalism'*. The rhetorical packaging of the agenda thus serves to obscure the actual message.

It is important to stress that N-VA-politicians not only adjust their political communication to the news formats of the commercial media, but they also invest a lot in what Silverstein (2003) calls the 'communication of identity'. The best-known example of this communication of identity is the mediatization of De Wever's diet. Before 2012 De Wever was known as a heavily overweight politician. His obesity was even part of his image: De Wever was known as a politician who, like the common man, loved to eat Belgian fries and hamburgers. Even more, he made his weight the subject of numerous sarcastic jokes at his own expense. As a consequence of this self-mockery he gained the image of a funny man. He was seen as "one of us" (Rohtus, 2012).

So when in December 2011 he announced that he was going on a diet, it became big news (Maly, 2012). For several months all media in Flanders regularly reported on the progress that De Wever made with his diet. From highbrow political magazines such as Knack to popular gossip magazines such as Story, De Wever's fight against his weight was news for more than 10 months. And this diet was quite successful, not to say spectacular. In 6 months he lost 60 kilos. This unusual metamorphosis was soon politically instrumentalized in the central slogan of the election campaign: "the power of change". De Wever was the prominent face of this campaign. Even though these were local elections, and De Wever ran for the major of Antwerp, billboards with his face and the central slogan appeared in the whole of Flanders. He was and is the face of the party. He is "the power of change".

In the last 5 years De Wever has become a truly Famous Fleming, which means that he isn't only in the news, but he is also present in the tabloids, quiz-shows and entertainment shows. There he sells his identity as an intellectual and a man of the people, as a man who has the strength and courage to go on a diet, and a funny man with whom most Flemings would like to go out to have a beer. By communicating all these identities in all these different settings he can reach out to many different target audiences: he's the intellectual and the common man, the hero and the victim of the political parties in Wallonia who are blamed to demonize him. His first breakthrough in this light was his performance in the very popular Flemish quiz show *'The smartest man on earth'*. The second time he participated in this quiz he not only showed himself as a funny man, he also showed himself, by ending second, as a smart man. An intellectual even, but an intellectual-of-the-people that also reads the tabloids. This status as intellectual is being enhanced by the Latin quotes that De Wever uses at strategic moments. The best know example is the Latin oneliner: Nil Volentibus Arduum (nothing is impossible if you want it). De Wever used this line not only when he won the elections in 2010, he also wore it on a banner when he ran the Antwerp 10 miles after losing his weight.

De Wever himself cherishes and also maintains this status as an intellectual in his opinion articles for papers as *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*. In these columns he regularly cites intellectuals such as Glucksmann, Proust, Fukuyama, Kohn, Weber, Cuperus, Machiavelli, Dukakis, Hayek, Friedman, Bush, Warren, Klein, Plasterk, Bredero, Dirks, Meijer, Lambert, Saul, Rawls, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kouchner, Billig, Mak, Bodifée, Knoop, Gantman, Abicht, Renan, De Tocqueville, Burke, Dalrymple, Clifford, Camus, Kant, Wittgenstein, Hume, Sartre, Canetti and Mommsen. By citing these intellectuals he not only gives his discourse a scientific aura, but even suggests that his political project incorporates the insights of these intellectuals and ‘thus’ his project is harmless: it’s ‘just science’. And so we see that both ways of communicating, the pure political communication and the communication of identity, are both deeply political. The one serves the same goal as the other.

### **Progressive journalists, Hroch and De Wever’s ‘scientific’ nationalism**

The image of De Wever as an intellectual helps to feed the idea that his nationalism is in line with science. His nationalism is then different than the old nationalisms because, to use the words of the famous progressive Flemish columnist Tom Naegels, his nationalism has internalized “*the critiques of postmodernism [...] without taking over its excesses.*” (2011: 7) Naegels therefore calls him “*one of the most thoughtful, reasonable and nuanced voices [...] within the context of the identity debate that in Europe has already being waged since the eighties and in the last ten years has erupted in all its severity.*” (2011: 7) These statements are in many ways quite interesting. What strikes us first of all is the public support that is given to De Wever and his political project by this progressive columnist by writing these lines in the introduction for De Wever’s second book. As we have just seen, in that introduction Naegels positions De Wever as one of the most moderate, nuanced and intellectual voices within what he euphemistically calls ‘the identity debate’. Secondly, we see that the image of De Wever as a person is reflected in the qualification of his project. He is an intellectual and *thus* his project is also intellectual. De Wever, according to Naegels, ‘*is a consistent advocate of a self-conscious, moderate and open nationalism*’. (2011: 7).

To say something about De Wever is to say something about the political project of N-VA and vice versa. It is in examples like these that we see that the communication of identity by De Wever is deeply political. The self-image of De Wever and his perception of his own project are not being critically reviewed, but are reproduced as real truths. Even more strikingly, this self-image is being reproduced by journalists who are known to be rather left-wing. In that way De Wever appears in public perception to have the approval of the left wing.

We see the same phenomenon occurring in the already mentioned book *The true De Wever*. The author of that book, Windels, works as a (sports) journalist for the ‘progressive’ newspaper *De Morgen*. What is striking about the book is its complete lack of critique, it ‘just’ describes what happens. Windels mostly reproduces the image of De Wever as an intellectual. By following De Wever, Windels comes to notice that De Wever not only read Hroch’s ‘*Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*’, but that he uses the book as a manual for success in his own nationalistic project. Windels writes as follows:

*‘Empirical research, De Wever reads it as some sort of manual for nationalists. ‘You find in it how you should do it’, summarizes De Wever. That’s why the work [of Hroch] made such a big impression on his assistant. He found it extremely tangible. Useable especially. How can you acquire public support for the idea of a nation? That*



*actually stands in the booklet. What does it take? What guarantees 'success'? Feel free to call it-with some exaggeration- De Wever's 'instruction booklet' ' (Windels, 2012: 109)*

According to this journalist, De Wever uses Hroch to gain success for his own nationalistic project. That's why De Wever's discourse focuses

*'[...] on Migration. On safety. On financial transfers between Flanders and Wallonia. [...]' (Windels, 2012: 110).*

Windels's understanding of De Wever's use of scientific writing is very similar to that of Naegels's, namely that De Wever is in the first instance a scientist and an intellectual, and as a consequence that his nationalistic project is also completely new. His project is in line with science and, according to Windels, De Wever has left behind everything that was indefensible:

*'De Wever debated constantly with postmodernists during lunch break [at the University of Leuven]. 'They sat with a whole bunch opposite of me, I sat lonely at the other side. That pures out your thinking. Then you let go of the standpoints that are unsustainable. All the classic nationalistic ideas I had to let go. There all the romance has been kicked out of my body. That wasn't that hard, because these ideas were already quite loose. The idea that the nation and nationalism are a man-made idea, that I have accepted. No problem. But my defense is simple: everything is man-made.' (Windels, 2012: 113)*

Windels, like Naegels, sees and portrays De Wever as an intellectual with an intellectual and scientific vision on nationalism. In that perception De Wever doesn't stand for a romantic nationalism, his political project is understood as 'rational'. They portray him as the man who reinvented nationalism so that it is free from the sins of the past. And this idea is constantly linked to the implicit and explicit labeling of De Wever as an intellectual, as a historian and as a former PhD student. The communication of identity is deeply political, it provides support for the nationalist project.

### **Scientific nationalism and the battle for banal nationalism**

The idea that the political project of N-VA is a scientific project instead of a radical, (extreme) right and organic nationalistic political project, is of course an interesting selling argument in the contemporary mainstream media. Strikingly from this perspective, is that this image has also entered the scientific world.

In 2012 Dirk Rochtus from Lessius University College published the article "*The rebirth of Flemish Nationalism: assessing the impact of N-VA Chairman Bart De Wever's Charisma.*" in *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*. In that paper Rochtus – the former vice-chief of Cabinet of minister Bourgeois (N-VA) – in large extent reproduces the discourse of N-VA and its chairman De Wever and the media reporting on N-VA as scientific truths. The success of the party and its chairman is presented as results of what the 'Flemings want' and the charisma of De Wever. The project of N-VA is described as a purely democratic political project that has nothing to do with the old nationalisms or with the extreme right Flemish Bloc. The whole communication of N-VA on the nature of her project is simply taken to be true, without any analysis. Rochtus quotes several journalists and De Wever himself to underline the democratic nature of N-VA:

*“The electoral victory was also a ‘moral’ victory for De Wever: Flemish nationalism in its democratic form captured a large section of the public vote, and the N-VA deprived the VB [Flemish Bloc] of its monopolization of the ideals of the Flemish Movement. Asked what the VB’s losses meant to him, De Wever answered: ‘the Flemish call for independence again becomes a negotiable and honourable [sic] endeavor For that reason June the 7<sup>th</sup> was an historical day’ (Van Baelen, 2009). ‘The Black beast has been tamed’, a leftist columnist exclaimed (Naegels, 2009), referring to VB’s defeat. On election day.”(Rochtus, 2012)*

What strikes us while analyzing this citation is the fact that Rochtus not only reproduces the words of De Wever as mere truths that don’t need no investigation, he also reproduces the reproductions of the image of N-VA by journalists as scientific proof that De Wever is right about his statements on the democratic nature of N-VA. What De Wever says about N-VA is a fact, not something that needs to be scrutinized. By publishing this article Rochtus grants ‘scientific allure’ to the discourse of De Wever and underlines the image of De Wever as an intellectual.

What the progressive columnist, the journalist and the scientist miss to see, is that the nationalistic project of De Wever *an sich* isn’t new. De Wever doesn’t include the criticisms of all the intellectuals he cites on nationalism in his project. He just uses what is useful in these scientific researches to sell his nationalism as a moderate nationalism, a democratic nationalism cleared from all the dangers of the old nationalisms. But in reality De Wever thus uses science as a means to strive for classical nationalist hegemony.

From this perspective, there isn’t anything new about the N-VA project. If scratch of the rhetoric, we see that De Wever still tries to sell a very old nationalism. The fact that the above mentioned scientist and journalist don’t detect this, is a consequence of the lack of analysis of the N-VA-project. Rochtus, for example, doesn’t analyze the claims of De Wever, but uses the media-reporting as proof of that the rhetoric of the N-VA-chairman is a scientific fact. By doing so, Rochtus and mainstream media repeat the political communication from N-VA and the reproduction of that image in the mainstream press.

What is new is the package and the communication strategy, a strategy based on a selective reading of scientific work. What is useful on the level of discourse is incorporated in the general communication of the party. The point is that De Wever uses scientific research on nationalism for two reasons:

1. To sell his nationalism as a safe nationalism, as a humanist and democratic nationalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that has nothing in common with the ‘wrong nationalisms’ of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.
2. To increase insight in the growth of public support for a nationalist cause as a base for the communication strategy in the mass media.

We work out these two points in depth below. To illustrate point 1, we focus on how De Wever understands and uses the famous insights of Anderson who sees the nation as an imagined community. Point 2 will be illustrated with how De Wever uses the research of Michael Billig as a manual to banalize his Flemish nationalist project.

### **The redefinition of Anderson’s imagined community**

From De Wever's perspective, the view of him as an intellectual and his nationalism as simply reiterating scientific research will not be problematic. Indeed, if this perspective on his project is dominant, then it is a step closer to being normalized. Both of these perceptions establish and underline the idea that his nationalism is unproblematic, normal even. The problem with the suggestion that the nationalism of De Wever is in line with scientific research is that De Wever is quite selective in using the intellectuals whose work he refers to. He selects what is useful for his nationalistic project and discards every critical eye of these intellectuals on nationalism. Only what fits to position his project as a moderate, even a democratic project that's free of all the sins of the past nationalisms is what he retains.

In the above citation we already saw an implicit reference to Anderson and, more specifically, to his understanding of nationalism as a construction. The fact that De Wever accepts this isn't as revolutionary as one might imagine. It isn't even a new idea within nationalist circles, for it echoes for example Renan's famous speech 'What is a nation'. Moreover, this acknowledgement by De Wever doesn't alter in any way his organic view on the nation as we know to exist within the anti-Enlightenment tradition (Sternhell, 2010, Maly, 2012). That becomes especially clear in the use of the work of Anderson in the discourse of De Wever.

On the webpage for De Wever's second book – *Workable Values* (2011) – De Wever acknowledges that Calhoun's "Nations Matter" together with "[...] *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe* by Miroslav Hroch and *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson laid the foundation of my thinking." (De Wever, 2011a) It is therefore no coincidence that De Wever several times implicitly refers to Anderson's famous concept. De Wever, especially when his concept of nationalistic identity comes under attack from political adversaries, suggests that he subscribes to the theory by Anderson. But, if we look closely we see that De Wever provides a rather peculiar interpretation of this theory:

*"Identity is, however, no imaginary [ingebeeld] community. It is a represented [verbeelde] community. Yes, identity and nationalism are invented constructions, but all -isms are invented by humans. Are they therefore wrong?"* (De Wever, 2010b)

De Wever uses the ambivalence of the translation of the word "imagined" in Dutch strategically. Imagined can be translated in Dutch as 'verbeeld' [represented] and as 'ingebeeld' [imagined]. He uses this ambivalence to twist Anderson's theory. Where Anderson stresses that the rise of capitalist communication media made it possible to imagine a nation, to invent and construct a nation that wasn't there before, we see that De Wever stresses the fact that the nation is represented, but not imaginary. The nation according to De Wever is somewhere out there as an entity with one national identity. And this last point is interesting because it shows that De Wever uses Anderson to rehabilitate and give legitimation to an old nationalist idea: namely the nation as symbolized in one identity and carried by one language and culture. This becomes clear if we scrutinize all the statements by De Wever on this Flemish identity. If we do that, we see that De Wever stresses the fact that the nation is more than a construction:

*"The Flemings are a community of six million people formed by destiny, who can recognize themselves as players of the same team because they have a name. We are "the Flemings". We know exactly about whom we speak. The Flemings have a definite territory, a common history and a cultural pattern. That binds us to each other at such a level that we can communicate and act with each other more easily than with*

*outsiders. [...] There is also a subjective element. You should also want it. If you don't want to be a Fleming you won't recognize the objective factors.'* (De Wever, 2009)

In the first instance, the conceptualization of objective and subjective elements of the nation echoes Hroch. But whereas Hroch (2000: 11-13) speaks of objective political, social and economic *relations* between individuals and subjective *relations* which he understands as a 'memory' of some common past, a higher degree of social communication and equality of all members of the group, we see that De Wever sees the territory, the language, the culture and the history as objective *factors*. Relations become characteristics and subjective elements turn into objective elements. Even more, he positions these factors as things that are just there, not as results of a historic nationalist struggle. So if we scratch the surface of the scientific rhetoric, we find a classical Herderian definition of the nation as a group of people with a name, a territory, a culture and a common language. De Wever sees these as the objective elements of the nation, a definition that in this conception isn't anywhere to be found in Anderson's or Hroch's work.

The concept of imagined community is filled by De Wever with a combination of two concepts of the nation. On the one hand, we distinguish a classical anti-Enlightenment concept of the nation as an organic community that connects all its members through the Dutch language (see f.e. De Wever, 2008a). On the other hand, we see a Renan-like conception of the nation (Renan, 1882) defined as 'the will to be a Fleming', the will to reproduce the nation. And to reproduce the nation, according to De Wever, we should cherish what he, like Renan, calls the narrative or mythical history (De Wever, 2012). Therefore De Wever advocates that school should not only teach 'deconstructivist or factual history';

*'But we must also know the value of the historical narrative. That historical stories are not just manipulations, but functional stories that connect people in a positive way with each other.'* (De Wever, 2012)

In short, we can establish already that the use of Anderson and Hroch's concepts is nothing more than a strategic instrument to sell his nationalistic ideas as new, moderate and 'scientific'. In reality, underneath the science-package we see a classic Herderian concept of the nation. What is more, science is instrumentalized to hegemonize that Herderian nationalism. Every Fleming has to see him- or herself as a Flemish nationalist: Flemish nationalism should become hegemonic. Not surprising, then, is the insight from Windels that the major lesson that De Wever has learned from Hroch is that '*a nation is an idea that must conquer the heart and soul of the people*' (Windels, 2012: 110). To succeed in that operation, De Wever looks at another heavy-weight in the study of nationalism: Michael Billig.

### **N-VA, Billig and the battle for a banal nationalism**

On several occasions, De Wever has pointed out that he strives for a banal nationalism in the sense that Michael Billig described it: '*Unlike the nationalism of the established nations (or patriotism) Flemish nationalism doesn't enjoy the luxury of what Michael Billig described as 'banal nationalism', an identity experience that's not being questioned and whose expression is omnipresent but usually totally unconscious*' (De Wever, 2011b: 47). In De Wever's perception, the objective basis for the Belgian nation is pulverized by the establishment of different communities (Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia). The establishment of these communities is a consequence of the battle waged by the mother party of N-VA: the Volksunie. The main problem for the nationalist project of N-VA, as De Wever sees it, is that although the battle of the Volksunie created an objective base for the Flemish nation (with its

own public broadcasting company, own parliament, own government, etc.), the subjective will of all Flemings to form a nation is not yet strong enough. A lot of Flemings still see themselves as Belgians. De Wever sees the problem as follows: *'[t]he subjective will to form one [Belgian] community, is still stronger but is becoming less motivated from a classical patriotism viewpoint, but arises out of the cherishing of Belgium as non-nation, the country with surrealism as main binder.'* (De Wever, 2010b: 47 ).

So the challenge for De Wever's nationalist project lies in the creation of the subjective will to form a Flemish nation: *"Although the germs of such a banal nationalism in Flanders are present through the political and institutional system and the impact of the media, the strive to bring the Flemings as a community to political autonomy still has to be explicitly articulated."* (De Wever, 2010b: 48) Note here the intertextuality with Billig. De Wever wants a Flemish nationalism that is seen as completely 'normal' and natural, a nationalism that is implicit in all talk. De Wever's goal is a nationalism that functions as a Barthesian zero point. Therefore the subjective basis of the nation has to grow; the Flemings should have the will to become one nation. All Flemings should see themselves as Flemish nationalists who then as a consequence want a Flemish state. Therefore N-VA has to win the Flemish souls (De Wever, 2011d).

When De Wever talks about this subjective will to form a nation, he not only echoes Renan's famous paper, but he also points in the direction of Michael Billig's Banal nationalism. De Wever has learned a lot from the work of Billig who, in his Banal nationalism, reminds us of the analysis by Roland Barthes. In his path-breaking *Mythologies*, Barthes (1959) points us towards normality as a site of power: the flag that hangs at the front of a city hall isn't innocent or powerless. On the contrary, says Barthes, just the fact that nobody notices this flag shows its hegemonic status. Normality is thus the result of established power and that power shapes the views of people.

We can see in the policy and conduct of N-VA that the party has understood this point very well (Maly, 2012). 'Communication' is seen in a Whorfian way by N-VA: political talk is equaled with political deeds. 'Communication' is seen as an instrument to establish a banal Flemish nationalism. N-VA implements this strategy of normalizing the nation in several domains. Let us now have a look at examples from two domains where N-VA is fighting this ideological battle, namely the role of the mainstream media in the political project of N-VA and the "Flemish character"- policies on the city level.

#### *Mainstream media and the construction of the nation*

The mainstream media are seen as crucial instruments in realizing the nationalistic project of N-VA. Their media strategy is directed towards what they call 'Flemish framing' (Bracke, 2011). Bracke, now a top N-VA-politician but in a former life one of the leading political journalists in Flanders, regularly criticizes his former employer - the public broadcasting company of Flanders - for promoting the Belgian identity by making programs with titles such as *"Made in Belgium"* or programs focusing on *Belgian* scientists or *Belgian* musicians instead of Flemish ones. We see another instance of this framing in the policy of the N-VA politician and former Minister for Media Geert Bourgeois who wanted to install a quota for Flemish music on the radio. To summarize, we can say that the central element in N-VA's media strategy is the instrumentalization of the public broadcasting company for the normalization of Flemish nationalism as something uncontroversial and realistic, a Barthesian zero point.

In practice this means that the Flemish public broadcasting (VRT) company should not only promote and help construct the Flemish identity, but it should also not depart from the Flemish nation as its only frame of reference. Therefore not the Belgian national holiday should be celebrated and broadcasted, but the Flemish one. Thus, when in 2011 the VRT would not cover *'The Gulden Ontsporing'* (a free festival to celebrate the Flemish holiday), Wilfried Vandaele, a Flemish MEP for N-VA, reminded the Minister of Media, Ingrid Lieten that ' [...] *the management agreement clearly [states] that public service broadcasting must strengthen the Flemish identity. Perhaps we should be even clearer in the management agreement that a presence in Brussels on the Flemish holiday is essential.*' (Vandaele, 2011) Public broadcasting services are being understood as necessary instruments to strengthen the subjective will of the Flemish to form a nation. Bracke summarizes this view as follows: '*The money of the public broadcasting company should not only be used to create programs' [...] ' It can also be deployed in the battle for the soul.*' (Bracke, 2011) Aside from this 'framing' policy, the party invests a lot in their political communication. "*If one wants to sell his ideas*", says De Wever, "*you should try to impose your political language on your opponent. You catch flies with honey, not with vinegar*" (De Wever, 2008a: 16).

In line with this, De Wever never speaks of separatism, but instead speaks of the need to restructure Belgian society because of the high heterogeneity costs (De Wever, 2010a). Of course, the underlying message is the same; N-VA strives for an independent Flemish nation. Language and semiotics are seen and being consciously used by N-VA as building blocks for the normalization of the Flemish nation, to build on the subjective will of all Flemings to establish a Flemish nation state. N-VA stands for a 'hot nationalism' but puts it in the package of a 'banal nationalism'.

The nation and the national inspirations of the party are seldom made explicit. On the contrary, in the N-VA-discourse they are constantly used implicitly, as a normality (Maly, 2012). De Wever doesn't speak about the need for a Flemish nation, but instead he speaks of the need to unblock the Belgian democracy. Note, by the way, that implicitly we see that N-VA is using a rather peculiar definition of democracy. Democracy in the discourse of N-VA isn't based on freedom, equality, and a constitution like in the Enlightenment tradition (Paine, 1791, Israel, 2010). Democracy, according to De Wever, is based on an identity:

*'Identity gives the answer to the question who belongs to the people and who doesn't. In that way it creates a democratic community.'* (De Wever, 2011a: 16)

A healthy democracy, according to N-VA, can only be built on one language, one culture and one public opinion. More democracy equals more nationalism in the discourse of N-VA (Maly, 2012). By using this rhetorical strategy, De Wever projects an image of moderateness. By doing so, the nationalistic project of N-VA is redefined as a purely democratic project and thus not to be mistaken for an extreme right or exclusive nationalism. Their separatist agenda is being sold as a democratic battle: the hot nationalism comes in the disguise of a banal one and that isn't a coincidence.

#### *The city and the construction of the nation: the case of Aalst*

Of course this quest for a Flemish nation isn't restricted to the context of media. Since the city elections of 2012, N-VA is one of the ruling parties in a lot of cities. As a result, we see in cities like Brasschaat, Wijnegem and Aalst the emergence of a new department: a department of Flemish affairs with an N-VA politician as alderman of Flemish affairs. In Aalst, Karim Van Overmeire, a former member of the racist and extreme right Vlaams Belang, takes up this

position for N-VA. Even though the policy of the newly elected coalition isn't available yet, we can get an idea of what policy N-VA has in mind to keep Aalst a Flemish city by looking at the program of N-VA on this issue. A central idea underlying all the propositions is the idea that Aalst has '*a Flemish character of its own*' (N-VA Aalst, 2012) that is threatened by immigration of people from the big city of Brussels. This arrival of '*people with other languages*' is a threat '*to the social cohesion, and is a source of annoyance and concern with the real native population of Aalst*' (N-VA Aalst, 2012). Immigration of French-speaking Belgians and non-Belgian migration is seen as a danger. That immigration could (possibly) degrade Aalst to a '*never ending growing suburb of Brussels*' (N-VA Aalst, 2012). To face these threats, says the brochure, a position for an alderman of Flemish Affairs and Integration has to be created and installed. N-VA Aalst lays out five tracks to conserve this authentic Flemish city by the alderman:

1. *an open and honest communication to the general public about these issues.*
2. *maximally slowing down the inward migration, and the import of poverty and backwardness.*
3. *additional efforts of the local government for the civic integration policy.*
4. *to prevent ghettoisation.*
5. *community-enhancing measures.*' (N-VA Aalst, 2012)

We can group the points mentioned into three domains: 1. Communication (1&5), 2. Stopping migration (2) and 3. Integration (3&4). We can see the first four points as a basis for understanding point five that concerns us here the most. The implicit idea underlying all these tracks is the classic nationalist myth of an authentic community of, in this case, real and authentic Flemish people of Aalst that talk Dutch. This is seen as a lost ideal that is threatened by migration. The migration, according to N-VA, is being facilitated and created by the policies of the federal government on the one hand, and the fact that Aalst is geographically situated near the Belgian capital Brussels on the other. Brussels is seen as the cause of the (undesired) migration towards Aalst. That migration - note that this 'bad migration' is equaled with the import of poverty and backwardness - has to be stopped: '*The policy should aim to keep Aalst compact and livable and thus the city can't grow any further either in surface, or in number of inhabitants.*' (N-VA Aalst, 2012) The city has, according to N-VA, some instruments at hand to do this. If all these measures fail, the migrants have to be integrated to prevent ghettoisation.

For integration to succeed, as De Wever stressed before (2011c), it is a *condition sine qua non* that there is a strong (Flemish) community with a strong identity, and that's where track five comes in. This track is introduced by the following sentences:

*"For the N-VA, there should be no doubt that Aalst is a Flemish and Dutch city. By communicating this clearly and behaving consistently, it helps the process of integrating new residents that speak a foreign language (both French-speaking Belgians as well as people from other countries)." (N-VA Aalst, 2012)*

Note here that N-VA stresses the need of communicating Aalst as a Flemish city where one speaks Dutch as a means to help the integration of new residents. Communication is seen as a central element in the community-building policy of N-VA. Aalst has to be communicated as a Flemish city and therefore N-VA proposes the following communication measures:

- The strict application of the language legislation in administration (in particular at the counters); only Dutch in the city schools. Only Dutch in childcare.
- To install a new type of welcome board at the borders (by analogy with various municipalities in Flemish Brabant), new type of street signs, with the icon of the Flemish lion on it and with the street name also mentioned in the local dialect.
- The flagging of city buildings and the streets: only the flag of the city and of the region. In the towns: the former flag of the municipality also.
- To promote businesses with a Dutch name in Aalst
- 11-July-celebration as fully-fledged and contemporary celebration of our [Flemish] national day
- Consistent reference to the use of Dutch at concessions, permits and authorizations.
- Spreading a (Flemish) party flag among the inhabitants.

The alderman of Flemish affairs, according to N-VA, should deploy a multilevel plan to construct a national identity. Central to this plan aiming at the banalization of the nation is communication by introducing new street signs, by distributing the Flemish flags, by promoting Dutch shop names, etc. In all this communication we see that Billig's Banal nationalism is used as a kind of manual. The task of the alderman is to make sure that the Flemish nation is flagged constantly. Concretely, we thus see that N-VA wants the normalization of a hot nationalism. To build a new nationalistic community, N-VA focus on a multilevel strategy: from the mainstream media to the classical political alderman: all are used as platforms to create that homogenous identity in a time of super-diversity.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have demonstrated how N-VA and their chairman in particular instrumentalizes scientific research on nations and nationalism for their battle for a Flemish nation. Concretely we established that these scientific authors are used for two goals. The first goal is to project the image that N-VA is striving for a moderate, even a democratic nationalism that is 'scientific' in that it is presented as building on established analyses of nationalism. Their nationalism is free from all the faults of the nationalisms of the past. The party creates this image by using the main concepts of famous scholars on nationalism in their own discourse, such as Anderson's imagined community or Billig's banal nationalism. This image of the N-VA nationalism as a scientific nationalism is strengthened by the communication of identity by De Wever: he is not only active as a politician in the public debate, but also makes frequent use of the label of intellectual and historian to refer to himself. In his columns in the newspapers De Standaard and De Morgen he regularly cites all the leading intellectuals on nationalism. The result of this strategy is the normalization of the Flemish nationalistic project of N-VA.

The scientific package makes the nationalism acceptable for the wider audience because it gets an intellectual and safe image. Underneath this scientific package though, we see a classical Herderian nationalism based on the idea of a homogenous nation with one people, one identity, one language, one history, one culture. The scientific research doesn't alter the nationalistic project as such, but is being instrumentalized to create a homogenous people with one identity as a basis for the establishment of an independent Flemish nation.

Here we see the second use of the scientific research in the project of N-VA. Scientific research like that of Hroch and Billig are being used as manuals for the hegemonization of the Flemish national identity and support for the nationalist cause of N-VA. The media communication of the party and especially the policy of the aldermen of Flemish affairs are



directed to banalize Flemish nationalism. The party ignores the criticisms voiced by these intellectuals and uses their analysis to hegemonize Flemish nationalism. This 'scientific' nationalism is only scientific in the way it uses science as a manual to establish a banal Flemish nationalism as a major step in realizing an independent Flemish nation.

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