Multi-national, multi-cultural and multi-levelled Brussels: national and ethnic politics in the "Capital of Europe"

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Abstract

This paper sets out the paradoxical intersection of national (ie. Flemish and Francophone), non-national and ethnic minority politics in Brussels, a multicultural and multinational city at the heart of linguistic struggle of the Belgian regions. Brussels is an extraordinarily diverse and cosmopolitan city, in which a mixed language Belgian population live alongside very high numbers of resident non-nationals, including European elites, other European immigrant workers, and immigrants from Africa and Asia. Among immigrant groups, the Turkish and Morroccan communities, in particular, are noteworthy for their strongly transnational character. After first explaining the complex distribution of power and competences within the Belgian federal structure, we explore whether these structures work to include or exclude disadvantaged ethnic groups. To better understand these processes, we introduce theories of multi-level governance in this context, and cross-reference them with theories of post-national citizenship and ethnic organisation and mobilization. The lack of formal political voting and participation rights often leads immigrant groups into developing other forms of participation and political expression in matters of cultural association, education, housing and territory. However, as these unconventional and marginal channels become routinised, the situation can also be seen to have seriously pathological consequences.

Keywords

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1. Introduction: Multicultural Brussels 2000

Long misrepresented as the grey, scruffy and rather boring adopted capital of Europe, Brussels in the year 2000 is headed for a triumphant reassertion of its deeply rooted cultural heritage and dynamism, and its emerging multi-cultural and multi-lingual future. Headed by a 'neutral' Scotsman, a group of young cultural entrepreneurs from both sides of the Flemish-Francophone linguistic divide, are hoping to avoid classic Belgian ideological and bureaucratic wrangling long enough to put together a forward looking programme of events and showpiece exhibitions, to fully represent a city fast becoming one of the most nationally, ethnically and racially diverse in Europe. The European Cultural Capital of 2000 will assert a new multicultural identity and public face, which underlines the reality of its present population composition: with its 70% national Belgian population (roughly 5:1 Francophone to Flemish) these days joined ever more visibly by its large minority of foreign residents, made up of a EU-centred pan-European elite, NATO personnel, multinational elite working for transnational corporations and sizable numbers of immigrant Italians, Spanish, Turkish, Moroccans and ex-Zaïrians, most of whom came originally either as part of state-sponsored guest worker programmes or as part of Belgian post-colonial arrangements. Recent flows of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants have increased the multicultural character of Brussels further. About 128 nationlities are today represented in the Brussels region.

Meanwhile, while all this proactive cultural policy is taking shape, a less happy story is playing out over the basic political rights and representation of these same groups and communities in the city. For reasons rooted in the official refusal to make the obvious connection between the bi-communal ethno-cultural management of Flemish-Francophone relations, and the developing policies on multi-cultural and multi-national issues raised by the immigrant, non-national population, Belgium has, of all the EU member states, been the most reluctant and awkward about the political implications of the EU's freedom of movement provisions and attached citizenship rights. A series of politically motivated delays has held up the implementation of Maastricht's European citizenship provisions on local voting rights and political participation for legal non-national residents. With non-EU third country nationals also long term residents in the city, the general issue of residents' rights has become the most potent mobilising banner for immigrant representatives trying to force an official recognition of a population long denied direct access to the political process in Belgium. Faced with these pressures, the issue of voting rights has moved central stage in the eternal political struggle in the city between the majority Francophone and minority Flemish representatives. Both sides are stalling nervously over the voting rights issue, fearing a dramatic shift in the careful, technically engineered balance which holds in the political and administrative institutions of the city.

The shape of these political tensions is archetypal of Belgian politics, poised as it has been for decades between an uneasy consociational compromise and the threat of national linguistic scission, with Brussels the unresolved territorial and power dilemma at the heart of it. The issue of voting rights brings in many different levels of political action and interaction, that

combine instrumental considerations of political strategy and positioning, with deeper ones about the formation and maintenance of ethnic and national identities and allegiance. The issue also illustrates well the fact that, what can be called 'multi-level governance' has long been the norm in Belgium: where politics gets played out, twisted and sometimes resolved across a complicated series of arenas and channels, located simultaneously at supra-national, federal, regional, provincial, city and communal level.

In this paper, we hope to illustrate some of these paradoxes of multi-level politics in Belgium, as they are manifested through the question of immigration and non-national political rights and representation in Brussels. After a brief introduction to the salient political and social facts about Brussels, and a discussion of the application of theories multi-level governance and post-national citizenship theories to the Brussels case, we will go on to explore various dimensions of immigration-related politics in the city. What we are most interested in, is raising some distinctly sociological questions concerning the place of disadvantaged groups in a fragmenting, multi-level political system. We would suggest that asking these questions might point research on transnational communities towards issues that should be at the heart of reflections on the institutionalisation of non-traditional, unconventional non-state political forms and activities. We argue that while the emergence of unconventional political channels and arenas may indeed help these groups get some access and voice in the political process - particularly when they are able to capitalise on crisis-situation cleavages, and build coalitions and *ad hoc* alliances with dominant political groups - the institutionalisation of these new forms of political action may also over time lead to more serious pathological inequalities and exclusions. These are rooted in sociological arguments about the effects of socialisation into a peculiar political environment where traditional forms of participation and representation are absent or blocked.

2. Brussels: geography, politics and society

The city of Brussels has just under 1 million inhabitants, around 30% of which are non-national residents (see figures below). In the constitutional structure of the new federal Belgium established in the settlement of 1988-9 and the state reforms of 1993 (see Hooghe 1993; Fitzmaurice 1996), Brussels-Capital is an independent region, on a par with the regions of Flanders and Wallonia. The city is dominantly French speaking, with a ratio of about 5:1 French speaking to Flemish (see Cools 1995). The actual population of each is unclear and controversial; all census taking was discontinued in the 1960s because of its explosive consequences for political struggle in the city. The best guide seems to be the numbers of votes cast in elections, where voters choose between separate linguistically-divided lists of candidates. In most recent elections, Flemish voters accounted for around 15% of the vote.

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Population Figures (Brussels-Capital Region)
(Real figures for 1990 and prospects for 2010)

	1990	2010
Belgians	696,616	561,728
	72.24%	61.99%
Foreigners	135,519	156,502
(Industrialised countries)	14.05%	17.27%
Foreigners	132,205	187,991
(Third World countries)	13.71%	20.74%
Foreigners total	267,724	344,493
	27.76%	38.01%
Total population	964,340	906,221

source: *Eindrapport van het Koninklijk Commissariaat* 1993, pp.27-28

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The status and future of Brussels has always been an issue at the heart of Belgian politics. Geographically, the city is entirely located in Flanders, and yet has always been ruled by a French speaking elite. Over the years, it has developed independently of the rest of the country, in economic, political and linguistic terms. The creeping *verfransing* (Frenchification) of the city is a constant source of anger to Flanders, which all around it has strengthened its uni-lingual base. Meanwhile, its economic success relative to Wallonia, its regional independence, and the distinct identity of *Bruxellois* apart from *Wallons*, has given its French speaking population a different set of political priorities to their cousins to the south and east. It should be pointed out as a caveat that the economic situation of Brussels is rather ambiguous in this respect. On the whole, the Brussels region is one of the wealthiest regions of the European Union in terms of production. On the other hand the number of poor living there would also rate highly. The explosive nature of the Brussels question put it at the heart of all regionalisation and federalisation negotiations. One of the major achievements of the most recent reforms was to succeed in coming up with an arrangement which, for a time at least, put Brussels more off than on the political agenda. In 1998 and 1999, Brussels jumped again to the top of the agenda in a pre-electoral period, running up to combined European, federal and regional elections in June 1999.

One of the central problems about Brussels has been its steady urban expansion into its periphery areas. Officially the bounds of the city have been set at the borders of the 19 communes that make up the city, but its spreading influence causes the periphery area to be a potential flashpoint in all future Francophone-Flemish negotiations. Some of the adjacent periphery communes have to provide special linguistic facilities for their French residents, given that they are officially part of Flanders. The bargaining issue of potentially withdrawing these linguistic allowances is always a key point in negotiations. Similarly the most heated

tensions over the ethno-cultural divide in recent years have come in communes such as Fourons, in the Flemish province of Limburg, and in six communes with a special linguistic status in the periphery of Brussels, where a majority or a large minority of French-speaking population finds itself under Flemish administration, and is able to mobilise the linguistically separate political parties and media around this single burning issue.

The solution in Brussels itself has been to institutionalise bilingualism at all levels, and to reproduce throughout political and administrative institutions formalised list-based joint representation, in which Flemish are usually lightly over-represented. To make it clearer, bilingualism means that the state institutions are obliged to address the citizens either in French or in Flemish. It does not mean that the civil servants are fluent in both languages. The main ruling body of the city is the Brussels regional council, which has 75 members (currently 65 French members and 10 Flemish). In addition special rules ensure that no decisions can made which override the wishes of the minority, and there is an official 'alarm bell' system that can indefinitely stop any decision which the minority deems to be unacceptable to their interests. This pushes representatives to seek a high level of consensus in all initial bargaining. Within the city, the 19 individual communes each then have their own administrative status and powers; each indeed has its own distinct identity, built around having their own mayor, administration, police force, etc.

Brussels is an independent region with, like Flanders and Wallonia, its own relations with supra-national organisations such as the EU, and its own distinct powers of finance, policy competence, and decision making. In the new constitutional arrangement, there is a complicated distribution of competencies across the different political levels and arenas, which is made further unclear by the fact that there is an asymmetrical match of territory and competencies over certain questions. The Flemish speaking population in Brussels are considered part of the Flemish national community, and the region locates its headquarters in the capital - despite Brussels not being part of the Flemish region. The French speaking *Bruxellois* meanwhile, are distinct from the Walloon national community, and Walloon and Brussels powers and competencies do not overlap. This has important consequences in areas of policy such as education which fall under the remit of the community not regional powers.

Finally, the high number of non-national and immigrant residents give Brussels a distinct, international and globalised feel of its own, that only extends and deepens the extraordinary impact that the location of the main European Union institutions here has had on the city. This has led to certain communes of the cities becoming majority non-national resident, especially given the strong concentration of both EU elites and immigrant minorities in particular areas of the city. Turks and Moroccans have long dominated the populations of the old north and south west industrial belt adjacent to the city centre: the communes of Saint-Josse, Schaarbeek, Koekelberg, Molenbeek and Eastern parts of Anderlecht. There is a strong pocket of ex-Zaïrians in Ixelles, alongside the EU elite who also move out East into the suburbs beyond the EU centred area around Schuman into Etterbeek and Woluwe Saint-Pierre. Other parts of the city remain often exclusively white and Belgian, and lack contact with the non-national and immigrant populations.

Maps

Figure 1: Map of Belgium.

source : UNESCO – MOST Programme (1998). *Multicultural Policies and Modes of Citizenship in European Cities* (MPMC), *Common Introduction to the Belgian templates (cities of Antwerp, Brussels and Liège).*

Figure 2: Brussels and its 19 communes, showing periphery communes with special linguistic facilities
source: Mean (1989), p. 64

3. Theories of multi-level governance: the questions raised

To better understand national and ethnic politics in Brussels - as both a distinct administrative region of Belgium, and the putative capital of the European Union - we suggest that theories of multi-level governance can be applied to the case, and combined with other theories of ethnic mobilisation and the multicultural society. Multi-level governance theories have been developed by scholars in the field of European Union studies to account for the development of new state and non-state political structures that distribute traditionally centralised powers over a range of new institutions at different levels of the polity. Typically, they are said to be non-hierarchical and essentially contested in nature, and may often lead to new forms of political representation and mobilisation (on theories of multi-level governance, see Hix 1998; Marks et al 1996; Hooghe 1998). Looked at this way, Belgian regionalist and federalist solutions to its inter-community tensions and power struggles, can be seen to have institutionalised a permanent multi-levelled situation in which powers and competencies are shared between the federal state and the different regional, provincial, city and communal levels (Brans 1993; Deschouwer 1994). These distinct levels interlock and overlap in various ways, producing different kinds of access points for actors and the expression of interests, which also widen the potential forms of interest representation and aggregation, enabling new forms of non-traditional and unconventional political activity to find a place and take root.

Overlaid onto this situation, we find the growing influence of European Union level legal and political institutions, itself enhanced in the Belgian case by the power of the regions to directly negotiate with the Union (something only enjoyed by one other regional grouping, the German *Länder*, who have less powers in the German federal structures than their Belgian counterparts - see Hooghe 1995). This combination of factors generates what is perhaps the most advanced state of multi-level governance in Europe. Other features of multi-level governance are clearly apparent in the Brussels context. Political actors and interest groups in Brussels enjoy the constant incentive to search out and try different levels on which to pursue interests and claims, thus leading to a great deal of cross-level competition. In this context, informal ties and networks have a very important role, caused by the behind-closed doors nature by which many proposals are put forward and decisions get made. And there is typically an unclear hierarchy of powers - in spite of all the attempts to clarify these in constitutional terms - and it is impossible to keep different levels from spilling over, thus opening up the possibility of tensions and political activity between the levels, and the opening up of opportunities to other interested parties who might normally be marginalised by conventional political parties and channels.

In the rather scarce theoretical political science literature on Belgian federalisation, authors have also discussed the presence of consociational and corporatist elements, and how these also create other constraints and opportunuties for political action and representation (Hooghe 1993; van den Bulck 1992). In Belgium itself, the debate on federalisation has been mainly led by specialists of constitutional Law. Although this is understandable, the relative absence of political scientists in the debate should certainly be questioned. Both consociationalism and corporatism take the accent of democratic politics away from open public participation and confrontation, in favour of an internalised, behind-closed-doors negotiation, which affirms the group-based autonomy of interests. Whilst the consociational elements of Belgian politics perpetuate a situation of permanent 'crisis' and potential gridlock between the two rival linguistic communities, it also ensures that progress is only made at the mutual benefit of both parties and is never zero-sum, and there is therefore an accent on internalising solution-

finding within the elite institutions, so that technical and consensual compromises can be found. Further, the shared understanding of all the parties that there can be no-going back once responsabilities are definitively devolved to nationally separate levels, ultimately checks parties from breaking out into open conflictual winner-takes-all behaviour, and encourages the introduction of other checks to the seemingly inevitable progress of regional secession. Deadlock is avoided by introducing side-payments and complicated trade-offs. Hooghe (1993) speaks of these elements as the inherent 'leeway' in a consociational situation, and it is in these points, both between levels and between the two linguistic communities, that other groups such as immigrant representatives may be able to come into the process and have some voice in the situation.

As far as immigration politics are concerned, the important parts of multi-level governance theories are those elements which discuss the role of outside or marginal groups, and how they use contentious politics or unconventional political activity to force a place in the political process (Tarrow 1995, 1996; Marks and MacAdam 1996). Multi-level governance theories indeed rest many of their claims about the potential democratic benefits of these new modes of politics 'beyond the state', on the fact that the multi-levelled, non-hierarchical powers and competencies it institutes may create new kinds of opportunities for entrepreneurial marginal groups. It is suggested they may be able to achieve interest representation in these new situations, which normally would have been impossible through traditional hierarchical channels of party and government representation. In their studies of the differences between different types of campaign organisations in the new European context, such as NGOs, international protest groups, trades unions and regionalist movements, Marks and McAdam conclude that while new opportunities are certainly opened up, the differences in access to the policy field are also as important. This can be explained by different structural factors about which types of collective action and organizational forms suit best the new transnational arena, as well as the historical embeddedness of some groups in hierarchical, national-level bargaining patterns. The different resources that distinct campaign groups can call upon then in turn has implications for the capacity of groups to organise their interests in novel situations where the exact distribution of powers and competencies is not clear.

What is interesting here, is to ask what this tells about the possible institutionalisation of political action and organisational forms that fall outside of campaigning oriented towards traditional national government and party-political channels (see Wiener 1997). In the social movements literature, this indeed has big historical connotations, because of the claims by these writers that liberal-democratic nation-states have built themselves - and undergone progressive reform - precisely through the motion of incorporating marginal groups contentious campaigners into the traditional political game (McAdam and al 1996). The organisation of non-orthodox or marginal interests is therefore an important litmus test of the democratic capability of a political system to listen to unrepresented and marginalised political voices. The question in the context of a multi-levelled system is what happens to this idea of state-building when there is no single unitary state - and hence no ordered system and hierarchy of parties and institutions, and ultimately norms or values - into which new groups might be integrated. In other words, what consequences will incorporation into a fragmented system have on the integration of these marginal groups, which will surely only be partial and incomplete? We must assume that some sort of institutionalisation of norms, routines and practices will still presumably take place; but how will this match with the desired democratic

incorporation of groups envisaged in the building of the old-fashioned unitary nation-state and political system?

What might have held for the working classes, women and social movements in the past, may not always hold for immigrant groups, who are arguably the most structurally disadvantaged group in a modern polity such as Brussels - especially given that this group often does not even enjoy formal political rights and citizenship status. Belgium has slowly opened up access to citizenship for second generation and third generation immigrants, and the number of voters with an ethnic immigrant background is on the increase. For these, formal political participation is therefore now a channel of empowerment which should not be neglected (this question is dealt with in other articles; see Martiniello 1998a, 1998b, 1998d, 1999). Non-nationals, on the other hand, might be able to mobilise other resources because of their cultural or socio-economic particularities. Yet in other ways, they are unable even to mobilise directly because of their formal status, and historically have often had to have their interests represented through elite advocacy, and go-between campaigning groups, which themselves may not share the same interests as those they are representing. Political parties meanwhile may offer openings, but also seek to co-opt and use the immigrant voice for their own interests (Martiniello 1992, 1993).

Before concluding negatively on these structural factors affecting immigrants ability to mobilise and see its interest represented, a slightly different spin may also been given to the 'beyond the nation-state' hypothesis, by cross-referencing multi-level governance theories with the new political sociology of post-national membership and citizenship, especially the work of Saskia Sassen (1995) and Yasemin Soysal (1994). In their accounts of the transnationalisation of immigration politics, they discuss how immigrant political action is increasingly grounded - and given legitimacy - in a wider international context, by its reference to international norms and institutions and legal powers at the transnational level. Immigrants claim social and political rights in virtue of the idea of universal personhood, not national citizenship of a particular state, and the pro-active role of institutions such as The European Union often cut out the nation-state level entirely, combining with city and regional levels to offer new political channels for these groups. This loss of national sovereignty is compounded by the increasing autonomy and freedom of transnastional business and the economic sphere from government control, creating a global economic system within which immigrants are well placed to pursue transnational interests and cultural agendas that fall far outside the range of the traditional nation state context. The question that follows from this is whether in shifting and devolving such powers 'up, down and out' the state is really 'losing control' as Sassen and Soysal appear to claim, or whether these new social and political institutions are in fact new forms of state control, in which the different levels are harnessed to enable continued state organisation of interests and powers (Guiraudon and Lahav 1997).

Our primary interest in this paper is not to show that multi-level governance theories apply to the Brussels situation: by itself a relatively unproblematic claim. Rather, we are interested in testing the different theoretical possibilities suggested by the opening up of new forms of political access and participation, and whether they do indeed open new opportunities or exacerbate structural factors of exclusion. This then will allow us to broach the important normative question about the democratic merits of a multi-levelled situation: how are the interests of immigrants being organised and represented; and what are the consequences of their being forced into exploring non-conventional political forms and channels? Answering these questions will also take us further to understanding the institutionalisation of new non-

state forms, and whether it genuinely represents a new form of democratic political organisation and governance as writers claim.

4. Paradoxes of immigration politics in Brussels

The answer to these questions will be highly ambiguous. There are several examples of the intra-community tension in Brussels enabling and encouraging new types of immigrant opportunities and political voice; but also evidence that the given institutional structure and biases reconfirm inequalities, and may be leading to pathological forms of political activity and expression among marginalised groups.

4.i. Political participation in all its forms

When all is said and done, it is still a brute fact that immigrants often have very limited political rights in the city, and are thus straightforwardly excluded from many conventional channels of participation, representation and welfare distribution. To some extent this is mitigated by the fact that a range of social rights attached to residence are available to legally resident immigrants in the city, but the basic message here is stark. The large majority of immigrant foreigners in Brussels have not yet been naturalised, despite the liberalisation of naturalisation laws in the early 1990s, and they are thus constrained in formal terms to channel what efforts they can through those immigrant representatives that are able to make some impact on local level politics in the city.

Of late, the voting rights issue has moved central stage in Brussels political life. Here immigrant groups converge in their open campaigning with many of the leading anti-racist and NGO campaign groups, as well as efforts sponsored by the Commission - and its new high profile citizenship information campaigns - to get full local voting rights for European citizens in accordance with the Maastricht treaty. Belgium was particularly troublesome members of the IGC negotiations on European citizenship rights; successfully laying down special clauses on percentage representation of foreigners in constituencies where they would form over 20% of the electorate (a reality in parts of Brussels).

Two dimensions of the voting rights issue play into the ongoing Francophone-Flemish tensions about political balance and administrative powers in the city. The first is the perceived claim that foreigners in the city would dominantly be found to be Francophone in orientation and thus provide a massive boost to Francophone political lists in any elections, thus rudely upsetting the current status quo which ensures a relative over-representation of the Flemish in Brussels institutions. These perceptions themselves are highly controversial and, as with many such questions which sit unhappily on the sensitive linguistic divide, the accumulation of reliable data itself on this question has been fraught with political danger. Though studies do tend to suggest that most immigrants naturally orient themselves to the Francophone side in practice, it by no means proves that this is a preference or an automatic reflex. It may in other words reflect the unequal balance in the city between the two linguistic sides, and immigrants' own perceptions of the best instrumental line to take (see the findings of the new report by Swyngedouw, Phalet and Deschouwer 1999). Moreover, immigrants' votes would only make a difference in favour of the French speaking interests if over 85% of them voted for Francophone lists. Certainly it is clear that the resident EU population in Brussels are much more likely to identify with the Francophone side, given the strongly

French flavour of the European institutions and its much stronger relative place as an officially institutional language of the Union. However, it is not so clear that immigrant groups would follow this pattern. This is especially so, given that the Flemish are increasingly the best source of funds and associational opportunities for immigrants in the city.

More to the point however - and why Flemish politicians are in general hostile to the voting rights proposition, while the French are coming round to it - is the fact that the introduction of large new numbers of minority voters into the system would encourage some Francophones to challenge the special status of Flemish in the city; that is, ask why should they have any special status *at all*. This has become a political tit-for-tat, given that Francophones are now raising this question in direct response to the current Flemish campaigns against special linguistic facilities in the periphery communes of Brussels. It does seem likely that an expansion of voting rights would lead to a complete renegotiation of all the current compromises over minority rights within and without the city, something which could plunge the country back into the kind of heated, institutional chaos it faced during the 80s. Other factors at this stage start to weigh on the minds of the city politicians and federal ministers involved. With international business getting uneasy about the Belgian political situation, EMU put into doubt, and Belgium receiving poor ratings on business studies of institutional stability, there is a strong international pressure on the city to not go down the path of chaos. But this in turn perhaps reinforces the current blockade on the voting rights issue.

However vociferous the campaigning for third country national rights in Brussels gets, it is unlikely therefore to gain much reward in the short term. Indeed, the connection of the issue with EU voting rights may have counter-productive effects; in which the moral imperative of the 'foreigner' status in Brussels is enough to ensure EU citizenship rights come through in 2000 as planned, but no further - at the expense of any resolution of the political rights of non-European foreigners in the city. They will certainly miss the next local elections to be held in October 2000, but may be granted local voting rights in 2006.

There is more to be said, though, in political terms about the effects of these formal blockages. It is a seemingly irresolvable material and symbolic stumbling block, and therefore the source of a whole of range forces created and unleashed by the Francophone-Flemish tensions. Other types of informal and non-traditional opportunities and spaces are thereby generated in the political agenda for political action in the absence of actual political rights and citizenship. The connected issues of multicultural Brussels and resident foreigner voting rights have thus risen giddily high on the political agenda - in contrast to many other places in Europe, where ruling parties have successfully managed to bureaucratically internalise the management of immigration issues and its place in the public political agenda. It has thus become a vector for public campaigning and high profile, media-fueled 'debate expansion', particularly as the issue was connected up through the figure of the young Belgian-Moroccan woman campaigner Nabela Benaï ssa - whose sister was murdered - with the White Movement and the public moral outrage in the aftermath of the Dutroux case and ensuing administrative corruption and scandal during 1996-7 (see Rihoux and Walraeve 1997; the expression 'des belges marocains' was introduced by Gaudier and Hermans 1991).

Moreover, the political parties themselves have been forced by the tension over the issue to not harden their positions, but rather seek to play off the issue in relation to their political competitors, on both their side of the linguistic divide. For example, the *Volksunie* in Brussels has taken the interesting step of endorsing the voting rights movement, in order it says to

expose the falseness of the claim that immigrants would automatically identify with the Francophone side of the agenda. Coupled with the wealth of local level initiatives to woo over immigrant groups to cooperate with Flemish authorities (who are usually better off, and more inclined towards multiculturalism) this represents a substantial counter-direction to the well-known hostility of the extreme right *Vlaamsblok* on immigration and integration. However, these paradoxes work in another direction. There is a growing Francophone hostility towards immigrants in the capital, which has pushed many French to in fact vote for the Flemish speaking *Vlaamsblok* at recent elections. Moreover, since immigrants overwhelmingly make claims to French community social provisions and education, many French speakers are now addressing their claims to the Flemish authorities who are under much less strain. In a circular fashion, this then exacerbates claims by the Flemish in Brussels that the French speakers are trying to take over their special rights and institutions - with the immigrants ultimately the ones to blame.

A third consequence of the political blockages has been the encouraging of new, unorthodox types of political representation and pressure groups among immigrants. Brussels city itself has lead the way, by setting up special consultative councils such as the *Commission mixte de consultation des citoyens bruxellois d'origine étrangère*. These alternative channels have partly arisen out of the representational pressures put on the most used political party of immigrant representation, the *Parti socialiste*. While officially backing many immigrant-initiative within the party, it has found itself hamstrung because of grass-roots resistence to further incorporating Moroccan and Turkish voices. Indeed, there has now been a block on the further recruitment of immigrant representatives in the party for this reason. Immigrant campaigners have therefore found that they can get better voice through their own commune-rooted, non-party structured efforts, sometimes in collaboration with federal-level advocacy groups (such as the *Centre pour égalité des chances et la lutte contre le racisme*), sometimes with external European funding, sometimes leaning on their transnational cultural and economic connections. There is a high degree of associational activity in Brussels, which the state itself has tried to curb and bring under control in new and very controversial laws on association that were designed to curb extremist political and 'fundamentalist' activity within the Belgian public sphere. The increasing heat of all these different currents in the city do indeed suggest that the state is losing control over the organisation and structuring of immigrant and immigrant-related political activity; a situation in which the extremes on both sides of the linguistic divide, and within the immigrant populations themselves, are the most likely benefactors.

4.ii. The politics of administration and welfare 'solidarity'

Belgian immigration policy as a set of issues, is an inherently problematic area, given that competencies over different aspects of border control, naturalisation, immigration, social welfare, education, housing and cultural policy were distributed to different levels of the polity in the federal reforms. It is clear that immigration-related concerns were not at all high on the agenda when the new federal arrangements were made, and this oversight is now beginning to make itself felt in the tensions these inconsistencies generate. Indeed, it is remarkable how even the most in-depth studies of Belgian federalisation offer very little discussion of the now central place of immigration in the intra-community struggle over Brussels.

In formal terms, immigration and naturalisation policy is still one of the clear areas which remains at federal level: a statement of the Belgian state's sovereignty over the boundaries of its national jurisdiction. What this in fact means in the current European situation is of course strongly compromised by the Belgian involvement in the Schengen agreement and its central role in the building of a new European immigration regime and international policies, that have been bolstered in the aftermath of the Amsterdam Treaty. At this level, the Belgian state has indeed seen best to devolve its responsibility over these free movement and control issues to a common supra-national level, where immigration control becomes more a matter of coordinated bureaucratic and police cooperation and the tracking of the movement of illegals and third country national; and where the big issue becomes the enforcement of better boundaries at the Southern and Eastern Borders of the European Union (Martiniello and Rea 1999).

Most integration policies, however, fall to regional level powers; despite the fact that it is the linguistic communities which have powers and finances over cultural policy, some social policy, and education. Welfare state administration itself remains also more in the province of the regional authorities. This confusion of powers leads to very unclear outcomes. It is in fact local commune administration and policing, for example, who hold the real practical powers over implementing residency and naturalisation requirements. The difference in treatment and behaviour of different Brussels communes over these questions is legendary. Some communes have had pit into practice a de facto '*refus d'inscription*' as a way of curbing or blocking immigrant registration and financial claims, although this has been challenged as illegal in the courts. The exclusion of groups with a precarious or unofficial status is here felt at its strongest. The practice of bureaucratic and police administration in the city often inscribe an informal politics of belonging, where offices and individuals may enforce their own judgements on who to admit or not (see Crowley 1999). This problem is heightened by the fact that across communes practices can easily differ and are thus often arbitrary and protected from proper scrutiny by the high level of administrative autonomy given to communes and their individual police forces.

One consequence of this can be dissuading immigrants to rely on state benefits and coverage, even when it is legally entitled. When applying is likely to lead to other inquiries about the legality of their residence status, this reluctance to deal with the administration is all the more likely. And in blocking naturalisation procedures for legitimate residents, local communes can also block access to state redistribution and welfare, the issue which is at the heart of the wider Belgian debate between Flanders and Wallonia over who should pay for the Belgian welfare state. The lack of a voice in this debate means that immigrants are entirely at the mercy of the Francophone-Flemish wrangling over this issue, particularly when their alleged 'over-use' of one communities facilities is said to lead to an unfair financial burden on one side of the population (as it does with education facilities in Brussels). Yet the two communities refuse to open the debate to a wider transnational perspective that might go beyond conceptions of federal versus regional solidarity, and the disparity between the two sides' net contribution (Flanders is currently being forced to redistribute some of its stronger GDP surplus to prop up the ailing social security and education system in Wallonia). For immigrants in Brussels, who often fall between the cracks of official social welfare entitlement, these debate themselves do not make much difference to their status. And this itself pushes them to look to their own own informal ties and social networks as a kind of alternative.

4.iii. The politics of language, education and culture

There is a long-standing difference in ideological orientation of Flemish and Walloons over the right normative model of integration of immigrants (Blommaert 1998). This finds the Walloons looking more to the individualist French republican model, and the Flemish closer to Anglo and Dutch ideas of group-based multiculturalism. Brussels, meanwhile, seems more oriented towards a multicultural vision, an inevitability perhaps given the large numbers of non-assimilating foreigners resident in the city. Brussels, indeed, is now an unlikely site for traditional assimilation to any unitary idea of Belgian culture; indeed, one of the hallmarks of life there is how little anyone needs to assimilate to 'Belgian-ness'. This tendency is viewed with deep suspicion by Francophones, who suspect that under the guise of multicultural Brussels - particularly the promotion of English as neutral, third language 'for all' - there is a plot afoot to reverse the French orientation of the capital.

Among cultural questions, education is especially problematic because of the costs of keeping a dual system running in Brussels, when a better solution would be to incorporate all resident foreigners and Belgians into a common bi-lingual structure, in which the teaching of English played a bigger role. The European EU elite here plays a negatively destabilising role, because of there tendency to move out of the city, not participate in any of its public institutions, and to always go (expensively) private in education. This again only perpetuates social boundaries and linguistic divisions between different groups, who literally never have to come into contact with one another.

Culture, however, can become a powerful vector for political interests. The exclusionary tendencies of formal political practice and competences, have forced immigrants to mobilise interests in other ways, some of which have been strongly encouraged by the *ad hoc* and uncoordinated efforts of different Francophone and Flemish authorities seeking to promote positive strategies towards immigrant groups (thereby, of course, capturing the issue for their sphere of influence). Hence, immigrant groups have found themselves in a very strong position when bargaining for special cultural funding, linguistic provisions, educational allowances, and cultural support - especially from the minority Flemish side most keen to promote its contacts and image with the immigrant communities in Brussels.

One the distinctive outgrowths of this has been the very high presence and role of organised Islam in Brussels (Bastenier 1998). Particularly in the Turkish part of town, mosque-based Islamic groups have cooperated intensely with local businessmen to promote an alternative venue for community interests, whose reference is a transnational diaspora stretching well-beyond the immediate city and national context. The international economy dimensions of these informal and reciprocal economic ties are considerable. This capitalises on the willingness within the city authorities to promote organised religion - through the funding of mosques, cultural events and so on - as a benign way of dealing with the immigrants' presence in the city. There is indeed a marked difference here in the organisational capabilities of Turkish and Moroccans groups; the former relying heavily on strong transnational ties with political and cultural groups across other Western European countries (particularly the direct channel through Germany's large resident Turkish population to the homeland), while the latter have proven to be much less organised along religious lines, have much less contact with homeland politics and social interests, and are much more disunited across age and class divisions. These distinctions are reflected in the correspondingly much

higher figures on urban poverty, deprivation, underachievement and crime that Morrocans display.

A second factor in inter-communal variation, is the relationship of the local community to the local administration. In Saint Josse, for example, a highly populist local mayor, Guy Cudell - in power for about 40 years - has built strong personal ties with the dominantly Turkish local community, through a seigneurial open-doors style of leadership, which builds local activities and cooperation through clientalist and informal political involvement (Dassetto 1991). While this leads to local privileges for some, at the same time it blocks a more structured, democratic involvement of organised party political or interest group activity. Indeed, the rejection of his 'corrupt' way of organising the commune was used as a central theme by the extreme right in recent elections there. The situation in Saint Josse stands in deep contrast to the troubled neighbourhoods of Molenbeek and Koekelberg in the north west of Brussels, where the strongly Moroccan population finds itself in a constant stand-off with local administration and police hostile to their presence, thus fueling alternative means of expression of political voice.

A third way in which alternatives have been found to formal political channels, has been the opportunities offered by the autonomous status of the regions and city level authorities to plug in directly into Brussels funding for social policy type initiatives within the EU's social exclusion and multicultural programmes, such as the *Integra* programme. One of the problems with this form of representation is the way successful bids for EU funding get monopolised over-time by go-between elite white advocacy groups, who are the best placed, and have more developed political networks to seize EU funding opportunities. Through working with these groups, ethnic minority leaders can be co-opted away from their communities into the political party structure. Moreover the fact that the European institutional structure requires a very specific kind of organisational know-how be successful in this field, narrows down opportunities even more. Brussels on the whole has not benefited as much as one would have expected from the fact the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament are located in the city; indeed the presence of the rich EU funded groups and lobbies is a constant source of anger to homegrown Belgian and minority campaign groups.

One of the other consequences of these difficulties in representing immigrants has been the downgrading of the campaign for citizenship for third country nationals in favour of a more successful anti-racist lobby in EU circles (see Favell 1998b). The citizenship campaign suffered badly after the collapse of the original Forum for Migrants within the European Commision, and their failure to influence the agenda of the 1996-7 intergovernmental conference on the Amsterdam Treaty. The politically 'costless' anti-racist declarations of this treaty and the setting up of the EU Vienna Monitoring Centre, mask the failure to really tackle the voting rights issue. This is mirrored by the increasingly elite co-opted direction of the Belgian anti-racist campaign, which has now been so closely brought into official party politics as to be able to get premier Jean-Luc Dehaene out on its behalf.

4.iv. The new urban politics

Finally, it is essential to bring into the frame the very real fact that contentious politics in Brussels takes on violent and territorial aspects, as a direct consequence of the frustration of political efforts in other channels. This informal politics of urban life should come as no

surprise in a city and country where politics between the Flemish and Francophones has become so furiously territorial in recent years. In this sense, the Moroccans and Turkish are only reproducing the kinds of paying lines that they have learned from the dominant political groups in the country.

Firstly, there had been the efforts of immigrant groups to secure political power in certain communes of the city, through gaining some control over the public housing stock in particular areas where there is a strong immigrant concentration. Through such spatial concentration, and the kinds of dense networks of social cooperation and informal ties that this enables, it builds up a source of genuine local political power that of course does not get registered in any official public way. This can go as far as to pressurise local white Belgian residents out of certain areas; and builds very much on the religious and economic opportunities offered by the unconventional non-western forms of social and political organisation which are allowed to flourish in these semi-autonomous pockets of the city.

The second and more dramatic symptom of this tendency, has been the political use of social disorder. Whatever was spontaneous about the famous race riots of Brussels in the summer of 1991 were certainly different second and third time round in 1997, by which time these groups had learned that a strategic political disorder can go along way in securing a fast political response from local authorities in terms of cultural and social funding and the attraction of political attention. Of course, one side of this pathological development is the ever closer involvement of policing and security forces in the civil administration of difficult 'inner city' zones, something from which the more radical militant religious and political elements draw power in binary relation. This tendency in communes such as Anderlecht has been particularly destructive of attempts of cultural and social organisations to build a path toward more constructive political and social form of integration. Once again, structural factors block at the essential involvement of the conventional political level, and the initiatives become prey to this kind of *détournement* when local actors find a more conflictual strategic line is a faster way of getting what they want.

The direction of these tendencies is to increase the alienation of each group of Brussels' residents to the others. It is no accident, for example, that the shopping center of Brussels is perceived to be 'taken over' - in the manner of American inner cities - by a kind of territorial invasion of the city centre by immigrant youth on a Saturday. This aggressive occupation of shared territory itself mirrors the way in which Flemish from the Brussels periphery also 'take the city back' on a Saturday. As national and non-national groups interact less, the city can often seem an increasingly alienating European version of the American dystopia. The destruction of much of old Brussels by the new European quarter has only added to this. The incredulous and angry media reactions to 'foreign' Turkish politics being fought out on the streets of Brussels - for example, the inter-communal fighting between Turks and Kurds in Nov 1998, when the headquarters several prominent Kurdish associations were attacked - bore witness to the extent to which Brussels is already seen by many as a 'lost' city.

5. Conclusions

Est-ce qu'on ne raconte que des histoires belges? We would strongly disagree. The Belgian case is chronically overlooked and understudied in comparative studies of Western European politics and society. We hope at least to have sketched a case for why the Belgian case should be central to any discussions about multi-level governance, not least because of the complex

and advanced state which institutional forms of dealing with this fragmentation of politics take in this country. As our account shows, the case also offers a fertile ground for asking important unasked questions about the degree to which multi-levelled institutional arrangements both enable and exclude groups from participation. If the underlying question is one about the democracy or representativeness of these new forms of organising political interests and incorporating minority or marginal groups in the polity, then these questions should indeed be moved to the forefront of our discussions.

A number of the studies of the federalisation process in Belgium implicitly or explicitly suggest that the institutional solutions found in the country, and their playing out in the future years, could be read as a guide to certain elements of the EU's future beyond the nation-state (Favell and Martiniello 1998; van Parijs 1995). Uppermost in their minds are the questions of social solidarity across territorial boundaries, and the way in which state institutions are likely to deal with the dual process of loss of sovereignty and the strengthening of sub-national ethno-cultural claims and identities. Some go so far as to suggest Belgium may have a moral duty to see itself as a potential role model for other European countries, who may face federal break up in future years (likely candidates: Spain, Italy, Great Britain…) In a strict sense, it is actually unlikely the technological and institutional devices that have been put in place in Belgium would necessarily translate outside of the Belgian context. Many of these are long rooted in the political cultural background of the Flemish-Francophone relations, built as they are on contradictory conflictual and consociational tendencies that perhaps can only be found in this particularly national context. It is also likely that the translation of national solidarity and citizenship questions to the European level, sharply misrepresents or over-idealises the kind of 'polity' that the EU is most likely to become; given it is a transnational organisation that is unlikely to ever have many true state-like or polity-like properties, particularly in the field of welfare redistribution and political participation. On this score, multi-level governance theories have the virtue of in fact picturing Europe as a dimension of national and sub-national politics, not as a fixed supra-national political entity. As so often in Belgium, it is but one potential arena that can come into play when regional or local interests find it is a useful way of short-circuiting the national or federal level.

Whereas it is not difficult (indeed rather trivial) to show that multi-level governance theories apply to the Belgium and Brussels, the conclusions from our underlying questions about incorporation and the institutionalisation of unorthodox political activities and channels reveal mixed, double-faced results. Whereas political science approaches to multi-level governance tend to begin only with charting the interaction of given groups and interests with a particular political opportunity structure - something in other words, which is already a social and cultural institutional structure, if not yet a formal political and legal one - what is interesting in the examples we have discussed is how these protean and shifting situations involving different immigrant groups in different contexts in Brussels are still largely *pre-institutional* in nature. That is, they are situations in which no recognisable pattern of institutional interaction is yet established, and thereby groups are empowered to both shift their own self-definitions and their targets of coalition and cooperation; and hence situations in which we can observe the formation of the actual identities and interests of groups, as they are socialised by the political system to take up certain places in the given political order (Pizzorno 1986; Bourdieu 1980).

What is substantially different about the multi-levelled situation found in Belgium, to one in which groups are being incorporated into a unitary traditional national state, and its

conventional channels of party political participation, law, and state governance, is that the socialisation process that goes on in a multi-levelled situation does not necessarily lead to the ordered integration of these groups into the polity. Immigrants, in other words, do not become citizens like everyone else. This confounds theories of incorporation rooted either in the ctizenship-centred idiom of T.H.Marshall or French republicanism, which can see no other path for the progressive mechanisms of state building, and democratic representation of marginal interests. The nation-state dominated patterns of traditional integration regimes in Europe - such as Britain and France - has seen a strong single idea of the nation overlaid onto the immigration question, such that immigrants are organised and represented along an orderly liberal path of integration into the dominant political values and cultures of the host nation. The success of this assimilation process is continually confirmed by the behaviour of ethnic minorities in the two countries, who are socialised to act as orthodox political actors pursuing conventional interest within the polity, and adapting its tools and opportunities to their own ends (Favell 1998a).

In the emerging multi-levelled situation in Belgium, however, something very different is happening. In the absence of traditional political incorporation and citizenship rights, groups have redoubled their effort to find alternative means of pursuing their interests in the Belgian context. They have often found the cleavages and ethno-national conflicts inherent in the Brussels situation, and the institutional structure of city and communes useful to their goals; the declining role of the state in Brussels has helped free them to pursue economic and cultural activities which escape state control and regulation, and permit strong territorial ambitions in the city. Certain new activities and channels have thus become effective, and immigrant groups have been creative in reconfiguring their collective identities around the opportunities as presented, even connecting up on occasions with unlikely allies such as the Flemish right or the EU elite. The efficacy of their political action and entrance into the arena is indeed dependent on the situation being in a state of flux and crisis, as it so often is in Belgium; immigrants' are thus socialised to take advantage of the peculiar kind of 'habitus' (comptences, reflexes) these situations require (see Dobry 1986). If one takes a global city view - in which these form of active politics in Belgium are a *sui generis* new development of political action and practice - it might be indeed possible to point to all this as potentially new forms of politics and democratic representation (see Sassen 1990; Cross and Waldinger 1997).

However, a more careful analysis of this same phenomenon is also needed. For sure, it is important not to prescribe a return to traditional forms and channels of representation and participation. Even more important, it is essential not to fall back on philosophical slogans about republicanism, citizenship, integration and the public sphere, which in the past have have rarely proved in practice to be very open or egalitarian in their actual treatment and incorporation of marginal or minority interests (Gaxie 1978). However, for all the originality of 'pluralisme à la belge' (Martiniello 1997), over time the deficiencies of a situation such as this can be seen to lead to pathological consequences. Immigrant groups may be able to pursue interests and achieve certain goals, but they are not being socialised fully into the unitary political values, ideas and cultural of a modern western political system, and therefore will remain deficient in many of the types of political competence required to best use the system to their own ends. In return, they are kept in a permanently disadvantaged status, which nevertheless maintains possibilities for them to find inside and outside the state their own sources of power and autonomy - through cultural self-help organisations, diaspora, and the freedom from local national ties and obligations.

Unfortunately, what starts out as a sober and realistic opportunism in response to the constrained objective range of opportunities new immigrants face in a western society - and the resultant unorthodox and innovative political forms and activities that are found - will overtime become routinised and institutionalised by the dominant state and non-state venues they interact with, as a set of unorthodox social norms and practices. These will not be structurally integrated into the mainstream political forms and institutions, and will therefore only have value in the contexts they arise in, and thus not enable a social learning that gives access to other political possibilities in society. An example of this is the use of street disorders as a form political activism: which first time round were a genuine political protest by a coalition of groups for recognition and voice, but second time round displayed a pathological feedback process of social learning about what pays in the specific local context where there is an absence of proper representation or satisfactory interlocutors. Instead of leading to a constructive expression of voice, the violence and threat became ritualised and instrumentalised as a way of enforcing a narrow local power, which may not have any greater political goal or outcome than chasing white Belgians out of certain neighbourhoods and political spaces in the city.

There is, in other words, an increasingly dysfunctional differentiation of the political system in a city like Brussels, into distinct marginalised sectors of influence and control, which enable immigrants to pursue and satisfy interests but remain outside of all dominant channels and sectors of influence in the host society (see here the work of Bommes, eg. 1995). Such developments are mirrored - indeed bolstered in a binary self-reinforcing way - by the growing autonomy of commune level administration and policing activities, which inside the fragmenting, multi-levelled city context are able to continually increase their own autonomy away from democratic central political control.

In the end, over time, the worry is that all these developments may turn out to be perfectly functional in a sense; it may be possible that all the various distinct interests of Flemish, Francophone, elite European and immigrants might be satisfied individually, without there being any commonality of interests and cooperation actually emerging. This is because of the way territorial and administrative differentiation in the city so closely shadow the boundaries between different community interests. Such a process, of course, will only enhance the reproduction of other absolute inequalities between elite and marginal groups, even as these marginal interest groups are socialised to understand their interests do not in any sense converge with those of communities still within the nation-state. The old idea of citizenship, together with the idea of politics being a public synthesis of pluralist democratic interests, would have collapsed.

We should perhaps take care to not go so far in our pessimism. Part of the problem is terminological: our normative language of democracy, citizenship, participation, the public sphere, and so on, is rooted in the democratic theory of the nation-state - and 18th century French and American republicanism - which can find no way of talking positively about the fragmentation of politics into its multi-levelled, multi-national and multi-cultural components. In this sense, the present day situation in Brussels is perhaps a very clear precursor of politics as they may well be recognised everywhere someday. Shedding some of the romanticism of present day theories of (nation-state centred) democracy and justice may be the price we have to pay to begin to understand what is really going on here.

Acknowledgements

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