“Flemish Friends, Let us Separate!”: The Discursive Struggle for Flemish Nationalist Civil Society in the Media

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“FLEMISH FRIENDS, LET US SEPARATE!”
THE DISCURSIVE STRUGGLE FOR
FLEMISH NATIONALIST CIVIL SOCIETY IN
THE MEDIA

Benjamin De Cleen

This article presents a discourse-theoretical analysis of the discursive struggle against the Flemish radical right from within Flemish nationalist civil society as it was fought out in debates about the Flemish National Songfest in the period 1991–1995. Using a discourse-theoretical redefinition of nationalism, the article develops the argument that the discursive struggle against the radical right from within Flemish nationalist civil society has been structured around attenuations of nationalism. Whilst the radical right takes the nationalist premise of the existence of a sovereign and limited nation to its radical conclusions, opposition to the radical right contests the authoritarian and racist consequences of radical nationalism. The radical right’s critics attenuate Flemish nationalism’s radical potential by articulating it with signifiers originating in other discourses: democracy, tolerance, peace and openness. But they do not question the nationalist premises in which the radical right’s authoritarianism and racism are grounded. By analysing these mechanisms, the article contributes to understanding the discursive struggle among Flemish nationalists, and especially the tension inherent in the resistance against radical right politics from the part of more moderate nationalists.

KEYWORDS radical right; nationalism; discourse studies; music; civil society

Introduction

The radical right has been a major political player in Flemish politics for decades. Flanders, the Northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, was confronted with the electoral breakthrough of the radical right party Vlaams Blok (VB) in the late 1980s, and saw the party enjoy continuous electoral gains until the mid 2000s. The rise of the VB provoked reactions from political parties and movements from across the political spectrum, including from other Flemish nationalists.

This article focuses on the struggle against the VB from within the so-called Flemish Movement. This network of extra-parliamentary organisations and pressure groups played a crucial role in the foundation of the VB in the late 1970s as an ideological breeding ground and as the basis from which to draw political personnel, militants and voters. However, the Flemish Movement has always been an ideologically heterogeneous network, held together by a shared Flemish nationalism but characterised by strong disagreements about how far Flemish nationalist demands should go and how they should be pursued, as well as by a diversity in economic, ethical and religious viewpoints. As the VB became the strongest...
Flemish nationalist party, its hold on the Flemish Movement grew. But this increasing dominance was also met with resistance from within the Flemish Movement.

This article presents a discourse-theoretical analysis of the discursive struggle between Flemish nationalists as it took place in mainstream media. In doing so, the article contributes to an understanding of the heterogeneity of nationalism and to the mechanisms of discursive struggles between nationalists. More specifically, the article shows how the struggle against the VB from within the Flemish Movement has revolved around the attenuation of the radical potential of nationalism through the articulation of nationalism with democracy, tolerance, peace and openness. It thus contributes to an understanding of the tension inherent in the resistance against radical right politics from the part of more moderate nationalists.

The article takes its empirical material from the struggle for the Flemish National Songfest, one of the main Flemish nationalist events, in the period 1991–1995. This period immediately after the VB’s electoral breakthrough saw a fierce struggle for hegemony within Flemish nationalist civil society. This struggle was waged within Flemish Movement organisations and in Flemish Movement publications. But it was also fought in the broader public space, as mainstream media became an arena for the struggle between nationalists. Moreover, journalists from a number of newspapers with nationalist sympathies also became active in this struggle.

The article first discusses the discourse-theoretical framework, discourse theory’s focus on discursive struggle and the media as a public space for such struggle. It then briefly outlines the characteristics of discourse-theoretical analysis. The following section develops a discourse-theoretical definition of nationalism, which structures the analysis. The article then moves on to a discussion of the VB, and of the struggle for the Flemish National Songfest as a case study for the struggle within the Flemish Movement. The remainder of the article discusses the main dimensions of the discursive struggle against the VB: the resistance against the VB’s “authoritarianism” and against its “racism”.

**Discourse Theory, Discursive Struggle and the Media**

The theoretical backbone for the analysis is formed by the poststructuralist and post-Marxist discourse theory formulated by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) and further developed by the so-called Essex school (see Glynos and Howarth 2007). Discourse theory analyses politics as the discursive struggle for hegemony, whereby hegemony is seen as the (always partial and temporary) fixation of meaning (Torfing 1999, 36–38).

In studying political projects’ attempts to fix meaning, discourse theory takes a middle position between structure and agency. It rejects both approaches to humans as rational self-interest maximising subjects and structuralist approaches that deny agency by subsuming it under the reproduction of structures (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 21; Torfing 1999, 137–154). This middle position hinges on the idea that political practices consist of the production of a structure of meaning through the articulation of existing discursive elements. Howarth and Stavrakakis write that:

A political project will attempt to weave together different strands of discourse in an effort to dominate or organise a field of meaning so as to fix the identities of objects and practices in a certain way. [...] [D]iscourse theory investigates the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality. (2000, 3).
It is useful here to introduce an analytical distinction between discourse and rhetoric. The latter refers to the discursive practices under study (e.g. the rhetoric of different Flemish nationalists). The former refers to the more encompassing and more stable structures of meaning those discursive practices draw on, contest and reproduce (e.g. nationalism) (see Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 140). Articulation refers to the act of bringing together existing discursive elements in a particular way to construct a more or less original structure of meaning. The space for agency lies in the fact that articulations are contingent relations of “no necessary correspondence” (Laclau 1990, 35) and that the process of articulation changes the meaning of that which it articulates (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105 and 113–114). At the same time, because the discourses they articulate are more stable and more encompassing than their own rhetoric, each rhetoric is necessarily tied in to and possible only because of an existing structure.

Discourse theory’s application has largely been confined to the field of institutional politics. However, even if discourse theory has rarely taken media themselves as an object of analysis (but see Carpentier and De Cleen 2007; Carpentier and Spinoy 2007; Dahlberg and Phelan 2012; Torfing 1999; Uldam and Askanius 2013), mainstream media are of crucial importance to the discourse-theoretical analysis of most discursive struggles. Media are one of the main public spaces in which meaning circulates in contemporary society. An analysis of discursive struggle cannot but take into account media as an arena of struggle (with its proper logics). Moreover, media institutions and media professionals are themselves producers of discourse, and very important ones at that.

**Discourse-theoretical Analysis as a Method**

The analysis presented in this article combines a discourse-theoretical conceptual framework with critical discourse analytical strategies (Fairclough 2003; Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2008; Wodak et al. 2009) and with the procedures of qualitative content analysis (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Wester 1995). This research strategy has been labelled discourse-theoretical analysis (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007; Carpentier 2010).

Discourse-theoretical analysis is characterised by a more macro-approach to the study of discourse than other forms of discourse studies (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007, 277). Language use is studied because it points to and allows identifying the more macro mechanisms at work in the discursive struggle under study. Discourse-theoretical analysis identifies the main elements of the competing rhetorics in a discursive struggle and studies how they articulate these different elements.

In doing so, discourse-theoretical analysis makes use of sensitising concepts, which point the qualitative researcher to relevant parts of and aspects of the material (Bowen 2006; Charmaz 2003). Sensitising concepts are identified and developed into analytical concepts through an iterative process that includes contextualisation of the discursive practices under study, theoretical development of the discourses central to the discursive practices under study and empirical analysis of the rhetoric produced within that discursive struggle. In this way, a balance is struck between analytical openness, thorough contextualisation of the case, and thorough theorisation.

In the case of the struggle in Flemish nationalist civil society, the central discourse is nationalism. Nationalism will therefore constitute the main sensitising concept for the present analysis.
A Discourse-theoretical Perspective on Nationalism

When developing a discourse-theoretical definition of nationalism, there is a significant body of constructionist approaches to nationalism to build on. Despite their explanations of nationalism as a consequence of (objective) socio-economic, socio-cultural or political changes, modernist theories of nationalism (most famously Anderson [1983] 2006; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Hobsbawm 1990) opened the door for the analysis of the social construction of the nation by undermining the nationalist claim that nations are natural entities. One constructionist way of theorising nationalism is to consider nationalism as a discourse that constructs the nation (for example, Day and Thompson 2004, 13–17; Bhabha 1990; Jenkins and Sofos 1996, 11; Sutherland 2005, 186). This implies moving away from the search for the essence of the nation towards the identification of the particularities of the discursive construction of the nation.

In this section I want to argue for a definition of nationalism as a discourse structured around the nodal point nation, envisaged as a limited and sovereign community that exists through time and is tied to a certain space, and that is constructed through an in/out (member/non-member) opposition between the nation and its outgroups.

As the in/out (Dyrberg 2003) construction of group identity is not exclusive to nationalism, we need to identify the particular manner in which nationalism constructs “in” and “out” (see Day and Thompson 2004, 102–103). Here we can turn to Anderson’s ([1983] 2006) idea of the nation as an “imagined community”. Although Anderson was concerned “in an anthropological spirit” ([1983] 2006, 6) with how the members of a nation imagine themselves as a community, he made “a decisive, if not necessarily fully intended, contribution towards the ascendancy of a constructionist perspective on nationalism” (Day and Thompson 2004, 87–88; Norval 1996, 60–61). His analysis of how the nation is imagined is very helpful to an understanding of how nationalism constructs the nation.

Firstly, the nation is constructed as limited: the world is made up of distinct nations (Anderson [1983] 2006, 7; Vincent 2002, 10). Secondly, the nation is constructed as a community. Whereas to Anderson community means that the members of the nation actually feel as if they belong together, what matters from a discursive perspective is the discursive construction of the nation as an organic community that all members of the nation are considered to be part of. Thirdly, the nation is constructed as sovereign: it has the rights to take decisions independently and without interference. This becomes most evident in demands for an independent state or sub-state. However, it is not the state but the nation that serves as the nodal point of nationalism: in nationalism the state’s legitimacy depends on its representation of the sovereign nation (see Jenkins and Sofos 1996). Shared time (a shared past, present and future) and space (a shared territory with borders and certain characteristics) serve to differentiate ingroup from outgroup, to obscure the (historical) contingency of the nation as well as to provide legitimacy for the nation’s sovereignty over a territory (Freedon 1998, 752; Wodak et al. 2009, 26).

To define nationalism as a discourse that constructs the nation differs from the dominant view of nationalism as “primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unity should be congruent” (Gellner 1983, 1). Whilst nationalism finds its clearest and most explicit formulation in nationalist politics, it is not limited to institutionalised politics. As a hegemonic discourse in our contemporary world, nationalism also pervades relatively independent societal spheres such as, for example, expressive culture (Leerssen 1999) and sports (Tomlinson and Young 2006). Even when looking at institutional politics,
the discourse-theoretical definition has a broader remit than more common definitions. The congruence between national and political unity does not necessarily imply an independent state, for this is but the most extreme “politico-institutional expression[s] of the nation” (Freeden 1998, 754). Moreover, the notion of nationalism also covers the (more implicit or banal) nationalism that underlies and reproduces existing nation-states (see Billig 1995). As a consequence, nationalist discourse is far more pervasive than the political parties and movements that are built around nationalist demands and that label themselves nationalist.

Flemish Nationalist Civil Society, the Radical Right and the Discursive Struggle between Nationalists

The discursive definition of nationalism helps to understand the heterogeneity of Flemish nationalism as well as the discursive struggle between Flemish nationalists. Flemish nationalist discourse has found its party political expression in a number of Flemish nationalist parties, but also in (most) other Flemish parties, particularly the Christian democrats. Moreover, Flemish nationalism is not limited to party politics. It forms the ideological core of a network of extra-parliamentary organisations and pressure groups that calls itself the Flemish Movement. Its members include think tanks, student organisations, organisers of Flemish nationalist events and organisations that are active in fields such as publishing, travel and adult education. Flemish nationalist party politics as well as the Flemish Movement have always been an arena of debate and struggle between progressive and conservative, Left and Right, but also between different views on the exact definition of the Flemish nation, on how much Flemish autonomy is needed and desired, and on the strategies to be followed to achieve this Flemish autonomy.

The radical right has been an important strand in the history of Flemish nationalism. It became a prominent voice in Flemish nationalism in the interwar period, when a number of radical right parties and civil society organisations rose to prominence. This culminated in the collaboration of large parts of Flemish nationalism with Nazi Germany during World War II. After the war, radical right nationalism was discredited and its leaders prosecuted and convicted, but the radical right remained active; first within Flemish nationalist civil society organisations, and later also in the Flemish nationalist party Volksunie (People’s Union) that was founded in 1954 (Vos 1998). Tensions in the Volksunie between radical and more moderate, conservative and progressive, authoritarian and democratic voices erupted in 1977 when the party entered a Belgian government following an agreement on a reform of the Belgian state. The radical and right-wing nationalists considered this so-called Egmont Treaty as “treason” of Flanders and broke away from the Volksunie to found two radical Flemish nationalist parties. These two parties participated in the elections of December 1978 under the header Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc) and merged to become the party Vlaams Blok in 1979.

The VB is considered one of the prime and core members of the radical right “party family” (see Mair and Mudde 1998) alongside parties such as the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs and the French Front National (for example, Betz and Immerfall 1998; Kitschelt with McGann 1995; Mudde 2007). At the same time, each of these radical right parties has its specificity, linked to its particular history. In the case of the VB, it is of major importance that the party is one of the heirs of a long Flemish nationalist tradition and emerged from and continues to have strong ties to Flemish nationalist civil society (Art 2008).
Since its foundation in 1978, the VB, as the party political expression of radical right Flemish nationalism, has been one of the main players in the discursive struggle about Flemish autonomy and the strategies to be followed to achieve it. This discursive struggle has been played out on the party political terrain, but has also entailed a struggle for hegemony within Flemish nationalist civil society. The VB has been at the heart of some of the fiercest moments of struggle in the Flemish Movement. The two peak moments were the party’s foundation in the late 1970s and the period after its definitive electoral breakthrough in 1991.

This article focuses on the period between 1991 and 1995. The VB had always voiced strong opinions about the Flemish Movement, but this period of electoral rise saw the VB claim power more explicitly and saw the party’s influence and legitimacy within the movement grow. However, the VB’s claim on the Flemish Movement and on Flemish nationalism was also contested. This led to rising tensions within the Flemish Movement and to a discursive struggle between nationalist factions for dominance within the Flemish Movement. This struggle was played out on different terrains, including in the media.

Case Study: The Struggle for the Flemish National Songfest in the Media

Empirical material is taken from the struggle for the Flemish National Songfest, one of the most important events on the Flemish Movement calendar. The Songfest, organised by the Algemeen Nederlands Zangverbond (ANZ; General Dutch Song Association), is an annual nationalist meeting structured around song, dance and marching band performances, mass singing and Flemish nationalist political speeches. The format of the Songfest has remained relatively unchanged since its inception in 1933 (De Meulder and Dewilde 1999).

As an event where Flemish nationalists from across political parties and belonging to a range of Flemish Movement organisations meet, the Songfest has always been the arena of strife between different views on Flemish nationalism, on the strategies of the Flemish Movement and its relation to Flemish nationalist party politics. Since its foundation, the VB and radical right voices close to the party have been among the main actors in this struggle.

The struggle for hegemony in the Flemish Movement has been played out, in different public and less public spaces, at and around the Songfest. There are discussions and sometimes struggles behind the scenes of the Songfest; for example, about which artists or speakers to invite. The struggle has also sometimes become visible at the Songfest itself; for example, when certain artists or (parts of) speeches were booed by part of the audience. Usually, the internal Flemish Movement struggle remains either invisible or visible only to the people who attend Flemish Movement events or read Flemish Movement publications. But the struggle has also in some cases been fought in the media, and the media have also played an active role in this struggle on some occasions.

The media covered the discursive struggle for the Songfest in the first half of the 1990s quite extensively. By the early 1990s, media attention for the Songfest had already declined significantly because of the decreasing political significance of the Flemish Movement. The extensive attention for the struggle for the Songfest can partly be explained by the fact that such open conflict chimes well with journalistic logics. But it was also due to the fact that the VB, a dominant item on the news agenda in that period, was involved in that struggle.
The struggle for the Songfest became most pronounced and was most covered by the media on two occasions in the period 1991–1995. The first was the radical right criticism of the 1991 Songfest for being insufficiently radical, and the resignation of Richard Celis as president of the ANZ (partly) as a reaction to this criticism. Despite the serious tensions, the ANZ (including president Celis who eventually decided to stay on as president) and most Flemish Movement voices did not explicitly distance themselves from the VB, and instead continued to stress the need for a united Flemish Movement. This strategy of unity and the VB’s increasing hold on the Flemish Movement eventually led a number of prominent Flemish Movement personalities to (attempt to) force the Flemish Movement to make a clear choice for or against the VB. In an opinion article published in the summer of 1994 entitled “Flemish Friends, Let Us Separate”, they publicly asked Flemish Movement organisations to take a stance regarding the VB. Following this opinion article, tensions that had been festering in the Flemish Movement burst open completely, and the struggle about the VB’s position in the Flemish Movement was fought out in the press.

Flemish nationalists voiced their opinions in and tried to use newspaper coverage to their benefit, and published opinion articles in mainstream newspapers, reacting to the plea for separation. Journalists covered the struggle for the Flemish Movement, and also spoke out about the Flemish Movement’s relation to the VB. Partly as a consequence of this mainstream media attention for the tensions in the Flemish Movement, the struggle between nationalists got linked up with much broader debates that were raging at the time about the legitimacy of the VB and about the strategies to be followed against it.

**Empirical Material**

Public debate about the Flemish Movement in the period 1991–1995 (and before and after) took place mainly on the pages of *De Standaard* (The Standard) and *Gazet van Antwerpen* (Newspaper of Antwerp). These two originally catholic titles have historically been closest to the Flemish Movement, which bears witness to the intricate historical articulation between Flemish nationalism and Catholicism in Flanders (De Bens and Raeymaeckers 2010, 287–326 and 391–401). *De Morgen* (The Morning) is included as a more progressive counterweight that is far more critical of Flemish nationalism. This results in a corpus totalling 227 newspaper articles.

To gain a better view of the VB’s and the ANZ’s rhetoric, the corpus also includes 39 VB party magazine articles and 31 texts produced by the ANZ. In addition, 161 articles published in the Flemish nationalist weekly *t Pallieterke* were included in the corpus. *t Pallieterke* pays more substantial and more regular attention to the Songfest and to the tensions within the Flemish Movement than mainstream media, and is itself a right-wing and radically nationalist voice in the struggle for the Flemish Movement. Furthermore, 290 newspapers articles published before and after 1991–1995 and a small corpus of VB texts produced immediately after the foundation of the VB in 1977 were included as context material.

**Nationalist Struggles**

How do Flemish nationalists oppose a radical right Flemish nationalist party? By attacking the radical right ideology of that party and by presenting that radical right ideology as distinct from its Flemish nationalism. Opposition to the VB from within the Flemish Movement is not grounded in opposition to the VB’s demands for an independent Flanders,
which are considered legitimate. Instead, opposition against the VB from within the Flemish Movement targets what is considered the VB’s “authoritarianism” and “racism”.

Whilst the VB’s Flemish nationalist opponents consider the VB’s authoritarianism and racism to be distinct from its nationalism, Flemish nationalist opposition to the VB in fact structured around the attenuation (see Smith 1994, 187) of the authoritarian and racist potential of the VB’s radical nationalism that takes (ethnic) nationalist premises to its radical conclusions. The attenuations are achieved through the articulation of nationalism with discourses and signifiers that are not inherent to nationalism. A first section looks at resistance against the VB’s “authoritarianism”, which is mainly built around the signifier democracy. A second section looks at opposition to the party’s “racism”. Here too, democracy is a central signifier, next to tolerance, peace and openness. As focus is on Flemish nationalist resistance to the VB, each section starts with a brief sketch of VB rhetoric and then looks in more detail at opposition to the VB.

Democratic versus Undemocratic Nationalism

Whilst all Flemish nationalists claim to speak in the name of the nation, there exist strong disagreements between them about how to gather support for nationalist demands. In the opposition against the VB, from within the Flemish Movement, these strategic disagreements are articulated with the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism. This is a first major dimension in the struggle for the Flemish Movement.

The VB: the Songfest as a radical vanguard. The radical character of the VB’s nationalism is a matter of demands as well as strategy. The VB strives for an independent Flemish state that represents the Flemish people, and the borders of which coincide perfectly with the borders around the ethnically defined people and its territory. It rejects anything less than an independent state, and considers reforms of the Belgian state that increase autonomy for Flanders as mere attempts to save Belgium and as “treason” of Flanders—even though such reforms are in fact built on nationalist principles about the congruence between state and nation. To the party-political strategy of compromises within a Belgian democracy, the VB opposes a radical combative strategy.

In the eyes of the VB, the Flemish Movement’s role is to be a radical nationalist vanguard. The Songfest, therefore, needs to be a combative nationalist meeting. It must voice radical and uncompromising nationalist demands. Also, it should be an event for (radical) nationalists. It has a “battery charging’ function”, it needs to be a moment to “sing and gather new nationalist energy”. To re-charge the batteries, the Flemish nationalist militants need to listen to a radical nationalist speech and to sing battle songs and Flemish folk songs together, as “weapon[s] of awakening and defensibility” (of Flemish identity). This is why the VB rejects the Songfest’s attempts to open up to new audiences beyond the traditional Flemish Movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s with a programme that goes beyond the nationalist songs, marching and flag-waving characteristic of the (radical) Flemish nationalist subculture. This evolution is seen as a move away from what the VB considers the “vocation” of a nationalist Songfest, as a leading article in the VB Magazine about the 1991 Songfest entitled “Flemish(? National(?) Songfest(?))” exemplifies.

Opposing the VB: a broad and democratic Flemish Movement. To the VB’s views of the Flemish Movement and the Songfest, more moderate voices, some of which speak out
against the VB explicitly, oppose a Movement that seeks support with broad layers of the Flemish population and a Songfest that appeals to a wide audience. The strategy of broadening the audience of the Songfest is inspired by the declining success of the Flemish Movement more than by the growth of the VB. But it does run counter to the VB’s views of the Flemish Movement as a radical nationalist vanguard and of the Songfest as a combative nationalist meeting reserved for radical nationalists. These partly strategic disagreements acquire a strong ideological dimension when the VB’s critics articulate the opposition between radicals and moderates with democratic discourse, accusing the VB of being undemocratic.

When in 1991 Richard Celis resigns as ANZ president due in part to radical right criticism of his attempts to broaden up the Songfest, the media cover his resignation as the result of a struggle between the VB and the moderates within the Movement. De Standaard and Gazet van Antwerpen (as well as a number of moderate Flemish nationalists) hold the VB responsible for Celis’ decision and criticise its views on the Songfest. Their rhetoric is structured around the opposition between a “broad” Songfest that attracts Flemings with a “contemporary” programme and the VB’s “narrow”, “extremist” and “ultra-conservative” Flemish Movement.

After 1991 the struggle for the Songfest continues. As the VB grows electorally, the party continues to pressure the Songfest into a radical (right) direction. This eventually leads Rob Eykens, Herman D’Espallier and Paul De Belder — members of the board of the ANZ and of the Yser Pilgrimage Committee — to propose a separation within the Flemish Movement between the forces around the VB and the rest of the movement. In an opinion article published on the Flemish holiday of 11 July 1994, they argue that tensions within the Flemish Movement have become intolerable: “If there is no agreement about the foundations, there is only one way out: Flemish friends, let us separate!”

The signifier democracy takes centre-stage in this call to the Flemish Movement: “The minds have drifted apart completely. On the one hand, there is a democratic Flemish Movement. And there is a movement around the Vlaams Blok on the other hand”. Like the broader resistance against the VB at the time, the nationalist critics of the VB strongly draw on democratic discourse to oppose the VB’s authoritarianism as well as racism. Let us first look at on how the signifier democracy is mobilised against what they consider the VB’s authoritarianism.

The VB is argued to be disrespectful of democratic pluralism. As one of the authors of the plea for separation puts it: “we are talking about people here that want a Flanders in which everyone has to think and act like they decide”. The VB’s undemocratic character is also said to reveal itself in the use of violence and intimidation — including at Flemish Movement events — as a political weapon against divergent opinions. In an editorial in De Standaard, Dirk Achten calls the VB “a racist party of which a number of members, including elected ones, do not shy away from violence, and show that on occasion as well”. The VB is also condemned for not taking into account the opinions of the “real, living people of Flanders”, as the Volksunie’s Hugo Schiltz’s argues. Schiltz distinguishes the Volksunie’s “democratic reform politics” from “those that refuse to participate in the democratic political process”. He opposes the “irrational extremism” that claims to speak in the name of an abstract ideal Flemish people that has no connection to the actual Flemish people.

Schiltz’s argument is an example of the articulation of nationalist and democratic discourse. These are two distinct discourses, built around different representational claims. Democracy is about the representation of the people as citizens, through democratic
processes. Nationalism is about the representation of the nation. Especially in nationalisms with a strong ethnic–cultural component such as Flemish nationalism, this nationalist representational claim does not depend on whether the members of that nation feel like or express the wish to be seen as members of the nation (see Gilbert 1998, 2000, 72). The articulation of democracy and nationalism thus serves as a way to attenuate the authoritarian potential of the Flemish nationalist representational claim by stressing the need to take into account the opinions of actual people making up that nation.

However, Schultz and other opponents of the VB do not see this as the articulation of two discourses with partly contradictory logics. Instead they present nationalism as inherently democratic and the VB as a danger to an inherently democratic Flemish nationalism: “a new twig on the unfruitful side-branch of the Flemish Movement that has earlier produced the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV),” the Flemish National Association, one of the main parties collaborating with Nazi Germany. The Flemish Movement is warned that it should learn its “lessons from history.”

The VB’s critics thus present Flemish nationalism as inherently democratic and the VB’s authoritarian nationalism as a matter of “derailment.” However, the VB’s plea for the Flemish Movements as a radical Flemish nationalist vanguard is based on the nationalist representational claim, rather than alien to it. It is based on the claim to represent an ethnic people defined in an essentialist fashion, unchecked by, and indeed opposed to, any attenuation of those principles. In doing so, the VB’s opponents vehemently reject the VB’s authoritarianism without questioning—and indeed, while reproducing—the nationalist representational claim on which the VB’s rhetoric about the Flemish Movement is based.

**Nationalism and Racism**

The second main dimension of the discursive struggle for the Songfest is the relation between the Flemish people and ethnic–cultural minorities. In the struggle for the Songfest, there is only very little discussion about the boundaries of the Flemish people; that is, about the possibility for foreigners to become part of the Flemish people. Instead, the debate revolves almost entirely about the Flemish people’s attitude towards the ethnic–cultural minorities living on its territory.

**The VB: anti-racism as anti-nationalism.** To the VB, the rejection of ethnic diversity—like the demand for an independent Flanders—is a matter of defending the congruence of nation and state: [T]he preservation and the strengthening of [...] culturally homogeneous nations is the essence of our people’s nationalism [volksnationalisme, i.e. ethnic nationalism, bdc]. The VB interprets nationalist premises radically. If nation and state need to coincide perfectly, then the state and its territory need to be reserved for the “own people” and foreigners need to return to their “home countries”.

The Flemish Movement needs to play a role in the protection of (the identity of) the Flemish people from French speaking influence as well as from foreigners. This leads the VB to demand that the Flemish Movement speaks out against ethnic–cultural diversity at the Songfest and other events. Most controversial, however, and more common, is the VB’s fierce rejection of positive statements about “multicultural society” at the Songfest.

Apartheid is one issue around which the struggle about the Songfest’s position towards ethnic–cultural diversity is played out. Despite strong criticism from more
progressive Flemish nationalist voices throughout the 1980s, the ANZ kept the Apartheid South African national anthem “Die Stem van Suid Afrika” (The Voice of South Africa) on the Songfest programme. When at the 1992 Songfest the ANZ does speak positively about the abolishment of Apartheid, the VB reacts by opposing the abolishment of Apartheid to the very essence of nationalism:

The respect for the peculiarity of peoples, confessed to by all the other texts during this Songfest, is contradicted by this manifest and blind admiration of the melting pot process in South Africa that denies the peculiarity of a people.27

Equally, the Flemish Movement must act against multicultural society in Flanders. VB Member of Parliament Francis Van den Eynde puts this explicitly:

The struggle against the multicultural utopia is also one for the Flemish Movement. I do not think that anyone can doubt that one of the most important goals of the Flemish Movement consists in safeguarding the identity of Flanders. It is this cultural identity that was at stake when the flamingants took arms against the threatening francophisation and it is for that reason that they later tackled the anglophonisation. The greatest threat for our identity at this moment however comes from proponents of the multicultural society.28

Because support for a multicultural society is “anti-nationalist”,29 the VB vehemently opposes the Songfest performances of artists who are of foreign descent or who have spoken out against racism or against the VB. The VB and radical right voices in ’t Pallieterke also demand that the ANZ fire Herman D’Espallier,30 the programme director of the Songfest who invited the “pro-multicultural” artists.

Opposing the VB’s racism: democratic, tolerant, open, peaceful nationalism. “Racism”31 is the VB’s opponents’ second main target. Here too, Flemish nationalist opposition to the VB bears resemblance to the broader resistance to the VB in the early 1990s (Blommaert and Verschueren 1994; Detant 2005; Van Aelst 2000). But much more so than this broader resistance, nationalist opposition to the VB is constructed around the need to “save” Flemish nationalism from the VB’s “racism”. This argument hinges on the distinction between legitimate separatist demands and illegitimate demands against ethnic-cultural diversity—a distinction that also characterises broader debates about the VB (see De Winter 2004). A focus on underlying structures of meaning rather than demands, however, reveals how in VB rhetoric these two types of demands are in fact largely based on the same view of the Flemish people as a limited and sovereign community with a distinct identity that needs to be protected (without therefore equating racism and nationalism).

Nationalist opposition to the VB’s racism revolves around the attenuation of ethnic nationalism’s racist potential. For, as Smith (1994, 187), argues, “Only by some attenuation of ethnic nationalism, can minorities be protected”. In the Flemish nationalist resistance to the VB, this attenuation is mainly achieved by articulating nationalism with the signifiers democracy, tolerance, peace and openness. These attenuations, I will argue, reproduce the foundation of the VB’s nationalism: the existence of a distinct and ethnically defined Flemish people that has the right to autonomy and to the protection of its identity.

In opposition to the VB’s racism, the signifier democracy refers to the liberal democratic principles of equality and human rights. The VB is considered undemocratic because it propagates violations of human rights by discriminating between people on the basis of ethnic background or religion. For example, Lou De Clerck of Gazet Van Antwerpen states that:
Flanders must deal in democratic openness and respect for the dignity of man, of each human, with those that are indeed different, but in the first place remain people. There is reason to be worried about the direction that is indicated by [VB] slogans such as “our own people first”.

As this citation indicates, the signifier democracy attenuates the VB’s “racist” demands, crystallised in the slogan “our own people first”. The nationalist principle of the existence of “our own people” in itself is not contested by the articulation of democracy and nationalism—for that would imply giving up (ethnic) nationalism. Instead, the VB’s racism is contested by attenuating the consequences of the principle that “our own people” be “first” through the articulation of nationalism with the democratic principles of equality and human rights.

The VB’s racism is also opposed through the argument that the Flemish people should exhibit a tolerant, peaceful and open attitude towards other peoples and towards foreigners living on its territory. Let me start with the nationalists’ use of the signifier tolerance, which was also a nodal point of the broader societal resistance against the VB (Blommaert and Verschueren 1994, 1998). The nationalist opposition to the VB uses the signifier tolerance to attenuate nationalism’s racist potential. Indeed, we are dealing here with the articulation of two discourses with distinct logics. Take, for example, Yser Pilgrimage Committee president Lionel Vandenberghè’s statement that “tolerance ‘tolerates’ self-consciousness but not smugness. Tolerance in no way means laxity, this to the attention of the Francophones of this country”. This quote shows how the articulation of tolerance and nationalism is a matter of balance. Too much nationalism threatens tolerance; too much tolerance threatens the nation.

The signifier peace is much less prominent than tolerance, but is sometimes used in a way similar to tolerance. Peace also acquires the meaning of an attitude of the Flemish people towards the groups outside of the Flemish people. The inherent tension between peace and demands for an independent state are not acknowledged. Instead, peaceful nationalism is opposed to the “hostile nationalism” of the VB. The articulation of nationalism with peace also goes against the potential excesses of a radical interpretation of nationalist principles, but it does not question and indeed reproduces nationalist principles.

A final signifier used to oppose the VB is openness, which is juxtaposed to the VB’s “closed” nationalism. The articulating of nationalism with openness is again a matter of attenuating nationalism’s racist potential, without questioning nationalist principles. For example, at the 1990 Songfest ANZ president Celis’ pleads for an open and hospitable Flanders that does “not maintain” Flemish identity by “closing our borders”. Openness thus curbs nationalism’s “closed” potential. But at the same time, nationalism poses limits to openness: “The confrontation with other cultures and with larger cultural areas is enriching for them and for us, on the condition that our input is our peculiarity”. Celis makes this “condition” more explicit when he states that:

We expect the uncontestability of our borders. We want open and hospitable borders for who respects the rules of hospitality. One of the rules is, that in Flanders without exception and without mutilation Dutch alone is the only official language.

The presence of prepositions and expressions that state either a condition (“on the condition that”) or a limitation (openness “without giving up its peculiarity”) show how the articulation of openness and nationalism is a matter of articulating two discourses with distinct logics and of striking a balance between them.
The rhetoric of a tolerant, peaceful and open Flemish nationalism attitude towards its outgroups goes against the VB’s attitude towards the outgroups of the Flemish people. But it does not contest the existence of a Flemish people, nor the principle that this people has a certain identity that needs to be preserved; nor indeed, does it question the VB’s ethnic definition of the Flemish people.

In some more rare instances, the signifier openness does refer to the openness of the membership of the Flemish people: the permeability of the boundaries of the group (and not only its territorial borders). This is a more profound alternative for the VB’s radical nationalism, because it proposes a competing definition of the Flemish people. However, here too, nationalist alternatives for the VB’s strict views on immigration never really question the foundations of VB rhetoric; they merely attenuate its radical consequences. The question is indeed how far Flemish nationalist rhetoric can go in opening up the definition of the Flemish people without undermining its own nationalist demands for a Flemish state that are based on the right to autonomy for an ethnically and linguistically defined Flemish people.

To deal with this tension, and to make the articulation between openness and ethnic nationalism possible, membership of the nation is made conditional to the maintenance of the identity of the Flemish nation. For example, Hugo Portier, the successor of Richard Celis as president of the ANZ, argues that:

He who wishes to remain foreigner, will in Flanders be considered as a temporary guest. They however who want to become citizens of this country, need to both demonstrate the will and get the chance to integrate. Each foreigner must make the Flemish community model his own.41

Integration, this citation shows, opens the boundaries around the Flemish people, but only slightly so and without questioning that this people has a certain identity that needs to be preserved. The fact that conditions, such as integration, are considered necessary reveals the contradictory nature of openness and (ethnic) nationalism. This points to the fact that the openness of the membership of the people also serves as an attenuation of nationalism.

Conclusions

This article has taken a discourse-theoretical look at the discursive struggle against the radical right from within Flemish nationalist civil society in the first half of the 1990s. It has shown how the heterogeneity of the Flemish Movement led to an open and public struggle between competing Flemish nationalist factions, and how mainstream media played a central role in this struggle both as an arena for and as voices in this struggle.

The discourse-theoretical focus on structures of meaning, supported by a discourse-theoretical definition of nationalism, has made visible the main mechanisms of the struggle against the VB. The political agency of the VB’s Flemish nationalist opponents, this article has shown, was located mainly in the articulation of nationalist discourse with other discourses: democracy, tolerance, peace, openness. The discourse-theoretical focus on the articulation of discourses—how different discursive elements acquire meaning through their interrelations—has made visible the attenuations at the heart of the discursive struggle against the VB from within the Flemish Movement. Indeed, attenuation could be seen as a particular type of articulation, and as a notion that might perhaps prove valuable in future discourse-theoretical analyses.
It is the process of attenuation of nationalism through its articulation with other discourses that explains how Flemish nationalist opposition to the VB has been both significant and limited, as well as characterised by internal tensions. Accusing the VB of being undemocratic and racist is a fierce critique. Demanding the scission between the authoritarian and racist VB and the democratic, tolerant, peaceful and open forces within Flemish nationalist civil society amounts to breaking up a long-standing network of nationalist civil society organisations to which “unity” has been a central strategy. At the same time, the articulation of nationalism with the signifiers democracy, tolerance, peace and openness does not question the Flemish nationalist principle that there is a limited and sovereign Flemish people with the right to self-government and protection of its identity. In so doing, opposition to the VB’s authoritarianism and racism has reproduced the very core of this authoritarianism and racism: the representation of an essentialist ethnic Flemish people. A shared nationalism has thus implied clear limits on how profound an alternative for the VB’s rhetoric from within the Flemish Movement can be.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. The Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc) was renamed Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) in 2004 after a conviction for racism.
2. In the mid-2000s, an electoral downfall set in that reduced the party to around five per cent of the vote in the 2014 regional, federal and European election. This demise had various causes, but the main explanation seems to have been the ascendancy of another, less radically right-wing Flemish nationalist party.
3. This article adheres to a conflictual view on public debate. Following Mouffe, the term “public space” is preferred over the term “public sphere”, for the latter is commonly associated with a more consensual model (Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006, 974).
4. This differs from Blumer’s (1954) more strictly empirical identification of sensitising concepts.
5. This section draws on the iterative development of the concept of nationalism in my PhD thesis (De Cleen 2012). Next to the Songfest case, this also included two other case studies: anti-VB concerts (De Cleen 2009; De Cleen and Carpentier 2010) and the struggle between the VB and the Flemish theatres (De Cleen 2013).
6. Nodal points are the “privileged discursive points that partially fix meaning within signifying chains” (Torfing 1999, 98) and around which other signifiers within the discourse acquire their meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 112).
7. The other major event is the Yser Pilgrimage, an annual commemoration of the fallen (Flemish) soldiers during the First World War (around the river the Yser).
9. Whilst focused on the Songfest, the analysis also includes references to the Yser Pilgrimage to obtain a complete picture of the struggle for the Flemish Movement.
10. ‘t Pallieterke was founded in 1945 for a readership of Flemish nationalists that had been involved in the collaboration with Nazi Germany during World War II. Whilst independent of the VB and sometimes critical of the party, it has traditionally been close to the VB. The name ‘t Pallieterke refers to the title of a 1916 book by Flemish-nationalist author Felix Timmermans.


12. See note 11.


16. The “Yser Pilgrimage committee” is the organisation behind the annual Yser Pilgrimage. Rob Eykens was then General Secretary of the ANZ, Herman D’Espallier was then Programme director of the Songfest and Paul De Belder was then a member of the Yser Pilgrimage Committee.


18. See note 17.


29. See note 13.


34. This tension is also inherent to the Yser Pilgrimage as both an anti-war and militant nationalist event.

36. This falls outside the 1991–1995 period but is used here because it is a good example of the focus on ANZ president Celis’ focus on openness, of the articulation of openness and nationalism and of the tensions inherent to this articulation.


38. See note 37.

39. See note 37.


REFERENCES


Eykens, Rob, Herman D’Espallier, and Paul De Belder. 1994. “Vlaamse vrienden, laten we scheiden.” *De Standaard*, July 11


